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STAINED-GLASS QUEER FOLK

"QUEER PERSISTENCE AND FAITH IN RURAL CHURCHES"

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ABSTRACT

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Stained-Glass Queer Folk delves into the persistence of queer Christians of faith from a rural and small-town context. This thesis challenges dominant narratives that assume that queer folk either abandon religion or escape to urban centers. Drawing heavily from qualitative data obtained from surveying and interviewing 12 queer Christians with lived experience within rural contexts, this study reveals how faith is sustained, reimagined, and reinterpreted despite exclusion, spiritual trauma, and in many cases limited access to affirming communities. Integrating queer and liberation theology as well as sociological analysis of rural religious and social contexts, this project emphasizes lived experience as a source of theological wisdom. The respondents speak to enduring relationships with God, separating divine constancy with failure of the religious institution, and engaging in reinterpretations through a queer lens that is rooted in love, justice, grace, and Jesus' message.

The findings shine a light on how rural dynamics, especially the heightened visibility, social policing, and the centralized role of the church as a community institution, increase both the risks of exclusion but also speak to the transformative power of affirmation. Even with varying relationships to organized religion, all respondents shared a sustained faith commitment and a desire to ethically engage scripture, which is shaped by resilience and a deep hope for transformation among the church. Stained-Glass

Queer Folks argues that queer Christians in rural contexts are not to be sidelined in Christianity's future but offer vital insights, which challenge exclusionary and harmful interpretations of faith and aim to reimagine the Christian community as a space of belonging, inclusion, grace, and accountability.

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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

In the small town where I live there sits a little white church, its bell tower rising high into the sky. The exterior of the church is plain except for the bright red door and the large stained-glass windows adorning both sides of the building. This is the picture I get in my mind when I think of a rural church. A picture that many don't get though, is of a queer person within this small church, illuminated by the sun through those same stained-glass windows. "Stained-Glass Queer Folks" aims to shed light, much like the church windows, on the queer experience in rural towns and to give insight into the resilience, power, and value queer folks can bring into the Church.

Queer folks are often imagined as being in bustling big cities or metropolises, and if they are in a small town, the prevailing line of thought is that they would leave that small town as soon as they could; however:

> "As of 2018, approximately 4.5% of the adult population identifies as LGBT. 21 National surveys of rural areas show that between 3% and 5% of the rural adult population identifies as LGBT. Other research suggests roughly 10% of youth identify as LGBT, with rural youth equally as likely as urban youth to identify as LGBT. Taken together, this suggests that between 2.9 million and 3.8 million LGBT people live in rural areas around the country."[1]

Through a review of personal narratives (including my own as a non-binary, queer person of faith from a small town) discovered via surveys and in-person interviews, we are able to see how rural queer folks continue to stay within their faith traditions, add

[1] Movement Advancement Project, *Where We Call Home: LGBT People in Rural America* (April 2019), https://www.lgbtmap.org/file/lgbt-rural-report.pdf

to the community, and broaden the view of God's immense diversity, creativity, belonging, and love. Despite historical and ongoing exclusion, many LGBTQ+ Christians in rural areas remain within the Church because of deeply personal spiritual experiences, a sense of calling or identity rooted in faith, the use of queer theological reinterpretations, and the hope for transformation within their religious communities. Their presence challenges traditional boundaries with the goal of fostering a more inclusive ecclesial life and reimagining Christian community as a site of belonging rather than exclusion.

Context and Rationale: Rural Life Dynamics and Faith Formation

Queer identity and Christian belonging within rural contexts are unique due to the traditional nature of small towns, social intimacy within the community, and the tangled web of religion, culture, and social belonging. With in-person conversations and surveys, the study focuses on rural queer Christians who remain in Church life despite pushback, exclusionary environments, and hatred.

In a society that has become increasingly polarized into an us vs them dynamic, we see a progressive turn towards inclusion, honoring identity, and building a sustaining faith in the queer Christian community, even in the more traditional rural communities known for their conservative views on what is right, normal, and moral.

Some defining characteristics of rural towns are the limited anonymity afforded to individuals within the community, the close-knit relationships forged in this small web of folks, and the immense intertwining of religion, culture, and social belonging within the small community itself. "Community is perhaps the most central aspect of rural American life. In 2018, a nationally representative survey asked 1,300 rural Americans—5% of whom identified as LGBT—what they thought was the biggest strength of their

local community. The most frequent answer was the closeness of the community, followed by "being around good people.""[2] The Church in many small towns and rural locations is seen and used as the central hub of the community. This is where one's personal, social, and moral formation occurs, near one's neighbors.

Due to the unique nature of rural locations, queer individuals must learn to navigate visibility, risk, and faith development in ways that are quite different from their cisgender, heteronormative peers. This includes masking or performing, thus pretending to be something they are not, to hide their true self out of fear they will be "outed" to the small community in which they live. Not only does the queer individual fear for themselves, but also there often is a layer of fear for their family as the small-town ties can be broken or shut down if someone or a family breaks tradition or becomes "immoral." Currently, rural queer folk can engage with social media and connect with other queer folks outside of their small towns. This can help those navigating faith, religion, and sexuality to not feel alone, as well as give them an outlet to express thoughts/feelings or voice questions they could not or would not be able to do in their small-town setting.

Statement of Purpose and Significance

This thesis examines how LGBTQ+ Christians in rural communities negotiate faith and identity, sustain spiritual life amid exclusion, and contribute to the theological and communal evolution of Christianity. Its outcomes can help to inform new practices and views within the Church at large and allow for more radical inclusion of folks within

[2] Movement Advancement Project, *Where We Call Home*.

our faith communities. The spiritual practices, interpretations, and resilience embodied by rural queer folk of faith can help to shine a light on the depth of creativity within creation and God's sincere desire that we see God in all people, queer folk included.

Methodological Overview

I have used a qualitative, interpretive framework drawing on theological reflection, narrative analysis, personal survey data, and existing ethnographic research on rural religiosity show how queer folks in rural areas are affected by their communities and how they have the potential to greatly impact their community. Integrating the use of theological sources (queer, liberation, contextual theologies) with sociological literature on rural identity and sustainability allows a foundation to build on as I explore the data and stories shared by respondents; data obtained through a survey provided both in person and online to 12 folks within the LGBTQ+ community who had grown up in or are currently within rural areas/spaces. As a queer, non-binary person of faith, I also add experiences from having grown up in a small town, moved away and have now been living with my wife and two children in a different small town. This personal connection allows my story and lived experience to help inform this thesis.

CHAPTER 2.

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

A foundational understanding of Christianity and the formation of sexual ethics, along with the insights of rural religious culture, the role of biblical interpretation, and the impact of the emergence of queer theology, collectively inform how we evaluate the current climate that queer Christians navigate in a rural community.

Christianity and the Formation of Sexual Ethics

The theological roots of exclusionary doctrines come in many cases from Paul's letters within the Bible, and Church leaders such as Augustine[1], who tied sexual desire to original sin. During the Reformation, sexuality in marriage became acceptable and part of life; however, this was strictly in a heterosexual sense. With Church influence, sodomy was outlawed, and moral codes were enforced in Europe. In the 19th and 20th centuries, we find that the Victorian morality of the Reformation reinforced purity, modesty, and strict conformity to gender norms.[2] This is when we see the pervasive suggestion and passing of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, an ideal of the traditional family (father, mother, children), and a strict and defined set of gender roles and expression. These roots have resulted in the current state of Christian sexual ethics; the regulation of gender/sexuality,

[1] Augustine, De nuptiis et concupiscentia 1.15.17, in NPNF1 5:271.
Note: For patristic works, it is best to use the standard book and chapter numbers (e.g., 1.15.17) rather than page numbers, as these are consistent across translations.
[2] Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth, "Martin Luther's Views on the Body, Desire, and Sexuality," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, published October 26, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.354

the marginalization and criminalization of queer folks, and the creation of purported moral communities.

Rural Religious Culture

Rural religiosity has many facets, but three major areas we will explore are moral conservatism, scriptural literalism, and social cohesion. Many rural towns are known for their conservative morals and traditions that are tied directly to the Church and its overall influence as a main hub in the lives of those who reside in small towns. In many instances, we find that small towns favor more conservative political candidates and policies.

When it comes to scripture, many small-town, rural churches subscribe to the concept of scriptural literalism. This means they believe that the Bible is to be taken literally in all instances. For example, they may believe in a literal six-day creation when discussing the creation narratives in Genesis. This view leaves little room for questions or interpretation, giving folks a black and white view of the world, their relationships, and society at large. With the church being the major community hub, with the essential lifeblood of community flowing through it, we find that one's ability to connect and build relationships is highly dependent on how well they fit into the desired image and beliefs that are espoused by the rural church.

In many small towns, families have forged roots and many generations still reside, worship, and work in the area. With this occurring, the Church's ecclesial structure remains largely unchanged due to the desire to stick with tradition and not to rock the boat fearing exclusion as retribution for questioning the status quo. We find an ‘us vs them’ mentality in many of those church structures, pitting the moral, church folk against

the ungodly, immoral people of the world. Katherine J. Cramer calls the aesthetic conditions in rural location, "rural consciousness," a perspective that tends to value the local in most things and often harbors a suspicion of social and political powers beyond the local. "In such an aesthetic, priority is generally given to practicing solidarity with those geographically close or close in family or social relationship."[3] This rural consciousness sets the foundation for the exclusion and hatred of queer folks as queerness challenges the traditions and norms of rural society.

The Role of Biblical Interpretation

Biblical interpretation plays a significant role in how queer folks in rural areas are viewed and engaged. As indicated above, scriptural literalism involves seeing the ways of the Bible and its message in narrowly defined terms, often disregarding context or linguistic and cultural dimensions. While this gives the illusion of certainty, and honestly who doesn't want that, it enforces the 'us vs them' mentality that many small-town churches have when it comes to the queer community. A few key interpretative moments that have shaped exclusionary theology include the 1946 translation debate on the Greek words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*. The cultural and theological use of "clobber passages" has also given a firm foundation for exclusionary theology to thrive in small towns where scripture is taken as the highest form of authority.

The 1946 translation and the pervasive usage of clobber passages persist in rural preaching and pedagogy due to their reliance on a literal view of scripture as well as the desire to determine, label, and acknowledge the "them" that they are consistently

[3] Benjamin Durheim, *Each in Our Own Language: Symbolization and Social Ethics in Rural America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2025), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/133465.

preaching against. The six common clobber passages against LGBTQ+ folks are Genesis 19:1-29, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10.

The clobber passages from 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy are tied with the 1946 translation of arsenokoitai and malakoi. Those words used by Paul were mistranslated to 'homosexual.' Per Kathy Baldock, a scholar who has deeply studied this mistranslation, states that the word arsenokoitai is a difficult word to understand and only appears about 100 times in 600 years of literature. Regarding malakoi, this word literally means "soft" and when read in context with Greco-Roman culture, was a metaphor for one who lacked manly self-control. Kathy goes on to explain that reading both arsenokoitai and malakoi within context should have resulted in a translation more closely tied to "sexual exploiter" not homosexual.[4] This mistranslation has led to the continuation of prejudice against the queer community, especially in rural communities where scripture is taken literally and with ultimate authority.[5]

Emergence of Queer Theologies

While some folks read the Bible literally and use clobber passages, others have spearheaded the growth of new perspectives. Queer theology has grown in the past ten years and its foundational principles support those within rural communities. Even with these new views, there continues to be a gap when it comes to small-town/rural experience. Those foundational principles include the inherent dignity of queer folks, the

[4] "*Unclobbering the Tangled Mess—Part 1*," *YouTube* video, 2:20:00 (approx.), posted by Kathy Baldock, August 23, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBwajcvZtqw

[5] *1946: The Mistranslation That Shifted Culture*, directed by Sharon "Rocky" Roggio (2022; United States).

imago Dei[6] of each person, the radical inclusivity of God, the use of lived experience to provide revelation, a reinterpretation of the Christian narrative, and a critique of normativity.

The frameworks uncovered in queer theology are immensely helpful and can inform rural faith communities and queer folk through the queering of scripture. This is done through disruption of assumptions on topics such as gender and sexuality, exposing power structures that have created the current and pervasive interpretations that are often harmful towards queer folk, and reimagining the ways in which we as persons of faith and as faith communities can affirm queer folks and their existence. As we see above and will explore further below, narrative and autobiographical stories about queer Christians can be used to highlight how God shows up and acts within queer lives, helping correct traditional doctrines that have caused harm or promote exclusion, and emphasizing the resilience of queer folks. A big part of queer theology balances on two hermeneutics: suspicion and liberation. The hermeneutic of suspicion questions oppressive interpretations, which is particularly helpful in rural locations where harmful traditional views can oppress queer folks of faith. The hermeneutic of liberation seeks readings that are rooted in justice. How can the Bible readings and lessons be used and viewed in a way that is just and equitable for all of God's creation, focusing on ways we can lift those who may be in the margins? Per queer scholar Patrick Cheng, "One noticeable trend is

[6] Stephanie Y., Mitchem, "EMBODIMENT, GENDER, AND RE-LIGION." *CrossCurrents* 68, no. 4 (2018): 550–60. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26756885.

the increasing focus by queer theologians on issues of race, class, and other factors in addition to sexuality and gender identity."[7]

[7] Patrick S. Cheng, Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 33.

CHAPTER 3.

RURAL LIFE, FAITH DEVELOPMENT, AND QUEER SUSTAINABILITY

In discussing rural life, faith development, and queer sustainability, we must take a look at the dynamics of rural life and the overall community. Rural communities are as varied as urban locales; however, some consistent features affect folks within those smaller locations. Considering those rural dynamics of community, we can then see how queer folks sustain their faith and engage in the challenging work of expanding minds and hearts in rural churches.

Dynamics of Rural Life and Community

The social ecology of rural life is varied but has a few constants, which include visibility, interdependence, and the social cost of difference. In a small town, one is less likely to fly under the radar. Many know you, your family, and all the dirty laundry you may have going back to your great-grandparents. This lack of anonymity can be comforting for some; however, for those who may not fit the desired mold, it can be terrifying. This terror comes from the fact that there is an interdependence of folks within the community. The community rallies together to support one another through life's trials. If one does not fit the mold of the community, by being queer for example, the social cost of being different is huge. This includes ostracization, bullying, and in some cases, deadly violence. This social cost may not be just for the queer person but can extend to their family as well. "According to the PRRI 2017 American Values Atlas, LGBT people in rural areas are significantly more likely than LGBT people in urban

areas to identify with Protestant Christian traditions, including white evangelical and mainline Protestant denominations." [1] The rural church can be seen as an anchor of the community, but also a site of exclusion. Exclusion is clearly incompatible with the gospel of Christ, and yet all of us will exclude and be excluded in some way over the course of our lives. On one hand, exclusion is important to maintaining a unique identity within a family or community. This type of exclusion is not meant to marginalize others, but rather to preserve distinct values or practices of a community. On the other hand, some of this exclusion is based on fear of difference and the human impulse to find a scapegoat for our problems.

It is in this exclusion and this dynamic that we see the tensions of belonging and visibility. Queer folks in rural churches are often present but invisible. They experience this as a result of navigating dual identities, disclosing selectively, and through coded participation in church life. Consequently, we see many psychological and theological implications of masking within faith contexts. Queer folks who are unable to share their authentic selves create a persona that is palatable to the rural church community. While this allows them to be physically present, who they truly are at a heart and mind level is hidden due to fear of exclusion. While queer folks can participate in this way, it creates a sense of being incomplete, fake, and not truly known by those they are in community with. This is where we can see how an issue in one area can affect another. If you stay away from church, you may be criticized or shunned not just within the church, but in the local social clubs as well. "The ripple effect of rural interconnection can come into play.

[1] Movement Advancement Project, *Where We Call Home*.

Since many faith institutions or religiously-affiliated organizations in rural areas provide opportunities for social connection, professional networking, loans and credit, or services … rejection from a faith community means LGBT people can find themselves shut out of far more that benefits, if not sustains, their lives—both spiritually and materially." [2]

Rural locations are best known for the fact that they are typically far removed from the influence of major cities and metropolises. They are in their own little world. This geographic isolation can be seen as both a constraint and a catalyst for spiritual creativity. As indicated above, this social bubble that is created is not easily permeated or changed. Traditions remain intact for generations, and this includes religious traditions and doctrine. While this means the traditions are deeply rooted, it does give fertile land for spiritual creativity, especially among those, such as queer folk, who want to pursue spirituality but need to do so in a way that is counter to their community. Queer folks can find ways to connect spiritually through social media, to queer theologians and scholars, as well as through local social groups, which have been rising in prominence in some small towns. This includes groups such as Parents, Families-Friends of Lesbians and Gay (PFLAG) or other social groups that promote LGBTQ+ acceptance and support. "So, when family, faith, and community organizations are not welcoming—or worse, are intentionally exclusionary— the lack of alternative faith communities, community-based service providers, and other places for connection and key services can result in

[2] Movement Advancement Project, *Where We Call Home*, 2019.

emotional, spiritual, and economic isolation for LGBT people that has substantial impacts for overall wellbeing and success."[3]

Faith Formation and Sustainability Among Queer Folks

Queer individuals in rural settings cultivate spiritual identity even with the scarcity of affirming networks due to the growing emergence of social media and other internet-based groups that can connect LGBTQ+ folks to other queer folks, all in the comfort of their own home. Groups such as Q Christian Fellowship, Beloved Arise, and The Reformation Project, among others, provide resources and, in many cases, support groups for queer folks from all over. Those digital faith communities allow for them to connect with their faith and others in a way that is comfortable and safe whereas trying to do so in their small town would tempt violence or other harm to befall the queer person in question. Those digital faith communities allow for the building of authentic communities, help to address toxic and harmful theology, and provide a space for folks to find healing and affirmation in their identity.

Queer Christians form their faith through honest and thorough wrestling with scripture while navigating real vulnerability through embodied authenticity. They rely deeply on the communities they create, and the concept of found family runs strong in LGBTQ+ circles. Despite the exclusion they face, they model and embrace a vision of radical inclusion grounded in both grace and imago Dei.

[3] Movement Advancement Project, *Where We Call Home*, 2019.

For many, social justice activism becomes an expression of faith. This includes advocating for inclusion, helping to transform churches from within, and addressing and participating in efforts to heal religious trauma within the community. Those actions become sacred, and their spirituality celebrates creativity, community, authenticity, and relationality. This embodied spirituality helps to root their faith not in doctrinal policy but through the lived experience of God and the sacred.

By engaging with queer theologians and scholars who help queer folks revisit and reinterpret scriptures and doctrines, queer folks can form a faith that allows them to find queer themes within the text, including those of exile, chosen family, and liberation. They can use this reinterpretation to also create a solidarity with the marginalized within scripture. This allows queer folks to remove spiritual barriers that may have been instilled in the rural church of their upbringing.

Queer faith is sustained over time by reclaiming scripture, rituals, and theology through engagement with storytelling, expressions of creativity within community, working with therapists, and being involved in community to reinforce belonging and affirmation. They can then more easily navigate rejection, build community in scarcity, craft theology out of their personal experience, and be better able to discern a safe versus unsafe religious space. Those faith practices embody resilience and authenticity. The Church at large needs to hear stories of resilience as they show the depth of God's love for all people and how one can still have immense faith in suffering, exclusion, and hatred. Contemporary queer theology challenges the idea of rigid, binary understandings of gender. It focuses more on the notion of God's expansive mystery. Rather than treating transgender folks as deviations from the divinely ordained norm, we can see gender

diversity as a gift, a gift that deepens the Church's imagination regarding Imago Dei. As one theologian, writes:

> "we would also miss the gift that God gave to the trans* community for our sake, for in their diversity, in their challenge to binary forms of gender, they call us to image God in ways that break us out of those binary boxes into which we have tried to stuff not only humankind, but God as well. They remind us that human beings, made in the image and likeness of a God who cannot be fully comprehended by human beings, are also complex, mysterious, and beyond our attempts to simplify them into easily managed categories."[4]

This act of challenging the current norms of both culture, society, and faith from queer folks especially gives folks the opportunity to see God anew, ponder the complexities of life, and to find a deeper relationship with God and their creation.

[4] Tara Soughers, Beyond a Binary God: A Theology of Trans* Allies (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2018), 86-87normsopportunity.

CHAPTER 4.

LIFE EXPERIENCES: METHODS & CONTEXT

Queer theology can inform our research and insights on queer Christian resilience in rural locations through its emphasis on narrative and the value of understanding how the lived experience of queer folks informs spiritual formation and faith.

Survey-Based Personal Narratives and Findings

This section synthesizes the personal stories gathered through an online survey and in-person interviews, demonstrating how individual experiences illuminate shared patterns of faith, struggle, and resilience. Reviewing these lived experiences, can illuminate the ways queer people of faith not only persist within rural churches but also contribute to transforming how each functions, welcomes, and thrives. All participant quotations are drawn from an anonymous qualitative survey conducted between December 2025 and January 2026 as part of this study. Respondents were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Participant Demographics, Contextual Scope & Significance

Participants were sought through in-person and online recruitment. Each participant was provided with the same survey questions, either asked during an in-person meeting or through an online survey. The survey sought to better understand the lived experiences of queer Christians in rural areas and small towns—how these settings shape faith, belonging, and spiritual resilience. Part of this survey process involved

obtaining demographic information, which allows us to look at correlations between age, identity, and other factors and theological and social impacts.

The survey had 13 total respondents; however, one respondent was excluded as they no longer identify as Christian, which was a criterion for this study. All 12 qualifying respondents grew up in a small/rural town and/or are currently residing in one. The sample skewed towards mid-life adults with ages ranging from 27 to 61. In the survey, we found that most respondents use binary pronouns (he/him: 8, and she/her: 3) one respondent does use they/them pronouns. Roughly 25% of respondents identify as transgender or non-binary. The presence of non-binary pronouns, non-binary folks, and transgender folks displays gender diversity in those who remain in the church suggests that we should expand our theological analysis beyond rigid binaries. This challenges the common perception that there are not any transgender or nonbinary folks in rural churches. As the study from the Movement Advancement Project concluded in 2019, "Roughly one in six (16%) transgender people live in rural areas—the same percentage of the non-transgender population, which lives in rural areas—according to a recent analysis by the Williams Institute of nationally representative federally-funded data."[1] Regarding gender identity, we had six identify as male, three as female, two as transgender, and one as non-binary. This supports the assertion that queer and trans folks are not absent from rural churches–they are present, discerning, and often leading transformation within the Church. In alignment with queer theology, the wide range of sexual and gender identities demonstrates that rural queer folk resist fixed categories and

[1] Movement Advancement Project, *Where We Call Home*.

often describe their identity as relational, evolving, and interpreted spiritually, emphasizing fluidity and the overall lived experience. Out of the twelve respondents, there were seven different sexual orientations, including four "gay," two "bisexual," two "queer," one "lesbian," one "gynosexual"[2], one "straight (transgender male attracted to women)," and one "queer/pansexual." Each participant provided valuable insights into their experience as a queer person of faith and how their rural roots or current rural locale, influences the way they engage in faith and impact faith daily.

Initial Findings

In reviewing the initial outcomes of surveys and interviews, three areas became clear: persistence over departure, a queer vocation and calling, and the concept of intersectional vulnerability. All three of these findings played a significant role in the emerging trends and themes that will be elaborated on in Chapter 5.

Persistence Over Departure

Instead of abandoning faith entirely, the respondents persisted through various methods, such as finding denominations that preached a message of inclusivity and affirmed their identity. They also studied scripture and found new ways to interpret it based on context and overall message. Some respondents practiced faith outside of organized religion, finding more organic community online or through a local group or practicing their faith alone. Others left for a period before returning to an affirming

[2]Per Medical News Today, "Gynosexuality" describes the sexual orientation of a person who is attracted to people who display characteristics that a culture typically associates with femininity."

tradition later in life after pursuing alternative spiritual paths. All of this occurred despite rejection or harm suffered in their small town and/or faith community.

Queer Calling and Vocation

Not only do respondents feel a call to serve, but some indicated they participate in church as lay leaders, acolytes, facilitators of queer faith groups, and ministers in training. The roles that they participate in show that queer presence itself has become a form of renewal and ecclesial critique within the church. Their impact in those roles humanizes queer folk within the faith community and allows them to build relationships with others who may not share the same sexuality or gender identity. As for respondents, we see that church participation is not just limited to the Sunday morning service–it extends into volunteer service, leadership roles, activism, and discernment toward ordained ministry. Alex, a 44-year-old bisexual man, stated, "Activism yes, church attendance, volunteer work, and church leadership. I am the greeter coordinator, taught Sunday School, sound board on rotation, and committee member. Going to church isn't enough for me; being the Church is important."[3]

Intersectional Vulnerability

"In 1989, legal scholar Kimberl´e Crenshaw introduced her theory of intersectionality to describe interlocking structures of oppression that compound discrimination; since then, the term has been employed by academics and activists to offer a critique and alternative to single identity politics."[4] This embrace of the concept of

[3] Alex, bisexual man, age 44, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026
[4] Graves, D., & Dubrow, G. (2019). Taking Intersectionality Seriously: Learning from LGBTQ Heritage Initiatives for Historic Preservation. The Public Historian, 41(2), 290–316. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2019.41.2.290

intersectionality allows us to take a closer look at the interwoven nature of geographic location, religion, and sexual as well as gender identity.

Transgender and nonbinary respondents reported heightened rejection noting that while there is greater awareness surrounding sexuality (gay vs. straight), there is even less understanding of gender identity, and, at times, a refusal to acknowledge anything beyond the male/female binary. Rooted in traditional biblical interpretations that emphasize a male/female binary, institutional structures will often maintain significant barriers. While some protections exist related to sexual orientation, far fewer protections are available for those who are transgender. Due to this rejection, along with the increased barriers, led respondents to seek out deeper theological clarity about God's unconditional and inclusive love. Mike, a 42-year-old gay man, stated, "My roots go deep because of the rejections and fear…rejections and physical harm have forced me to be resilient. I have deepened my relationship with spirituality because I've had to face questions and challenges that my heterosexual counterparts have not."[5] Mike illuminates a very poignant area of concern, that queer folks' experiences with rejection, harm, and exclusion give them insights that many others may not be able to provide to the Church.

[5] Mike, gay man, age 42, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.

CHAPTER 5.

EMERGING MAJOR THEMES: QUEER FAITHFULNESS IN RURAL AMERICA

Through the survey and in-person discussions, the following emerging themes were revealed: narratives of exclusion and marginalization; queer theological reinterpretation; rural visibility, risk, and social surveillance; affirming communities as healing and transformative; and queer gifts to the Church. The insights gleaned through this work highlight the lived experience of queer folks in rural locations and give us insight into the true resilience of queer folks in rural communities.

Narratives of Exclusion and Marginalization

Despite deep experiences of harm, rejection, and marginalization, many respondents shared a strong and persistent attachment to faith that cannot be explained as just institutional loyalty. The faith that endured in those respondents is often deeply personal, exceptionally relational, and in many cases, a transformed commitment to God. This is done not through any form of certainty but built out of the struggles they have endured. This very persistence is what challenges the dominant narratives that LGBTQ+ folks will inevitably abandon Christianity; in the respondents' cases, we see how their faith was reclaimed, reinterpreted, and continues to move forward outside of traditional structures and boundaries.

For most respondents, this persistence in their faith journey is grounded in relationship to God, distinctly separating that relationship from direct Church authority or

doctrine. In conversation with Jake, a 49-year-old gay man, he stated, "People failed and hurt me; God did not."[1] This very distinction was seen repeatedly across respondent narratives and shows a practical theology where God's faithfulness is being understood as relational (as opposed to institutional). From a theological standpoint, those narratives mirror biblical patterns such as Israel's experience in Exile where we see that divine presence persists even when the religious systems of the time fail.

Some respondents described their faith as an ongoing conversation rather than an assent to belief. Kaden, a 28-year-old trans man, explained, "From the time I was able to truly have a thought of doubt of the Lord I 'talked' with the Lord… always listening."[2] In Kaden's case, doubt did not hinder his faith but became an entry point into which he could explore and engage. This certainly speaks to mystical traditions where faith is seen as encounter, relationship, and practice instead of blind or rigid certainty.

Many respondents explored the belief in God persisting while they distanced themselves from institutional Christianity. Caleb, a 29-year-old gay man stated, "I believe in God, but not organized religion… I still pray frequently."[3] Theologians would see this distinction as a way of believing with actual belonging. They do not reject Christianity altogether, but they redefine faith as something they can do themselves, outside of the rigid structures of denominations and church membership. An interesting insight was discussed by Jerry, a 37-year-old queer man, stating, "If it weren't for my upbringing and moving around, I don't believe I would be connected to the faith in any way."[4] In their

[1] Jake, gay man, age 49, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.
[2] Kaden, trans man, age 28, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.
[3] Caleb, gay man, age 29, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.
[4] Jerry, queer man, age 37, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.

case, this persistence is intriguing as the very environment that caused harm and exclusion also provided them with the language and spiritual formation to be able to later on rework and reclaim their faith.

Persistence of faith does not mean continuous participation for all respondents. Sometimes persistence required the person to leave. They may have left relationships, their family, the rural environment, or the faith community itself as an act of self-preservation.

For some respondents, staying in faith and having that connection is a form of spiritual resistance. By staying, queer folks can show a new way and refuse to accept the narratives that are oppressive and the harmful interpretations of God. Kaden shared, "I thought the Church would never love or accept me… that made me just more thinking suicidal than a 10–13 year old really should."[5] This same respondent described that later in life they established new belonging within a small rural church and vocational discernment through that practice, which illustrates that this is not a passive action, it is an active reclamation of faith. Queer theologians often argue that this very persistence truly exposes exclusionary theology because if queer people can encounter God even with rejection of the institution, then the exclusion itself cannot be divinely mandated. Those respondents' faithful lives and journeys completely undermine the authority of the exclusion itself.

Along with this persistence of faith, there is often a series of reinterpretations including that of self, identity, Scripture, and doctrine. Meg, a 49-year-old lesbian, spoke of her faith fondly, stating, "The basic tenets of the faith in which I was brought up

[5] Kaden, survey response.

continue to ground me today."[6] As indicated previously, some may leave the faith and return, but many core tenants remain while other teachings, such of that as queerness as sinful, are rejected. Especially in rural contexts, it can be difficult as alternatives can be limited; however, this interpretative process allows queer Christians to ground their faith while pushing away that which causes theological harm. Overall, this persistence is also linked to a hope for change in the Church. Being connected and remaining connected to faith allows respondents the ability to survive in a landscape that can often be hostile but also gives them breathing room to dream and imagine a different church, one that can truly be the church Christ calls us to be. This is grounded fully in their lived experience as a queer person in small rural congregations, other faith spaces, and affirming communities.

Respondents show that LGBTQ+ Christians demonstrate persistence of faith, and it is not a contradiction, it is a theological act. It speaks to God beyond institution, a God who is with and for the marginalized, and one that is continually calling out to people for relationship even amid harmful experiences. Persistence is especially powerful as a site of resistance in small rural towns, challenging the Church to look into the mirror and see if the exclusion they preach truly reflects the gospels' claims.

Queer Theological Reinterpretation

In the respondents' narratives, acts of reinterpretation surface as a way of survival, a hermeneutical intervention, and construction of theological belief. Most respondents did not reject Christianity as a whole; however, many chose to reengage with

[6] Meg, lesbian woman, age 49, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.

scripture through a queer lens and distinguish the gospel's core commitments and the forces that shaped its overall interpretation. This life-giving work in interpretation allows queer Christians to retain their faith while being able to reject or refute theology that equates faithfulness with conformity or outright exclusion.

A pattern developed in the respondents' narratives, that of separating Jesus from biblical interpretations causing harm. They often noted that they discovered that the exclusionary teachings about sexuality and gender did not originate from Jesus. Per Kaden, "Jesus not once mentioned anything about the LGBTQ+ members."[7] This very observation shows a Christ-centered hermeneutic, which uses the teachings and life of Jesus as the lens for evaluating theology. The respondents do not treat the Bible uniformly; however, they view it through the ethical trajectory of Jesus and His ministry– His solidarity with those who were marginalized, His resistance to the institution's legalism, and His call to love over judgement. Kaden expressed his feelings, stating, "I wish true believers of Jesus Christ would call themselves followers of the Way… not with the Bible, a book that has been tarnished."[8] This response speaks to a challenge to modern biblicism. which lifts the text's authority above lived experience and discipleship.

Respondents critiqued literalist readings of Scripture, citing them as sources of true harm instead any form of faithfulness to God. Allie, a 33-year-old bisexual woman commented, "The Church needs to focus on how to extrapolate wisdom for our modern society rather than lazy literal interpretation that ignores history, translation, authors, and

[7] Kaden, survey response.
[8] Kaden, survey response.

cultural context."[9] This respondent's comments in regard to lazy interpretation, reflects a queer hermeneutical desire to bring theology into context, seeing that we need to see Scripture as a collection of work that was shaped in a specific time, place, and culture. In discussion with respondents, they often dismiss the idea that moral authority can lie in isolated verses without context and emphasize that we have interpretive responsibility when engaging the text. Mike lamented the fact that harmful interpretations, such as the word homosexual being added in 1946, led to harm and exclusion.[10] This act of imposing modern language for sexuality on to ancient texts led to conclusions that the Scripture, when taken in context, does not support. Caleb expressed his views about judgement stating, "Jesus tells us to love everyone and not judge anyone."[11] This statement goes hand in hand with the emphasis on the love of neighbor in Matthew 22:37-40. In this, queer Christians don't just view love as a sentimental act, but as a standard against which they can use to evaluate their interpretations. If the doctrine or theology is causing harm, despair, or exclusion, those folks will reject it as it fails to meet the core message of the gospel. This same standard led a respondent to review and reframe their view of salvation. Meg insisted that "God is love, and we are called to love our neighbors AND ourselves."[12] Often, internalized shame has been sanctified and viewed as humility; self-love as referenced by respondents, challenges the notion of self-denial is required to be holy.

[9] Allie, bisexual woman, age 33, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.
[10] Mike, survey response.
[11] Caleb, survey response.
[12] Meg, survey response.

The respondents' process of interpretation was often described as question driven, not answer driven. Allie expanded on this in her response, "Queer people, when brave, can ask the questions that crowd mentality dares not ask the collective Church."[13] Instead of viewing this act of questioning as a threat to faith, the respondents consistently expressed it as an act of faith–not blindly accepting inherited doctrine, but examining it through the queer lens of Jesus. Another respondent put it this way; after they were able to find an affirming church that welcomed questions. Jerry added that "The pastor… gave us permission to be authentic, question the Bible, and remain curious."[14] This permission allows for an essential shift from authoritative certainty to a more dialogical theology. This is where queer folks see faith as dynamic and relational. It is important to note that "affirming churches hold to a theology that affirms that God created each person the way they are, and that LGBTQ+ members don't need to conform to cisgender, heteronormative social and religious constructs. Affirming churches tend to be very clear on their teachings regarding gender and human sexuality. Simply put, there is full and unqualified acceptance in their congregations, which gives LGBTQ+ people the ability to flourish and live as their true selves."[15]

Another recurrent theme amongst respondent narratives was that of separating God from that of any failures that may have been perpetrated by institutional Christianity. Jake echoed this concept when he stated, "People failed and hurt me. God did not."[16] This distinction allows queer Christians the ability to be able to critique institutional harm

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[13] Allie, survey response.
[14] Jerry, survey response.
[15] Q Christian Fellowship, "Welcoming, Inclusive, or Affirming?", Q Christian Fellowship Blog, May 22, 2023, https://www.qchristian.org/blog/welcoming-inclusive-or-affirming
[16] Jake, survey response.

without abandoning their faith. From a theological standpoint, this action displays a rejection of the idea of infallibility of the Church institution and show that God is without institutional boundaries. Sasha, a 51-year-old nonbinary person stated, "Those that want to separate us from God are the ones who have put God into too small of a box."[17] This contributes to the concept that exclusion is not judgment from God but stems from the Church putting limits and boundaries on God's expansive and inclusive nature.

Overall, respondents wholeheartedly rejected the idea that queer theology is not a part of Christianity. They frame this act of reinterpretation as a means to return to the core ethical and relational concepts of the gospel. Allie expressed that "We should stop using God's name in vain when people discriminate… judging in place of God."[18] This turns the constant accusations of sin back on the actual exclusionary practice, returning to Jesus' warnings against hypocrisy within the faith and with the institutional Church. Queer theology is itself, a form of accountability, a call out to the Church to make sure its adherents are aligning their beliefs with their actions regarding the queer folks within their congregations and communities.

As evidenced above, queer theological reinterpretation of the Bible is a way to show fidelity to faith, not an abandonment of it. In discussion with respondents, many reinterpreted harmful and spiritually violent traditional interpretations through the lens of love that they have found to be the core of the gospel. This act of centering Jesus, bringing Scripture into context, putting priority on love, and asking questions, allow queer Christians to reclaim Christianity. They can also see the areas in which the Church

[17] Sasha, nonbinary person, age 51, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.
[18] Allie, survey response.

can grow, repent, and repair damage done. In rural contexts, this interpretive work allows queer folks a way to continue in faith while resisting harm that may be perpetuated by the limited institutional Churches in their areas.

CHAPTER 6.

RURAL VISIBILITY, HEALING COMMUNITIES, & QUEER GIFTS TO THE CHURCH

In chapter 5 we followed the personal theological work that was done by respondents in their rural contexts—their persistence, their ability to separate God from the institutional harm they endured, and the deep reinterpretation of Scripture through a queer, Christ-centered lens of love. This work is shaped by their geographies, relationships, and risks involved. We now turn to the hermeneutics of their lived environment, looking at how rural visibility, social surveillance and the overlap within community structures can intensify both belonging and vulnerability, which sees queer persistence as faith under duress. Through exploration of affirming communities as sites of healing and growth, an awakening of calling into church leadership, and embodied grace, we are then able to name the gifts that queer folks can bring the Church—resilience, imagination, deep relationship, and prophetic witness. These overarching themes demonstrate that rural queer Christianity is not just surviving exclusion and hate but is actively able to reshape ecclesial life through its resilience, hope, and persistence.

Rural Visibility, Risk, and Social Surveillance

The accounts of rural contexts show that respondents live and survive in spaces where they are unable to escape the public eye. Social, familial, and religious community life overlap and intersect in a way that can increase a sense of belonging, but it also increases risk. In rural environments, queerness is seen as something beyond just an

identity–it becomes a public condition that is then monitored and discussed through one's participation, reputation, and overall behavior in the community. Caleb shared his insights, stating, "If you weren't at church, it was almost like it was just as bad as sinning."[1] This insight shows how a religious practice such as attending church becomes a way for the community to audit one's faith and count absence as a moral failure. Attendance as spiritual support and encouragement is minimized and is more about conforming to the norms of the community. This reveals a shift away from a faith rooted in grace rather than being rooted in performance-based belonging. Your righteousness is measured by your visibility at church and/or church events and less on what you believe and the relationship you have with God. This surveillance–the feeling and reality of always being watched, is already potent for queer folks and increases the vulnerability in social engagement. While choosing to opt out of church attendance may provide a sense of safety from harmful theology, it will also invite scrutiny and judgement, reinforcing the exclusion.

Those dynamics were apparent in what the rural respondents shared, which involved descriptions of how their worlds consistently collide with little to no space or relief from one or the other. Sasha explained her social location, stating, "Church was school, [it] was home, and they all overlapped."[2] This lack of separation meant there was no hiding, no neutral ground that provided safety to explore identity without threat of consequence. From a sociological standpoint, this creates a social environment where deviating in one area has a ripple effect among the others. Thus, within our rural context,

[1] Caleb, survey response.
[2] Sasha, survey response.

this causes a weaponization of religion, making it a source of control rather than true liberation. Especially unique in rural contexts is the interconnected nature of the community. The overlap of social spaces makes it difficult to come out gradually or explore with limited visibility, leaving individuals feeling forced to either remain hidden or be fully exposed.

This environment inspires and breeds fear, with many respondents finding social reprisal a strong motivating factor in hiding their identities. Caleb expressed, "I was not able to be myself for fear of persecution."[3] Allie shared, "I was secretly closeted … out of fear of being outside the bounds of what their faith required."[4] Those sentiments expressed by respondents show how communal norms become so fully engrained that they create a sense of self-censorship automatically. This self-erasure goes directly against Christian claims about Imago Dei. When we fear that our authentic selves will be punished, our faith becomes unembodied.

The surveillance that is felt is not just in the rural church, it is not confined to just clergy or theology; additionally, it is enforced throughout the entire community. Respondents expressed concerns about the way they were talked about when they were not in the room. Dale, a 61-year-old gay man, discussed his experience with folks judging him, stating, "[They talked] behind my back … [there was] some name calling."[5] However, it is not limited to back-room discussions. Caleb added that he experienced

[3] Caleb, survey response.
[4] Allie, survey response.
[5] Dale, gay man, age 61, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.

"People constantly telling me I'm living my life wrong."[6] This monitoring by peers consistently reinforces heteronormativity. It is also a way in which institutions like Caleb and Dale's attempt to skirt responsibility, claiming that it is an interpersonal issue rather than a systemic issue; however, the theological message that is being presented enables this environment and leaves it unchallenged. Those environments foster fear, social isolation, and distrust of institutional spirituality/religion. This is especially potent for queer folks who already have the anchor of moral suspicion around their necks.

There is certainly the phenomenon of quiet disappearance in rural communities as queer folks attempt to avoid the humiliation of being formally expelled. Kaden explained, "They just saw people stop showing up."[7] Churches then use this to maintain the narratives of being "welcoming" and "open" and skirting accountability for their judgement and exclusion. In a theological sense, it shows that there is a failure in providing pastoral care and support. Their absence is then framed as their choice instead of an outcome of continual harm. Especially unique in rural contexts, the interconnected nature of the community, disappearing from one section of community means disconnecting from all that compounds the spiritual trauma with loss of social support networks. You are either all in or you're out.

While the number is few, there are affirming churches in rural areas, and respondents expressed concerns that entire congregations could be at risk due to the heightened visibility. Alex expressed his concerns as follows, "We wonder if we will be

[6] Caleb, survey response.
[7] Kaden, survey response.

targeted in a service because we are affirming."[8] Affirming rural churches come under threat of theft and protests due to their beliefs with over 150 incidents being reported by GLAAD's Alert Desk since June 1, 2022.[9] Their visibility in the community becomes a shared act of courage, showing that queer inclusion is a communal act, not just a private belief. Affirming theology disrupts the community norms and, in this case, invites forms of retaliation, which is the cost they have for public faithfulness.

Family is important in many communities and cultures; however, the ties that bind and roots grow and run deep in rural contexts. The family dynamic often extends and reinforces the rural social structure and surveillance. Alex explained, "My father went to his grave without knowing my identity."[10] Kai, a 27-year-old trans man, lamented, "I lost my entire family over this [his gender identity]."[11] Those two quotes from respondents truly demonstrate how disclosing identity can threaten individual relationships, but also the family reputation in those tightly knit and highly monitored communities. By staying silent, queer folks can feel a sense of protection at a high personal, emotional, and spiritual cost. This raises the particularly important questions about truth, love, and family relationships, especially in such traditions that claim family as a source of grace.

The risk that visibility raises in rural context reframes queer Christians' persistence in faith as a form of discipleship under duress. If they are to remain in faith, it

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[8] Alex, survey response.
[9] Sarah Moore, "150+ Anti-LGBTQ Incidents Targeted Religious Communities in the US, According to Newly Released Data from GLAAD's ALERT Desk," *GLAAD*, April 15, 2025, https://glaad.org/anti-lgbtq-incidents-target-religious-communities/
[10] Alex, survey response.
[11] Kai, trans man, age 27, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.

requires a navigation of constant surveillance, moral judgement, and potentially large loss. The loss includes their biological family, social supports, their job, and overall safety. The narratives shared challenges that exist with the prevalent urban assumption that visibility brings forth liberation. In rural contexts, this visibility can be dangerous and survival requires strategic navigation; however, even in hiding, respondents' faith did not stop. They continued to pray, believe, engage the texts, and seek a relationship with God showing that faith is something that can endure even if the recognition of it is denied by the institution.

Affirming Communities as Healing and Transformative

Looking across the narratives, affirming faith communities emerge not only as safe spaces from exclusionary churches, but will often function as healing agents, helpful in theological reframing and providing vocational transformation. For many of the respondents, the affirmation extended to them was not symbolic, it was incarnational, reshaping their understanding of themselves, their community, and God.

For a handful of respondents, the affirming communities they encountered were one of the first places they felt they could be their authentic selves without having to defend, explain or conceal parts of themselves. Mike explained that "To come to a place that embraces me for me and doesn't ask me to change who I am or who I love has been life changing."[12] This insight demonstrates an important theological shift that you don't need to perform to belong. In rural contexts, where participation is conditional, affirming communities instead follow a theology of grace, affirming worth over fitting into a mold.

[12] Mike, survey response.

This transformation while emotional is also doctrinal. God is seen as a sustaining, supportive presence throughout the affirming community instead of a distant, judgmental being.

The affirming environments help to counter years of enforced invisibility, whether by self or family. Kaden shared that, "From day one I felt welcomed and just overwhelming belonging."[13] The recognition oftentimes becomes sacramental. Queer folks are finally being named, seen, and invited into a community, which can help to restore the connection between embodiment and spirituality, which was fractured by religious trauma. This further affirms incarnation, pushing forth the notion that bodies, whether queer, trans, disabled–are valid and sites of divine encounter, not problems that need to be solved or hidden away.

Consistently, respondents connect affirming communities to a sense of healing for spiritual and psychological wounds. Meg had nothing but kind words for her faith community stating, "Trinity UMC has been a lifeline."[14] In regard to affirming communities, Mike expressed, "My local congregation… all been extremely accepting and affirming."[15] Those statements place affirming churches as sources of pastoral repair, where the religious trauma of the past from other religious systems can be named and countered through the affirming and consistent practices of care. It is important to note that healing will not occur through denial or repression of harm and its effects, but it is done through identification of the cause of harm and refusing to replicate it. Affirming

[13] Kaden, survey response.
[14] Meg, survey response.
[15] Mike, survey response.

communities model a different future for the Church, one that does not require people to suffer as a cost of faith.

For some respondents, this affirmation goes beyond just healing, it awakens something deeper inside them, a calling. Kaden shared his journey stating, "Not even a year later I was asked to be an acolyte."[16] Mike explained, "I am now a Synod Authorized Minister… and beginning the process of ordination."[17] Those stories display how affirmation can create pathways to leadership that have been previously out of reach. This overall shift from exclusion to empowerment changes the narrative on queerness as not a barrier to ministry, but an essential asset. This shift directly challenges Church structures that limit or restrict leadership based on factors such as sexuality or gender, uncovering how much potential is being suppressed through the Church's exclusionary practices.

As indicated above, in many cases queer folks often lose family connections that used to be a vital part of their lives. These affirming communities will often serve as a "found family" that can help to supplement or replace disconnected biological family structures.[18] This resonates with Jesus' redefinition of family from Mark 3:35. Jesus is emphasizing the unity of groups as source of strength and survival. The Church, although not biological family, becomes kin through mutual caretaking and shared discipleship.

[16] Kaden, survey response.
[17] Mike, survey response.
[18] Sasha, survey response.

For queer folks, affirming communities help to provide a theology of remembering, restoring bonds that were once cut off by rejection.

Through discussions it became apparent that there was importance in the acts of visible affirmation done by affirming communities. Jerry explained that "Visitors invariably tell us that their attraction… was inspired by our display of the Pride/Transgender flag."[19] The act of affirmation becomes evangelistic–not through any coercion, but through a sometimes-simple act of hospitality such as flying a flag. Those signs signal safety before a single word has been exchanged, which disrupts the assumption that all Christianity is hostile to queer folks. Those visible acts are especially vital, but potentially costly acts of transformation, which offer healing to those who are in the church, but also those who have already left at some point.

Beyond the healing of queer individuals, those acts help to shape and reform the church body as a whole. Sasha added that "Faith spaces that fully include queer and trans people are more expansive, more gorgeous."[20] This reframes inclusion as not an accommodation, but an enrichment to the church community. Queer folks help to expand the worship expression, theological imagination, and community resilience. Instead of the false narrative that this is a weakening or deviation from tradition, affirmation shows that it has its roots deeply in love, justice, and courage.

Affirming churches reject a fear-based, judgmental theology in favor of deep and true relational faithfulness. They refute the claims that queerness and Christianity are

[19] Jerry, survey response.
[20] Sasha, survey response.

incompatible. Healing becomes communal, theology is full embodied, and faith becomes life sustaining.

Queer Gifts to the Church: Resilience, Imagination, and Prophetic Witness

The queer Christians interviewed consistently express that their presence in the Church is not a problem to be managed, but a gift-bearing vocation that was created through marginalization, deep spiritual wrestling, and resilience. Those gifts present themselves and have been shaped by exclusion, forcing queer folks to reflect on theology, find creative ways to engage in faith, and hold an embodied commitment to love that goes hand in hand with the ministry of Jesus.

In discussions with the respondents, they identify three central gifts that queer folks bring to the Church. These very traits are not just abstract virtues, but were forged through the fire of survival, rejection, and return. Meg expressed that, "Queer people… bring tenacious hope and resilience. This is a gift that comes at great cost. Many have been deeply hurt by the Church, and yet they return to the love and hope, drawn to the story of Christ despite the shortcomings of the Church."[21] From a theological standpoint, we see a theme of death, loss, and resurrection that is foundational to Christian faith. Queer Christians put forth a faith practice that is what many liberation theologians call a faith from below, their belief is not sustained by the institution's power, but through lived experiences of suffering and grace. This continued practice and participation becomes powerful testimony to resurrection instead of leaning on doctrinal certainty. Similarly, another respondent frames queer resilience through the Beatitudes: "We understand

[21] Meg, survey response.

completely what it means to be 'downtrodden'… not as miserable sinners, but those who need healing from trauma and broken relationships that should have loved us." This take aligns strongly with queer Christian experience emphasizing Jesus' attention to the marginalized, which puts queer believers not outside the gospel, but at its core.

It is repeatedly emphasized throughout the survey responses that queerness offers the church a vital vantage point, the perspective of the outsider, which will help them to pursue deeper humility, genuine hospitality, and a penchant for questioning. In discussing this vital vantage point, Britney, a 47-year-old queer woman added, "Queer people bring the perspective of the outsider to the church… [and] hold space for questioning, for people to take their own paths to faith, and for a radical inclusiveness."[22] This view challenges the dominant models of the Church itself as a boundary policing institution and reimagine it as a community marked by discernment and openness. The act of boundary policing is seen as determining who is "in" or "out" based on a narrow view of scripture instead of focusing on the expansive and inclusive nature of God. Queer Christians' intimate connection with exclusion makes them attentive to who is being silenced and marginalized or who might be missing, which echoes Paul's plea that the body of Christ needs all members for the body to function. This outsider wisdom from queer folks helps to disrupt the certainty-driven theology so prevalent today. Instead of demanding one way of belief, queer Christians see and cultivate faith as a process that can make room for doubt, questioning and, growth.

[22] Britney, queer woman, age 47, survey response, Stained-Glass Queer Folk, January 2026.

Other contributions that queer folks can do and bring into worship and community life that were named by respondents include creativity, artistry, and joy that queer folks can and do bring into worship and community life. When we discussed gifts that queer folks bring to the Church, Jake replied, "We bring the same gifts as straight people… art, decorating, singing, music, joy, helping hands…"[23] Those gifts seem to resonate deeply with sacramental theology where God is encountered through beauty, embodied practice, and materiality. This contrasts with harmful traditions, which often frame queerness as a disease or disorder. Respondents continually expressed how queer creativity can expand liturgical imagination, foster a space of joy, and enhance overall worship, which then becomes, a theological act. Their creativity also serves a function of survival theology where queer folks often use things such as art, music, and celebrations to resist despair and reclaim their belovedness.

A recurring theme among respondent's is that queer Christians often display relational awareness, ready to offer presence, support, and solidarity even after the harm they have received from religious spaces. Jerry expanded on this stating, "Many of us understand what it is like to be ostracized, othered, and yet still be 'on call' for friendship, connection, community, and prayer."[24] This goes well with Christological models of ministry where it is not rooted in authority, but in accompaniment and availability. Queer Christians minister from a place of shared vulnerability rather than enforcing hierarchy. They embody pastoral care practices that are grounded in empathy

[23] Jake, survey response.
[24] Jerry, survey response.

rather than judgement. This relational ministry challenges the current Church institution to reimagine leadership as mutual care rather than ways to control.

Some respondents see their presence in the Church as prophetic witness, a check on the authorities, calling communities to return to the ethical core of the gospel message. Allie expressed that "Queer people, when brave, can ask the questions that crowd mentality dares not ask the collective Church in public spaces."[25] This role aligns with prior biblical traditions where the truth-telling comes not from the center of power, but from the margins. Queer Christians' lived experience, dealing with rejection and exclusion, allows them to more easily home in on hypocrisy, abuse, and distortions of biblical truths. This is especially true when Scripture is weaponized against the marginalized to retain power. Instead of rejecting Christianity, many respondents feel that queerness can ground the Church more deeply into Christ's message by resisting the misuse of God for harm.

In viewing the accounts all together, respondents challenge the doctrines that treat queer inclusion as an accommodation or pastoral concession, rather, they speak to queerness being a measure of a Church's health and overall faithfulness to the gospel. Sasha explained that "Faith spaces that fully include queer and trans people are more expansive, more gorgeous… People that fully accept us see that beauty and giftedness as a superpower instead of a deficit."[26] This view resonates quite strongly with queer and liberation theology that consistently argue that marginalized bodies can reveal new

[25] Allie, survey response.
[26] Sasha, survey response.

dimensions of God's presence in the world. Queer Christians do not belong despite their identities they belong because their lives can disclose truths about incarnation, grace, and a deep love that the Church cannot afford to lose.

Points of Agreement and Difference Among Respondents

In this analysis, there were many themes and insights that were in agreement with each other including: the distinction between God and the Church, God as love and not condemnation, a rejection of conditional belonging, the theologically generative nature of queer experience, the harmful impact of biblical literalism, the power of community, and a true desire for the Church to transform. While there was much agreement, there are some points of difference, which include the way in which respondents engage (leaving vs. staying), how Christianity is reimagined through a lens of spiritual pluralism, and overall visibility. Areas of difference and agreement show how queer folks in rural locations can often begin with similar experiences and perspectives; however, deconstructing or distancing from the Church for a time, can lead folks to different conclusions about aspects of faith. Below we explore these shared threads and meaningful points of difference.

Agreements Among Respondents

Even with a wide variation of background, theology, and current relationship to institutional religion, respondents demonstrated agreement around a few core themes. Those points of convergence do not reveal a monolithic queer theology, but a shared moral and theological language that has been shaped by marginalization, lived experienced, and resilient faith.

The most consistent point of agreement was the distinct separation respondents made between the character of God and the treatment they received from religious institutions. Jake reiterated, "People failed and hurt me, God did not."[27] Kai added that through it all, "I feel myself being drawn to God's presence, like he never left me."[28] Across the narratives any harm endured was not attributed to God, but to human misuse of religion either intentionally or unintentionally. This distinction allowed respondents to keep their faith while rejecting churches and theologies that foster exclusion and judgement. This speaks to a practical theology that lifts divine faithfulness over institutions, which echoes prophetic traditions such as Amos and Jeremiah[29] that critique religious systems while still affirming God's constant love.

Consistently respondents spoke to a theology that is centered on love, relational connection, and grace instead of moral policing and sin management. Mike stated, "I lean harder and harder into believing that God is love."[30] Alex explained his views, stating, "God knows me. I was created for a purpose."[31] Even when respondents differ on biblical interpretation or practice, they do agree in a theology that portrays a God that would reject the notion that queer folks are incompatible with their spiritual experience and belief. This consensus challenges punitive frameworks that dominate rural Christianity.

Overwhelmingly, respondents continue to reject the idea that acceptance requires them to conceal parts of who they are, live celibate lifestyles, or deny their identity. Many

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[27] Jake, survey response.
[28] Kai, survey response.
[29] *Amos*, *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (NRSVue).
[30] Mike, surrey response.
[31] Alex, survey response.

respondents shared the experience of hearing a variation on the sentiment, "I accept you, but I don't accept your choices." Conditional welcome is seen and named as spiritually harmful, damaging psychologically, and incoherent with theology. Alex insisted, "If all are welcome, then it must mean all."[32] This displays a church theology that emphasizes belonging over behavior, concepts, which resonate deeply with baptismal theology and the teachings of Jesus.

The respondents agree that queer lives can bring insights, overall resilience, and a spiritual depth to the faith communities that embrace them. Jerry emphasized, "We understand what it is like to be ostracized… and still show up."[33] Mike added that "Queer people bring tenacious hope and resilience."[34] Queerness is not seen as a liability, but as a source of wisdom born from suffering, survival, and overall creativity. This goes hand in hand with liberation and queer theology, which locates divine revelation with and among the marginalized.

Respondents also criticized literalist approaches to scripture. Caleb also pointed out that the churches he encountered seemed to be "Cherry picking which sins they're going to enforce."[35] The overarching agreement is that scripture must be read within the contexts of history and culture, and with an ethical lens instead of being weaponized against marginalized groups. This consensus supports hermeneutical approaches that are

[32] Alex, survey response.
[33] Jerry, survey response.
[34] Mike, survey response.
[35] Caleb, survey response.

rooted in context, reason, tradition, and lived experience which aligns with many progressive Protestant frameworks.

Even respondents who no longer attend Church at large agree that faith requires some form of relational grounding. Meg insisted that "Community has been a lifeline."[36] This community can be found in many spaces including affirming churches, small groups, online connection, or through chosen family. Community building and support have been named an essential feature in sustaining faith. This affirms Christianity's communal nature and challenges individualist spirituality without emphasis on institutional loyalty.

A striking shared sentiment is that of a refusal to abandon hope for transformation within the Church. Mike stated, "I believe people have the capacity for change."[37] Alex added, "We must not be afraid of queer clergy."[38] Even with deep wounds from the Church, many articulate a desire for the Church to face accountability, repair burned bridges, and reform their ways rather than rejecting the faith outright. This shows a hope rooted in redemption rather than despair. This positions queer Christians as agents of reform instead of defectors from the faith.

What ultimately unites the respondents is a shared conviction that God is trustworthy even when the institutional Church is not, that love is the lens in which we should view theology, and that queer lives are not problems to be solved but witnesses to

[36] Meg, survey response.
[37] Mike, survey change.
[38] Alex, survey change.

a more hopeful, inclusive, and relational way of faith. Those shared commitments form the core of this thesis, which is that queer Christians' persistence, especially in rural contexts, is not done out of naivete or by accident, but because of deep faith and spiritually grounded discernment.

Differences Among Respondents

While respondents did share in the experiences of exclusion, persistence, and the act of reinterpreting scripture, they do have some divergence when it comes to how they navigate Christianity after they have been harmed. While some may say this signals to theological incoherence, it reflects multiple faithful responses to duress, which is molded by personality, geography, trauma history, overall safety, and their perception of the possibility for change.

A key point of divergence was whether queer Christians remain within institutional Churches or leave while maintaining their faith. Some did choose to remain within or re-enter church communities with the understanding that their presence could and would be transformative. Jake shared his commitment with me stating, "I attend weekly services and facilitate a small queer faith support group."[39] Alex emphasized, "Going to church is not enough for me. Being the Church is important."[40] From a theological standpoint, queer Christians staying within the Church serves as a form of incarnational witness. This mindset draws on ecclesiology that envisions the Church as always reforming, believing that queer presence can shine a light on injustice, expand the

[39] Jake, survey response.
[40] Alex, survey response.

Church's imagination, and help reshape communal norms from within the Church. For some, their remaining within the Church is sustained by tangible affirmation. In talking about faith communities and support, Dale added, "My pastor has been very supportive… encouraging my journey to be a lay servant."[41] In this case, institutional recognition of personhood and value allows for continued engagement, suggesting that persistence is often contingent upon signs of belonging and safety.

Others state that leaving institutional Christianity is not an act of abandoning their faith, but spiritual survival. In discussing faith, Caleb stated, "I believe in God but not organized religion."[42] Kai added, "I turned my back on all of it for years."[43] Those respondents reject narratives that equate church participation with faithfulness. They enact what some theologians call a boundary setting theology[44], this is where their leaving serves as an ethical response to harm rather than a failure of spiritual devotion. This mirrors the practice of withdrawal seen within the bible, especially the concept of being in the wilderness in Luke 4. It affirms that God's presence is not limited to just the Church institution.

Whether they stayed within the Church institution or left it behind, respondents continued to have a relationship with Christ, engaging in prayer and scripture. The main difference lies not in their belief, but in where their faith can be practiced safely and

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[41] Dale, survey response.
[42] Caleb, survey response.
[43] Kai, survey response.
[44] Alicia Brock, "How LGBTQ+ Christians Can Set Healthy Boundaries with Non-Affirming People", The Christian Closet (blog), September 15, 2022, https://www.thechristiancloset.com/blog/2022/9/15/boundaries-and-being-lgbtq

without harm. This supports the claim that queer Christians do not just exit Christianity but change its boundaries.

Another point of difference surfaces in how respondents define their faith and practice it, namely the distinction between religion and spirituality. Some integrated Christian belief with other spiritual practices. Explaining his current spirituality, Jerry added that "In addition to church, I utilize crystals, affirmations, numerology, and astrology."[45] Instead of an indication of theological dilution, this practice reflects embodied theology especially among respondents that are shaped by diaspora or cultural erasure. Christianity is not thrown out but may be de-centered and placed in dialogue with other spiritual traditions. Looking at this through a queer theological lens, this hybridity resists rigid orthodoxy and affirmations that God is beyond any boundaries set by institutional doctrine.[46] This displays a theology in which faith is measured not by relation to a Church institution, but with God. In rural contexts where affirming churches can be geographically inaccessible, this act allows continued faith practice without self-erasure. In unpacking the narratives, it is apparent that spirituality does not replace Christianity, but is used to correct it, addressing what the respondents perceive as institutionalized Christianity's failures regarding joy, justice, inclusion, care, and embodiment. They cast a new lens on the binaries of the religious and spiritual in a way that shows a spectrum of queer Christian faith practice.

[45] Jerry, survey response.
[46] Duane R. Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn't Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

The respondents also differed in opinions on their belief about whether change within Christianity is possible. Some use advocacy to directly challenge harmful theology and leadership. Allie spoke strongly of our responsibilities, saying that "We have a responsibility to NOT allow pastors to speak falsehoods… by directly calling them out."[47] This strategy mirrors prophetic traditions within Scripture, where truth-telling is used to disrupt religious complacency. Brandan Robertson, a queer scholar and theologian says the queering of Christianity is "about challenging every aspect of Christian theology and ethics that doesn't align with Jesus' ethics of love and inclusion, inviting us to reimagine a way of being followers of Jesus beyond traditional Christianity."[48] Change is imagined as risky, but necessary, especially when lives are at risk. Others emphasize that structural reform is necessary and a symbolic action. Britney added, "If LGBTQ+ people are to be welcomed, it must be explicitly stated."[49] Mike explained that "Having even a small rainbow flag posted on the church somewhere."[50] This framing of change as institutional signaling, recognizes that silence and ambiguity often perpetuate harm. From a theological standpoint, this reflects an ethic of public repentance and repair, where the Church must not only change in belief, but also in visible, tangible action.

Queer Christians in rural contexts do not follow one path toward belonging or resistance. They navigate their faith through a variety of strategies including, leaving,

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[47] Allie, survey response.
[48] Brandan Robertson, *Queer & Christian: Reclaiming the Bible, Our Faith, and Our Place at the Table* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2025.
[49] Britney, survey response.
[50] Mike, survey response.

staying, reimagining or outright refusing, with their faith being shaped by trauma, hope, and safety. The differences expressed do show signs of fragmentation, but also expressions of faithfulness under duress reveal that belonging cannot be boiled down to cookie cutter participation or loyalty to the institution.

Across all experience of religious trauma and exclusion, the respondents are not just reacting to harm in their lives but are theologizing their lives. Their faith adapts, resists, and then reemerges on the other side as they center themselves on Jesus, reinterpret scripture, and prioritize love. In rural settings, where harm and hope can be intensified, queer Christian persistence becomes both survival and invitation, which calls the Church to a vision of love, belonging, and shared vulnerability before God.

CHAPTER 7.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine why and how, despite historical and current exclusion, many LGBTQ+ Christians in rural areas remain engaged in the Christian faith, and in some cases, institutional Church life. The narratives that were gathered in the survey reveal that queer folks' persistence is a direct result of their resilience and a core belief in a God that loves all. They sustain this faith through a deeply personal spiritual journey, reinterpreting Christian theology through the lens of lived experience and a hope that the Church can transform to become what it claims to be.

When reviewing respondents and their narratives, strong points of agreement emerged. They were consistently distinguishing between God and institution, determining in most cases that the harm suffered was from human institution rather than from God. They found God to be present even when churches were an unsafe place. The idea of conditional belonging was consistent in some narratives. The concept of "welcome, but" was continually rejected by participants. If they could not be their true authentic selves, they walked away to find a more affirming community. When those affirming communities were found, respondents found a source of belonging and a chance to fully participate in church life and work.

Even then, some respondents' relationships with religion varied. Some left institutional Christianity while others remained, hoping and pushing for reform, and others still were in between, searching for spirituality outside of church and other faith

expressions. This shows that there is no one perfect path and that lived experiences allow us to see the diverse set of strategies utilized to survive.

The rural context in which the respondents lived amplified the harm and hope they endured. The fact that they were more visible and the amount of social surveillance being done increased the costs involved, which included exclusion. However, when affirmation was found, it held a weighty significance. Respondents challenged the harmful literalist and exclusionary scripture interpretations and emphasized reinterpreted readings that were grounded in the life of Jesus, love, and justice for the oppressed and marginalized. This persistence shows that queer Christians, especially in rural contexts, are not just bystanders in the Church's future, but can be vital witnesses, shining a light on the damage of exclusion, and showing what a more faithful and inclusive Christian community can be.

This study suggests that queer Christians in rural locations are not just another ministry opportunity to add to the list at church, they are among one of the most faithful witnesses in and for the Church. Their persistence shows us the genuine cost of exclusion but also the hopeful possibility of transformation within ministry. Queer Christians have historically been told they do not belong, and those wounds are deep, but the Church has a chance to heal. Even with this exclusion, their continued persistence in faith speaks to a deeper truth: the Christian community is a place of grace and belonging. By listening carefully to those voices, the Church will hear the invitation to not just include queer Christians, but to be ultimately transformed by them.

APPENDIX A. SURVEY

Survey: Queer Faith Experiences in Rural/Small-Town Contexts

1. *Background:*
How would you describe the rural or small-town community you grew up in (e.g., size, religious culture, general attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people)?

2. *Faith Tradition:*
What faith tradition or denomination were you raised in, and are you still connected to that tradition today? If so, how?

3. *Experiences of Acceptance or Rejection:*
Have you experienced affirmation, rejection, or mixed responses from your faith community regarding your queer identity? Please describe.

4. *Resilience and Retention:*
What has helped you stay connected to your faith despite any challenges, exclusion, or pushback you may have encountered?

5. *Sources of Support:*
What resources, relationships, or community spaces (online or in-person) have been most helpful in sustaining your spiritual life?

6. *Queer Contributions:*
In your view, what gifts, perspectives, or strengths do queer people bring to churches or faith communities?

7. *Rural Dynamics:*
How has being from a rural or small-town environment shaped your spirituality or relationship to your faith community?

8. *Current Faith Engagement:*
How do you currently practice or express your faith (e.g., church attendance, personal practices, online communities, activism, etc.)?

9. *Barriers to Participation:*
What barriers—if any—still make it difficult for you and other queer individuals to fully participate in church life?

10. *Hopes for the Church:*
What changes, actions, or commitments do you believe would allow churches to become more inclusive, supportive, and life-giving for queer people—especially in rural settings?

APPENDIX B. FORMS

Consent Form

Title of Project: We're Still Here: Queer Persistence and Faith in Rural Churches

Name of Researcher: Dani Patrick

I, _____ (print name), have been asked to participate in a research study as part of the MA program at CTS. I understand that this research will focus on queer faith for individuals who grew up in or reside in a small town and will involve an interview and/or survey that will take place on or before February 2026.

The study will last until April 2026.

I understand that the risks involved in this project include:

Emotional discomfort may arise when discussing experiences of exclusion, discrimination, or trauma within religious settings.
Participants may fear being identifiable due to the small-town nature of the communities being studied.
Risks associated with inadvertent outing if confidentiality is not strictly maintained.

I understand that my anonymity (if requested) will be protected and that all records and information will be stored securely. Only the researcher will have access to these materials, and they will be destroyed after two years.

I also understand that I am free to refuse to answer any specific questions and may withdraw completely from the study at any time without penalty.

I understand that while the researcher retains copyright protection and all intellectual and commercial rights to the research materials, I may have access to the work for the purpose of citing or quoting it for my own use.

By signing this document, I consent to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher (Dani Patrick): _____ Date: _____

By checking this box, I request a pseudonym when sharing my stories/insights.

For more information, contact the Researcher at:
Email: dani.patrick@ctschicago.edu Phone: 616-272-1621

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