We are not Christians, We are Episcopalians: An Ethnographic Study of How Members of a Local Congregation are Defining Their Religious Identities in Relation to the Issue of Homosexuality within the Episcopal Church

by

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Abstract

This research examines how individuals are “doing religion” or more specifically, how a certain group of people are actively translating and making meaning of religion in their everyday lives. Through the use of qualitative research, I will examine multiple but intersecting topics with religion serving as the major foundational piece or filter that is used by a group of individuals in order to define aspects of their lives. This paper is not focused upon the literal translations of religion or faith, but instead, on how people negotiate events in their lives through the use of religion. Individuals use religion and faith (among other things) to motivate themselves to live a certain way and to become involved in different social and political processes. Different aspects of theology are often used to justify actions and most notably for this paper, social-justice-based actions. An understanding of how individuals motivate themselves to become involved in such actions can be used to illustrate how processes of inequality can be addressed in a systematic attempt to promote “inclusion for all” in every aspect of society.
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This paper examines how people define faith and religious identity. More specifically, it examines this process of definition in the context of conflict within the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church of the United States (hereafter, TEC) is involved in a struggle that may develop into a rupture within the Anglican Communion. While TEC has increased their acceptance of homosexuality, the conservative movement within TEC is establishing unions with the Anglican world beyond the United States in an attempt to protest the more inclusive environment that is being supported here at home. These unions have resulted in relationships with southern Anglican churches from Africa, Asia, and South America in an unprecedented move that is causing a shift within the Anglican Communion (Hassett 2007). Churches in the global South are concerned with Western morality, cultural dominance, and most importantly, are eager to strengthen their relationships with Episcopalian priests and bishops in the United States in an attempt to establish stronger ties with the worldwide Anglican Communion. In contrast, churches in the global North are predominately concerned with providing an inclusive environment that is progressively grounded with a primary focus being placed on the future growth and internal structure of the Anglican Communion. The continued pressure supplied by these two opposing groups may result in a rupture within the Anglican Communion (Kaye 2008).

In the following sections, I will examine how the issue of homosexuality is affecting members of a local congregation of the Episcopal Church (TEC), and how this struggle is challenging members to examine their attitudes, values, and beliefs critically.
Individuals within this congregation are actively defining their religious identities, and through this process are working together to offer a message of inclusion to the larger community. I maintain that our identities are collectively “packaged” to form the self, or who we are as individuals. Constructing the self is a reflexive project that the individual creates through a series of experiences and interactions that make up their everyday lives (Blumer 1969; McAdams 1996). Developing an understanding of how individuals establish meanings in their lives provides critical insight into how identities are created and how the self functions and manages the process of identity maintenance. Each individual defines who they are through the exchange of symbols (language) in their interactions with others, and then these meanings are passed along to others through interpretive processes (Mead [1934] 1962; Blumer 1969). These are the basic principles of the symbolic interactionist theory; meanings are not fixed but instead are flexible. They can and do change over time and space. Physical and internal environments cannot be separated in the development of social theory, and in turn, institutions are an integral part of identity creation (Rohall, Milkie, and Lucas 2011). A person’s involvement with a religious institution permits him or her to constantly define and redefine the sense of self and personal value.

Religious belief systems hold cultures together and provide meanings for the adherents. Culture and religion have determinant roles in the formation of opinions regarding homosexuality; religion in particular has repeatedly acted as one of the strongest predictors of attitudes regarding homosexuality within society (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009). Religion affects not only our social, political, and economic conflicts, but also the meanings that we assign to daily events and interactions. Regardless of our personal
belief in a higher power or a specific religious system, an understanding of religion and the many effects of religion, is becoming critical in our society (Dennett 2006). For many people, nothing matters more than religion and their faith dictates how they experience the world. This is the reason that we must learn how individuals “experience” religion. Religion is often the primary structure of communication in society and until we understand how individuals define their faith, we are at a disadvantage in understanding how society, on an individual level, defines their interactions with others. According to a survey conducted in the summer of 2010 by the Pew Research Center, religion is the primary influence on how Americans think about homosexuality (Pew Research Center 2010). In an indirect correlation with the previous statistic, roughly 7 in 10 people report that their clergy have indicated that homosexuality should be discouraged (Pew Research Center 2010).

According to Richard Berger (1969), religion provides people with the tools needed to make sense of their world (Kurtz 2001). Through a process that Berger defines as world construction, adherents are provided with a protective shield that buffers them from the pressures and stresses of the outside world and serves to answer questions about their existence (Kurtz 2007). Berger (1969) refers to this shield as a “sacred canopy.” He proposes that if this shield or sacred canopy suffers a collapse for some reason, people will be forced to establish new meanings in their lives regarding their existence, values, and beliefs (Kurtz 2007). I suggest that a similar loss of social cohesion occurs when a person’s sacred canopy collapses. This person consequently experiences a state of normlessness or anomie (see Durkheim 1951; Edles and Appelrouth 2005). This topic has been discussed extensively in the field of sociology, most notably by Emile Durkheim in.
his examination of suicide (see Durkheim 1951). This type of anomie occurs during a religious schism or rupture within a Church. When a Church divides or separates into opposing factions, there is often a sense of anomie among the adherents – there is a collapse of the sacred canopy. They experience a sense of normlessness as their foundation of faith crumbles and they are left scrambling to define what they believe. During this process, people are usually forced to take sides or strike out on their own in search of a new belief structure that fits their needs. Durkheim proposed that anomie could result in suicide when individuals feel disconnected or estranged from those around them (Durkheim 1951). Something similar can happen during schisms and ruptures within the Church; people commit varying degrees of “religious suicide” by abandoning their faith or leaving one denomination in order to find an alternative that works better for them as individuals.

Some families pass their faith down from one generation to another with individual family members adopting the meanings surrounding their faith from their parents and grandparents. These individuals move through their lives in a similar pattern to past generations and seldom question why or what they believe. They find comfort in the fact that they are following the path of those who have came before them, adhering to their family’s tradition; they remain there regardless of the issues surrounding them. While this group of people provides an intriguing research opportunity, a full discussion falls outside the scope of this paper. The focus of this paper is, more precisely, on those who struggle with their faith or struggle with others regarding how they have defined or are working to define their belief systems.
This paper is not focused upon the literal translations of religion or faith. A deep exploration of the mystical qualities of faith and of personal relationships with God, a divine creator, or a higher power will also not be discussed in this paper. While these topics are relevant components of faith for many individuals and are certainly valid aspects of religious belief systems, they are not relevant to the areas of faith and identity creation that I intend to examine. It is not my intention to evaluate the qualities or effectiveness of faith or expressions of faith. I am not attempting to judge whether faith is “true” in an empirical sense. I am only studying the consequences of holding a particular belief as true. According to the Thomas Theorem, if people define a situation as being real, the situation becomes real in its consequences and that is the way that faith will be addressed in this paper (Thomas and Thomas 1928; see also Merton 1995; Thomas 1966; Rohall, Milkie, and Lucas 2011). If people claim to have faith and if their faith is real for them, the consequences of this belief will be real in their lives. I propose that this theory also holds that if the consequences were real for these people, the consequences would also become real for those they meet during the course of their lives.

Defining faith is a challenge. Broadly stated, faith is the confidence or belief that individuals construct around a person, a concept, or an object. For the purpose of this paper, Hebrews 11:1 (The Ryrie Study Bible 1978) offers one of the more concise definitions of faith found in the Bible and it is considered by many to be the classical definition of faith. This passage states, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith is abstract and personal; thus no perfect definition of faith exists, and there is no way to prove if someone has faith. It is through the use of narratives, personal interactions, and through individual experiences that
people are able to define their faith. People may share aspects of their faith but no two people believe in exactly the same thing. This makes the study of how we define our faith difficult to say the least, but it is possible to pull out some common re-emergent threads that seem to manifest themselves within certain contexts. The issue of homosexuality provides one of those contexts that permit the examination of how people must work to define and in some instances re-define their faith when confronted with a controversial issue that challenges established belief systems.

My research offers an examination of how people are actively translating and making meanings of religion in their every day lives. Using qualitative research methods, I will examine multiple but intersecting topics with religion serving as the filter used by a particular group of individuals to define aspects of their lives. The individuals in this study negotiate events in their lives through religion. They are using religion and faith (among other things) to motivate themselves to live a certain way and to become involved in different social and political processes. Aspects of theology are often used to justify actions and most notably for this paper, social-justice-based actions. An understanding of how individuals motivate themselves to become involved in such actions can be used to illustrate how processes of inequality can be addressed in a systematic attempt to promote “inclusion for all” in every aspect of society.

*The Episcopal Church (TEC)*

Religious dissent has provided the climate for some of the most dramatic social changes in history (Baumeister 1986). Historically, Protestant and Anglican schisms have had profound effects on the lives of people searching for a universal consensus about religious truth (Baumeister 1986). These interruptions in religious life create doubts for
people regarding the way they are living their lives. At this point, decisions must be made and belief systems must be redefined in a manner that incorporates the changing structure of the model in question. For example, in medieval Europe, Catholicism was the primary religious option and faith provided a basis for defining the self in terms of how effectively you practiced your beliefs (Baumeister 1986). However, with the Protestant Reformation, people were provided with a choice and from this point forward faith had to be defined or informed by some type of criteria (Baumeister 1986). Defining the self became more complicated due to having this type of choice.

As mentioned previously, TEC is currently embroiled in the type of conflict that could result in a schism or rupture that forces adherents to make choices. The conflict concerns TEC’s policies regarding homosexuality and inclusion and these policies are threatening the unity of the larger Anglican Communion. On a local level, congregations must make sense of issues and determine how they, both as individuals and as collective units, are going to move forward with their faith. This becomes complicated when a majority of the congregation desires the formulation of a message of “inclusion for all,” and at the same time is attempting to retain the loyalty of all those who attend and are part of the established church family. This is a very “hot” topic, about which very few people have a passive reaction. Moreover, with eternal salvation on the line, the TEC treads lightly on the topic to keep everyone engaged in the process. One possible outcome is a “rupture” in the Anglican Community that would result in TEC becoming an independent denomination that no longer resides under the umbrella of the larger Anglican Communion. This result would be the equivalent of a child taking his or her toys and going home, or being asked to do so.
Before examining how this problem evolved, a brief introduction is in order to provide a clarification of how the Anglican Communion is organized and how it operates within the religious marketplace (Kurtz 2007). The Anglican Communion is a family of churches that are all considered to be descendants of the Church of England. This family consists of 38 autonomous national churches in 164 countries (Kaye 2008). These churches are connected to one another through a shared history and tradition in what the Anglican Communion refers to as “a bond of mutual affection,” with each national church considered an independent unit that is responsible for its own governance and cultural expressions (Kaye 2008). This is an important point to keep in mind, because this type of organizational cohesion has encouraged the type of diversity that is now resulting in conflict.

The Anglican Communion is comprised of over 7,500 congregations and associated dioceses around the world with roughly 70 million worshipers (Kaye 2008). The mostly progressive churches of the global North (Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand) have traditionally dominated the Anglican Communion because of their numbers and wealth, but, this is changing due to the fact that more than half of the world’s Anglicans now reside in the global South (Africa, South America and Asia) (Kaye 2008). This majority provides the national churches in the South with a new position of power since Anglican leadership is based upon consensus. Due to the cultural, political, and economic differences, there is a significant amount of diversity that must be accommodated at every level of the governance process in order to keep the global family intact. While the Anglican Communion has no central organizational authority, the head of the Church of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is considered the spiritual
leader of Anglicans worldwide (Kaye 2008). However, it is important to keep in mind that the Archbishop has no official, organizational authority outside the Church of England; he is considered the “first among equals” by other Anglican bishops (Kaye 2008).

Every ten years the members of the Anglican Communion are provided with an opportunity to come together in order to discuss matters of importance, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. These gatherings are called Lambeth Conferences and are held on the campus of the University of Kent at Canterbury, England. These international meetings are held as representations of unity within the Anglican Communion. These gatherings provide Bishops with opportunities to voice concerns regarding issues involving the Church, in an attempt to promote dialogue within the Communion (Kaye 2008). Resolutions are customarily passed at these gatherings reflecting areas of interest and concern. While these resolutions are not legally binding, they are nonetheless influential and respected within the community of churches that make up the Anglican Communion (Kaye 2008).

The African Episcopal Church is one of the fastest growing members of the Anglican Communion and has come to play a vital role in how the issue of homosexuality is framed. Homosexuality is not only unthinkable in most African nations; it is actually illegal and often punishable by death (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009). This fact has made the dioceses within these nations the perfect points of allegiance for those churches within the United States who do not agree with TEC’s message of inclusion. As TEC increases their acceptance of homosexuality, a conservative movement within TEC is establishing unions within the Anglican world beyond their home borders in attempts
to send the message that this type of acceptance is not universally supported (Hassett 2007). This is leading to a divisive polarization in the larger Anglican Communion as the worldwide community rushes to take sides on this issue.

The battle lines within the Anglican Communion regarding homosexuality were formally drawn prior to the 13th Lambeth Conference held in 1998, at the first meeting of Anglican leaders from the Southern Hemisphere at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in February of 1997 (Solheim 1998). The Kuala Lumpur Statement, an official statement released at the conclusion of this meeting defined all sexual promiscuity as sin and included both homosexual practices between men or women, as well as heterosexual relationships outside marriage (Solheim 1998). The Kuala Lumpur Statement presented this issue to the worldwide Anglican Communion and expressed a “concern about mutual accountability and interdependence within our Anglican Communion” (Solheim 1998). The Episcopal Synod of America, a conservative organization within TEC, not only endorsed this statement but also introduced the possibility that TEC should be expelled from the Anglican Communion if it continued its acceptance of homosexuals and the blessings of same-sex unions (Solheim 1998).

In 1998, the 13th Lambeth Conference began with a demonstration of the Anglican Communion’s diversity. Bishops joined together in the opening services in order to reflect and reinforce the conference’s message of diversity and unity that is representative of the group’s membership around the world (Hassett 2007). However, this unity was fractured two-thirds of the way through the conference when the Nigerian Bishop, Emanuel Chukwuma, attempted to exorcise or expel a demon from English Deacon Richard Kirker (Hassett 2007). Kirker was and is openly gay. The “demon” in question,
according to Bishop Chukwuma, was homosexuality. Bishops from both Uganda and Nigeria demanded that bishops supporting equal rights for homosexuals either repent or leave the Anglican Communion (Solheim 1998). During this conference, the bishops of the global South realized and were empowered by the strength of their collective voices (Jenkins 2004). During this conference, a resolution passed that declared homosexual activity to be “incompatible with scripture” and advised against the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions (Solheim 1998). However, the same resolution committed the Church to “listen to the experience of homosexual people” defining them as “full members of the Body of Christ” and condemned the “irrational fears of homosexuals” (Solheim 1998). The bishops who spoke out in disagreement to this resolution were literally hissed and denounced as racists and imperialists (Solheim 1998). This resolution produced a polarization within the Anglican Communion and made future discourse problematic. This was the beginning of what would later become known as the “Anglican Realignment.”

In 2003, TEC solidified their progressive position with the election of Gene Robinson to the position of bishop in New Hampshire and with his consecration confirmed by the delegates of the General Convention later that same year (Kaye 2008). Gene Robinson is an openly gay man, in a long-term committed relationship and his confirmation resulted in a hailstorm of criticism from the conservative members of both the TEC and the larger Anglican Communion (Kaye 2008). Delegates to the same convention approved a resolution that provided a local option for individual churches to decide their own course of action on the topic of same-sex unions (Kaye 2008). This was an attempt to provide official recognition of the fact that priests had already been
performing blessings of gay and lesbian couples in some dioceses in the United States for decades (Kaye 2008). Issues surrounding homosexuality and inclusion had been brewing for more than a decade at the international level. This seemingly defiant act by TEC was the catalyst for the fundamentalists within the Anglican Communion to cry foul and demand that TEC be reprimanded (Kaye 2008). Conservative churches and dioceses around the world began demanding that steps be taken to ensure that the ordination and confirmation of gay men and lesbians not be defined as normative behavior within the Anglican Communion (Kaye 2008).

Culturally specific differences concerning race, class, and gender within the TEC have been overlooked historically because of the belief that the whole community benefits from the “raising up” of previously marginalized persons into leadership positions within the church (Sachs 2009). This philosophy has allowed local churches and individual dioceses the capacity and freedom to select leaders from a pool of individuals that are of their own choosing. This has made a model of unity through diversity possible and for leadership positions to be held by those who may be otherwise discriminated against by society. This focus on cultural diversity is the foundation for many general conclusions regarding the proper formation and function of church life and offers a vital clue as to how this current crisis regarding homosexuality has been able to engulf the Anglican Communion. This focus also illustrates how the claims of “reverse colonialism” originated, took hold, and have been able to develop into a conflict that is affecting every aspect of what it means to be an Episcopalian (Rubenstein 2004).
A Local Congregation

The local congregation that was chosen for this research is located in a historic district of a large metropolitan area. The church building is over a hundred years old and has been designated as a historic landmark by the city and county in which it is located. As this church has grown with its neighboring city, it has developed a personality that is a reflection of the surrounding diverse neighborhood. During the 1960’s, the church offered its facilities to many activist groups as the community struggled with issues concerning civil rights, school desegregation, and fair housing; it was one of the first Episcopal churches in the area to install a female priest as rector. This congregation has a rich history of involvement with social justice issues and the church formally offers a message of inclusion - all are welcomed.

On my first few visits to this church, I was struck by the warm and friendly atmosphere. Members of the congregation were quick to engage me in conversation and this made me feel as if I were a welcomed member of the community. I was obviously an outsider and freely acknowledged that I was not looking for a religious “home” but instead curious about the conflict between conservative and liberal churches within TEC and the conflict between TEC and the Anglican Communion more specifically. Members of the congregation were as curious about me as I was about their construction of faith and religious identities. Certain members of the congregation and I established an immediate rapport. I was invited to church functions and encouraged to attend adult classes in my quest for information and I quickly established relationships with those who were on the vestry and with members of the clergy. Their collective input and
suggestions were invaluable and permitted quick access to other members of the congregation.

It quickly became obvious, during those first few visits, that the members of this congregation had a special relationship with members of the clergy and even with the building itself. There was always a hum emanating from the ceiling fans and the windows were always open in a way that permitted the sounds from outside to drift inside the building. The Spanish architecture and the sounds from outside wafting in made me feel as if I were in an exotic location and not in a crowded, bustling residential neighborhood located in a large metropolitan area. One of the first sermons that I witnessed was on the topic of inclusiveness and the role of the Church in the LGBTQ community. The priest who delivered this particular sermon did so with a great deal of emotion and passion behind the words. After the sermon concluded there was a loud round of applause and it was at this moment that I realized this was the right environment for my research. There is nothing formal about this congregation; they are ready at the drop of a hat to get involved and become active. African hymns were sung and candles were lit throughout the building during the services and the message of inclusion that was offered went well beyond sexual orientation. There was a feeling of connectedness in this church that I found exciting.

Methods

The data in this paper come from three primary forms of ethnographic research: participant observation, informal conversations, and intensive interviews. More specifically, this paper draws on data gathered from fifteen in-depth interviews, a countless number of informal discussions, and a series of follow-up interviews that
occurred between April 2010 and February 2011. During this time span, I attended more than thirty church services and twenty adult classes. I also attended the ceremony for the installation of a new rector (priest), an informal discussion led by Bishop Gene Robinson, and a weekend workshop for Believe Out Loud. This non-profit, inter-denominational organization formed in 2007, addresses the issue of inclusion across denominations and provides local congregations with a voice on the national stage. In addition, I attended a parish picnic and a Christmas party. I visited six local congregations before establishing a primary location to do my research. I attended each local church at least twice to get a "feel" for the congregation. This included attending the refreshment hour immediately after each church service when members linger over beverages and snacks and have the opportunity to catch up with one another and become acquainted with visitors. I attended at least one adult class for each location. All of the congregations I visited were viable choices for this research, but the location I chose is one of the oldest and most well-established churches in a large metropolitan area. I chose this church for several reasons, including its rich history regarding social justice issues and for the degree of warmth the congregation expressed to everyone who walked through the doors, regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other factors.

To develop a better understanding of how people construct and define their faith in this particular denomination, I regularly attended Sunday morning services for a period of eleven months. As the study progressed, I established relationships with people who became "key informants." This is a well-established, integral part of ethnographic research. Perhaps the most well-known use of key informants in ethnographic literature is William Foote Whyte’s relationship with “Doc” in his study of “Cornerville” for the
book, *Street Corner Society* (Whyte 1955). Similarly, the key informants in this study provided information that allowed me to gain further insight and entry into the church setting and to establish further a role of observer-as-participant (Gold 1958; Junker 1960; Adler and Adler 1987). I conducted the initial interviews with people I had made connections with during my first few months of attending weekly services. All were members of the vestry. Initially, I made a point to interview as many members of the vestry as possible. I then used their recommendations to schedule additional interviews through snowball sampling.

The sample contained variation by gender (ten females and five males), age (five under the age of fifty, five between the ages of fifty and sixty, and five over the age of sixty), occupation (three self employed, five professionals/white collar, two members of the clergy, and five retirees), race (three were African American and twelve were white), and sexual orientation (three lesbians, one gay man, and eleven heterosexuals). Based on information provided by the rector, the individuals who were interviewed, and by the occasional references to occupation it could very roughly be established that most of the congregation was middle to upper middle class. Most people had some degree of upper level education and throughout the interview process, many mentioned going to graduate school. References to childhood economic conditions would also roughly suggest that most of the respondents came from somewhat privileged, middle-class backgrounds. Some have been with this congregation for more than thirty years, while others had been members for only a few months at the time of our interview. Some of the respondents were life long Episcopalians and others had found TEC in the “religious marketplace” (Kurtz 2007). All of the participants in this study were over eighteen years of age and all
were required to sign a standard consent form before being interviewed. Each respondent was provided with my phone number and email address and were encouraged to contact me at any time during the process with questions or ideas. They were also provided with the contact information of the IRB at the University of Colorado and of my primary advisor Dr. Eleanor A. Hubbard in case they felt like I had crossed a line or been inappropriate in anyway during our conversation. Prior to the recording of each interview I also gave each respondent an opportunity to ask questions and offer feedback “off the record” in the attempt to make them more comfortable. After the interview, I repeated this process. All of the respondents took advantage of these “off the record” moments to ask questions about my research and offer support for what I was trying to accomplish.

All of the formal interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Consistent with IRB policy, the data were analyzed and information was coded and saved in a secure, password-protected location to protect the identities of everyone involved. The interviews ranged from thirty minutes to well over three hours and all of the respondents were provided with their choice of location for the setting of the interview. As a result, these interviews took place in settings that varied from the library of the church, a spare office located on the second floor of the church, local restaurants, respondents’ homes, and in some instances, in my home. I interviewed some of the respondents twice to either follow up on additional information that became relevant after the transcription and data analysis processes began or to add comments that the respondents themselves wanted to add. All of the questions asked were open-ended and each respondent was encouraged to discuss their religious history, their personal faith, their experiences within TEC, and their personal opinions and beliefs regarding
homosexuality and the topic of inclusion. Consistent with grounded theory techniques, which I discuss below, I updated my interview schedule after each interview to expand on the information that I believed was important to this research.

Consistent with most ethnographic research, this study did not begin with a specific hypothesis that required testing. Instead, this process started with a group of questions that emerged because of my interest in faith and how people negotiate and define meanings in their lives. As I worked through the process of collecting and analyzing data, I was able to construct theories using grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1978; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1997). This approach offers systematic and flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data in order to construct theories "grounded" in the data themselves. A collection of specific themes emerged through the interview process: concerns for social justice, reliance on the biographical narratives of Jesus, and a lack of concern for unity within the Anglican Communion. Thus, my data formed the foundation of my theories and my analysis of these data generated the concepts I constructed (Charmaz 2006). During the time I spent at the church and with members of the congregation, I took extensive field notes detailing all of the interactions that took place in order to develop an understanding of the dynamics involved within the church setting. This information then informed my theories (Charmaz 2006).

All of the names used in this paper are pseudonyms, used to protect the identities of those involved. For the sake of full disclosure, I am not a religious person and do not consider myself a Christian. Because of this, I was an “outsider” to a certain extent throughout the data gathering process. Due to my outsider status, I was able to bring a
relatively unbiased perspective to this project in relation to the topics of faith and religious experiences. On the other hand, I am a lesbian. My partner and I have been in a committed relationship for more than thirteen years and we have been fortunate enough to raise two amazing children. Due to this set of circumstances, I would consider myself an “insider” when discussing issues involving homosexuality and inclusion.

Throughout the course of this study, I maintained an overt status (Lofland 1971; Adler and Adler 1987). Each member of the congregation I met knew that I was gathering data for a research project for my undergraduate degree in sociology and that I had an interest in how people defined their religious identities and in correlation with this how they defined their faith. My primary role throughout this study was that of observer-as-participant, however, when first entering a setting my role was initially that of a passive participant (Gold 1958; Junker 1960; Adler and Adler 1987). By acting as a passive participant I was able to establish a “feel” for the environment and how people interacted with one another; I was able to “observe the unobserved observer” and gain critical clues as to how the members of a particular congregation managed their impressions within the church environment (Goffman 1959). Later, I was able to observe how these interactions changed when I introduced myself into the setting and I felt better equipped to handle the subsequent interactions based upon my past observations.

Instead of being able to maintain one role throughout this study, I found that I moved from one role to another throughout the course of gathering data. Such transitions in membership roles are well documented in the ethnographic literature (Denzin 1970; Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Janes 1961; Adler and Adler 1987). As time went by, I became more involved in the daily life of the church due to requests by various members
of the congregation. On more than one occasion, I felt guilt associated with this increased level of participation and questioned my own motivation. While I did try to be as honest as possible about my religious opinions, I was also well aware of the fact that it was in my best interest to find some sort of common ground and in essence “play the game” for the sake winning the trust of individuals within the congregation. The only reason that I was able to continue this research and finish the project is because I was able to work through the guilt and realize that even though I am not religious and have never felt the “warmth” of faith, a genuine bond of friendship became present throughout the process. In short, I experienced some of the moral dilemmas common to ethnographic research (e.g., Bosk 2001). I also reconciled the fact that field research involves negotiations between the participant observer and the insiders and that this is necessary in order for both sides to “benefit” from the experience (see Blau 1964; Whyte 1984; Jorgensen 1989). Therefore, I was able to participate in church activities and functions and, in return, I contributed like any other active member of the church.

Due to my changing roles and my increased involvement, as time went by, I was able to gain more of an insider status and thus gather richer data (Adler and Adler 1987). My evolving status within the group reflected an increasing level of acceptance by the group and did in fact lead to the attainment of a greater degree of trust by the congregation. By becoming more involved and resolving my personal issues associated with guilt, I was able to move from a provisional (marginal) status to more of a categorical (involved) pseudo-membership status (Adler and Adler 1987). However, with this said, I would still consider myself an outsider and to a certain extent so would the members of the church. During the time that I spent attending church services, I never
took communion, sang hymns, or participated in prayer. In my opinion, taking part in such activities would have been deceptive and, over time, the members of this congregation accepted my “secular behavior” and decided that it was okay.

All of the research in this paper was conducted under the protocols set forth by the Human Research Committee at the University of Colorado at Boulder. This project was developed under the primary guidance of Dr. Eleanor A. Hubbard and my committee members, Dr. Isaac Reed and Dr. Diane Martichuski.

**Faith and Identity**

The importance of understanding how people establish identities in their lives cannot be overemphasized. The members of a local Episcopal church, (hereafter, the Social Justice Episcopal Church), located in a large metropolitan area, are working to define their religious identities while struggling with the issues of homosexuality and inclusion. At times these struggles are internal and force people to redefine their faith on a personal level and at other times, the struggles are external within their families, with friends, and with their Church. Interestingly enough, in this study, struggles are not with the Bible or religious doctrine. Respondents did not rely upon isolated passages or commandments to guide or inform their faith on the issues of homosexuality and inclusion. They instead relied upon broad themes that correspond with the way they believe Jesus led his life. The people in this congregation, based upon the information provided during interviews, were not heading in the same direction as their clergy and this may lead to future conflict on a local level. It is because of the existence of such discrepancies in this process of reconciliation that it is important to listen to their voices, hear their concerns, and when necessary, adjust church policy to meet their needs.
In this study, some of the respondents have built upon the faith provided by their parents while other have had to enter the religious marketplace and search through the multitude of religious traditions available in order to choose the one that works best for where they are in their lives (Kurtz 2007). There were those who left TEC for periods of time because the message being offered by their clergy failed to provide comfort and support only to return at some point when they felt as if the message had changed or evolved in way that was more suitable to their needs. Many people in this study also mentioned that they knew people who “walked away” from their faith and in essence committed a form of religious suicide, due to personal conflicts with messages coming from the hierarchy of the Church. This study illustrates some of the ways in which people have constructed their religious identities and what happens when this identity is threatened and their sacred canopy begins to collapse (Kurtz 2007).

Through the presentation of dynamic personal narratives of the participants in my study, I will provide an opportunity to develop an understanding of the “people in the pews.” The biography of each person provides a context for their narratives, particularly how long they have been Episcopalians and how they found TEC. In their narratives, a picture emerges of how they have been able to work through personal struggles and define religious identities. Religious identities and their associated beliefs are closely linked to socialization and how people establish meanings in their lives. People are drawn toward representations that mirror their definitions of the sacred when they find meanings in traditions that support and enrich their lives (Kurtz 2007; Weber 1947). The respondents in this study were drawn to or have continued to remain with this particular
Episcopalian church because of the diverse atmosphere and the message of inclusion that is offered.

People do not develop their identities in a vacuum. The respondents in this study have developed their religious identities based upon life experiences and their involvement with social, political, and religious institutions that have specific values and ideologies (Bauer and McAdams 2004). Respondents also cited the importance of biographical narratives in their creation and maintenance of religious identities. The biographical narratives of Jesus proved to be a particularly influential aspect of how people in this study are defining their religious identities. Through the examples provided in the Bible that addressed how Jesus lived his life and practiced his faith, respondents were able to define their understanding of faith, homosexuality, and inclusion. These biographical narratives provided a common theme of social justice that was prevalent in all of the interviews and discussions that took place. For all of the respondents in this study, their understanding of faith was based upon themes of social justice used as foundational components of their faith.

For the people in my study, being an Episcopalian requires being active in one’s faith. When I asked members of the Social Justice Episcopal Church (SJEC) to define their faith, their stories shared many common points of reference. Developing and maintaining faith is a process that evolves out of personal experiences. The development of faith is not accomplished through one or two isolated interactions, but instead through a complex string of interactions that work together to make up individual lives. As I talked with people in this congregation, it became clear that they are able to develop meanings in their lives and their faith through the act of living or through the process of
everyday life (Blumer 1969). Through this process, people are also able to provide meanings for others through interactive exchanges that are continuously evolving (Blumer 1969). The respondents in this study are actively “doing religion,” using a process that is similar to how West and Zimmerman (1987) described “doing gender.”

Bonnie is a member of the clergy at the SJEC. She found TEC in 1976 after becoming unhappy with the direction of the Catholic Church. She openly discussed her reasons for leaving the Catholic Church one Sunday afternoon shortly after the morning’s church service had ended. She explained, “I was raised in the Roman Catholic Church, which during my formative years was a liberal and somewhat activist type of institution.” She added, “as the Catholic Church became increasingly conservative and authoritarian, I left because I was hungry for something else and TEC was a great fit with the same sacramental and liturgical life.” She told me that she believes we move through life being affected by others and their experiences. As she put it, “we are not born in a vacuum, we are born on the shoulders of those who precede us and we are influenced by those around us.” She went on to discuss the importance of historical and social contexts, linked lives, agency, and timing (Elder 1994). As Bonnie explained:

We know certain things by the virtue of being born in this era and within a specific culture but with faith we are not making everything up for the first time. It enriches my faith to hear and read about other people’s faith, and in turn, to share my own experiences with others. (Bonnie - 30+ years)

**Defining Their Faith**

Based upon my findings, people actively start to evaluate and redefine their faith during times of conflict (collapse of the sacred canopy) or when something stops working for them in their current religious belief structure and with the institution to which they
belong (Kurtz 2007). Similar to what we heard from Bonnie, when a church begins to
deviate from what attracted a person in the first place, a reevaluation of faith and purpose
takes place. Sometimes, as with Bonnie and her decision to leave the Catholic Church, a
person explores the religious marketplace in an attempt to find a new connection with an
institution that provides a better fit with their expectations of how faith should actively be
defined and expressed (Kurtz 2007). The conflict currently being experienced between
TEC and the Anglican Communion is challenging members to re-define their faith, take
sides, and in some instances turn to the religious marketplace with the hope of finding an
institution that better fits their individual needs.

The Issue of Homosexuality and Inclusion

Historically, homosexuals have been involved in all aspects of TEC under the guise of
what closely resembles a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Everyone knew that gay men and
lesbians were members of the Church and this fact was just not “talked about.” I
discussed this issue with Colin for more than three hours on a blustery, Friday afternoon
in his home. He has been an active member of TEC for more than 70 years and explained
that homosexuality has not always been an issue in TEC:

Oh no, homosexuality didn’t use to be an issue. People knew that there were gay and
lesbian people in the congregation, they knew that there were gay priests. I mean
there are still many priests who are openly gay or lesbian. I have taken more tours of
gay bars with gay priests than we have time to talk about. It has always been
accepted. (Colin - 70+ years)

Many of the respondents echoed Colin’s statements. Gay and lesbian people have always
been part of TEC. Everyone knew this, and it did not seem to pose a problem. The
turning point for TEC was centered on a resolution that was passed by the Lambeth
Conference in 1998. The resolution was in direct response to the battle lines previously
established at the first meeting of Anglican leaders from the southern hemisphere at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in February of 1997 (Solheim 1998). This was an attempt by the Anglican Communion to address the issue of homosexuality within the Church, in a way that would pacify conservative members of the Church who were threatening to leave (Solheim 1998). The resolution declared homosexual activity “incompatible with scripture” and advised against the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions within the Anglican Communion (Solheim 1998). However, the same resolution committed the Church to “listen to the experience of homosexual people,” defining them as “full members of the Body of Christ” and condemned the “irrational fear of homosexuals” (Solheim 1998). This resolution sent mixed messages to congregations around the world and produced a polarization within the Anglican Communion - this was the beginning of what is known as the “Anglican Realignment” (Solheim 1998).

Now that homosexuality and inclusion were out in the open and discussed on both a national and international level, the issues presented a challenge for adherents. Congregations are now being forced to deal with how they incorporate gay and lesbian members through a more formal and codified system of acceptance. This has presented a problem for congregations, because homosexuality does not fit neatly into Bible-based religious traditions. During the re-evaluation and refinement of personal belief structures and traditions, the respondents in this study often found themselves in conflict with and at times estranged from other members of their social networks and even with their immediate families. My findings suggest that these conflicts are common and actually work to allow people to better define their opinions and beliefs regarding their faith.
I met Karlyn at a small coffee shop on a tree-lined street during one of the first snowstorms of the season. She explained that she is a “cradle Episcopalian” and cannot remember a time when she was not involved with TEC. She said that her parents found TEC “early in their married life” and that they are very conservative. Karlyn and her parents experienced a great deal of conflict when she first started college and later as she started to progress through her career. She recalled, “I have never struggled with my faith, but I have had a struggle with my family concerning my beliefs.” She has a degree in history and has worked for many years within the political arena. She claimed that her experiences have influenced how she views the world. She said, “I have had to adjust my relationship with my family as I have moved through the process because my beliefs and opinions do not match theirs.” She indicated that her faith provided a foundation for how she interprets the meanings of everyday life. She said, “I became very involved in the pro-choice movement when I was younger, and I developed a feminist perspective that my parents thought was horrible,” and added, “I felt like the church was a great place to make change real in people’s lives - especially through the ordination of women.”

During our conversation, Karlyn explained that she is one of three daughters, and it saddens her that her father still refuses to attend a church that has a female priest. She said, “My mom and dad both went to national convention, and my dad voted against the ordination of women.” It was clear during our conversation that Karlyn takes the opinions of her father personally. She said, “My parents cannot get past gender issues so there is no point talking about gay, lesbian, and transgender inclusion. I have a relationship with my family, but we have had to agree to disagree.” For Karlyn, “inclusion has always just made sense,” and she has never really had an issue with diversity. This is despite the fact
that she grew up in a small, conservative town and is a member of a conservative family. She cited her exposure to diversity within her work environment as providing her with a foundation to support her beliefs. Through her friendships and associations with people who were gay and lesbian, she was able to confirm her more inclusive beliefs. She told me, “as I matured and became involved in politics and was exposed to more diversity in my workplace, it just became very obvious to me that we are all the same, and my beliefs were confirmed.”

On a separate occasion, I spoke with Julia, an African American woman who has been a member of TEC for more than thirty years. She comes from a Baptist background and has examined her beliefs through both an Episcopalian and a Baptist filter. She was also forced to justify her beliefs when challenged by friends and family members. As we settled into the library on the second floor of the church, she explained how she came to TEC for family reasons, and because she enjoyed the structure and diversity of the services. Like Karlyn, she never struggled with her faith on a personal level, she just did what she felt was right. Also, similar to Karlyn, she experienced friction within her family due to her beliefs, beliefs that have been questioned and redefined since coming to TEC, “inclusion has never been a problem for me, but if I had stayed at my previous church it would have been a big problem.” She explained that she could not discuss this issue with her family and friends, “they say that you don’t talk about religion and politics and that is a really true statement.” She said, “My family and friends know that I have friends who are gay and lesbian, but that is all they want to know. It is really difficult at times...it is kind of painstakingly hard at times.”
Julia’s mother is a staunch Baptist. While Julia was growing up, she refused to let her play near a house on the block where two gay men lived. This confused Julia and she did not understand why she had to treat these neighbors differently than the other neighbors on the block. She explained that she “would ask questions about the gay men who lived across the street, but would never really get a solid answer.” She knew that the only thing she could say to them was “hello,” and she could never go on their side of the road. Similar to the other respondents in this study, she relied upon her personal interactions as the basis for her beliefs. She said, “As I grew older, I developed friendships with gay men, and they were some of the best friends I have ever had, and I never paid any attention to the fact they were gay.” These friendships have allowed Julia to define her faith independent from the beliefs of her mother and her other family members and friends. She concluded this portion of our discussion by adding:

Did God say that we all have to come to church dressed in a certain way or look a certain way or have to gather to pray in a certain way? No. He said come to me as you are. So I don’t understand the problem; I have had to tell my family that I am blind to the things that they are telling me. My family and I have an agreement to not talk about this issue - we have agreed to disagree. (Julia - 30+ years)

Conflicts not only occur between the individual and their families and friends but also between the individual and the Church. Not everyone agreed with TEC and the path that they have taken or the fact that it has taken so long for them to formally embrace more inclusive language. I spoke with one woman who redefined her faith many times throughout the years and left TEC at numerous points due to conflicts between her definition of faith and the Church’s definition of faith. Fiona has been involved with TEC for more than fifty years. We spoke for a few hours on a Saturday afternoon while sitting in my living room drinking tea. The conversation flowed rather easily, and Fiona openly
discussed how she became disillusioned with TEC in the past, “I have left TEC off and on throughout my life, because I repeatedly became frustrated with the exclusive language.” She added, “my faith is defined by inclusion for everyone.” Fiona explained that she was always “different,” and she understands how it feels to be excluded. Fiona was born with a disability, and her family moved often due to her father’s profession, “I know what it is like to be on the outside, the new kid, the funny looking kid, the female.” She had to fight throughout her life to be included, and these experiences have been used to define her faith.

Hermine is a cradle Episcopalian and she also left TEC a few times and found her way back. She is a lesbian and a self-defined “activist.” Hermine becomes frustrated when she feels as if the Church is moving too slowly regarding issues that to her are simple and clear-cut. She feels “called” to the issue of inclusion and has fought hard at all levels within the hierarchy of the church to move the issue forward. She explained, “Homosexuality and inclusion are very simple issues for me and I feel profoundly called to address these topics. I have had to leave the Church when inclusion was being approached in too gradual a way.” While homosexuality has never been a point of conflict for Hermine in her faith or family, it has interfered with her relationship with TEC:

Homosexuality has never conflicted with my faith. But, it certainly interferes with my relationship with TEC. This is very difficult. I always feel the love of God. However, I do not feel that love from certain entities within the Church.
(Hermine – cradle Episcopalian)

Personal interactions and relationships with those involved with the Church and in particular with priests were recurring themes that provided insights into how the
respondents were able to gain perspective when attempting to sort out what they believed. Colin has been a member of TEC for more than seventy years. He could not tell me why he believes what he believes, he just believes. Colin said his interactions with priests along the way acted to confirm his beliefs. “I wasn't exactly raised in a progressive town,” he explained, “but as I interacted with Episcopal priests, some of them gay, exclusion and bigotry just didn’t seem to make sense.” For him this is not a “homosexual issue,” it is a “human rights issue.” Colin explained that he did not even know what “homosexuality” was until he went into the Air Force and was assigned to investigate homosexual activity.

Colin entered the Air Force after he completed four years of college, because as he explained, “that is just what people did back then.” Colin described how his first few months in the Air Force provided him with an introduction to homosexuality:

I was assigned to the Office of Special Investigations, which is the criminal investigation division of the Air Force and they sent me to school in Washington D.C. I was taught how to shoot, how to investigate a crime scene, and I was taught about homosexuality. They actually gave us classes on homosexuality because it was one of the things that we had to investigate - homosexual behavior.

He explained that he completed his training and was stationed at a base in his home state. Once he was settled in, he was assigned to investigate allegations of homosexual behavior. He said, “I didn’t know anything about this topic except what I had learned in Washington D.C.,” he continued, “I started investigating these accusations and met hundreds of gay and lesbian people.” Colin explained, “this was my education and it became very clear to me that homosexuality is not a choice.” Through his personal interactions, Colin was pushed to internally evaluate why homosexuals were being persecuted by the military. He said, “I thought why in the world are we investigating
this? It just didn’t make sense to me and it still doesn’t.” Colin was able to define his faith through his friendships with gay and lesbian members of the Air Force. As he explained, “my experiences confirmed to me that inclusion was the right thing. I just can’t see why people should be discriminated against and marginalized.” Once he established relationships with members of the gay and lesbian community, he was unable to understand why exclusion was necessary.

Other respondents pinpointed specific moments, periods in their lives, or specific relationships that directly influenced how they viewed the world and others within their community. Danielle is a lesbian and has been a member of TEC for more than sixteen years. Before joining TEC, she attended various fundamentalist churches. While she enjoyed the camaraderie at these churches, she remembered feeling a lot of pressure to fit into a certain religiously-defined mold. This influenced the way she initially defined her faith. She said, “There was a lot of pressure on me to be a good Christian, to pray, and to memorize Bible verses.” Danielle added, “I felt as if I never quite measured up to how these churches defined being a good Christian.” Danielle’s story provides a good example of how people work through experiences in order to define and confirm their beliefs. In one particular instance, she witnessed a boy being physically removed from the church that she was attending. He had been involved in a minor shoplifting incident and because it was a small town, everyone knew what had happened. She said, “I witnessed the deacons physically remove this boy from church and tell him that he was not welcome any longer. That was a real turning point for me,” she explained, “I had always assumed that everyone was welcome. This was my first negative experience.”
While we sat at my kitchen table one afternoon, Danielle explained how this constant pressure to be a “good Christian” forced her to separate different aspects of her life. She became guarded with her private life, and for many years, she actually felt forced to lead a dual life, one that encompassed her private life and the other that encompassed her life within the body of the Church. She felt this was necessary, based upon what she had witnessed in her own community. For example, she said, “I had a friend who went away to camp one summer as a camp counselor and when she returned she announced that she was a lesbian.” This announcement had a “storm effect” on Danielle’s community, and she witnessed how her friend was ostracized. “She was disowned and nobody would speak to her,” she said, “I realized at that point that it was not okay to be yourself.” This event had a tremendous impact on Danielle’s life and forced her to reevaluate her position within her church. At this point, she no longer felt comfortable with other members of the congregation and began to reflect on how she needed to define her faith in a way that was more inclusive. Shortly after this event occurred, Danielle quit going to church (religious suicide) and moved away from this community.

Several years later, Danielle was established in a new city and she became involved with a local crisis center. Through her friendships with other members of the crisis center, who happened to be Episcopalians (a couple were priests), she discovered that she could redefine her faith in a way that was more inclusive. Through this process of redefining her faith, she discovered that she was able to merge the different aspects of her dual life. She explained, “this was my first interaction with TEC,” and added, “I met some priests who were women, and it was just a really positive experience. They knew that I was a
lesbian and it just didn’t matter to them. For the first time in years, I was able to merge the two aspects of my life.” Danielle’s involvement with a small group of people at a crisis center allowed her to continue the process of redefining her faith.

The last presidential election provided another respondent with an interesting experience that pushed her into re-evaluating not only her faith but also the discourse that was taking place in the African American community regarding inclusion. Shary is an African American woman who, like Hermine and Karlyn, is a cradle Episcopalian. She was raised in a liberal, religious family, and issues of diversity and inclusion were not discussed. She explained, “Everyone was welcome, and to think otherwise was unacceptable.” She was shocked at the conversations she witnessed leading up to the presidential election in 2008. These conversations made her realize that she needed to learn how to talk to her “own people”:

When Obama was elected, and Proposition 8\textsuperscript{10} was being fought in California, it really surprised me how many African Americans were supporting this amendment. It really bothered me. I realized I needed to figure out how I can speak to my own people. During Obama’s campaign I watched how white people had to talk to their friends and families about why they were supporting Obama - how they were trying to make people comfortable. I realized that this was going to be what it is going to take - black folks talking to black folks about issues like homosexuality - about why any type of discrimination is wrong and how to dispel this notion that homosexuality is un-Godly.

We spoke about this issue at great length after a church service, and she shared how this issue affected her on a personal level. She said, “I have known people who have left the church over the issue of inclusion. It seems to be a problem in the African American community, and this makes me sad.”

Shary also discussed why an inclusive environment is important to her on a personal level. She moved to this city a few years ago, and once she arrived, she started
the process of searching for a church. She attended a variety of Episcopal churches in the area and the SJEC message of “inclusion for all” spoke to her and made her feel more welcome than some of the other churches she visited. “I would go to churches and feel like such an oddity,” she added, “I was used to being in the minority, so that was not a big deal, but some places can make you feel like even more of an outsider.” She explained, “There are some points or places in life that you just don’t want to have to work that hard to be accepted.” She continued:

It’s not that I couldn’t deal with it, but when I am worshipping and going to church, I don’t want to have to be “on”. There are certain moments in your life that you don’t mind having to play a role, and you don’t even think twice about it but choosing to worship and going to church is just not one of those times that you should feel like going there. In my journey, I realized that if a church is open to the LGBTQ community, it is probably open to all communities and that is what I have always looked for in a church - it is a good barometer.

All of the respondents indicated that they relied upon their personal experiences to help them sort through tough decisions regarding their faith. Personal relationships with members of the gay and lesbian community were a strong, positive influence on the members of this congregation. Lisa and I had the opportunity to speak with one another in a quiet corner of the church one Sunday afternoon after the morning’s services had ended, and people had cleared out. Lisa is a cradle Episcopalian and she said that she never had an issue with homosexuality in her faith. As she explained it, “these people are my friends and family; they have names and faces. It is just not an issue for me and it never has been.” She added that she becomes frustrated when issues of homosexuality and inclusion are presented in a way that neglects the fact that “we are talking about real people.”
Earl expressed something similar one afternoon while we were talking in the church library. He has been a member of TEC for more than 30 years. He said, “Homosexuality is not an issue for me. There are members of my family who are gay and lesbian and these people who use specific passages or specific wording from the scriptures to justify their position just don’t get it; these are real people.” For both Lisa and Earl, this issue is personal. They have friends and family members who are part of the gay and lesbian community, and exclusion is not an option for them. Both Lisa and Earl have defined their faith based upon the relationships present in their lives. It became clear during my research that once gay and lesbian people have names and faces, it becomes much harder for church members to discriminate against them.

Even though many of the respondents in this study have never had a personal struggle with their faith regarding issues of inclusion and homosexuality, there were those who have struggled to make sense of conflicting feelings. Valerie has been a member of TEC for more than thirty years. She is a very active member of the congregation and is involved in multiple activities. She initially had problems with the inclusive message that this church supports. She explained, “Several years back, I questioned whether or not inclusion was right, but I don’t question it any more. It is just part of my life now.” While discussing this issue in her home, she was very open and honest about how she sorted this issue out on a personal level. She said “it was unacceptable for me to not to be able to come to an agreement with myself about the topic of inclusion.” As she put it, “I had to have a chat with myself, and I realized for me to have a problem like this was unacceptable to my well being, to who I say that I am.”
The inclusive message of this particular congregation also caused a conflict for Alex, who has been a member of TEC for more than thirty years, but not in regards to his interpretation and understanding of religious doctrine. He had what he defined as “a visceral response to homosexuality that was not positive,” and he indicated that it was only through his experiences and interactions that he was able to finally understand and work through what he described as “a problem that originated due to the time period and geographic area in which I grew up.” This comment is reflective of how Glen Elder (1994) discussed the importance of historical context and timing through his examination of the “life course” in his book, *Time, Human Agency, and Social Change: Perspectives on the Life Course*. I met with Alex in his home on a sunny Saturday afternoon in order to discuss his personal struggles with faith. He was very forthcoming about his views and how they are constantly changing and evolving. He said, “living with and experiencing life with gay and lesbian people is where my growing level of comfort comes from; this process helps me.” He went on to explain how he worked through his issues and illustrated how he has been able to use his personal interactions to help him redefine his previous positions on homosexuality:

Living with, engaging with, and worshiping with members of the congregation who are gay and lesbian members of our community has helped me immensely. That is what has made a difference for me - the personal connection. Worshipping together. This just helps me become more viscerally comfortable. (Alex – 30+ years)

Matthew also has negative feelings about the topic of homosexuality. I spoke with him after a church service one Sunday afternoon, upstairs in the church library. As we settled down with our beverages, he bluntly explained that he cannot “accept homosexuality,” but he will “tolerate it” for the sake of keeping the peace. He is a cradle
Episcopalian and has been active in the Church for more than seventy years. He explained, similarly to Colin, “homosexuals have always been members of TEC, but we didn’t need to talk about it in the past.” He expressed a desire for TEC to return to a more “simple time.” Matthew was rather spunky and said that he appreciated the fact that he was being provided with an opportunity to be “heard.” He openly admitted that he did not represent the “future” of the Church, but instead represented the “past.” Even though Matthew was openly hostile toward homosexuality and even admitted that he suspected that I was a homosexual, he seemed to enjoy the experience, and we had a lively conversation about the future of TEC.

Matthew was openly opposed to the consecration of “practicing homosexuals”, or those in committed relationships, to the priesthood or to the position of bishop. Matthew mentioned more than once that he was “definitely a heterosexual” and never mentioned having a close friendship or connection with someone who identified as gay or lesbian. He said, “God would not intentionally create homosexuals” and added that he felt “homosexuality was a mistake.” This provided another example of how personal interactions and experiences are used to define opinions and beliefs. Matthew was the only one of the respondents to disagree completely with inclusion and to have such open animosity towards homosexuality. He is also the only one who did not volunteer information regarding personal interactions or experiences with members of the gay and lesbian community.

**Doctrine and Interpretation**

Based upon my in-depth interviews, it was clear that all of the respondents defined some portion of their religious identities and their faith on their interpretations of personal
experiences. But, what about the Bible? Did reading scripture help these respondents define aspects of their religious identity? While I am primarily interested in how people construct meanings in their lives through their personal interactions, I was expecting, due to the subject matter, a greater reliance on the Bible to provide meaning. This really was not the case, and unless I specifically brought the Bible into the conversation, it was often ignored or used as an example of why we should view the issue of inclusion as a social justice issue and not a Biblical issue or in other words to draw attention away from the Bible. For this reason, what was not said was more powerful than what was said during the interview process.

While what I have defined as “biographical narratives” did provide meanings for many individuals (this topic will be discussed in greater detail later in this section), the sociopolitical context in which the Bible was written and canonized came up repeatedly as a reason why other portions of the Bible should not be relied upon to provide meaning in everyday life. For example, Fiona attended various Episcopal churches in a variety of states for more than fifty years, and she repeatedly indicated that she might know “too much” about the history of Christianity to rely on biblical resources to aid her in defining her faith:

I disagree with using Biblical references as starting points for defining faith because the Bible is a fabrication. When I historically examine how the Bible was written and decided, with the council of Nicaea and so forth, I am forced to look at the Bible as perhaps a false foundation as an element for defining my faith.11 (Fiona – 50+ years)

Fiona shared her experiences in a way that illustrates how many members of this particular congregation seem to struggle with the importance of biblical resources and church doctrine. She said, “we created this whole crust of falsehoods that don’t coincide
with what Jesus’ life was really about,” and added, “I don’t believe that people should base their faith on ‘unreliable information’.”

On separate occasions, I brought this same subject up with other respondents, and a reoccurring theme began to develop. Hermine is well traveled and has experienced her faith in many diverse locations around the world. She was very blunt about her feelings toward the Bible and how it has contributed to her faith. She said, “I am not a believer in the literal truth of the Bible, so the term Biblical truth doesn’t mean much to me.” She added that she was sorry that her faith “doesn’t come with bells and whistles - it just has always sort of been there.” Colin also frankly stated that he did not believe in the literal truth of the Bible. He said, “I believe that God works through people, not through the Bible.” Karlyn took this sentiment a step further and explained she was on the far left of the political spectrum. She thinks the Bible is a great text, “but it is not the be all and end all about how to live your life.” She said, “to be honest, if pushed, I would have to admit that I don’t believe in the virgin birth and a resurrection. I believe it is presented as more of a parable and historical narrative to help provide guidance for the bigger issues in our lives.” She said, “If they ever start kicking people out of TEC, I would probably be one of the first asked to leave.” While other forms of narratives do prove to be influential in the formation of faith and will be discussed further in this paper, the biblical narrative as a whole was clearly not instrumental in helping the respondents in this study interpret or define their faith.

Everyone in this study indicated a certain level of respect for the historical qualities of the Bible, but many also expressed little need for knowing every passage or every theme. It became increasingly clear that this group of people put a greater emphasis on
what they had experienced in their everyday lives than on the importance of specific passages contained in the Bible. Many of the respondents also defined the Bible in terms of myths and inspirational stories. Shary is involved with various aspects of the Church; she has participated in the choir, the vestry, and served on various committees. Her mother and father were also involved with TEC and have served in leadership positions. Faith is an integral part of her family’s structure, and their group identity and has always been a major component in the makeup of her individual identity. The Bible, for Shary, is a set of stories that present lessons for how to live your life, and she indicated that you must be very careful when attempting to bring these stories forward to the present, especially when trying to apply Biblical conditions to events occurring today:

I have a lot of friends who are Baptists and I don’t know the Bible nearly as well as they do - I think of the Bible in terms of metaphors and teaching terms. I don’t think of these stories as being real in the sense that I don’t believe in the big bang theory and dinosaurs; these things happened thousands of years ago and should be treated as allegories - lessons for life. (Shary - cradle Episcopalian)

Sam echoed this sentiment when I discussed the topic with him one afternoon after a church service in what was quickly becoming my favorite nook in the church library. He is also a cradle Episcopalian and TEC is an important part of his family. He is openly gay and explained that when he told his parents and other family members “it was no big deal.” Being gay has never been a problem for him or his family. His parents are active members of an Episcopal church in another city, and they have always held liberal opinions and supported inclusion. He shared that the Bible was not an important factor in the way that he defined his faith or in the way that his parents encouraged his faith during childhood. He expressed a degree of concern as he admitted that he “should know more about scripture,” but for him it did not seem relevant when discussing issues concerning
inclusion and homosexuality in particular. He also explained that he understood the stories contained in the Bible as “metaphors and allegories” that could be used to provide guidance but not necessarily as tools for defining faith.

The fact that the Bible does not resonate with these people was curious to me because that was not one of my initial assumptions. Understanding how the respondents used or did not use the Bible as a resource provided an unexpected but welcomed reflection of how people pick and choose information based upon what works for them in their lives, regardless of the importance placed upon the information by the church leadership. Those who are responsible for guiding TEC into the future, such as the priests, deacons, and bishops need to know that many members of their congregation are in conflict with the Church on this issue:

   Homosexuality has never been much of an issue for me. My understanding of the meaning of Christ and the role of the Church, I have never had a second of conflict with. Doctrine as spoken, explained and practiced by my church, I am in plenty of conflict with. (Hermine – Cradle Episcopalian)

*Jesus and Social Justice*

In a study conducted in 1998, and published in 2006, 2,300 clergy and 1,600 congregation members of individual Episcopal and Lutheran churches in the United States were surveyed in an attempt to develop an understanding of beliefs and opinions within both TEC and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) regarding formal denominational statements on homosexuality (Djupe, Olson, and Gilbert 2006). For the purposes of this paper, I am only concerned with the responses from the clergy and members of TEC. The findings from the 1998 study indicated that there seemed to be a gap between what the congregation wanted and what the clergy “believed” that their
congregation wanted (Djupe et al. 2006). A clear majority of Episcopalian adherents believed that TEC should adopt official statements on homosexuality, and they indicated a high level of support for inclusion (Djupe et al. 2006). However, the clergy expressed a belief that their congregations wanted them to move slowly and methodically on this issue (Djupe et al. 2006). The congregation members believed that the effects of globalization and multiculturalism being felt at every level of social and economic development dictated that changes needed to be made, and the failure of TEC to make necessary changes would undeniably result in a status of irrelevance in the global religious marketplace (Djupe et al. 2006). According to this earlier study, the opinions and beliefs of the members of TEC were driven by a social justice agenda (Djupe et al. 2006). The responses collected in 1998 directly correspond with and support the responses provided by the respondents in this study.

Throughout the course of this study, I was concerned with how the social justice aspect of faith was defined and supported. While the Bible did not resonate with the respondents in correlation with how they defined their faith, it did provide a foundation for how they defined the need to embrace issues of social justice. The Bible provided respondents with historically situated biographical narratives. The importance and significance of various forms of narratives, particularly self-narratives are an important part of the symbolic interaction process and how we define meanings our lives (Rohall, Milkie, and Lucas 2011). Research on personal narratives has also demonstrated the importance of narratives in the creation of personal identities (Irvine 1999). I will attempt to take this a step further and suggest that reading and hearing the biographical narratives of others is also a powerful component in the creation process of both personal and
religious identities. The ways in which we tell and conceptualize stories become so
habitual that they become models for structuring personal experiences and lives (Bruner
1987). The study of biographical narratives permits people to select items that resonate
with them on a personal level; these types of narratives can provide formulas for people
to use in times of conflict or struggle in their lives. The Bible provides a collection of
narratives that demonstrate how to maneuver through life’s obstacles for those who have
faith. Valerie explained that reading the Bible comforts her because it provides examples.
She said, “I read the Bible because it provides stories that tell you how to live.”

Jesus lived his life in a way that demonstrated the value of social justice and the
historical Jesus\textsuperscript{12} was a strong focus of this congregation (Chidester 2000). He helped
those in need, cured the sick, and spent time with the outcasts of his society. Through
hearing, reading, and studying the stories of his life, people in this study were able to add
meanings to their religious identities. They found inspiration in the connections between
the way Jesus lived his life and in the way that he managed his faith. Shary was amazed
that people “can ignore passage after passage about Jesus and his love of the outsider,”
and she added, “I mean how much more clear do the passages have to get before you
understand that exclusion is wrong and that this is a social justice issue.” Colin also
commented that, “any type of discrimination is totally opposed to the teachings of Jesus
and the examples of how he lead his life.” He used the biographical narrative of Jesus to
illustrate that “this is not a biblical issue; it is a human rights issue and a social justice
issue.”

During one of our conversations, Bonnie attempted to shed some light on the social
justice component of faith, especially when discussing issues of inclusion. She explained
that it is really difficult to separate the issues of faith and social justice because “the Bible has been about social justice from its inception.” She continued by saying that you do not even have to go all the way to the New Testament and the stories of Jesus, “the Old Testament is full of stuff about feeding the poor, protecting the widow, sharing your crops, and opening your household.” She added, “Social justice is part of the fabric of scripture and the separation of scripture and social justice is impossible.” Danielle was another respondent who talked about how difficult it would be to separate social justice issues from the Bible:

The Bible talks about loving one another and treating one another with respect. Whether we view the Bible as the literal word of God or as a group of stories that are there for our edification, there are enough examples to demonstrate that Christ wanted us to help one another and not judge. So, for me, the issue of inclusion is a social justice issue. There is no way to study the stories in the Bible and not be forced to embrace issues of social justice. Jesus led his life in a way that clearly demonstrated this fact. (Danielle - 16+ years)

Therefore, while individual answers about the conflict regarding issues of homosexuality and inclusion may not be found explicitly spelled out in scripture, the overall tone of the biographical narratives contained in the Bible depicting the life of Jesus can be used to highlight the importance of social justice issues, or at least that is what my respondents indicated. Inclusion for these respondents represents exactly what Jesus was saying through the way that he led his life. During a follow-up conversation with Shary, we discussed Jesus in greater detail than during our first interview. She indicated that she had been thinking about how Jesus would respond to the issue of inclusion and those who disagree with inclusion. “I guess there is a group of people who believe that if Jesus were here today that he would hate homosexuals,” she said. “I think not. That wasn’t the way that he led his life.” She explained that she could not understand
how people could look at the way Jesus led his life and conclude that inclusion was wrong. This connection between Jesus and social justice was a prevailing theme and reference point for most of the respondents when framing the issue of homosexuality and inclusion within TEC. During our discussion, Alex reflected upon social justice issues and the history of TEC in a way that demonstrated why inclusion “just makes sense” for him:

I don’t view inclusion as a church issue but as more of a social justice issue. We were having a similar conversation a hundred years ago about African Americans, and 40 years ago about women priests and now look at the Church. Now the conversation involves LGBTQ. The tide of history is very clear and it is just a matter of getting through this, and trying to get through it in a graceful way. (Alex – 30+ years)

Fiona found it problematic that so many people construct problems based upon Biblical passages and once again introduced the historical context:

If you want to use the Bible, please include the historical context. This really makes me angry. Look at the life of Jesus, as historians, anthropologists, and archeologists understand it. Put his life in context. What he did was live his life with the rejects. So, he was saying everyone was included. Social justice was part of Jesus’ life. The two cannot be separated. Look at what the Bible says, and why, historically, the Bible says this. (Fiona - 50+ years)

The Future of TEC

Even though many respondents, when questioned, did not emphasize the mystical qualities of their faith, the ritualistic aspect of faith, or the Bible when explaining how they have defined their faith (besides the historical Jesus and the Biblical narrative components), it is clear that the future of the Church, according to the clergy, relies on the interpretation of scripture and the practice of ritual. Throughout the research process, members of the clergy reminded me repeatedly that progress is going be slow because a significant amount of time must be devoted to the development of solutions based upon
scripture. They indicated that they believe scripture should provide the foundation for faith and must in fact be used when attempting to expand the meanings of faith. I discussed this with Bonnie and she said “the Bible has to be part of the discussion, if you are talking about the conduct of the Church.” She explained that within society, and our democracy in particular, we have the opportunity to discuss the merits of sex and marriage as civil concepts and as social concepts but added, “if you are talking about these issues within the Church, you have to include scripture.” She believes that troublesome passages, apparent contradictions, and the void of information in regards to the Bible must be discussed. She went on to say, “we must ask what scripture has to say about the subjects of race, gender, and sexuality.” She indicated that this was important because it is the responsibility of the Church to ask what scripture has to say about these topics so that individuals can properly use Biblical sources to define their faith. When I pointed out that this was in direct conflict with how the people in this study indicated that they define their faith, she said that it is also the responsibility of the Church to guide people through this process.

It was suggested by one of the members of the clergy that the comments of the members of this congregation were systemic. She explained that a focus on the historical Jesus and social justice were part of the structure and history of this particular congregation. She believes that the combined structure and history of the church is responsible for the comments of the respondents and that they are not necessarily reflective of TEC. It must be noted that this is possible. This is just one congregation and those who were interviewed represent only a small sample of the congregation, however, most of them had attended the church for many years and had direct experiences that
were directly related to this topic. I provided respondents with open-ended questions and encouraged them to talk about their faith and their experiences and only a few felt that scripture played an important role in helping them define their faith. For them the issue of inclusion was more a question of social justice and human rights than it was an issue of Biblical interpretation. The ritualistic and mystical aspects of faith were not mentioned or discussed.

This issue was something that I discussed with Nicole, another member of the clergy at the SJEC. She stressed during one of our conversations that she was aware of the fact that the congregation seemed to be “missing” certain aspects of faith and that this did not surprise her in the least. She indicated that the future of this congregation would include a greater emphasis on the mystical and ritualistic portions of faith:

It has not been a focus of past clergy here, and there has been a long history of having a strong focus on the historical Jesus and social justice. Both of which are good but do not provide the whole picture of a faith-filled life. Social justice is half of the truth. If you are not entering the mystery then something is missing; for me that is one of the points of focus for our leadership, connecting these two pieces. We are focused on social justice, but not all Episcopalians are; you have to consider the communities in question. Our weakness, as a congregation, is the mystical and ritualistic portion of faith. (Nicole - 30+ years)

While this sounds reasonable, there still seems to be a “disconnect” regarding these issues between the opinions of the clergy and the individual members of the congregation. Most of the respondents I talked with were openly frustrated with how slowly TEC was moving on the issues of homosexuality and inclusion. They almost unanimously believed that finding Biblical solutions for issues surrounding homosexuality and inclusion was a non-issue and that those who are opposed to inclusion were going to find an excuse to leave anyway:
Homosexuality is the new topic. In a democracy we always talk about everyone being created equal, we addressed race, then gender, and the next arena is homosexuality. It puzzles me when people get their knickers in a knot about sexual orientation; I just don’t get it. People hate anything that is different from them and after we settle this issue there will be another. (Fiona - 50+ years)

Members of the congregation were not at a loss when it came to offering suggestions concerning the future direction of their church, and most importantly these suggestions did not always match those of the leadership. Shary would like to hear “more discussion about the issues facing TEC and maybe from a national perspective and not just a local perspective.” She believed that the inclusion of more personal narratives and biographical narratives of members of the congregation and the local community would provide members of the church with additional tools that could enable them to “move forward in their faith.” Karlyn and Hermine expressed a desire to see “full sacramental rights for everyone.” Karlyn thought as a congregation, they were moving forward but admitted, “our progress is probably slower than it should be.” While she believed that the process they were going through is meaningful, she said, “this doesn’t change where I think we need to be as a congregation.” Hermine said that struggling with “Biblical interpretation is wrong,” and there is really nowhere to go with “trying to have this type of discussion” and, according to her, “this is a lousy political strategy.” She pointed out that no one has ever figured out what “Christ is Lord” means, yet we all continue to be Christians. For this reason, she thought this type of discourse was not helpful. She wished that TEC could “just please move forward.”

Many of the respondents shared these sentiments. Danielle reminded me that “gay and lesbian people have been involved in TEC forever” and “it has only become a problem since it has been redefined as being an issue.” She insisted this “whole debate is
silly because these are the same people who have been here all along, and now that the conversation has started, we are being forced to choose a side.” She found it “odd that cooler heads have not stepped up to the plate and pointed this out and ended the panic.” Valerie provided the perfect conclusion to this section as she walked me to the door after our interview, and said, “there should be more discussion regarding social justice issues, but nothing should be shoved down anyone’s throat and most importantly, we need to keep moving forward as a church and no one should be excluded.”

The Future of the Anglican Communion

In 2004, the Lambeth Commission was established by the Archbishop of Canterbury with the express purpose of examining the issue of homosexuality within the Church (Sachs 2009). This commission issued the Windsor Report. The primary focus of the report is the legal and theological implications of permitting gay and lesbian adherents to have leadership roles within the Church and the Church blessing of same sex unions (Sachs 2009). Based upon their examination of the issue, the Lambeth Commission made suggestions regarding the reconciliation of the Anglican Communion, in an attempt to avoid the realignment currently taking place around the globe (Sachs 2009). The suggestions of the Commission were put forth in the Windsor Report. This report took a strong position against homosexuality and recommended a moratorium on any further consecrations of bishops and the blessings of same-sex unions; however, it fell short of recommending any sort of disciplinary action or retribution against TEC (The Windsor Report 2004). This report also called for the creation of an Anglican Covenant. If accepted, this covenant would serve to define what it meant to be part of the Anglican Communion and establish a more defined hierarchy within the Church. Instead of acting
to diffuse the situation and serve as a point of reconciliation, this report and the associated proposed covenant served as a catalyst for both sides to amplify their rhetoric.

Many members of the clergy and the congregation of this church believe that a rupture in the Anglican Communion is imminent, due primarily to the introduction of an Anglican Covenant that is viewed as an attempt by the Anglican Communion to exert control over TEC. While such a rupture is not desired by TEC, reports and covenants are not preventing the leadership of the TEC from moving forward. In 2010, TEC confirmed an openly lesbian priest to the rank of bishop (McCaughan 2009, McCaughan 2010). The confirmation of the Rev. Canon Mary Douglas Glasspool in California is expected to further inflame theological conservatives in TEC and their global partners in the Anglican Communion, who have warned about the repercussions of such actions (McCaughan 2009). The respondents in this study agree that it is only a matter of time before gay men and lesbians are included in every facet of the Church, and they welcome this reality.

William Sachs (2009) suggested in his book, *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Anglicanism*, that the average Episcopalian would probably not notice a rupture in the Anglican Communion and that their day-to-day life in the church would not be significantly altered. Colin echoed this sentiment during our conversation. He said, “A split in the Anglican Communion will not affect me at all,” and added, “TEC is moving in the right direction, and if the larger Anglican Communion is stupid enough to take a stand, then they will suffer in the long run.” In reality, Colin is correct. If a rupture does take place, the Anglican Communion would experience a considerable financial loss because TEC is one of the wealthiest members of the larger Anglican family (Sachs
2009). The members of the global South actually make up a majority of the membership, but TEC supplies a majority of the Anglican Communion’s funding (Sachs 2009).  

This is a fact that does not escape the attention of respondents in this study. Colin feels as if TEC is headed in the right direction and that the Anglican Communion would be foolish to push the issues of homosexuality, inclusion, and a mandatory covenant far enough to initiate an actual split resulting in the expulsion of TEC. He said, “it just would not be financially smart for them to do this, I don’t see it happening.” Colin has witnessed many historical events within the Church, and he believed the Anglican Communion will be forced to “find a way of keeping the middle ground intact.” He concluded, “I think that the Archbishop of Canterbury knows where TEC stands on these issues, and he also knows that England is moving in the same direction, so is Scotland - it is not just the United States. I think there will have to be an accommodation.” Colin was one of only respondents who did not believe a split in the Anglican Communion was imminent.

Other members of this congregation shared Colin’s feelings regarding the impact of a split or rupture, and it is clear that the respondents in this study do not rely upon the Anglican Communion when defining their religious identities. This may come as a shock to those trying desperately hard to establish some sort of compromise with the Anglican Communion in an attempt to keep the union intact. While the respondents in this study do not necessarily want a rupture, they absolutely do not want TEC to change its course on the issue of inclusion. Alex was particularly concerned with people feeling “so alienated that they feel as if they are being forced to leave,” but added, “I am not going to be upset if some people choose to leave because we as a church or me as an individual are taking a stand on the issue of inclusion.”
Danielle addressed the history of the Anglican Communion during her interview and illustrated how this history is being used against TEC in a type of reverse colonialism (Rubenstein 2004). She believes that collectively the global North is partially to blame for this situation, “we colonized these countries and provided the people with these foundational beliefs, and we have done a poor job of shepherding them along.”

According to Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Danielle is on to something with this line of thought. Rubenstein (2004) suggested church leaders in the United States have found themselves faced with reverse colonialism, or the post-colonial southern hemisphere’s interpretation of the same scripture and ecclesiastical traditions that the global North had initially imposed upon them. In a turn of events, the African dioceses, in particular, have come to consider themselves as the “true bearers of the light of the gospel.” They believe it is their mission to complete the task of re-converting the global North and the churches that have fallen from the path of righteousness and condemn those that do not follow suit (Rubenstein 2004). Danielle said, “The Anglican Communion provides a connection for Anglicans all over the world, but, it is in fact still a communion and has always agreed to move forward as a group.” Danielle expressed that she does not believe that any one group “should have the power to stifle the growth and progress of another group.” She concluded by saying that TEC needs to move forward, because “as a culture we are ready to move forward.”

I entered this project with the assumption that a rupture in the Anglican Communion was presenting a real threat for TEC and that a rupture would alter how the “people in the pews” defined their religious identities. I had assumed that the Anglican Communion provided a touchstone for those involved with TEC and other Anglicans.
around the world. I was surprised to hear just how nonchalant the respondents were when addressing the topic of a rupture. This group of people feels a level of commitment to the message of inclusion that far supersedes the value they place on the Anglican Communion when defining their religious identities. They value the relationships that they have with gay and lesbian members of their families and their social networks more than they value the connection that they feel with the larger Anglican Communion and even TEC. In Earl’s view, if people feel strongly about their beliefs and can see no room for compromise then they should leave:

   People keep trying to massage this issue - sometimes when you have a big problem you keep pushing it out, spreading it out until it doesn’t look like you have a big problem any more, kind of like Playdoh being spread all over a table. But, you still have a big mess and the problem is still there. You may as well just go, if you feel that strongly about these ideas, then maybe you should go and move off in another direction and pursue your religion in the light that is going to work for you.
   (Earl – 30+ years)

Fiona had a slightly different perspective on this issue of a split in the Anglican Communion. She thought that a split actually represented a real opportunity for TEC to move closer to the original example of how Jesus led his life. She believed that “there will be a split,” and this “needs to happen.”

   Respondents who have traveled and experienced the power of the Anglican Communion throughout different areas of the world expressed a greater level of regret than those who have not. This once again is representative of the importance of personal experiences when defining issues that come together to define personal religious identities. For example, Shary has traveled extensively, and she reflected upon the fact that being able to “go to another country, and worship is powerful.” She said, “a rupture would make me sad, but if a separation is what needs to happen for TEC to move forward
on this issue of inclusion, then we need to proceed.” She added, “I don’t believe that the possibility of splitting off from the Anglican Communion should deter us.” Shary has personal relationships with members of her family who are gay and lesbian, and this took precedence when she was evaluating how she defines her faith:

There are members of my family who are gay and lesbian, and you have to decide whether or not everything that you think and feel about that person has to be discarded, or you have to re-examine your beliefs and maybe even something about yourself....I mean when you know people, you have to examine your beliefs, especially those beliefs that alienate and exclude people based upon sexual orientation. (Shary - cradle Episcopalian)

Hermine has also traveled extensively and experienced the power of the Anglican Communion. While she believed that a separation would present a sense of loss, she said, “this type of loss would fall under the conceptualization of necessary losses that are needed in order for TEC to progress in the right direction.” She added, “TEC needs to cut the Gordian knot and actually initiate the separation.” She believed that the Anglican Communion is “infinitely wrong” in the way that it is exercising its judgment on the issues of inclusion and gender, and they “can go hang if they in any way affect the acceptance, value, and full inclusion of one person.” She concluded our interview by noting that “Christ did not say keep the Anglican Communion together at all costs.”

While a few respondents expressed a small amount of regret and sadness at the prospect of a rupture, most of the respondents expressed little real concern regarding a split in the Anglican Communion. Their connections to the TEC and individuals in their lives superseded any sense of loyalty they felt toward an institution not moving toward inclusion. It is clear that these people are not defining their faith based upon the tenets of
the Anglican Communion, and maybe those within the hierarchy of TEC should pay
closer attention to the voices of the “people in the pews”:

I think the more that it gets brought up and the more everyone realizes that we have
gay and lesbian people in our church family, the quicker this struggle will end. I
mean if we all had to wear a sign listing our private qualities, we would all be
humbled. There are much bigger things that we don’t know about one another than
sexual preference. The more that we talk about it and talk about it normally in our
everyday conversations, the more normal it will become. We need to be able to
speak to and hear people, even when we don’t agree. We have to be able to
communicate. (Shary - cradle Episcopalian)

A large part of being an Episcopalian is being a member of a larger missionary
society, and this is also a defining component of being a member of the Anglican
Communion (Jenkins 2004). This has enabled churches within TEC to share the common
bond of Anglican heritage with other churches around the world but to also vary greatly
in their histories, worship style, spiritual concerns, and their social and political
orientations (Hassett 2007). This emphasis on mission has provided the basis for a unified
focus on global outreach that has become a cornerstone of TEC. Unfortunately, this
acceptance of all individuals and all cultural identities has resulted in the issue of
homosexuality becoming a divisive topic within the Anglican Communion. The
respondents in this study have demonstrated that they place a greater emphasis on their
immediate connections to others than they do on their connections with the larger
Anglican Communion. They have clearly indicated that they are ready to go forward as
an independent denomination and are prepared to take their chances in the world’s
religious marketplace (Kurtz 2007).
Summary

Through the personal narratives provided by the respondents in this study, I was able to develop a partial understanding of how faith is defined, evaluated, and redefined under specific circumstances. As people move through their lives, they establish definitions of normative behavior through their personal interactions and experiences (Blumer 1969). When members of TEC started taking sides in the issues surrounding homosexuality and inclusion, they were forced to evaluate the meanings in their religious life. Some people left the Church, while others were forced to redefine their faith and establish new meanings. In most instances, this group of respondents relied upon their experiences and personal interactions to provide meanings and these interactions and experiences trumped or outweighed the opinions of the clergy and the Church. Personal relationships with gay men and lesbians have provided this group of people with personal definitions of homosexuality that cannot be labeled, as one respondent put it, as being “ungodly.” Once homosexuality had a face and a name, exclusion was no longer an option. It no longer mattered what members of the clergy or the Church said or thought about the issue. It became personal for these people.

Factors such as historical conditions, timing, linked lives, and agency also contributed to the respondents’ interpretation of the world, and influenced how they made decisions, and came to conclusions about issues in their lives (Elder 1994). While religion provides a filter through which many respondents view one another, historical conditions also provided some of them with a foundation for how they view the world. Some of the respondents were raised in very conservative environments and during a period in which homosexuality was not discussed. Others were raised during a period in
which homosexuality was considered a psychiatric disorder in need of treatment. Many were adults before they even realized that there were homosexuals or before they had ever met someone who openly identified as gay or lesbian. For some of these people redefining their faith was more of a struggle, and they had to work backwards in a sense and redefine previous beliefs and opinions. They were forced to do this because what they had been taught or led to believe no longer matched what they were experiencing through their personal relationships. Others in this study were raised in environments and historical periods that promoted and accepted diversity; they had friends who were gay and lesbian, and for them the issue of inclusion seems like the only logical way to move forward. These people never struggled with their faith, but they have struggled with family members and friends regarding their personal definitions of faith.

Biographical narratives were a strong focus in this study. Respondents relied heavily on the way Jesus led his life to provide meaning for them in their construction of faith regarding issues of homosexuality and inclusion. Yet, the commandments and laws contained in the Bible were discounted as being “historically questionable” and “flawed” due to the context in which they were written and canonized. This ability to pick and choose was evident in all of the personal narratives. This is a subject of concern for the clergy of this particular church. They feel a responsibility to guide these people in a uniform way and to instill a greater understanding of and reliance on Biblical doctrine. This is an issue that is just now beginning to be addressed in this church, and a few of the respondents have expressed concern about this focus. Based upon the conversations that I had with members of the congregation, this subject will provide areas of conflict in the future of this church. The religious identities that have been formed within this
congregation are going to clash with the clergy in very similar way that the values of TEC are clashing with those of the Anglican Communion.

The self can be seen, in part, as a collection of identities. It is among these identities, within the self, that conflicts occur. This study provides an illustration of how our identities must work in unison or must, at the very least, find some sort of common ground with one another. Many of the respondents mentioned having to struggle in order to reconcile their separate identities. They are fathers, mothers, friends, co-workers, brothers, and sisters of gay and lesbian individuals whom they love. Many are also involved in political organizations that fight for equal rights, adding an additional identity that must be incorporated into the “big picture” of the self. Each of these identities must cohabitate, as it were, within the self. If one of the identities becomes compromised, the self is in danger of not being properly supported. This was the case with Danielle, who became disillusioned with the message provided by her church. The members of this church were part of her social community, the people who provided her support. When her religious identity could no longer reside with her other identities, she felt forced to cut off all ties with her community. This was a form of religious suicide. Danielle left her religious identity behind and created a new identity in a new city. This was a struggle for Danielle; she was forced to create a new religious identity and this affected her other identities and in the process her self.

The opinions and beliefs of the people in the pews have a “bottom up” effect on the philosophy of the larger Church when there is conflict. When groups are properly organized, they can be defined and studied as social movements within the Church. Members of this congregation have become a social movement within TEC. They are
involved with organizations both within and outside of the Church, organizations that are pushing for the total inclusion of all people. This is putting pressure on the clergy of this church to be aggressive in their message of inclusion. However, the clergy has expressed the fact that they are not comfortable with the level of aggression that the congregation supports and instead prefer a more gradual progression toward collective goals. This is creating a division within this church between those who want inclusion “now” and those who want to methodically and systematically move forward in a more gradual way.

**Conclusion**

When I started this project, I was concerned with how people define faith and their religious identities. However, as time progressed it became clear that religion and faith were not sole my focus, instead my attention became fixed upon how people define meanings in their lives. Because of this, I could have studied any group of people and focused on any particular aspect of group membership. The people in this study were diverse, and no two were similar in any other areas of their lives, from what I observed, other than how they defined their faith, or to be more specific, how they told stories about their faith (Irvine 1999). Their religious narratives had a formula when they discussed the topics of homosexuality and inclusion. This formula ensured their membership to this particular group (congregation). This is not the same formula that would be used to talk about the mystical qualities of their expressions of faith or their personal relationship with a higher power. This formula was specific and contained necessary components – the reliance on biographical narratives from the Bible, the influence of personal relationships and experiences, and the theme of social justice (see Irvine 1999).
As discussed in the introduction of this paper, the self is a reflexive project that is constructed through our interactions in everyday life (Blumer 1969; McAdams 1996). The self provides signs of who we are and offers a demonstration of our identities in practice (Holstein and Gubrium 1999). The individuals who participated in this study are actively forming their religious identities and adding to their concepts of self. Through agency they are able to make choices, and these choices reinforce or detract from their definitions of self (Musolf 2003). Religiously defined sub-cultures in society offer a platform for examining how individuals negotiate meanings and at times re-define components of their life through the filter of faith. In periods of conflict or change, we are able to examine closely how individuals use interpretive processes in order to construct new elements and extensions of their faith. While faith is an abstract component of life and can be extremely personal, at the foundational level it is a product of community. It may be revelatory and based upon a single experience or an amalgamation of different experiences and interactions, but whatever the makeup or basis, faith is used to communicate lasting values and is communally received and defined (Plaskow 1990). This makes the creation of religious identities important when viewed on a societal level.

In Durkheim’s examination of suicide, he proposed that anomie or a sense of normlessness could result in an individual feeling hopeless (Durkheim 1951). In this, he treated the individual as a whole unit. I am suggesting that we have many identities and that the problem of anomie becomes more complex when addressing a multitude of identities contained within an individual. When one identity becomes unstable and experiences a sense of “normlessness,” the self does not necessarily become suicidal; only the identity in question must deal with this circumstance. In the case of religious
suicide, this is exactly what occurs. That is not to suggest that the self is not influenced. The self is a product of all identities, and when one identity becomes unstable, the self becomes unstable. To be sure, it may not always become unstable to the extent that Durkheim may have suggested. Although a closer examination of this topic is outside the scope and time constraints of this paper, it is a potentially fruitful topic for both the study of religion and identity.

The information provided in this study offers valuable clues that can be used to lessen the tension in our society when addressing issues involving sexual orientation or difference of any kind. If people are exposed to diversity and challenged to deconstruct stereotypes, they will be able to redefine their beliefs and opinions regarding marginalized groups. When marginalized groups of people have names and faces, their differences do not seem as dramatic or extreme. As our neighborhoods and communities become more diverse, we must change and evolve in order to keep up and remain relevant; this is not just a problem for TEC but for society in general. By repeating the mistakes of the past and refusing to learn lessons from history, we will fail to move forward as a society. Belief systems hold cultures together and in turn, societies are formed from the scaffolding of these belief systems.

Religion affects not only our social, political, and economic conflicts, but also the meanings we find in our lives, regardless of our personal belief in a higher power or a specific religious system (Dennett 2006). For many people, nothing matters more than religion, their faith. Their faith dictates how they experience the world and through their connections to others; we are all affected by how they experience the world, thus we must learn as much as we can about all religions. Religion is often the primary structure of
communication in society and until we understand how individuals define their faith, we are at a disadvantage in understanding entire cultures and their interactions with others.

The Episcopal Church has always been able to embrace change and accommodate progress, whether scientifically or theologically based, and this made TEC the perfect denomination for my research. This Church has successfully navigated and survived such issues and conflicts as human slavery, contraception, female ordination to the priesthood, and female consecration to the status of bishop. Homosexuality is the newest and the most controversial issue to strike at the very base of the Church’s dogmatic foundation. Yet, TEC has held fast and continues down a progressive path toward the acceptance of all individuals without regard to their sexuality, pushing the limits of what it means to have faith and worship in the 21st century. Gay and lesbian individuals, couples, and family units are being drawn to TEC because it provides them with the opportunity to establish a religious identity without having to divorce themselves from their sexual orientation. As with all progressive change, however, conservative forces remain ready to prevent such changes from occurring.

The topic of homosexuality incites a variety of responses that range from open and active acceptance to the most vile and hateful forms of violence imaginable. Religious institutions are quickly discovering that the emotions involved in the debate surrounding homosexuality are more powerful than those that can be easily managed with simple declarations of theological evolution. Homosexuality is a topic that has torn families apart, and TEC is one “family” within the Anglican Communion that is struggling to remain intact. The Bible has some seemingly problematic verses where homosexuality is concerned, and interpretation of these passages have divided many Episcopalian
congregations over the last decade. As people construct their religious identities, they are forced to sort through a mountain of secular information and religious opinions regarding the issue of homosexuality and make determinations of how they are going to define their faith. By examining the respondent’s narratives, I was provided with examples of how people were working through this process at a time when TEC is experiencing pressure from the Anglican Communion and from conservative churches within its own family to exclude homosexuals from the Church family. Examining how they work through their lives and their experiences provides clues regarding how biases are created and maintained. This knowledge is critical in a world that is becoming increasingly small and in cities and towns that are becoming increasingly diverse. Understanding how we make meanings in our lives provides us with the information that we need to build better communities.

Endnotes

1 For the purposes of this paper, the global South is defined as Africa, Asia, and South America. This is how the Anglican Communion defines the global South (Hasset 2007).

2 For the purposes of this paper, the global North is defined as including the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Once again, this is how the Anglican Communion defines the global North (Hasset 2007).

3 While the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury have no direct authority over TEC or the Presiding Bishop, the Archbishop does have a certain amount of indirect power due to the fact that he can “dis-invite” the Presiding Bishop and all
American bishops from the Lambeth Conference, and/or refuse to recognize TEC as part of the Anglican Communion.

4 Nationally, TEC is governed by the General Convention, which meets every three years to consider issues facing the Church and consists of the House of Deputies (elected representatives from each diocese), and the House of Bishops (Prichard 1999). The General Convention is also responsible for electing a Presiding Bishop, who serves for a term of 12 years (Prichard 1999). The Presiding Bishop acts as both a spiritual and administrative leader, and is thus responsible for carrying out the programs enacted by the General Convention.

5 The vestry is elected from within the congregation and they are responsible for the management of day-to-day operations. They are the governing body of the church on a local level. The Vestry is responsible for determining the policies and goals of the congregation and is responsible for communicating with the congregation about the goals, concerns, and functions of the church.

6 LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning.

7 West and Zimmerman (1987) described the process of doing gender as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction, a constant ongoing process of creating and maintaining gender through interaction. They proposed that gender is constituted through interaction and is not innate or biologically based.

8 “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” is the phrase commonly used to refer to the policy (Pub-L.103-160) that restricts homosexuals from openly serving in the military in the United States. Under this policy, homosexuals are not asked information regarding their sexual
orientation, and they are not required to offer the information. This policy was repealed in December 2010 and is currently under review.

9 A cradle Episcopalian is someone who was born into the faith and raised as an Episcopalian.

10 Proposition 8 was a ballot proposition passed in California in the November 2008 state elections. The measure added a new provision, Section 7.5 of the Declaration of Rights, to the California Constitution, which provides that "only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California.” This invalidated the previous legalization of same-sex marriage in the state of California.

11 The Council of Nicaea was a meeting of Christian bishops organized by Constantine 325 c.e., in the attempt to attain consensus in the church (Chidester 2000). There is controversy surrounding this first council due to Constantine’s involvement, and some critics claim that the results of the council were unreliable and were politically, not theologically motivated (Chidester 2000).

12 Historical Jesus refers to the scholarly reconstructions of Jesus of Nazareth. These reconstructions are based upon historical methods and include the consideration of the historical and cultural context in which he lived his life (Chidester 2000).

13 The Windsor Report builds upon and is fashioned after an earlier document referred to as the Virginia Report that was written in 1997. This report addressed what was considered an enormous threat to the fabric of the Anglican Communion - the consecration of a female bishop. It cautioned against authoritarianism and stressed the importance and acceptance of diversity.
There are approximately 80 million people in the Anglican Communion and only 2.5 million are members of TEC (Jenkins 2004). This puts TEC in an awkward position in times of conflict, and TEC must balance its position, one of wealth and privilege with one of being a minority when it comes to actual membership within the Anglican Communion.

The former Anglican Primate of the Church of Nigeria, Archbishop Peter Jasper Akinola, went as far as to publicly declare TEC, “the Church of Satan,” because of the ordination of women and the acceptance of homosexuals (Rubenstein 2004).

I have developed a partial understanding because this was a small sample of only one congregation and a larger sample with multiple congregations could offer different results. It is possible that a complete understanding would be very difficult and would require much more time than this process permitted.
References


