



Does It Get Better?

PROVIDING SPIRITUAL CARE FOR SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL, DOMESTIC, AND
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE WHO ARE LGBTQIA+

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Thank you to all the survivors who trusted me with their experiences of sexual and intimate partner violence that led to the creation of this work. It is thanks to your courage that we can begin talking about queer and trans sexual, domestic, and intimate partner violence alongside religion and spirituality. I hope that I have managed to authentically express your thoughts through this work, but I know I was truly unable to put into words the awe and inspiration that each conversation left me with. Thank you.

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Introduction

Throughout each one of our beautiful and sacred traditions of faith runs a deep spiritual current that urges humanity to move through life loving our neighbors and embracing the stranger. To this end it is important that as spiritual care providers and faith leaders, there is a standard for respect, understanding, love, and honor grounded in the diversity of those we minister to. This is especially true for those care seekers who occupy an intersection of being a sexual minority, a person of faith, and a survivor of sexual and intimate partner violence.

As spiritual care providers, we are tasked with serving all in need to the best of our abilities. When we consider the survivor of sexual violence (SV) and/or intimate partner violence (IPV) we know that there are certain ways of interacting with and caring for these community members through that lens alone. There are many resources available on the Safe Havens website (www.interfaithpartners.org) to help faith leaders learn more about the intersection of faith and abuse.

At the same time, in many traditions being openly LGBTQIA+ (see Appendix A for definitions) can have terrible consequences, ranging from internalized self-loathing and suicidality to violent hate crimes. Therefore, when a queer or trans identifying person experiences SV and/or IPV and turns to a spiritual care provider for help, the care provider must be prepared to consider the immense uniqueness and sometimes difficult realities of their LGBTQIA+ care seekers.

If you are reading this book, then you've already taken a huge first step, and for that I am grateful. A little about me, the writer and spiritual researcher. My first brush with spiritual pain came in 1995 at the age of six when my dad died of a massive heart attack. Along the way my family continued to wither, my mom eventually connected with a partner who was a state police officer, and for fifteen years I watched my mom endure unbridled abuse. I also experienced trauma from a figure meant to be like a father to me. My experience with sexual violence, like many others who are called to navigate these assaults on personhood, is all too personal.

As a queer cis-gender white teen growing up in Albuquerque, NM, I was raped by a cis gender male classmate in my senior year of high school. While I managed to graduate, it wasn't easy. Alcohol and drugs became my coping mechanism, and it always seemed easier to see the Divine at the bar or at the bottom of a bottle than by going to church like my mom would. I suffered with depression, anxiety, and severe trauma, yet I managed to earn a BA from the

University of New Mexico in 2015 with a major in religious studies and political science. As a deeply spiritual person, navigating the realities of my experiences of surviving violence as well as my longing for spiritual flourishing and meaning making drew me to Connecticut, where I began a Cooperative Master of Divinity program between Hartford Seminary and Boston University School of Theology. I completed the work at Hartford Seminary in 2018.

Prior to moving to Boston in July of 2018, I had somehow convinced the Rev. Dr. Anne Marie Hunter (Director) and Alyson Morse Katzman (Associate Director) at Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse to support my research project with survivors of SV and IPV who were LGBTQIA+. I wanted to know more about their experiences both with violence and sexuality as they related to faith. During my time at Hartford Seminary, I had written on topics such as biblical hermeneutical renderings that empower survivors of violence, considerations to take when caring for care seekers living with HIV, and how social movements can be forms of healing from violence. However, the entire time I struggled with the reality that theological literature and spiritual care resources for LGBTQIA+ survivors of SV and IPV are practically nonexistent. When the three of us met to consider potentially collaborating through BU's Contextual Education program, we expressed our frustrations with this lack of knowledge. It was Anne Marie who said, "Let's make a resource!" and for that I will be forever grateful.

During my time at Safe Havens, I organized listening sessions and focused conversations with survivors of SV and IPV who identified as LGBTQIA+ and listened to how their experiences with faith and spirituality impacted how they healed from trauma. In order to get a more comprehensive picture of what was lacking and what was uplifting in the spiritual care field, I also established relationships with community agencies and organizations around New England, as well as faith and ethical leaders,¹ to hear their thoughts on the state of spiritual care for LGBTQIA+ survivors. I include all of this, with names and identifying features of survivor participants being altered for their safety, in the following pages.

I would like to take the time here to stress that spiritual care provided to queer and trans survivors of violence must be deeply rooted in safety and respect for the care seeker. The history between faith communities and LGBTQIA+ people

¹ While every effort was made to include a diverse, multi-religious sampling of faith leaders, we acknowledge the need for this resource to be more broadly inclusive of marginalized and minority faith traditions.

is difficult and lined with experiences of violence and trauma. In order to best serve queer and trans survivors, faith leaders must begin by accepting that spiritual care is not the appropriate place to proselytize or to in any way seek to change the care seeker. It is important for faith leaders to respect the inherent dignity and autonomy of survivors, particularly because cycles of abuse are intended to strip a person of their power and control. As a faith leader you have the ability to help survivors make meaning of their experiences and to reclaim power and control over their own life once again.

This resource is intended to be supplemental to basic understandings of the LGBTQIA+ community. This means that I will be using terminology that has specific meanings that I am assuming will be understood. If this is your first introduction to the LGBTQIA+ community, or you'd simply like to refamiliarize yourself with common terms, I have included two appendices at the end. Appendix A briefly considers the meaning of the letters LGBTQIA+ and provides a small example of words used in the community. Appendix B considers the concept that sexuality and gender are spectrums rather than absolutes and offers guidelines on how to delicately connect with people through the proper usage of pronouns.

While this resource is a forerunner in those among spiritual care for sexual minority survivors of sexual, domestic, and intimate partner violence, it is not all encompassing; and I might say, such a feat would be defying the realities of queer and trans individuals and communities to find infinite new ways to express and to love, which I've seen to be among the greatest blessings of the queer people. This work serves to fit a dire need in our faith communities **now**, but this is merely a **starting point**. Now it is up to you to carry back what you're about to read, because it might save someone's life. And if there's anything that I as the author and advocate would ask you to take away from this work, it is the importance of simply opening up one's heart enough to ask, "what can I do to help?".

SECTION ONE: PROFESSIONALS WEIGH IN

While a major focus of this work has been centered on experiences from survivors themselves, I also spent time interviewing care providers who work directly with LGBTQIA+ communities. These interviews included faith leaders, health care providers, advocates, educators, and other professionals with an interest in the needs of the queer and trans community. Each of these individuals

provided a unique voice and perspective regarding the spiritual care needs of LGBTQIA+ survivors of sexual and/or intimate partner violence. In the following section I will detail four of these conversations.

Xavier Quinn is the **Program Manager of Fenway Health’s Violence Recovery Program (VRP)**, based out of Boston, Massachusetts. According to their website, “Fenway’s Violence Recovery Program (VRP) provides counseling, support groups, advocacy, and referrals to survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, hate violence, and police misconduct. We specialize in working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals.”² When I met with Quinn, I began our conversation by asking “How, if at all, does spiritual/pastoral care impact survivors of violence? Does it prove useful after the event?” According to Quinn, spiritual/pastoral care can be positive for survivors of violence, with the caveat that the care provider understands both the LGBTQIA+ community and has knowledge about SV and IPV.³

Quinn acknowledged two significant ways that spiritual care and religion have been detrimental to LGBTQIA+ survivors in the past. His first concern was that religions have, dangerously, advocated for partners experiencing violence to stay in the relationship rather than seek help. This is an interesting consideration for this conversation, as these faith leaders are often speaking to those legally married or who have children. While neither of these are cis-gender, hetero-specific, the right to marriage across the gender spectrum is a relatively new phenomenon among LGBTQIA+ people in America. This is largely because of the homophobic, transphobic, and heteronormative history of the country. Marriage inclusion or equality is thanks in part to recent federal changes enacted by President Obama in 2013. Now that marriage and child rearing have become more attainable to LGBTQIA+ people, the potential for violence to be met with faith leader disapproval of separation should be addressed.

The second concern he spoke to was how LGBTQIA+ people have historically been rejected by religious institutions, leading to the isolation of the survivor from the faith community. Expanding on this, we can see that if an individual were to approach a faith leader in their faith community about experiencing violence, they are exposing themselves not only to the potential for unsafe advice that seeks to keep the abused with the abuser, but also requires the individual to be open about their identity as a queer person with someone who

² <https://fenwayhealth.org/care/behavioral-health/violence-recovery/>

³ There are many resources available on the Safe Havens website (www.interfaithpartners.org) to help faith leaders learn more about the intersection of faith and abuse.

may not feel that their gender or sexual identity aligns with their theology. Quinn shared that he has heard many “horror stories,” as he called them, from LGBTQIA+ people who reached out to faith leaders, leading to further trauma and in some cases a complete separation from the spiritual community.

When asked if Quinn felt LGBTQIA+ people have equal access to spiritual care/pastoral care services, he said that he didn’t believe so. One of the significantly dangerous aspects of this absence in care is that there is a reduction in the possibility for community support that could very well help someone experiencing violence to get out of a situation. In many ways, sexual, domestic, and intimate partner violence are quite similar for LGBTQIA+ survivors as for cis gender, heterosexual partners; however, some of the differences include less social and community support, more stigma associated with being both a survivor and a sexual minority, and an increase in substance abuse.

Quinn emphasized a need to publicly recognize homicides as they pertain to LGBTQIA+ violence, saying that “people don’t think it’s that serious,” and I have to agree with him. SV and IPV within the LGBTQIA+ community wasn’t well recognized until 2013, when President Obama signed the re-authorized Violence Against Women Act and included additional protections for LGBTQIA+ people experiencing rape and domestic violence.

As we neared the end of our interview, I asked Quinn how someone like myself could further help in ensuring that survivors receive care. Quinn responded that an empowerment model is the best way to ensure the survivor gets the help they need. “Survivors are the experts of their own lives,” the very lives that have been controlled by partners and societal norms, so by helping them to claim power and make autonomous decisions we are truly serving them with dignity and respect. When asked what the biggest takeaway Quinn wanted me to understand about their work at the VRP was, he answered, “We don’t think survivors are broken.” This couldn’t be truer based on our conversation.

During our interview, Quinn provided me with an abundance of VRP resources, including cards that read “You deserve to have your body respected” in large print, and below “even if you met on Grindr, are dating, or change your mind.” This prompted another discussion around the ways in which LGBTQIA+ people meet potential partners, with dating apps being a massive one. I was happily surprised to see this organization include “even if you met on Grindr” on their cards, as the app (Grindr) is a main one used in the community, predominantly among gay men (cis and trans), to find connections.

I met with **Rev. Mariama White-Hammond** in the lobby of Boston University School of Theology on a Thursday evening in November 2018. Rev. White-Hammond is **pastor at New Roots AME Church in Boston, MA, as well as a social and climate activist**. When asked about the need for spiritual/pastoral care for survivors, she said “Yes, there needs to be more access to God.” Rev. White-Hammond referred to Jesus’ critique on power and the ways in which the Spirit of God manifests in the margins. She said that LGBTQIA+ people and allies have been doing the tough work, and yet the list of people who can’t find spaces in church continues to increase.

One of the most significant obstacles is that there are fewer spaces for queer people of color to reflect on culture and community. “The spaces are hard to find,” she said, and one of the ways this manifests is the continued lack of queer and trans people of color in the pulpit. Rev. White-Hammond said that too often claims are made of “loving the lifestyle” yet the reality is communities are “not accepting of a minister” who is LGBTQIA+ and of color.

“There’s no denying that we are not at a good place,” Rev. White Hammond said somberly. She pointed to a lack of transparency within faith communities. “If people don’t feel welcome as LGBTQIA+ in general, if there is any additional layer [such as violence] it makes it difficult.”

Rev. White-Hammond, when speaking to marriage in her congregation, said “I’ll either marry everyone or no one.” This opened up a discussion that I hadn’t planned on, which is that marriage counseling and assessment may not be accessible for same sex couples. Historically, premarital counseling has been one means of assessing a relationship for healthy and violent behaviors. With the removal of the relationship from the guidance of a trained clergy person, the potential for abuse to carry forward into a marriage is more likely for same sex couples. “We need to agree and be honest about what a healthy relationship looks like.”

The complexities of queer and trans violence in relationships is made more apparent when we see physical violence occurring from both sides. Rev. White-Hammond made it clear that “clergy people need training, period” and “a lot of ministers are not equipped” to handle queer and trans violence, stating that for

many there is an “objective sense of what healthy is.” She spoke with resounding sincerity that as care providers “you can feel lost” without adequate training.⁴

The conversation got deeper as Rev. White-Hammond asked, “What do we do about abusers?” We know that violence often leads to more violence, so the reality that abusers may have been abused themselves is very possible. The options for queer and trans abusers are less than those who are heterosexual and cis gender. “It’s not safe to be a gay man in abuser treatment programs,” Rev. White-Hammond said firmly. She continued along this train of thought when she asked, “What are we doing for the children?” She spoke to the painful truth that young men who are living in an environment where abuse is happening are more likely to abuse in the future, so what does that mean for same sex relationships where violence is happening? “Somebody else is going to get hurt.”

Imagine living in a family where being gay wasn’t okay, where the very struggle with one’s sexuality may involve anger. Rev. White-Hammond has obviously considered these same scenarios, and she doesn’t like where her imagination takes her. “When you know that society played a role in why the anger is there, does taking a black and white understanding of violence help?” She doesn’t think so. “People don’t change from a comfortable place.”

Rev. White-Hammond, when asked about how she would try to help in a situation where violence was occurring, said very simply, “There’s nothing wrong with loving them, but you’ve got to save your life.” She says, “We are all beautiful and broken, but we can’t soft pedal the brokenness in these relationships, and there are points of brokenness that must be urgently addressed. Yes, there is beauty sometimes, but it doesn’t make the situation better.”

We also talked about how both HIV status and mental health can adversely impact relationships. There is immense stigma both in and outside of the LGBTQIA+ community with regard to HIV. Within the gay community there has been an ongoing fight to encourage sex with condoms and to consider other preemptive means of avoiding contracting HIV, such as PrEP. Yet at the same time there continues to be a push back from parts of the gay community that encourage “raw” or condom-less sex. In previous research, I’ve found the lack of spiritual care resources for people living with HIV to be minimal, yet we expect these individuals to continue living their lives in as normal a fashion as possible. While an HIV

⁴ There are many resources available on the Safe Havens website (www.interfaithpartners.org) to help faith leaders learn more about the intersection of faith and abuse.

diagnosis (in parts of America) may no longer be seen as a death sentence, the enormity of living with something so life changing shouldn't be overlooked.

I had the opportunity to meet with **Tatiana Gil** and **Celia Castro**, who both work at **The Network/La Red**, a Boston based “survivor-led, social justice organization that works to end partner abuse in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, SM, polyamorous, and queer communities.”⁵ Both of these individuals work with queer and trans survivors of violence directly, so their experiences were invaluable for this resource. “There are a lot of queer and trans folks who are impacted by religion.” They expressed that overall the experiences survivors share about religion are negative, though there were some people who sought some form of spirituality or tradition for comfort.

Both Gil and Castro spoke to the reality that many survivors are unable to safely and comfortably access care services offered through religious organizations. “The mainstream story is being a cis-woman survivor. The church [faith community] demands moral correctness to receive services, creating rules about sex, pleasure, and sobriety. Survivors are forced to cut up parts of their identity and hide to be accepted, and abuse is never a part of the conversation.”

When asked whether queer and trans survivors had the same access to spiritual care that cis non-queer people do they said, “No. The general messaging is that you're a sinner and going to hell, that you're not worthy of healing. Survivors are being retraumatized through having to reach care. There needs to be larger systemic change and rehabilitation rooted in the problems that has our world dying and killing each other.” While they both expressed concern about the state of religion and spiritual care, they still maintained hope, “It's a huge step to see churches and faith communities publicly supporting queer and trans liberation and black empowerment. Maybe it won't happen in our lifetimes, but the change will happen later. We need more queer and trans faith leaders.”

Both Gil and Castro had ideas on how faith communities and leaders could better serve queer and trans survivors. “The assumption that spiritual care is about fixing someone needs to change, we aren't here to be fixed because we aren't broken.” They said that the work needs to be survivor led. “Everyone's healing looks different, there's not a booklet with steps. It can't look like manipulation and receiving spiritual care shouldn't require indoctrination. Don't impose your agenda before knowing more about the survivor. Be understanding of how vulnerable these people could potentially be. Don't manipulate them. Survivors don't need to

⁵ <http://tnlr.org/en/>

be told what to do, they need space.” They emphasized that care providers need to recognize what parts of religion are harmful. “Acknowledging the context of identities and trying to understand the nuances of how this person came to be here is important. There’s probably a reason, whether it’s for comfort or as a last resort.”

Before we wrapped up, I asked Castro and Gil about the non-traditional ways that queer and trans survivors connect spiritually when religious traditions fail them. They spoke to survivors seeking out ancestral roots, “They want to know what ancestral practices looked like pre-colonialism” There was an emphasis on reclaiming spirituality as opposed to finding a religion. “What if spirituality was a form of liberation? What would it look like?” When we got to the return to mystical or “witchy” cultures they encouraged that if someone is going to draw on these traditions that they should go to the source itself, not to stores selling crystals and sage.

Finally, I asked Gil and Castro what they would want faith leaders and spiritual care providers to know. “Educate yourselves on abuse. Ask yourselves who gets abused and consider in what ways you are abusive. As a representative of a larger institution, you are an abuser, what are you going to do about it and how do you reckon with the abuse taking place within this system? Ask how you can reform.”

Walking up the steps to the historic **Old West Church** in Boston, Massachusetts on a gloomy day, it is hard to not be struck by the vibrant messages of love and resistance that quite literally decorate the space. On this particular day, I was meeting with **Sara Garrard**, who is the **Pastor** at this **United Methodist Church**. As I walked through the doors I was greeted by her faithful canine companion, and was introduced to two beautiful people, Karen and Apollo, who were working on cultivating an urban garden on the church grounds. I knew that this space was special, but I didn’t know quite how unique it was until this moment.

When asked to what extent the queer and trans community has access to spiritual care, Garrard didn’t pull punches. “Cis-white dudes and heteronormative looking couples have the most access”. One of Garrard’s concerns when ministering is to be aware of our privileges, and her honest, off the cuff statement spoke volumes to my own experiences. She continued by saying, “The church is fucked up” and that “there needs to be an axial shift that will look a lot like death.”

“We need to replace caustic and outdated institutions and systems, or we’re going to continue to do harm.” This was immediately paralleled with the United Methodist statement “do no harm.” Garrard shrugged and said, “I know that the church now cannot face these things, that there needs to be a reform and resurrection. There will be chaos, but I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus, and I believe this can happen. The Body of Christ is not these four walls.”

Garrard continued by saying, “There needs to be a reimagination of what the church can be. We are serving Christ by serving people in the ways they need to be served.” “Jesus isn’t for everyone, and that’s okay. We’re still doing God’s work.” When asked what needs to happen, Garrard said, “We need to be open. As an imperfect person who hasn’t always done things perfectly, I can say that there needs to be a big redistribution of power in how the church is organized.” “There’s a lot of trauma in even coming to church,” Garrard shared. In her experience, queer people who left the Christian church, and remained monotheist, often turned to Islam and Judaism. “It’s like visiting a new country. You don’t take a lot of baggage with you, and you experience it for what it is.” Garrard continued speaking to the presuppositions and baggage that accompany queer survivors, particularly in a Christian context. “I haven’t experienced sexual violence, but when I walk into a church I’m immediately on the defensive. I don’t know who these people are or what intentions they have.”

As our conversation continued, we began to consider the different ways that queer and trans survivors of violence find alternative means of accessing spiritual care outside of traditional methods. Garrard shared a personal aspiration from her time growing up in Georgia, that she wanted to create a space for survivors of sex trafficking, where among basic needs the individuals would have the opportunity to engage in hands-on skills such as coding, sewing, and fiber arts. “Being able to use your hands in such a focused and hands-on manner makes your brain focus on something else. Your brain can be an exhausting place.”

Another spiritual care approach that Garrard recommended? Working out. During this time, I learned of another of Garrard’s deeply held longings, which is to create a gym or workout space that was considerate to queer and trans bodies. “I personally love CrossFit. But working out, it’s not as simple as it sounds. The gym and CrossFit both have binary gendered realities that make it terrifying for queer, trans, and non-binary people to feel comfortable. It matters how we refer to people’s bodies.” She cautioned that careful consideration needs to be taken when referring a survivor to attend a physical fitness center. “I’ve been to really good CrossFit locales where instructors asked, ‘may I touch your knee?’ The knee isn’t

an overtly sexual body part, but you have no idea where trauma exists in a body. I've also been in spaces where there's a clearly defined gender norm, where physical consent isn't considered, where bathrooms and locker rooms aren't designed for non-binary people.”

In the following sections we will be focusing on the voices of survivors who attended listening sessions or shared their experiences through focused conversations.

SECTION TWO: ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF FINDING SPIRITUAL CARE

We would be remiss to say that religion and wisdom traditions have never erred, and for many within the LGBTQIA+ community the trauma of past experiences with spirituality haunt them throughout their lives. During the course of my listening sessions, I heard survivors talk about the multitude of ways in which their faith communities failed them, particularly as sexual minorities. Queer and trans people are strong and many have likely experienced violence and oppression to some extent throughout their lives. However, there is a substantial difference between hearing hate speech from a passerby on the street and hearing it from the lips of a faith leader. To hear that one's very existence is detested by the Almighty, Divine, Creator of Life, is one of the most painful affronts one can hear as a human being.

The tragedy is that these attacks on LGBTQIA+ people's identity from faith leaders continue to happen to this day, and the fear survivors have about speaking to their faith leaders regarding sexual and intimate partner violence is legitimate. One survivor put their feelings in words saying, “The church I grew up in failed me.” Even if you are a faith leader who has chosen to support sexual minorities publicly, it is crucial to realize that much of the damage may have already been done.

Throughout my time at Safe Havens I have held concerns that my project might be discovered by a boisterous homophobic person of faith, so it broke my heart when the resistance I received came from within the LGBTQIA+ community itself. People are angry and afraid of religion, and for good reason. To quote one survivor, “So many queer people write off religion because of ties to pain and

suffering. It's never seen as worth getting involved in again." In describing their experiences and feelings with attending religious services, some survivors expressed feeling deep pain and fear, citing concerns of being retraumatized.

"I feel like an animal in a zoo" was a sentiment shared during one of the listening sessions. This person said that they aren't able to find comfort because they felt that their being both queer and a survivor painted them in ways that made them the center of attention in church. Feelings of being the targets of microaggressions force survivors to defend themselves, frequently resulting in a call for them to forgive their aggressors and apologize for their responses.

A common theme that arose during listening sessions was the discomfort with how often faith traditions use a language of things working out as they were supposed to, or of bad things happening for a reason. For queer and trans survivors of violence, this connection between suffering and salvation is a difficult one. By attempting to normalize or even valorize suffering, faith leaders risk sanctioning often painful treatment of LGBTQIA+ people by partners and society. Glorifying suffering also creates the potential for dangerous self harm practices and suicidal ideations.

While historically LGBTQIA+ people have been hurt by religion, many continue to express a need for spiritual enrichment, often leading them to turn away from organized traditions. During the listening sessions, some survivors shared that they were drawn toward faith traditions we might refer to as neo-pagan, with adoration and meaning making centered around Goddess veneration, particularly looking to figures associated with an avenging goddess quality. Some of the rationale for leaning into this idea of the Divine are related to having experienced suffering quite literally. One survivor expressed their discomfort with venerating a Divine manifestation who suffers, referring in this case to Jesus. While there are certainly survivors within large organized faith traditions, it's important for faith leaders and care providers to understand and accept that some survivors may feel more comfortable trusting in different or non-traditional Divine manifestations.

For these reasons, it is essential for faith leaders and care providers to reach outside their communities to where LGBTQIA+ people are, meeting them where they are most comfortable. For some queer and trans people, these spaces take the shape of bars and night clubs, particularly those that are defined as gay, either by the establishment itself or the clientele which attend.

In her dissertation, and published book which followed, Marie Carter interviewed numerous individuals who shared their experiences of pre-Stonewall bars as “the only place.” This “only place” referred to gay bars as the only spaces where queer people could gather in community and find a semblance of safety in expressing their identity. She argued that these gatherings were “possible sites of a lived corporeal theology and political space where the beginnings of gay and lesbian civil rights were fomented.”⁶ In this sense, bars where sexual minorities gather have often been referred to as ‘church’ within the queer community. This trend of merging night life with sexuality and spirituality continues post-Stonewall, and should be considered when thinking about sources of spiritual care for queer and trans survivors.

Another way that survivors engaged in spiritual care practices was through expressions of creativity and art. This included both creation of physical art and participation in performance, as well as being an observer. Survivors shared many mediums, which included painting, pottery, drawing, music making, theater, drag, gardening, and story writing. These were some of the ways that survivors were able to care for themselves following experiences of violence. A common suggestion to spiritual care providers was to include art as an option for spiritual care, whether that be in painting together during recounting of events, symbolic meaning making in story or artwork, or creative ways of interpreting scripture and sacred text.

If faith leaders are able to unpack and reconsider what a sacred time and space looks like, they might find people within the queer community to be more receptive to experiences of spiritual care.

A faith community can claim to be open and affirming in matters of sexuality and gender, but this is proven when such a community empowers queer and trans people through giving them authority. Invite queer and trans people to participate in spiritual practices and worship publicly within your community. This sentiment echoes Taiwanese feminist theologian Lily Kuo Wang who suggests that one of the easiest, and yet most overlooked things one can do to empower women is to hire them.⁷ Following this train of thought, we can reach a logical

⁶ Cartier, Marie. "Baby, You are My Religion: The Emergence of “theology” in Pre - Stonewall Butch -femme/gay Women's Bar Culture and Community." Order No. 3470498 The Claremont Graduate University, 2010. Ann Arbor: ProQuest. Web.

⁷ Fabella, Virginia., and Park, Sun Ai Lee. *We Dare to Dream : Doing Theology as Asian Women*. Kowloon, Hong Kong : Manila, Philippines: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology ; EATWOT Women's Commission in Asia, 1989.

conclusion that greater representation of LGBTQIA+ people in spiritual leadership, care, and education will provide transformative spaces for queer and trans survivors to reclaim their authority and power.

SECTION THREE REIMAGINING THE DIVINE

When asked about obstacles to spiritual care, many survivors expressed their discomfort with the ways in which religious language continues to be gendered. Language such as “brothers and sisters” excludes those people who identify as non-binary or somewhere in-between. One survivor suggested using the phrase “siblings in spirit” as a more inclusive way of addressing the faith community.

Another concern raised by survivors related to gendered language is the historical and continued use of masculine terminology to describe the Divine. While referring to the Divine as God, He, and/or Father/Son has become the standard when speaking about the Divine, for some people I spoke to it is important to hear the Divine spoken of in non-traditional gendered ways, or as gender neutral. This desire for gender neutral language, while not universally claimed, was common enough that faith leaders would benefit from considering who they are ministering to; and whether LGBTQIA+ people generally, and those who have experienced violence in particular, are best served by continuing to use masculine and binary gendered language in their faith community.

At the same time, it is important for faith leaders to accept that the ways that survivors articulate their expression of the Divine may be different from traditional examples. During the listening sessions, some survivors shared that reimagining the Divine allowed them to reclaim some semblance of authority in their lives. For some survivors this meant looking to indigenous traditions for support, with examples including pre-Christian African and European goddess worship. The ability for a person to reimagine their spiritual tradition is an example of the immense capacity that human beings have to make sense of suffering and evil for themselves.

This is not an easy thing for all faith leaders and care providers to grapple with, but if you are going to provide care for queer survivors of violence it is imperative that you understand and appreciate what people do in order to survive. This means being able to imagine and respect the countless ways that people

might consider what the Divine is and how humanity relates, whether that be through traditionally dominant models of Abrahamic religion, the wide expanse of Eastern and South Asian beliefs, ancient polytheistic veneration, the pronounced absence of the Divine, or any other method of trying to understand this cosmic idea of what is Sacred.

SECTION FOUR: IT HAPPENS, TALK ABOUT IT

In holding these listening sessions, I found that one of the most important functions I was serving was to provide a space for survivors to talk about their experiences and feelings regarding violence, sexuality, and the sacred. When reflecting on their spiritual needs, one survivor said, “This part of me, the part that was hurt, is underserved.” We know that violence happens, yet survivors frequently shared that the messages being received from their faith leaders were that, “we don’t talk about that here” and “that doesn’t happen here.” Avoiding talking about issues of violence doesn’t serve your community. While it may be difficult to hear, someone in your faith community is being hurt, and you have the power to address this.

Survivors spoke to issues of safety in their communities. Often, they did not feel safe enough to talk about their experiences with violence. They were also fearful of being hurt by a faith leader or care provider. Survivors want to hear that you care about their suffering (even if you are unaware of it) through your talking about the issues of SV and IPV to the community at large, not just once, but regularly. One survivor said, “Every single person, including children, needs to be talking about violence.” People who are experiencing violence are stripped of their agency and power. However, you as a faith leader or care provider can empower them by being courageous enough to have the tough conversations and to preach the painful truths.

Some simple ways to start conversations in your communities of faith are to post resources and to connect to your local domestic violence and rape crisis centers. Make sure to have contact information available in discrete places, such as in the stalls of your restrooms. Build a relationship with these agencies. Call their hotlines to ask questions. Ask about their policies when it comes to LGBTQIA+ violence. Let them know that you are a faith leader or care provider who not only

acknowledges that violence is happening in queer communities, but that you refuse to be silent on the matter.

If you are in a position to offer premarital counseling, consider extending that beyond just marriage. While marriage equality has arrived in America, there continue to be queer people who do not intend to get married. This means that a significant part of the LGBTQIA+ population is excluded. In an effort to be more considerate and aware of the violence occurring in your communities, it might be beneficial to encourage either a more generalized form of relationship counseling, or to set up a particular program inviting queer and trans people to talk with you one on one, or with their partner(s), so that LGBTQIA+ people in your community can feel comfortable speaking openly about their experiences, both the beautiful ones and the painful. Note, however, that any form of couple's counseling is unsafe in relationships where there is abuse or where you suspect there may be abuse. In these situations, counsel the partners separately.

Recognize that survivors of violence are everywhere, regardless of whether they are out about their experiences with violence. Survivors and abusers can come in any form, any gender, any race, any faith, any sexual orientation, so be mindful about the ways that your community addresses violence. Due to the disproportionate number of female survivors and victims of violence, the general narrative surrounding sexual, domestic, and intimate partner violence tells us that men abuse, and women are abused; however, this directly impacts who will approach you for help. If a faith community fails to speak to the reality that anyone can abuse and be abused, it can further isolate survivors of violence. If we say that men abuse, that masculinity is associated with one's ability to hurt and to not be hurt, then we further stigmatize and shame those people who have experienced violence and who identify as more masculine than feminine. This means that cis-gender and transgender men, as well as those people who do not identify with traditional binary genders, are less likely to approach you after experiences of violence.

If you come from a tradition that includes scriptural references to rape or other sexual violence, don't avoid them, talk about them. During one listening session, survivors expressed their concerns with scriptural narratives of sexual violence, with an emphasis on faith leaders' unwillingness to approach them in productive and useful ways. Unpack what is happening during your religious services, because these are also stories that people in your congregation are able to relate to. Interpretations of scripture that condemn sexual and intimate partner violence need to be the norm.

SECTION FIVE: LISTENING AS A FORM OF SUPPORT

For many of the survivors that I met during the course of this project, this was the first time that someone listened to their experiences. One of the most powerful things I learned from this was just how transformative it can be to have a space where an individual can give voice to the painful memories of their survival and just have someone listen. For queer and trans survivors of violence who are spiritual, it is nearly impossible to find a space where all three of those aspects of their identity can be shared. Many faith communities don't speak to the reality of sexual, domestic, or intimate partner violence. Many queer people have distanced themselves from traditional faith communities because of the historical pain that has been inflicted by religion on LGBTQIA+ people. The queer community itself has difficulty speaking to the realities of violence. When these three facts merge into one being, it can mean that an individual literally has no one they can talk to about their experiences surviving violence.

For many of the survivors I listened to, their experiences of violence were held as a closely guarded secret. For some, there was shame and self judgement associated with being someone who experienced violence. For some, they thought that being strong meant enduring abuse and violence. The consensus throughout the listening sessions was that queer and trans people aren't talking about the violence taking place within the community. One concern raised in relation to this is how small the queer community is, and the survivor's fear that the abuser continues to be a member and will thus find out. This is a real danger in communities that are tightly woven, but especially dangerous in the queer community where sex and sexuality are often the subject of discussion.

When you open yourself to spiritually caring for queer and trans survivors of violence, you likely will help people who have never had someone listen, and that is huge. Listening, in and of itself, is a powerful way of supporting survivors, and when done through the lens of faith, becomes a spiritual act. What I would call Spiritual Listening, the ability to be present and supportive even when you know that physically there may be nothing you can do to stop violence from occurring, is an incredible gift that faith leaders and care providers can give to survivors. Holding sacred time and space to be with someone as they open up about experiences of violence allows for the survivor to unburden their heart and mind, to feel like they are being heard and believed.

SECTION SIX QUEER VIOLENCE IN THE INFORMATION ERA

Thanks to the work of sexual and domestic violence survivors and advocates, we have managed to make strides in addressing violence, particularly against women. While much of the information provided by advocacy organizations has empowered survivors of violence, it is important to understand some of the significant differences regarding violence in LGBTQIA+ communities.

During the listening sessions, survivors were invited to share about their experiences with violence and spirituality, and one of the largest commonalities was how diverse each individual's experience with violence was. One survivor shared their experiences with familial and incestuous violence, others spoke to violence done at the hands of an intimate partner, while some survivors revealed that their experiences with violence came after meeting a hookup on a dating app.

What's crucial to understand is that all of these are serious forms of violence and should be treated as such. Many in the domestic violence community have worked hard to reveal that violence often occurs at the hands of those closest to us, such as biological family. However, such views of violence, when compared to the experiences shared by LGBTQIA+ survivors, prove to be antiquated and heteronormative. For many LGBTQIA+ people, relationships to biological family are fractured, and while this doesn't negate the reality that queer and trans people experience familial violence, it is also important to consider where and in what form violence is taking place.

The story of LGBTQIA+ people in America is one of perseverance and survival. In many parts of the country there remains a stigma and shame associated with being sexually nontraditional. Over the years, individuals have found ways to meet and engage in intimate acts with discretion so as to avoid being outed. With the advent of the internet, queer individuals would use websites such as Craigslist to find potential intimate partners, and while this particular avenue has recently been removed, there remain numerous apps for LGBTQIA+ people to meet, including Grindr, HER, and Scruff. While these apps provide a means for people to meet others, one common use is to engage in "no strings attached" sexual intercourse with someone nearby.

Unfortunately, not everyone on the other end of an app is a friend. Apps like Grindr are primarily used by gay men to meet other gay men for casual sex, but what happens when the lines of what constitutes sexual violence are blurred?

For example, if an individual connects with someone through an app that is meant for casual sex, and decides during the encounter to retract their consent, what happens if this decision isn't respected? What if a connection is made online, but the potential partner wasn't honest about their identity yet pressures the individual to participate in sexual activity?

Each of these scenarios were shared with me during listening sessions. These situations are happening to real people. Sadly, because of the way that our society has defined sexual, domestic, and intimate partner violence, these acts of violence went unreported. While we could speculate on what would have happened had these been considered as the violent acts that they are, it would be more beneficial for us to question the societal norms that become obstacles for queer people experiencing violence. For one thing, the idea that violence is primarily inflicted by those we know does not match with these experiences. In fact, as these abuses came to light, they were accompanied by the reality that the violators were anonymous, and that aside from a location there was little distinguishing information that the survivor could use to report.

DOES IT GET BETTER?

In this resource I've tried to interweave the experiences of queer and trans people's survival of violence with spirituality and religion as a way forward, yet I know that this doesn't solve our problem. Sexual, domestic, and intimate partner violence in the queer and trans communities will continue so long as the advocates who care come solely from the realms of queer and trans identity. Based on my findings, a lot has to change in faith communities if there is to be meaningful care provided to these survivors; and yet, I don't think that's necessarily a terrible idea. Faith leaders and spiritual care providers need to expand their methods of caring for people. From what I've learned, the faith community and the advocacy community have a lot to learn from the experiences of LGBTQIA+ survivors of violence, and there is a need that has to be met. Queer and trans people are dying. I have hope that one day we will be able to say that yes it does get better, but in order for that to happen we need things to change in our faith communities. It's up to you now to expand upon this resource by talking to your own communities and providing spiritual care for those most in need of it without judgement, and with compassion and respect for their identity.

APPENDIX A LET'S QUEER SOMETHING UP

There's a lot to be said about the LGBTQIA+ community, and there is no expectation that you be an expert on queer theory. With that being said, in order for us to have a good dialogue surrounding sexuality, spirituality, and violence we should consider the common language already at play in the LGBTQIA+ community. If you want to be a mindful spiritual care provider to the LGBTQIA+ community, you've first got to know who your care seekers are, what each of those letters means, and why they're important.

L Stands for Lesbian, and refers to a woman who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards women.

G Stands for Gay, and refers to a man who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards men. It is also a generic term for lesbian and gay sexuality – some women refer to themselves as gay rather than lesbian.

B Stands for Bi or Bi Sexual, and refers to a person with an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards both men and women.

T Stands for Transgender or Trans, an umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) transgender, transsexual, gender-queer (GQ), gender-fluid, non-binary, gender-variant, crossdresser, genderless, agender, nongender, third gender, two-spirit, bi-gender, trans man, trans woman, trans masculine and trans feminine. Please note that this is not transgendered, which is a term implying that something happened to a person which made them trans. More on this later.

Q Stands for Queer or Questioning. Historically the word queer has been used and understood to be offensive; however, in our modern times we have seen a reclamation of the term queer to express the understanding and experiences of the sexual minority through the lens which ‘otherness’ offers. Someone who identifies as queer may be speaking about their sexuality, gender, or both. We also see the word as the mantle in the hermeneutical rendering of scripture through the lens of sexual minorities across the spectrum in what is known as Queer Theology.

I Stands for Intersex. A term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not meet with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female. Intersex people may identify as male, female or non-binary.

A Stands for A-Sexual. This refers to a person who doesn’t experience sexual attraction, or to the extent that is considered normalized. These people continue to have meaningful relationships, while experiencing attraction and arousal in different ways that go beyond the act of sexual intimacy.

+ Stands as a placeholder acknowledging the ever-changing ways that humanity has for expressing sexuality and gender.

While we have gone through some of the common understandings of the acronyms used within the sexual minority community, it is important for care providers not to assume that these words (or others) can be used for every person. It should also be noted that these terms are the very basic ones used, and by no means are exhaustive in their defining. As a care provider working with someone who is a sexual minority it is crucial to discover how the care seeker defines themselves, and the proper terminology to use.

Along with these acronyms, I’d like to provide some clarification on other commonly used words relevant to this work.

Cis-Gender is a term used to describe someone whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth.

Ally is someone outside of the queer community who is either a friend, ally, or advocate.

Closeted refers to someone who is not open about their sexual and/or gender identity.

Coming Out describes the process or journey of an individual accepting their sexual or gender identity and may be related to sharing their acceptance with others. This journey is one which may or may not involve a public revelation.

Down Low (DL) is predominantly used within the gay male community to describe a man who publicly identifies as heterosexual but engages in sexual acts with other men. Often, these men are in committed sexual or romantic relationships with a woman, while discreetly engaging with men sexually.

Drag Queen and Drag King are terms used by people who present socially in clothing, name, and/or pronouns that differ from their everyday gender, usually for enjoyment, entertainment, and/or self-expression. Drag queens typically have everyday lives as men. Drag kings typically live as women and/or butches when not performing. Drag shows are popular in some gay, lesbian, and bisexual environments.

Pansexual refers to a person who is not limited by biological sex, gender, or gender identity when considering a sexual or romantic partner.

APPENDIX B GENDER AND SEXUALITY SPECTRUMS AND PRONOUNS

When providing care for someone, it is essential to be mindful of the ways which a person chooses to self-identify. The common understanding of gender includes the usage of he/him/his and she/her/hers to refer to male and female. Historically these have been the two major genders which all people have been compared to in order to help understand who they are, man and woman, male and female, him and her; however, as the study of human sexuality and gender has expanded, the limits to these binaries have been exposed. Some people who outwardly present as one of the binary genders may feel more comfortable

expressing themselves through means that are more masculine or feminine than the binary would traditionally allow.

What's important to understand when engaging in spiritual care with survivors who identify as a sexual minority is that the first thing you can do is be open and understanding about how a person chooses to identify. For some people, the common genders of female and male simply do not speak to their authentic identity and lived experiences for a variety of reasons; leading to the idea of gender and sexuality as a spectrum, rather than absolute points. Below are two charts borrowed from the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee which may make understanding pronouns easier.⁸

Pronouns-- A How To Guide

Subject: 1 laughed at the notion of a gender binary.

Object: They tried to convince 2 that asexuality does not exist.

Possessive: 3 favorite color is unknown.

Possessive Pronoun: The pronoun card is 4.

Reflexive: 1 think(s) highly of 5.

The pronoun list on the reverse is not an exhaustive list.
It is good practice to ask which pronouns a person uses.

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⁸ <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>

1	2	3	4	5
(f)ae	(f)aer	(f)aer	(f)aers	(f)aerself
e/ey	em	eir	eirs	eirself
he	him	his	his	himself
per	per	pers	pers	perself
she	her	her	hers	herself
they	them	their	theirs	themself
ve	ver	vis	vis	verself
xe	xem	xyr	xyrs	xemself
ze/zie	hir	hir	hirs	hirself

With these pronouns hopefully better understood, some simple yet powerful ways of providing care include:

- Avoid assuming someone's gender based on outward appearances. While some people may appear more feminine or more masculine, these methods of defining a person are outdated and harmful. You can never be sure how a person identifies until you ask them.

- Introduce your pronouns when you introduce yourself. One of the best ways to be an ally to the community is by normalizing the use of pronouns. When someone who is in a position of power shares their own pronouns, it creates a space in which people feel comfortable expressing their own pronouns. An easy way of doing this is by saying something along the lines of, "Hi, my name is (insert name). My pronouns are (x/y/z), and yours?"

- Be kind to yourself. Using pronouns regularly will take time, and you will slip up. That's okay. The most important part is that you continue trying to use inclusive language, including pronouns. It might feel awkward at first, but sometimes positive changes take some discomfort.

