

**Queer Diakonia: The Deacon's Role in Helping
The Episcopal Church Welcome LGBTQ People of Faith**

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Here I am, Lord
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night
I will go, Lord
If you lead me
I will hold your people in my heart

- Dan Schutte, *Here I Am, Lord*

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Acknowledgments

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At a recent CDSP school retreat, our senior class was challenged to make lists of everyone who had helped us arrive at that moment - 100 days from graduation - and I was overwhelmed to realize how many people I owe thanks to. I cannot name everyone here, but some do need to be mentioned.

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¹ Vicki Gray, *Troublemaker: Troubling Words for Troubled Times* (Red Moon Publications, 2013).

there's one thing I have learned from the Millennial generation, (with a nod to my eldest child for the wording), it's *how to verb*.

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Chapter One: Methodology

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

- Galatians 5:6 (NRSV)

LGBTQ+ Inclusion and Why it Matters

I was talking with a friend of mine who is, like me, in the process towards ordination as a deacon in the Episcopal Church. We were conjecturing together about what church or parish each of us might get placed in for our field education; and while we were both looking forward to serving in a new place, Dani was also anxious about it. Our situations are similar but also very different; Dani's family is entirely, unapologetically and *visibly* both queer and unique, and they were concerned about where they would be placed and what their reception as a family would be. While this has not been an issue in the church we both attend or with the diocese in which we reside, the question of where and how they would be welcomed was a very real concern for them. At first glance the Gabriels could look like a classically normative (if edgy) nuclear family - mother, father, daughter and son - but it can become noticeable fairly quickly that this is not the case. Dani put it in an article for *Role Reboot* is:

My family is a multigenerational queer family. We embody that in various ways. I am a queer gender non-conforming poet with weird hair and an attitude, my partner is a transgender construction worker who loves to clean and cook, my son is an 11-year-old transgender aspiring drag queen, and my daughter is a 13-year-old lesbian with a dream of a wife, a big truck, 20 dogs, and a dusty piece of land. We own the label. All LGBT and Q of it... I'm proud of us. We are breaking the binary

here in our little family, raising questions and confusing the order of things just by existing.²

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender or queer (LGBTQ) Christians often have difficulty and face challenges in their relationship with organized religion, leading them to separate themselves from their places of worship. Reciprocally, and often causally, they have been excluded from or made to feel unwelcome by their congregations, pastors or parishioners or told that they have no place there. Episcopal deacons, like priests and bishops, are ordained to specific ministries and roles within the Church. I will expand on this later, but one key role for deacons is to be a point of contact between the church and the world, especially where there are people being marginalized and excluded, as many lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans folk have been and continue to be.

In the Episcopal Church it is incumbent upon every baptized person and member to take part in creating and extending welcome to everyone - including people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer – involving them in the life of the church and offering spiritual support. Positioned as a bridge between the church and the world, it is the role of Episcopal deacons to lead congregations in this work, to model best practices in relationship with people who identify anywhere on the LGBTQ+ spectrum and to encourage all the *Body*

² Dani Gabriel, “I’m Queer and So Are My Kids - Role Reboot,” accessed March 12, 2019, <http://www.rolereboot.org/family/details/2018-10-im-queer-and-so-are-my-kids/>. Dani’s pronouns are they/them/theirs.

of Christ to participate in providing deep, authentic, lasting and healing welcome from a place of love and compassion.³

Research and Practical Theology

This paper will utilize Christian scripture, the *Baptismal Covenant*⁴ of The Episcopal Church and the framework of *practical theology* to explore the role of Episcopal deacons in creating and extending welcome from the church to LGBTQ people of faith.

Practical theology is a hands-on discipline centered on locating where God is operating amongst people, especially in communities of need. According to Westminster Theological Seminary, practical theology is:

...the application of theological truth to all of life, particularly the life and work of the church... (which) concerns our participation with God in the work of bringing that revelation to the church and the world... As an applied discipline, practical theology is concerned with how theology ought to be applied to life and with making that application directly. That is, practical theology has both theoretical and lived dimensions. This dual character allows for the study of theology to exist in constructive dialogue with the practice of applying that theology.⁵

³ April 17, 2019. While discussing this paper and the roles of deacons with Episcopal Archdeacon David Stickley, he offered four directly applicable words: *support, lead, model* and *encourage*, which I have used here to frame the role of deacons in this work.

⁴ The Baptismal Covenant is a catechetical document that forms the core of Christian practice for Episcopalians. This will be covered in Chapter 3, under the sub-heading, *The Baptismal Covenant and the Diakonia of All Believers*.

⁵ “Westminster Theological Seminary - Writing for Practical Theology,” accessed November 7, 2018. https://students.wts.edu/resources/westminster_center_for_theolog/paper_formatshtml/practical_theology.html<https://www.google.com>. This particular part of Westminster’s definition calls out directly to the diaconal charge of bringing the hopes and cares of the world to the church and the church’s response back to the people.

I will use a *practical theology cycle model* as a framework to organize my paper. In *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, Richard Robert Osmer explains the cycle this way: “there are four core tasks that frame the work of all practical theologians... the descriptive, interpretive, normative and pragmatic... These four tasks mutually impact each other and work as a kind of hermeneutical circle.”⁶ The way I have worked with the model is:

1. Phase 1: *Descriptive/indicative* (what the situation & challenges are).
2. Phase 2: *Subjunctive/interpretive* (what resources/answers are available and how they might be used).
3. Phase 3: *Normative/pragmatic* (solutions and changes that could address the challenges, put into action).

The key to understanding these phases is that while they are referred to as a *cycle* and can be visualized in a circle, with arrows from one phase leading neatly into the next, this is not always how the process goes; in operation, it is both more continual and more non-linear than the model might suggest. It is often necessary to re-visit or newly enter each of the phases at various times, and a researcher may be in the middle of one, move to the next and then back up to the previous phase. While I have utilized the cycle in this way through the process of researching and writing, I have organized the chapters in this paper by aligning them with specific phases of the cycle. Chapter One is descriptive, setting the context and motivation for this work, establishing the thesis and defining some of the terms I will use. Chapter Two is based in the *indicative*

⁶ Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 286. As cited in Andrew Root, “Practical Theology”, 55-56.

phase (looking at where we are now), Chapter Three is the *subjunctive/interpretive* (resources of theology & tradition), and Chapter Four focuses on the *normative/pragmatic* phase (what we can do).

Elizabeth Conde-Frazier writes, “If a practical theology is to accomplish its proper end, it must specifically name the injustices that need to be addressed and it must create a plan for liberation.”⁷ Conde-Frazier also points out that practical theology is, “contextual and never neutral,”⁸ emerging out of the lived experiences of both dominant and marginalized communities, and stresses that because of this, it is imperative for practical theologians to be conscious of and clearly state their own social locations and acknowledge ways in which their own experiences can’t help but tint their interpretation and understanding. She further cites the need to, “pay attention to the everyday dynamics of people’s lives,” which she says in Latinx theology is called, *lo cotidiano* – “the everyday.” This is, “a way of approaching theology as a space where God encounters those who are oppressed at the very place of their suffering.”⁹

As Conde-Frazier noted, practical theology is an explicitly contextual discipline, which necessitates including information about my own social location and reasons for exploring this topic; I will cover this at the end of this

⁷ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “Participatory Action Research,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014), 235. I have chosen to use gender-neutral terms such as *Latinx* where possible, to steer away from the grammatical “given” of gender binary language.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁹ Conde-Frazier, 235.

chapter.¹⁰ I will also draw upon the work of theologians and researchers who have written about and utilized *queer theology*, a branch of practical theology specific (though not exclusively) to the social location, needs and experiences of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer.¹¹ Patrick Cheng, defined it as, “theology that is done by and for LGBT people,” and also added,

...in light of the definition of ‘queer’ as transgression, queer theology can be understood as a theological method that is self-consciously transgressive, especially by challenging societal norms about sexuality and gender. Thus, queer theology refers to a way of doing theology that, in the words of the *Magnificat*, brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly (Luke 1:52).¹²

While my research and this paper have been informed by and arguably include queer theology, I will not have an opportunity to delve into the field as its own topic in the course of this paper.

¹⁰ Ibid, 234.

¹¹ It is necessary to note here that through the lens of the diaconate, I see queer theology as related to and even a subset of practical theology; while many theologians’ writings do support this position, there are others such as gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler and academic scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who weigh in on queer theology as more theoretical and academic, and not under the umbrella of practical theology. For further research on the topic, please see *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2006, J. Butler), *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2018, J. Butler) and *Epistemology of the Closet, Updated with a New Preface 2nd Edition* (2008, Kosofsky Sedgwick). Susannah Cornwall’s *Controversies on Queer Theology* (2011, Cornwall & Isherwood) gives a broad overview of both sides of this argument (as well as additional study) that is accessible to both lay persons with little or no familiarity with the subject and experienced theologians and academics.

¹² Patrick S Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 9.

Defining LGBTQ

In order to establish a common understanding of terms that can be interpreted in multiple ways and to alleviate uncertainty and miscommunication, I will define the terms *LGBTQ*, *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *transgender* and *queer* relative to their use in this paper.¹³ It is worth noting that gender identity, (how a person self-identifies) and gender expression, (how others perceive a person's gender) are not always synonymous; I will cover this further under *transgender*.

Lesbian (L): By *lesbian*, I will be referring to women/female-identified persons who are primarily attracted to and/or romantically or sexually involved with other women/female-identified persons; or who identify themselves as *lesbian*. Because both gender and sexuality are spectrums not binaries, this terminology is not always as consistent or applicable as it may seem; hence the need for understanding and respecting how each person self-identifies. There are cases, for example, where one woman in a lesbian relationship realizes that she is gender non-conforming or transgender and no longer identifies as a *woman* or *female*. As a couple, they may end up “presenting” or appearing to be a straight (heterosexual), male-and-female couple, though one (or both) may still identify as lesbian. Similarly, in the case of a heterosexual couple where a *cisgender*¹⁴ man transitions to female or non-binary, that person's partner may

¹³ These definitions are by no means comprehensive, but rather represent the understanding of each term as I am using it in the context of this paper. Gender and sexual orientation are more complex than the simple “gay – straight,” or “male – female” binaries they are often assumed to be.

¹⁴ *Cisgender* is a term used to describe a person whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth.

or may not continue to identify as straight vs. choosing to identify newly as lesbian, to honor their partner's new gender or a changed dynamic in how they relate to one another and/or to the world.

Gay (G): *Gay* can be used to refer to men/male-identified persons, who are attracted to and/or in relationship with other men/male-identified persons; but the term is also used by people of other genders and different relationship configurations. Prior to the 1990s and sometimes still preferred by some in the modern day, "gay" was used as an umbrella term to refer to lesbians, bisexuals, or transgender persons, (I.E.: "the gay community," or, "a gay woman").

Bisexual (B): *Bisexual* or *bi* will be used to designate persons of any gender who are romantically attracted to and/or will consider being in a relationship or sexual liaison with a partner of any gender identity. It is a common misconception that the "bi" in bisexual denotes the binary understanding of gender, i.e., that there are only male and female and that bisexual people are therefore only attracted to women or men (and not to people who identify elsewhere on the gender spectrum).¹⁵ Bi activist Robyn Ochs elaborates, "I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge in myself the potential to be attracted romantically and/or sexually to people of more than one sex and/or gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree." Words such as *pansexual* and *omnisexual* are also used; for clarity, I will only use the terms *bisexual* or *bi* when referring to this orientation.

¹⁵ Kasandra Brabaw, "'Bisexual' Doesn't Mean What You Think It Means," accessed May 11, 2019, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/bisexual-definition-gender-binary>.

Bisexuality is often confused or conflated with *polyamory*, a term used to denote someone who is in relationships with more than one person at a time, consensually.¹⁶ While a bisexual person *may* be in a polyamorous, *polyfidelitous* or other non-monogamous form of relationship, their sexual preference does not necessarily imply that this is so.¹⁷ Bisexuals can often be or feel “invisible” in that when in a relationship with someone of the same or same-perceived gender, bisexuals are often assumed to be gay or lesbian, while if in a relationship with someone of the opposite gender, those same people may be assumed to be heterosexual.

Transgender (T): *Transgender*, abbreviated as *trans*, refers to persons who identify as a gender other than that assigned or assumed at their birth.

According to the National Center for Transgender Equality:

Most people – including most transgender people – are either male or female. But some people don't neatly fit into the categories of "man" or "woman," or “male” or “female.” For example, some people have a gender that blends elements of being a man or a woman, or a gender that is different than either male or female. Some people don't identify with any gender. Some people's gender changes over time.

People whose gender is not male or female use many different terms to describe themselves, with non-binary being one of the most common. Other terms include genderqueer, agender, bigender, and more. None of

¹⁶ Dossie Easton and Janet W Hardy, *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Freedoms in Sex and Love*, Expanded Edition. (Ten Speed Press, 2017), 41.

¹⁷ While often assumed otherwise, many bisexual (and LGTQ) people live in traditionally-defined, long-term monogamous relationships, with a person of either the same or a different gender, (and many heterosexual couples choose a non-monogamous lifestyle). The real questions perhaps are: *Why does this matter?* and, *Should it be in the Church's purview to define what shape loving relationships take?*

these terms mean exactly the same thing – but all speak to an experience of gender that is not simply male or female.¹⁸

Some (though by all means not all) additional terms that are commonly used are *gender nonconforming*, *two-spirit* and *gender-fluid*. The term *intersex* is sometimes inaccurately used interchangeably with *transgender*. Intersex is a medically defined condition concerning the genitalia and genetic material one is born with (please see further explanation under *LGBTQIA*).

Queer (Q): *Queer* was originally used in its LGBT context as an epithet slung degradingly at lesbian, gay and other people perceived to be outside of the assumed or expected societal sexual or gender norm. *Queer* became a word of empowerment through the Stonewall Riots in New York in 1969.¹⁹ My godfather, Malone, was at the Stonewall Inn when the police showed up for a raid. He was living downstairs from us at the time, and my mother shared with me her recollection of what happened that night, and how Malone explained his understanding of how the word came to be used as a term of strength to the community:

...during those years, there were several gay bars and dance clubs he used to frequent in lower Manhattan; the Sewer and Stonewall being two

¹⁸ “Understanding Non-Binary People: How to Be Respectful and Supportive,” *National Center for Transgender Equality*, last modified July 9, 2016, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-non-binary-people-how-to-be-respectful-and-supportive>.

¹⁹ *Stonewall* is considered by many people to be the beginning of the Gay Rights movement in much the same way that Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery is accepted to be the beginning of the Black Rights movement. While other, less-known episodes of defiance existed in both movements, these are the moments considered to have “sparked” each, igniting their respective trajectories. For further information, please see: History.com Editors, “Stonewall Riots,” *HISTORY*, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/the-stonewall-riots>.

I can remember. One night he came rushing into our apartment saying that there had been a scuffle with the police (who regularly raided the place and arrested guys) and this time, for the first time, the guys at the bar began fighting back. As I remember it, he said the patrons poured out onto the street screaming and fighting and someone screamed “we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it.” I remember asking if they *wanted* to be called queer and he said, “Why not? That’s what they call us anyway.” Then, I’m not sure if it was the following day or how long after that night, the West Village gay men planned and organized an official march in the streets chanting, “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it” to protest the police brutality and to petition for the right to be left alone in “their bars.” It did raise the awareness of the general population of New York anyway, and as far as I know, that was the beginning of “Gay rights” as it was originally known.²⁰

The word queer has expanded in its definition and use. Mihee Kim-Kort and Rachel Held Evans point out in their book *Outside the Lines* that “Queerness... began as a way to describe certain expressions of sexuality and gender, and now it includes other markers of identity, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, ability, and more.”²¹ For the limited purpose of this paper and because I will not have the space to pursue and examine additional meanings, I will use “queer” and “queerness” in their context as relating only to sexual and/or gender identity, as part of the acronym LGBTQ or for persons who prefer not to be labeled as or assumed to be *heterosexual* or *straight*, but who do not refer to themselves using the terms *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual* or *transgender*. I

²⁰ Zia Wesley, email message to author, November 2, 2018.

²¹ Mihee Kim-Kort and Rachel Held Evans, *Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness Will Transform Your Faith*, 2018.

will use queer as an umbrella term interchangeably with *LGBTQ* in places, to avoid excessive repetition of either term within a given sentence or paragraph.²²

LGBTQIA, or LGBTQ+: The letters “I” and “A” (most commonly but among others) are sometimes appended to the acronym LGBTQ, as is a plus sign (+), to bring awareness to further separate identities that may come under the *queer* umbrella. In the extension, “I” (or sometimes “i”) stands for *intersex*, while “A” represents *asexual*. According to the *Intersex Society of North America* (ISNA), “‘Intersex’ is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.”²³ The same source continues,

People who have intersex conditions have anatomy that is not considered typically male or female. Most people with intersex conditions come to medical attention because doctors or parents notice something unusual about their bodies. In contrast, people who are transgendered (sic) have an internal experience of gender identity that is different from most people.²⁴

The topic has gained new international attention in the past week, as the highest governing body in sports ruled that runner Caster Semenya, a woman who has an intersex condition, would be required to medically lower her

²² Varying interpretations and understanding of the word Queer are explored in Jay Emerson Johnson’s book, *Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness*, 2014.

²³ “What Is Intersex? | Intersex Society of North America.” Accessed November 13, 2018. http://www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex.

²⁴ “What’s the Difference between Being Transgender or Transsexual and Having an Intersex Condition? | Intersex Society of North America.” Accessed November 13, 2018. <http://www.isna.org/faq/transgender>. The term “transgender” is currently accepted as correct, vs. “transgendered,” as used here.

(natural) testosterone levels in order to compete.²⁵ This has sparked controversy and anger from intersex advocates including Hudson Taylor, executive director of the advocacy group *Athlete Ally*, who said that, "Forcing athletes to undergo medically unnecessary interventions in order to participate in the sport they dedicate their lives to is cruel and a violation of their human rights."²⁶

In the United States, infants identified as intersex (with “atypical sex characteristics”) at birth and children who later develop outside of accepted, “gender-normative” physical expression have in the past been routinely subjected to gender assignment surgeries. This practice is changing through the work of advocacy groups such as InterAct and the Human Rights Campaign.²⁷

Merriam-Webster defines *asexuality*, (also called, “ace”) as, “not having sexual feelings toward others: not experiencing sexual desire or attraction,”²⁸ and cites, “In general, an asexual person does not feel or otherwise experience

²⁵ Associated Press, “Semenya Ruling Could Have Impact on Transgender, Intersex Athletes,” *NBC News*, last modified May 2, 2019, accessed May 6, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/semenya-ruling-could-have-impact-transgender-intersex-athletes-n1001126>.

²⁶ Associated Press, “Semenya Ruling.”

²⁷ According to *InterAct*, “The results (of genital surgery on infants and children) are often catastrophic, the supposed benefits are largely unproven, and there are generally no urgent health considerations at stake.” For additional information, see Human Rights Watch, “I Want to Be Like Nature Made Me’ | Medically Unnecessary Surgeries on Intersex Children in the US,” *Human Rights Watch*, July 25, 2017, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/25/i-want-be-nature-made-me/medically-unnecessary-surgeries-intersex-children-us>.

²⁸ “Definition of ASEXUAL,” accessed May 5, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/asexual>.

any sexual attraction, according to The Asexual Visibility & Education Network (AVEN). Basically, it is an inborn absence of sexual desire.”²⁹

For the purpose of this research project and paper, I will not be looking further at the experiences of people who identify as *intersex* or *asexual*. For a thorough discussion on descriptive initialism for queer communities, (as of the November, 2018 date of its publication), please see reporter Bill Daley’s article in the Chicago Tribune, “Why LGBT Initialism Keeps Growing.”³⁰

LGBTQ Communities: I will intentionally use the plural *communities* throughout this paper when referring to an overall group of LGBTQ people. Terms such as, “the gay community,” “the trans community,” or “the LGBTQ community” are commonly used but make an inaccurate inference that people in those groups are of one collected mind or position, or act with one voice; I find the plural *communities* to be a more accurate representation. It can also be problematic to assume that people who are marginalized or discriminated against due to their sexual orientation, have the same challenges or needs as persons who are treated in this way due to a difference in gender.

As Conde-Frazier expresses, it is important to understand one’s own social location (and that of others) as much as possible, in order to have a contextual understanding of where and how each of us interacts in the world and

²⁹ Lindsay E. Mack in “Definition of ASEXUAL.”

³⁰ Bill Daley, “Why LGBT Initialism Keeps Growing,” *Chicagotribune.Com*, accessed November 17, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/sc-lgbtqia-letters-meaning-family-0606-20170602-story.html>.

particularly with regards to practical theology. I am a 53-year-old, middle-class, White woman of Russian and German Jewish descent; my ethnic makeup is marked on my features, though I have not experienced being treated badly, discriminated against or marginalized because of it. I have lived all of my life in the United States, with over 85% of that being split between Northern and Southern California. Most of the areas I have lived in have been affluent, majority-White urban or suburban cities and towns, though my own situation has varied and I have lived as both upper middle-class and below the poverty level (with most of my life spent roughly at a midpoint between the two). I was raised in and around the queer community, and I began to identify and came out as bisexual at the age of 17, with no negative effect. My parents divorced when I was a toddler and both remarried. I have one brother who shares the same father, (and also one step-brother), but I was mostly raised as an only child in my mother's house; my brother and I lived together with our father and step-mother during brief but formative periods on and off during my earlier life. My parents on both sides were born in the United States, attended college, and own/ed their own successful businesses. I have only relatively recently come to understand how White privilege has shaped my life and my opportunities, and the importance of delving into what that means, how to let go of some of it where possible, and how to use the privilege I have in service to others.

As an openly bisexual woman and a *postulant* for the diaconate in the Episcopal Church – someone in discernment and training to be ordained as a deacon – I have a more-than-academic interest in how full inclusion of LGBTQ

people in the life of the church can be achieved and the role of Episcopal deacons in bringing this about. It is my intention with this paper to address the topic by compiling information from diverse, related areas, applying a *diaconal hermeneutic*³¹ as a lens, and offering concrete suggestions for moving forward.

Living in mostly secular and at times anti-religious environments throughout much of my life, I spent many years avoiding close contact with Christianity and Christians. Despite being drawn to Jesus' life and teachings from an early age, I had had enough uncomfortable exchanges along the way with some of his followers and their institutions to keep me at a wary distance.

Nine years ago when I did finally decide to look for a church community, I had some concern over whether I would be judged as unworthy or unwanted. I have worshipped in different religious traditions throughout my life and learned to see the Divine in different ways; in whatever form or by whatever name, God has been and is a very real presence in my life. My partner (now husband) was raised Irish Catholic and we decided to explore whether the Episcopal Church might be a good "in-between" place for us.

I attended a small weekday service at *All Souls Episcopal Parish* in Berkeley on my own as a test, both to see how it felt to me and how we might be received. Being a cisgender woman in a monogamous relationship with a

³¹Roderick Dugliss, "The Diaconal Hermeneutic," 2017. A *hermeneutic* is the theological lens or context through which we understand and process information and experiences. A diaconal hermeneutic, then, is looking at the world through the lens of servant ministry to which deacons are called.

cisgender man, how I identified sexually was a “hidden” piece of information that could have been left unsaid; but if I was going to become part of a church community, I felt the need to be accepted as who and what I was, not just who and what I was perceived to be. And “bisexual” was by no means the only potential strike against me - I was also Pagan and Hindu by practice, Jewish by birth, divorced more than once, and living with my boyfriend in a creatively-knit-together family that included children from each of our past marriages.

So when the presider (who turns out to have been the parish rector) came over after the service to introduce himself and ask what had brought me there, I responded with a *tell them everything and see whether they still want us* attitude - and probably disclosed more than he’d expected. His answer is what brought me back the following Sunday: he gave a genuine, warm smile, told me he was happy I had come and that our family was welcome. The word *welcome* can sound trite or overused... but it is a deep concept and practice that has profound implications and effects on people, whether by its presence or even more so, by its lack. The priest I met that day was the first *official representative* not only of the Episcopal denomination, but of Christianity as a whole, that I had spoken with in probably more than 15 years. If he had not offered what felt like sincere welcome, I would have gone elsewhere. In that moment, *one person* represented for me a church, a denomination and a specific congregation within it, and made the difference between whether I risked entering that circle of community or not. How many people, I am led to wonder, have turned and walked back out of

a church door on the same day they arrived, because that welcome was missing; or worse, because condemnation or hostility took its place?

Chapter Outline

In this first chapter I have focused on the methodology and theology that have informed and framed this thesis, the component terms in the acronym “LGBTQ” as I understand and am making use of them, and my personal social location and background.

Chapter Two will outline the current situation between LGBTQ people of Christian faith and the Church,³² examine how that specifically manifests in The Episcopal Church, and consider some spiritual needs of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer.

In Chapter Three I will look at how the Episcopal Church understands the community it calls the *people of God*,³³ the Baptismal Covenant of the Episcopal Church, the call to *diakonia*,³⁴ who Episcopal deacons are and why they are uniquely positioned to help congregations reach out to LGBTQ+ Christians. I will also share some of my own journey towards the diaconate.

³² In the context of this discussion, *Church* used alone with a capital “C” refers to the wider Christian community, encompassing people of all Christian-identified denominations (I.e.: “...we will discuss whether *the Church* has historically been discriminatory to LGBT people”), while *church* with a small “c” refers to a church building, congregation or group, (I.e.: “whether people are comfortable *in church*”). *TEC* or *The Episcopal Church* refers to the body of the Episcopal denomination in particular.

³³ As a point of clarification, while I personally believe that *all* people are “people of God,” in this instance the phrase refers specifically to baptized members of the Episcopal or other Christian denomination.

Chapter Four will present some of the characteristics and actions of welcoming and affirming congregations, how parishes can better create and extend welcome to LGBTQ people, ways in which deacons in particular can help to bring that about, and suggestions for how congregational leaders can support and encourage deacons in this work.

³⁴ Diakonia is often defined as “servant ministry.” I will go into further detail in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two: Where We Are and How We Got Here

It is helpful to remember that most GLBT persons expect religious persons to see them as less than, as sinners, as persons who are in need of correction... (it is) incumbent upon spiritual care providers to articulate not only through language the words that are welcoming but also through gestures that express their comfort in the discussion.

- Nancy Anderson & Jo Clare Wilson³⁵

LGBT people have historically been excluded and often actively persecuted or shunned by the Christian Church writ large. In her 2000 doctoral thesis, M.R. Ritley wrote:

(I)t is always astonishing to discover how many healthy and self-affirming gay women and men are to be found in the churches, and how much humor and courage they bring to the task of being Christians in a world that views Christians with suspicion, and being gay in Christian churches that view being gay with condemnation, fear or anger. Somehow, they have managed to remain faithful Christians, genuinely devoted to their various churches, trying to live out both the gospel imperative and the truth of their own lives. But there are so few compared to the larger number of gay men and lesbians who either become refugees from churches that will not accept them, or remain in their communities, hidden and silent, either fearful of being known for who they are, or brainwashed into believing that the church is right in condemning them in the first place.³⁶

One of the ways in which the Church has traditionally enacted exclusion and marginalization against LGBTQ people involves utilizing scripture as a

³⁵ Nancy K. Anderson & Jo Clare Wilson, "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered (GLBT) People," in *Professional Spiritual and Pastoral Care: A Practical Clergy and Chaplain's Handbook*, 5th ed. Stephen B. Roberts, editor, Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2016. 282-3.

³⁶ M.R. Ritley, "Speaking for Ourselves: a pro-Active Class for Gay and Lesbian Christians." D.Min. thesis, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, 2000. The Flora Lamson Hewlett Library, 5-6.

justification. There are six biblical passages that are commonly used for this purpose, sometimes referred to as the “clobber clauses.”³⁷

In his book *Divine Communion: A Eucharistic Theology of Sexual Intimacy*, theologian Jay Emerson Johnson explains that, “the whole Bible deserves both responsible and faithful reading,” and looks at how one can go about doing so.³⁸ In a previous book, *Peculiar Faith*, Johnson says,

...modern Christian churches have mostly overlooked or failed to notice Paul’s more radical claim that spiritually thriving communities need not, and in fact cannot, rely on rote conformity in order to flourish (see 1 Corinthians 9:20-23 and 10:23-32 for an indication of Paul’s own vexations about this question).³⁹

In *Queer Clergy*, R.W. Holmen adds,

Biblical authors, especially the apostle Paul, should be understood in their own context... Pauline attitudes towards slavery, the role of women in the church, and same-gender sexual relationships all require contextual understanding, and Paul’s own inclusive, boundary-breaking egalitarianism is the best lens for interpreting his writings...⁴⁰

³⁷ These verses are: Genesis 19:5, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. For an explicit connection between these verses and the Baptismal Covenant, see Jay Emerson Johnson, *Divine Communion: A Eucharistic Theology of Sexual Intimacy* (Seabury Books, 2013), 165-182.

³⁸ Johnson, *Divine Communion*, 168-172.

³⁹ Jay Emerson Johnson, *Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2014), 52.

⁴⁰ R. W Holmen, *Queer Clergy: A History of Gay and Lesbian Ministry in American Protestantism* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2013), 101-102.

While I do not have space here to give more than brief coverage to this topic, I encourage further exploration.⁴¹

Whether based in scriptural interpretation or from fears, discomfort, or personal prejudices, many LGBTQ+ people have experienced exclusion, condemnation, and/or hostility from churches, congregations, church leaders and other Christian people of faith.⁴² According to a March, 2016 report on discrimination by the American Psychological Association, *Stress in America*, discrimination can lead to increased stress, decreased mental health and a risk to physical health. In addition, the report states:

"for many adults, dealing with discrimination results in a state of heightened vigilance and changes in behavior, which in itself can trigger stress responses—that is, even the anticipation of discrimination is sufficient to cause people to become stressed... Stigma can also directly affect health by encouraging ostracized individuals to avoid social encounters, shy away from healthcare professionals, reach for addictive substances to quell their anxiety and aloneness, or engage in (other) risk-taking behaviors..."⁴³

⁴¹ For additional information on biblical passages that have historically been used against LGBTQ+ people, see Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*; Justin R. Cannon, *The Bible, Christianity, & Homosexuality*; and *The Bible does not condemn "homosexuality."* *Seriously, it doesn't*, (blog post by Adam Nicholas Phillips), cited in my bibliography.

⁴² I have not included people of other faith traditions in this research.

⁴³ American Psychological Association (2016). *Stress in America: The impact of discrimination*. *Stress in America™ Survey*, 8. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2015/impact-of-discrimination.pdf>

Evidence of Exclusion and Marginalization

To illustrate some of the challenges that LGBTQ people face, I asked a few queer Episcopalians to share from their personal experiences.⁴⁴

Marguerite's story:

The family who took me in, in 1971 saved my life and taught me about God's redeeming grace; as a result on Dec. 5, 1971, I decided to be baptized. They were a constant source of spiritual comfort and leadership & were members of an Episcopal church as well as the Charismatic renewal. When I came out in 1983 they strongly encouraged my ex-husband to sue me for custody to "protect" my daughter from me. It was an excruciating betrayal. My former mother-in-law was American Baptist and also used religion to push the custody fight...

Watching the prolonged "study it" approach of TEC and the Anglican Communion worldwide has been very frustrating and painful. I got tired of the waiting and attended MCC services for several years in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I returned to TEC in 2006, after the consecration of Gene Robinson as bishop.⁴⁵

Tom's story:

One time, after we'd been attending our home parish for a while and so had gotten into the habit of going to church on Sunday together, we spent a weekend in West Marin and we looked up the local Episcopal church so we could attend. I have no memory of how we were greeted upon arrival but, when we went up for communion, the rector literally stopped and hesitated before giving us communion. My husband's recollection is that he paused in front of us and raised his eyes to heaven and said some prayers before proceeding. It was like we were the embodiment of Satan and he had to ask God's special permission and steel himself before he could offer us the body of Christ. It was a

⁴⁴ I have obscured the names of congregations or people who might feel singled out or who did not give explicit consent for their names to be used by changing proper names to "my rector," "my home parish," "my spouse," etc.

⁴⁵ Marguerite Judson, email to author, March 31, 2019. Marguerite is an openly lesbian priest in the Episcopal Church; Marguerite's pronouns are she/her/hers. Gene Robinson was the first openly gay bishop consecrated in the Episcopal Church.

startling and deeply disturbing experience. Feeling like we might have to do some outreach, we stayed afterwards for coffee hour. I don't recall any additional unpleasantness, but my husband says that it was all very Episcopalian and very, very polite. At the same time, we both left with the feeling that we would never set foot in that church again--and we haven't. We mentioned the experience to our rector when we saw him next and he laughed and said that the rector there was a pretty notorious homophobe and he wasn't at all surprised.⁴⁶

Not all exclusionary behavior is overt or obvious; some queer folk have experienced more subtle and sometimes unintentional marginalization, even within the context of welcome or from well-meaning people.

Jonah writes:

I think as a gender queer child who was deeply interested in faith, I found a tremendous amount of love and support within the Roman Catholic Church. I asked my mother to take me to church, I insisted on CCD and participating in the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Communion and Confirmation. I earnestly and actively strived for participation and I was welcomed. I always felt welcomed. I was, in fact, very much supported and encouraged by all manner of faith leaders, including priests and every CCD instructor I ever encountered. (And)... I was repeatedly told that I seemed to be destined to become a nun, that I should listen for the call. And I have no doubt that this was directly in correlation to my obviously queer presentation. I think the Church saw my inevitable failure to fit appropriately into it and society's expectations and pushed me towards living outside of that failure by embracing a role that would obscure my gender and sexuality. I think it was a well-meaning attempt to save me from myself.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Tom Reilly, email to author, March 27, 2019. Tom is an openly gay layperson in an Episcopal Church congregation and has asked to be identified with the pronouns he/him/his.

⁴⁷ Jonah Gabriel, email to author, April 27, 2019. Jonah is a layperson in the Episcopal Church and identifies as queer and trans, with no pronoun preference.

The Episcopal Church and LGBTQ People of Faith

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is quoted as saying, “If it’s not about love, then it’s not about God.”⁴⁸ To live into the Baptismal Covenant, Episcopalians need to reach out to and invite LGBTQ people of faith into the full embrace of our congregations; and though it has come a long way, the Church still struggles to fully accept and include LGBTQ people in the life of the community or to provide them with the spiritual and pastoral care they need. Spiritually embracing queer people of faith can help to bridge a pastoral gap to LGBTQ communities, and is beneficial to the growth of the Episcopal Church and the vibrancy of individual congregations. For Christians, it is also no more or less than what God calls us to do.

From Jonah:

As an adult who presents as a gender normative white guy, with the theoretical accompanying wife and children, I now feel very welcomed in the Episcopal Church. The freaking name tags where I can assert my preferred pronouns, the insistence by every church website and bulletin that they are a welcoming and affirming church, the presence of queer and trans faith leaders, and the support of laity in the lgbtq community, are all demonstrative efforts to change the widely and reasonably held perception that church is not for queers.

I think this is good work; work that attempts to make up for what are often traumatic and damaging histories of exclusion that queer folks of mine and previous generations hold from past engagement with communities of faith. And I wonder about where the line of welcome starts and ends. How much buy-in do we have to offer in order to truly be welcomed? If I was not so apparently gender normative, would my

⁴⁸ “Presiding Bishop Michael Curry,” *Episcopal Church*, last modified June 28, 2017, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/presiding-bishop-michael-curry>.

welcome be less enthusiastic? I'm not sure. In what ways do we welcome that are in spite of?⁴⁹

*From a transgender Episcopal priest:*⁵⁰

Based on conversations among trans clergy, I believe the following:

- There are only 5 full time priests who are openly trans. All trans men. Two associate priests, three rectors.
- Of the three rectors, only one was called as rector (while) openly trans. The other two transitioned in place.
- There are a few trans women who have been appointed part time positions as priest in charge.
- The trans women who have transitioned while rector have had to leave their positions in short order after announcing their intention to transition. There is one trans woman/two spirit person who has a full time position.
- There is one non-binary person in a campus ministry (I believe they are out); the other non-binary person, whom I know, is currently without a position.
- There are several trans and non-binary people in process in various seminaries.⁵¹

In March of 2018 Larry J. Bingham, the treasurer of the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas, wrote a brief guest commentary for the *Kansas City Star*, explaining the historical position of the Episcopal Church (TEC) in regards to LGBTQ people. Bingham wrote:

⁴⁹ Jonah Gabriel, email to author, April 27, 2019.

⁵⁰ Anonymous, email to author, April 30, 2019. Anonymous is an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church who identifies as transgender. These numbers are from personal conversation only, not verified statistics, and are believed to apply throughout the entire Episcopal Church, not a single diocese.

⁵¹ Anonymous, April 30, 2019.

For more than 40 years the Episcopal Church has stood in support of the rights of gay and lesbian people and in more recent years has expanded that to include transgender people. This support for LGBT rights isn't a political stance but a theological one, based in the knowledge that people are beloved children of God and worthy of respect.

It was one of the first Christian denominations to recognize in 1976 that "homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance and pastoral concern of the Church." This resolution was passed only one year after the American Psychological Association voted to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. At its next General Convention in 1979, the Episcopal Church declared that there is no barrier to the ordination of homosexual people.⁵²

But not everyone in TEC was on board with support for this theology, and the process of building support and acknowledgment within the church as a whole created a tension and a schism that in present day we are still working to recover from. Bingham continues:

Over the next 36 years, we struggled with the recognition of the faithful and monogamous relationships between gay and lesbian couples. Our denomination has its conservative wing, and we were unable to reach a consensus to give full recognition to these relationships... A major change of emphasis took place in 2000, when a majority of the deputies to General Convention passed a resolution that changed the focus from addressing the issues of relationships of same-sex couples to an acknowledgment that the issues of relationships are common to all of our members... We moved from "them" to "us."^{53, 54}

⁵² Larry J. Bingham, "The Episcopal Church Changed Course for Our LGBT Members" *The Kansas City Star*, last modified March 18, 2018, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.kansascity.com/opinion/readers-opinion/guest-commentary/article205579084.html>. Emphasis added.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ It is notable that while progress has been made, there was a built-in expectation and requirement in Bingham's assertion, that to recognize LGBT people's relationships as valid, they must be monogamous. While I disagree in principle that the church should have authority over how people express their sexuality, (straight or LGBT), I think it is particularly relevant in the case of queer sexualities, which may or may not take the same shape as hetero-normative monogamous pairings. (see my footnote #16)

On June 26, 2015 the United States Supreme Court ruled that it is unconstitutional and illegal for states to ban same-sex wedding unions. News coverage posted on CNN.com's *Politics* page said:

Nearly 46 years to the day after a riot at New York's Stonewall Inn ushered in the modern gay rights movement, the decision could settle one of the major civil rights fights of this era. The language of Kennedy's opinion spoke eloquently of the most fundamental values of family, love and liberty... The U.S. is now the 21st country to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide, including territories. Married same-sex couples will now enjoy the same legal rights and benefits as married heterosexual couples nationwide and will be recognized on official documents such as birth and death certificates.⁵⁵

At the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 2018, Resolution B012 (*Marriage Rites for the Whole Church*) was passed, bringing the church's policy into alignment with the 2015 federal ruling on marriage equality. The Church has come a long way - but we have further still to go. In the diocese of Albany, Bishop William H. Love recently published a pastoral letter stating his refusal to comply with the new resolution, citing his personal belief that allowing same-sex marriage is a ploy by Satan to ignore God's Holy Word. Bishop Love wrote:

I both spoke and voted against (Resolution B012), sharing my concerns, all to no avail... While I don't question the sincerity or the well intentions of many in the Episcopal Church who believe the best way to love and minister to our Gay and Lesbian Brothers and Sisters in Christ is to embrace them in their sexuality and make provisions for their same-sex attractions through same-sex marriage rites, I do believe they have been deceived into believing a lie that has been planted in the Church by the "great deceiver" – Satan... The Episcopal Church and Western

⁵⁵ "Supreme Court Rules States Must Allow Same-Sex Marriage - CNNPolitics," accessed March 2, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/26/politics/supreme-court-same-sex-marriage-ruling/index.html>.

Society have been hijacked by the “Gay Rights Agenda” which is very well organized, very strategic, very well financed, and very powerful. Satan is having a heyday bringing division into the Church over these issues and is trying to use the Church to hurt and destroy the very ones we love and care about by deceiving the leadership of the Church into creating ways for our gay and lesbians brothers and sister (sic) to embrace their sexual desires rather than to repent and seek God’s love and healing grace.⁵⁶

I have observed that whenever a high-profile Christian begins talking about the “Gay rights agenda,” progressive Christians end up needing to defend our faith to people who assume (and sometimes loudly assert) that *all Christians* think, believe and act this way. I take comfort in knowing that the larger part of the Episcopal Church - and its official position on this - dispute Bp. Love’s claims and support the understanding that love does not require repentance.⁵⁷ Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and House of Deputies President Gay Clark Jennings published a response to Bishop Love’s letter, stating, “We are committed to the principle of full and equal access to, and inclusion in, the sacraments for all of the baptized children of God, including our LGBTQ siblings.”⁵⁸

The practices of exclusion and marginalization of LGBTQ people, as evidenced in Bishop Love’s letter and the stories here, are against the Episcopal

⁵⁶ White, Jon. “Albany Bishop Draws Red Line, Challenges Authority of GC.” *Episcopal Cafe* (blog), November 11, 2018. <https://www.episcopalcafe.com/albany-bishop-draws-red-line-challenges-authority-of-gc/>.

⁵⁷ *Love* does not require repentance; in my personal opinion, hatred, abuse of ecclesial authority and refusing to acknowledge the validity of a relationship because it looks different from one’s own, might.

⁵⁸ John Chilton, “Presiding Officers Respond to Albany Bishop’s Letter.” *Episcopal Cafe* (blog), November 12, 2018. <https://www.episcopalcafe.com/presiding-officers-respond-to-albany-bishops-letter/>.

Church's tenets of Christian practice as I have learned them; they violate the laws that Jesus repeatedly upheld as being foundational for his followers, as well as the canons of the Episcopal Church, and are hurtful to people who are already shunned and marginalized in our society. Even so, Curry and Jennings also reminded the bishop of Albany that no one is to be forced to act in ways that are against their personal faith and beliefs; there remains a "conscience clause," whereby, "the canons of The Episcopal Church give authority to all members of the clergy to decline to officiate a marriage for reasons of conscience, and Resolution B012... does not change this fact."⁵⁹ This was followed by a reminder that, "In all matters, those of us who have taken vows to obey the doctrine, discipline, and worship of The Episcopal Church must act in ways that reflect and uphold the discernment and decisions of the General Convention of the Church."⁶⁰

Spiritual Needs of Transgender and Non-Binary People

There are many areas which overlap throughout the LGBTQ+ spectrum, which can be considered together; there are also challenges and spiritual needs specific to people who are trans or non-binary in gender, which I will look at

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

separately in more detail.⁶¹ In an article for *Queer Theology*, Fr. Shannon

Kearns wrote:

Lots of churches declare their “open and affirming” status on their websites. Or they will put a rainbow flag on their church sign or website homepage. But those symbols often don’t tell the whole story. Many churches that have done a lot of work on gay and lesbian issues haven’t bothered to study anything about transgender people. They have outdated language on their websites or don’t mention transgender issues at all. Some folks will ask “Why do we need to mention it at all? Why can’t we just say we welcome all people?” Because most churches don’t. Because I’ve sat through too many services where my life and identity is either ignored or talked about badly. If your website says nothing about transgender people I will automatically assume that you are not welcoming of transgender people.⁶²

Within the umbrella of the LGBTQ communities, people who identify within the spectrum of transgender or non-binary gender are underrepresented and often have additional challenges and spiritual needs that lesbian, gay and bisexual people may not. According to an article in *Psychology Today*,

Individuals who identify as transgender tend to experience higher rates of mental health issues than the general population. While approximately 6.7 percent of the general United States population suffers from depression and 18 percent grapple with some iteration of an anxiety disorder, nearly half of all individuals who identify as transgender experience these issues.⁶³

⁶¹ While the original scope of this paper did not single out the needs and challenges of trans and gender-variant people, some of the research I engaged in made it clear that this is an area of specific need within the larger LGBTQ+ umbrella that required additional focus.

⁶² Shannon Kearns, “How to Tell If Your Church Is Welcoming for Transgender People,” *Queer Theology*, August 12, 2014, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://www.queertheology.com/transgender-inclusion-church/>.

⁶³ Katherine Schreiber, “Why Transgender People Experience More Mental Health Issues,” *Psychology Today*, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-truth-about-exercise-addiction/201612/why-transgender-people-experience-more-mental-health>.

Rev. Dr. Justin Tanis, in the groundbreaking book, *Transgendered: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith*,⁶⁴ speaks to some of the challenges and needs of people who identify as trans or gender non-binary.

In a number of different ways, a congregation can explicitly or unconsciously create an atmosphere that conveys to transgendered (sic) people that they are not welcome there. Communities of faith also need to be aware that they need to extend a welcome that bridges the fear of rejection that a transgendered person may have that prevents them from seeking acceptance within the congregation. This one barrier is probably the largest to the participation of transgendered people in communities of faith... When I have asked trans people about their attendance in worship, particularly those early in transition, I have frequently received the answer, "Of course, I could not go to church/synagogue/temple."⁶⁵

Dani Gabriel, shared their son's story in *Sojourners* magazine:

After a long period of exploration, my daughter Isabel came out as a boy named Samson, and he was ecstatic. That excitement quickly faded with the arrival of awkwardness, inappropriate comments, and harassment at school. There were all kinds of discussions in the news about transgender people, the military, bathrooms, and Trump. Samson was confused, hurt, and overwhelmed. As Samson's parents, we were also overwhelmed and terrified. Samson's papa and I are both queer, with complicated gender identities of our own. Many of our chosen family, Samson's aunts and uncles, are queer and transgender. We felt relief in knowing that Samson would grow up in our protective bubble. "Kids these days have it so much easier than we did," we thought. We were wrong. By the end of March, Samson was in a deep depression. All of his sparkle and talkativeness was gone. His downhill slide ended with a four-day hospitalization.

The first time we visited Samson, our priest, Mother Liz, came with us. She sat on the bed with Samson. He asked her to pray for him, and she anointed him... Sometime later, we were sitting at a cafe a few blocks from church when Samson asked Liz, "Could you re-baptize me?" She

⁶⁴ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 9. There is an updated version of this book, (2018), which shifts language both in the title and the copy to the currently-used form, from *transgendered* to *transgender*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 9 & 115.

said “No, we baptized you, it worked the first time. But we can do something special.”⁶⁶

Samson’s naming ceremony and blessing, adapted by his priest from a liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer, may be the first blessing of its kind - the first re-naming ceremony for a transgender child - in an Episcopal church.⁶⁷ The ceremony was beautiful and affirming, and I have seen the congregation’s love and support for Samson before and since. This is especially important for transgender people - youth and adults alike. Gabriel’s mention of their son’s depression and hospitalization cannot be glossed over or considered an isolated case. They shared their experience as a volunteer hospital chaplain with *Sojourners* readers:

I volunteer as a chaplain, and one of my trainers told me that if I encounter a transgender person who is suicidal, I *must* say, “God does not condemn you,” that that—more than any other statement—is critical. LGBTQ people have grown up in religious institutions, and I have the most experience with people who grew up in Christian traditions, being rejected, shamed, and excluded. It is estimated that 40 percent of transgender people attempt suicide. And there is no way to know what the real number of attempts and suicides is, because of reporting gaps and because the deaths of transgender people are often shrouded in shame and secrecy. Much of the pain LGBTQ people struggle with comes from the communities that are supposed to hold us up, communities that are supposed to be centered around the teachings of Jesus Christ. That has been some of my own experience.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Dani Gabriel, “Samson’s Blessing: A Mother’s Account of Her Transgender Son’s Renaming Ceremony - the First to Be Done in the Episcopal Church,” *Sojourners*, June 2018 (June 2018): 30–34.

⁶⁷ Adaptation of the BCP rite by the Rev. Liz Tichenor with input from the Rev. Phil Brochard and the Right Rev. Marc Handley Andrus

⁶⁸ Gabriel, “Samson’s Blessing.”

The suicide rate among people who identify as transgender or non-binary - especially for the youth population - is shockingly high; often this is exacerbated by a lack of support from sources that people tend to count on most such as family members, schools or churches. According to the Human Rights Campaign,

Harrowing statistics from a study recently published by the American Academy of Pediatrics revealed alarming levels of attempted suicide among transgender youth -- with the highest rates among transgender boys and non-binary youth. The findings emphasize the urgency of building welcoming and safe communities for LGBTQ young people, particularly for transgender youth. More than half of transgender male teens who participated in the survey reported attempting suicide in their lifetime, while 29.9 percent of transgender female teens said they attempted suicide. Among non-binary youth, 41.8 percent of respondents stated that they had attempted suicide at some point in their lives.^{69,70}

⁶⁹ Human Rights Campaign, "Study Shows Shocking Rates of Attempted Suicide Among Trans Teens," *Human Rights Campaign*, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://www.hrc.org/blog/new-study-reveals-shocking-rates-of-attempted-suicide-among-trans-adolescen/>.

⁷⁰ Russell B. Toomey, Amy K. Syvertsen, and Maura Shramko, "Transgender Adolescent Suicide Behavior," *Pediatrics* 142, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): e20174218. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/142/4/e20174218>.

Chapter Three: Called to Serve

Radical welcome has to go deeper, into the very marrow of your congregational life. A community cannot hope to live faithfully and fully as the Body of Christ without re-imagining its structures in order to make room for The Other.

- Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome*

Imago Dei: The Vision of the Church

In a July, 2017 theological reflection on the rights of transgender people,

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry wrote:

The Episcopal Church welcomes all persons: young and old, liberal and conservative, high-church and low-church, cisgender and transgender children of God. This principle – adorning the signs of the Episcopal Church which read, “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You” – has its origins in the way of Jesus of Nazareth, given voice by the Apostle Paul, who wrote: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:27-28)⁷¹

In part because of this vision of who we are called to be through our baptism into Christ, the church is meant to be a sign of and a witness to God’s dream for the entire human family living as “the Beloved Community” of God. This vocation of the church as a sign and a witness informs my concern for Gavin and our other transgender siblings. All people have been equally created by God in God’s image and likeness. The proclamation of Genesis 1:26-27 that humankind is created in the “image” and “likeness” of God is the solemn declaration of the Lord God Almighty of the inherent sacredness, dignity, worth, and equality of every human person, by virtue of the *imago dei*.^{72, 73}

⁷¹ While this quote from Galatians is used elsewhere in this paper, I have left it here also, as it is relevant to the presiding bishop’s point.

⁷² Imago Dei is translated from the Latin as “image of God.” For extensive study and commentary, see “Imago Dei,” *ReligionFacts*, accessed May 10, 2019, <http://www.religionfacts.com/imago-dei>.

⁷³ Josh Hornbeck, “Presiding Bishop Curry Offers Theological Reflection on Transgender Rights,” *The Episcopal Diocese of Olympia*, last modified March 2, 2017, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://ecww.org/presiding-bishop-curry-offers-theological-reflection-transgender-rights/>. The presiding bishop began this reflection by stating: “I offer this brief theological reflection to share some of my thoughts and convictions which informed my decision to join with the President of the House of Deputies as signatories to the amicus brief in

The Baptismal Covenant and the Diakonia of All Believers

The *Baptismal Covenant* of The Episcopal Church forms the core of the agreements made in becoming Episcopalian Christians. From the official website of the Episcopal Church:

The baptismal covenant, found on p. 304-5 of *The Book of Common Prayer*, is a small catechism for use during the rite of initiation into the Church. Armentrout and Slocum, in their *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, note that the baptismal covenant “is widely regarded as the normative statement of what it means to follow Christ” (p. 37); in these questions and answers, the congregation expresses the ways each of the faithful will live their faith both inside and outside the church walls... the covenant includes five questions regarding how we, as Christians, are called to live out our faith: with firm commitment and a reliance on God’s help.⁷⁴ These five questions are:

1. Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
2. Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
3. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
4. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? People:
5. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

To live into the covenants we make at baptism, especially the declarations of “seeking and serving Christ in all persons” and “striving for

the case of Gloucester County School Board v. G.G, which concerns Gavin Grimm, a transgender youth who seeks equal access according to his gender identity, to bathroom facilities in his public school.”

⁷⁴ Episcopal Church, “Baptismal Covenant,” in *The Book of Common Prayer: And Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America : Together with the Psalter, or, Psalms of David.*, 1981. Further exploration of the Baptismal Covenant to follow.

justice and peace,” Episcopalians need to improve our welcome and support to people who are gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual and/or queer and become more proactive in doing so. The role of deacons, whose ministry is in large part defined by questions 3, 4 and 5, is uniquely suited to leading people of faith in this work.

For me, the last two questions from the covenant are the *WWJD* - “What Would Jesus Do?” - litmus test for Christian behavior in the world. I do my best not to judge others (that would be God’s job, not mine). The world we live in can offer a steep challenge to that practice, and in becoming a Christian, I made the conscious decision to use Jesus’ teachings and behavior as a model. I do not consider myself an ethicist, but I do use these questions as guidelines for “right” and “wrong,” within the parameters of my understanding of Jesus’ teachings. When a decision on something is needed, I feel secure in thinking: *Will this bring me closer to or farther from seeking and serving God in all people? Am I striving for justice and peace? Am I respecting the dignity of every human being or only some?* Given Jesus’ assertion that the two most important commandments we can keep are, “Love God” and “Love your neighbor as yourself”... what *would* Jesus do?

Diakonia, according to the Association for Episcopal Deacons (AED), is a Greek word which means caring for those in need, carrying out God’s vision

in word, action, and in attending to all of God's creation."⁷⁵ In their brochure, *Engaging the Diakonia of all Believers*,⁷⁶ the AED states:

In diakonia those serving and those served are both transformed; the purpose of diakonia is to make Christ's redemptive love known by word and example... We must challenge all theological interpretations that do not take seriously the suffering in the world, a world afflicted with poverty, violence and injustice, and environmental degradation. We must also challenge all theological interpretations that do not take seriously the systems, structures, and powers that foster, or even benefit from, poverty, violence, and injustice, and environmental degradation.⁷⁷

Episcopal Deacons: Standing in the Doorway

Many people - even many of those who have been in the Episcopal Church for all or most of their lives - do not understand who deacons are and what they are called to. Knowing this can help to illuminate why and how deacons can be a resource to help the Church build a supportive structure of welcome and respond to the needs of LGBTQ Christians.

Deacons in the Episcopal Church are *ordained leaders* who serve under a bishop, often alongside priests.⁷⁸ Like priests, deacons are required to undergo

⁷⁵ "Engaging the Diakonia of All Believers." (Westborough, MA: Association for Episcopal Deacons, September 3, 2014). Accessed October 18, 2018. https://www.episcopaldeacons.org/uploads/2/6/7/3/26739998/trifold_rev914.pdf

⁷⁶ This verbiage is based on the phrase, *the priesthood of all believers*, Martin Luther's assertion that all Christians can be - and are - "priests," whether ordained or not. For further reading, please see Martin Luther, *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation* (1520).

⁷⁷ "Engaging the Diakonia of All Believers."

⁷⁸ People called to ordained priesthood are first ordained and serve for a period of 6-12 months as "transitional deacons." While the purpose of this is for priests to be deacons first, to learn to exemplify and take on Jesus' identity as servant to all, the distinction can be confusing for some. While transitional deacons can and should (in my own opinion) serve in as many diaconal capacities as possible before being ordained to the priesthood, to gain a deep

several years of formative training. This varies by diocese, but some areas of study (in no particular order) are: pastoral care, theology, liturgics, prophetic preaching, ethics, and biblical studies; Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) or chaplaincy, and field education service in a church and/or in the external community are also required.

Archdeacon and theologian Ormonde Plater explains that there are “two biblical models... *agape* (divine love) and *diakonia* (sacred agency)” at the core of a deacon’s call and ministry.⁷⁹ Plater refers to these as “two rivers flowing through the biblical landscape,” saying,

In the first stream, *agape*, run the waters of God’s unconditional love for human beings and of our human duty to “do justice and to love kindness” (Micah 6:8). From the second stream, *diakonia*, God sends forth human beings as emissaries on a dusty but holy mission, with orders to proclaim the good news and heal the sick.⁸⁰

One of the primary roles of a deacon is reaching out: to go “into the world,” learn what the needs are of people in the nearby communities, especially those living on the margins of society, and bring those needs back to the church. The second part of this role is to then bring a response or aid from the church to those in need, in the community. As Deacon Bob Zito put it, “At

understanding of the deacon’s roles, this thesis paper is focused mainly on those with a vocational calling to be deacons.

⁷⁹ Ormonde Plater, *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2004), xii-xiii. Elsewhere, Plater has mentioned two other “faces” of the diaconate, *leitourgia* (liturgy), *logos* (the Word), which I will look at here, though in different authors’ words and interpretations. For more of Plater’s treatment of these areas, see “The Four Faces of the Diaconate” in “Diakoneo Magazine,” *Association for Episcopal Deacons*, accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.episcopaldeacons.org/diakoneo-magazine.html>, (Issues 18, No. 4; 18 No. 5; 19 No. 1; 19 No. 2).

⁸⁰ Plater, *Many Servants*, 1.

the door of the church, the deacon has one foot in the church and one foot in the world.”⁸¹ Another way to say this is that deacons form a bridge between the Church and those in need; in the particular context of this thesis, a bridge to and from LGBTQ communities. Deacons I have known are fond of saying that Jesus came not only to comfort the afflicted, but also to afflict the comfortable; both of which deacons are called to.⁸²

Deacons are perhaps best-known in their role of exemplifying the *servant ministry* of Jesus. According to the *School for Deacons (SfD)*, “The diaconate, as a distinctive order, recalls to the Church the Body of Christ, that Jesus Christ came to serve, and that the Church has a servant identity. Ordained deacons personify, sacramentalize and enable the ministry of service to which all Christians are called at baptism.”⁸³

But diakonia is not *only* “servant ministry.” There has been a shift over the years in who and what deacons are understood and expected to be. In *Being*

⁸¹ Nicole Seiferth, “Wall Street’s Deacon,” News & Blogs: Voices from the Trinity Community, Trinity Church Wall Street. April 14, 2010. Accessed October 18, 2018. <https://www.trinitywallstreet.org/blogs/news/wall-streets-deacon>.

⁸² Tim Stewart, “God Comforts the Afflicted and Afflicts the Comfortable,” Text, *Dictionary of Christianese*, last modified August 5, 2013, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.dictionaryofchristianese.com/god-comforts-the-afflicted-and-afflicts-the-comfortable/>. While I have seen this attributed to both Christian ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr and Lutheran theologian Martin Marty in a religious context, the quote actually goes back to Chicago humorist/journalist Finley Peter Dunne (1867-1936). The original usage was from *Observations by Mr. Dooley* (Finley Peter Dunne, New York, NY: R. H. Russell, 1902, p. 240), and read: “Th' newspaper does ivrything fr us. It runs th' polis foorce an' th' banks, commands th' milishy, controls th' ligislachure, baptizes th' young, marries th' foolish, comforts th' afflicted, afflicts th' comfortable, buries th' dead an' roasts thim aftherward.” (sic)

⁸³ Roderick Dugliss, “Mission,” School for Deacons, accessed October 18, 2018. <http://sfd.edu/mission>.

a Deacon Today, Rosalind Brown explains: “The Church is charged with going into all the world to preach the gospel and so diaconal ministry is not just ministry in the Church but the ministry of the Church *in the world*.”⁸⁴ Brown continues,

Once the deacon has been called, commissioned and ordained by the church, it is the deacon’s vocation to enable the church to be itself in following Christ... diaconal ministry is about stirring up Christians so that the church is radically faithful in its worship and its witness, recognizing both the personal and societal implications of being called into the diaconal ministry of the body of Christ.⁸⁵

There are also different ways in which the translation of the word *diakonia* (and with it the understanding of the roles of deacons), have evolved. Ormonde

Plater wrote:

Recent scholarly studies challenge the popular translation of the Greek word *diakonia* and its cognates, including *diakonos*, as “service” in the sense of care of the needy and even menial labor. An Orthodox bishop and theologian, Paulos Mar Gregorios, argues that *diakonia* involves not only mercy, justice and prophecy, but also worship, upbuilding the church, royal priesthood, and prayer and intercession.⁸⁶

Plater explains the origins of the understanding of *diakonia* as *service*, dating it to 19th century German Lutherans who “sought to recover the original ministry of deacons and deaconesses as servants of the poor, the sick, neglected children, and prisoners” and how this was later used by the Roman Catholic church as part of the “rationale for the establishment of the permanent

⁸⁴ Rosalind Brown. *Being a Deacon Today: Exploring a distinctive ministry in the Church and in the world*. (Norwich, Norfolk, UK: Canterbury Press), p. 11. Emphasis added.

⁸⁵ Brown, *Being a Deacon Today*, p. 17. Emphasis added for clarity.

⁸⁶ Plater, *Many Servants*, xii-xiii.

diaconate.” Plater goes on to cite John N. Collins, a scholar of Greek and the New Testament, who found, “remarkable consistency among pagan, Jewish, and Christian writers of the ancient Greek world, who tended to use words of *diakonia* and its cognates in three related and overlapping ways.” These are:

1. *Courier or go-between* “who bears the sacred word as a herald... interprets the words of others... intervenes (and) mediates... and who even stirs the emotions of an audience through song.”
2. “*An agent, instrument or medium* who conducts an operation, acts on behalf of others, carries out the desires or commands of a superior... who gets done whatever needs to be done...”
3. “*One who attends... waits on others... cares for the needs of a guest, and on formal and hence religious occasions bears the wine cup and conducts the feast...*”⁸⁷

Plater also includes a fourth group of meaning, sharing that,

Early Christian writers used *diakon-* words, including eighty places in the New Testament, to talk about Jesus, themselves, and others as spokespersons and emissaries of heaven, emissaries in the church, and others who exercise commissions within Christian communities to act under God, the church, and the Spirit...⁸⁸

In addition to all of the above roles - and perhaps most importantly - Deacons are also called to be a *prophetic voice*, interpreting the needs of the times through preaching, intercessing, proclaiming the Gospel and speaking up to alert the church to the needs of others (in this case, specifically lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer+ folk) and to help congregations speak truth to power; even (or perhaps *especially*) when that “power” is the Church or congregation itself.

⁸⁷ Ibid. Items summarized for brevity.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Here I Am, Lord: My Social Location and Story

My own journey to the diaconate has in some ways been a lifetime in the making and in other ways was entirely unexpected. While deep faith (in many forms), a sense of service, and a call to social justice have been constants in my life for as long as I can remember, I did not come to the Episcopal Church or learn about deacons until well into my adulthood. When I decided to be baptized, I took classes in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Testament⁸⁹ at the School for Deacons, and attended the catechumenate at my church, where I learned about the Baptismal Covenant and the roles of ministry for lay people, deacons, priests and bishops. The Covenant spoke to me deeply (and still does); I was drawn in particular to the agreements to proclaim the Good News, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to respect the dignity of every human being.⁹⁰ I was shocked the day my rector looked at me and said, “You’re an evangelist!” I’m what? The “e” word is one of the things that historically kept me away from the Christian faith; my experience of it had been in the context of others trying earnestly to convert me to (their very narrowly-defined idea of) Christianity. So it took me by surprise - but when Fr. Phil described why he thought this, it also did not take long for me to realize that he was right. I am enthusiastic about what I have learned about Jesus, his teachings and where the Episcopal Church is in its polity. And when I am enthusiastic about something -

⁸⁹ For information on preferred nomenclature and background on the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the Christian Testament (New Testament), see “From Hebrew Bible To Christian Bible | From Jesus To Christ - The First Christians | FRONTLINE | PBS,” accessed May 1, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/scriptures.html>.

⁹⁰ BCP, 305.

I share it; with anyone who is willing to listen. I also came to realize that part of my call is to be a bridge to people who have the fear, uncertainty and distrust of organized religion that I once did, and to share with them a different perspective of a differently-lived faith that might call to them.

The call to seek and serve Christ in others is perhaps the most familiar concept in the Covenant for me, as I have used a similar practice throughout my life; both Paganism and Hinduism (among other world religions) teach about seeking, acknowledging, and relating to God or the Divine in others.

My pivotal moment of *call* to the Episcopal diaconate came during my second year in the church. I was in a pew, standing for a hymn during a Eucharistic service. As with most of the hymns I sang in those first years, I was not familiar with this one and simply began to sing along with the congregation. When we got halfway through the first verse, I realized that I had tears streaming down my face; by the time we reached the chorus, I knew I was being told directly what I needed to do - and that I was giving my answer, my “yes” to God, as I sang:

I the lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry
All who dwell in dark and sin / my hand will save
I have made the stars of night; I will make their darkness bright
Who will bear my light to them? / Whom shall I send?

Here I am Lord / is it I Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night
I will go, Lord / if you lead me
I will hold your people in my heart.⁹¹⁹²

⁹¹ “Dan Schutte - Here I Am, Lord Lyrics | AZLyrics.Com,” last modified 1979, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/danschutte/hereiamlord.html>.

As I began to discern a call to ministry and what that might look like, I started to realize how blessed I was to be in a parish with a dedicated deacon (and unfortunately how rare that was, as there are nowhere near enough deacons in each diocese to fill the need for their ministry). Even before the defining moment of call I experienced, I had found myself watching what Deacon Mary Louise did in the liturgy and identifying with that position as one that spoke to me. As I got to know her and learned what she did in her ministry and life outside of church walls, and accompanied her a couple of times, I felt myself further in alignment with the role of a deacon, so that when I stood and heard myself answering “here I am, Lord!” I had a pretty good idea of what I was being called to and where it might lead.

⁹² In the course of doing research for this paper, I learned that Here I Am, Lord had been written last-minute for a diaconal ordination - and while the composer was still a seminarian. For further information, see: “‘Here I Am, Lord’: The Little-Known Story behind a Catholic Hit,” *America Magazine*, last modified October 12, 2017, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/10/12/here-i-am-lord-little-known-story-behind-catholic-hit>.

Chapter Four: Making Needed Changes

*Congregations are corporate expressions of the Body of Christ formed in response to God's initiative of grace and as a response to God's calling... The primary mandate of the church is to be a transforming influence in the world. This is how the church becomes relevant in people's lives.*⁹³

- Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations*

It was the morning of the San Francisco LGBTQ Pride Parade a few years ago. I had joined the *Oasis California*⁹⁴ group as part of the Interfaith Religious Contingent, and after a short, lovely service (and several hours of waiting, milling about and visiting among the group), we had finally started to move from the side street we had gathered on towards the parade route itself. As we got officially underway and took a left from Main Street onto Market Street, a clergy person in front of me who was wearing a clerical collar, put out their hand to “high five” people along the sidelines. I was several paces back and watched as people enthusiastically began to reach out, sometimes over their friends' heads, to return the high five. As I passed a group of onlookers, I saw someone turn to their friend and heard them say, “That was a *priest!*” with incredulity, awe, delight, appreciation, and hunger. They saw a person openly identified as Christian clergy, (I believe they were actually a deacon, not a priest), marching in the pride parade, extending welcome and love on behalf of a mainline Christian denomination. And I remember thinking, *this is so very needed*. Further evidence for this can be found in the personal testimonies

⁹³ Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), p. 40.

⁹⁴ “Oasis California | the LGBTQ Ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of California,” *Oasis California*, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://oasisca.org/>.

shared earlier in this paper by Dani, Tom, Marguerite, and Jonah, all of whom live in the San Francisco Bay Area. While this is a locationally-limited sample, it also illustrates the point. Even in the midst of the forward-thinking, progressive, inclusive, affirming Bay Area, widely recognized as one of the most queer-friendly metropolitan areas in the nation⁹⁵ ... this is needed.

And if it is needed *here* - how much more might it be needed elsewhere? This experience also solidified an understanding of my call as one that would explicitly require ordination. I marched in the parade, smiled and waved at folks on the sidelines and was happy to *represent* as a queer Christian and seminarian. *And...* the person wearing a clerical collar was an iconic figure, who visibly represented the weight of the church - and because of that, could also represent, exemplify and offer the *Church's* love and welcome. The collar was a visible statement of their role as an official representative of the Church; and in extending *their* hand in welcome, the deacon extended the welcome of the *entire Episcopal Church*; they were a representative and a symbol - or as Presiding Bishop Curry said, *a sign and a witness*.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ According to a 2018 study, San Francisco has a higher percentage of its population identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender than any other city in the U.S. and "...has some of the nation's strongest local non-discrimination ordinances ensuring equality and fairness in law enforcement and in access to city jobs, benefits and services." Scott Van Voorhis, "What Cities Have the Largest Percentage of LGBT Residents?," *TheStreet*, last modified May 31, 2018, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://www.thestreet.com/personal-finance/cities-with-largest-percentage-of-lgbt-residents-14605660>.

⁹⁶ Hornbeck, "Presiding Bishop Curry Offers Theological Reflection on Transgender Rights."

That experience was catalytic for me, and I came to understand that I am not only called to minister to those in need but also to be a bridge between the church and the community, and a symbol representing each to the other; in a word, to be a *deacon*.⁹⁷ All people can and should reach out in love, and all people of faith should do so in and with God's compassion (in Hebrew, *racham*), and lovingkindness (*hesed*). Baptized Christians both lay and ordained are called to do this as ambassadors of faith, letting others know that they are not alone, that they are loved by God, seen by the church and invited in with open arms and open hearts; that they are truly *welcome*, and that we (all - straight as well as queer), stand with them. Within the structure of the Episcopal Church, it is the explicit role of *deacons* to articulate this deep need from people in the world – in this case from lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people - to our church congregations and to bring the church's response back to them.

Welcoming and Affirming Congregations

Congregations approach formation and how they work with their local communities differently. The Episcopal Church allows for a diverse range of practices in all areas of congregational life and development including leadership structures, and in many ways individual churches and parishes are free to follow the needs and desires of the people who make up their congregations. That said, each church or parish *is* a member of the larger Episcopal Church, which is in turn a Christian organization. We do not only

⁹⁷ "Lovingkindness-Definition of Hesed | Precept Austin," accessed May 10, 2019, https://www.preceptaustin.org/lovingkindness-definition_of_hesed.

gather as a *community*; we gather as an explicitly *Christian* community, and claim to be guided by the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we name and understand as Christ - *Christos, anointed one*. Jesus taught, unequivocally, that we are to be guided in all that we do by *love*: love for God, love for ourselves and love for our neighbors; and that *everyone* is our “neighbor.”

Trans people need to be seen and explicitly told that they are welcome as they are. I have been fortunate to be a part of congregations that actively welcome, include and support transgender people - both lay and ordained - in all aspects of parish life.⁹⁸ A while back, my *sending parish* - the church community that formed me and has been sponsoring and supporting my call to ordained ministry - put up a cork-and-blackboard on the sidewalk outside of their main doors. The blackboard half of the sign is for members and people in the local community to share thoughts and prayer requests on - there is chalk left on a ledge, and questions are posted that anyone walking by can respond to. The cork side of the board is usually used for a poster, flag or other supportive messaging. Lately when I drive by on my way to work, there has been a large

⁹⁸ In this paper, I have chosen to focus on congregations that *want* to welcome and affirm queer people, how they can go about doing so, and why I feel this is necessary. It is crucial to note that there are many congregations in the Episcopal Church that are not yet supportive or welcoming to LGBTQ people for various reasons, such as the example cited by Justin Tanis (Trans-Gendered, 116-117), about gender difference being “a source of humor in our culture.” Tanis states: “Some members of the congregation may feel that gender variance in church is therefore mocking the community or mocking God, rather than an authentic expression of a person’s self-hood.” In the course of this paper I will not be able to spend time on how one might go about shifting those beliefs and changing the climate they create, but will acknowledge here the importance of doing so and hope to address it in the future.

vertically-striped flag in the Trans Pride colors - light blue, pale pink and white - pinned to the board, declaring in broad lettering, “God Erases No One.”⁹⁹

Grace Cathedral, the seat of the Episcopal Diocese of California, is another excellent example of a welcoming congregation. Located in the heart of San Francisco, from the earliest days of the AIDS epidemic, the congregants and clergy at Grace - led by Deacon Connie Hartquist - created some of the first ministries to people with HIV/AIDS, working with San Francisco General Hospital to help create the *Sojourn Chaplaincy* program, and reached out into the LGBTQ (then “gay”) community to determine need and provide spiritual support to people living with the disease and their families.¹⁰⁰ Archdeacon David Stickley adds, “(Deacon) Anthony Turner... was instrumental in beginning the AIDS Quilt project. It's also entirely possible that, because of the ministries of Connie and Anthony, we have the AIDS Memorial Chapel at Grace Cathedral.”¹⁰¹ Grace has upheld the equal standing of women and transfolk in the church, commissioning and employing LGBTQ clergy and lay people; it has been at the forefront of the fight for marriage equality,

⁹⁹ Signage board outside of All Souls Episcopal Church, Berkeley, CA. www.allsoulsparish.org. The church also printed and distributed stickers with this graphic and message.

¹⁰⁰ Monica Burden, “Sojourn Chaplaincy: Journeying With Others for 25 Years” (n.d.): 8. Additional information provided by Rod Dugliss, Dean of *The School for Deacons*.

¹⁰¹ David Stickley, email to author, April 27, 2019.

exemplifies LGBTQ welcome and inclusion, and supports the ordination of people in all of the above categories.¹⁰²

So what - exactly - can congregations do to become more welcoming and supportive for LGBTQ+ people?

In *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk*, David J. Kundtz and Bernard S. Schlager offer that there are “Three Basic Steps to Building a Community of Care for LGBTQ People: (1) Create a Genuine Welcome, (2) Integrate Queer People into the Life of a Congregation, (3) Build Alliances with Queer Communities outside the Congregation.”¹⁰³

I have utilized Kundtz and Schlager’s *Three Basic Steps* to outline suggestions for congregations to use in better supporting and reaching out to people who identify as LGBTQ.

Creating a Genuine Welcome

Kundtz and Schlager expand upon their first step by offering that, “a church or synagogue that cares for queer people is one that honors them as morally complete human persons, invites them into full membership, and celebrates their life experiences in all aspects of congregational life.”

¹⁰² “Pride 2018,” *Grace Cathedral*, June 8, 2017, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://gracecathedral.org/pride/> and <https://gracecathedral.org/people-initiatives/>. Many examples of and resources for LGBTQ+ inclusion can be found on www.gracecathedral.org.

¹⁰³ David Kundtz and Bernard Sloan Schlager, *Ministry among God's Queer Folk: LGBT Pastoral Care* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 161.

David Stickley offered the following on creating welcome:

The place for me to start is always that what we do in church is meant to be the symbolic parallel of what we do in the world; and the deacon in me is always wanting to highlight these parallels. When we welcome someone - anyone - into our homes, our first order of business is (or at least should be) to make them comfortable... However, when we welcome someone into our church homes, the usual routine is: welcome to St. Whereveryouare's; here's everything you need to get through the next hour. Good luck! Why not: Good morning - I don't remember seeing you before; is there anything we can do to help you feel comfortable? When we get to that place, people will want to be with us and stay with us, and be part of our communities. And they will believe that we are sincere when we... include them in our prayers, when we are sad when they suffer, and rejoice when they are happy - just like we do with anyone else in our family.¹⁰⁴

It was my own personal experience of genuine welcome *as I was* that brought me into the fold of the Episcopal Church, that made me decide to be baptized as a Christian, and later that allowed me to answer a call to ordained ministry without the need to compromise who I am, including my identity as a bisexual woman. Before I ever set foot in All Souls Parish, though, I looked them up online and was drawn by the explicit welcome stated on their website's homepage. At the top was, *All Souls Welcome. Visitors Expected!* Followed by:

No matter who you are or where you are on the spiritual journey, you are welcome here! We invite people looking for healing, love, forgiveness, and acceptance, and seeking to find or recover a spiritual home in Christian community, including families, children, young people, older people, couples, singles, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Join us as we sing our song, as we walk the faith, as we care for each other, and as we come together around the common Eucharistic meal: all who seek Christ are welcome at God's table.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ David Stickley, email of March 16, 2019.

¹⁰⁵ "Welcome to All Souls!," *All Souls Parish*, accessed April 18, 2019, <http://www.allsoulsparish.org/>.

The Unitarian Universalist (UU) Church has pioneered ways in which congregations can extend welcome to LGBTQ people. In an introduction to the second edition of the UU Association's *Welcoming Congregation Handbook*, Rev. Keith Kron cautions congregational leaders that, "A congregation that is interested in becoming more welcoming of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender persons will need to take the time to involve as many people as possible in the decision-making process."¹⁰⁶ It can be tempting for a deacon to tell a congregation what it *must* do or to step in and try to make that change happen themselves, rather than going through the process of gaining consensus, especially if the process is moving slowly. Kron explains: "The more listening, consultation, dialog and consensus that occur at the beginning between the professional staff, trustees, boards, committees and members of the congregation, the more likely the program is to succeed once the congregation as a whole is invited to participate."¹⁰⁷

Kron suggests to begin by forming a *Welcoming Congregation Committee*, with "members of all genders, sexual orientations, ages, and cultural and racial groups (who are) thoroughly committed to the goals of the program" and to set up events for parishioners to attend. This may be accelerated if the congregation is already affirmative/inclusive to LGBTQ people, where the goal might be, for example, to officially state this and/or register with an

¹⁰⁶ Scott W. Alexander, Meg Riley, and Keith Kron, eds. *The Welcoming Congregation Handbook: Resources for Affirming Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and/or Transgender People*. 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1999), p. 7.

¹⁰⁷ Alexander et al, *The Welcoming Congregation Handbook*, 7.

organization such as Integrity USA, Oasis CA, that promotes and supports affirming congregations.¹⁰⁸

The Welcoming Congregation Handbook offers a list of suggested actions that congregations might take to express their welcoming affirmation to LGBTQ people. I have included an abridged version that Episcopal congregations may want to make use of:

1. Offer religious education that incorporates bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender life issues.
2. Offer a congregation-wide workshop program(s), with follow-up opportunities for study and reflection.
3. Use inclusive language and content as a regular part of worship services, and provide (clergy and other preachers) with guidelines on inclusive language.
4. Provide worship space and ministerial services for (LGBTQ) rites of passage.
5. Welcome (LGBTQ) persons in the congregation's brochure... recognize same-gender couples in directories and other publications as they desire.
6. Celebrate & affirm bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender issues and history during the church year
7. Participate in and/or support efforts to create justice, freedom, and equality for (LGBTQ) people in the larger society.
8. Advertise in the local press and/or other media that reach the bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender communities.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Integrity, USA is a national organization affiliated with the Episcopal Church (ECUSA). Integrity's resource page can be found at: <http://www.integrityusa.g/resources>; guidelines and information on becoming an Integrity *Believe Out Loud* (LGBTQ+ welcoming) *Congregation* are at: <http://www.integrityusa.org/invitation>. Oasis is specifically for congregations and LGBTQ people of faith in the Episcopal Diocese of California, covering the San Francisco Bay Area. Information on how to become an Oasis congregation can be found here: "Become An Oasis Congregation – Oasis California," accessed April 23, 2019, <https://oasisca.org/oasis-california-welcomes-you/become-an-oasis-congregation/>.

Some of these suggestions will take more involved planning and time to implement than others, and individual congregations may not want to take on every option, or might already have some in place. The Institute for Welcoming Resources has a wide array of materials, articles and information for congregations wishing to explore how to best reach out to LGBTQ people and also is an excellent resource for people who are LGBTQ or need information on related topics. Integrity USA recommends the Institute's, *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit*, which is available as a free PDF download.¹¹⁰

Facing Challenges

There are challenges and pitfalls to be aware of in our quest to become truly welcoming. Kundtz and Schlager note that there may be resistance to work with, saying:

A congregation that seeks to open the doors of welcome to LGBTQ people may face disapproval from some members who believe that they do not have a legitimate claim to membership in the community. A congregation may also face censure from denominational officials who oppose any change in belief systems and policies that marginalize queer people. To become a community of care may, indeed, mean that some members will leave the congregation or that a congregation's institutional affiliations will be jeopardized or even terminated. For the congregation that feels called to welcome and include all people, however, these risks are worth taking because they are outweighed by

¹⁰⁹ Alexander et al., *The Welcoming Congregation Handbook*, 14. Left out are those suggestions specific to Unitarian Universalist congregations and repeated items. The *Handbook* details ideas for how to implement these suggestions and provides a *Workshop Series* in 14 lessons for doing so. While written in 1999, the *Handbook* remains relevant to many of the current challenges faced by congregations.

¹¹⁰ *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit*, PDF, available on "The Institute for Welcoming Resources," accessed April 16, 2019, <http://welcomingresources.org/downloadresources.htm>.

the opportunity to grow as a community that welcomes, loves, and includes all of God's children.¹¹¹

Stephanie Spellers, an African American priest in the Episcopal Church, mentions other challenges in discussing the reticence of some congregations around racial inclusion, which can also apply to queer inclusion:

Put bluntly, they didn't sign on for that level of transformation. They didn't open the door to share power. These congregations are striving to be genuinely hospitable and inclusive, but the operative word to describe their goal is really *incorporation*, offering marginalized people a place inside, but still on terms that allow the hosting institution's power structures and identity to remain unchanged. So while they are open in theory and ideology, and they often thrill at the presence of a person of color or a gay or lesbian person or young adult or (more rarely) a person who appears to be poor or homeless... it stays at the level of "cultural tourism." Thus, the inclusive church's culture and environment will continually contradict its warm welcome. "Come in and join us, and please come back!" members say with their lips. But they wind up creating a revolving door, promising to receive people whom they have yet to develop the capacity to truly welcome.¹¹²

Integrating Queer People into the Life of a Congregation

While creating welcome does need to be explicit in order to be most effective - for example, having "we are a queer-friendly (or LGBTQ-affirming) congregation" stated on the landing page of a church's website - *integrating* people into congregational life is not always about explicitly pointing out who and what they are; sometimes it is more important to be inclusive by *not* calling attention to someone's social location and simply welcoming them in as you

¹¹¹ Kundtz and Schlager. *Ministry among God's Queer Folk*, 161.

¹¹² Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* (New York: Church Pub., 2006), 68-69. The author includes additional detail. Again, though mostly aimed at racial bias, this sentiment is also applicable to church communities' acceptance or lack of welcome to LGBTQ people.

would anyone else. This is what it means to be *inclusive*, to *include* every person and welcome each one's unique gifts, insights, perspectives and values. For an example, the church I serve at for my field education, Good Shepherd, has a deep preaching ROTA; we are fortunate to have many trained scholars, associated clergy and well-spoken lay people who are each accomplished preachers and we utilize their gifts by including them in the monthly rotation rather than scheduling the vicar to preach every Sunday. We do not call attention to whether a preacher is gay, trans, straight, differently-abled, or any other demarcation: each is simply that day's scheduled preacher. While this may seem an unnecessary point to make, it is this type of everyday subtlety that can communicate the message, "you are one of us - and we accept you as you are, the same way we hope you will accept us"... it is a way of showing that we are all one Body of Christ. It is this *all-oneness* that can often make people feel the most welcomed.

Building Alliances with Queer Communities

In the updated edition of their book, Schlager and Kundtz highlight that, "by speaking from a progressive faith perspective you can demonstrate that not all people of faith consider homosexuality a sin or seek to restrict the rights of LGBTQ people and their families."¹¹³

¹¹³ Bernard Schlager and David Kundtz, *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk, Second Edition LGBTQ Pastoral Care*. (La Vergne: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019), 175. Note: In this new edition, the order in which the authors' names are credited was reversed from the first edition; hence a new citation was needed to honor this change.

The authors continue:

Perhaps the most important external work of a welcoming congregation is finding opportunities to become an ally to the larger LGBTQ community. Through outreach to individual LGBTQ people and by building alliances with a variety of queer groups and social justice organizations a congregation can “walk its talk” of living as a genuine community of care.¹¹⁴

Several ways in which congregations can become LGBTQ allies in their communities are listed in *Ministry Among God’s Queer Folk*:

1. Find opportunities to educate your local community about religion and queer people.
2. Find ways to work with PFLAG (Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays), GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network), your local LGBTQ community center and other organizations.
3. Host a weekend workshop or retreat.
4. Pay attention to local, state, national, and international legislation that affects queer people.
5. When the civil rights of queer people are being threatened, speak up!
6. Offer space in your building (at low or no cost) for local queer-friendly organizations.
7. Celebrate/mark LGBTQ cultural events... consider marching in the local gay pride parade or hosting inter-religious services that are open to members of the local community.

Extending Welcome to Trans and Non-binary People

Fr. Shannon Kearns shares:

¹¹⁴ For this section, I will lean heavily upon Schlager and Kundtz, whose updated chapter, “Creating Communities of Care for LGBTQ People” in the 2019 second edition of *Ministry Among God’s Queer Folk*,[#] released as I am finishing this paper, contains the most relevant and up-to-date information available.

My default stance is to assume that your church will not be welcoming because most of them are not. If your church is, you need to be upfront and clear about it. **But don't lie.** If your church needs to do work on transgender issues, you need to do that work on your own without having a transgender person be your guinea pig. Please, don't overstate your welcome if you're not ready to actually be welcoming.¹¹⁵ Some suggestions from the article:

1. Do you mention transgender people anywhere on your site?
2. Do you make it a point to mention that you have gender neutral or single stall bathrooms?
3. Does your statement of inclusion specifically mention both gender identity and gender expression?
4. Do some work with your greeters to help them understand how hurtful gendered greetings might be.
5. Let people use the bathroom that they want to use and let them use it in peace.¹¹⁶
6. Provide an opportunity for people to give you their pronoun
7. Help people understand that it's not okay to stare.
8. Help people to understand that it is not, under any circumstances, okay to out someone. Even if you think it's "obvious" that they are transgender. Even if they have told other people.
9. Do you mention that you welcome families with gender diverse children?¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Kearns, "How to Tell If Your Church Is Welcoming for Transgender People." This article contains *many* more suggestions and the site has a Welcoming Congregations Checklist to print and use. Emphasis included in original.

¹¹⁶ Additionally, the State of California's Equal Access to Restrooms Act, in effect since 2016, requires that all single-stall restroom facilities in places of business be marked with gender-neutral language. For more information, see "California's Equal Restroom Access Act: 5 Facts Employers Need to Know," *SHRM*, last modified August 1, 2017, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/state-and-local-updates/pages/california-equal-restroom-access-act.aspx>.

¹¹⁷ Kearns, "How to Tell If Your Church is Welcoming for Transgender People."

The Role of Deacons in Creating Welcome

In the Episcopal Church, the role of the deacon is uniquely placed; where a priest serves at the (literal and figurative) front of a congregation as its liturgical leader, shepherd and pastor, a deacon stands in the doorway (figuratively when not literally), *facing outward*, beyond church walls.

Deacons do not address or solve all the problems they encounter or make them go away, and they don't provide an answer by themselves... they are ordained and called to help engage the people of a church community in learning what the needs of the larger community around the church are, and to lead congregations in compassionate ministry. Because of this position as a bridge between church communities and people in need, the deacon is an ideal person to lead a congregation through the process of becoming a welcoming and supportive place of worship for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith. Revisiting the roles of deacons, here are some of the ways each might be applied:

1. In their role as ordained leaders in the church, deacons are expected to not only lead, but also to model behaviors for other Christians to emulate. This may include deacons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer being open about their orientation or gender in whatever ways are appropriate and deacons who are not queer showing acceptance and a willingness to support and stand with those who are LGBT or Q - in these ways, modeling healthy spiritual relationships with God, the church and other people.
2. Deacons can reach out and become bridges into queer communities by leading congregants in many of the outreach opportunities mentioned previously, from Pride parades to hosting meetings or events. Another way to form a connection with trans folk is to ask for, respect and use people's correct pronouns. In a recent Trans Spiritual Care Initiative

(TSCI) training, the speaker invited those present to practice offering our own pronouns when working with patients (i.e., “Hi I’m Ari, I’m a chaplain here. My pronouns are she and her. What name do you prefer to go by?”). When used with all patients (or in the case of parish work, all visitors and parishioners), not just those you think may be transgender, there is an equity of hospitality and an invitation for someone to let you know how they identify, without singling out any one person.¹¹⁸

3. To exemplify a ministry of service, deacons can be approachable by: wearing a rainbow or other known Queer Pride lapel pin or other visible sign; adding their pronouns to name tags and emails; visiting queer people who are sick, isolated or incarcerated; and even just by showing the same respect to every person they commune or work with, regardless of gender or sexual identity.
4. Deacons are charged with speaking up and speaking out about injustice, inequality, complacency or marginalization by reminding congregations that we *all* are the Church - and that we need to live into our roles as the hands and feet and voice and heart of Jesus in the world. In this way, deacons are also couriers or go-betweens and also exercise their prophetic voice. Deacons can also add topics both about and for LGBTQ people to their homilies, staff information booths at events, or offer their voice when someone who is queer is unable to do so.
5. Deacons can be agents, mediums and emissaries of the church, embodying the church at its best and most loving, and being that *sign and witness* of which Presiding Bishop Curry spoke.¹¹⁹

In all of these areas, deacons live out the Baptismal Covenant’s charges to *proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, seek and serve Christ in all people, and strive for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being* - through a deacon’s hermeneutical filters of *agape and diakonia*.

¹¹⁸ Emiliano Leemus, “Trans Spiritual Care Initiative (TSCI)” (presented at the Sojourn Chaplaincy Training, San Francisco, CA, May 8, 2019).

¹¹⁹ Josh Hornbeck, “Presiding Bishop Curry Offers Theological Reflection...”

How Congregational Leaders Can Support Deacons

One of the challenges faced by deacons who are placed to serve in congregations is the need for a better understanding of their role by priests and lay leaders and the importance of supporting deacons in their work.

The first way that congregational leaders can support deacons is to learn about and teach their congregants what the roles of a deacon are. If a vicar or rector has not worked with deacons before or is not certain how the roles of deacons have changed, inviting a deacon or archdeacon to deliver a sermon or share about their work in an adult education class or a question and answer session could be helpful in determining how a deacon would function within their church and where the existing clergy and laity feel diaconal leadership is needed most. This is especially important in a church that has not had a deacon, or where others have been enacting a deacon's liturgical roles, such as proclaiming the Gospel, writing the Prayers of the People, dismissing the congregation or other liturgical functions. It is also important that existing congregational leadership consider the individual gifts that each deacon has and brings to their ministry, and keep that in mind when discerning whether and how to call and deploy a deacon.

Good communication is another way in which existing leaders at a church - both ordained and lay - can support deacons they work with or plan to work with. This might include periodic check-ins on projects, frequent dialog about what is working well and what could be done better - on both sides -

making sure the deacon has access to any needed resources and including the deacon in staff meetings, Bishop’s Committee or vestry meetings and other important conversations. When in doubt – ask a deacon directly how you can best support their work.

The Rev. Dr. Jay Johnson pointed out in a conversation that “clergy need to be adept at being able to interpret the context in which they find themselves, to know what the real issues are.”¹²⁰ Deacons inform the church of the “hopes and needs of the world” so that, as Rosalind Brown wrote, “The church (can) be itself in following Christ... radically faithful in its worship and its witness...”¹²¹ When deacons are part of a church’s leadership team, they can help to facilitate this and make it a reality.

Finally, congregational leaders can learn how to recognize diaconal gifts in their parishioners, engage with them in discussions around discerning a potential call to ministry, and support congregants through discernment, formation, diaconal training and/or education.¹²²

¹²⁰ Jay Emerson Johnson, conversation with author, Feb. 26, 2019.

¹²¹ Brown, *Being a Deacon Today*, 17.

¹²² “Seeing the Deacon in Our Midst: An Aid for the Discerning Community | School for Deacons,” accessed May 10, 2019, <http://sfd.edu/seeing-the-deacon>.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored the need for deeper and wider welcome and support for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer; and that all people in The Episcopal Church, whether lay or ordained, are called to create and extend that welcome. I have looked at the importance of including LGBTQ+ people in the life of the church and supporting them spiritually, and argued that, positioned as a bridge between the church and the world, Episcopal deacons are the people to lead congregations in this work. In this role, Episcopal deacons remind congregants of and engage them in the diaconal practices of the Baptismal Covenant of the church. Deacons are uniquely positioned to model best practices in relationship with people who identify as LGBTQ, to encourage all the *Body of Christ* to participate in providing deep, authentic, lasting and healing welcome from a place of *agape* love, compassion and lovingkindness.

There is a passage written by author and activist (and many would say modern-day prophet) Michael Eric Dyson, in his book *Tears we Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*,¹²³ that I keep coming back to: “Justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public.”

I have used this in a homily and as a signature line for emails; I included it in a small journal of favorite prayers and passages I keep and I have a printout of it taped to the shelf above the desk in my study. If there is one short sentence

¹²³ Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (New York, NY, 2017).

that could explain how I hear a deacon's call to love, social justice, and servant ministry - and why it is so deeply important to me - this is it.

Throughout the Christian Testament, we hear assertions - from Jesus, from St. Paul, and from others - that *love* is everything... the Greatest Commandments are to love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:36-40); and without love, we are nothing (1 Cor. 13:2). But it is not enough to have love, though everything is based in that; once we *have* love, we must *share* it - and "Justice is what (that) love sounds like when it speaks in public."

What better expression of the Golden Rule and of God's greatest commandment, might we find?

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