Love at the Intersection: Supporting the Faith Development of LGB Students of Faith at the University of Dayton.
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Supporting the Faith Development of LGB Students of Faith at the University of Dayton

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Abstract

While the value of faith development in college is recognized, it is a painful topic for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students given religion's anti-LGB history. Yet many value their faith and seek developmental support. Given the dearth of research on this intersection, this qualitative study examined which forms of support LGB students of faith at the University of Dayton (UD) described as most beneficial to their faith development.

Research Questions

- What forms of support from campus professionals do undergraduate LGB students of Christian faith describe as most beneficial to their faith development?
- How do such forms of support specifically help them as LGB students of faith?
- Are there unique forms of support that they seek as LGB students of faith and, if so, what are they?

Methods

This study took a transcendental phenomenological approach, drawing significant statements and representative themes from the interviews of seven LGB students of faith at UD. A snowballing technique was utilized to identify participants through the referrals of campus professionals working with this population.

Findings

Religious Closet

Most students reported staying closeted around people of faith and within faith communities, resulting in the stress of inauthenticity and isolation.

“...a lot of my friends except for my very Catholic ones because I don’t want them to judge me.” - Audrey

Authenticity Meets Unconditional Love

One of the most beneficial forms of support cited was that of religious community members responding with unconditional love and inclusion to honest expressions of sexual orientation.

“It was never, “I love you anyways.” It’s not like that. It’s just, “I want you to come and I love you.” “It’s not, “I love you anyways...”” - Meg

Research Questions

Advocating for LGB Inclusion

Many referenced the positive impact of and the continuing need for allies who advocate for LGB inclusion within the Church and its theology.

“I met the Marianists and learning about their LGBTQ initiatives and their charism of inclusivity and community have been really important... if I hadn’t gone to a Marianist institution then I might not still identify as a person of faith.” - Meg

Telling Their Own Stories

Receiving space and support to publicly tell their stories, own their intersecting identities, and explain this reality to others was described as making a huge impact on faith development.

“I lied [the retreat] the next semester and was able to give a talk about discovering my own identity and my sexuality, and how I understand love intertwined with faith and the love of Christ.” - Tom

Impact of Role Models

Examples of openly LGB people of faith and people of faith who were committed to the Church yet critical of specific religious community members.

“There’s no patron saint of homosexuality, like, “Yeah, this guy lived a very holy life and he was gay.” There’s no one to look to as an example of faith, so once I found that example, that was probably one of the things that really helped me.” - Tom

Need for Common Community

Connecting with fellow LGB students of faith was described as valuable and needed. This unique community helped them see they were not alone and that others could relate to their challenges.

“I’ve met other people who identify as, like, queer, gay people of faith. So, also having these people who identify similarly as me to talk to about it, share experiences, has been really important.” - Meg

Implications

Based on this study, the most beneficial forms of support in faith development for LGB students could include: 1) fostering environments in which authentic identity is encouraged and met with unconditional love; 2) empowering LGB students of faith to share their stories; 3) providing LGB students of faith opportunities for mutual connection; 4) highlighting people whose lives reflect the challenges of this population; and 5) advocating for their inclusion within the Church. Future research should focus on LGB people of faith post-college to account for continued development.

Sample

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<td>Philip</td>
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