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# LGBT and Christian: Experiences with Identity

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**LGBT and Christian: Experiences with Identity**

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A special thank you to my advisor Lindsay,  
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### **Abstract**

I grew up in a Christian household and when my brother came out as gay my parents did not react well. My father even said things that seriously affected their relationship. My brother inspired me to conduct research that will help people better understand how LGBT adults who currently live in the Netherlands experience their sexual and Christian identities. I interviewed seven people who identify within the LGBT community and one minister. I focused most of my research in a specific town in the Bible Belt of the Netherlands called Urk. In conclusion, I found that where someone lives and who someone is surrounded by impacts their experiences trying to find the balance between LGBT and Christian identities. Overall, this study explains how important it is to give people the space and the support they need to find their identity in their own way and on their own terms.

Key Words: LGBT, Christian, Identities, Urk, Religion

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## **I. Introduction**

I grew up in a Christian home where my parents taught my brother and I conservative family values. We learned that when a man and a woman love each other they get married and have children. My parents expected us to follow their idealized plan in order and if we failed to do so we were supposedly unsuccessful. When my brother announced that he was gay our household turned upside down. He took my father to lunch to tell him and he responded with nothing but terrible comments. He had even taken back a cross that he had earlier gifted to my brother. One day I came home to find my mother crying because she felt in the middle of my brother and my father. For my mother, I was the only one she could talk to about how she was feeling until my parents decided to go to therapy. My mother told me not to tell anyone about my brother's sexuality because she wanted him to be positive about his identity before it went public. It was frustrating because I could not talk to anyone I know about what was happening and it became a big secret. It has been three years now and my brother and my father are still amending their relationship. Also, other members of my family are just now finding out within the past year and a half about everything that happened.

My brother inspired me to learn more about the development of sexual identities within Christian contexts because throughout middle school and high school he always had an idea about his sexuality, but he never felt comfortable to explore and act upon those feelings until he left for college. Based on my experiences with my brother I came up with the question: How have lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adults who currently live in the Netherlands experienced their sexual and Christian identities? I hope this paper can help LGBT Christians better understand their relationship between faith and sexuality. I also hope that this paper can help heterosexual

Christians and non-religious LGBT people in becoming better allies to LGBT Christians and helping create more inclusive environments.

## **II. Literature Review**

An article called *Opening the Religious Closet: The Lives of Gay Christians and Muslims in the Netherlands* starts by explaining how, “The Dutch government explicitly acknowledges that some ethnic and conservative religious communities have made things more difficult for out gays and lesbians, and it has adopted an official policy of supporting and encouraging their acceptance in society” (Fleenor & Moenaff, 2016). This made me curious about how religiously affiliated people react to LGBT members within their organizations and if they are even aware that people in their church are LGBT. The heterosexual members of religious communities and their general beliefs on LGBT identities can completely change the atmosphere of their religious environment in ways that are inclusive for people who identify as LGBT or are even unwelcoming for them. These environments can also impact how LGBT Christians find their balance between their religious and sexual identities or even if they can find that balance at all. Maybe unexclusive environments change how LGBT people identify with religion or maybe these environments make them turn away from religion completely.

Milly, my host mom while I stayed in the Netherlands, told me that there are LGBT people in her congregation, but their sexuality is generally not spoken about (M. Holwijn, personal communication, September 7, 2016). As I was researching, I found information that supported her observation which said, “Note, however, that though up to 95 per cent of Dutch people claim in surveys that they accept homosexuals, 42 per cent report that they dislike seeing two men kissing in the street (precisely the image used in the documentary *Naar Nederland* for the

immigration test) while respectively 31 per cent and 8 per cent express a similar dislike for lesbian and straight couples kissing in public (Keuzenkamp et al., 2006: 36)” (as cited in Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011). In the Netherlands, I think LGBT identities are becoming less stigmatized, but in the case of religion I think this may be because their sexuality is ignored. Ignoring is not the same as accepting. I think ignoring is tolerating and putting an idea out of sight and out of mind. If this is true, ignoring LGBT identities is a problem because it deteriorates the possibility of normalizing non-heteronormativity. Instead, ignoring can contribute to the otherness and stigma associated with LGBT identities especially in religious contexts.

I also think it is also important to understand how non-religious LGBT people perceive Christian identities and how that may affect LGBT Christians. A previous School of International Training (SIT) research project talks about homosexual people’s experiences with their Christian identities (Mitchell, 2009), but what about their experiences throughout the development of their sexual identities within Christian contexts? Also, what about other members of the LGBT community? Wielie Elhorst and Ioan Nemes noticed that, “What they find surprising is that they are challenged less by the Christian community than by the gay community” (Fleenor & Moenaff, 2016). Wielie and Ioan inspired me to better understand how LGBT communities affect people’s ability to balance Christianity with their sexual identities. Non-religious people within the LGBT community may make it challenging for other LGBT people to identify as religious especially if people do not understand how those two identities can coexist.

In addition to people, location is a factor that might impact how LGBT Christians experience their sexual and religious identities: specifically, like the Dutch Bible Belt. As said by Oosterbeek (2006), in his the novel *Gordel van God*, “Ik stuit al gauw op een boek van de

sociaalgeograaf Hans Knippenberg: *De Religieuze Kaart van Nederland: omvang en geografische spreiding van de godsdienstige gezindten vanaf de Reformatie tot heden*,” which means: “I come soon on a book by social geographer Hans Knippenberg: *The Religious Card Netherlands: magnitude and geographical distribution of religious denominations from the Reformation to the present day*.” The location of the Bible Belt in the Netherlands is where religion is most concentrated and this is what the area looks like on map:

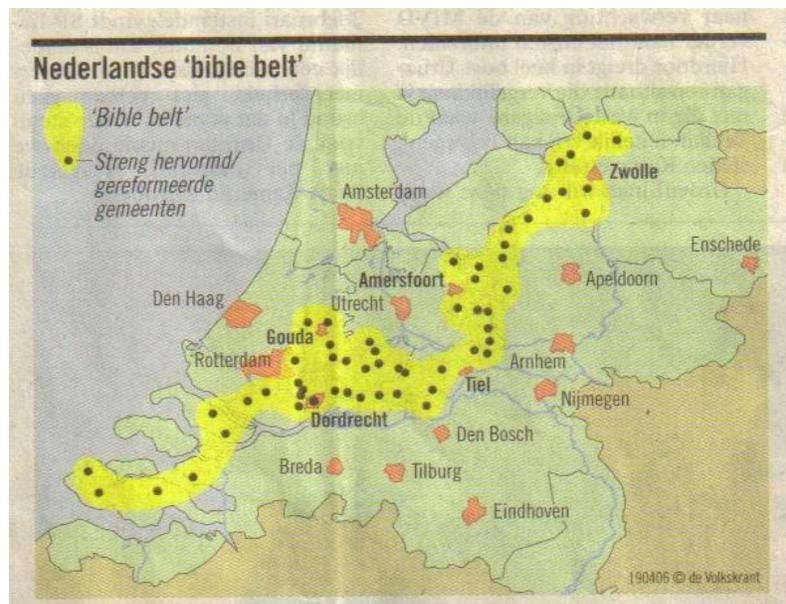


Figure 1. Nederlandse 'bible belt' in *de Volkskrant* (Retapirda, 2015).

The Bible Belt made me wonder about if and how living in a predominately religious environment would be different for LGBT adults and LGBT Christians than living in a city where religious affiliation is not an expectation. I was also curious if a close community where most people know each other would be more supportive or ostracizing and if places where religion is a social norm effects how and when LGBT people feel comfortable publically identifying with their sexuality.

### **III. Methodology**

My study is based on the interpretive group method where I interpret how a specific phenomenon occurs through interviewing human subjects. I interviewed eight adults in the Netherlands. Seven identify in the LGBT community and one is a minister of a Christian congregation. I found my participants through personal and snowball sampling. People I met in Amsterdam this semester put me in contact with other people willing to participate. Some of those interviewees also recruited more people through their own personal networks. To get to know the communities I researched, I interacted and spent time with people to get to know them better.

To answer my research question, I created four sub-questions that I needed to answer first:

1. How are LGBT people's sexual identities affected by heterosexual members of religious communities?
2. How are LGBT people's sexual identities affected by non-religious LGBT people?
3. How do LGBT Christians balance faith and sexuality?
4. What are the reasons some LGBT Christians do not find the balance between faith and sexuality?

To answer my sub-questions, I conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews, so I could explore people's life experiences in depth and on a more individualized level. I created an interview guide, but semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask additional questions that were not on my interview guide depending on each respondent and the direction of their interview. Qualitative interviews also allowed me to ask open ended questions where people could share

anything they feel is relevant to my research question. I took notes during each interview and I also recorded them, so I could accurately represent everyone to the best of my ability. I made sure each participant felt comfortable and I also made sure that they were aware they could refuse any questions or stop the interview at any time. I required each participant to sign a consent form prior to their interview that included statements about not using any identifiable information in my report, using this study for my future research, and destroying everything with their names on it after my study was completed (see appendices for a sample copy of the consent form).

To analyze my interviews, I put together common themes I found throughout the interviews. One limitation to my study is that many of my interviewees are from the same community in Urk, but I did make sure to also interview people who are from or are currently living in Tollebeek and Amsterdam to hear other people's perspectives. Before I conducted my research, I assumed most LGBT adults would have similar experiences to my older brother in Christian contexts, but I was surprised to find in many cases I was proven wrong.

#### **IV. Interviews**

Urk is a town located "in the region of Flevoland in Netherlands with a population of approximately 17, 345 people" (*Places in the world*, n.d.). The town used to be an island and due to their previous geography, Interviewees E and F said they speak a different dialect of Dutch. Fishing is a large aspect of the economy in Urk. A lot of men go to sea during the week while the women stay in town.



Figure 2. Netherlands, Quay of Urk (Senna3, 2011).

The town of “Urk is one of the most politically conservative areas in the Netherlands. As part of the so-called Dutch 'Bible belt', a vast majority of election votes go to the three Christian parties in the Netherlands, [SGP](#), [ChristenUnie](#) and [CDA](#)” (*Liqui Search*, 2016). Most people within the community are religiously affiliated. Since the community is small most people also know each other. There are nearly twenty churches in Urk and “Preachers estimate that 97 percent of the town attends a Sunday service” (Castle, 2007). For people who grow up in Urk, religion is generally a family and social expectation.

Tollebeek and Amsterdam are two places that do not have religious expectations like Urk. As reported by *DutchNews.nl* (2016), “Fewer than a third of Dutch people have a religious faith and nearly one in four describe themselves as atheists, according to the latest census of belief in the Netherlands.” Especially when comparing places in the Bible Belt to other areas around the Netherlands, religiosity varies and even “Within the Christian group the survey also found a trend towards more secular beliefs. Just 13% of Catholics believe in heaven and fewer than half believe that Jesus is the son of God. The trend was less pronounced among the Protestant congregations” (*DutchNews.nl*, 2016). This survey supports the idea that in and outside of

Christian communities there are variations of religiosity that effect what people believe in and how they live.

I interviewed seven people who identify in the LGBT community and one minister.

Interviewee A was born in a small town near Urk called Tollebeek. She identifies as a lesbian and currently lives in Amsterdam with her wife, Interviewee B. Interviewee B is originally from Urk. Interviewee C is from California, but now lives in Amsterdam. He identifies as in transition. Interviewee D has always lived in the Netherlands and currently lives in Tollebeek. He identifies as a transgender man. Interviewee E grew up in Tollebeek. She identifies as a lesbian and she lives in Urk with her wife, Interviewee F. Interviewee F is also originally from Urk. Interviewee G was born in a municipality near Urk called Emmeloord, but lives in Urk. He identifies as a gay man. Interviewees H and I both grew up in Urk and identify as gay men. Lastly, Interviewee J is originally from Germany, but he is now a minister in Amsterdam.

## **V. Analysis**

### **The Role of Communities**

#### **1. Location**

Where people live impacts how LGBT adults experience their sexual and Christian identities. For example, the difference is dramatically displayed when comparing the basic ways of living in Urk to the basic ways of living in Amsterdam. Religion is a foundational aspect of Urk whereas in Amsterdam religion is not prominent at all. In fact, as reported by *Dutch News* (2016), a majority of Dutch people are actually not religiously affiliated at all.

Changing living spaces from one location to another also makes a difference in how people perceive their sexual and religious identities. Sometimes leaving a familiar place can make

people understand ideas about their own life differently. By learning about new perspectives people can find other ways of living that may be more compatible with what they really believe in. Changing locations gives people the space to create their own opinion away from any previous surrounding social pressures and expectations.

Location is also in relation to specific religious groups and how group dynamics impact people's identities. Due to the variation within Christianity itself, LGBT Christians will have different experiences depending on the level of conservatism or liberalism of the particular religious group they are or were involved in.

### **A. City or Town**

The city or town people live in effect how LGBT adults and LGBT Christians fit into their communities. This goes further than if a city or a town is conservative, liberal, religious, or secularized. There are also differences between living in close knit communities compared to large cities or even living in different types of places throughout one individual's lifetime. In the context of people who identify as LGB in the south of the United States, "The men interviewed expressed the need to have a group that understood them, where they would fit in, and that would be there for them" (Woodell, Kazyak, Compton, 2015). I also found that in Urk, people had positive experiences with their sexual identities in religious contexts because of the small community support. On the other hand, because everyone in the small community knows each other and most people are religiously affiliated, there were also some extended social pressures that impacted the progressions of people's sexuality.

Living in Urk is different from other parts of the Netherlands because of the town's geographical history. According to Interviewee E and her wife Interviewee F, Urk used to be an

island. Due to their previous locational conditions, their Dutch dialect is different from other places. For example, because of how small the town is and how a lot of people in the community know each other, they are allowed to use terms that are usually perceived as insulting. Other members of the town know people's intentions are not negative which makes their language acceptable. Interviewees E and F said it is okay for one Urker to call another Urker a dyke. They compared this example to calling someone fat. When people say terms that seem derogatory, others understand that their intentions are not mean. Actually, people do not necessarily have the ability to be mean to each other because of the commonly close relationships throughout the community. It is acceptable to call people by those terms only to and from fellow Urkers though. If someone were to be called something like that outside of Urk then the meaning would be insulting again.

Something else that makes Urk unique is their fishing industry. Fishing is a main part of Urk's economy and Interviewee H's father brought up a large fishing company in the town. Interviewee H joined his father's company which impacted his religious upbringing. He said in his family they had a rule that, "if you've never been to sea you were under my mom's regime. Once you were at sea you were under my dad's regime." His mother went to church and his father did not, so the women in his family did not have any other choice but to attend with her. Interviewee H had more freedom in that because of his role in the fishing industry and in his father's company.

Interviewee G is also from Urk, but his family stopped going to church when he was four. His brother dated the minister's daughter and when they broke up there was a big fight which is also around the time when his family stopped attending church. He did attend two or three times when he was trying to figure out his life, but most of what he learned about religion was from his

parents and his peers. He read the Bible at home and participated in other religious practices like going to Sunday school with his friends. Even though he did not attend church growing up, religion was still a common practice by his friends and family in the city he grew up in.

Being a close knit community like Urk gives a different meaning to being gay and Christian. Interviewee E was only criticized once for identifying as both lesbian and Christian and that was not even in Urk, but in Amsterdam. She said other members of the LGBT community outside of Urk do not understand how to be both, but the LGBT community in Urk understands each other's backgrounds and experiences in the religious environment they grew up in. Also, since everyone knows each other in the community, people are more tolerant of LGBT identities among their community members. Interviewee A did say that revealing LGBT identities in Urk comes in waves though. People tend to come out around the same time and then it will be still for a few years. Some people are also now getting divorced at age forty and then deciding to come out. Interviewees A and B attributed this to a generational gap.

Urk also has different standards for gay men and gay women. According to Interviewees A and B, men cannot pretend they are friends with other men to cover up their sexuality where women can. Interviewee I also said that men who can still identify with alpha male attributes also have an easier time if they are gay.

Interviewee I recognized his sexuality when he was twelve, but because of his religious upbringing in Urk he thought it might just be an experimental idea and that his thoughts were a problem. Due to his religious background, it took Interviewee I until he was twenty to stop going to church and start thinking about his sexual identity. Studying religion became an intellectual exercise for him and after he started questioning the Bible, he started thinking homosexuality was acceptable. When he left Urk for school in Amsterdam he also started questioning his

upbringing. Interviewee I had to leave the place where he came from to recognize the uncertainties he has about some of his childhood experiences.

Similar to Interviewee I, Interviewee C also changed locations and found a home away from his religious roots. He is originally from the United States and he stopped practicing religion after he moved out at the age of sixteen. Interviewee I lived in a few different places, but he has currently found his home in Amsterdam and he no longer practices the religious faith he grew up in.

Living in a specific town or city changes people's perspectives on what they believe in and how they live their lives, especially in a place like Urk that has individual characteristics different from many other places in the Netherlands. Compared to Urk, there are differences living in a large city like Amsterdam with less religious expectations. Also, sometimes changing locations can also open up new ways of thinking that were not visible before. Leaving a familiar place can be a growing experience and sometimes staying in the same place for a long time can potentially make people more close-minded.

## **B. Religious Group**

Specific congregations also impact LGBT adults in Christian contexts because some groups are more accepting than others. How organizations handle discussions about the LGBT community effect how people identify and how people come about their identities. The same study about LGB Christians living in the south of United States found, "that most interviewees employed two strategies to reconcile their Christian and gay identities: emphasizing a personal connection to an accepting God and finding a local church in their rural community in which they felt accepted" (Woodell, Kazyak, & Compton, 2015). This point is also comparable to the

Netherlands and when someone still wants to participate in religious groups, finding the right congregation is crucial in maintaining both an LGBT and Christian identity.

Interviewee A used to attend a church in Urk with traditional characteristics, but the church itself is actually more liberal in its fundamental ideas. For example, it is traditional in the sense that people dress nicely and get baptized as babies, but the congregation is also aware of LGBT identities and they really take time to think about the issue. Interviewee A said the church does not condemn LGBT identities, but they do not necessarily support them. What both Interviewees A and B did say about congregations in Urk is that there are variations of more conservative and more liberal groups. Specifically, Interviewee B said that in regards to LGBT identities, “there it’s a lot of variation within the Christianity. There’s very traditional churches in which it is really I think of a sin.” In Urk there are people who are so conservative to the point where they do not have TV’s in their homes. Some people are also conservative enough that they did not want to attend Interviewee A and B’s wedding. On the other hand, though, there are also churches in Urk that are more accepting and who are critically thinking about LGBT identities in relation to their faith.

Interviewee A also attended a church in Amsterdam for nine months. She thought she found a place she felt comfortable in, but it took almost a year for her to be proven wrong. Around the time Pride was happening she saw a woman holding a paper with prayers against homosexuality. Interviewee A said that she would have never seen something like that at the church she attended in Urk. Even if people in her old church had negative feelings towards homosexuality they would not talk about it publically, especially if they would challenge the opinion of the church majority.

Interviewee J is a Christian minister and his congregation is a member amongst a larger group of congregations from all over the world. The congregations have a world board that

brings representatives together to make decisions. Meeting with groups from all over the world can be challenging to find common ground regarding the LGBT community. Interviewee J said that Western oriented congregations, “experience out of their surrounding, as being a congregation in Amsterdam it’s very, very different than congregation in Tanzania or somewhere, so even the political, the social context you are living in and even your belief is not really abstract from that context where you are living in.” The level of acceptability for LGBT identities varies between countries because in some places homosexuality is not positively perceived and is also connected to their country’s laws. For this reason, some congregations threaten to back out of their affiliation with the world group if people permit homosexual marriages for the everyone. Due to the variations of beliefs throughout the different congregations, Interviewee J said that the board decided that “every congregation have to decide for themselves.” For Interviewee J’s congregation specifically, homosexual members are treated like everyone else. He said, “There is no point that we are excluding them holy communion, having special tasks, special positions in the church, so that they are not, not excluded in whatever kind of way.” He and his community treat everyone in the group equally.

There are many variations of congregations and as a minister, Interviewee J believes that when joining a religious community people need to first see if they fit into the congregation. He received a phone call from a TV producer wanting to find a church for a transgender man, so they could film him having a positive experience. Interviewee J did not agree with forcing a good experience because no matter who the person is or their sexual identity they need to find the congregation that best fits them. Interviewee J said everyone is welcome in his congregation, but it is important to know which community is right for an individual and that is not something people can force.

Different perspectives from different churches is what made Interviewee C start questioning religion. He did not understand why people who supposedly believe in the same God believe in different things. He said:

You know one church would say one thing about a particular Bible passage that say in another church that we went to would say another and so you know, I'd hear different things, so many different things. There are different perspectives about the same thing from different churches which got me started thinking okay, how come they're not all believing in the same things? Supposedly they all believe the same God and look at the same Bible. How come they don't believe the same thing? Other than you know this, that, that, and that are sinners and everything else is very different.

After Interviewee C started questioning religion, participating in his family's religious practices were still a social expectation until he moved out. He is unsure if other kids his age were questioning religion too, but no one talked about it because everyone wanted to fit into the community.

Specific Christian congregations have different beliefs and may value different ideas more than others. As said by Interviewees A and B, there are variations of religiosity and my research has found that those variations impact LGBT adults' experiences with Christianity. It is important to take Interviewee J's advice and try different religious congregations to find the right fit.

## **2. Family, Friends, and Peers**

People effect LGBT adults in Christian contexts whether that impact is positive or negative. People create environments that either make others feel comfortable or not which is especially important to consider when navigating LGBT identities and Christianity. In a website for expats in the Netherlands there is a statement that says, "As one friend puts it, whether he hangs his

rainbow shirt inside or outside the closet depends on where he unpacks his suitcase” (Fischer, 2013). Ultimately, someone’s identity can affect how they feel in certain places.

### **A. Supportive Allies**

Having a support system makes it easier for LGBT adults to identify with their sexual and/ or religious identities. Ultimately, people make or break how someone feels in a specific space. The same website for expats in the Netherlands says that, “Amsterdam certainly is the hub of LGBT activities, but support and community events can be found throughout the Netherlands” (Fischer, 2013). These groups are important because they advocate for LGBT rights and provide spaces for people to identify freely. There are also different types of spaces for certain needs. For example, specifically religiously affiliated LGBT advocacy groups are also options.

Some interviewees were surrounded by supportive people. Interviewee A has a big family and her childhood was very family based. According to Interviewees A and B, people in Urk generally have large families with many children. Interviewee A identifies as a lesbian and started recognizing her sexuality when she was about eleven, but she officially came out when she was twenty. On January 2, 2007 Interviewee A’s parents figured out her sexuality on their own. Her best friend is also a lesbian, but after Interviewee A came out they lost contact within the year. She thinks that is because her friend is a lesbian too, but she is from a different family. She said her old friend has a girlfriend, but people perceive her relationship as a friendship even though she wants it to be seen as more. Interviewee A’s sister is 8 years older than her and she had a relationship with a woman for four years before bringing her significant other around. Her parents ignored the relationship for a while, but eventually accepted it. Interviewee A thinks her sister made her coming out experience easier for her. She said, “I also think because back then

when I came out my mom and dad were already, yeah, acknowledged the relationship of my sister with her girlfriend and everybody in church knew that, so I think for a lot of people it was like oh, but they accepted it, so yeah it's fine." According to Interviewee A, her sister's identity helped her.

Interviewee H came out as gay when he was nineteen. At the time, his boyfriend got kicked out of his house because of his sexuality and when Interviewee H's mother found out her reaction was, "Which idiot mother does that to his, to, to her child?" His mother said that when you have three children in the three grave yards in Urk you are happy when your son brings home another son for you. Interviewee H's friends did not have any problems with his sexuality. There was only one guy who did, but he does not consider him a friend to begin with.

Interviewee H said he actually gained more friends when he came out. He had one instance with a fellow fisherman that really stood out to him. There was a day with poor weather conditions and the fellow fisherman said over a loud speaker, "If I were you, I would return home to my husband." Especially in a community of religious fisherman where masculine ideals are clearly present, this public comment was extremely important to Interviewee H. According to him, many people feel uncomfortable walking hand in hand with their partners in other parts of Holland, but in Urk there is no problem at all.

For other interviewees, acceptance happened gradually. Interviewee G believes other members of the Urk community influenced his parents. Since they stopped going to church when he was four, his parents were not surrounded by people telling them homosexuality was wrong. Instead they only talked to their friends and family about Interviewee G's sexuality. He thinks his father was more influenced by personal conversations with specifically him though. He also thinks his oldest brother's wife helped him because she was very vocal about accepting him and

she was determined to change other people's minds. He does think his experiences were different than some people though because his parents were frequently out of town for work. For this reason, he did not feel like he needed other people and he thought "I'll just do it myself and yeah, I'll figure it out." He had to grow up independently and he did many things for himself, including figuring out his sexuality and realizing he did not want to identify with a religion.

Twenty years ago Interviewee C came out as a lesbian to his mother and at the time he had a girlfriend. Her initial reaction was, "What did I do wrong?" By the time Interviewee C told his mother he was transitioning, her reaction was not negative. She actually did not have any reaction at all.

Interviewee D's family was not initially supportive either, but now two years later they see how happy he is. As for his friends, they have always been accepting of his identity. When he first came out as a lesbian his best friend actually doubted him and already had an idea that he is transgender.

The role of people is so important for LGBT adults and LGBT Christians' experiences. Allies create support systems and those allies can also help promote acceptance among families, friends, and peers.

## **B. Unsupportive Peers**

Negative reactions towards LGBT identities makes it more difficult for people to figure out their sexuality and then publically identify that way. A study done by FRA, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, as reported by Fischer (2013) found that:

Reviewing the survey with an eye on the Netherlands shows that LGBT issues still exist, in spite of Dutch progressive laws and initiatives:

- > 30% felt discriminated against or harassed on the grounds of sexual orientation.
- > 13% felt discriminated against when looking for a job and / or at work because of being LGBT.

- > 20% felt discriminated against in areas other than employment because of being LGBT. Even more disheartening, the statistics reflect issues for those of school age:
- > 88% had heard negative comments or seen negative conduct because someone was perceived to be LGBT during their schooling before the age of 18.
- > 63 per cent had "always" or "often" hidden or disguised being LGBT during their schooling before the age of 18.

Negative criticisms towards the LGBT community can really effect someone's life and how they feel about themselves and their identity.

Negativity from family and friends is also tough for members of the LGBT community. When Interviewee D was asked as a kid what he wanted to be when he grew up he said, "A boy." When he responded this way, the other kids in school bullied him. This happened years before the time he started really recognizing and acting on sexuality.

Interviewee G was originally not accepted in the Urk community. He recognized his sexuality when he was eleven, but he knew he was different in kindergarten. He was thirteen when he officially came out. His brother, sister, and friends were all accepting, but his parents were not. His mother initially told him he was sick and needed to see a doctor. His father kept to himself more, but later in personal conversations shared that he was not okay with his sexuality. In high school he was bullied to the point where he even received death threats. He moved out when he was seventeen which he said was relatively young and in his perspective, "I ran away in a way." He believes a lot has changed in Urk within the past ten to fifteen years, but when he initially came out it was hard for him. He had the chance to leave, so he wanted to get away from the negativity he was surrounded by. It took him falling in love with an Urker to come back to the town which is also when he noticed the progressing acceptance of the LGBT community. He thinks Urk changed because people are in a different age and they grew up. He also said something changed in the culture, but he is not sure where that change came from.

For Interviewee H, one of his aunts responded more negatively than the rest of his family, but according to him:

You only have to be firm in the way you are living. You don't have to let, let yourself get over ruled by people who, who knows it better for you. One of my aunts always used to ask me every f\*cking Sunday, 'Have you be going to the church?' Nope. 'Oh child, child, oh the poor God is crying.' Wouldn't you think he would be crying about you? 'Why?' Well, you and your husband have more than twenty million euros. Did you give your ten percent last year to the poors?

After he stood up to her in this way a few times, she stopped bothering him. In his opinion, he thinks people like his aunt need to look in the mirror. Religious people who discriminate against the LGBT community are hypocritical and they emphasize some parts of their religion over others. Interviewee H used those inaccuracies to stand up for himself.

Some people who identify as Christian deal with the discussion of LGBT identities by trying to "fix" people because they think non-heteronormative sexualities are curable. Interviewee D did not have a great relationship with his father and at fifteen he replaced that relationship with a man who sexually abused him. He had boyfriends, but girls at school made him curious. When he was sixteen he came out as bisexual. His mother told him to go to therapy and that he will be prayed for. In her opinion, bisexuality was a sickness. When Interviewee D was nineteen he still had boyfriends, but started thinking that he may be a lesbian. He was still attending church and one instance someone approached him and asked how insecure he was about his sexuality. He told the man five percent. The man said that since he still had insecurities the church could still pray for him to be straight. When Interviewee D became aware that he may be transgender, he wanted to do research before telling people. He was brought back to when he was a kid and he told his peers he wanted to be a boy when he grows up. At the time he had an internship and his mom noticed something in his work that made Interviewee D have to tell his parents he is

transgender. His mother panicked and still thought therapy and prayers could “cure” him. His father was more passive and said he had to think about it.

It is challenging when people in a community do not accept and also try changing a part of someone’s identity that they cannot control. This makes it more difficult for people to be true to themselves because some people may suppress their feelings to please the community around them. Trying to use religion to “fix” people may also change how or if people continue perusing their religious identities. If the religious affiliation they are a part of does not accept them for who they are, they may separate themselves from the group.

In some cases, families were supportive of an interviewee’s sexuality, but not of another part of their identity that is at least partly effected by their sexual orientation. Interviewee E recognized her sexuality when she was fourteen, but other people did not know until she was eighteen when she started dating Interviewee F. Her family was generally supportive of her sexual identity and even her grandmother loves Interviewee F. As for Interviewee E’s mother, she was not upset that she was dating a woman, but instead she was upset by the age difference between the two of them. Interviewee E believes that even if she was dating a man, her mother would have still been angry.

For Interviewee I, his family was supportive of his sexuality, but not his decision to be an atheist. He said that, “being atheist like completely challenges everything they believe. Their, their whole point of view, their whole view of the world, their whole view of history, everything is completely challenged by being an atheist and being gay doesn’t challenge their view of how this world came to be or where life started or about whatever it is a, a man with a long beard and I think by that in Heaven being gay doesn’t challenge that, but being an atheist does challenge

it.” His family was disappointed that he did not believe in the same foundation that they do. They still accept him as a person, but they reject what he does.

For these two interviewees, their families valued religion and specific qualities of significant others more than sexual orientation. They were not discriminatory against their children’s sexuality, but they were also not as supportive as they could have been which also makes a difference in the interviewees’ experiences with LGBT identities in Christian contexts.

Ultimately, being ostracized by peers in school and in life is extremely difficult. Not feeling accepted in the community you come from is a challenging realization that people deal with in their own ways like suppressing their feelings, running away, or even standing up for themselves. In the end, people should not have to justify their own identities.

### **C. Aging and Independence**

When some interviewees reached certain ages they were less restricted by their family’s rules regarding religion. When they got older they were more independent and they were able to make decisions for themselves. An article from class this semester stated that, "Only when *individuals* began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one’s own sex" (D'Emilio, 1993). Similarly, until these interviewees were on their own and/ or had the power to make their own choices, they were stuck under their family’s religious restrictions.

Throughout Interview C’s childhood, he was required to attend church and Bible studies. It was not until he moved out at the age of sixteen when he stopped attending religious events.

When he was nine or ten he was passionate about religion, but he started recognizing that he did not believe in God when he was twelve or thirteen. After that realization, he still had to participate in religious practices under his family's regime, but when he was on his own he had the opportunity to make his own decisions and separate from those practices.

Interviewee D has lived in the Netherlands his entire life and currently lives in Tollebeek. He grew up in a Christian family and his mom forced him to go to church every Sunday until he was eighteen. When he had the freedom to choose if he wanted to attend church or not, he decided to no longer go. It took him having the freedom to make that choice to change how he was living.

Growing up allowed these interviewees to make their own decisions which gave them space to figure out their identities on their terms rather than feeling expected to fit into the specific mold forced by their families.

### **3. Bisexuality**

Bisexual identities are not common in Urk. An article about bisexual citizenship in the Netherlands states that, "As argued by Monro: '[t]he bisexual communities are similarly diverse, with different aims. The identity fluidity associated with bisexuality means that bisexuals easily become politically assimilated into either heterosexual or lesbian/gay cultures' (Monro, 2005: 145–6)" (as cited in Maliepaard, 2014). Interviewee I said he does not know anyone who identifies as bisexual in Urk. Interviewee B also does not know anyone who identifies as bisexual in Urk and she said, "I don't even know if people think about this 'option.'" She also said that:

I only know that within the LGBT community bisexuals are a bit left out. In the Netherlands you have this phenomenon of girls kissing girls at parties to turn boys on. So they are not really bisexual, but their behavior reflects badly on the bisexual community. I also think that within the

LGBT community bisexuality is seen as 'fake', that the person just doesn't know he/she is fully gay yet.

In the context of Urk, bisexual identities are rare and are also sometimes stigmatized due to current social practices. Bisexuality is treated differently than the other titles within the LGBT community which is something that needs to be changed.

#### **4. Community Involvement**

A positive relationship with someone's community helps other people accept their sexual identities, especially in the religious town of Urk. In the previous SIT research project about homosexual Christians in the Netherlands, "a consistent theme across interviews was the high level of importance placed on the specific community where a homosexual parishioner could feel at home, welcomed, and accepted" (Mitchell, 2009). This also seems to be the case for many of my interviewees and the more involved and well-known someone is, the more accepted they are.

Interviewee B said that in Urk, "... if you're doing well in other parts [of life] they accept the gayness." Interviewee A's sister's girlfriend is very involved in the community and she helped take care of Interviewee A's grandmother. A part of her social acceptance was created from what she did within the community. The same thing happened for a fisherman in Urk. He is also a friend of Interviewee A's grandmother and he helped take care of her as well. His success with his business and his connection with Interview A's grandmother helped with the acceptance of his sexuality in Urk. Even Interviewee A's grandmother who is very traditional, accepts not only him, but also Interviewee A, Interviewee A's sister, and both of her granddaughter's girlfriends.

After Interviewee H stopped going to church he still helped drive elderly members of his community to Sunday services. One time someone complained about his clothing, so he stopped helping, but for the most part because he drove people around, they accepted that he no longer

attended church. His involvement with his driving and also his role in Urk's fishing industry helped people accept him within the community.

For Interviewees E and F, a reason people in Urk accept them for who they are because everyone knows them from their jobs. They both work in places where they socialize with a lot of people. Interviewee E said that, "When I act normally it's okay." People do not perceive her for her sexual identity, but for her other qualities.

From the perspective of a minister, Interviewee J said that people who are already in his congregation and identify as LGBT are more respected than people they do not know who also identify as LGBT. He said that sometimes there are people who want to include faith into their wedding ceremonies, so they reach out to ministers and congregations they are not involved in. The problem with this is the minister and the congregation do not know the people requesting a marriage ceremony. It is different if people in his congregation were wanting to get married because Interviewee H and the rest of the group know about the individuals and their faith.

Essentially, having strong relationships and having peers who understand almost everything about someone's life and upbringing makes it easier for them to be accepted. Many people recognize that LGBT adults' full identity is not just their sexuality, so they are not discriminated against for identifying within the LGBT community.

### **A. Respect**

An aspect that is important for Christians and non-religious adults to keep in mind is respect. Respect does not necessarily mean agreeing. Respect means allowing people to live their own lives the way that makes them happy and knowing it is not an outsiders place to tell them what to do.

Respect was a big part of Interviewee E and F's experiences. They said the people in Urk understand that they may not agree with everything everyone does, but that does not affect their relationships with people. Interviewees E and F are still friends with people who do not agree with homosexuality. They open up each other's homes and spend time together because their sexuality does not define their relationships.

Interviewee H also believes that respect is important. Specifically, he chooses not to wash his car on Sunday and if he goes golfing on Sunday he puts his bag in the car the night before and waits to put it away a few hours after church services end. He does this to respect people's religious beliefs in Urk. Interviewee H said that as an identifying Freemason, "we never talk about God, we talk about main, main builder of the Universe. It's complete whether and, and I mean it's and it's up to you what kind of God you will see in under that. It's just a one name for something that covers everything." According to Interviewee H, faith is about someone's individual relationship with God and no one else has the right to touch that. Even though he does not believe in the same religious ideas as his fellow Urkers, he still respects their practices.

Religious people in Urk also respect Interviewee H for his identity. He said, "as long as you work hard and it doesn't matter on which, which level or which position you have, as long as you work hard the more and more people will of course they don't always accept the way you're living but they respect your way of living and they don't discriminate on that. It's only discrimination on do you work or don't you work." In his opinion, people in Urk do not judge others based on the parts of their identity that they may not agree with. As long as everyone works hard, people do not care how they live.

Ultimately, people cannot control others' lives and it is not anyone's place to judge people if they disagree on a life style choice. It is also okay to disagree sometimes which is why respect is

so crucial. As long as people keep respect in mind everyone can feel comfortable living in the ways that make them happy.

## **5. Silence**

For many religious communities their answer to handling LGBT identities is silence. Some people like the silence and feel comfortable in congregations that do not talk about LGBT issues. Specifically, in the study about LGB people in the south of United States, when people felt comfortable in a church, “It is not a church that necessarily explicitly discusses LGB issues or has small group bible studies for LGB people, for instance. Rather, it is a church where homosexuality is not preached as a sin.” (Woodell, Kazyak, Compton, 2015). Some churches in the Netherlands and also similar, but on the other hand, silence can also cause problems because it still promotes the idea that LGBT identities are non-normative and should be treated differently. Silence from people who disagree with LGBT identities in a sense can help communities feel accepting, but complete silence will ultimately not help congregations find the balance between LGBT identities and their religion.

According to Interviewee J, if nobody in his congregation asks questions about LGBT identities and marriages then they generally do not talk about it. According to him, “As long as you are not talk about it you will we will not know.” Even the people who are against homosexuality will stay silent. The church Interviewee A attended was also silent in this way, but contrary of Interviewee J’s congregation, she only saw the true colors of the organization when she noticed a woman with prayers against homosexuality around the time of Pride.

Interviewee E said that everyone knew about her sexuality, but no one spoke about it. She said that people in church specifically ask her, ““How is your mate?”” She also said, “But I don’t

expect them to say how is your woman when they say to me ‘How is your best friend? Your mate?’ It’s also okay.” Her wife, Interviewee F said that it is different on the streets though because people directly ask her how her wife is. She believes it is not the people, but the church and even then Interviewee E and F’s relationship is not a big problem.

Interviewee I’s first sexual relation with a boy was a secret at the time because neither of them were out yet. Interviewee I is out now, but the other man currently has a girlfriend and performs alpha male attributes to assimilate into the community. He said the group dynamics in Urk allows others to suppress people’s identities. According to him, homosexual men who display the alpha male attributes are more accepted than homosexual men who are more feminine. Ultimately, if people still aesthetically fit their gender box then they have an easier time identifying in the LGBT community. For this reason, Interviewee I said transgender people have a more difficult time in Urk, but according to Interviewee A or B they do not even know any transgender people who are out.

According to the church Interviewee A’s parents attend, “If you are born that way that’s ok, but you can’t act on it.” The church forces people who identify as LGBT to silence their sexual identities instead of actually accepting them for the entirety of themselves. Interviewee H also had a similar experience and in the church he used to attend homosexuality does not exist and people are not supposed to act on their feelings.

Silence is not only in regards to sexual identities, but also religious identities. Interviewee A said that she does not talk about religion if people do not ask about it and Interviewee B pointed out that people in Amsterdam generally cannot tell Interviewee A is a Christian accept by little qualities like praying before dinner and calling out someone if they curse in God or Jesus’s name. Interviewee A said, “.... I don’t think myself as someone who judges people for not being

Christian, so I don't think people will judge me because I am a Christian and the, the \*asked Interviewee B for translation\* prejudice they have about Christians yeah, I get them sometimes and yeah, I don't think I want to be like that." She does recognize that there are prejudices towards religion from the LGBT community, but she did point out that in Urk specifically the LGBT community understands that religion is something that people there grew up in and it can still a part of some of their identities. For that reason, the Urk community has a different understanding of being LGBT and Christian. The only criticism Interviewee A has received about being both a lesbian and Christian has been on Facebook, but she still chooses to be silent about her religious identity unless she is personally asked about it.

People are sometimes forced to silence parts of their identity to please the community of people they are surrounded by and this impacts how people identify both sexually and religiously. This can also impact how people feel about themselves. Silence can potentially interfere with people's contentment in the ways they are living in comparison to the ways they want to live.

## **6. Balancing Faith and Sexuality**

Balancing faith and sexuality is not easy and something people will be trying to unpack for centuries to come. The balance is possible if someone decides to choose that path, but "Nevertheless, religious gay and lesbian men and women are still fighting for their emancipation. Some are fighting to be accepted by their gay community as religious, while others are fighting to be accepted by their religious community as gay. Still others have given up the fight, unable to reconcile their sexual identity with their faith. The experiences of gay and lesbian men and women in The Netherlands cannot be boiled down to just one story" (Fleenor & Moenaff, 2016).

It is important to recognize that so many people have different experiences, but it is also important to know why those experiences are different and to use the past to help create more positive environments.

### **A. LGBT and Religious**

There were interviewees who found the balance between their sexual and religious identities. In some cases, the balance is still a work in progress, but they continue to identify and practice Christianity regardless of their sexuality.

Interviewee A identifies as a Christian because she grew up in a place where religion was not voluntary and where it was a rule in her family. She has not fully found the balance between her sexual and religious identities, but she has always been around Christianity, so she feels she cannot just ignore her religion now. She currently does not go to church, which is something she thinks she should be better about. When she first met Interviewee B, she tried getting her to attend church with her, but now they generally do not go anymore except for holidays. They also both work on the weekends which is one reason why they stopped going. Interviewee A realized that she believes in God, but she does not believe everything in the Bible or everything she hears at church. She believes that God has a plan and that the Bible is a guide to live a better life and to be nice to other people. Also, for her, her faith is always something she thinks about before making decisions. As for Interviewees E and F, they go to church and are still actively involved in the religious community in Urk. They were able to find a church where they feel accepted and comfortable.

Sometimes how people identify with their faith changes after they come out as a member of the LGBT community. In the context of the people in Good News, a conservative gay Christian

organization, “Through a process of socialization, they renegotiate the boundaries and definitions of their religious identity to include a positive valuation of homosexuality. This accommodated, but still distinctively Evangelical, identity enables persons to resolve the dissonance between their Christian beliefs and their homosexual feeling” (Thumma, 1991). The people in Good News changed ideas about their faith to correspond with their sexual identities.

Interviewee A’s identification with Christianity slightly changed after she came out. She liked her church in Urk, but since she could not act on her sexuality or get involved with the church due to her sexual orientation she now desires a church without those restrictions. She does not want to give up her religious beliefs, but instead find a place with more of a balance between both her sexual and religious identities.

It is okay to identify as LGBT and Christian and these interviewees found spaces where they can and do identify as both. They decided to not forget about the foundation that they grew up with.

## **B. Criticisms of Religion**

Other interviewees did not find the balance between Christianity and their LGBT identities. In some cases, they do not understand how this balance is even possible. They believe that LGBT identities contradict Christianity and the two should not go together.

Interviewee C was tired of constantly hearing that homosexuals will go to hell. For a while, he pushed his feelings aside, but he did not want to do that anymore. According to Interviewee C, people who identify as LGBT and Christian may ignore the parts of their religion that condemn homosexuality. In some ways they make him feel unsafe because the two identities contradict. He also does not like the doctrine of financial stability that is talked about in

Christianity. He heard in church that God rewards the faithful, but he saw his mother, a very faithful woman, not getting any of those financial rewards.

Interviewee C believes organized religion is useless and causes more problems than it solves. He said, “If it’s organized it’s structured and if you don’t fit into this structure then it doesn’t matter how much how spiritual you are or how faithful or devoted. If you’re not doing something that, if you’re doing something that doesn’t fit within these narrow limits then it, you know you’re bad, you’re a sinner and that f\*cks with people’s heads, you know? You can’t tell somebody they’re a sinner for ten, fifteen, twenty years, and not have that cause problems.” He still believes in spirituality, but he finds organized religion damaging.

Interviewee I identifies as an atheist. He believes that “the Bible is a product of historical processes and culture valuable for people, but not in that way historically reliable.” He thinks religion does not make the world better and he is hostile towards organized religion because of how he grew up and the problems he experienced when coming out. Interviewee I does not like how religion dictates the way people should live and how it sometimes violently attacks people who think differently. He sees religion as a decline in freedom, gay rights, and women’s rights. Ultimately, he said he believes Christianity is “inherently incompatible with homosexuality.”

Interviewee H’s father did not attend church, but his mother does. She attends a more conservative church in Urk with old fashioned traditions like wearing black. It was surprising to Interviewee H though that their priest did come out as gay. Interviewee H thought the priest should have said something about homosexuality in the context of the Bible, but he failed to do so. Interviewee H does not like how religion is a one-way conversation and that no one doubts the priest. He also said that you cannot act on your sexuality if you are gay. In his opinion, he is looking for an easy going God. He thinks, “If you call it God, in what way it doesn’t matter, they

have to show it more in a joyful way instead of thinking that, that you complete life you have to crawl for Him and if you make one slight mistake He will, He will kill you or ban you to Hell. I-I that's, it's never meant that way." He wants to look at God in a more empowering way than as someone who people should be afraid of and suffer for.

According to Interviewee H, the Bible is not someone's own opinion and he would be surprised if there was one God that let people kill each other, put children in danger, and physically ruin parts of the world. Overall, he thinks that:

At the end of the day it's, it's not what, what actually the Bible says about your religion and homosexuality. Now it's what and your conversation with your God and the way you have your feelings with God and what in your homosexuality. That's the only thing that matters. If I'm in, in peace with my God and no matter who that is that's not important, but if I'm in, in harmony and I can go on my knees every night and ask him to take care of for me over the night and say your prayers it's a complete, nobody has the right to touch that because it's the intimacy you have with your God.

He believes that nothing is more important in religion than someone's own individual stance and relationship with their beliefs and that should not be influenced by someone else's opinion.

When Interviewee D was eighteen he chose to be a Christian and get baptized, but now he no longer attends church because he is afraid people will have an opinion and will judge him. The church he previously attended tried praying for him to be happy with his body and act like a woman, but he said, "If there is a God, why can't I be born as a boy?" Currently, there is a boy transitioning in that same church and the people are trying to be good to him, but the church does not know how to handle talking about the LGBT community. He said that in their opinion, "They will pray the gay away eventually." This negative opinion pushed Interviewee D away from his religious identity.

Negative religious experiences push people away from religion and can even destroy the possibility of finding the balance between their LGBT identity and Christian faith. The negativity can be so impactful that those two identities can seem impossible to coexist.

### **C. The Balance is Possible**

Balancing LGBT identities and Christianity is difficult, but possible in the right environments. Specifically in the Netherlands, “There are also Christian-based initiatives such as the Evangelische Roze Vieringen Amsterdam (Evangelical Pink Celebrations Amsterdam) or Internationale Roze Kerk (IRK) International LGBT Church, The Hague” (Fischer, 2013) and organizations like these, “hold services for LGBT communities and their friends and family” (Fischer, 2013). Additionally, some religious congregations that are not specifically created for LGBT Christians are also accepting of the LGBT community.

Interviewee D is no longer religious, but he does think it is possible to find the balance between identifying as both LGBT and Christian. He believes there is still something between Heaven and Earth. He also thinks religion can be strengthening and that God loves you no matter what. For these reason, he said that in a few years he might attend church again.

Interviewee C said he knows many people who identify as both LGBT and Christian. He said that from their perspective it is more about a personal relationship with God than about the organized religion itself. Interviewee C also thinks that the difference between him and the people he has talked to is that their families accepted them for their sexuality where he did not have the same support. He also thinks that maybe being an only child also might have played a part in his family’s lack of acceptance because maybe their expectations were higher for him. Additionally, he lived on and off of reservations throughout his childhood which might have

impacted his experiences too. Now Amsterdam is where he feels at home and it has been a place where he does not identify with or practice Christianity. He said that, “Even before I could speak Dutch, Amsterdam felt like home.”

Interviewee G does not believe in religion, but he does like that people can unite under a common idea. He thinks people can identify as both LGBT and Christian, but he decided not to. He thinks his sexuality affected his religious affiliation, but he is not sure in what ways. He does not talk about religion with his mother because he thinks it is too painful for her. She believes that you can be gay and Christian, so she would have preferred Interviewee G to still identify with Christianity.

Interviewee I still lives in Urk because he believes it is his duty to stay. According to him, “If you let people chase you away with their beliefs, which are absolutely like very old fashioned, very medieval, sometimes not always sometimes, I think if you let those people chase you away with their attempts to intimidate you into to, to dictate how you should live I think you’re making a big mistake.” He thinks there are a lot of people still in the closet in Urk and he wants to be an example for other people in his community who want to come out.

LGBT identities and Christianity can coexist. With the right support people can find the balance if they choose to do so. It is important to have respect for people and to allow them space to figure out the ways they want to identify and live their lives.

## **VI. Conclusion**

It is extremely important to make others aware of the struggles LGBT adults face in Christian contexts. People have different experiences depending on a variety of different factors. One in particular is the specific religious congregation. Some churches are more accepting than others

and some churches are more vocally non-accepting than others, but like Interview J said it is important for people to find the place that works best for them. Due to the variations throughout Christianity there are options for people who want to identify as Christian and also support LGBT identities.

One variation that was extremely important for someone's experiences with identifying as LGBT in Christian contexts or just LGBT and Christian are who they are surrounded by. Some interviewees had supportive interactions with people and others did not. This includes heterosexual religious people, LGBT religious people, and non-religious LGBT adults. Having support makes the process easier and gives people freedom to figure out what they really believe in and how they want to identify. Environments with strict religious expectations and no safe outlet for variation can be restricting. It can make people suppress their identities in order to please the people around them and follow what they were socially taught as "correct" or "normal." People should have the ability to find themselves without expectations from their communities.

Some interviewees, even in strict religious environments, still had support from their social circles. Even people in Urk who do not necessarily agree with LGBT identities do not let that disagreement affect their relationships with people. Having support from peers is so crucial in identity development. In the context of religious groups in Mitchell's (2009) study, "Respondents conveyed the extreme importance of these welcoming congregations in their faith lives, congregations which some choose to use only as a "backbone," a source of strength that allows them to venture out into less welcoming communities." We should use this knowledge to replicate those environments where people do feel safe identifying freely because people should

not have to feel ashamed or be bullied for who they are. A basic idea of Christianity is love, but discriminating against LGBT identities ignores that basic foundational concept.

People who identify as Christian should not forget that God wants people to love everyone. Religion can be empowering and comforting, but exclusiveness makes the positive aspects of religion inaccessible for some people. As said by Interviewee I, “It’s completely wrong if you claim to be a Christian and you claim to implement Christian teachings in your life among which is ‘love thy neighbor’ and if one of your kids turns out to be gay well you treat ‘em in a disrespectful way I think that’s not, not acceptable and it’s really a shame that it still exists now.” People like Interviewee D are afraid to go to church in fear of being judged. He should not have to feel that way and Christians who appreciate their faith should not push people away and should want everyone, no matter what their sexual identity is, to understand why their faith is important to them and in what ways they believe their faith can really help people.

To create support, everyone really needs to internalize the idea of respect. It is okay to agree to disagree. Disagreeing does not give someone permission to dictate how someone else lives their life or to be judgmental just because someone has a different opinion than them. Respect can create unity and not necessarily under the same opinions, but under mutual respect for freedom of speech and expression. Figuring out how religion and LGBT identities can coexist is already difficult, but when people ridicule others for finding or trying to find that balance, the process is even more challenging. It is so important to give people a safe space to feel comfortable with every aspect of their identity.

Interviewee J proposed an interesting question to me about Christianity. Why do different denominations believe in certain concepts differently? Some people interpret the same Bible passages in different ways. For this reason, some congregations are more supportive of the

LGBT community than others and this effects how people experience their religious and sexual identities. Varying interpretations are why different denominations exist, but what are the reasons behind each group's thought process? I think looking into why denominations think the way they do is an extremely important concept for future research.

I also think it is extremely important for future research to consider race and class when conducting a study like mine. Those are two additional perspectives that may find different results. The parameters of this specific project was limited on time and specifically to the Dutch context and these restrictions did not allow me to represent all races and classes.

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## **VIII. Appendices**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **(A) Introduction**

My name is Mackensie Priley and I will be your interviewer today. I grew up in a traditional Christian household and when my brother told my family he was gay my parents did not react well. Specifically, my father said very harsh things that ruined their relationship. It has been three years now and they are still working through it. The purpose of my study is to understand how LGBT Christians experience their sexual and religious identities. I hope my ISP can help LGBT Christians better understand their relationship between faith and sexuality. I also hope my ISP can help heterosexual Christians and non-religious LGBT adults in becoming better allies to LGBT Christians and in helping create more inclusive environments. I will be asking you questions about your background and your personal experiences. Your participation is completely voluntary, so you may choose to end the interview at any time or dismiss questions you do not feel comfortable answering. The interview should last between 40 minutes to 1 hour. Please tell me when you are ready to begin.

#### **LGBT identifying adults in Christian organizations**

##### **(B) Part One: Background information**

I am going to start by asking you questions about your background so I can get to know you better.

1. Where are you from?
2. What was your childhood like?
3. How do you sexually identify?

4. At what age did you start recognizing your sexuality?
7. When did you tell your friends and family about your sexual identity?
8. How did you tell them?
  - a. How did your friends react?
  - b. How did your family react?
9. When did you become religious and why?
10. What Christian organization are you involved in and how long have you been a part of this particular organization?

**(C) Part Two: Religious Experiences**

Now I am going to ask you questions about your religious experiences.

1. Did people in your religious group treat you any differently after you came out? If so, how?
2. How do they treat you now?
  - a. Why do you think that is?
3. Did your identification with Christianity change after you came out? Why or why not?
4. How have LGBT people reacted to your Christian identity?
  - a. Why do you think that is?

**Heterosexual identifying adults in Christian organizations**

**(B) Part One: Background information**

I am going to start by asking you questions about your background so I can get to know you better.

1. Where are you from?

2. What was your childhood like?
3. How do you sexually identify?
4. At what age did you start recognizing your sexuality?
5. When did you become religious and why?
6. What Christian organization are you involved in and how long have you been a part of this particular organization?
7. What is your opinion about LGBT identities? Why?

**(C) Part Two: LGBT Identities and Religion**

Now I am going to ask you questions about LGBT identities and religion.

1. Do you think LGBT identities and Christianity can coexist? Why or why not?
2. What is your religious group's general opinion about LGBT identities and why?
3. Are there LGBT identifying people in your particular Christian organization?
4. How do you feel about LGBT people as a part of your religious community? Why?

**Non-religious LGBT identifying adults**

**(B) Part One: Background information**

I am going to start by asking you questions about your background so I can get to know you better.

1. Where are you from?
2. What was your childhood like?
3. How do you sexually identify?
4. At what age did you start recognizing your sexuality?
5. When did you tell your friends and family about your sexual identity?

6. How did you tell them?
  - a. How did your friends react?
  - b. How did your family react?

**(C) Part Two: LGBT Identities and Religion**

Now I am going to ask you questions about LGBT identities and religion.

1. What is your opinion about organized religion? Why?
2. Have you ever been religious? Why or why not?
  - a. If yes: Did your sexual identity affect your religious affiliation? How?
3. Do you think LGBT identities and Christianity can coexist? Why or why not?
4. How do you feel about LGBT identifying people who also identify as Christians? Why?

**(D) Conclusion**

1. This is the end of the interview. Do you have any additional comments?
2. Thank you for taking time to participate in my ISP project. If I have any further questions may I follow up with you through email?
3. Also, if you would like a summary of results and/or a copy of the ISP, I am more than happy to email those to you.
4. I really enjoyed speaking with you. If you have any further questions, please contact me through WhatsApp at +1 (916) 960-6230 or by email at [priley@oxy.edu](mailto:priley@oxy.edu).

**Some probing questions**

- What do you mean by that?
- Can you please elaborate on that?
- Why?
- How?

- Why do/ did you feel that way?
- How else might that have affected you?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Consent Form



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### *LGBTQ and Christian: Experiences with Identity*

#### **Consent Form**

You are invited to take part in an interview about LGBTQ Christians' experiences with their sexual and religious identities.

This interview will take about 40 minutes to 1 hour. There are no known risks or harm associated with this interview. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to be in the study you can withdraw at any time.

Results from this study will be used for this academic project and in a comparative study for my senior comprehensive project at Occidental College. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential, and data will be stored in secure computer files, devices, and notebooks. All identifying material will be kept strictly private, and will be destroyed at the end of this SIT study, -- 4 December 2016--.

Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified.

If you have questions or want a copy or summary of this study's results, you can contact Mackensie Priley at the email address above. You may contact SIT Academic Director, Garjan Sterk ([garjan.sterk@sit.edu](mailto:garjan.sterk@sit.edu)) with any questions as well. Please feel free to keep this copy of the consent form.

Do you have any questions about the above information?

#### **Participant's Consent to Take Part in This Study**

I have read the above and I understand its contents and I agree to participate in the study.

I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.

I give my consent to be recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date