
TEACHING RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP IN THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY: AN EXERCISE IN THEOLOGICAL FORMATION FOR MINISTRY

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Abstract

This essay explores the theologically formative role of a recent course of study in ministerial leadership with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community (LGBTQ) in the development of religious leaders. The work of Edward Farley, critically applied from a queer perspective, provides important insights into how religious leaders may be taught to interpret situations that emerge in the lived experiences of LGBTQ people. The impact this type of theological formation has upon participants in such a course of study extends beyond the LGBTQ community in a counterintuitive way, affecting the character and content of ministry in general. This paper opens new frontiers of thought and research in two directions: first, Farley's work has not been used to elucidate the work of ministry among members of sexual and gender minorities in this way before; and second, the hermeneutical education of religious leaders as interpreters of these contextual challenges actually "flips the script," extending beyond the LGBTQ community to address how religious leadership may be retooled theologically and practically in our time.

A Controversial Course: Ministry in the LGBTQ Community

Rarely does a seminary class make the news. "Ministry in the LGBTQ Community," a seminar taught during the 2016 fall semester at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas, made the front page of a news weekly that is widely read throughout North Texas. The story in the *Dallas Voice* was entitled, "Brite Divinity School tackles a subject few

others touch: Ministry in the LGBT Community.”¹ What makes such a religious leadership course newsworthy for the media and at the same time noteworthy among theological educators are differing issues, of course, but they remain related in interesting ways, given the current challenges facing society and religious leadership.

Simply because such courses are rare in North American theological higher education² does not reduce them to a passing fancy. Churches have been engaging LGBTQ persons and their predecessors for millennia, either for good or ill. Ministers, priests, and chaplains have been meeting the spiritual and ecclesial needs of non-heteronormative persons at least since the early post–World War II era, and interest in serving these populations has grown markedly.³ How to ground the assessment of a

¹ David Taffet, “Back to School. Brite Divinity School Tackles a Subject Few Others Touch: Ministry in the LGBT Community,” *Dallas Voice* 33(17) (September 2, 2016): 8. The *Voice* editor made this article the cover story.

² Among the “Issues Integrated Courses” currently taught in the thirty-one seminaries and divinity schools listed online as “Seminaries That Change the World, Class of 2016–2017,” Brite’s PRTH 70163: Ministry in the LGBT Community, is one of few that address the situations facing sexual and gender nonconforming minorities, and the only one specifically designed to equip religious leaders who seek to do ministry in the context of the LGBTQ community. Seminaries That Change the World is a program of the Center for Faith and Service, based at McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago. See www.stctw.org/the-list-2016-17-schools. Accessed 12/20/2017. For a course description, see the Brite Divinity School page on this site.

³ For an introduction to ministry among LGBTQ people in mainline Protestantism, see David J. Kundtz and Bernard S. Schlager, *Ministry Among God’s Queer Folk: LGBT Pastoral Care* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007); Justin Edward Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003); L. William Countryman and M. R. Ritley, *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church* (Harrisonburg, Pa.: Morehouse, 2001); Joretta L. Marshall, *Counseling Lesbian Partners* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997); Heather R. White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina, 2015); and R. W. Holmen, *Queer Clergy: A History of Gay and Lesbian Ministry in American Protestantism* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2013). For an account of the ills wrought among LGBTQ people by the Religious Right, see Mel White, *Religion Gone Bad: The Hidden Dangers of the Christian Right* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2006).

course such as this one in practical theological thought is the subject of this paper.

This paper proposes to appropriate the queered practical theological insights of noted theologian Edward Farley as a means of interrogating this course on ministry in the LGBTQ community. Thus, the class may be understood as more than a way of addressing a niche group. It embodies an exercise in theological formation, with implications for how credible religious leadership in a variety of ministry contexts may be examined and assessed.

Teaching for Theological Formation: The Legacy of Edward Farley

William Edward Farley (1929–2014) was the Drucilla Moore Buffington Professor of Theology, emeritus, at Vanderbilt Divinity School and a former member of the DePauw University and Pittsburg Theological Seminary faculties. His seminal work in systematic theology and theological higher education is well-known. Less well-known is his reading of the nature and tasks of practical theology, published as *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry*, by Westminster John Knox in 2003.

The situation of the Protestant mainline motivated Farley to focus this book upon the tension between popular piety, which tends toward idolatry if left unchecked, and a more complex faith in an undomesticated, mysterious God. The theological movement Farley describes is from an exclusivist conservatism toward a nuanced faith engaging God's transcendence. According to Farley, the Protestant mainline experience is far too familiar with the reductionistic tendencies of a theological populism that, left unchecked, drifts into ethnocentrism, xenophobia, casuistry, hyper-individualism, cosmologizing, and selective literalistic biblicism, before it finally collapses into the assumption that "its beliefs and practices are identical with

what God believes and desires.”⁴ Though he approves of the vitality and conviction of popular piety, Farley contends that theology’s apophatic work constantly presses religious fervor toward a more nuanced faith that he says exists in a “relationship to a transcendence that calls for metaphor, qualification, and inclusivity.”⁵ Instead of submitting to a binary choice, his work suggests that Christianity holds popular religion and nuanced faith in a perennial, dynamic tension, rather like polarities.

It might be argued that because Farley’s work on practical theology does not address the situation of LGBTQ people directly, his thought would be of limited utility for evaluating how ministry takes place among non-heteronormative persons. Such a reading of his work is too narrow. Generations of LGBTQ people, both faithful and faith-free, have experienced the harm done by the misguided interpretations of unchecked popular piety that harden into condemnation, matters that were very much on Farley’s mind as he gave an account of Christian faith in *Practicing Gospel*. “Gospel” rather than “the gospel,”⁶ Farley insists, is a vibrant, inclusive, and sophisticated exercise and a transformative hermeneutic of faith at work in the world, “an ever-arriving, redemptive transformation of situations” when rightly practiced by congregations.⁷ As such, it is a “disruption” of the familiar norms and orders of congregational life, “under the hopeful expectation of redemption”: a dialogical movement from “exposure,” understood as repentance, to a new creation of possibilities brought about by God’s redeeming work.⁸ The theologian’s work, to understand “Gospel and the world of Gospel,”

⁴ Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’s Ministry* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003), xiii.

⁵ Farley, xiii.

⁶ Farley, xiv. “To use Gospel without the definite article transforms it from an abstract noun (*the* gospel) to the more direction notion of ‘good news.’ . . . The primary subject of these essays is the practice of Gospel by the participants and leaders (both ordained and unordained) of congregations.”

⁷ Farley, xiv.

⁸ Farley, 91.

compelled him to engage Scripture, other historical texts, ethics, congregational life and ministerial practices, and the secular disciplines by which these subjects are examined.⁹ Corruptions of belief are overcome by the kerygmatic interpretation of Christian faith. His way of arguing for the inclusive, disruptive dynamic of Gospel opens theological space where people of difference can flourish, among whom he lists women, racial/ethnic minority persons, and other outsiders in American society, including members of non-heteronormative groups. Farley might never have used the terms *queer* and *queering* to describe the content and method of his practical theology, but the affinities between his work and later developments in queer hermeneutics are easily recognized.¹⁰

Issues raised by the inclusion of sexual and gender nonconforming people were on his mind, too, though the degree of scrutiny about their status and significance in congregations and denominations had not yet reached current levels of intensity. He was aware of the struggles taking place in mainline Protestant denominations and congregations concerning the religious acceptability of gays and lesbians, as well as a set of long-standing issues that lay behind these battles, such as the authority of the Bible, doctrinal purity, and moralism in church and culture.¹¹ He refused any idea that something could be proved about the standing of lesbians and gays by the quotation of Scripture verses, and at another point, he indirectly revealed his conviction that “gays and lesbians can be serious Christians and gifted, ordained leaders,” despite an aggressive

⁹ Farley, xi.

¹⁰ For a thorough discussion of the term *queer* and its infinitive, see Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology* (London: SCM, 2011), 9–42; for an accessible account of the work of queer theology, see Jay Emerson Johnson, *Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness* (New York: Seabury, 2014), 19–27.

¹¹ Farley, xii and 9. When moralism becomes dominant in church and culture as a ministry paradigm, for example, it distorts the reality and vocation of the church.

conservatism in the churches.¹² The point here is that Farley's idea of a redemptive, transformative hermeneutic of Christian faith, which he calls Gospel, his sense of theological inclusion, and his actual reference to the challenges posed by gays and lesbians in the churches ensure that his practical theology is applicable to the situations presented to religious leaders by the LGBTQ community.

In order for his hermeneutic of situations to be credible in LGBTQ contexts (and, we would argue, in other contexts, as well), Farley's theology needs critical interrogation from a queer perspective. Indeed, Farley's limited vision concerning LGBTQ people calls for a queer update. He never mentions transgender persons in his practical theology, for example, perhaps indicating a form of cisgender blindness toward gender fluidity and expression.¹³ Further, Farley's work, as a white, male, cisgender heterosexual, sits at the crossroads of debates about whether all such authors' works are so tainted by heteronormative presuppositions that they must be dismissed from the study of LGBTQ people, or whether queer criticism might ameliorate these deficiencies.¹⁴ Our judgment is the latter. Queer criticism indeed identifies and deconstructs lacunae in works like Farley's, and it lifts up and sharpens the queerness of his insights. Some of these

¹² Farley, xiii and xiv.

¹³ See resources on transgender theology, such as *Trans/formations*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: SCM, 2009); *This Is My Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians*, eds. Christina Beardsley and Michelle O'Brien (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2016); Sharon Groves, "What Transgender People Teach Us About God, and Our Humanity." www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2013/08/19/what-transgender-people-teach-us-about-god-and-our-humanity/11240-article-header-end/ (accessed December 11, 2016); "Practical Tips for Faith Communities." accessed December 11, 2016, <http://www.transfaithonline.org/empower/allies/faith/> (accessed December 11, 2016).

¹⁴ See Susannah Cornwall, "Strange Encounters: Postcolonial and Queer Intersections," in *Indecent Theologians: Marcella Althaus-Reid and the Next Generation of Postcolonial Activists*, ed. Nicolas Panotto (Alameda, Cal.: Borderless Press, 2016), 9–10.

insights he learned from the prophetic core of Christian Scripture and tradition, and some he constructed from his lifelong encounter with the transformative call of the mysterious God.

An example will show how the interplay between one of Farley's key theological insights and scrutiny under the "queer eye" works to the benefit of this study: Farley's reliance upon transcendence as a transformative catalyst in his hermeneutic of ministry. In "Toward a Practical Theology of Popular Religion," he lays out the case for the dynamic, undomesticated nature of God. The brittleness of literalism and cosmological speculation lies in popular religion's failure to grapple with the transcendent mystery of the Divine. He writes:

. . . the character of the sacred, . . . being what it is, cannot coincide with or simply be an ordinary entity in the world. As the world creator, as redeemer, as the source and norm of justice and love, God evades, transcends, and cannot coincide with any finite worldly entity, relation, distance, quantity, or quality. All such notions, when used of God, carry with them a hidden qualification.¹⁵

Queer theologians have been suspicious of transcendence as a Trojan horse category for patriarchy and hetero-supremacy. Even in the work of white male heterosexual theologians they consider sympathetic, they have perceived lingering neocolonial, hierarchical, and kyriarchal residues under the influence of which these authors still operate. Marcella Althaus-Reid, whose "indecent theology" intends to overturn the heterosexist presuppositions of first-world theologians, and instead ushers in a queer theological synthesis identified with sexual and gender nonconforming people, is one such critic.¹⁶ In "Queer I Stand," she writes, "Queering theology does not

¹⁵ Farley, 44–57, especially 52.

¹⁶ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2001) and *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003).

leave theology intact in its systematic structures, traditional positions or ecclesiologies, but uses its own sexual ways of knowing to question the sacred as a heterosexual assumption.” Her suspicions about theological transcendence are clear: “This heralds the end of unnecessary transcendence and the beginning of sensual concretization in theology.”¹⁷

We do not know if Althaus-Reid and Farley ever engaged each other on transcendence per se, but for the sake of argument, let us assume that they might have done so. We have no doubt that Althaus-Reid would have had much to say about Farley’s theology, both positive and negative. Likewise, Farley would have critical appreciation for her work on the person and work of God. Here is where their work on the doctrine of God and contextual theology has the most to benefit from dialogue. Althaus-Reid would applaud the way Farley queers the doctrine of God (whether he chose to call his hermeneutics *queer* or not) in *Practicing Gospel*, and she probably would encourage him to examine his own theology for ways he could disrupt the sexual program latent in his work, as well. She would congratulate him on expressions of the strangeness of God throughout his work, and how his account of transcendence influences Christians to stand in solidarity with all marginalized people. Take, for example, this Farley passage:

The tension between popular religion or piety, especially in its self-consciously defensive form, and the prophetic strain of faith is at the center of the conflicts taking place in mainline Protestantism. . . . At the center of this tension is the question of God, the issue posed by “direct” language that lays claim to an identity between what God is and wills and specific churchly beliefs and practices. These beliefs or practices range from the use of patriarchal and

¹⁷ Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God,” in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, Queering Theology Series, eds. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 102.

sexist expressions to the status of homosexuals in the church leadership.¹⁸

We suspect that Althaus-Reid would exempt Farley from her main critique of transcendence. As a contextual theologian herself, she would have appreciated his work on practical theology and learned from him. While no one would say their theologies of God are identical, their vocations as reformers of practical theology shared much in common. Bringing their critiques of western hubris, biblicism, and heteropatriarchy into conversation, even in imaginative dialogues like this, demonstrates how queer theologians and hetero-cisgender theologians can benefit from encountering each other's theology. Holding theologies of difference in dynamic tension is in itself a queer theological act. Wholesale erasure of sympathetic theologies eliminates the benefits of mutual alliances and the opportunities they bring. While not minimizing the problems of differing theologies, the gains far outweigh the potential losses.¹⁹ Queering does not supplant Farley's practical theology. It enhances what he set out to do in the life of the church.

All of this goes to show that Edward Farley's insistence upon the prophetic criticism of churchly thought and practices is queer-friendly, and useful in assessing religious leadership education in the LGBTQ community, as this passage would surely confirm to a queer audience:

Practical theological thinking about the church's tasks and ministries can be a prophetic thinking, a thinking that confronts the principle of identity and subjects all literalizing, finitizing, and cosmologizing tendencies to Gospel and to the mystery of God When ministers think prophetically toward the sermon, they become suspicious of claims of identity between God's will and a passage of Scripture, suspicious of being certain about the beliefs of biblical authors or ancient church

¹⁸ Farley, 55–56.

¹⁹ Cornwall, *Indecent Theologians*, 20–22.

teachings, leery about thinking Gospel in cosmological terms, leery of allowing ancient casuistry of human sexuality to have the status of a divine command. And when they think about the church's education, they envision an education that does not merely serve but confronts, qualifies, and corrects popular religion; an education that shapes metaphorical sensibilities; an education ever focused on the transcendent, identity-eluding, mysterious God.²⁰

How Farley Appraises Ministry

Farley calls for a reformation of the role of clergy, one that recovers ministry as theological and practical. He argues that the professionalist, elitist clergy paradigm of theological education that boxed theology into a specialized seminary subject must be set aside by the re-empowerment of the believer as theologian. A clergyperson is indeed a theologian, but in the same way a believer is: by the exercise of a rigorous discipline of mind by which doing theology becomes a *habitus*, an existential posture, a Christian's second nature that shapes responses to "being-in-a-situation."²¹ The work of theology, then, occurs whenever the Christian community faces situations that impinge upon it, as God's people enact their *raison d'être* in ongoing encounters with culture. The people of God engaging with the situations of living in the world are the very *discrimen* of theology itself for Farley. The religious leader, formally ordained or not, has a special role vis-à-vis the church, as a teacher. As Farley puts it, "The church leader is always also a teacher. And the aim of that teaching is the disciplining of the believers' interpretive or thinking capabilities."²²

Throughout *Practicing Gospel*, Farley's concern is for the formation of the religious leader as a theological interpreter of church life and practices, that is, a prophetic witness to

²⁰ Farley, 57.

²¹ Farley, 37 and 15–28.

²² Farley, 13.

society. As a teacher whose ministerial purpose is deeply and richly theological, the clergyperson is neither a “professional Christian” for the congregation, a moralistic nag, nor a therapeutic hand-holder. Farley knew that the crying need of the Protestant mainline is for theological leaders who practice a chastened professionalism and understand their vocation as hermeneutical guides. Their primary mission is to inspire an all-pervasive commitment within the community of faith to live out a “general theology of being-in-a-situation,”²³ one that addresses the demands that situations impose upon Christians through the medium of lived experiences in the world. For Farley, authentic ministerial education forms a theological character that is marinated in Gospel, relentlessly concerned for truth, and fundamentally oriented toward addressing situations of all kinds as they arise in everyday life.

In order to see how Farley appraises ministries, we will briefly set forth his understanding of practical theology as interpreting situations. He defines a situation as “the way various items, powers, and events in the environment gather together to evoke responses from participants.”²⁴ Situations are never static, and believers-as-theologians must develop the aptitude to engage, interrogate, and evaluate them on the fly, always questioning the dominant paradigm, much in the same way that queering works upon normativities of all kinds.²⁵

Farley constructs a rubric of tasks by which the theological formation of religious leaders may be assessed. We will first list them and then apply them to the actual class on ministry in the LGBTQ context in order to evaluate the role the course played in shaping the theological character of ministers-in-training.

²³ Farley, 37.

²⁴ Farley, 38.

²⁵ Cornwall, *Controversies*, 32–34.

- Task One: Identify the situation and what constitutes its special features.²⁶
- Task Two: Study the situation's past, seeking to uncover the disguised suppressions that oppress, stultify, and communicate negative elements to the present situation, as well as the factors that illumine, correct, and inspire it.²⁷
- Task Three: Discern beyond a nearsighted focus on a single, discreet issue or element in the situation, taking into account the multivalent nature of situations and the intersectional ways a situation is constructed.²⁸
- Task Four: Because situations are never passive, but rather demand responses from us, discern the theological factors that reveal the "mythos" of the situation. Farley says that situations pose occasions for idolatry and redemption to individual agents and communities, such that this "demand-response is at the very heart of a theological hermeneutic of situations."²⁹

In addition to Farley's four tasks, we include a fifth step, a queering step that further interrogates the normativities that impinge upon the individual agents and communities that the situation confronts:

- Task Five: Exercise the resources of queer hermeneutics upon the situation to reveal the possibilities of liberation, reparative understanding, and hybridity that disrupt the corrupting influences of heterosexism and transphobia upon it.

A Class in Context(s): The Situation of the LGBTQ Community in the United States, in North Texas, and at Brite Divinity School

In our cultural context, the subject of the course stands squarely in the crosshairs of one of the most hotly debated ethical issues facing organized religion today: the political

²⁶ Farley, 38.

²⁷ Farley, 39.

²⁸ Farley, 39.

²⁹ Farley, 40.

and social relevance of the LGBTQ, or gay, community in American public life. An analysis of the situation, Farley's first task in practical theological formation, requires the description of a complex set of factors impinging upon ministry in the American LGBTQ context, and specifically in North Central Texas.

The General Context

Attitudes toward sexual minorities are changing rapidly. A growing majority of Americans now affirm their tolerance for LGBTQ neighbors, friends, and family members. Great numbers of persons self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, cisgender, queer, and questioning (plus other identities that refuse the gender and sexual binaries of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries³⁰) have publicly declared themselves, making it unlikely that contemporary Americans do not know someone who is a member of this diverse demographic group. The United States Supreme Court decision, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, handed down on June 26, 2015, declared same-sex marriage legal in all fifty states. In the wake of that sweeping change, the horrific massacre of forty-nine people at the Orlando, Florida, Pulse Nightclub on June 12, 2016, catapulted LGBTQ folk into international news once again. Then came the election of Donald J. Trump to the U.S. presidency, and the anxiety of the gay and transgender community skyrocketed with announcements of self-avowed anti-LGBTQ cabinet members and presidential advisers. Issues such as transgender rights, the security of same-sex marriages, and federal protections against discrimination were thrown into question. The future for queer folk in America became unsettlingly opaque, and the

³⁰ Examples include, but are not limited to, intersex, two spirit, radical faery, genderqueer, and asexual. This article employs *gay*, *transgender*, and *straight* as collective terms when appropriate. For a discussion of the terminology of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in the field of religious leadership, see Stephen V. Sprinkle, "Gender, Identity, and Inclusive Leadership," in *Religious Leadership: A Handbook*, vol. 2, ed. Sharon Henderson Callahan (Thousand Oaks, Cal.: SAGE, 2013), 409–416.

specter of bias-driven violence against gender-nonconforming people reared its head once again.³¹

The context of organized religion in the United States continues to be generally glum. According to the Pew Research Center, between 2007 and 2014, the percentage of the U.S. population declaring themselves Christian slid a further 7 percent, from 78.4 percent to 70.6 percent, with increases among unaffiliated and non-Christian respondents.³² Decreases in church affiliation occurred across the board, with the largest losses occurring among Protestant mainline denominations and the Roman Catholic Church. Digging deeper into the relevant numbers, however, more LGB individuals identified as Christian than ever, forty-eight percent, up from forty-two percent in 2013.³³ This statistic is surprising for several reasons. Though considerably fewer LGB people claim to be Christians than the general population, and though three in ten LGB people say they have been personally made to feel

³¹ In their fourth update since Trump's election, the Southern Poverty Law Center documented that LGBT persons suffered the fourth-largest number of confirmed bias-driven incidents of intimidation and/or physical violence in the United States, nearly tied with the number of incidents reported against Muslims. See Southern Poverty Law Center Hate Watch, "Update: 1,094 Bias-Related Incidents in the Month Following the Election," last modified December 16, 2016. www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/12/16/update-1094-bias-related-incidents-month-following-election (accessed December 23, 2016). For a more comprehensive account of incidence of anti-LGBTQ hate crimes in the United States, see Stephen V. Sprinkle, *Unfinished Lives: Reviving the Memories of LGBTQ Hate Crimes Victims* (Eugene, Ore.: Resource Publications, 2011).

³² Michael Lipka, "10 Facts About Religion in America," Pew Research Center. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/27/10-facts-about-religion-in-america/ (accessed December 23, 2016).

³³ Eliel Cruz, "LGBT People of Faith: Why Are They Staying?" *The Advocate* (September 17, 2015). <http://advocate.com/religion/2015/9/17/lgbt-people-faith-why-are-they-staying/> (accessed December 11, 2015). The Pew Center did not include transgender people in this survey.

unwelcome in a church,³⁴ queer folk alone buck the downward slide among American Christians. This evidence points to a robust spiritual and religious segment of the LGBTQ community. Many of these people belong to churches founded by LGBTQ Christians, and to mainline denominations where non-heteronormative voices are becoming increasingly strong.

Of further significance for the LGBTQ community, more than five thousand churches in America have now declared themselves intentionally inclusive and welcoming.³⁵ This remains one of the great, untold stories of religion in the United States. Though the current human rights movement was actually born in churches and para-church organizations as far back as the post-World War II era,³⁶ the hostility between Christian churches and queer folk has all but become a cliché in LGBTQ life. This increasingly outworn presupposition must be reevaluated according to the evidence at hand, and supplanted by the story of a much more complex and nuanced relationship between non-heteronormative people and organized religion. While the harm perpetrated against the LGBTQ community in the name of God is undeniable, the current growing number of welcoming churches and faith-based organizations must be taken into account if we are to have a more accurate sense of how faith works in the lives of American gender-nonconforming people. At one time, places of worship where LGBTQ people could feel safe and welcomed were rare. Now the number of these congregations is growing significantly.

³⁴ Pew Research Center, "Survey of LGBT Americans," June 13, 2013. www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/chapter-6-religion/ (accessed December 11, 2016).

³⁵ Believe Out Loud, "Christianity and LGBT Equality." www.believeoutloud.com/background/christianity-and-lgbt-equality/ (accessed December 23, 2016).

³⁶ Jim Downs, *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 41–64.

Texas Contexts

North Central Texas, the home of Brite Divinity School, continues to be a crossroads of conflict and change for the LGBTQ community. The Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex is booming with new residents. Texas leads the United States in population growth, and the thirteen-county Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington metropolitan area is the fastest growing in the state, doubling in the last thirty years to 6.8 million, to become the seventh largest in the country. Experts say that by 2020, the metroplex will grow by between one and two million new residents, especially in the northern suburbs and the mid-cities. It is predicted that 3.2 million Latino/a’s will live there, nearly surpassing the 3.6 million resident whites, and the Asian population is expected to increase dramatically.³⁷

With an estimated LGBTQ population of 629,428, Texas has the greatest concentration of queer folk between the eastern seaboard and the west coast, a vast area encompassing the Rockies and prairie lands, the Southwest, and the Gulf Coast South. The metroplex has been a haven for LGBTQ people for generations. The 2016 statistics of the Movement Advancement Project,³⁸ an independent think tank utilizing the survey work of the Williams Institute and the Gallup organization, show that virtually a third of queer Texans live in the Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington metropolitan area, 199,200 people, though transgender population statistics are notably less accurate than those of LGB residents. Of these, approximately forty-six percent are white, thirty-eight percent are Latino/a, and

³⁷ “Dallas Population 2016.” <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/dallas-population/> (accessed December 29, 2016).

³⁸ “Texas’ Equality Profile,” Movement Advancement Project. http://lgbtmap.org/equality_maps/profile_state/TX (accessed December 29, 2016). The population statistics for the LGBTQ community in the metroplex are projected estimates done by our study for this article, since separate 2016 Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington numbers were not available from MAP. The total LGB estimate for the metroplex done by Gallup, Pew, and the Williams Institute for 2006 was increased by the percentage of growth approximated in December 2016 by MAP, which takes the most accurate data available.

fifteen percent are African American. Some fourteen thousand same-sex couples live in the area, and a fifth or more of these couples are rearing children under the age of eighteen.³⁹ In 2010, Dallas County had the second-most same-sex couples in the state, and Tarrant County listed the twelfth most. The actual numbers of same-sex couples might be considerably higher. Though Dallas and Fort Worth have comprehensive antidiscrimination statutes protecting LGBT people in matters of employment, public accommodation, and housing, and both cities earned the top score awarded by the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equality Index in October 2016,⁴⁰ only Plano in the northern suburbs has such protections, and none of the mid-cities offer any statutory security at all, leaving tens of thousands of LGBT people vulnerable.

The Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington area boasts scores of LGBTQ social groups, athletic clubs, arts and recreational organizations, media outlets, and many political action groups. The North Texas GLBT Chamber of Commerce, based in Dallas, lists 287 businesses and commercial organizations. In 2004, Dallas County voted in a lesbian Latina, Lupe Valdez, as sheriff, an office she still occupies after four elections. Fairness Fort Worth, founded in the wake of the infamous 2009 police raid on the largest gay bar in the city, is an advocacy organization of businesses and individuals intent on moving the equality agenda of Fort Worth and Tarrant County forward.

Truly, however, the jewel in the crown of the LGBTQ community is Resource Center, which opened its new,

³⁹ Extrapolated from the “Williams Institute Texas Fact Sheet.” <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Texas-fact-sheet.pdf> (accessed December 29, 2016). See especially “Counties with 50+ same-sex couples per 1000 households.” http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Census2010Snapshot_Texas_v2.pdf (accessed December 29, 2016).

⁴⁰ “MEI 2016: See Your City’s Score,” Human Rights Campaign. <http://www.hrc.org/resources/mei-2016-see-your-city-score> (accessed December 29, 2016).

twenty thousand–square foot Dallas headquarters in 2016 at a cost of \$8.7 million. Resource Center supports, empowers, educates, and advocates for queer youth, LGBTQ seniors, people living with HIV/AIDS (especially young black men, both gay and straight, who are suffering an explosive spike in new infections), and the poor.

The human rights climate in Texas is not a good one for LGBTQ people. On a wide range of issues concerning sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender identity, the Movement Advancement Project rates the Lone Star State woefully deficient. On sexual orientation policy, the rating is “LOW,” and on gender identity policy, the rating is rock bottom: “NEGATIVE.”⁴¹ Like their peers in other southern states, LGBTQ residents of North Central Texas are more likely than their straight peers to earn less than \$24,000 per year; to report that they cannot afford enough food, health care, or prescription medicines; and to record more new HIV and sexually transmitted disease (STD) infections per capita than anywhere else in the United States. Dallas and Fort Worth are good places for LGBTQ people to live, but outside their municipal limits, it is another story. Looming over this whole scene is an overtly hostile state government. The mood in the LGBTQ community is guarded, wary, and even fearful going into the Trump era.

The spiritual and religious landscape confronting the LGBTQ population of North Texas is also a difficult one. Southern cities and metropolitan areas might call themselves “the buckle on the Bible belt,” but the Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington metro area claims that title with evangelical fervor. Around two thousand churches are located in the metroplex. Of these, eighty-four intentionally call themselves welcoming or LGBTQ friendly.⁴² There is

⁴¹ “Texas’ Equality Profile,” last updated December 16, 2016. Capitalizations are in the original text.

⁴² See “Find a Church,” gaychurch.org. www.gaychurch.org/find_a_church/list-churches-by-state/?loc=TX/ (accessed December 30, 2016). Also see “Find a Welcoming Congregation.” National LGBTQ Task Force Institute for Welcoming Resources.

great variety among these churches. The world's largest LGBTQ congregation is located in Dallas, the Cathedral of Hope, along with a growing number of mainline Protestant churches that also welcome queer folk, most of them established congregations, and some vigorously growing new starts. Groups as different as the Liberal Catholic Church, Dignity, and the Unitarian Universalist Association have open and affirming congregations thriving in the cities and the suburbs. There are also charismatic African American LGBTQ-predominant and -friendly congregations in the metroplex. Even a few Baptist churches have become officially welcoming.

Still, the opponents of the religious inclusion of LGBTQ people are vocal and well-funded, and they pander shamelessly to the mainstream media in North Texas. When Wilshire Baptist Church of Dallas voted by a sixty-one percent majority to fully embrace queer folk, the Baptist General Convention of Texas immediately booted them from the organization. Tiny Stedfast Baptist Church of Sansom Park, a western suburb of Fort Worth, made international news by mocking the dead at the Pulse Nightclub massacre, declaring that God should have finished the job the shooter began. The large African American Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship teaches against the acceptance of LGBTQ persons, claiming homosexuality undermines the black family. The pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, Rev. Robert Jeffress, raises money and fervent support by regularly deriding LGBTQ people in the media and from the pulpit, and First Baptist Church of Arlington houses a notorious reparative or conversion therapy outreach, which teaches that homosexuality is a sickness, a perversion, and a sin. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the third-largest seminary in the United States, used its considerable power to oust the Tarrant Baptist Association from its Fort Worth campus

www.welcomingresources.org/texas.htm (accessed December 29, 2016).

Metroplex welcoming and affirming church total is an amalgam of these two Web site lists and the author's personal experience in the area.

because a member congregation was suspected of “tolerating homosexuality.”⁴³ The seminary’s code of ethical conduct includes the warning that disciplinary action will be taken for “engaging in a lifestyle contrary to Biblical standards including, but not limited to, heterosexual misconduct, homosexual or bisexual behavior, transgenderism or any other form of sexual misconduct,” conduct “unbecoming of a Southern Baptist minister.”⁴⁴

The Brite Divinity School Context

Brite, founded in Fort Worth on the campus of Texas Christian University by the Disciples of Christ in 1915, is a leading theological seminary in the Southwestern United States. In its policies and its outlook, Brite embraces a range of diversity in matters of race/ethnicity, theology, church polity, and religion. Its settled teaching faculty includes Christians and Jews. The majority of students hail from mainline Protestant backgrounds (particularly Disciples of Christ and United Methodists) and from a variety of Baptist backgrounds. Since the late 1980s, the school has moved toward full acceptance of students, faculty, and staff from the LGBTQ community. The first publicly self-identified gay faculty member was called to the school in 1994. Two faculty members out of twenty-two, one of them the academic dean, are LGBTQ. Brite is listed among Seminaries That Change the World and Sexually Healthy and Responsible Seminaries. Of note for the class in question, Brite’s nondiscrimination policy includes sexual orientation and gender identity in clear and unambiguous language.⁴⁵ Thanks to funding by the E. Rhodes and Leona

⁴³ Elena Garcia, “Baptist Association Ousts Association for Tolerating Homosexuality,” *Christian Post* (January 15, 2011).

www.christianpost.com/news/baptist-seminary-ousts-association-for-tolerating-homosexuality-48505/ (accessed December 30, 2016).

⁴⁴ Catalog of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<http://catalog.swbts.edu/student-life/ethical-conduct/> (accessed December 30, 2016).

⁴⁵ Brite Divinity School Web site, “Non-Discrimination Policy.”

www.brite.edu/non-discrimination-policy/ (accessed December 30, 2016).

B. Carpenter Foundation, Brite's Carpenter Initiative on Gender, Sexuality, and Justice:

promotes conversations about healthy sexuality, enhances ministries with diverse communities that include bisexual, transgender, lesbian, and gay persons, and provides sanctuary and encouragement for ongoing dialogue and justice-oriented practice. The three areas include: 1) events for Brite's community of students, staff, and faculty; 2) public opportunities for constituencies beyond Brite as well as for the Brite community; and 3) courses for our students in multiple degree programs.⁴⁶

Ministry in the LGBTQ Community has been a popular course at Brite for more than seventeen years, but this year was different, probably because of the timing of major news stories. Class registration soared, making it an unusually large upper-level elective.⁴⁷ Several students, gay and straight, confirmed that reaction to current events was an important reason that motivated them to take the course.

The attractiveness of the class for religious leadership students, however, was far more nuanced. Reactivity alone could not account for the sincerity and determination of the students to become engaged with the LGBTQ community. Deeper questions were at work. Urgent questions of personhood, faith community, social justice, vocation, and hope stimulated students to enroll and wrestle with what it takes to do credible ministry in marginalized communities

⁴⁶ Brite Divinity School Web site, "Carpenter Initiative on Gender, Sexuality, and Justice." www.brite.edu/?s=carpenter+initiative (accessed December 31, 2016). The Carpenter Initiative was a strong ally for the class, funding the Fort Worth premier of the film "From This Day Forward: The Story of a Different Sort of Family in Small Town America," on October 20, 2016. The documentary, directed by Sharon Shattuck, is the story of how a transgender father transitions to womanhood, and the interactions of the family as she does. The film was opened to the entire seminary community.

⁴⁷ Twenty-six master's level and graduate certificate students were admitted to the class by the end of the registration period. Brite's customary ratio of students to professors is eleven to one.

like this bewilderingly diverse one. The complexity of human beings, the reluctance of many Christians to expose themselves to lessons culturally vilified people have to teach them, and the difficulties of trying to cross chasms of difference presented challenges our ministers-in-training refused to ignore. Students said their concerns for vulnerable people and their vocations as religious leaders compelled them to enroll. Brite's Dean Joretta L. Marshall expressed to the *Dallas Voice* the vision that a course like this contributes to students in ministerial training. Instead of being about sex, she said, "It's about giving a broader scope. How do we live together in the world? How do I live and minister with people I disagree with?"⁴⁸

Class Composition and Design

Seminarians who registered for the class came from LGBTQ as well as heterosexual student populations: twenty-seven percent of the students identified as straight. Thirty-eight percent were female, including cisgender and transgender persons. Nineteen percent were racial/ethnic minority students, both African American and Latino. Nine denominations were represented, with the largest three contingents coming from United Methodism, Disciples of Christ, and Baptists (both Cooperative and Missionary). All four major segments of the LGBTQ community were represented in the class, with four percent of the roster identifying as transgender.

Vocational choices included pastoral ministry (thirty-one percent), chaplaincy and pastoral care (twenty-seven percent), theological higher education (fifteen percent), youth ministry (twelve percent), and nonprofit leadership (four percent). Eighty-eight percent were either previously ordained or currently seeking ordination.

The design of the class directly identified and analyzed the present human rights situation in its several contexts, and laid out the story of the struggle for LGBTQ equality

⁴⁸ Taffet, 18.

since Stonewall. Seven textbooks were required, chosen with these aims in mind.⁴⁹

The readings were engaged by a series of short theological reflection papers requiring students to synthesize the assignments with their own lived experience of ministry in and among marginalized communities, and by regular on-class deep listening exercises in which dyads of students discussed the insights they had gleaned in response to a set of guiding questions given by the instructor.

Given the role heteronormative (mis)interpretations of biblical texts play in a plethora of issues facing the LGBTQ community, issues of biblical citation are bound to confront anyone seeking to serve in this minority. Hence, the class began with two full sessions on how students can empower themselves to intelligently interpret Scripture passages by dissenting from normative readings. The class was divided into six study groups and assigned a passage from a variety of genres: Genesis 19:1–29, the Sodom and Gomorrah story; 2 Samuel 21:1–14, the Jonathan-David-Rizpah stories; Matthew 6:5–15 and Luke 11:1–13, the Lord’s Prayer parallels; Acts 8:26–40, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch; and Ephesians 5:21–33, the wifely submission pericope in the Holiness Code. This semester-long exercise was modeled and adapted from the work of Professor Erica L. Martin’s presentation to the Academy of Religious Leadership and her subsequent article in the *Journal of Religious Leadership*, “Holy Dissent: Teaching Religious Leaders to Preach AGAINST the Text.”⁵⁰

This Empowerment Text Exercise was crafted to immerse students in the struggles over Scripture interpretation LGBTQ people routinely face in Texas faith communities, and to model what accessible exegesis for intelligent laypeople could look like, beginning with their own experience. Students learned to pay attention to variant readings, to contest established meanings, and to prepare

⁴⁹ A list of these books will be provided to interested parties upon request.

⁵⁰ Erica L. Martin, “Holy Dissent: Teaching Religious Leaders to Preach AGAINST the Text,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 15(2): 69–80.

themselves to queer biblical texts, as Professor Martin had masterfully done with her students. This method worked wonders. As one student said, “The processes of critical analysis along with resulting conclusions empowered us to interpret the readings more fully and apply Scripture with deeper understandings. I came to see the potential and power of the fluid and living nature of Scripture.”⁵¹ Students gave themselves permission to argue with Scripture texts, and to discover queer dimensions in the totality of the Bible, not just the so-called clobber passages.⁵²

Lastly, the contextual situation was presented by a variety of visiting speakers who gave witness to the embodied meaning of being LGBTQ and allies. Each speaker was chosen to enrich the class with diverse life stories and religious leadership expertise.

Farley’s second task focuses on the examination of past influences upon present situations as a necessary prerequisite to interpreting them justly. Though no history text was required, the instructor delivered presentations on queering early church tradition, colonialism, and the contributions of feminism, black theology, and Latin American liberation theology. Later class presentations dealt with the history of the human rights climate in Dallas–Fort Worth and environs.

The historical work in the class addressed the curiosity of students who had little or no acquaintance with the culture and story of the LGBTQ community, demonstrating that enculturation in queer histories gave new depth and meaning to how situations are interpreted in religious leadership contexts. A youth ministry student said, “Why was Ministry in the LGBTQ Community such an integral part of the development of my preaching and

⁵¹ Penny Armstrong, e-mail comment to the author, December 31, 2016. Used by permission.

⁵² See *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, eds. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).

leadership skills? The answer is simple. . . . The majority of my life I thought I was an anomaly. Growing up in rural West Virginia, I thought I was the only Gay Christian. After taking this class, I know now I am not alone.”⁵³ As Farley discerned, practical theology depends upon personally understanding what set in motion the influences that emerge in current faith and secular contexts.

Farley’s third task calls any formation for religious leadership to take into account the multifaceted nature of situations in a way that is disciplined, self-critical, and aware of intersectional theory. His insights could have been tailor made for this class. As he writes:

God does not redemptively transform human beings the way the fairy godmother turns a pumpkin into a carriage. The symbolism and story of redemption reach the depths of individuals as they interpret and reinterpret their world. The narrative engages both human persons and their communities. The interpreted Gospel exposes layers of language, self-understanding, and commitment that harbor bigotry, sexism and xenophobia. To submit such things to Gospel, to allow Gospel to reveal alternative ways of being and speaking, is an activity of ongoing interpretation.⁵⁴

Since narratives reveal the “situations [that] occur within situations”⁵⁵ out of which ministerial challenges are construed, the class was given two major assignments. These assignments were designed in order to prompt students to deal with modes of being and self-understanding that are not their own. First, they were to write a narrative comparison/contrast paper taking into account two LGBTQ points of view they did not natively understand. To that end, students could select from a set of suggested texts in the syllabus, or they could substitute an

⁵³ Todd McGraw, e-mail comment to the author, January 5, 2017. Used by permission.

⁵⁴ Farley, 6.

⁵⁵ Farley, 39.

interview with a member of the LGBTQ community whose life experience did not mirror their own. The suggested texts were from a variety of gender fluid, nonbinary, and sexually nonconforming authors.

Second, students were required to do a field visit to an LGBTQ-predominant faith community, or a setting that carries out a significant ministry with the LGBTQ community. They were then to write a report that was basically descriptive in nature, paying attention to personal interactions with congregants, the leadership styles of religious leaders, liturgy and liturgical arrangements, music, art, sermons, and theology.

Students were given chances to share their experiences and their newly minted insights from these encounters. A transgender member of the class said that her grounding as a leader was aided by this exercise: “Being exposed to these voices gave me what Laverne Cox likes to call ‘possibility models’ as well as new language and frameworks to use as a basis to describe my journey as a leader.”⁵⁶ For several of them, this was a first experience in an LGBTQ racial/ethnic minority setting, and it raised important issues of postcolonialism, racism, classism, and misogyny, as well as gender and sexual nonconformity.

Farley’s fourth task, his theological exploration, and a queer critique of his practical theology became dancing partners throughout the class. Farley’s insistence upon a corruption-redemption motif, and the critical deconstructions and reconstructions of queer theology, complement each other. Queer theologians often emphasize embodiment, concretization, and the doctrine of creation, especially their preference for a queered interpretation of *hesed*, the *imago Dei*, and other biblically generated issues. Holding these emphases in tension with Farley’s commitment to Gospel and redemptive reparation as expressions of Divine love and justice offered students a powerful and useful theological trajectory for moving

⁵⁶ Avery Belyeu, e-mail comment to the author, January 3, 2017. Used by permission.

beyond heterosexism and transphobia in ministry. Like good dance partners, Farley's hermeneutic of situations, and the queer theologians' challenge to normative interpretations and church practices, stepped onto the ballroom floor and queerly switched leads as partners in a tango.⁵⁷ Students learned new theological rhythms from them both, and found they could improvise on the theological dance floor themselves by the conclusion of the course.⁵⁸

Their capacity to interpret and improvise was particularly in evidence as students presented their Empowerment Text Studies to the class during the final session of the semester. Their interpretations of the assigned Scripture passages showed definite improvement at exegeting communities as well as texts, a Texas Two-Step necessary in the ecclesial climate they and LGBTQ people must cope with in order to minister meaningfully and credibly in the Lone Star State. Students in Ministry in the LGBTQ Community might not have quite become dancing instructors by the end of the course, but they certainly grasped a new theological choreography and were on their way.

Thanks to interaction with visitors, texts, assignments, videography, and field settings, students in this course emerged from it as changed people, at least to some degree. They found old ways of huddling in their separate silos of race, gender, and orientation insufficient for good ministry and no longer tenable as learners and teachers among the

⁵⁷ For an example of dancing the tango as a metaphor for doing theology, see *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan (London: SCM, 2010).

⁵⁸ Two of the outgrowths of the course have been the organization by students of the first interfaith service of worship, "Being Pride," for Tarrant County Gay Pride Week, held at Texas Christian University's Robert Kerr Chapel in October 2016; and the establishment of an official Brite LGBTQIA student organization, "Brite SAGA" (Sexuality and Gender Alliance). See Tamara Hyatte, "Brite Divinity School to Participate in Tarrant County Gay Pride Week," *TCU 360 Magazine* (September 29, 2016). www.tcu360.com/2016/09/brite-divinity-school-to-participate-in-tarrant-county-gay-pride-week/ (accessed February 9, 2017).

people of God. Significant encounters with God's queer folk, both faithful and faith-free, changed their interpretation of effective ministry. They also found themselves theologically formed in deepened and transformative ways. As one student put it:

This class was pastorally formative because it gave me an opportunity to engage my own community as an LGBT person in a way that was deeper than simply defending our own place at the table. Instead, I got to develop in myself how to do the pastoral work that my community needs. This type of pastoral care is not something best learned through books and worksheets, but through engaging real life people and stories.⁵⁹

Another student said, "I learned in the class that leadership is truly a collaborative effort. It is not one person telling all those below what to do and think. Leadership is about respectfully listening to diverse ideas and opinions . . . All [speakers to the class] emphasized collaboration."⁶⁰

Conclusions

What Ministry in the LGBTQ Community Teaches About Religious Leadership

"Let the ministry teach," is a familiar adage among theological field educators.⁶¹ This course revealed how seminarians can learn leadership theologically and practically from the LGBTQ community. When the foci for ministry are (1) transformational change of the process that has made religious leadership exclusive and narrow for centuries (including but not limited to the exclusion of LGBTQ persons from church leadership), (2) the empowerment of leaders to exercise their gifts and graces

⁵⁹ David Lee, e-mail message to the author, December 17, 2016. Used by permission.

⁶⁰ John Rock, e-mail message to the author, January 4, 2017. Used by permission.

⁶¹ Robert L. Kinast, *Let the Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection (From the Interfaith Trauma Institute)*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996).

for theological leadership, LGBTQ and straight alike, and (3) the necessity of collaborative alliances not only between straight and queer folk, but also among each segment of the LGBTQ community, then the ministry does teach leadership, powerfully. The combination of lived experience among the members of the LGBTQ community in North Central Texas, and the practical theological interrogations of Edward Farley and a number of able queer theologians and ministerial practitioners, took the adage beyond what is considered normal, as any good queer hermeneutic will do given half the chance.

Religious leadership must change to become reflective of all people, ready and willing to access the gifts of theologically formed queer folk. The principle of full inclusion of representatives of all the baptized, LGBTQ included, is still largely an imaginary exercise for most ecclesial bodies in America, and certainly in Texas. Full inclusion, however, would create a tectonic shift in religious leadership, as it is already doing in much of corporate America. Studies of the impact LGBTQ leaders are having on business are already on the shelves and are being widely read in boardrooms across the country.⁶² Corporations are actively recruiting LGBTQ leaders. Business is good. Church membership and attendance are in decline all across America. Do the math.

A sort of mock change refuses the leadership skills and charisms of all the baptized. That is “Titanic change,” driven by an exclusivism deplored as impractical and anti-theological by Edward Farley. I can hear the deck chairs being moved around even as we speak. Real, lasting change, however, is tectonic change, of the sort when continental plates shift, and something truly new is birthed, or queered into existence, if you will. Full inclusion of the gifts and

⁶² See, for example, Daniel M. Cable, *Change to Strange: Create a Great Organization by Building a Strange Workforce* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Wharton School Publishing, 2007), and Kirk Snyder, *The G Quotient: Why Gay Executives Are Excelling as Leaders...and What Every Manager Needs to Know* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

graces of all God's children in the church's leadership falls into this category.

Empowerment models create good religious leadership, as this course demonstrated. Inverted pyramids of leadership are excretions of hierarchy and patriarchy, styles of religious leadership that are based on poor hermeneutical understandings of past, present, and future situations. A pastoral ministry student in the class observed that the class design modeled empowerment "without any of us realizing it. . . . All could offer their opinions and their struggles with the readings and the issues in class with complete candor."

He went on to say, "I believe this ultimately had an impact on how we responded to the final project: an invitation to take an assigned Bible passage and to 'queer' the reading. . . . All of us fearlessly dug into the passages and the resulting exegesis from many of my colleagues was nothing short of prophetic and inspiring." How to model empowerment, he concluded, "is a lesson that I will value not only for my ministry to the LGBTQIA+ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual] community, but for my overall ministry in general."⁶³

Collaboration builds alliances. One of the most enduring talents of LGBTQ people is the ability to network for political power to change the status quo. Across experiences of difference, however, such communal abilities break down. This truth not only applies to the differences between queer folk and straight religious people. All of the pathologies common to society at large exist across the LGBTQ spectrum, as well: racism, misogyny and misanthropy, ableism, ageism, and xenophobia, to name a few. Internalized vestiges of homophobia also plague the LGBTQ community. This class taught that effective religious leaders, not only queer and straight, but across all the differences exhibited by this LGBTQ community-of-communities, must learn how to become good allies for each other. No one sits at the

⁶³ Matthew Pargeter-Villareal, e-mail comment to the author, January 3, 2017. Used by permission.

privileged center anymore. Beyond détente, for deeply theological and practical reasons, religious leaders must serve as ambassadors⁶⁴ for people different from them.

A straight African American Disciples of Christ leader became an ally of LGBTQ folk during the semester, even though he said it might prove difficult back in his context:

It is not enough to just say that I believe one has the same rights if I am not willing to preach it to the congregants of my church. To be an effective leader one must be willing to speak to those things that will cause others to question your Christianity. I realized [in the class] that I must speak the truth to power or I will be just as guilty as those who dehumanize the LGBTQ community. . . . No matter how uncomfortable it may be we must come together as humans and seek justice for all. That is how the class changed my outlook as a leader of the Christian faith.⁶⁵

A well-seasoned businessman echoed his classmate's feelings about collaborative alliances across lines of difference for religious leaders:

The best qualities of leadership are the ability to listen, to show understanding, and to help develop solutions that fix the process and not just the immediate problem. This class helped me remember these important traits and to realize that just because I identify with one of the letters in the alphabet soup of queer doesn't mean I know everything about everyone else in the pot. It is critical to listen and ask questions to fully understand another person's story and history, and how that has formed the current situation. . . . My hope is to take this learning experience and use it

⁶⁴ Todd L. Pittinsky, *Us + Them: Tapping the Positive Power of Difference* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012); Stephen V. Sprinkle, *Ordination: Celebrating the Gift of Ministry* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 43–50; and Countryman and Ritley, *The Gift of Otherness*, 140–49.

⁶⁵ Anthony Chatman, e-mail comment to the author, January 4, 2017. Used by permission.

whether I am involved in pastoral care settings in a faith community or chaplaincy role.⁶⁶

The richness of this course experience is still unfolding. Discovering how to do ministry emerged in the consciousness of each student in the course in different ways, but everyone quickly gathered that encountering challenging situations like these requires a common core of reinterpreted self-understanding: a hermeneutic continually learning how to resist powerful negative forces in order to transform the status quo, a ministerial ethos that empowers rather than robs the people of their theological vocation, an imperative to network with likely and unlikely allies, and a humbly tenacious capacity to take a supple theological stand against the prevailing tides of popular religious politics and opinion. What ministry in the LGBTQ community has to teach is a style of theological reflection that is resilient, visionary, concrete in its relational engagements with God and the people, eager for new ministerial forms, and, in the end, formed by Gospel. That is the queerly Texan way.

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⁶⁶ Jeffrey Spangler, e-mail comment to the author, January 4, 2017. Used by permission.