

HE, SHE, THEY, ZE:
HOW PRONOUN USAGE IMPACTS THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

Katina D. Sharp

April 2023

Knoxville, Tennessee

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
University of Dubuque Theological Seminary
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry**

Katina D. Sharp

Doctor of Ministry Degree

University of Dubuque Theological Seminary

Rev. Dr. Susan Forshey and Rev. Dr. Kevin Goodrich, Advisors

April 2023

Dissertation Abstract

Although Jesus' words in Scripture command his followers to love God and love thy neighbor, the Christian Church has historically not been a place of refuge and acceptance for members of the LGBTQIA+ community. This doctoral thesis researches the effects of inclusion and exclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community in the Church and follows one congregation in their efforts to create a welcoming and affirming space for all. The congregation featured (Powell Presbyterian Church in Powell, TN) created an LGBTQIA+ ministry called Affirmed. The Affirmed ministry engaged in the "Pronoun Project," an effort to be more inclusive by becoming educated on gender-inclusive speech and intentionally using pronouns as requested, including the use of nonbinary pronouns such as the singular "they," as well as less traditional pronouns such as "xe" and "ne." The results of the project offered hope for the unity of the Christian Church.

Searchable Keywords

LGBTQIA+, Church, affirming ministries, nonbinary, pronoun usage, gender and sexuality

Copyright © 2023 Katina Sharp. All Rights Reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced in any form without permission from the author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. To request permission, contact Katina Sharp at RevKatinaSharp@gmail.com.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Terminology.....	4
Scope of the Problem.....	10
Powell Presbyterian Church and the Affirmed Initiative.....	27
The Gender Spectrum.....	35
Binary and Nonbinary Pronoun Usage.....	39
A Christian Response to Nonbinary Humans.....	49
The Pronoun Project.....	57
Conclusions.....	91
Bibliography.....	102
Appendices	
A. Author Resume.....	108
B. Initial Survey.....	109
C. Exit Survey.....	111
D. Monthly Newsletter Articles.....	113
E. Affirmed Advertising Signage.....	118
F. More Light Presbyterians “Why Stating Pronouns Matters” Sign.....	119
G. Pronoun Chart.....	120
H. Signs Displayed at Knox Pride.....	121
I. Copyright Release Letter from Davey Shlasko.....	123
J. Copyright Release Letter from More Light Presbyterians.....	124

Introduction

I am a pastor of a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation in Powell, TN. Three years ago, I met a man, whom I will call James. James attended my church's secular Wednesday evening dinners weekly and made friends with the mid-week crowd. When I invited him to worship, he declined. He told me worship just was not "for him." As I got to know James better, he eventually confided in me that he was a gay man. Although he considered himself spiritual and loved Jesus, church had always been a painful place for him, and he had no intention of putting himself back in harm's way by attending a worship service. I had grown really fond of James, and so I insisted that he trust me and give this church a chance to accept him. He finally agreed, visited on a Sunday morning, fell in love with the congregation, and began attending weekly. He still refused to join as a member, and he never told a soul outside of me about his sexual identity. He was our only gay parishioner until 2020, and, until the spring of 2022, was not open about his sexual orientation.

In the spring of 2021, after reopening our physical building following fifty-four weeks of virtual and/or outdoor worship during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Session of my church took a hard look at the damage. Our size had declined sharply, and our budget was tight as a result. The few who were left were tired and felt defeated. In that Session meeting we came to the conclusion that we were in a rebuilding phase, and we decided to look at it as an opportunity, rather than a burden. We dreamt about who we wanted to be as a congregation and began making some blueprints to get us there. Nothing was off-limits, and the words "we have always..." were strictly forbidden. High on the wishlist? Help people like James feel welcome and included as

part of the worshipping body of the church. After month of discussion, we launched Affirmed, an LGBTQIA+ ministry dedicated to supporting, nurturing, and growing the faith and fellowship of this marginalized community. To our astonishment, it was an immediate success. Even during a time of social isolation, people started coming into the church to see what this place was all about. In the months since launching our vision into the world, we have seen an increase in weekly attendance of about 20%. Every single new person who has visited this year has mentioned Affirmed or our LGBTQIA+ welcoming policy as their reason for visiting.

Jesus taught that the greatest commandments are to love God and love thy neighbor.¹ Unfortunately, the Church has historically not been a place of love for LGBTQIA+ people, creating trauma and contributing to the problems plaguing LGBTQIA+ people. This doctoral thesis will examine the history of LGBTQIA+ inclusion/exclusion in the Christian Church, investigate how becoming a more inclusive church affects the spirituality of the entire congregation, explore developing spiritual practices in people who have been deeply wounded by the church, and create a broader vision for the Church moving forward which reflects the rich diversity of God's Creation.

Given the need to create a safe, affirming, and loving place of worship, I invited members of Powell Presbyterian Church (Tennessee) to participate in the Pronoun Project. Over the course of a semester from September to December 2022, participants were asked to engage in workshops on pronoun usage and put this knowledge into practice in the church. This doctoral thesis will specifically discuss the results of my church's "Pronoun Project," designed to make the church more unified and inclusive with the goal of using the rebranding of my own congregation and their commitment to the spiritual nourishment of the

¹ Mark 12:30-31.

LGBTQIA+ community to encourage other churches to develop similar pathways to inclusivity in worship and fellowship.

Terminology

Because language is constantly evolving to keep up with the lives of the human beings who use it, and because so much of the terminology surrounding the LGBTQIA+ community is relatively new and unfamiliar, I will define what some of these words will mean throughout the entirety of this thesis.

I have chosen to use the acronym **LGBTQIA+** when referring to members of this community. There are many variations of this acronym (LGBT, LGBTQ, and LGBTQ+, to name just a few). LGBTQIA+ seems to be the most all-encompassing and so, although it is a little unwieldy, I use it to show the greatest amount of inclusion. The exception is when quoting other sources, when I leave the acronym that the author originally used.

Each of the letters of this acronym stand for one marginalized group under the umbrella of gender and sexuality minority groups. L stands for lesbian, which is a person who identifies as female and is sexually attracted to other people who also identify as female. G stands for gay, typically referring to someone who identifies as male and is sexually attracted to other people who identify as male, but could also refer to anyone who is sexually attracted to a person of the same gender. B stands for bisexual, which is a person who is sexually attracted to people of more than one gender, although not necessarily at the same time or in the same way. T stands for transgender, which refers to a person whose gender identity is not consistent with the gender assigned at birth—more on this in the following paragraph. Q stands for queer, a once derogatory but now reclaimed word to describe anyone who is outside of the gender or sexuality binaries—more on this word later in this chapter. I stands for intersex, which refers to a person

whose reproductive or sexual anatomy does not fit the binary of “male” or “female.” A stands for asexual, describing a person who does not experience strong sexual feelings toward other people, although they may engage in sexual behavior and may experience romantic attractions toward others.²

Transgender is a broad term which describes people whose gender identity is not consistent with the gender they were assigned at birth. There is no correlation between transgender identity and sexual orientation—a transgender person may be heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or something else entirely. While some people do choose to engage in medical changes such as surgeries or hormone therapy so that their anatomy matches their gender identity, not all transgender people do. This can be due to them simply not wishing to, because they cannot afford such treatments, or because they cannot find medical professionals in their area to perform them. The word “transition” is used to describe the process of changing gender expression from gender assigned at birth to the gender the person identifies with, which may include such elements as name and pronoun changes, hair and clothing changes, and other shifts in personal and professional appearance. Transition may or may not include medical intervention.³

Oftentimes when a transgender person transitions, they will choose a new name which better represents their inner sense of self than their name given at birth. This new name may reflect their gender identity better than the birth name does, or it may just affirm the person’s sense of who they are during and post transition. When the new name is adopted, it is expected

² South Dakota State University, Office of Multicultural Affairs & Accessibility. “LGBTQIA+ Basic Terms and Definitions.” Accessed at <https://www.sdstate.edu/office-multicultural-affairs-accessibility/lgbtqia-basic-terms-and-definitions> on December 20, 2022.

³ The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. *TransAction: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions*. Institute for Welcoming Resources, undated, page 10.

that those around the person will stop using the old name and begin using the new one.

Deadnaming is continuing to use the old name, despite being aware of the new one.⁴

Many people have strong feelings about the word “**queer**,” which was once a slur used to ridicule the LGBTQIA+ community but has since been reclaimed by the very ones it was once used to objectify. John Pavlovitz addresses this process:

One of my favorite episodes of The Simpsons illustrates it succinctly. It features director John Waters, who voices a character named John, a gay man befriended (after much objection) by Homer Simpson. During one of Homer’s many homophobic tirades early in the episode, he struggles to find the right word to describe John and those like him, to which John interjects, “Queer?” Homer is incensed. “And that’s another thing!” he screams incredulously. “That’s our word for making fun of you. We need it!” Younger generations of the LGBTQ community have commandeered the word queer as a fitting definition of their uniqueness. For many, what was once a slur has been transformed into a declaration of beautiful difference, and Christians should affirm when this happens for marginalized communities. We should remember where we came from and that we were born out of scorn and ridicule, and that we are supposed to be the people of the mischaracterized underdog.⁵

Further, Una Fahy claims, “While gays and lesbians often call each other queers...they consider it homophobia and offensive when heterosexuals use these words.”⁶ Because this word carries such heavy emotional baggage for those who were abused using this slur, and some consider it a word to be used only within the LGBTQIA+ community, I will not use it in this thesis except when quoting other sources. This omission should only reflect a desire to avoid adding to already existing trauma, however, and not a judgment on those who self-identify as “queer.”

⁴ The Cleveland Clinic. “Why Deadnaming is Harmful: Find out What it is and Why it Should Be Avoided.” November 18, 2021. Accessed at <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/deadnaming/> on December 28, 2022.

⁵ Pavlovitz, John. *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017, page 135.

⁶ Fahy, Una. *How to Make the World a Better Place for Gays and Lesbians*. New York, NY: Warner Books, 1995, page 49.

Nonbinary means something very different for every person who claims this identity, so it is always wise not to assume anything about a person’s sexuality or gender. For the purpose of this thesis, the term “nonbinary” shall refer to any identity which does not conform to the traditional “male/female” gender binary system. Binary will refer to the polar “male/female” way of thinking about gender.

Gender is probably the most complex word I will address in this thesis. Gender is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “the socially constructed characteristics of women and men—such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed.”⁷ It is important to draw attention to the WHO’s claim that gender is both socially constructed (meaning it is not necessarily tied to biology or genetics) and that it is fluid—there is room for change over time in the way we look at gender. In keeping with the generally accepted code of conduct for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, the term **gender identity** shall, in this thesis, describe a person’s internal sense of gender. In general, gender identity is not interchangeable with the word **sex** (which refers to biological gender) and may or may not be the same as the **gender assigned to a person at birth** (which is typically assigned by a doctor based on a combination of sex chromosomes, genes, hormones, and (most commonly) genitalia—both internal and external).⁸ The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has this to say about gender:

Unlike biological sex—which is assigned by others on physical characteristics—gender identity refers to our internalized, deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, or neither. It can be different from the biological sex we were assigned at birth. Society is

⁷ Finke, Leigh. *Welcoming and Affirming: A Guide to Supporting and Working with LGBTQ+ Christian Youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2020, page 19.

⁸ Markham, Myles, Austen Harke, and Michael Vazquez. “For They Know Not What They Do: Human Rights Campaign Foundation Religion and Faith Program, Film and Discussion Guide & Toolkit.” The Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2019. DVD discussion guide, page 8.

*beginning to recognize that there are more than two categories of gender identity and is creating newly defined terms to reflect these normal variations of gender.*⁹

(More on this idea of additional gender categories shall follow.) **Gender expression**, unlike gender identity, is external and describes the way in which gender is shown to the outside world. Anything that communicates gender to others can contribute to gender expression (“clothing, hairstyles, body language mannerisms, how we speak, how we play, and our social interactions and roles”).¹⁰

Sexual orientation is a separate category from gender, as nonbinary people have many different sexual orientations (17% claim to be asexual, 2% report being straight or heterosexual, and 81% refer to their sexual orientation as something else including: “pansexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian”).¹¹ It is an important distinction that, while nonbinary people consider themselves to be transgender, this is not universally true and, in fact, more than half of transgender people identify as either male or female. (In fact, only 29% of transgender people use “they/them” pronouns, with the majority of transgender people using the traditional “she/her” or “he/him” pronouns.)¹² Anyone whose gender identity matches that which was assigned at birth shall be referred to as “cisgender.” This word comes from the Latin word for “same” (cis) and was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015.¹³

⁹ The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. *TransAction: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions*. Institute for Welcoming Resources, undated, page 7.

¹⁰ *ibid*, page 7.

¹¹ Clarke, Jessica A. “They, Them, and Theirs.” *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 132, Issue, 3, January 2019, page 957.

¹² *ibid*.

¹³ Jarry, Jonathan. “The Word ‘Cisgender’ Has Scientific Roots,” *McGill Office for Science and Society*, November 13, 2021. Accessed at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-general-science/word-cisgender-has-scientific-roots> on December 27, 2022.

Finally, the word **ally** shall refer to anyone who is not a member of the LGBTQIA+ community but desires to be supportive and loving. Davey Shlasko offers this helpful definition of an ally: "...being an ally is not something you are, nor something you think or feel, but something you *do*. It is informed, accountable action that contributes to other people's ability to survive and thrive in a context of inequality."¹⁴ Part of being a good ally is creating a safe space for LGBTQIA+ people to worship. Such a place is called an **affirming** church. According to the Human Rights Campaign, "When we use the term 'affirming,' what we are referring to is the theological view that all expressions of gender are an integral part of God's design for diversity within the created order. When we use 'non-affirming', we are referring to the theological view that transgender and other expressions of gender variance are either a) sinful within themselves or b) that they are morally neutral but nevertheless a kind of disorder, mental illness, or other brokenness."¹⁵ The goal of this doctoral project is to help churches become more affirming and better allies with an understanding that doing so is being true to Scripture and our calling to love one another as Christ loves us.

¹⁴ Shlasko, Davey. *Trans Allyship Workbook: Building Skills to Support Trans People in Our Lives*. Madison, WI: Think Again Training, 2017, page 5.

¹⁵ Markham, Myles, Austen Harke, and Michael Vazquez. "For They Know Not What They Do: Human Rights Campaign Foundation Religion and Faith Program, Film and Discussion Guide & Toolkit." The Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2019, DVD discussion guide, page 8.

Scope of the Problem

One might conclude that the growing visibility of the LGBTQIA+ population, as well as modern laws which allow for homosexual marriage and offer some protections against discrimination would result in the elimination of bullying, conversion therapies, prejudice, hate speech, and other harmful behaviors. This is, sadly, not the case. Social media debates, off-color jokes, protests at Pride events, businesses which refuse to serve LGBTQIA+ people, new legislation proposals which attempt to limit gay rights, and other factors keep pressures to conform to heteronormative behaviors on our LGBTQIA+ siblings. This is to say nothing of the extremely harmful behaviors coming out of the Christian Church (which will be addressed later). All this leads to a stressful and sometimes toxic environment for LGBTQIA+ citizens. According to David Balog:

LGBT individuals, stigmatized by negative societal attitudes directed at the essence of their being, struggle on a daily basis to balance the dual dangers of publicly engaging their need for equality and validation and remaining closeted to find some calm through an escape from public scrutiny. Many gay persons internalize such discrimination and prejudice. Fractured social-support mechanism and minority-stress-associated low self-esteem contribute to a high prevalence of self-destructive behaviors, such as substance abuse, suicide, and risky sexual behavior.¹⁶

What is the cause of such discrimination? The 2007 documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So* follows the lives of a handful of parents and their LGBTQIA+ children who have directly experienced the conflict with Christianity and non-heterosexual identities. The commentators

¹⁶ Balog, David. *Healing the Brain: Stress, Trauma and LGBT/Q Youth*. Schenectady, NY: Healing the Brain Books, 2018, page 61.

note: “If you combine the fear of the other, our fear of sex, and our fear of the feminine, homophobia is well-grounded in our psyche,”¹⁷ and elaborate by saying:

*The consequence of homophobia is to stereotype gay people and then to define them in negative ways. And once we do that, we are able to treat them negatively and brutally. Fear does terrible things to a society. When people are afraid, they have to find scapegoats, and then they want to get rid of those people who are the bad guys. The cheapest way of getting the feeling that we are a group, a family, a something, is to make an other. It's throughout history with all different groups: civil rights with the blacks, antisemitism with the Jews—to have an other. And homosexuals are, unfortunately, the new other. There is something about human nature to always look for an outsider.*¹⁸

The consequences of such stereotyping and homophobia are staggering. According to The Trevor Project, who studied over 34,000 LGBTQIA+ youth (ages thirteen to twenty-four) in the United States as recently as this year (2022), 45% of youth who identify as LGBTQIA+ “seriously considered attempting suicide” (up from 40% in 2020 and 42% in 2021), and “nearly one in five transgender and nonbinary youth **attempted** suicide” (emphasis mine) in the past twelve months. According to Jessica Clarke, 39% of nonbinary people in a study had attempted suicide, compared to only 4.6% of the general population.¹⁹ Thirty-four percent of transgender people who have attempted suicide report that their first attempt was at age thirteen or younger, with an additional 39% reporting that their first attempt was ages fourteen to seventeen.²⁰ This tragedy is compounded by the fact that 82% of LGBTQIA+ youth have expressed a need/desire

¹⁷ Karlake, Daniel, director. *For the Bible Tells Me So*. New York, NY: First Run Features, 2007. DVD, timestamp 1:14:01.

¹⁸ *ibid*, timestamp 1:11:22.

¹⁹ Clarke, Jessica A. “They, Them, and Theirs.” *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 132, Issue 3, January 2019, page 910.

²⁰ Jarry, Jonathan. “The Word ‘Cisgender’ Has Scientific Roots,” McGill Office for Science and Society, November 13, 2021. Accessed at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-general-science/word-cisgender-has-scientific-roots> on December 27, 2022. Page 115.

for mental health services, but only 40% actually received such help.²¹ Twenty-seven percent of transgender people report heavy or binge drinking,²² 25% reported currently using marijuana (compared to only 8% of the general population),²³ and 29% have turned to illicit drugs.²⁴

Not all of the tragedies facing the LGBTQIA+ community are related to mental health and substance abuse, however. Safety and lack of basic rights are also hugely problematic for the LGBTQIA+ community. In 2017, twenty-eight transgender individuals were murdered. In that same year, 29% of transgender people lived below the poverty line, compared to only 14% of the general population, and the unemployment rate for transgender people was three times that of the general population, likely due to the fact that 30% of transgender people reported having been fired, denied a promotion, or abused in the workplace due to their gender identity.²⁵ Twelve percent of transgender people have been forced to participate in some kind of sex work for necessary income.²⁶

Further, 36% of transgender people who were open about their identity during their school years were disciplined for fighting back against a bully, 17% left school because of the way they

²¹ The Trevor Project. “2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health,” <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/>. Accessed May 19, 2022.

²² Jarry, Jonathan. “The Word ‘Cisgender’ Has Scientific Roots,” McGill Office for Science and Society, November 13, 2021. Accessed at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-general-science/word-cisgender-has-scientific-roots> on December 27, 2022. Page 116.

²³ *ibid*, page 117.

²⁴ *ibid*, page 118.

²⁵ Balog, David. *Healing the Brain: Stress, Trauma and LGBT/Q Youth*. Schenectady, NY: Healing the Brain Books, 2018, page 64.

²⁶ Jarry, Jonathan. “The Word ‘Cisgender’ Has Scientific Roots,” McGill Office for Science and Society, November 13, 2021. Accessed at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-general-science/word-cisgender-has-scientific-roots> on December 27, 2022. Page 159.

were treated, and another 6% were expelled.²⁷ Ten percent of transgender minors report having run away from home, and 32% of those youth were fifteen or younger when they ran away.²⁸

Of those who attempted to change the gender on their passports, only 18% were able to do so,²⁹ and of those who attempted to change the gender on their birth certificates, only 9% have been able to successfully do so,³⁰ and that 67% of transgender people do not have an ID with their gender identity correctly listed.³¹ Thirty-two percent of transgender people report that they do not have a single ID or document with their gender identity correctly listed.³²

We must also consider the substantial amount of violence and hate crimes against LGBTQIA+ individuals. A staggering 54% of transgender people have experienced intimate partner violence.³³ According to the *New York Times*, LGBTQIA+ people passed Jews as the most targeted group for hate crimes in 2014, making them twice as likely to be targeted as African-Americans in that year. In fact, according to the same article, nearly one fifth of hate crimes reported in 2016 (bearing in mind that a vast number of hate crimes against LGBTQIA+ people go unreported) were due to the victim's sexual orientation or gender identity.³⁴ The

²⁷ *ibid*, page 9.

²⁸ *ibid*, page 74.

²⁹ *ibid*, page 87.

³⁰ *ibid*, page 82.

³¹ *ibid*, page 87.

³² *ibid*, page 89.

³³ *ibid*, page 13.

³⁴ Park, Haeyoun and Iaryna Mykhyalyshyn. "L.G.B.T. People Are More Likely to Be Targets of Hate Crimes Than Any Other Minority Group," *New York Times*, June 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/16/us/hate-crimes-against-lgbt.html>. Accessed May 19, 2022.

reasons for these hate crimes include “disbelief in nonbinary identity, erasure of non-binary experiences, dehumanization of those who do not fit conventional gender categories, concern that nonbinary people will underhand traditional gender roles, and politicization of nonbinary identity in a time of increasing polarization.”³⁵

The data makes it clear that the LGBTQIA+ community is still very much in crisis and in need of help. Does the church then enter to provide some much-needed relief? This would make sense, as the leaders of churches of most mainline denominations vow in some way to tend and care for God’s people, and the churches themselves claim to be places of refuge and love. It would, therefore, stand to reason that people inside the church would experience less discrimination and acts of hatred and would express a healthier mental state with less depression fewer attempted suicides. This, sadly, is not the case.

A 2011 study from the University of Texas at Austin found that people who identified as lesbian or gay were 38% more likely to have suicidal thoughts if they were also religious. Looking at just lesbians who identify as religious, that statistic jumps to a staggering 52% more likely to have suicidal thoughts than those who are not religious. This is statically very relevant, given that religiosity is generally correlated with a lower incident of suicidal ideation than those who do not identify as religious.³⁶ Put plainly, in general, the Church is a life-giver for cis-gendered heterosexuals and a life-threatener for their LGBTQIA+ siblings in Christ.

This should be surprising, but it is unlikely that these statistics are raising many eyebrows by readers. The groundbreaking book *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about*

³⁵ Clarke, Jessica A. “They, Them, and Theirs.” *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 132, Issue 3, January 2019, page 910.

³⁶ Harding, Anne. “Religious Faith Linked to Suicidal Behavior in LGBTQ Adults,” *Reuters*, April 13, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/5y27muc>. Accessed May 20, 2022.

Christianity...and Why it Matters closely examines the perception of the Christian Church, and it paints a dismal picture. Ninety-one percent of American non-Christians perceive the Christian Church to be homophobic. Note the authors of the book:

Outsiders say our hostility toward gays—not just opposition to homosexual politics and behaviors but disdain for gay individuals—has become virtually synonymous with the Christian faith... When you introduce yourself as a Christian to a friend, neighbor, or business associate who is an outsider, you might as well have it tattooed on your arm: antihomosexual, gay-hater, homophobic. I doubt you think of yourself in these terms, but that's what outsiders think of you.³⁷

And it should be no surprise that so many people report feeling this way. The commentators of *For the Bible Tells Me So* note:

It's estimated that every five hours an LGBT teen takes his life and for every teen that takes his or her own life there are twenty more who try. One of the top five reasons why teenagers call (the helpline) is for religious reasons. They're feeling there isn't a place for them and God. The church, because of its teachings that homosexuality is sinful, is wrong, is a perversion, has created the climate in which gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender children growing up feel very much in conflict with the world in which they live. It really shapes their thinking so that they hate themselves so that they internalize this judgment and condemnation. They're afraid to talk to their parents. They're afraid to talk to their peers about what they're going through, and sadly, they resort to that irreversible decision: suicide.³⁸

What is it, exactly, that makes the Church so unwelcoming and unloving? W. Dailey offers one perspective (specific to the Roman Catholic Church, but still a helpful observation for all denominations):

The (Roman Catholic) church's teaching on human sexuality is simple enough: Sex is a powerful dimension of the human person ordered toward procreation and the bonding of husband and wife, and expressions that willfully sever sex from its nature are immoral. But too often, many in the church have seemed to pay special attention to gay sex,

³⁷ Kinnaman, David and Gabe Lyons. *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why it Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007, page 92.

³⁸ Karlake, Daniel, director. *For the Bible Tells Me So*. New York, NY: First Run Features, 2007. DVD, timestamp 1:04:49.

ignoring the rigorous demands that chastity places on us all, gay and straight alike. To many L.G.B.T. people, this is a stiff-arm from the church, a sign of unwelcome, and has led to harrowing weekends... We can and must do better to provide a loving welcome to every son and daughter of God we encounter and walk with them toward the truth together.”³⁹

While many denominations outside of the Roman Catholic Church, mine included, would push back against Dailey’s claim that marriage is between “husband and wife,” his point remains the same: the Church has focused on the private, sexual lives of LGBTQIA+ people without concern about how this might damage them and has ignored the private, sexual lives of cisgendered, heterosexual people. This has not always been the case: the early Church is fairly quiet on LGBTQIA+ relationships. It wasn’t until the year 1179 that “an ecumenical church council was influenced enough by Cantor to require punishment for homosexual acts. This was followed by Thomas Aquinas’ magisterial *Summae Theologiae* in 1273, which officially anchored the Catholic Church against homosexuality.”⁴⁰ It is, therefore, not a valid argument to say that the Church has always condemned LGBTQIA+ relationships. Further, the moral teachings of the Church are not stagnant but change over time. For example, as Susannah Cornwall points out:

...there are times at which the morality of the Christian tradition expressed in its past may be distasteful to present-day readers—as when Augustine holds that the continued existence of prostitutes is necessary in order that there be an outlet for the lusts which would otherwise unsettle society, or when Aquinas argues (on natural law grounds) that rape is morally less problematic than masturbation, since at least with rape there is still a possibility of the sexual act becoming ‘completed’ in conception and birth.⁴¹

³⁹ Dailey, W. “Lessons from Notre Dame on ministering to L.G.B.T. students.” *America Magazine*, Vol. 226, No 2, page 10.

⁴⁰ Aelred, Peter. *To Melt a Golden Calf: An Evangelical Christian Case for Same-Sex Relationships*. Coppell, TX: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013, page 15.

⁴¹ Cornwall, Susannah. *Sexuality: The Inclusive Church Resource*. London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2014, page 60.

Jack Rogers also points out that scripture has been wrongly used to justify such sins as slavery⁴² and the oppression of women.⁴³ In both cases, Rogers claims, a “Christ-centered approach to Biblical interpretation” helped reveal the error of the Church and correct its course of action to be more faithful to the message of love intended by God.⁴⁴

While strict judgment against the LGBTQIA+ community may not have always been the way of the Church, it certainly is now in many Christian congregations, and the effects are wildly damaging. As Donald Koepke warns: “Once the...spiritual damage is done, most people...will not have a burning desire to return (to church). It is difficult to convince estranged people...that things have changed.”⁴⁵ Therefore, the Church must begin addressing how it is harming the LGBTQIA+ community immediately, before any further damage is done.

The commentators of *For the Bible Tells Me So* note: “(The Church) is the place where the prejudice was born and was nurtured and has been promoted,”⁴⁶ and “For a long time, the Bible has been misused to support prejudice, apartheid, segregation, slavery, the second-class citizenship of women. Now it’s being used—misused—to condemn gay people. It’s an old trick fundamentalist Christians have been using throughout the ages, and now they’re doing it again.”⁴⁷

⁴² Rogers, Jack. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, page 18.

⁴³ *ibid*, page 25.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, page 34.

⁴⁵ Koepke, Donald. “Opportunities for Ministering to LBGT Elders: A Conversation with Rev. Daniel Hooper.” *Journal of the American Society on Aging*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Summer 2016, page 27.

⁴⁶ Karslake, Daniel, director. *For the Bible Tells Me So*. New York, NY: First Run Features, 2007. DVD, timestamp 3:03.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, timestamp 3:09.

Jim Dant, pastor and author of the mini-book *This I Know: A Simple Biblical Defense for LGBTQ Christians* notes that he is often met with the argument that accepting LGBTQIA+ people is a slippery-slope to accepting bestiality and pedophilia. His response is that this is a fear-based argument used to condemn LGBTQIA+ people. He says: “The Bible is very clear with regard to pedophilia, bestiality, and any other forms of sex without consent—it is not condoned. The gospel is clearly and morally opposed to treating people like property or treating people as less than human. These are the clear morals of Jesus; ironically, these are also the moral demands ignored by those who reject the LGBTQ community.”⁴⁸ Likewise, Sara Boesser notes that:

*Bible quotes were used by devout Christians for far too long to support slavery and later to maintain ‘separate but equal’ education laws and poll taxes against people of color. Interracial marriage stayed illegal in parts of America until 1967 in large part because of Bible passages used to oppose it. In Biblical times polygamy (having more than one wife) was not considered sinful as it is today; rather, it was a divinely accepted institution in certain cultural contexts. Bible passages were the mainstay denying women the right to vote or to have equal education opportunities. Just a few years ago, Bible verses traditionally used to attack and diminish people with physical or mental disabilities were still obstructing efforts to secure equal rights and equal access for Americans who experience disabilities.*⁴⁹

These fear-based, prejudiced responses are not representative of the teachings of Jesus, and yet, the Church has held tight to them at the expense of the LGBTQIA+ community. As a result, 39% of transgender people report having left a faith community due to fear of rejection,⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Dant, Jim. *This I Know: A Simple Biblical Defense for LGBTQ Christians*. Macon, GA: Nurturing Faith Inc., 2018, page 63.

⁴⁹ Boesser, Sara L. *Silent Lives: How High a Price? For Personal Reflections and Group Discussions about Sexual Orientation*. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2004, page 35.

⁵⁰ Jarry, Jonathan. “The Word ‘Cisgender’ Has Scientific Roots,” McGill Office for Science and Society, November 13, 2021. Accessed at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-general-science/word-cisgender-has-scientific-roots> on December 27, 2022. Page 77.

19% of transgender people have been forced to leave their churches or spiritual homes due to their gender identity, and only 42% of those who left the Church were able to later find a welcoming community to accept them.⁵¹

There is much debate over what the Bible says about LGBTQIA+ people. There have been volumes written about the so-called “clobber” passages, which are the passages of Scripture that seem to condemn LGBTQIA+ people and their relationships. Colby Martin speculates that they have been called “clobber passages” in recent decades because “I imagine being told that you are an abomination destined for the fires of hell and responsible for catastrophes like earthquakes and AIDS is probably a feeling similar to being clobbered over the head with a large object.”⁵² Because this is not the focus of this thesis, and there are many books and scholarly articles written which attempt to reframe these passages in a new perspective that is inclusive of all God’s people, I will not spend much time addressing these specifically. It is, however, important to note that “there are approximately six verses (out of 31,000) in Scripture that appear to reference same-sex sex acts, and our gay brothers and sisters have long felt the brunt of these six verses as the Christian church has historically used them to deny the LGBTQ community a seat at the table of God, as full recipients of grace, and as full participants in the body of Christ.”⁵³

The ways in which the church inflicts harm upon LGBTQIA+ people vary from church to church and from person to person, but there are many common observable themes. In her book *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church*, Bridget Eileen

⁵¹ *ibid*, page 65.

⁵² Martin, Colby. *UNCLOBBER: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016, page XIII.

⁵³ *ibid*, pages XIII-XIV.

Rivera suggests seven ways the Church has victimized the LGBTQIA+ community: 1) The Church insists that members of the LGBTQIA+ community practice celibacy in order to avoid participating in sin, while cisgender, heterosexual church members engage in sexual activity and consider it a normal, healthy, necessary part of being human.⁵⁴ 2) The Church labels homosexuals as sinners beyond grace and insists that being a gay Christian is an oxymoron.⁵⁵ 3) The Church has, for decades, taught that the LGBTQIA+ community is the personification of moral evil, and it seems to be committed to maintaining that stance, even at the cost of LGBTQIA+ lives.⁵⁶ 4) While most Christians agree that the Bible is complex in its teachings and conflicts or is just unclear in many areas, those same Christians often claim that the Bible is “clear” when describing the (arguably confusing) passages on homosexuality and refuse any evidence to the contrary.⁵⁷ 5) The Church teaches traditional gender roles, and where LGBTQIA+ people fall short of these expectations, they are considered moral failures.⁵⁸ 6) Christians teach that human beings are created in the image of God, but this seems not to apply to members of the LGBTQIA+ community, who are condemned for the way in which they were created and are defined in the Church by their sexuality and/or gender identity rather than their *imago Dei* (image of God).⁵⁹ 7) The Church teaches about sins of conscience and sins of violence. Both are condemned, but sins of conscience (living as a divorced person or being

⁵⁴ Rivera, Bridget Eileen. *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021, page 39.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, page 63.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, page, 84.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, page 110.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, page 132.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, page 158.

wealthy, for instance) are rarely quoted as sure tickets to hell in the way that living as an LGBTQIA+ person is.⁶⁰

Rivera's seven church-inflicted burdens, while well-argued and extensively researched, are merely generalizations of the generations of abuses that have taken place in the church at the expense of LGBTQIA+ people and certainly do not include every way that the Church has harmed this marginalized community. An exhaustive list would be impossible to collect both because of the sheer volume and, also, because so many abuses are silently endured without report.

Historically, one of the most harmful practices that the Church has inflicted upon LGBTQIA+ people is the use of conversion therapy, sometimes referred to as reparative therapy. Assuming many forms, conversion therapy is “any practice aimed at intentionally changing someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity.”⁶¹ Volumes have been written on these abhorrent practices, but in sum, they include everything from talk therapies and “pray-the-gay-away” sessions to aversion treatments in which pain is inflicted upon the victims when they experience arousal at same-sex stimuli in an attempt to create a negative association.⁶² Eric Marcus notes about such practices: “A gay person can become heterosexual through prayer just as easily as a heterosexual person can become gay through prayer. In other words—it’s impossible. Prayer and/or meditation may help you suppress your God-or nature-given sexual orientation, but prayer

⁶⁰ Rivera, Bridget Eileen. *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021, page 179.

⁶¹ Finke, Leigh. *Welcoming and Affirming: A Guide to Supporting and Working with LGBTQ+ Christian Youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2020, page 66.

⁶² *ibid.*

will not eliminate these feelings and certainly can't change them."⁶³ Statistically speaking, conversation therapy has alarming consequences: teenagers who undergo conversation therapy are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide, and 57% of teenagers who have documented conversion therapy experiences attempted suicide in the last year.⁶⁴ Despite these statistics and the fact that nearly every professional psychological association (including The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the American Psychological Association) cautions against these practices, citing the dangerous consequences and lack of success, the practices are still legal in many states and are still widely performed across the United States.⁶⁵ The Church is certainly no safe haven from this kind of torture. Even in states where there are laws preventing the use of conversion therapy, the use of manipulative prayer and pastoral guilt would not be covered by such laws, and many psychological tortures fall outside the protections of these laws. The Williams Institute estimates that 57,000 youth ages thirteen to seventeen in the United States have experienced conversion therapy **in a religious setting**, with 38,000 of those "therapies" being performed by someone without a mental health license.⁶⁶ Sometimes the "conversion therapy" is entered into gradually and is disguised as an attempt to help. Leigh Finke notes that using the term "phase" to describe how an LGBTQIA+ identifies is a red flag and is opening the door to conversion therapy when the "phase" does not come to an end as expected.⁶⁷

⁶³ Marcus, Eric. *Is It A Choice? Answers to the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Gay and Lesbian People*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005, page 174.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, page 68.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, page 67.

⁶⁶ Mallory, Christy, and Taylor N.T. Brown and Keith J. Conron. "Conversion Therapy and LGBTQ Youth: Update," The Williams Institute, June 2019. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Conversion-Therapy-Update-Jun-2019.pdf>. Accessed May 20, 2022.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, page 82.

Indeed, morality and religious faith are often cited as justifications for the most hideous of emotional and spiritual abuses. David Balog opens his book on trauma in the LGBTQIA+ community with the story of “Russell” (name changed for his protection) who was adopted by Christian parents when he was five years old. At age sixteen, Russell came out to his parents as gay. Because of their “moral beliefs,” his parents went to court and had the adoption annulled. He spent the rest of his childhood in foster care and aged out at age eighteen with no family.⁶⁸ This would be tragic if it were an isolated case, but, sadly, Russell is just one of many people who have been wounded by the Church under the guise of protecting good Christians from the sins of LGBTQIA+ people.

Add to these abuses the challenge of knowing which churches are safe spaces and practice gay-affirming worship, since “many Christian communities still consider LGBT identities to be false perversions of heterosexuality; some Protestant organizations are still highly conflicted on the matter, while the Catholic Church accepts the reality of ‘homosexual’ orientation but considers its expression sinful.”⁶⁹

All of these abuses are internalized by LGBTQIA+ people and lead to what is known as “minority stress,” that is, stress related to the challenges of being part of a minority group.⁷⁰ Balog confesses that it is difficult to prove the causation, but the correlation of minority stress to sexually transmitted diseases, drug usage, and suicide suggest that LGBTQIA+ experiencing this

⁶⁸ Balog, David. *Healing the Brain: Stress, Trauma and LGBT/Q Youth*. Schenectady, NY: Healing the Brain Books, 2018, page 7.

⁶⁹ Wilcox, Melissa M. “When Sheila’s a Lesbian: Religious Individualism among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians.” *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 63, Issue 4, 2002, page 503.

⁷⁰ *ibid*, page 60.

phenomenon may be seeking an escape from the pain and turn to risky behaviors.⁷¹

Unfortunately, few studies have been done on the effects of minority stress and “heterosexism” (that is, the expectation heteronormative behaviors) on LGBTQIA+ people.⁷² Patricia Jennings’ research on stress and trauma in children and teens points out:

“...the stress reactions that evolved to help us survive can become toxic if sustained over long periods of time...the stress response can damage the cardiovascular system. If the lion is chasing you, you need your heart to pump oxygen to your muscles so you can run as fast as possible. But...I don’t need to run, and fighting is inappropriate, so the stress response leaves me with a residue of unused, toxic biological substances and elevated functions.”⁷³

Jennings goes on to elaborate on how this residue of toxic substances in the body affects the heart and circulatory system, leading to problems with blood pressure and even stroke, as well as metabolism problems which could potentially lead to diabetes and other chronic health problems.⁷⁴ Clearly, the traumas caused by abuses to LGBTQIA+ people reach beyond just the psychological.

Understanding that many traumas (both at the hands of the Church and of the greater community) are deeply painful, it is likely that many of the harmful events are not ever spoken of, and it can be speculated that what we know about these abuses is only a fraction of what actually occurs. Knowing the lasting damage to mental health and trauma surrounding all aspects of religious life that these abuses occur invites pastors and church leaders to think about ways to bring about major changes for this fragile community of siblings. What is clear is that these

⁷¹ *ibid*, page 61.

⁷² *ibid*, page 73.

⁷³ Jennings, Patricia A. *Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton. & Company, 2019, page 15.

⁷⁴ *ibid*, pages 15-16.

traumas not only affect the lives of the LGBTQIA+ they are inflicted upon but also the Church as a whole. Marie Houghton points out: “the majority of LGBT people with a Christian upbringing experience conflict and most resolve it either by leaving Christianity, for example choosing instead to identify as spiritual rather than religious, or by moving away from conservative denominations, such as the Catholic Church, to gay-affirming churches, such as the Metropolitan Community Church.”⁷⁵

In his book *Love Wins*, Rob Bell condemns the practice of pushing LGBTQIA+ people away from the church, pointing out that a loving God would embrace them just as they are and that, because God is all-loving and always good, there can be no one outside of that love. He writes:

*Millions have been taught that if they...don't accept the right way...and they were hit by a car and died later that same day, God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would, in essence, become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them forever. A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormenter who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony. If there was an earthly father who was like that, we would call the authorities. If there was an actual human dad who was that volatile, we would contact child protection services immediately. If God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like this could ever be trusted, let alone be good.*⁷⁶

The bottom line: God is good, all the time, and no one is outside of that realm of goodness. It is, therefore, the job of the Church and the Christians who represent it to prove that to our LGBTQIA+ siblings in Christ by being loving and accepting them as they were created by their Creator. This was the goal of Powell Presbyterian Church as we created the Affirmed

⁷⁵ Houghton, Marie, and Fiona Tasker. “Exploring Lesbian and Bisexual Catholic Women’s Narratives of Religious and Sexual Identity Formation and Integration.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol 68, Issue 1, 2021, page 47.

⁷⁶ Bell, Rob. *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005. Pages 173-174.

program, embarked on the Pronoun Project, and strived to become a more welcoming and inclusive congregation.

Powell Presbyterian Church and Its Affirmed Initiative

Powell Presbyterian Church (PPC) is located in the tiny suburb of Powell, Tennessee on the north side of Knoxville. The Powell community has 13,800 residents, 92.3% of whom are white.⁷⁷ The street on which PPC is located is spotted with Antebellum homes from the Civil War era and family farms, and donkeys frequently get loose and wander the six acres of mostly wooded property on which the church sits. The community is conservative, politically right-leaning, and tightly knit—the kind of community that shows up for Friday night high school football games and knows the names of the mail carriers and the butchers at the grocery store.

Church members will proudly proclaim that PPC has the tallest structure in Powell—a large oak tree estimated to date back to the 1700s which stands proudly in the front yard—but if this is true, there is nothing in writing to prove it. Regardless, the church takes great pride in maintaining the tree and other landscaping around this mid-century modern style building. On the inside, however, the building looks less pristine. The donation corner is piled up with a hodgepodge of collections for various charities. Peace lilies from funerals of the past droop sadly in a line down the hallway. The coffee nook in the narthex is littered with candy wrappers where the little hands have found the treat jar but not the wastebasket. The brick walls need painting, and the ceiling tiles show signs of multiple roof leaks and repairs over the years. Only as recently as this year the original red carpet in the sanctuary was replaced with light marble-style tile, making the sanctuary look infinitely more kept than the rest of the building.

⁷⁷ Statistics from 2020 census found at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/powellcdptennessee/POP010220>, accessed August 4, 2022.

Powell Presbyterian Church is a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the most progressive and largest of the Presbyterian denominations. PPC celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2019. I was ordained and installed as the solo pastor of PPC on February 18, 2018, just prior to this half-centennial birthday.

When I arrived in 2018, the congregation looked very much like the community in which it sits: largely white with very little diversity (the clerk's report proudly proclaimed that the active congregation was 3% Guatemalan, the result of a thirty-person congregation with one twenty-year-old female who was adopted from Guatemala by her white parents as an infant). Diversity was something the church claimed to desire in their Ministry Information Form (the church's call for pastoral applicants), but they seemed to have no real idea how to achieve this goal. In my interview with the four-person Pastoral Nominating Committee (the committee that selects a new pastor to fill a vacant call), I asked if there were any LGBTQIA+ people in the congregation. I was told that there were not, but that the committee thought the church would be welcoming to them. I followed up by asking if I would be permitted to perform weddings for LGBTQIA+ couples in the church sanctuary, and the committee told me that they felt sure that this would not be a problem, although it had never happened before. I was surprised, and a little hesitant, given the conservative nature of the community in which the church sits, but the affirmation was a hopeful first step to becoming a more diverse and inclusive church.

In 2019, the Session (elected and ordained leaders of the congregation) of Powell Presbyterian Church adopted a new slogan for the church: "All are welcome. All means all." This slogan was, and still is, included in the bulletin every week and was printed on the church banner, which hangs at festivals and parades. The Session (of which I, as the pastor, am the moderator) had a long conversation about what it meant to say that all were welcome. One

church member suggested that we hang a rainbow banner in the yard to proudly proclaim our welcoming status, but the Session and I thought it was too early to do that because hanging a flag sent a message that LGBTQIA+ people would be safe there, and we did not think that the work had been done to make that promise.

In 2020, I was asked to officiate a wedding for a lesbian couple. This was not the first time I had officiated an LGBTQIA+ wedding, but this was a slightly different experience because the couple decided to visit the church after feeling a sense of welcome from me as the pastor. The couple held hands in worship and made no apologies for who they were. This was really the first time that the church had been given the opportunity to prove their welcoming status, given that the only other LGBTQIA+ person was still closeted about his sexuality. Although there were a few people who grumbled (both openly and in the parking lot), the majority of the congregation grew to know and love this couple, and they became the first real face of the openly LGBTQIA+ population the church had encountered.

As the couple became more active, they began to invite friends to visit periodically, and word began to spread that Powell Presbyterian was an “affirming” church. The Session and I were in the process of discerning who we were as a church and what we thought it meant to be “affirming” rather than just open, and we decided the church needed to take an extra step. From this discernment process came the idea of starting a program to support the LGBTQIA+ population and also help the non-LGBTQIA+ members of the congregation learn more about their new friends and how to be better allies. As a nod to our affirming status, we decided to call the program “Affirmed.”

After much planning, many preparatory meetings, a lot of Facebook advertising, and several delays due to COVID-19 outbreaks in our area, the first meeting of Affirmed was in the

fall of 2021. We had an informal meeting and opened the floor to questions and suggestions about how the group could be most helpful. From this came a basic purpose statement: “We rejoice that each one of us is wonderfully made in God’s image and celebrate the rich diversity which makes Creation so beautiful. Both online and in-person, this group is a safe place to ask questions, explore new ideas, find support, and worship.” The quick tagline we used for advertising became “Affirmed, A Ministry of Love and Support at Powell Presbyterian Church.” The lesbian couple mentioned above took on an important leadership role and helped with advertising and communication as well as planning some of the events, with the leadership of the pastor and the help of some eager volunteers.

With the launch of the program (and after losing two families who did not like the direction the church was headed), the Session finally felt like it had reached a point in the life of the congregation in which we could safely say that LGBTQIA+ people would be safe and fully affirmed in the church. Rainbow banners which read “Love Lives Here” were hung at both church entrances. One was vandalized after a few months, but it was immediately replaced with a fresh one, and the banners still hang visibly and proudly a year later. The community most definitely noticed, and the LGBTQIA+ population (and allies!) began to grow in the church as curious by-passers visited to find out if there really was an affirming church in Powell.

In an effort to formalize our stance on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, the Session passed the following official statement of LGBTQIA+ inclusion:

At Powell Presbyterian Church, we rejoice in the fact that each and every one of us was wonderfully made in God’s own image, and we celebrate the rich diversity which makes God’s Creation so beautiful. We recognize that the Church has done great harm to the LGBTQ+ community through its exclusive interpretations of scripture regarding salvation and community. We have the highest respect for scripture’s authority and take it very seriously, but we reject interpretations of the Bible which leave any of God’s people outside of the realm of Christian community. We strive to reclaim the radical good news of the gospel through proclaiming God’s unapologetic love for all. We recognize that

*there is a great distinction between merely tolerating and truly affirming, and we choose to fully embrace all members of the LGBTQ+ community by affirming their value, dignity, and full inclusion into the Church. We are better together, and we celebrate the goodness, the sacredness, and the equality of every individual and every loving relationship.*⁷⁸

With the help of Session, I created a small committee of four people (including myself) to help plan events and structure our Affirmed ministry. One of our first initiatives was the “Adopt-Me” program. Because many of the people who were attending the group had been cut off from their biological families after coming out as LGBTQIA+, they had no real family support and mentioned the feeling of loss from not having comforts like Thanksgiving dinners, birthday cards from proud dads, and phone calls from worried moms. In a church full of empty nesters, this seemed like a place where we could make a difference. We asked for volunteers to be “adoptive” families to pair with those experiencing familial loss. We did not anticipate the next problem.

We did receive volunteers to be stand-in families, either for a day (like a wedding) or for a more on-going relationship. Unfortunately, some of these volunteers, well-meaning as they seemed to be, did not have an understanding of what it meant to be LGBTQIA+, the wide and new vocabulary surrounding this community, or what kinds of questions and statements are considered intrusive, rude, or insensitive. Knowing that so many people in the LGBTQIA+ community have been deeply hurt by the church and by “family,” we were immediately concerned that the lack of knowledge of how to be a good ally could lead to more damage, even if unintentional. It became clear that training was in order.

I reached out to the Knox Pride Center, a local organization which provides resources and

⁷⁸ Official statement of LGBTQIA+ inclusion, as passed by the Session of Powell Presbyterian Church and posted on the church website at www.PowellPCUSA.org.

support for LGBTQIA+ people in the community, and asked for guidance about getting ally training in our congregation. I became acquainted with the staff and volunteers at this organization and, while they were initially quite cautious to be working with a Christian church, we developed a mutual trust through a series of conversations, meetings, and shared dreams. They provided some direction about how to develop our own training program, and the research and planning began.

The date for the first ally training classes was set for May of 2022, with the hope being that, after attending a four-week training series, the participants would be better prepared to attend Pride events in June (which is nationally celebrated as Pride Month). We met every Wednesday in May for an hour each week and heard lectures about LGBTQIA+ allyship, including lots of training on the ever-growing list of vocabulary words with which most of the group was not familiar. The series concluded with a session in which the trainer (a lesbian woman who had some experience with ally training at her job at the University of Tennessee) presented scenarios and asked the group to role-play how to intervene when we noticed discrimination was occurring, how to step up to support our LGBTQIA+ siblings, how to make the church a safe space for the LGBTQIA+ community, and how to correct our mistakes when we inevitably make them. The following week we celebrated our work by holding the first-ever Pride Sunday worship service, in which the sanctuary was clothed in rainbow banners, the hymns were chosen to reflect our inclusionary goals, the sermon concentrated on the need for the Church to be a safe place for all people, and the theme of the day was loving one another as God loves us.

While the Affirmed program was seemingly an early success (the attendance was about half of our Sunday morning worship numbers, it brought in new church members who decided to

attend worship at the church after stepping their feet in the door for the classes, and it sent a strong message to the community that there was a church in the middle of this conservative suburb that was fully affirming), there were also some growing pains. One parishioner moved her membership to a Baptist church, citing as her reason that she was uncomfortable with all the “gay stuff” happening. (Ultimately, the Session decided that, while we hated to see a member leave, overall, the church felt really good about the shift toward inclusion, and pointed out that there are plenty of churches that non-affirming people could attend but very few that welcomed the LGBTQIA+ community fully. The loss was noted as regretful, but we sent blessings her way as she settled in with her new church family.) I also noticed that church functions (lunches, etc.) were often segregated, however unintentionally. The LGBTQIA+ members sat together at tables or rows separate from the rest of the congregation. While there did not seem to be any animosity between the two groups, I was distressed that there were two groups at all and began brainstorming reasons why this might be the case and what to do about it. After all, Galatians 3:28 calls for the breaking down of dividers in our community: “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”⁷⁹

The timing of this problem was nothing short of providence. At the same time I was pondering how to unite my loving, but inadvertently divided, congregation, tasked with creating a thesis on congregational renewal for my Doctor of Ministry capstone project. As I informally chatted with people in the congregation, I found that I heard many of the same types of statements repeatedly. Most often was a comment that went something like this: “I want to be a good ally, but I am finding it hard. I don’t know why we have started using ‘they’ instead of he or she. And, while I am pretty comfortable with gay and lesbian people, I don’t really understand

⁷⁹ Scripture references throughout this document are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

about being trans or changing your gender.” And so, the church entered a season of learning, growing, and changing in order to make the space as welcoming and loving as possible.

The Gender Spectrum

If you approach someone randomly and simply pose the question, “How many genders are there?” it is very likely that the answer will be “two,” possibly accompanied by a baffled expression or a follow-up question about why that is even in question. This is not surprising, given that, until relatively recently gender was a binary concept. A person was either male or female, and there were no other options. As society is becoming more open to hearing the stories of nonbinary people, and as science is acknowledging the complicated biology and psychology accompanying gender, it becomes apparent that it is not that simple.

Most human beings begin developing a sense of their gender identity between the ages of two and four. Gender identity may remain constant, or it may change over time. There is often a period of fluctuation in gender identity during adolescence or early adulthood and these fluctuations can continue to occur at any point in a person’s life, especially if outside pressures cause a person to ignore their gender identity in favor of their gender assigned at birth.⁸⁰

According to Jessica Clarke, “Nonbinary people may have any number of relationships to gender, including, to name a few, hybridity, rejection, dynamism, insistence of a third option, subversion, or all of these.”⁸¹ Gender hybridity is defined by Jessica Clarke as “combining gender roles into non-traditional configurations” and may include people who are “bigender,

⁸⁰ The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. *TransAction: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions*. Institute for Welcoming Resources, undated, page 7.

⁸¹ Clarke, Jessica A. “They, Them, and Theirs.” *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 132, Issue 3, January 2019, page 905.

pangender, and androgynous.”⁸² People who experience gender rejection demonstrate a “refusal to adopt traditional gender categories” and may include people who are “agender, genderless, gender neutral, or unisex.”⁸³ Gender dynamism is defined as “not static over time” and includes people who are gender fluid.⁸⁴ For those who claim that their gender requires a third option outside of male or female, Clarke writes that there are unlimited genders which are creatively named such as “twidget, bird, OtherWise, and transgenderist.”⁸⁵ And, finally, people who experience subversive genders, such as “genderqueer,” (definition to follow) do so using parody or oxymoron to “deconstruct the gender binary.” Examples include “lovable freak,” “not man, not woman,” and “[s]mart blonde.”⁸⁶ The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force defines genderqueer this way:

*People who identify as genderqueer may think of themselves as being both a man and a woman, as being neither a man nor a woman, or as falling completely outside the gender binary. Some wish to have certain features of the opposite sex and not all characteristics; others want it all. The terms ‘transgender’ and ‘genderqueer’ are not synonymous, but there is some overlap between people who identify as transgender and people who identify as genderqueer.*⁸⁷

All this makes it obvious that the question “how many genders are there?” is simply not answerable. Alfred Kinsey, founder of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, hypothesized that gender exists on a spectrum rather than as a binary. In order to

⁸² *ibid*, page 906.

⁸³ *ibid*, page 906.

⁸⁴ *ibid*.

⁸⁵ *ibid*, page 907.

⁸⁶ *ibid*, page 908.

⁸⁷ The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. *TransAction: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions*. Institute for Welcoming Resources, undated, page 10.

prove this theory, Kinsey developed the “Anima-Animus Continuum Scale” to measure reported gender along an eleven-point scale from most feminine to most masculine.⁸⁸ In analyzing the results from his study, Kinsey wrote: “the dichotomization of sex and gender is not an adequate representation of human nature. The study has flung open the doors to further research into this concept of anima-animus continuum in the hope that sex education should devote at least a chapter in delineating the diversity of biological sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, human sexuality as well as describing how holistic gender is.”⁸⁹

If we trust that the science behind the gender spectrum is real, how then ought we to address the seemingly endless gender possibilities? The simple answer appears to be with love and respect for our nonbinary siblings in Christ. Becky Herz suggests that people trust others to know and understand their gender better than anyone else and follow these four simple truths about gender:

1. *Variances on the gender spectrum are real.*
2. *People who express their gender differently aren't doing so to be different—they are doing so to be themselves.*
3. *People who are gender nonconforming are part of our community and should be included in our programs.*
4. *Everyone deserves simple kindness and respect.*⁹⁰

Knowing the science behind the gender spectrum (that gender is not binary, is not necessarily experienced by the individual in the same way that it was assigned to them at birth), and knowing the psychological, financial, educational, medical, spiritual, and other

⁸⁸ Chow, Peter and Mikayla Jeffery. “The Reliability and Validity of the Anima-Animus Continuum Scale.” *Education*, Vol. 138 Issue 3, Spring, 2018, page 267.

⁸⁹ *ibid*, page 269.

⁹⁰ Herz, Becky. “Gender-SPECTRUM: Inclusion for Recreation Professionals.” *Parks & Recreation*, Vol. 53 Issue 10, Oct. 2018, page 61.

consequences of harming our LGBTQIA+ siblings, including nonbinary people in all ways and using non-traditional pronouns as requested (more on this in the next chapter) seems like a small ask for churches and the Christians who represent them.

Binary and Nonbinary Pronoun Usage

Pronouns In the English Language

Put simply, a pronoun is any word that takes the place of a noun. Pronouns may be first person (I, me, my, we, us, our, ours), second person (you, yours), or third person (he, him, his, she, her, hers, it, its, they, them, theirs) and may be singular (referring to one person or thing) or plural (referring to two or more people or things). These words are fluidly used in the English language to avoid repeating nouns and names multiple times. In English, all third person singular pronouns are coded by gender. Although English does have a gender neutral third person pronoun (it), it is used only for describing objects and is not used for people. The two options for describing people (he and she) assume that people fall into one of two categories: male or female. This binary system does not have a third option for people who do not identify as either male or female.

In Other Languages Which are not Gender Binary

Because our language and our culture so heavily encourage the gender binary, it sometimes comes as a surprise to people that not all societies operate on a strictly two-gender system. Davey Shlasko points out that: “Throughout history many, if not most, cultures have had more than two gender categories. Most cultures have two main gender categories (like men and women), and many have one or more additional categories that are considered unusual, but not abnormal, ways to be. Hijra in South Asia, Fa’afafine in Samoa, Mahu in Hawaii, Muse in Oaxaca, and the various Two Spirit traditions in indigenous North America, are all examples of traditional gender categories beyond man and woman. Some of these terms are still in wide

use.”⁹¹ Additionally, Chile and Argentina recognize “machi,” who are “spiritual leaders who fluidly move between or embrace both womanhood and manhood during healing ceremonies.”⁹² Austen Hartke also points out that a “creation story from Sumer, a Mesopotamian society and neighbor to what would become Israel, has references from 1600 BCE to humans who are created with sex organs that are not immediately identifiable as female or male. The Mishnah and the Talmud, the Jewish compilations of law put together between 200 CE and 500 CE, include examples of individuals who don’t fit male or female categories, including those whose sex is indeterminable, those who have characteristics of more than one sex, and those whose characteristics change over time.”⁹³ Additionally, at least six different genders are listed with distinct names in the Hebrew sacred writings.⁹⁴

Lest an ethnocentric viewpoint lead to the belief that binary pronouns are a universal problem, it is important to note that today many languages have gender-neutral pronouns (some old, some new). “Turkish, Hungarian, Finnish, (and) Persian are entirely genderless. The Pipil language, a language indigenous to Central America, uses a genderless pronoun – “yaja” – to refer to “he or she.” Others have attempted to amend their language by borrowing from others –

⁹¹ Shlasko, Davey. *Trans Allyship Workbook: Building Skills to Support Trans People in Our Lives*. Madison, WI: Think Again Training, 2017, page 13.

⁹² Barbee, Harry and Douglas Schrock. 2019. “Un/Gendering Social Selves: How Nonbinary People Navigate and Experience a Binarily Gendered World.” *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 34, No. 3, September 2019, page 575.

⁹³ Hartke, Austen. “God’s Unclassified World: Nonbinary Gender and the Beauty of Creation.” *Christian Century*, April 25, 2018, page 27.

⁹⁴ Heath, Emily C. “Being They: God and Nonbinary Gender.” *Christian Century*, August 17, 2016, page 13.

as Sweden did by introducing the gender-neutral “hen,” based on “hän,” meaning “he or she” in Finnish – with varying degrees of success.”⁹⁵

Why Binary Pronouns are Problematic

The fundamental problem with only having only two pronouns, representing two distinct genders, is that not everyone fits neatly into the categories of “male” or “female.” Davey Shlasko explains it this way:

*The binary gender system teaches us to assume the biological sex and gender identity always line up in particular ways—for example that everyone born with a vulva identifies as a woman, and no one born with a penis does. While it’s true that most people born with a vulva grow up to identify as a woman, some grow up to identify as a man or as nonbinary, and of course the same is true for those born with a penis, and of intersex people born with genitals that are hard to categorize.*⁹⁶

These “hard to categorize” people Shlasko mentions are a small but important part of God’s kingdom and deserve consideration in this conversation. Those who are intersex, that is, exhibit some combination of both male and female sex characteristics, constitute somewhere between .018 and 1.7% of the world’s population. Many of these people have undergone surgeries to “correct” what their doctors thought was a “problem.” Most often these surgical corrections occur in infancy and frequently even without the consent or knowledge of their parents, although in recent years, groups like The Intersex Society of North America have fought

⁹⁵ Berry, Lorraine. “‘They’: the singular pronoun that could solve sexism in English.” *The Guardian*, May 5, 2016. Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/may/05/they-the-singular-pronoun-that-could-solve-sexism-in-english> on December 19, 2022.

⁹⁶ Shlasko, Davey. *Trans Allyship Workbook: Building Skills to Support Trans People in Our Lives*. Madison, WI: Think Again Training, 2017, page 14.

to put an end to surgical modification of infants identified as intersex.⁹⁷ This is good news considering that, according to Jessica Clarke, surgeries performed on infants are more traumatic psychologically than is growing up with genitalia which is against the norm.⁹⁸ It is no surprise, therefore, that many people who are intersex do not feel particularly “male” or “female” and require a nonbinary pronoun to better describe who they are inside.

People who are intersex are not the only ones who find that a nonbinary pronoun is more fitting, however. For a host of reasons (hormonal, psychological, experiential, physiological, chromosomal, etc.), many people feel that they are neither clearly “male” nor “female,” and a nonbinary pronoun better encapsulates this way of being than the binary third person singular pronouns (“he/him/his” and “she/her/hers”) available in the English language.

Dr. Lynn Liben, University Professor of Psychology at Penn State, researched the effects of gender-specific language for fifteen years. Dr. Liben claims that it is not just pronouns that are problematic but all gender-coded words (such as girl, uncle, and Mr.). Her 2008 and 2010 studies of preschoolers found that children inherently adopt ideas about gender stereotypes from the language of the adults around them and are less likely to play with children of a different gender when their teacher uses language such as ‘girls and boys’ rather than ‘children’: “When they see adults talk about gender as a category system, kids become more vigilant about making the distinction themselves.”⁹⁹ Therefore, using less gender-specific and more inclusive language actually molds us from a young age into more accepting and less discriminatory beings.

⁹⁷ Hartke, Austen. “God’s Unclassified World: Nonbinary Gender and the Beauty of Creation.” *Christian Century*, April 25, 2018, page 27.

⁹⁸ Clarke, Jessica A. “They, Them, and Theirs.” *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 132, Issue 3, January 2019, page 930.

⁹⁹ Hess, Amanda. “Multiple Choice.” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 3, 2016, page 14.

Knowing all this, it is easy to see why using correct pronouns (meaning the pronouns that people feel most accurately describes who they are, made known by their own disclosure) is so essential. Camille Brown clarifies this by offering several such reasons: 1) “hearing others use correct pronouns can indicate to a young person the degree to which their physical appearance matches their gender identity or their gender expression,”¹⁰⁰ 2) to “promote a sense of being heard and supported by others,”¹⁰¹ and 3) reducing stress and improving mental health.¹⁰²

What does all of this have to do with the Church? A 2010 study called “At the Intersection of Church and Gay A Review of the Psychological Research on Gay and Lesbian Christians” by Eric Rodriguez examined the prayer habits of LGBTQIA+ Christians in affirming churches. What he found was not surprising: churches that embrace LGBTQIA+ people fully by truly affirming their identity as children of God by using their pronouns, putting them in leadership positions, and making no distinction between them and their non-LGBTQIA+ siblings in Christ rather than merely tolerating them, saw very little difference in the prayer habits of LGBTQIA+ Christians and their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts. The conclusion Rodriguez drew from his data collection is something that all churches need to hear: when people receive love and acceptance from their church, they develop “resilient and healthy religious self-identities...(and) healthy identity integration is possible for LGBTQ persons of

¹⁰⁰ Brown, Camille. “‘It Makes Such a Difference’: An Examination of how LGBTQ Youth Talk about Personal Gender Pronouns.” *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, Volume 32, No. 1, January 2020, pages 74.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, page 75.

¹⁰² *ibid*.

faith, perhaps even the norm given an appropriately supportive religious environment.”¹⁰³

Melissa Wilcox draws a similar conclusion: “the congruence of LGBT identity and Christianity is never in question (in a church) where the identity of LGBT Christians never needs to be negotiated but is simply taken for granted.”¹⁰⁴ This should be a call to action to all churches to accept all people by taking simple steps such as using the correct name and pronouns to address them.

Emerging Nonbinary Pronouns in the English Language

Currently, the most commonly used gender-neutral, third person singular pronoun in the English language is “they.” One common objection to using “they” as a gender-neutral singular pronoun is that it goes against the standard rules of English grammar. Jessica Clarke points out, however, that this objection “elevates rules of grammar over considerations of how to treat one another equally,” and, quoting philosophers Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak, “if using they slightly complicates communication, it is preferable to further maligning minority gender groups.”¹⁰⁵ The English language is, however, beginning to change its stance on this in favor of being more gender-inclusive. The Washington Post added the singular “they” into their stylebook in 2015, and, in that same year, the American Dialect Society voted that the singular form of

¹⁰³ Young, William D. “Listening to Gay Prayers.” *Journal of Religion and Society*, Vol. 22, 2020, ISSN 1522-5668. Page 14.

¹⁰⁴ Wilcox, Melissa M. *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003, page 119.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, page 962.

“they” would be the Word of the Year.¹⁰⁶

Despite this fairly recent activity, usage of this pronoun to indicate a singular person of unknown gender is not new. Without even thinking about it, many English-speaking people will “refer to a hypothetical person who, say, goes to the store and forgets ‘their’ wallet.”¹⁰⁷ In this case, the gender of the person is unknown, so a gender neutral “their” seems natural to those who are not sticklers for grammatical rules. Geoffrey Chaucer was using “they” in this way as early as 1395 when he wrote “The Pardoner’s Tale” (one of *The Canterbury Tales*): “And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame, They wol come up...”¹⁰⁸ William Shakespeare used a similar literary license with “they” in 1594 in “The Comedy of Errors:” “There’s not a man I meet but doth salute me/As if I were their well-acquainted friend.”¹⁰⁹ “It wasn’t until 1745, when the schoolmistress-turned-grammar-expert Ann Fisher proposed ‘he’ as a universal pronoun for a person of unknown gender, that the use of ‘they’ in the same circumstance was respun as grammatically incorrect.”¹¹⁰ This was instantly problematic because of the lack of usable pronouns for use when a person’s gender is unknown or irrelevant. In 1808, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an English poet, offered a possible solution: “repurpose ‘it’ and ‘which’ in order to

¹⁰⁶ Hess, Amanda. “Multiple Choice.” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 3, 2016, page 14.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Berry, Lorraine. “‘They’: the singular pronoun that could solve sexism in English.” *The Guardian*, May 5, 2016. Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/may/05/they-the-singular-pronoun-that-could-solve-sexism-in-english> on December 19, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Hess, Amanda. “Multiple Choice.” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 3, 2016, page 14.

avoid particularizing man or woman, or in order to express either sex indifferently.”¹¹¹

Obviously, his solution was not widely accepted. Still, the official rules of grammar did not stop Jane Austen from using the singular form of “they” seventy-five times in her 1813 masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice*.¹¹² AA Milne was still struggling with this literary problem over 100 years later when he wrote, “If the English language had been properly organised...there would be a word which meant both ‘he’ and ‘she’, and I could write: ‘If John or May comes, heesh will want to play tennis,’ which would save a lot of trouble.”¹¹³

Since that time, a number of neologisms have been coined in an attempt to solve the problem of a lack of a gender neutral third person pronoun in the English language. The most commonly used is “they,” redesigned to refer to only one person rather than a group. This is sometimes confusing because, since “they” can now refer to a singular person or a group of people, it is not always clear if it is referring to one or several people, but, as Jessica Clarke points out, context is generally sufficient to clarify, as is the case with the word “you,” which can be used in the singular or plural.¹¹⁴ There are also a number of less familiar pronouns including “ze” (pronounced as “zee”) and hir (pronounced as “hear”).¹¹⁵ Additionally, some nonbinary people request the honorific prefix “Mx” (pronounced “mix”) rather than the more traditional

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² Berry, Lorraine. “‘They’: the singular pronoun that could solve sexism in English.” *The Guardian*, May 5, 2016. Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/may/05/they-the-singular-pronoun-that-could-solve-sexism-in-english> on December 19, 2022.

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Clarke, Jessica A. “They, Them, and Theirs.” *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 132, Issue 3, January 2019, page 962.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, page 957.

Mr., Mrs., or Ms.¹¹⁶

As nonbinary people and their allies are increasingly using gender nonbinary pronouns, they become more and more common in all areas of human life. In 2016, a court in Oregon became the first in the United States to recognize a nonbinary gender identity. The following year, California passed the “Gender Recognition Act,” which allowed people to change their gender on legal documents to “nonbinary” (and, in the three years that followed, eight more states plus New York City and Washington D.C. followed suit).¹¹⁷ By 2017, Canada, Australia, Bangladesh, Germany, India, Malta, Nepal, New Zealand, and Pakistan all offered nonbinary options on government documents.¹¹⁸ Private and publicly owned companies are making a shift toward affirming pronoun usage too. IBM, an American technology company which now has locations in multiple countries which employs over 350,000 people, now has a pronoun field on employees’ email signatures and includes pronouns in the company directory.¹¹⁹ And, in social media, Facebook has fifty-eight gender categories for people to choose from when making their personal profile.¹²⁰

Unfortunately, these gender-neutral pronouns are also often met with quite a lot of

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, pages 896-897.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, page 897.

¹¹⁹ Johnson, India R., Evava S. Pietri, David M. Buck, and Roua Daas. “What’s in a pronoun: Exploring gender pronouns as an organizational identity-safety cue among sexual and gender minorities.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 97, 104194, July 2021, page 2. Accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104194> on June 10, 2022.

¹²⁰ Barbee, Harry and Douglas Schrock. 2019. “Un/Gendering Social Selves: How Nonbinary People Navigate and Experience a Binarily Gendered World.” *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 34, No. 3, September 2019, page 575.

skepticism, fear, and opposition. The University of Tennessee Pride Center published a blog article in 2015 which encouraged the use of gender-neutral pronouns on campus and offered a list of possible alternatives to “he” and “she.” Almost immediately, Republican State legislatures began criticizing the university’s stance on diversity¹²¹ and the article was removed from the university’s website.¹²² In response to this effort, the very next year a state law was passed which channeled money away from the university’s diversity departments and into minority scholarships.¹²³ Clearly, the English language still has a long way to go to becoming more accepting and inclusive.

¹²¹ Howard, Jennifer. 2015. “Colleges Consider Adopting Inclusive Language in Their Systems.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 23. Accessed at <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.dbq.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=110524196&site=ehost-live> on December 17, 2022.

¹²² Jaschik, Scott. “Fear of New Pronouns,” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 8, 2015. Accessed at <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/09/08/u-tennessee-withdraws-guide-pronouns-preferred-some-transgender-people> on December 19, 2022.

¹²³ Culligan, Tricia. “University of Tennessee Shuts Diversity Office After Sex Week, Gender Diversity.” *NBCNews*, May 21, 2016. Accessed at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/university-tennessee-shuts-diversity-office-after-sex-week-gender-controversy-n578101> on December 17, 2022.

A Christian Response to Nonbinary Humans

Merism in the Creation Story

One of the foundational (albeit flawed) arguments for keeping a binary gender system in the Christian Church comes from Genesis 1:27: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Opponents of nonbinary pronoun usage, particularly in the Church, cite this verse to point out that God created two genders—male and female—and that insisting that there are more genders than the two God created indicates that God somehow made an error.¹²⁴ As Austen Hartke points out, however, God did not create in black-and-white extremes but also in grays and mediums and spectrums. He writes: “the world isn’t separated distinctly into land or sea; there are also marshes, estuaries, and coral reefs...Genesis 1:27 breaks humans into two groups...male and female...(but) this verse does not discredit other sexes or genders, any more than the verse about the separation of day from night resets the existence of dawn and dusk, or the separation of land from sea rejects the existence of marshes and estuaries...Just as we call God the Alpha and the Omega, implying all things from first to last and in between, the author of Genesis 1 is using a poetic device to corral the infinite diversity of creation into categories we can easily understand.”¹²⁵ This poetic device is called merism, which Yael Avrahami defines as—“using two words to describe

¹²⁴ Kennedy, J. W. “The Transgender Moment: Evangelicals hope to respond with both moral authority and biblical compassion to gender identity disorder.” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2008, page 58.

¹²⁵ Hartke, Austen. “God’s Unclassified World: Nonbinary Gender and the Beauty of Creation.” *Christian Century*, April 25, 2018, page 27.

something in its whole or complete form.”¹²⁶ Jože Krašovec elaborates on this definition, offering three characteristics of merism: 1) merism expresses “totality by mentioning the parts, usually the two extremes”; 2) merism serves as a synonym for the words “all,” “every,” and “always;” 3) merism is metaphorical and does not convey its intended purpose when taken literally; and 4) merism is the opposite of antithesis (in which the two words are intended to convey extremes, rather than totality of everything in between the two words as is the case with merism).¹²⁷ In everyday language, saying that a person searched “high” and “low” indicates that they have searched all possible places, not simply on the ceiling and on the floor.¹²⁸ Likewise, saying “young and old are welcome” would indicate that everyone should feel invited, not just toddlers and senior citizens but everyone in between as well.¹²⁹ Possibly the most familiar use of merism is in the traditional wedding vows: “for better and for worse,” “for richer and for poorer,” and “in sickness and in health.”¹³⁰ Certainly no one is arguing that their wedding vows only apply in the extreme circumstances but in all the situations which fall somewhere between the two polars. Therefore, although Genesis 1:27 does indeed claim that God created male and

¹²⁶ Avrahami, Yael. *The Senses of Scripture : Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible*. The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies. New York: T&T Clark, 2012. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.dbq.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=711593&site=ehost-live>, accessed December 14, 2022.

¹²⁷ Krašovec, Jože. “Merism: Polar Expression in Biblical Hebrew.” *Biblica*, Vol. 64, No. 2, 1983, page 232.

¹²⁸ Mariotti, Shannon L. and Joseph H. Lane. *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson. Political Companions to Great American Authors*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2016, page 14.

¹²⁹ Cervel, Ma Sandra Peña. “For Better, for Worse, for Richer, for Poorer, in Sickness and in Health: A Cognitive-Linguistic Approach to Merism,” *Metaphor and Symbol*, Vol. 37, No. 3, June 27, 2022, page 230.

¹³⁰ *ibid*, page 241.

female, if the literary tool merism is used here, as it is in much of the Creation story, the reader is to understand that God created the entire spectrum of genders and, therefore, all people are included in this narrative.

Nonbinary People are Created in the *imago Dei* (Image of God)

Alexander Witt makes this important point about why Christians need to be having conversations about pronouns and gender: “The heart of this conversation is a human person created in the image and likeness of God. All deserve love and respect. We will be judged by how we love others. When it comes to pastoral care of transgender persons, the way of love is the way of the Christian.”¹³¹

The same Creation verse (Genesis 1:27, quoted previously) that is often used to defend a binary system might actually be better used to defend use of a nonbinary pronoun. Perhaps, rather than being concerned with the words “male and female” we might need to focus on the words “in his image.” But what does this mean? Scholars have long debated whether humankind was literally created in God’s image (meaning that God looks like a human) or if it means something more metaphorical. “The discussion whether the image and likeness of God referred to the corporeal or the spiritual aspect of the person has brought us to the conclusion that the question has been placed incorrectly... (this verse) is concerned neither with the corporeal nor with the spiritual qualities of people; it is concerned only with the person as a whole.”¹³² John

¹³¹ Witt, Alexander T. “The Use of Preferred Gender Pronouns.” *Ethics & Medics*, Vol. 26, No. 2, February 2021, page 3.

¹³² Hartke, Austen, quoting Claus Westermann. “God’s Unclassified World: Nonbinary Gender and the Beauty of Creation.” *Christian Century*, April 25, 2018, page 29.

Wesley taught that humankind was made in God's image in a number of ways: God's natural image ("a spiritual being, endued with understanding, freedom of will, and various affections"), God's political image ("the governor of this lower world, having dominion over the fishes of the sea, and over all the earth"), and God's moral image ("in righteousness and true holiness" and "full of love").¹³³ Austen Harke summarizes his understanding of this verse in this way: "We have to say yes to who (sic) God created us to be before we can begin imaging God in the world."¹³⁴

However you choose to read the verse, one thing is clear: God created humankind in God's own image. Christians refer to God in terms of both being a Holy Mother and a Holy Father. Take, for example, Isaiah 64:8: "Yet, O Lord, you are our **Father**; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand," and Isaiah 66:13: "As a **mother** comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." Referring to God with characteristics and titles of both father and mother, it becomes clear that God is not specially male or female and that the "enormity of God (is) far beyond any human understanding of gender. If this is true, and if all of us are made in the image of God, then perhaps (nonbinary) people...were created to be exactly as (they) are: people who transcend binary understanding of gender and live as a reminder of the expansiveness of creation."¹³⁵

¹³³ Hartke, Austen, quoting John Wesley. "God's Unclassified World: Nonbinary Gender and the Beauty of Creation." *Christian Century*, April 25, 2018, page 29.

¹³⁴ Hartke, Austen. "God's Unclassified World: Nonbinary Gender and the Beauty of Creation." *Christian Century*, April 25, 2018, page 29.

¹³⁵ Heath, Emily C. "Being They: God and Nonbinary Gender." *Christian Century*, August 17, 2016, page 13.

Jesus Called on the Disciples to Accept Nonbinary People

Jesus' primary commandments to Christians, as expressed by Jesus in Matthew 22:34-40 are to love God and neighbor:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." foundational to this project. Jesus said that all laws ought to hang on these two commandments.

The Church must begin from this place of loving one another and inviting others to share in God's love in order to follow in Christ's footsteps. This is fundamental to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

While Jesus does not ever specifically address homosexuality in our recorded scriptures, he does have something to say about accepting and caring for nonbinary people. In the ancient world, anyone who lived outside of the gender norm was labeled a eunuch. Eunuchs may have been born intersex (that is, with sexual or reproductive anatomy that is not clearly male or female), or they may have been castrated (having the testicles removed) either voluntarily or by force. Kittredge Cherry claims that the "Hebrew and Greek terms (for eunuchs) seem to have much broader meaning than is commonly associated with eunuchs today and may have referred to anyone who did not procreate."¹³⁶ Eunuchs were typically used as slaves and were not permitted to marry, given their inability (or lack of desire) to engage in reproductive sexual activity, and they were often "feminized male priests, no longer male, but more female, like the

¹³⁶ Cherry, Kittredge, and Zalmon O. Sherwood. *Equal Rites: Lesbian and Gay Worship, Ceremonies, and Celebrations*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, page xvii.

deity they served (Mother Goddess).”¹³⁷ They were the nonbinary people of the Biblical world, and their gender status directly affected their social status. Matthew 19 provides some insight into Jesus’s perspective on how to treat these nonbinary neighbors:

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there. Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?” He said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.” His disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” But he said to them, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.” (Matthew 19:1-12)

This story begins with the Pharisees as they try to test Jesus, asking him if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all. Jesus responds in verses 4-6 that God joins a couple in marriage and, for this reason, they should not separate. The Pharisees then attempt to trap Jesus in his own answer by asking why they were commanded by Moses to allow a divorce, to which Jesus replies that they were “hard-hearted” in their view of marriage but that it was not always this way and that divorce is still a sin. The Pharisees are indignant and comment that it would be better not to marry than to risk the possibility of marrying and committing adultery.

¹³⁷ Patterson, Stephen J. “Punch Thy Neighbor.” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Volume 41, Issue 3, May 2015, page 66.

Then Jesus does something surprising: he widens the conversation to include people who are gender-diverse. Marriage, in the limited man/woman sense, is not possible for everyone, particularly because some people do not fit neatly into the binary categories of man or woman.

Jesus goes on to describe eunuchs, pointing out that there are several ways that a person might fall into this category and that everyone ought to accept these people as they are. Jesus does not make any argument that the eunuchs should try to conform or that they should be looked down upon because of their nonbinary gender. Rather, Jesus urges acceptance of these children of God as they are.¹³⁸ This is in keeping with the Old Testament promise to the eunuchs in Isaiah 56:4-5: “For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

The apostle Philip must have kept this teaching at heart, because in Acts 8:36-39, he baptizes a eunuch:

As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

Anna Rebecca Solevåg claims that the reason that the eunuch asks the question about what prevents him from being baptized is that there were, in fact, Old Testament laws which prohibited such (Deuteronomy 23:1: “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut

¹³⁸ Rogers, Jack. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, pages 130-131.

off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”¹³⁹ Solevåg writes: “The story thus reinterprets the eunuch as someone included in, rather than excluded from, Christian worship. Although his genitals are ‘cut off,’ he is no longer cut off from the house of God. Through baptism, his body is transformed...his stigmata no longer signify exclusion.”¹⁴⁰ As Philip must have known, a church that truly follows in the footsteps of Jesus welcomes nonbinary people and accepts them as beloved creations of a loving Creator.

¹³⁹ Solevåg, Anna Rebecca. “No Nuts? No Problem!” *Biblical Interpretation*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Feb. 2016, page 92.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid*, page 94.

The Pronoun Project

In planning an inclusivity project with which to engage my congregation, the first step I took was to find a place to begin where we all had common ground—a place we would not have much room to disagree. Because our church had already adopted a policy to love and accept everyone, and because we claim to be a Christ-following church, I decided to begin with Jesus’s commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. No one had any objections whatsoever when I floated the idea of doing a project in which we learned to love one another in a more Christlike way. From there, it was not hard to take the next step: loving one another means supporting people for who they were created to be. This is where the brainstorming began—looking for ways in which we, as a loving congregation, could be more accepting and loving of our LGBTQIA+ siblings in Christ. Shanna Kattari claims: “inclusive behaviors are actions and communication supporting (LGBTQIA+) individuals. Examples include using language not reinforcing the gender binary, asking for and using correct pronouns, creation of spaces that welcome members of the transgender community, and acknowledging cisgender (non-transgender) privilege.”¹⁴¹ If the church wanted to love our nonbinary siblings in Christ, these were the areas on which we most needed to focus.

Rob Bell points out:

We have tremendous power as human beings. We can choose all sorts of paths—we can choose peace, we can choose grace, we can choose love. We can also choose other paths, destructive paths, violent paths, abusive paths; we can choose to say no to the goodness of God’s creation. Jesus had a way of talking about the power of this choice. He had a word he used to describe what happens when you reject the good, the true, the beautiful,

¹⁴¹ Kattari, Shanna, Ashley A O’Connor, and Leonardo Kattari. “Development and Validation of the Transgender Inclusive Behavior Scale (TIBS).” *Journal of Homosexuality*, Volume 65, No. 2, 2018, page 181.

the humane. The word Jesus used, and it was a word he used more than anybody else—in fact, he is one of the few people who use this word in the scriptures—is the word hell.^{142\}

In *The Love Wins Companion*, Bell claims that hell is less about a place we go after we die if we do not follow Christ and more a state of being here on earth that we bring about with harmful and destructive behaviors which separate us from God and neighbor. In the same book, Shayne Moore elaborates on this point:

*Jesus insists that hell is very real—uncomfortably real, in fact. But...Jesus did not mean hell is merely a place souls go after people die. Instead, hell is a consequence of people choosing not to follow the path of life God puts before us; by rejecting God, we are free to create hell—both on earth and after death. And to worry about who goes to hell after death while ignoring the hells on earth is massively to miss God's point...*¹⁴³

This is the antithesis of what Bell claims earlier in the book: "...heaven is not a place out there that we will arrive at some day, but a reality we encounter now..."¹⁴⁴ The purpose of this project, as I saw it, was to create a space where LGBTQIA+ people could experience heaven and avoid hell—to grow closer to God and neighbor rather than feeling pushed away and rejected.

Participants

The participants in this project were the roughly 100 members of Powell Presbyterian Church—everyone in the weekly worshipping body (averaging fifty-five people each Sunday) participated in the liturgy changes, received the monthly newsletter with articles about the project and information about how they could be better allies, heard the sermons about loving

¹⁴² Bell, Rob. *The Love Wins Companion: A Study Guide for Those Who Want to Go Deeper*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2005, page 37.

¹⁴³ *ibid*, page 67.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid*, page 25.

one another, saw signage around the building about pronoun usage, and received introductions from their peers using pronouns. These worshipping participants were all ages and included primarily Caucasians in addition to fourteen African Americans, one Latin American, and one Pacific Islander.

A smaller group of people agreed to be more intensely involved in the project, agreeing to participate in surveys to collect data about their experiences, attend the classes, and put their knowledge into practice between classes. Because of the potentially sensitive nature of the topic (with conversations about sexuality and possibly stirring up church traumas which had been experienced in previous worshipping bodies), I limited this group to church members (or people who had attended regularly enough to no longer be considered “visitors”) ages eighteen and older. A total of twenty-five people agreed to full participation and were given directions on how to withdraw from the study at any time. This group ranged in age from twenty to seventy-six (two people ages eighteen to twenty-five, six people ages twenty-six to thirty-five, six people ages thirty-six to forty-five, five people ages forty-six to fifty-five, two people ages fifty-six to sixty-five, three people ages sixty-six to seventy-five, one person ages seventy-six to eighty-five, and no one in the over eight-five category, although a ninety-three year old woman from the congregation did attend the second class). Of these twenty-five participants, ten said that they consider themselves to be LGBTQIA+ with the other fifteen participating as allies. At the beginning of the project, eight of the participants had attended PPC for less than six months; five of them had attended for seven to twelve months; five had attended for one-two years; three had attended three-five years; and four had attended for more than five years. Because the study was designed to break down the gender binary and make the church more gender inclusive, I did not ask participants to disclose their gender on the surveys, but I did invite them to share their

pronouns each week (with the understanding that gender can be fluid, and pronouns might change from time to time).

Process

The early stages of the project began in August 2022. I included a teaser article in the August edition of “Pew News,” our monthly church newsletter, introducing the work we would be doing together and the reasons for embarking on this journey together as a church. (Article can be found in Appendix D.) I also put signs around the building advertising our Affirmed meetings which would take place the following month and including QR codes to our social media pages (Appendix E) and another small sign published by More Light Presbyterians on the welcome table which was entitled “Why Stating Pronouns Matters” (Appendix F).¹⁴⁵ I made announcements weekly from the pulpit inviting anyone who was interested in learning more about being a good ally to join us for our weekly Affirmed meetings on Wednesdays at 6:00 in the month of September 2022.

In September 2022, the real work of the project began. The assembled group met every Wednesday in September at 6:00 for an hour of study, discussion, fellowship, and group growth. (A description of each meeting will follow.) I began our time together by explaining the process and ensuring that everyone knew that I would be using the data collected (anonymously) for a doctoral project, in addition to helping the church grow in their allyship. Before we went any further, I asked everyone to fill out an initial survey (Appendix B), making sure that they understood that participation was voluntary, could be revoked at any time, and was completely anonymous. I also pointed out that they had the option of choosing “decline to answer” or

¹⁴⁵ Sign was downloaded from the More Light Presbyterians website. Accessed at <https://mlp.org/document/11-x-17-why-pronouns-matter-poster/> on July 10, 2022.

leaving any question blank that they did not feel comfortable answering. I collected twenty-five surveys for initial data and compiled the data after the class. The results of the surveys indicated that we did have some work to do in the area of pronoun usage, but that the group was overwhelmingly in favor of learning to be good allies:

- 1) When asked if they introduced themselves using their pronouns, no one indicated that this was their standard practice. One person said that they did this “usually”; seven people indicated that they did this “sometimes”; seven people said that they did this “rarely”; and ten people marked that they never did this.
- 2) When asked if they ask for pronouns when meeting a new person, no one indicated that this was their standard practice. Four people said that they did this “usually”; four people indicated that they did this “sometimes”; eight people said that they did this “rarely”; and nine people marked that they never do this.
- 3) When given the statement “I feel comfortable using the singular form of “they,” seven people said that they “strongly agree”; six people said that they “agree”; three people said that they “neither agree nor disagree”; one person said that they “disagree”; and, although no one said that they “strongly disagree,” eight people indicated that they did not know what the singular form of “they” was.
- 4) When asked if they knew anyone who used non-traditional pronouns like they/them, ze, xe, etc., fourteen people said that they did; three people said that they did not (interesting, since there were people in the class who use “they/them” pronouns); and eight people said that they were unsure.
- 5) When asked if they felt comfortable in religious settings, four people said “always”; ten people said “usually”; four people said “sometimes”; three people said “rarely”; three people

said “never”; and one person did not answer the question. (It should be noted that this survey was completed in a religious setting among church members, so that likely contributed to the high number of people who indicated they were comfortable.)

- 6) When asked if they thought churches were welcoming to LGBTQIA+ people, no one marked “always” or “usually”; seven people said “sometimes”; 15 people said “rarely”; and three people declined to answer.
- 7) When given the statement “LGBTQIA+ people are welcome at Powell Presbyterian Church,” fifteen people said “strongly agree”; four people said “agree”; three people marked “neither agree nor disagree”; two people said they did not know; and one person declined to answer. No one indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- 8) When given the statement “I feel emotionally and spiritually safe at Powell Presbyterian Church,” fifteen people indicated that they “strongly agree”; six people said that they “agree”; two people said “neither agree nor disagree”; one person said “disagree”; and one person declined to answer. No one said that they strongly disagree.
- 9) When given the statement “There is a separation (intentional or unintentional) between LGBTQIA+ people and non-LGBTQIA+ people at Powell Presbyterian Church,” one person said that they “strongly agree”; six people said that they “agree”; nine people said that they “neither agree nor disagree”; four people said that they “disagree”; three people said that they “strongly disagree”; and two people declined to answer. One person did write on the survey form that they noticed the separation but did not think it was necessarily a bad thing and that it happened organically.
- 10) When given the statement “Being an LGBTQIA+ affirming church is important to me,” fourteen people indicated that they “strongly agree”; eight people said that they “agree”; one

person said that they “neither agree nor disagree”; and one person declined to answer. No one indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Four Weekly Classes

Session One: An Introduction to Pronoun Usage and Gender

After opening prayer, the initial welcome, and survey completion, the work of the first session officially began.

The United Church of Christ, a denomination which is known for its liberal and affirming attitude toward all people, created a team called the “Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ.” This team produced a toolkit for churches who are looking to take the steps toward becoming inclusive to LGBTQIA+ people. This toolkit notes: “Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people of faith often experience emotional and spiritual injury in churches that condemn their capacity to love and seek love. Because they’ve learned that ‘All Are Welcome’ usually doesn’t apply to them, they can’t assume that any church will be safe for them and their families.”¹⁴⁶ This concept was the driving force behind our first session, which focused on inclusion and learning to understand and appreciate others by respecting their pronouns and gender identity.

We began the work of the session by setting ground rules for our time together. Borrowing from the session structure of *TransAction: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions*, we agreed upon the following:

¹⁴⁶ United Church of Christ. *Open and Affirming Starter Toolkit*. Cleveland, OH: Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ, 2018, page 3.

- Listen carefully to others.
- Be willing to examine your own beliefs in light of what others say.
- Speak your mind freely, but strive to maintain an open mind.
- Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.
- Don't monopolize the discussion.
- Address remarks to the group and not to an individual.
- Engage in friendly dialogue.
- Everything said in the groups remains confidential.
- Speak only from a place of love.¹⁴⁷

I invited everyone to go around the room and introduce themselves as though they were greeting a stranger. I purposely put myself last. I did not make any comments about the words they said but wrote down the way that each of them made their introductions. Not one person in the circle used pronouns when they offered their names to one another. When it came to me, I introduced myself this way: “My name is Katina Sharp. I use she/her/hers pronouns.” Immediately I could see from their body language that a few people realized they had forgotten to use their pronouns. Some had no response to my use of pronouns at all. I asked the group if they noticed anything about my introduction, and one person offered the observation that I used my pronouns in my introduction. One person was brave enough to ask what that meant. I explained that pronouns are a shortened way of referring to people to avoid repeating names

¹⁴⁷ These guidelines were adapted from The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. *TransAction: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions*. Institute for Welcoming Resources, undated, page 4. The first seven guidelines were taken word-for-word from this manual. The last two were additions the group thought were necessary, in keeping with the manual's directions to add any other guidelines that the group thinks is necessary to me in “respectful community with one another.” (page 4)

several times in a row, and that in English, we typically use the binary system (she for females and he for males) but that this is problematic because not everyone identifies as a female or a male. I explained that many people choose to use nontraditional pronouns such as “they/them” and other words that are new to the English language. I gave them each a chart of personal pronouns taken from the *Trans Allyship Workbook*¹⁴⁸ (chart included as Appendix G) and we discussed which ones were new and which ones were familiar to the group (most of the nontraditional ones were new to most, if not all, of the group). I asked them to go around the room again and try introducing themselves in the way that I did (with both name and pronouns). Although it led to some uncomfortable giggles and squirms, everyone was able to provide their pronouns, and some in the group were surprised to learn that we had a couple of “they/thems” among us.

As an introduction to pronoun usage, I showed the class the video “Connecting the Dots Pronouns Excerpt” from *More Light Presbyterians*.¹⁴⁹ This seventeen-minute excerpt from their longer curriculum offers a brief overview of nonbinary pronouns, how to use them, how to ask for them, and why it is important to use them as requested.

Next we discussed the gender binary—the traditional system of male and female which is often used to classify people based on the genders they were assigned at birth—and the alternative gender nonbinary—recognizing that gender exists as a spectrum and does not fall neatly into two distinct categories. I shared with them the vocabulary terms “gender identity,” “gender assigned at birth,” “gender expression,” “sex,” and “nonbinary” and gave a brief

¹⁴⁸ Shlasko, Davey. *Trans Allyship Workbook: Building Skills to Support Trans People in Our Lives*. Madison, WI: Think Again Training, 2017, page 34.

¹⁴⁹ More Light Presbyterians. Accessed at <https://mlp.org/document/pronouns-video/> on July 15, 2022.

definition of each of them (definitions can be found in the terminology chapter). I helped the group to understand the difference between gender identity (the gender a person feels inwardly) and gender expression (the gender a person demonstrates outwardly) and we discussed the danger of assuming someone's gender identity based on their gender expression (e.g. someone who wears dresses and skirts may or may not identify as female, so it is not safe to assume that just because a person dresses in traditionally feminine clothing that person uses she/her pronouns). There were a great many questions about these confusing terms, and we spent quite a bit of time sorting out the meanings of each of them and using them in intelligent and respectful conversation. The group was fortunate to have a transgender person (using he/him pronouns) in attendance, and he and his family were an invaluable resource for answering the situational questions of some of the attendees. I did point out that not every transgender person shares the experiences of this one human being and that it is always wise to assume nothing about a person but allow them to share their own stories, make their own requests, and be the expert on their own gender.

We ended the session with a quick review of what we had discussed and closed in prayer asking God to guide our path toward inclusion, respect, and love.

Session Two: Misgendering, Deadnaming, and Correct Pronoun Usage

I opened the second session with prayer and an untitled poem by The Rev. Molly McGinnis (which can be found on the More Light Presbyterians website).¹⁵⁰ This training session of the Affirmed group focused on misgendering. After a review of the term “nonbinary” and a

¹⁵⁰ Untitled poem by The Rev. Molly McGinnis (they/them). Accessed at <https://mlp.org/my-pronouns-are/> on July 20, 2022.

review of the difference between gender expression, gender identity, and sex, the group then adopted this definition of misgendering: “referring to someone using a word, especially a pronoun, that does not correctly reflect the gender in which they identify.”¹⁵¹ Beginning here, as well as holding tight to Jessica Clarke’s admonition against misgendering by “the refusal to refer to a person by the correct pronouns or other gender designations,”¹⁵² the group spent some time studying what misgendering looks like, particularly in a faith setting. I shared with them the data I had collected on misgendering.

Misgendering occurs in most every place where nonbinary people go. For example, a study just released this year indicates that 46.50% of intake forms in medical offices do not have gender-affirming language; 81.6% of doctor’s offices do not ask for pronouns upon intake; and 67.5% of medical providers do not ask clients if they would like to be called a name other than their legal name.¹⁵³ In the legal system, it is up to the mercy of the courts if a person is permitted to use a chosen name and nonbinary pronouns. The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin and the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts both have refused to use pronouns as requested by plaintiffs, despite their filing using those pronouns.¹⁵⁴ In airports, the

¹⁵¹ Brown, Camille. “‘It Makes Such a Difference’: An Examination of how LGBTQ Youth Talk about Personal Gender Pronouns.” *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, Volume 32, No. 1, January 2020, page 72.

¹⁵² Clarke, Jessica A. “They, Them, and Theirs.” *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 132, Issue 3, January 2019, page 914.

¹⁵³ Holt, Natalie R., Robyn E. King, Richard Mocariski, Nathan Woodruff, and Debra A. Hope. “Specialists in Name or Practice? The Inclusion of Transgender and Gender Diverse Identities in Online Materials of Gender Specialists.” *J Gay Lesbian Soc Serv.*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2021, page 6.

¹⁵⁴ Salpietro, Francesco G. “R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Transgender Pronoun Preference and the Application of the Model Code of Judicial Conduct.” *Court Review: The Journal of the American Judges Association*, 590, 2017, page 164. Accessed at <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ajacourtreview/590> on June 1, 2022.

TSA agents push either a male or a female button depending on how the person going through security presents, which leads to embarrassment and long delays if the person's anatomy does not match up with what the agent suspects it will.¹⁵⁵

A joint study from 2020 on the effects of trans people feelings supported or rejected offers this finding: when trans people feel a mixture of support and rejection, “participants tended to focus predominantly on the rejecting behaviors. Although these participants conceded that the presence of some supportive... behaviors was preferable to none, for them, ultimately, the perceived rejecting behaviors outweighed the supportive ones. Thus, these participants reported many of the same perceived consequences as (in the rejected category).”¹⁵⁶ Although this study focused primarily on parental support and rejection, the church can certainly use this data to guide its ideas on rejection/support. If this study teaches anything, it is that a small amount of rejection overrides a fair attempt at being supportive. What does this mean for the church? Simply this: support is a whole-church effort. Every time a person is misgendered, it is safe to assume that the misgendered person has internalized that offense and will remember it more so than the times that their gender is affirmed.

In contrast, churches that offer supportive and loving environments create a safe place for LGBTQIA+ people. According to a study by Ribeiro Barbosa, such a church provides “a place where individuals could find support and build up strength through community and spirituality...it was highly empowering to belong to a church that didn't simply ‘tolerate’

¹⁵⁵ Heath, Emily C. “Being They: God and Nonbinary Gender.” *Christian Century*, August 17, 2016, page 11.

¹⁵⁶ Johnson, Kelly C., Allen J. LeBlanc, Paul R. Sterzing, Julianna Deardorff, Tamar Antin, and Walter O. Bockting. “Trans Adolescents’ Perceptions and Experiences of Their Parents’ Supportive and Rejecting Behaviors.” *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 2020, page 164.

LGBTQ individuals, but one that focused on the unique elements of their lives, acknowledging their struggles and their desire to fully belong. (LGBTQ members) sense of community was linked to feelings of support and, because of their individual experiences with discrimination in other spaces, they greatly valued feeling included and welcome in this place...the church (is) a place where they allowed themselves to be vulnerable, which led to emotional healing.”¹⁵⁷

Similar information exists about the harms of deadnaming. As mentioned in the terminology chapter, deadnaming means knowingly using the “dead” name (or old name) of a person who has transitioned or taken on a new name as part of their new beginning. The Cleveland Clinic cites a study which shows that depression and suicidal ideation is decreased when transgender people are called by their chosen names.¹⁵⁸ Deadnaming is often done by accident (habit causes a person to use the deadname without realizing it). In this case, The Cleveland Clinic recommends simply making an apology and then changing the course of the conversation (using the chosen name) going forward.¹⁵⁹

The group spent some time discussing some reasons they thought people might misgender or deadname a person, including both accidental and purposeful reasons. Most of the discussion surrounded the problems of habit (changing a name after calling a person by the deadname for a long period of time) and assumptions (using someone’s gender expression to

¹⁵⁷ Barbosa, C., N.F. Ribeiro, and T. Liechty. “‘I’m Being Told on Sunday Mornings that There’s Nothing Wrong with Me’: Lesbian’s Experiences in an LGBTQ-Oriented Religious Leisure Space.” *Leisure Sciences*, Vol. 42, No. 2, March 2020, page 234.

¹⁵⁸ The Cleveland Clinic. “Why Deadnaming is Harmful: Find out What it is and Why it Should Be Avoided.” November 18, 2021. Accessed at <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/deadnaming/> on December 28, 2022.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

assume we know what their gender identity is). We then spent some time discussing ways to correct the error if we accidentally deadname or misgender (identifying the mistake, correcting it, and using the name or pronoun several times in a row to encourage the creation of habit). We had some discussion about whether or not to apologize for the mistake (because this puts the burden of forgiveness on the person who was deadnamed or misgendered), and the group decided that we could agree that this could be a situational decision.

We finished our time together with a quote from *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit*: “If you don’t know which identity terms, pronouns, or titles to use and find yourself getting ‘stuck’ on terms, recenter yourself on the fact you are talking about a person. It is also okay to ask someone what pronoun they use, or just avoid using gendered terms. Remember, all that is needed to welcome someone is their name.”¹⁶⁰ We ended our meeting in prayer.

Session Three: Situational Practice

This session was a chance for the group to put their new knowledge into practical application. I opened with prayer and then moved into the practice part of our time together. In advance of the session I prepared five scenarios and made slides of each one so that I could read them and display them for the group. One at a time, I read each of the scenarios, and we discussed as a group how to maneuver the situations in a loving and LGBTQIA+ friendly way. In each one, we discussed the actions and possible reactions of the characters in the story as well as the pastor (if they were not mentioned in the scenario), the Session of the church, the

¹⁶⁰ *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit*. 3.0. Vol. 3.0. Saint Paul, MN: ReconcilingWorks, 2017, page 42.

by-standers, and other people as seemed appropriate. I also asked the attendees to brainstorm ways to avoid situations like these happening in the first place, if that seemed possible.

Scenario One: Jamie

When Jamie was in high school, they told their church youth leader that they were nonbinary and wanted to be called by they/them pronouns. Their youth leader had never heard of nonbinary, and so she looked up the term and was surprised to learn that it was a gender classification. The youth leader had only ever heard of male and female genders and was uncomfortable with the idea of having someone nonbinary in her youth group, especially on retreats and at lock-ins. She went to talk to Jamie's parents about this new information, and she was surprised to learn that her parents had no idea what she was talking about. The youth leader and Jamie's parents then went to the pastor for guidance, and the pastor pointed out that the youth leader had broken a confidence by sharing this information without asking Jamie first. The youth leader went back to Jamie to ask permission to discuss their gender with their parents and the pastor, and Jamie was livid that the youth leader had broken their trust by talking to their parents and the pastor without their permission.

As I read this group, there were a lot of wide eyes and uncomfortable squirms. The first person to speak asked if it was wrong for the youth leader to go to the pastor, pointing out that the pastor was in a position to guide the youth leader about such matters. The group agreed that it would be fine for the youth leader to go to the pastor for guidance, provided that details which identify the child were left out and the question was more general in nature—more about what to do in a situation where a child identifies as nonbinary and less about addressing this specific child. One person then pointed out that the youth leader should have asked the youth if they were okay with the leader talking to their parents—there are a great many reasons why a youth would want to avoid that (fear of rejection, being forced to leave the home, conversion therapy, etc.) If the youth asked for their identity to be kept secret, it would be outing them to tell anyone.

There was a great deal of discussion about the issue of lock-ins and youth retreats, which are almost always divided by gender for sleeping and restroom usage. The group most liked the

idea of having common sleeping areas with two or more chaperones in the same room so that gender was not an issue at all as well as implementing all gender restrooms or allowing the youth to use the restroom which matches their gender identity (however, this would not be possible if the youth identify as nonbinary and there is no all-gender restroom).

The group was concerned about the damage done to Jamie, since their trust was broken. Everyone agreed that it would be better to avoid a situation like this in the first place by asking for permission to talk to trusted adults (and respecting their decision if they say no). Since the error had already been made in this situation, they agreed that the best course of action was for the youth leader to apologize to Jamie and get educated as quickly as possible about gender issues so that this can be avoided in the future. They also thought it would be wise for the youth leader to check up on Jamie to be sure that they are safe, both from rejection at home and from ideas of self-harm after feeling hurt by people close to them.

Scenario Two: Maggie

Maggie has been attending First Presbyterian Church since she was eighteen months old. She was baptized there and took her confirmation classes there and taught preschool Sunday School when she was in college. All of this occurred before Maggie transitioned, however. Recently Maggie has asked the church to call her by the name Maggie and using she/her/hers pronouns. A few people have tried to respect Maggie's wishes, but most people have continued to use her deadname and the pronouns they used prior to her transition, despite Maggie's constant requests to the contrary. Maggie is feeling hurt and abandoned by the church who nurtured her for so many years, and she is considering moving her membership to another church in town which is known to be LGBTQIA+ friendly and where no one knows her deadname.

Because this discussion was taking place in an affirming church, this scenario was highly offensive to many in this group. There was some discussion about how tragic it is that churches still treat people in this way. When I reminded them that their task was to address the situation as though it were actually happening, they focused first on who would be responsible for stopping

this injustice. One person commented that they would talk to the pastor about it, and someone else mentioned that they thought Session should also be made aware. There was much discussion about the appropriateness of calling out the behavior in the moment, and most everyone thought that it was the most loving thing to do as long as it was called out gently (giving the offending person the benefit of the doubt that it was an honest mistake and not an intentional harm).

I asked the question, “Should Maggie leave the church if this behavior continues? And if so, does First Presbyterian have any responsibility to her after she leaves?” The group overwhelmingly thought that she should because everyone deserves a place to worship and feel safe. One person suggested that a good ally would help Maggie find such a church, even if it could not be in her home congregation (although it would be preferable to make her home church a welcoming and loving place). We discussed ways to find such a congregation for Maggie, including asking other people for recommendations, visiting websites that list affirming churches, and calling the local pride center and asking for suggestions.

Scenario Three: Andi

Andi and their spouse Jessica just joined the church last month. Jessica uses she/her/hers pronouns and has a very feminine gender expression. Andi is more androgynous, wearing jeans and t-shirts most of the time and keeping a short haircut that does not easily identify Andi as a man or a woman. Everyone has noticed that Jessica calls Andi “they.” Andi has never corrected anyone when they refer to Andi as “he” or “she,” and people often whisper about wondering which gender Andi is. The Presbyterian Women decided to watch to see which restroom Andi uses, but so far, Andi has not been seen to enter either of the restrooms in the church. When one church member asked why it was so important to know which gender Andi is, one of the Presbyterian Women answered that they would like to invite Jessica to join the group but that they were not sure if they should invite Andi or not. “We just don’t want to offend him...or her...” the Presbyterian Women member answered.

“This is why churches get a bad reputation!” was the first comment made after I read this scenario. “Say more about that,” I requested. “They are acting ridiculous. Why is it anyone’s

business what genitalia Andi has?” the indignant group member questioned. This prompted me to give a quick recap about the difference between sex organs and gender identity. I reminded the group that even if they knew what Andi’s genitalia looked like (which would indicate a totally different and dangerous problem of sexual abuse in the church!), that still would not help them to know what Andi’s gender identity was. One person asked if it would be okay for the curious parties to just ask Andi how they identify, but the group decided that this was an offensive question and inappropriate for casual acquaintances to ask. A nonbinary person in our group offered the helpful suggestion that perhaps nonbinary is Andi’s gender identity and that is why they use the pronoun they and so there is really no reason to wonder because everyone already knows the answer to the question, reminding the group that not everyone is going to identify as either male or female. This led to some thoughtful nods and a few “ahh” sounds as people grappled with the idea that nonbinary is a gender identity.

I reminded the group that their job was to make suggestions about how to handle the situation, not just to point out why it is a harmful scenario. The group decided that it would be best, since we do not have any indication that Andi is aware of the situation, to speak with those who are playing gender guessing games privately and gently educate them on why their behavior is insensitive and harmful. They also decided that the pastor and/or Session of the church ought to be tasked with offering some whole-church sensitivity training to avoid situations like this in the future.

“What about the Presbyterian Women problem?” I asked the group. “Should Andi be invited? Just Jessica? Neither of them?” There was a lot of discussion about how to dance around the issue: mailing a postcard invitation to Presbyterian Women to Andi and Jessica’s home with no name specifically listed in the address, inviting Jessica and saying something like, “Do you

think Andi would like to come?” and making general announcements inviting all women to the group from the pulpit on a Sunday morning and/or in the church newsletter. One person offered the suggestion that Presbyterian Women might be a harmful concept in general, since it perpetuates the binary gender system, and suggested that the church consider dropping the word “Women” from the group name and just making it a study and fellowship circle for whomever wishes to come.

Scenario Four: James and Ronnie

James and Ronnie have been attending the church for about six months now. They attend worship regularly, make an offering each week, and even came to help with the food drive last month. Although they usually sit together, no one has ever been quite sure what their relationship to each other is. This morning was the first membership class for people who are interested in joining the church, and they both came. To everyone’s surprise, they told the class that they are actually married and are planning to adopt in the coming year or two. Further, they introduced themselves by saying their names and giving the pronouns they wish to be called. While some of the group was familiar with the practice of sharing pronouns upon introductions, several of them had no idea what this meant. To make things more complicated, one person interjected, “I don’t even believe in that pronoun stuff!”

The group agreed that it sounded like this church had not had proper education on how to be a good ally, and they suggested that this was a good way to prevent scenarios like this in the future. Since it had already occurred in this church, they suggested that anyone in the room could respond immediately by pointing out the insensitivity of the comment and giving a quick lesson on pronoun usage. As a group, we made the assumption that the pastor was leading the membership classes (because that is the case at Powell Presbyterian Church), so the group also thought that the pastor should use their position of authority in this situation to put a stop to the harmful language, offer their own pronouns as a demonstration to the rest of the group, and encourage the group to follow the example by offering their pronouns as well. The group also

thought that the pastor needed to talk to the person who made the offensive comment privately, asking them to refrain from that kind of behavior in the future, and also to James and Ronnie to try to repair any damage that was done to them with that comment.

Senario Five: Alex

Alex is visiting the church for the first time this morning. When Alex enters, Alex is greeted by the usher who gives Alex a bulletin and welcomes Alex to the church. The usher introduces himself and is proud that he remembers to add his pronouns to the introduction. "My name is Alex, and I don't use pronouns," Alex replies. "I prefer if you just use my name." The usher is confused and asks, "Can I call you they/them, since you don't have pronouns?" Alex responds that they/them are pronouns and that Alex prefers to avoid the use of pronouns altogether. "This is all getting so complicated!" the usher exclaims. "Just when I learn to use pronouns they throw in a new trick!" The usher smiles at Alex as he said this as though he is joking, but Alex walks away uncomfortably and quickly finds a seat without talking to anyone else.

The group agreed that the church must have already begun the work of ally training in order for the usher to offer their own pronouns and ask for the pronouns of the visitors. Everyone thought that the usher must have been uncomfortable and making a joke to ease his own discomfort, but that it is always inappropriate to make a joke at someone else's expense. The group decided that the usher should seek Alex out and apologize for being insensitive and then make an effort to introduce Alex to someone else so that he would have the opportunity to practice speaking about Alex without using pronouns. In the event that the usher does not do this, the group thought that the pastor or perhaps someone who was responsible for training ushers for their duties should talk to him privately to explain why his comment was insensitive and offer help practicing talking about Alex without using a pronoun. One person pointed out that any bystander could (and should) go talk to Alex and make Alex feel welcome so that the usher was not the only experience of the church Alex got while Alex was there.

After discussing all of the scenarios (and going over our allotted time by almost fifteen minutes), we closed our time in prayer.

Session Four: Putting our Education into Practical Application at PPC

I opened session four in prayer and briefly reviewed the early teachings of the classes. Although, by this time, the group understood that no one is going to change overnight and that we are all bound to make mistakes when practicing our new ally skills, the goals I challenged the group to live up to were to 1) lead by example and 2) encourage one another, both in their allyship and in their expressions of self. Everyone agreed that respect ought to be our highest calling for living in community with one another. I shared with the group the work of James Martin, a Jesuit priest who wrote *Building a Bridge*, a book which calls upon both the Catholic Church and the LGBTQIA+ community to work together to find common ground. Martin mentions, but does not directly quote, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, number 2358.¹⁶¹ I found the wording of this catechism on a website maintained by the Vatican:

*The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.*¹⁶²

Initially I was floored that a book about LGBTQIA+ inclusion would cite a catechism that used

¹⁶¹ Martin, James. *Building a Bridge (Revised and Expanded): How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018, page 29.

¹⁶² The Holy See Press. "Catechism of the Catholic Church." Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P85.HTM on December 21, 2022.

the phrase “homosexual tendencies” (which feels very disrespectful), but as I gave Martin a chance to redeem the book, I was actually inspired by the take-away he offers from this. While the catechism is not perfect by any means, it does call Catholic Christians to “respect, compassion, and sensitivity” toward LGBTQIA+ people. It is from these three starting points the progress can be made and a bridge can be built.¹⁶³ From this point on, I called on my Affirmed group and the church in which it serves to be respectful, compassionate, and sensitive to one another’s needs and identities.

In session four, I invited the group to brainstorm (with a few nudges from me, having spent quite a bit of time thinking about this outside the classes and researching it on my own) ways we might put our new knowledge into practice, making PPC a place of love and inclusion. The group came up with several ways we could be more inclusive, and we went to work immediately implementing as many of the ideas as possible. We spent the rest of the session making a to-do list to complete over the next couple of months. After affirming our desire to complete as many of our to-do list items as possible before January 1, 2023, we closed our last session together in prayer. The rest of this chapter describes the various items we committed to working on together in October, November, and December 2022.

All Gender Restrooms

Gender-separated restrooms are so commonplace today that it sometimes comes as a surprise to people to learn that this system is really only about 135 years old. As indoor plumbing became more common, most businesses and workplaces had only one restroom which was

¹⁶³ Martin, James. *Building a Bridge (Revised and Expanded): How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018, page 31.

shared by all. In 1887, however, Massachusetts passed a state law requiring workplaces have toilets separated by gender. Over the next thirty years, all the remaining states followed suit.¹⁶⁴

Restrooms separated by gender are often extremely problematic for trans and nonbinary people. As one nonbinary participant in a study on “nonbinary people in a binary world” self-reported: “I don’t really feel comfortable going into a bathroom that says, ‘Men,’ and I don’t feel comfortable going into a bathroom that’s labeled, ‘Women...’ I’m constantly reminded that I live within a gendered society because going to the bathroom is always a hassle. It doesn’t matter what bathroom I use...I don’t fit.”¹⁶⁵ Research by Justin E. Lerner on the avoidance of using public restrooms among transgender people shows that: “In this large and gender-diverse sample, more than six out of ten (61.9 percent) transgender people had avoided using a bathroom in public, at work or at school because they were afraid of having problems using them.”¹⁶⁶ He goes on to report that 23.8% of transgender people have been questioned about being in the wrong restroom at some point during the last year and that being questioned about being in the wrong restroom led to a rate of public restroom avoidance of almost four times that of people who had never been questioned about their restroom choice.¹⁶⁷ He also cites a study which found that suicide rates and the ability to use a public restroom are directly related in transgender university

¹⁶⁴ Lerner, Justin Evan. 2021. “Having to ‘Hold It’: Factors That Influence the Avoidance of Using Public Bathrooms among Transgender People.” *Health & Social Work*, Vol. 46, No. 4, November 22, 2021, page 260.

¹⁶⁵ Barbee, Harry and Douglas Schrock. 2019. “Un/Gendering Social Selves: How Nonbinary People Navigate and Experience a Binarily Gendered World.” *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 34, No. 3, September 2019, page 587.

¹⁶⁶ *ibid*, page 263.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid*, page 265.

students and notes that 61% of students who had been denied bathroom access due to their gender identity had also attempted suicide.¹⁶⁸ In 2016, 12% of transgender people were verbally harassed upon entering a public restroom; 1% were physically attacked, and 1% were sexually attacked.¹⁶⁹ Jessica Clarke claims: “People with nonbinary gender identities, like many transgender men and women, report avoiding public restrooms altogether, with adverse health consequences.”¹⁷⁰ Thirty-two percent of transgender people claim to limit eating and drinking in order to avoid using a public restroom, and in 2016 8% had a urinary tract infection, kidney infection, or other kidney-related problem in that year as the direct result of avoiding restrooms.¹⁷¹ Clarke suggests that the best solution to this problem is to phase out gender-specific restrooms in favor of “all-gender” restrooms with floor-to-ceiling walls or some other way to offer privacy. In the absence of that possibility, for whatever reason, the next best solution is to simply allow people to use the restroom where they feel most comfortable.¹⁷²

Tynslei Spence-Mitchell claims that the problem of restrooms is not new and has been used to discriminate against minorities for decades. Spence-Mitchell writes:

During the Jim Crow era, bathroom segregation policies were enforced to prevent African American women from using the bathroom with white women due to negative

¹⁶⁸ *ibid*, page 261.

¹⁶⁹ Jarry, Jonathan. “The Word ‘Cisgender’ Has Scientific Roots,” McGill Office for Science and Society, November 13, 2021. Accessed at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-general-science/word-cisgender-has-scientific-roots> on December 27, 2022. Page 14.

¹⁷⁰ Clarke, Jessica A. “They, Them, and Theirs.” *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 132, Issue 3, January 2019, page 981.

¹⁷¹ Jarry, Jonathan. “The Word ‘Cisgender’ Has Scientific Roots,” McGill Office for Science and Society, November 13, 2021. Accessed at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-general-science/word-cisgender-has-scientific-roots> on December 27, 2022. Page 15.

¹⁷² Clarke, Jessica A. “They, Them, and Theirs.” *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 132, Issue 3, January 2019, page 981.

sexual stereotypes. In current policy, trans women are prevented from using the bathroom with other women due to negative stereotypes surrounding their sexuality...Bathroom legislation in past and present history highlights a greater issue: white cisgendered femininity being utilized as a tool to further white supremacy and legislation being passed in support of it. White supremacy has constructed white femininity as something that needs consistent protection, and that protection comes at the expense of “othered” sexualities.¹⁷³

Knowing this, the Affirmed group decided to take action at Powell Presbyterian Church.

The group did an inventory of restrooms in the church building: two downstairs (both single-stall, one labeled “men” and one labeled “women”) and four upstairs (one single stall restroom labeled “men,” one single stall restroom labeled “women,” one multi-stall restroom with two urinals and two toilets labeled “men,” and one multi-stall restroom with two toilets labeled “women”). (There is also a very small water closet in the nursery, but it is only used by small children and is not labeled with any gender designation. This restroom was not considered as part of the project.) After some discussion on the matter, the group agreed that it would make sense to change the four single-stall restrooms to “all gender.” They wrote a motion to Session to do just that, and the motion passed with a unanimous vote. The following week, all four of the single-stall restrooms were changed to say “all gender.” The multi-stall restrooms were left with the “men” and “women” label, but it was agreed upon that the church would not police who entered those spaces and would allow people to decide for themselves which restroom best fit their needs.

Introductions with Pronouns and Wearing Nametags with Pronouns

By session four, the group was well-practiced in introducing ourselves with our pronouns

¹⁷³ Spence-Mitchell, Tynslei. 2021. “Restroom Restrictions: How Race and Sexuality Have Affected Bathroom Legislation.” *Gender, Work & Organization*, Vol. 28, Supplement 1, 2021, pages 14-15.

and asking for the pronouns of those we encountered. We were only twenty-six (twenty-five participants plus myself) out of approximately 100 church members, however, and so the group agreed that we needed to take our practice back to Sunday mornings and engage the rest of the congregation in good pronoun usage. Each week, I challenged everyone in the group to find one person to introduce themselves to using their pronouns and then ask the other person what their pronouns were. We discussed how to respond if the other person did not understand what they were being asked and practiced an “elevator speech” about pronoun usage.

One member of the group graciously offered to make nametags with pronouns on them for everyone who had participated in the four sessions. These nametags were on rainbow lanyards, making the people who had finished all four training sessions easy to identify to anyone who was looking for an ally in the church. I regularly point out that just because someone does not have a rainbow lanyard, it does not necessarily mean that they are not an ally, because most everyone in the church has demonstrated their desire to support and love our LGBTQIA+ members, but that the rainbow lanyards just indicate those people who were willing to go the extra steps and now have the knowledge to offer educated support. I put a roll of blank name tags on the welcome table with a permanent marker and the sign from More Light Presbyterians about why pronoun usage matters (Appendix F). I began directing people to the roll of nametags and announcing each week that I requested, on behalf of the Affirmed group, that everyone wear one and include the pronouns they wished to be called on them. Of course, not everyone in the congregation understood what the latter part of the request meant, and I challenged the Affirmed group to begin gently educating people who did not include pronouns on their nametags. When people asked why it was necessary for everyone to include their pronouns (even those who used traditional she/her/hers and he/him/his pronouns), I shared with them the words of India R.

Johnson: "...mandating pronoun disclosure may normalize the practice and alleviate the unnecessary expectation that only nonbinary and transgender persons engage in pronoun disclosure."¹⁷⁴

Email signatures and Zoom profiles

My email has long had a signature box (including my office address, office phone number, cell phone number, and email address) that says "she/her/hers" under my name. Every email I send has this gentle prod to be respectful in our use of pronouns. I pointed this out to the group, and many agreed to take on the challenge of changing their email signatures as well. The more tech-savvy among the group offered to help the less technological participants set this up. The justification for this being a priority for us was that the more occasions that people see pronouns in use, the more it normalizes the practice.

Because this project occurred on the back side of the global COVID-19 pandemic, most everyone in the group was familiar with Zoom (an online meeting platform) and had an account for personal or professional meetings. The group discussed the idea that changing the display name on a Zoom account to include pronouns after the account name was an easy and non-threatening way to normalize pronoun usage. Again, our tech-savvy participants offered to help those who needed assistance making this subtle change.

¹⁷⁴ Johnson, India R., Evava S. Pietri, David M. Buck, and Roua Daas. "What's in a pronoun: Exploring gender pronouns as an organizational identity-safety cue among sexual and gender minorities." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 97, 104194, July 2021, page 2. Accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104194> on June 10, 2022.

Changing Binary Programs to Be More Inclusive

The scenario the group discussed in Session Three (described previously) about the name Presbyterian Women prompted the Affirmed group to revisit the idea of eliminating binary guidelines to church programs. At the time of the discussion, Powell Presbyterian did have an active Presbyterian Women group, and the leader of that group was also part of the Affirmed class. She told the group that she was planning to lead the women in a book study beginning after Christmas and that she did not think anyone would mind at all if the group was open to people who did not identify as female. With that, the name “Presbyterian Women” was dropped from the list of church programs and replaced with “Book and Study Club” which meets at the same time. The leader of the program plans to announce the change in the morning announcements and in the church newsletter early in the new year so that everyone feels welcome to attend.

Joining More Light Presbyterians

According to their website:

More Light Presbyterians engages over 230 congregations and thousands of individuals in the Presbyterian Church (USA), enabling Presbyterians to lead LGBTQIA+ service and advocacy in communities nationwide. More Light’s mission has always been to empower and equip individuals and congregations to live into their welcome for LGBTQIA+ people. More Light has developed interrelated programs to move congregations along a pathway towards full inclusion, improve ministry services for LGBTQIA+ individuals in need, and expand the faith-based movement opposing discriminatory legislation. Our programs help congregations and our members build their capacity and develop new skills to deepen their welcome to LGBTQIA+ people within their churches and in their wider communities.¹⁷⁵

I introduced the idea of joining More Light Presbyterians with the Affirmed allies first.

¹⁷⁵ More Light Presbyterians. “Who We Are.” Accessed at <https://mlp.org/our-story/> on December 24, 2022.

We explored their website and looked at the membership requirements and mission statement, comparing it to our church's own. The Affirmed ministry very much agreed that the mission was in line with Powell Presbyterian's and immediately printed a copy of the steps to membership on their website.

Because the church is governed by a Session, the decision to join was not actually Affirmed's to make, so we prepared a motion that we join the group and outlined the suggested next steps, and a Session Ruling Elder who was also part of the Affirmed ministry offered to make the motion on the floor of Session. It was quickly seconded by an interested party on Session, and all the Ruling Elders were given a few minutes to look over the More Light Presbyterians website. It was just a matter of minutes before someone called for the vote, and the Session unanimously voted to join the group. PPC is now listed on their website and displays the More Light Logo proudly on the church website and in their publications.

Nonbinary pronoun Usage in Liturgy

This area was primarily mine to practice, since I am the one who writes and prints the liturgy for the worship services and studies each week. Kittredge Cherry notes that inclusive liturgy is often uncomfortable for parishioners in the beginning but opens a "way for them to experience new dimensions of the divine" in the long-run. Kittredge goes on to say that the "growing use of inclusive language in worship reflects a serious commitment to use words more responsibly, to speak more precisely, and to communicate sensitively."¹⁷⁶ As I prepared the bulletin and weekly liturgy, I tried to be very conscious of the gender binaries I was using,

¹⁷⁶ Cherry, Kittredge, and Zalmon O. Sherwood. *Equal Rites: Lesbian and Gay Worship, Ceremonies, and Celebrations*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, page xiv.

however inadvertently. I began to replace “brothers and sisters” with “siblings in Christ” and divided crowd readings into “left side” and “right side,” rather than “men” and “women.” Following the advice of Emily Heath, I stopped using the terms “same-sex marriage” and “same-gender marriage” (opting, instead, just for “marriage”).¹⁷⁷ All of this is intended to reach and include LGBTQIA+ people whom Kittredge claims are “starved for words of life, for symbolic forms that wholeheartedly affirm their personhood” because “traditional worship’s message for sexual minorities is so ambivalent, irrational, and nonsensical, its power so negative, that attendance at such rites can poison lesbian/gay souls. Worship has become all too often an occasion of sin rather than redemption, a place from which lesbians and gay men come away angry and frustrated rather than enlightened and healed.”¹⁷⁸

Ronald Witherup notes:

*Inclusive language used to be viewed as a restricted concern of those in academia, far removed from the daily lives of ordinary people. But with the rapid changes in society and with increased awareness of the issues involved, that situation is no longer the case. Many parishioners even in small, rural parishes will have at least heard about the notion of inclusive language, even though they may not have strong feelings one way or another.*¹⁷⁹

and elaborates on this in a later chapter:

inclusive language...is language that engages all people in the action of prayer and worship. It excludes no one; rather, all are invited equally into the liturgical experience. Such language fosters unity rather than division, a sense of belonging rather than displacement. Excising all exclusive language from the Bible or the regulated liturgical texts of the Church is not always possible, especially in the current situation of diverse

¹⁷⁷ Heath, Emily C. “Being They: God and Nonbinary Gender.” *Christian Century*, August 17, 2016, page 13.

¹⁷⁸ Cherry, Kittredge, and Zalmon O. Sherwood. *Equal Rites: Lesbian and Gay Worship, Ceremonies, and Celebrations*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, page xv.

¹⁷⁹ Witherup, Ronald D. *A Liturgist's Guide to Inclusive Language*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996, page xii.

responses to the entire issue of exclusive and inclusive language. But every worshipping community should acknowledge its own historical heritage (including exclusivity) and, at the same time, be committed to fostering inclusive language wherever possible.¹⁸⁰

The challenge of creating inclusive liturgy while being true to the Scriptures is that “in the scriptures, we are confronted not only by God’s redeeming Word, but also by the sinful response to that Word, both in the texts and in our lives. The history of exclusion must never be covered over by making the reading comfortably inclusive.”¹⁸¹ Therefore, there will sometimes be Scripture which cannot be reworded for inclusivity without losing the truth that humankind has participated in the sin of discrimination and judgment of the other which has historically contributed to the binary and often patriarchal language.

The Inclusive New Testament, in its brief introduction about why the editors created the text at all, states this:

The Word became flesh within a culture where sexist structures and institutions were considered the norm. The texts went through varieties of translations into other languages and cultures, and each time the people of those times and places had to find ways of expressing the Word in their own limited way. So too are our translations of scripture layered with cultural baggage—and sexism, being very much a part of that cultural baggage, continues to permeate our reading of scripture. At the same time, we know that the Word of God is not bound by such cultural restraints. The Word of God is countercultural, challenging our most sacred cows.¹⁸²

Historically, many of the names for God have followed these cultural restraints and have been very masculine in nature. The editors for this Biblical translation recommend using “Abba God” in place of “Father.” This exchange “retain(s) the idea of intimacy of relationship while

¹⁸⁰ *ibid*, page 11.

¹⁸¹ Priests for Equality. *The Inclusive New Testament*. Brentwood, MD: Priests for Equality, 1996, page xvi.

¹⁸² *ibid*, page xxii.

de-emphasizing the idea of fatherhood.”¹⁸³ As God is not known to have any true gender, masculine names do not allow for the fullness of God’s being and often make it difficult for those who are not male to see themselves in the image of God and also limits the vastness of God’s nature. Kittredge Cherry offers several additional suggestions for addressing God in gender-inclusive terms: “Gentle One, Justice Seeker, Giver of Hope, Compassionate One, Healer, Comforter, Companion, Creator, Lover, Amazing Grace Liberator, Risk Taker, and Friend of the Poor.”¹⁸⁴

In addressing Jesus Christ, *The Inclusive New Testament* claims it is important to “emphasize humanity over maleness. The significance of the Incarnation...is not that God became a man, but that God—all-powerful, all-knowing and seeing, absolute Divinity—became flesh, took on human life and suffering and weakness.” In keeping with this spirit, the editors of this text recommend using male pronouns for Jesus when describing his earthly ministry but gender-inclusive words to describe Jesus following the Resurrection.

Powell Presbyterian Church, like many other Christian churches, sings a doxology each week. Ashely Hooker describes doxologies in this way:

Merriam-Webster defines the word doxology as an expression of praise to God, usually liturgical. This word is comprised of the Greek words doxa and logos. In the Greek language, doxa means glory, splendor, or grandeur while the Greek word logos means word or speaking...Doxologies are an expression of praise to God. In the Christian church, we often hear them sung or chanted. They are a tradition that has meaning and importance for all Christians. Since the early church, doxologies have been a way for Christians to express their love and thankfulness for what God has done in their lives. A doxology will be heard at the end of canticles, psalms, and hymns. They are a short hymn

¹⁸³ *ibid*, page xvii.

¹⁸⁴ Cherry, Kittredge, and Zalmon O. Sherwood. *Equal Rites: Lesbian and Gay Worship, Ceremonies, and Celebrations*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, pages xvi-xvii.

*of praise one will find in various Christian and Jewish worship services today.*¹⁸⁵

The doxology that we sing in worship each week is the 1674 song written by Thomas Ken entitled “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow,” which is very common in Presbyterian Churches, especially as a response to the offering. The lyrics to this doxology, which is taken from the last stanza of a fourteen-stanza song are:

*Praise God from whom all Blessings flow,
Praise him all Creatures here below,
Praise him above, ye Heavenly Host.
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*¹⁸⁶

These lyrics are well-known to my congregation and have been sung in this format there since before I began as the pastor (and I have been singing them in various Presbyterian Churches since my childhood). Until recently, I had not given the lyrics much thought. In addressing the problems of gendered language in the Church, however, I became aware of the masculine pronouns for God in this familiar piece. As a result, I suggested that the congregation begin singing the lyrics in this way:

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
Praise God, all creatures here below.
Praise God, above, ye heavenly host.
Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost!*¹⁸⁷

Admittedly, most people still sing the lyrics in the old format, most likely out of habit, but

¹⁸⁵ Hooker, Ashley. “What is the Doxology? Its Meaning and Importance in Christianity.” *Christianity.com*. June 22, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/church/the-doxology-its-meaning-and-importance-in-christianity.html> on January 2, 2023.

¹⁸⁶ Smith, James D. III. “Where Did We Get the Doxology? The Story Behind the World’s Best-Known Hymn.” *Christian History: The Golden Age of Hymns*, Issue 31, 1991. Accessed at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-31/where-did-we-get-doxology.html> on January 2, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ Borrowed from the liturgy of First Congregational Church, UCC, in Bellingham, WA. Accessed at <https://worshipwords.co.uk/tag/doxology-using-inclusive-language/> on November 13, 2022.

increasingly I hear the gender-inclusive lyrics from the worshipping body.

Sermons

Again, this area was primarily mine to implement. During the months of October-December, I made a concentrated effort to address the injustices the church has inflicted upon the LGBTQIA+ community in my weekly sermons. While we did not have an official “pride service” during these months, and I did not preach any sermon entirely on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, I did give a voice to the LGBTQIA+ community as many times as possible during the final quarter of the calendar year. This is an area where I plan to continue to grow in the future because it has become obvious to me that hearing the pastor affirm the personhood of each individual and preach about love and inclusion is necessary not only for the LGBTQIA+ parishioners but also for the church as a whole as they think about the importance of being a loving and inclusive church.

Conclusions

Laurel Zwissler makes a distinction between “queer spaces” (that is, spaces which are primarily owned, operated, or inhabited by LGBTQIA+ people) and “queer-welcoming spaces” (that is, spaces which are owned, operated, or inhabited by a mix of LGBTQIA+ people and their cis, heterosexual neighbors).¹⁸⁸ Today, the congregation of Powell Presbyterian Church would easily qualify as a “queer-welcoming space” by Zwissler’s definition. Leigh Finke points out that this is not just beneficial for the LGBTQIA+ community but also for the church itself. She says:

*Safe spaces aren't just for queer teenagers—they benefit everyone. All of your students will grow by learning how to welcome, affirm, and accept people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Your non-LGBTQ+ students will be more comfortable inviting their queer friends (because, yes, they have queer friends) to church when they know their friends will be valued and love. And your straight and cis students will be grateful for a space that doesn't reduce them to gender stereotypes or limit them to narrow ideas about their bodies and relationships.*¹⁸⁹

Although Finke is writing specifically about church youth groups, the wisdom can be applied to all areas of church life.

Upon the completion of the project (and I only say completion because there was a necessary end date for data collection purposes—the work that this project began will necessarily continue indefinitely) I asked all of the participants who had participated from the very beginning (the same twenty-five that completed the initial surveys) to complete an exit survey summarizing their experience. Because of the busyness of December, both in the church and in

¹⁸⁸ Zwissler, Laurel. “Sex, Love, and an Old Brick Building: A United Church of Canada Congregation Transitions to LGBTQ Inclusion.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 87, No. 4, December 2019, page 1132.

¹⁸⁹ Finke, Leigh. *Welcoming and Affirming: A Guide to Supporting and Working with LGBTQ+ Christian Youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2020, page 118.

the secular world, I asked the participants to complete the surveys sometime during the month of December. The final surveys were collected at the worship service on January 1, 2023, officially completing the data collection phase. The results of the exit surveys indicated that we still have work to do, but the project helped the church make good progress toward being more inclusive, unified, and loving to one another.

- 1) When asked if they introduced themselves using their pronouns at this point, one person said “always”; four people said “usually”; ten people said “sometimes”; six people said “rarely”; and three people said “never.” One person declined to answer the question.
- 2) When asked if they requested pronouns when meeting someone new, one person said “always”; three people said “usually”; eleven people said “sometimes”; six people said “rarely”; three people said “never”; and one person declined to answer.
- 3) When given the statement “I feel comfortable using the singular form of ‘they,’” ten people indicated they “strongly agree”; eight people said that they “agree”; four people “neither agree nor disagree”; and three people “disagree.” No one indicated that they did not know what the singular form of they was.
- 4) When asked if they knew someone who uses non-traditional pronouns, a jaw-dropping twenty-three people said that they did, and two people said that they were “unsure.” (This high number is most likely due to the fact that we had a few in the class who used they/them pronouns, and this was made known during introductions each week.)
- 5) When given the statement “I feel comfortable in religious settings,” three people said “always”; eleven people said “usually”; nine people said “sometimes”; and two people said “rarely.” No one said that they never agreed with this statement.

- 6) When given the statement “Churches are welcoming of LGBTQIA+ people,” zero people said “always”; zero people responded “usually”; fourteen people said “sometimes”; and ten people said “rarely.” No one said “never” but one person declined to answer.
- 7) When given the statement “LGBTQIA+ people are welcome at Powell Presbyterian Church,” an impressive seventeen people said “strongly agree”; four people said “agree”; three people said “neither agree nor disagree”; and no one said “disagree” or “strongly disagree.”
- 8) When given the statement “I feel emotionally and spiritually safe at Powell Presbyterian Church,” fifteen people said they “strongly agree;” nine people claimed to “agree;” and one person said “neither agree nor disagree.” Thankfully, no one said “disagree,” “strongly disagree,” or “decline to answer.”
- 9) When given the statement, “There is a separation (intentional or unintentional) between LGBTQIA+ people and non-LGBTQIA+ people at Powell Presbyterian Church, no one claimed to “strongly agree.” Four people said that they “agree”; eight people said they “neither agree nor disagree”; nine people claimed to “disagree”; and four people said they “strongly disagree.”
- 10) When given the statement, “Being an LGBTQIA+ affirming church is important to me, the vast majority (eighteen people) said they “strongly agree”; four people claimed to “agree”; and two people said they “neither agree nor disagree.” While one person did decline to answer, no one said they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with the statement.
- 11) When given the statement, “As a result of this project, I feel more comfortable at Powell Presbyterian Church,” five people said they “strongly agree”; ten people claimed to “agree”;

eight people said “neither agree nor disagree”; and one person said they “disagree.” No one claimed to “strongly disagree,” but one person did decline to answer.

- 12) When given the statement, “As a result of this project, the church is more unified,” eight people claimed to “strongly agree”; twelve people said that they “agree”; three people “neither agree nor disagree”; one person said “disagree”; and one person declined to answer. No one said that they “strongly disagree.”

Effects of the Pronoun Project on Powell Presbyterian Church

One of my goals with this project was to better unify the church. Although the congregation was, on the whole, very accepting of LGBTQIA+ people, I had noticed that the two groups (LGBTQIA+ and non-LGBTQIA+) tended to stay segregated at events like church potlucks and even in worship. My hope was that giving the two groups a common goal would bring them together and break down that divisive barrier. At this point in the project (the official work completed, but the real work of being the Church together continuing indefinitely), my observation of the church is that it was moderately successful. I was encouraged to see that, at our Christmas potluck on December 18, 2022, there were several tables that included both LGBTQIA+ people and non-LGBTQIA+ people. There were, however, several tables that were exclusively one or the other. There is still much work to be done in order for the church to truly put aside all barriers that divide, but we are making progress. When I get frustrated that the church has not fully put aside the desire to separate among classes, I am comforted by the words of Steven Shakespeare:

Inclusion divides, and this should not surprise us...inclusion should not be reduced to a shapeless tolerance for anything and everything. Rather, it is central to the challenge of authentic Christian faith and community...The crossing of boundaries, the welcoming of strangers, the pouring of the Spirit on all flesh: these have shaped the dynamic of

*Christian faith from the beginning...Authentic inclusion is a way of putting into practice the doctrines of creation, redemption and sanctification. Creation is what binds us to one another, to the earth and to the God in whose image all people are made...And the Holy Spirit guides and transforms our hearts, leading us to a new creation where differences are celebrated but divisions are no longer absolute...This does not mean that we sink back into passivity because God does everything for us. Inclusion is costly and transformative.*¹⁹⁰

Indeed, there have been many growing pains that have caused us to fear this change toward inclusion, but the work is valuable and good, and we need not ignore our differences entirely but actually embrace them and celebrate them for the good and unique nature of Creation. John Pavlovitz points out that achieving unity does not mean that we lose the characteristics which differentiate us. “When Jesus began the new kingdom movement, it had only its beautiful oddness, its counterintuitive compassion, its wonderful *different-ness* to do the work of drawing people to it...The early Christians were a queer lot for sure, and this is the very reason they were not extinguished as they began.”¹⁹¹

One of the proudest moments for me as the pastor and creator of this project was in late September 2022 when Knoxville, TN held its annual Pride Parade. PPC had a float in the parade this year, and we had eighteen people on the float, representing both LGBTQIA+ people and allies. Everyone worked together to decorate the float, and we took a photo of everyone arm-in-arm and decked out in rainbow garments when it was completed. We proudly displayed the church banner in the front, and people on the sides watching the parade pointed and commented about how awesome it was that a church showed up to support the event. The next day we had a booth at Knoxville Pridefest (October 1) in which we displayed information about our church and the Affirmed program (Appendix H) and spent the day talking to people who

¹⁹⁰ Shakespeare, Steven. *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*. New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2008. pages ix-x.

¹⁹¹ Pavlovitz, John. *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017, pages 135-136.

stopped by our booth to ask questions about the church, thank us for being there, pray with people, and give our

LGBTQIA+ siblings in Christ a word of support from an affirming Christian congregation. I was thrilled to hear the members of my church introduce themselves using their pronouns, asking for the pronouns of the guests at the table, and speaking with respect and love to everyone who came by that day.

Moving Forward

As we move forward as a congregation, one project for the future I would like to embrace is working on the way we talk about the work we are doing. I have heard many comments to the effect of “We knew that creating Affirmed would ruffle some feathers, but we think it is worth it.” While this is true, *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit* suggests losing that kind of narrative entirely because it sets up the expectation that there will be unpleasant moments and potential divisions:

...frames are often unintentionally set in a negative way when talking about welcoming LGBTQIA+ people into a faith community. For example, if a (church) member...were to tell a community member, ‘I know this work will be hard, and might cause some division, but it is important so we are going to talk about welcoming LGBTQIA+ people anyway,’ the frame has been set that this work will be ‘hard’ and create ‘division.’ It is important to not reinforce negative stereotypes in this holy work.¹⁹²

While I wish that I had read this bit of advice on the front end and could have guided the language in a more positive light from the beginning, I am grateful for this wisdom moving forward and would encourage churches who are planning to embark on a journey toward inclusivity to consider this up front.

¹⁹² *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit*. 3.0. Vol. 3.0. Saint Paul, MN: ReconcilingWorks, 2017, page 35.

The Affirmed group has plans to meet once a month (as we did in October and November 2022, taking December off so that we could use that time for Advent studies) indefinitely. Ally training will continue to be an important part of our mission, holding the four-week training series at least one-two times a year for those who would like a refresher or are new to the program. We also have plans to hold special interest classes such as a legal workshop in which we discuss the delicate legal needs of LGBTQIA+ people in protecting their rights and Bible studies in which we study the “clobber passages” (that is, the passages of the Bible which are most often used to condemn LGBTQIA+ and keep them out of the Church).

Unintended Results of the Project

Church growth

While the goal of this project was not to grow the church, this ended up being an unintentional side effect of the program. As information about Affirmed got out into the LGBTQIA+ community, and word spread that there was a fully affirming church in Powell where LGBTQIA+ people could be fully included and embraced, visitors began showing up on Sunday mornings. It is now my practice to introduce myself to every visitor using my pronouns as a result of our practice together, and I generally ask some sort of question to find out how the visitors found our little church or what brought them to our doors. Overwhelmingly, the response to that question has been something like “I heard you were a welcoming church,” or “Knox Pride sent me because they said you were a safe place for people like me,” or “My friend is gay and attends here. He said I should come check it out!” Our current membership class has thirteen people in it—adding more than 10% to our membership when they become official members. Of

these thirteen, five are LGBTQIA+, and four of them who are not LGBTQIA+ have joined our Affirmed group as allies. In the month of December 2022, we had an additional four LGBTQIA+ visitors. Clearly, there was a great need for an affirming church in our area, and PPC is embracing these newcomers with hospitality and joy. (With the exception of the one person who left when we first created Affirmed, mentioned earlier in this thesis, we have not had anyone leave as the result of our welcoming attitude.)

Community Unity

While the focus of this project was unity within the church, an unexpected effect of the project has been the way it has united the community outside the church building. Since we put the rainbow flags in the yard, the church has gotten quite a bit of attention on the Facebook page for the neighborhood in which it sits. Several people asked about the flags and if they indicated that PPC was a “gay church” and others jumped into the conversation to say that the church was just welcoming of everyone. There is a cabinet in the front yard that we call the “Blessings Box” in which we stock food and hygiene items for our neighbors who do not have these items at their disposal, and we have seen a great increase in the amount of donations we have received there from our neighbors who are not church members. We have added a Boy Scout Troop which is open to people of all genders (they claim to be the first troop in Tennessee to welcome youth who were not male, but I was not able to verify if this was factual or not). We have opened our building to families participating in Family Promise (a program to help families experiencing homelessness stay under one roof) who are LGBTQIA+, which disqualifies them from staying in some of the other churches who participate in the program. We held four LGBTQIA+ weddings on the church grounds in 2022 (none of whom were church members), and we hosted a surprise

sixtieth birthday party for a woman whose wife called to ask if the building could be made available because she understood that we were welcoming of LGBTQIA+ people and they intended to decorate with rainbows because the birthday fell during the celebration of Pride in Knoxville (in October 2022).

Because I had started this project by calling Knox Pride and developing a relationship with the directors, by the end of the project I had a pretty good relationship with the people there. The Executive Director, a transgender female whom I have become friends with over the last few months, recently called me with a problem with which she thought I might be able to help. A pastor in our area had been calling on his congregation and the community around him to protest drag shows and was releasing the personal information about the drag artists in the East Tennessee area. As a result, many of the drag artists had been receiving death threats and were having trouble finding paying work. Additionally, the day after the November 2022 election, Tennessee State legislatures immediately released what has been called the “Slate of Hate,” a series of proposed bills that would limit the rights of drag artists and would have a very dangerous trickle-down effect on transgender and nonbinary people.¹⁹³ The Pride director asked if I could come to the Pride Center, along with any other like-mine clergy friends I could gather, and help brainstorm ideas for ways in which we could counteract the harmful rhetoric of the pastor inciting violence and the legislators (who were using Christianity and “family values” as a method to push the discriminatory bills forward). The following week, I was sitting in the Pride Center with two other affirming pastors, a lawyer, two transgender drag artists, and two gay men who work for Knox Pride, and we created Knox Pride Interfaith.

¹⁹³ Information about the bills in the “Slate of Hate” can be found at the Tennessee Equality Project’s website at <https://www.tnep.org/blog>.

Knox Pride Interfaith (KPI), of which I am co-chair now, is an interfaith gathering of LGBTQIA+ affirming religious leaders who are willing to use their votes and their positions of authority in their religious settings and in the community to stand up for LGBTQIA+ rights and fight against injustices to this group. In the short time since this group was created (approximately six weeks), we have grown the group to over twenty religious leaders, met three times (including a lunch with the Knoxville City Mayor), created a joint statement video which was released on social media, and held a press conference with four major news outlets in attendance in solidarity with our LGBTQIA+ siblings. Truly, making it known that PPC is a safe space for LGBTQIA+ people has opened doors for connections in the community which would not have otherwise existed. This very much follows the advice of *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit*, which suggests that the work of church allyship cannot stop at the doors of the sanctuary but must include the people in the community in which the church sits. As the manual states: “(Being an affirming church) is not only important within the four walls of worship, but the church building is also critical in the life of LGBTQIA+ people in the cities, counties, and states in which they live.”¹⁹⁴

Final Conclusions

The Christian Church has gotten a bad reputation for being exclusive when it comes to LGBTQIA+ people, and for good reason. Overwhelmingly, churches have not been safe spaces for LGTBQIA+ people and have caused more harm than good. This is not universally true, however, and Powell Presbyterian Church has been an intentional effort to offer a different

¹⁹⁴ *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit*. 3.0. Vol. 3.0. Saint Paul, MN: ReconcilingWorks, 2017, page 52.

experience—a place where LGBTQIA+ people are treated as beloved children of God and cherished for being perfectly created by a perfect Creator. This was not without growing pains, but the Affirmed LGBTQIA+ ministry and all of the LGBTQIA+ members and guests who have crossed through the church doors have been embraced with love. Beginning with the simple acts of learning about and practicing respectful use of pronouns, the congregation of PPC embarked on a journey toward inclusion and acceptance. Truly it is the mission of this small but mighty church that we follow Jesus' lead to love God and love our neighbors. The rest is surely just details.

Bibliography

- Achtemeier, Mark. *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical's Change of Heart*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.
- Aelred, Peter. *To Melt a Golden Calf: An Evangelical Christian Case for Same-Sex Relationships*. Coppell, TX: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.
- Avrahami, Yael. *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible*. The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies. New York: T&T Clark, 2012. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.dbq.edu/login.aspxdirect=true&db=nlebk&AN=711593&site=ehost-live>, accessed December 14, 2022.
- Balog, David. *Healing the Brain: Stress, Trauma and LGBT/Q Youth*. Schenectady, NY: Healing the Brain Books, 2018.
- Barbee, Harry and Douglas Schrock. 2019. "Un/Gendering Social Selves: How Nonbinary People Navigate and Experience a Binarily Gendered World." *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 34, No. 3, September 2019. Pages 572–93.
- Barbosa, C., N.F. Ribeiro, and T. Liechty. "I'm Being Told on Sunday Mornings that There's Nothing Wrong with Me': Lesbian's Experiences in an LGBTQ-Oriented Religious Leisure Space." *Leisure Sciences*, Vol. 42, No. 2, March 2020. Pages 224-242.
- Bell, Rob. *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005.
- Bell, Rob. *The Love Wins Companion: A Study Guide for Those Who Want to Go Deeper*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2005.
- Berry, Lorraine. "'They': the singular pronoun that could solve sexism in English." *The Guardian*, May 5, 2016. Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/may/05/they-the-singular-pronoun-that-could-solve-sexism-in-english> on December 19, 2022.
- Boesser, Sara L. *Silent Lives: How High a Price? For Personal Reflections and Group Discussions about Sexual Orientation*. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2004.
- Brown, Camille. "'It Makes Such a Difference': An Examination of how LGBTQ Youth Talk about Personal Gender Pronouns." *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, Volume 32, No. 1, January 2020. Pages 70-80.
- Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit*. 3.0. Vol. 3.0. Saint Paul, MN: ReconcilingWorks, 2017.
- Cervel, Ma Sandra Peña. "For Better, for Worse, for Richer, for Poorer, in Sickness and in Health: A Cognitive-Linguistic Approach to Merism," *Metaphor and Symbol*, Vol. 37, No. 3, June 27, 2022. Pages 229-251.
- Cherry, Kittredge, and Zalmon O. Sherwood. *Equal Rites: Lesbian and Gay Worship, Ceremonies, and Celebrations*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.
- Chow, Peter and Mikayla Jeffery. "The Reliability and Validity of the Anima-Animus Continuum Scale." *Education*, Vol. 138 Issue 3, Spring, 2018. Pages 264-270.

- Clarke, Jessica A. "They, Them, and Theirs." *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 132, Issue 3, January 2019. Pages 895-991.
- Cornwall, Susannah. *Sexuality: The Inclusive Church Resource*. London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2014.
- Culligan, Tricia. "University of Tennessee Shuts Diversity Office After Sex Week, Gender Diversity." NBCNews, May 21, 2016. Accessed at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/university-tennessee-shuts-diversity-office-after-sex-week-gender-controversy-n578101> on December 17, 2022.
- Dailey, W. "Lessons from Notre Dame on ministering to L.G.B.T. students." *America Magazine*, Vol. 226, No 2. Page 10.
- Dant, Jim. *This I Know: A Simple Biblical Defense for LGBTQ Christians*. Macon, GA: Nurturing Faith Inc., 2018, page 63.
- Fahy, Una. *How to Make the World a Better Place for Gays and Lesbians*. New York, NY: Warner Books, 1995.
- Finke, Leigh. *Welcoming and Affirming: A Guide to Supporting and Working with LGBTQ+ Christian Youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2020.
- First Congregational Church, UCC, in Bellingham, WA. "Doxology Using Inclusive Language." *Worship Words*. Accessed at <https://worshipwords.co.uk/tag/doxology-using-inclusive-language/> on November 13, 2022.
- Gary, Sally. *Affirming: A Memoir of Faith, Sexuality, and Staying in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021.
- Gushee, David P. *Changing Our Mind*. Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2017.
- Harding, Anne. "Religious Faith Linked to Suicidal Behavior in LGBQ Adults," *Reuters*, April 13, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/5y27muec>. Accessed May 20, 2022.
- Hartke, Austen. "God's Unclassified World: Nonbinary Gender and the Beauty of Creation." *Christian Century*, April 25, 2018. Pages 27-29.
- Heath, Emily C. "Being They: God and Nonbinary Gender." *Christian Century*, August 17, 2016. Pages 11-13.
- Herz, Becky. "Gender-SPECTRUM: Inclusion for Recreation Professionals." *Parks & Recreation*, Vol. 53 Issue 10, Oct. 2018. Pages 58-63.
- Hogan, Steve and Lee Hudson. *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1998.
- Hess, Amanda. "Multiple Choice." *The New York Times Magazine*, April 3, 2016. Pages 13-15.
- Holt, Natalie R., Robyn E. King, Richard MocarSKI, Nathan Woodruff, and Debra A. Hope. "Specialists in Name or Practice? The Inclusion of Transgender and Gender Diverse Identities in Online Materials of Gender Specialists." *J Gay Lesbian Soc Serv.*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2021. Pages 1-15.
- Hooker, Ashley. "What is the Doxology? Its Meaning and Importance in Christianity." *Christianity.com*. June 22, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/church/the-doxology-its-meaning-and-importance-in-christianity.html> on January 2, 2023.

- Houghton, Marie, and Fiona Tasker. "Exploring Lesbian and Bisexual Catholic Women's Narratives of Religious and Sexual Identity Formation and Integration." *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol 68, Issue 1, 2021. Pages 47–69.
- Howard, Jennifer. 2015. "Colleges Consider Adopting Inclusive Language in Their Systems." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 23. Accessed at <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.dbq.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=110524196&site=ehost-live> on December 17, 2022.
- James, Sandy, Jody Herman, Susan Rankin, Mara Keisling, Lisa Mottet, and Ma'ayan Anafi. "The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey." Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016. Accessed at <https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS Full Report - FINAL 1.6.17.pdf> on December 30, 2022.
- Jarry, Jonathan. "The Word 'Cisgender' Has Scientific Roots," *McGill Office for Science and Society*, November 13, 2021. Accessed at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-general-science/word-cisgender-has-scientific-roots> on December 27, 2022.
- Jaschik, Scott. "Fear of New Pronouns," *Inside Higher Ed*, September 8, 2015. Accessed at <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/09/08/u-tennessee-withdraws-guide-pronouns-preferred-some-transgender-people> on December 19, 2022.
- Jennings, Patricia A. *Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton. & Company, 2019.
- Johnson, India R., Evava S. Pietri, David M. Buck, and Roua Daas. "What's in a pronoun: Exploring gender pronouns as an organizational identity-safety cue among sexual and gender minorities." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 97, 104194, July 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104194>. Accessed June 10, 2022.
- Johnson, Kelly C., Allen J. LeBlanc, Paul R. Sterzing, Julianna Deardorff, Tamar Antin, and Walter O. Bockting. "Trans Adolescents' Perceptions and Experiences of Their Parents' Supportive and Rejecting Behaviors." *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 2020. Pages 156-170.
- Karlslake, Daniel, director. *For the Bible Tells Me So*. New York, NY: First Run Features, 2007. DVD.
- Kattari, Shanna, Ashley A O'Connor, and Leonardo Kattari. "Development and Validation of the Transgender Inclusive Behavior Scale (TIBS)." *Journal of Homosexuality*, Volume 65, No. 2, 2018. Pages 181-196.
- Kennedy, J. W. "The Transgender Moment: Evangelicals hope to respond with both moral authority and biblical compassion to gender identity disorder." *Christianity Today*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2008. Pages 54-58.
- Kinnaman, David and Gabe Lyons. *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why it Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007.
- Koepke, Donald. "Opportunities for Ministering to LBGT Elders: A Conversation with Rev. Daniel Hooper." *Journal of the American Society on Aging*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Summer 2016. Pages 26-29.

- Krašovec, Jože. "Merism: Polar Expression in Biblical Hebrew." *Biblica*, Vol. 64, No. 2, 1983. Pages 231–239.
- Lerner, Justin Evan. 2021. "Having to 'Hold It': Factors That Influence the Avoidance of Using Public Bathrooms among Transgender People." *Health & Social Work*, Vol. 46, No. 4, November 22, 2021. Pages 260–267.
- Mallory, Christy, and Taylor N.T. Brown and Keith J. Conron. "Conversion Therapy and LGBTQ Youth: Update." The Williams Institute, June 2019. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Conversion-Therapy-Update-Jun-2019.pdf>. Accessed May 20, 2022.
- Marcus, Eric. *Is It A Choice? Answers to the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Gay and Lesbian People*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005, page 174.
- Mariotti, Shannon L. and Joseph H. Lane. *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson. Political Companions to Great American Authors*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2016.
- Markham, Myles, Austen Harke, and Michael Vazquez. "For They Know Not What They Do: Human Rights Campaign Foundation Religion and Faith Program, Film and Discussion Guide & Toolkit." The Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2019. DVD and accompanying discussion guide.
- Martin, Colby. *UNCLOBBER: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016.
- Martin, James. *Building a Bridge (Revised and Expanded): How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.
- More Light Presbyterians. Accessed at <https://mlp.org/document/11-x-17-why-pronouns-matter-poster/> on July 10, 2022, <https://mlp.org/document/pronouns-video/> on July 15, 2022, <https://mlp.org/my-pronouns-are/> on July 20, and <https://mlp.org/our-story/> on December 24, 2022.
- Park, Haeyoun and Iaryna Mykhyalyshyn. "L.G.B.T. People Are More Likely to Be Targets of Hate Crimes Than Any Other Minority Group," *New York Times*, June 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/16/us/hate-crimes-against-lgbt.html>. Accessed May 19, 2022.
- Patterson, Stephen J. "Punch Thy Neighbor." *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Volume 41, Issue 3, May 2015. Pages 26 and 66.
- Pavlovitz, John. *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.
- Prayers for an Inclusive Church*. New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2009.
- Rivera, Bridget Eileen. *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021.
- Priests for Equality. *The Inclusive New Testament*. Brentwood, MD: Priests for Equality, 1996.

- Robinson, Gene. *God Believes in Love: Straight Talk about Gay Marriage*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.
- Rogers, Jack. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- Salpietro, Francesco G. "R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Transgender Pronoun Preference and the Application of the Model Code of Judicial Conduct." *Court Review: The Journal of the American Judges Association*, 590, 2017. Pages 162-169. Accessed at <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ajacourtreview/590> on June 1, 2022.
- Schutz, Susan Polis, director. "Anyone and Everyone." Ironzeal Films. 2007. DVD.
- Shakespeare, Steven. *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*. New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2008.
- Shlasko, Davey. *Trans Allyship Workbook: Building Skills to Support Trans People in Our Lives*. Madison, WI: Think Again Training, 2017.
- Smith, James D. III. "Where Did We Get the Doxology? The Story Behind the World's Best-Known Hymn." *Christian History: The Golden Age of Hymns*, Issue 31, 1991. Accessed at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-31/where-did-we-get-doxology.html> on January 2, 2023.
- Solevåg, Anna Rebecca. "No Nuts? No Problem!" *Biblical Interpretation*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Feb. 2016, pages 81–99.
- South Dakota State University, Office of Multicultural Affairs & Accessibility. "LGBTQIA+ Basic Terms and Definitions." Accessed at <https://www.sdstate.edu/office-multicultural-affairs-accessibility/lgbtqia-basic-terms-and-definitions> on December 20, 2022.
- Spence-Mitchell, Tynslei. 2021. "Restroom Restrictions: How Race and Sexuality Have Affected Bathroom Legislation." *Gender, Work & Organization*, Vol. 28, Supplement 1, 2021. Pages 14–20.
- United Church of Christ. *Open and Affirming Starter Toolkit*. Cleveland, OH: Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ, 2018.
- United States Census Bureau. "United States 2020 Census for Powell, Tennessee." <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/powellcdptennessee/POP010220>, accessed August 4, 2022.
- The Cleveland Clinic. "Why Deadnaming is Harmful: Find out What it is and Why it Should Be Avoided." November 18, 2021. Accessed at <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/deadnaming/> on December 28, 2022.
- The Holy See Press. "Catechism of the Catholic Church." Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P85.HTM on December 21, 2022.
- The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. *TransAction: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions*. Institute for Welcoming Resources, undated.
- Tennessee Equality Project. "Tennessee Slate of Hate 2023." Accessed at <https://www.tnep.org/blog> on January 3, 2023.
- The Trevor Project. "2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health," <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/>. Accessed May 19, 2022.

- Vines, Matthew. *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships*. New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2014.
- White, Mel. *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- Wilcox, Melissa M. "Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity and Community." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 9, No. 3, February 2006. Pages 120-123.
- Wilcox, Melissa M. "When Sheila's a Lesbian: Religious Individualism among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians." *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 63, Issue 4, 2002. Pages 497-513.
- Witherup, Ronald D. *A Liturgist's Guide to Inclusive Language*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996.
- Witt, Alexander T. "The Use of Preferred Gender Pronouns." *Ethics & Medics*, Vol. 26, No. 2, February 2021. Pages 1-4.
- Young, William D. "Listening to Gay Prayers." *Journal of Religion and Society*, Vol. 22, 2020, ISSN 1522-5668. Pages 1-17.
- Zwissler, Laurel. "Sex, Love, and an Old Brick Building: A United Church of Canada Congregation Transitions to LGBTQ Inclusion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 87, No. 4, December 2019. Pages 1113-1152.

Appendix A

Rev. Katina Sharp

3428 Teal Creek Lane, Knoxville, TN 37931 865-742-2292 RevKatinaSharp@gmail.com

EXPERIENCE

Solo Pastor
Powell Presbyterian Church, Powell, TN — 2018–Present

Director of Children's and Youth Ministries
Farragut Presbyterian Church, Farragut, TN — 2013-2018

Early Intervention Counselor
Tennessee Early Intervention System, Knoxville, TN — 2005-2011

Senior Program Counselor
Peninsula Behavioral Health, Knoxville, TN — 2001-2004

EDUCATION

The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, IA
DMin Candidate, 2020-current

The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, IA
MDiv, 2014-2017

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN
BA in Psychoeducation, 1998-2001

Appendix B

He, She, They, Ze: How Pronoun Usage Impacts the Ministry of the Church, Initial Survey

Participation in this study is voluntary and may be revoked at any time. If you have any questions during the study, you may contact Katina Sharp at 865-742-2292 or RevKatinaSharp@gmail.com. Specific questions about your rights as a research subject can be directed to the Chair of the University of Dubuque's Institutional Review Board at irb@dbq.edu.

1. I introduce myself using my pronouns.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Always | <input type="radio"/> Rarely |
| <input type="radio"/> Usually | <input type="radio"/> Never |
| <input type="radio"/> Sometimes | <input type="radio"/> Decline to answer |

2. I ask for pronouns when meeting someone new.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Always | <input type="radio"/> Rarely |
| <input type="radio"/> Usually | <input type="radio"/> Never |
| <input type="radio"/> Sometimes | <input type="radio"/> Decline to answer |

3. I feel comfortable using the singular form of "they."

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly agree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree |
| <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> I do not know what 'the singular form of "they"' is. |
| <input type="radio"/> Neither agree nor disagree | <input type="radio"/> Decline to answer |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree | |

4. I know at least one person who uses non-traditional pronouns (they/them, ze, xe, etc.)

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Yes | <input type="radio"/> Unsure |
| <input type="radio"/> No | <input type="radio"/> Decline to answer |

5. I feel comfortable in religious settings.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Always | <input type="radio"/> Rarely |
| <input type="radio"/> Usually | <input type="radio"/> Never |
| <input type="radio"/> Sometimes | <input type="radio"/> Decline to answer |

6. Churches are welcoming of LGBTQIA+ people.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Always | <input type="radio"/> Rarely |
| <input type="radio"/> Usually | <input type="radio"/> Never |
| <input type="radio"/> Sometimes | <input type="radio"/> Decline to answer |

7. LGBTQIA+ people are welcome at Powell Presbyterian Church.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly agree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree |
| <input type="radio"/> Agree | <input type="radio"/> I do not know. |
| <input type="radio"/> Neither agree nor disagree | <input type="radio"/> Decline to answer |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree | |

8. I feel emotionally and spiritually safe at Powell Presbyterian Church.

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Decline to answer

9. There is a separation (intentional or unintentional) between LGBTQIA+ people and non-LGBTQIA+ people at Powell Presbyterian Church (i.e. the two groups sit separately, converse mostly within their own group, etc.)

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Decline to answer

10. Being an LGBTQIA+ affirming church is important to me.

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Decline to answer

OPTIONAL questions for data classification purposes:

I consider myself

- LGBTQIA+
- Neither of the above
- An LGBTQIA+ ally (supporter and advocate)
- Decline to answer

My age:

- 18-25
- 66-75
- 26-35
- 76-85
- 36-45
- Over 85
- 46-55
- Decline to answer
- 56-65

I have attended Powell Presbyterian Church for

- 0-6 months
- 3-5 years
- 7-12 months
- Over 5 years
- 1-2 years
- Decline to answer

I am excited by the LGBTQIA+ affirming changes at Powell Presbyterian Church.

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Decline to answer

Appendix C

He, She, They, Ze: How Pronoun Usage Impacts the Ministry of the Church, Exit Survey

Participation in this study is voluntary and may be revoked at any time. If you have any questions during the study, you may contact Katina Sharp at 865-742-2292 or RevKatinaSharp@gmail.com. Specific questions about your rights as a research subject can be directed to the Chair of the University of Dubuque's Institutional Review Board at irb@dbq.edu.

1. I introduce myself using my pronouns.

- Always
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- Decline to answer

2. I ask for pronouns when meeting someone new.

- Always
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- Decline to answer

3. I feel comfortable using the singular form of "they."

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I do not know what 'the singular form of "they"' is.
- Decline to answer

4. I know at least one person who uses non-traditional pronouns (they/them, ze, xe, etc.)

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Decline to answer

5. I feel comfortable in religious settings.

- Always
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- Decline to answer

6. Churches are welcoming of LGBTQIA+ people.

- Always
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- Decline to answer

7. LGBTQIA+ people are welcome at Powell Presbyterian Church.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I do not know.
- Decline to answer

8. I feel emotionally and spiritually safe at Powell Presbyterian Church.

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Decline to answer

9. There is a separation (intentional or unintentional) between LGBTQIA+ people and non-LGBTQIA+ people at Powell Presbyterian Church (i.e. the two groups sit separately, converse mostly within their own group, etc.)

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Decline to answer

10. Being an LGBTQIA+ affirming church is important to me.

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Decline to answer

11. As a result of this project, I feel more comfortable at Powell Presbyterian Church.

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Decline to answer

12. As a result of this project, the church is more unified.

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Decline to answer

OPTIONAL questions for data classification purposes:

I consider myself:

- LGBTQIA+
- An LGBTQIA+ ally
(supporter and advocate)
- Neither of the above
- Decline to answer

My age:

- 18-25
- 46-55
- 76-85
- 26-35
- 56-65
- Over 85
- 36-45
- 66-75
- Decline to answer

I have attended Powell Presbyterian Church for

- 0-6 months
- 1-2 years
- Over 5 year
- 7-12 months
- 3-5 year
- Decline to answer

I am excited by the LGBTQIA+ affirming changes at Powell Presbyterian Church.

- Strongly agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Decline to answer

Appendix D

Monthly Newsletter Articles

August 2022

Someone left their Bible in the sanctuary. They can come to Katina's office to pick it up anytime!

Ok, that's not true. No one left their Bible in the sanctuary (to my knowledge, anyway), but you see what just happened? You read that line with no problem! Congratulations! You just used the singular form of they! One person left a Bible, but since I didn't know the gender of the Bible owner, I used "their" instead of "her" or "his." Confused? If so, you're in good company.

For many people, the traditional he/she, her/hers pronouns don't fit. This could be for many personal reasons, among which are that they are non-binary (that is, not fitting neatly into one of the two male/female genders), or they are gender-fluid (that is, their gender identity changes from time to time). Unfortunately, our English language doesn't have an official non-gendered singular third person pronoun. This is why you might have someone ask you to call them "they" rather than he or she.

But how will I know what to call someone when I meet them? Do I use the singular or plural verb form with the singular they? What do I do when I accidentally call them by the wrong pronoun? Is there anything wrong with my choosing to use the traditional pronouns for myself? ALL GREAT QUESTIONS, and if you have wondered any of these (or have other questions, or don't even know what to ask!), please join us at our Affirmed classes every Wednesday in September, 6:00-7:00 in the narthex. The Carutherses and Pastor Katina will guide you through four weeks of LGBTQIA+ allyship and support. Together, we can make PPC more kind, more loving, and more welcoming. See you in September!

September 2022

My name is Katina Sharp, and my pronouns are “she/her/hers.”

What does that mean? Of course my pronouns are “she/her/hers” because I am female, right? Well, it isn’t that easy, actually. Many people do not identify as male or female, or perhaps their gender seems to change from time to time, so the traditional he/she pronouns just don’t fit. For this reason, some people may ask to be called “they/them” or even something like “xe” or “ze.” Is all of this making your head spin with questions? If so, you’re in good company.

Join us every Wednesday this month for a discussion about pronoun usage and other LGBTQIA+/ally issues. There are no stupid questions, so come prepared to ask or just listen to the questions of others so that you can learn to be a better ally and/or feel more comfortable in your own skin at PPC. No questions are off-limits, and we start from a place of love and acceptance (as per our church’s inclusion policy), so the discussion will be respectful and loving at all times.

Because our church is doing such incredible things in the area of inclusion with our Affirmed program, Pastor Katina would like to help other churches learn from our efforts. As such, she will ask the participants in the classes to fill out a short (anonymous) survey at the beginning and end of the series and will offer the opportunity for more in-depth questioning in one-on-one interviews. Katina will use your responses (anonymously) to write her dissertation on pronoun usage in the Christian Church and how this will create a more loving and affirming congregation. Your participation is always voluntary. If you have any questions about this, please reach out to Katina directly at 865-742-2292 or RevKatinaSharp@gmail.com. For questions

about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Chair of the University of Dubuque's Institutional Review Board at irb@dbq.edu.

October 2022

By now you are all pronoun-pros! Thank you to everyone who came out in September for our Affirmed classes on allyship and LGBTQIA+ issues. It was a great time of discussion, learning, and growth. Now what?

Now that you have learned about pronoun usage and why it's important in the Church (and at the PrideFest downtown Sept. 30-Oct. 1, and ANYWHERE, really!), it's time to put our new skills to use. There are name tags on the narthex table each Sunday. Please wear one each week, and include your pronouns on the name tag so we all know how to address you. When you meet someone new, begin with an introduction that includes pronouns like this: "Hi! My name is Katina Sharp. I use she/her pronouns. What is your name, and what pronouns can I use for you?" Yes, it will feel awkward at first, but that is why we practice in a loving and safe space! If you have any questions about this (why we are doing it, what to do if it feels really weird, etc.) please don't hesitate to contact Pastor Katina at 865-742-2292 or RevKatinaSharp@gmail.com.

Remember that this is part of a dissertation project Pastor Katina is working on about LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the Christian Church, and your participation is voluntary. For questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Chair of the University of Dubuque's Institutional Review Board at irb@dbq.edu.

November 2022

This month I am giving thanks for YOU and your loving, amazing, inclusive spirits! It has been such a joy to see all the folks wearing nametags with pronouns on them and hear all the awesome pronoun practice that is taking place around the building. As with any skill, it may feel awkward and difficult at first, but the more we practice, the easier it will become! And, isn't it worth the work to make ALL our siblings in Christ feel welcome at Powell Presbyterian Church?

As a reminder, the "Pronoun Project" is part of a dissertation study by Pastor Katina. Participation is always voluntary, and you may ask questions and offer feedback at any time by contacting Katina directly at 865-742-2292 or RevKatinaSharp@gmail.com. For questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Chair of the University of Dubuque's Institutional Review Board at irb@dbq.edu.

December 2022

'Tis the season of love all over the world, and that love is spreading like wildfire at PPC! Thank you so much for continuing to wear nametags with pronouns each week and practicing using correct pronouns in conversation with one another. Why is this so important? Using pronouns in your introductions and conversations, as well as identifying yourself with your pronouns, lets people around you know that they are safe near you to be who God made them to be. Even if you use traditional pronouns, it gives the message that you will be loving and courteous in using the pronouns of those around you. In short, it's just respectful and kind, and it makes Powell Presbyterian Church the kind of affirming church we are working so hard to be.

As a reminder, the "Pronoun Project" is part of a dissertation study by Pastor Katina. Participation is always voluntary, and you may ask questions and offer feedback at any time by

contacting Katina directly at 865-742-2292 or RevKatinaSharp@gmail.com. For questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Chair of the University of Dubuque's Institutional Review Board at irb@dbq.edu.

Appendix E



Affirmed

A ministry of love and support
at Powell Presbyterian Church

*Meeting every Wednesday in
September at 6:00*

Follow us on Instagram

@affirmed_powell_presbyterian



Find us on Facebook

facebook.com/AffirmedPowell



Appendix F¹⁹⁵

WHY STATING PRONOUNS MATTERS

**IT HELPS EVERYONE FEEL
INCLUDED AND RESPECTED**

**IT ACKNOWLEDGES SOMEONE'S
PRONOUNS AREN'T ASSUMED**

**IT ENCOURAGES FOLKS TO
THINK ABOUT THEIR OWN GENDER**

**IT'S A WAY TO SHOW FOLKS YOU'RE
SERIOUS ABOUT BEING AN ALLY**

**IT ENSURES FOLKS GET
EVERYONE'S PRONOUNS RIGHT**

As those who seek to be welcoming in the name of Christ, we hope to see everyone in our midst as themselves, as children of God. Creating space where people name their pronouns not only shows our welcome, but also invites people to share their full selves with us and with God.



MORE LIGHT
PRESBYTERIANS

¹⁹⁵ Sign downloaded from the More Light Presbyterians website. Accessed at <https://mlp.org/document/11-x-17-why-pronouns-matter-poster/> on July 10, 2022.

Appendix G¹⁹⁶

SUBJECT	OBJECT	POSSESSIVE (adjective)	POSSESSIVE (subject)	REFLEXIVE
He	Him	His	His	Himself
<i>He</i> likes us to call <i>him</i> when <i>his</i> order is ready. That one is <i>his</i> . <i>He'll</i> pick it up <i>himself</i> .				
She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself
<i>She</i> likes us to call <i>her</i> when <i>her</i> order is ready. That one is <i>hers</i> . <i>She'll</i> pick it up <i>herself</i> .				
They	Them	Their	Theirs	Themselves; Themselves
Singular: <i>They</i> like us to call <i>them</i> when <i>their</i> order is ready. That one is <i>theirs</i> . <i>They'll</i> pick it up <i>themselves</i> . Plural: <i>They</i> both like us to call <i>them</i> when <i>their</i> orders are ready. Those two are <i>theirs</i> . <i>They'll</i> pick them up <i>themselves</i> .				
Ze* (sounds like zee)	Hir or Zir (both rhyme with ear)	Hir(s) or Zirs	Hirs or Zirs	Hirself or Zirself
<i>Ze</i> likes us to call <i>hir</i> when <i>hir</i> (or <i>hirs</i>) order is ready. That one is <i>hirs</i> . <i>Ze'll</i> pick it up <i>hirself</i> . Or <i>Ze</i> likes us to call <i>zir</i> when <i>zirs</i> order is ready. That one is <i>zirs</i> . <i>Ze'll</i> pick it up <i>zirself</i> .				
Ey (rhymes with hay)	Em	Eir (sounds like air)	Eirs (sounds like airs)	Eirself
<i>Ey</i> likes us to call <i>em</i> when <i>eir</i> order is ready. That one is <i>eirs</i> . <i>Ey'll</i> pick it up <i>eirself</i> .				
Per**	Per	Per	Pers	Perself
<i>Per</i> likes us to call <i>per</i> when <i>per</i> order is ready. That one is <i>pers</i> . <i>Per'll</i> pick it up <i>perself</i> .				
[no pronouns]	[no pronouns]	[no pronouns]	[no pronouns]	[no pronouns]
<i>Jordan</i> likes us to call <i>Jordan</i> when <i>Jordan's</i> order is ready. That one is <i>Jordan's</i> . <i>Jordan'll</i> pick it up <i>Jordanself</i> .				

* also spelled zie, sie or xie.
** short for person; from Marge Piercy's 1974 novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*.

¹⁹⁶ Shlasko, Davey. *Trans Allyship Workbook: Building Skills to Support Trans People in Our Lives*. Madison, WI: Think Again Training, 2017, page 34.

Appendix H



Affirmed

A ministry of love and support
at Powell Presbyterian Church

Follow us on Instagram

@affirmed_powell_presbyterian

**Find us on Facebook**

facebook.com/AffirmedPowell



Ask me about



Affirmed

A ministry of love and support
at Powell Presbyterian Church

 @affirmed_powell_presbyterian

 @AffirmedPowell

 affirmedppc@gmail.com

Appendix I

DocuSign Envelope ID: E12D8A9A-B229-4027-AFC2-2996AB78D48B

Rev. Katina Sharp
3428 Teal Creek Lane
Knoxville, TN 37931

January 5, 2023

Davey Shlasko
Think Again Training & Consulting

Dear Davey Shlasko:

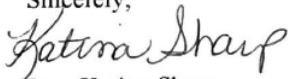
I am completing a doctoral dissertation at The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary entitled "He, She, They, Ze: How Pronoun Usage Affects the Ministry of the Church." I would like your permission to reprint in my dissertation page 34 (a colorful chart on various personal pronoun options) from the following:

Shlasko, Davey. *Trans Allyship Workbook: Building Skills to Support Trans People in Our Lives*. Madison, WI: Think Again Training, 2017.

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my dissertation, including nonexclusive world rights in all languages, and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by ProQuest through its UMI® Dissertation Publishing business. ProQuest may produce and sell copies of my dissertation on demand and may make my dissertation available for free internet download at my request. These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. Your signing of this letter will also confirm that you own (or your company owns) the copyright to the above described material.

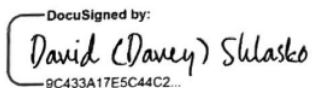
If these arrangements meet with your approval, please complete sign and return this form to me. Thank you!

Sincerely,


Rev. Katina Sharp

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Typed Name: David (Davey) Shlasko

Signature: 
9C433A17E5C44C2...

Date: 1/5/2023

Appendix J

DocuSign Envelope ID: CC2A4CBC-C710-4C05-AFCF-4771A10B3DDB

Rev. Katina Sharp
3428 Teal Creek Lane
Knoxville, TN 37931

January 5, 2023

Larissa Kwong Abazia
Transitional Head of Operations
More Light Presbyterians

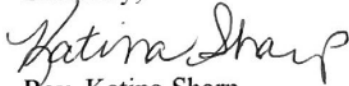
Dear Ms. Abazia,

I am completing a doctoral dissertation at The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary entitled "He, She, They, Ze: How Pronoun Usage Affects the Ministry of the Church." I would like your permission to reprint in my dissertation the downloadable chart "Why Stating Pronouns Matters" found at your website at <https://mlp.org/document/11-x-17-why-pronouns-matter-poster/>.

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my dissertation, including nonexclusive world rights in all languages, and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by ProQuest through its UMI® Dissertation Publishing business. ProQuest may produce and sell copies of my dissertation on demand and may make my dissertation available for free internet download at my request. These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. Your signing of this letter will also confirm that you own (or your company owns) the copyright to the above described material.

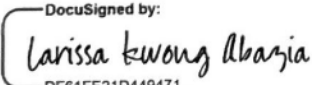
If these arrangements meet with your approval, please complete sign and return this form to me. Thank you!

Sincerely,


Rev. Katina Sharp

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Typed Name: Larissa Kwong Abazia

Signature: 
DF61FE21D449471...

Date: 1/5/2023