

Uncertainty in Clergy's Perspectives on Homosexuality: A Research Note

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Abstract This research note analyzes expressions of uncertainty in clergy's perspectives on homosexuality. We conducted interviews with forty Christian clergy who lead congregations in the vicinity of one large southeastern US city. Seven in ten clergy interviewed expressed uncertainty in their personal *opinions* about homosexuality, uncertainty about how they should *act* pursuant to the issue, or *both*. We describe clergy's experiences with these uncertainties and analyze the patterns in which it appears in their opinions and actions regarding homosexuality. The nuance evident in these patterns illustrates how a range of superseding factors influence clergy's opinions about homosexuality and the extent to which they feel constrained in taking action with regard to the issue. We argue for the conceptual value of a framework that provides space for analysis of uncertainty in public opinion about contentious social issues such as homosexuality.

Keywords Homosexuality · Clergy · Religion · Uncertainty · United States

Introduction

As organized religious bodies continue to debate whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people should be allowed to marry, serve in positions of leadership, and otherwise participate in religious life, broader public debates about the appropriate places and roles of gay people in American society go on as well (e.g., Campbell and Monson 2008; Fleischmann and Moyer 2009; Haider-Markel 2001; Lewis

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2005; Soule 2004). Because organized religion plays such a prominent role in shaping broader societal debates about homosexuality, it is especially important to understand the nuances inherent in religious contributions to this discourse. Scholars have shown that Americans' personal religious backgrounds have a powerful effect on their attitudes about homosexuality (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; D'Emilio and Freedman 1997; Olson et al. 2006; Schwartz 2010; Sherkat et al. 2010; Whitehead 2010). Meanwhile, religious bodies and leaders issue formal statements about sexuality and sexual morality, and variously constituted religious groups participate in and fund a wide range of pro- and anti-gay initiatives. As but one example, consider that the successful 2008 campaign to pass California's Proposition 8, which defines marriage as a union between one man and one woman, was driven in large part by the leadership, money, and organizing skills of religious people, organizations, and leaders (see Bain 2008; Ravitz 2008).

Clergy influence public opinion about a wide range of issues, including homosexuality, through the pronouncements they make inside their congregations and via their more public involvement in social change organizations (Djupe and Gilbert 2009). Sizable proportions of Americans claim to attend religious services at least once a month, so clergy are in a position to provide cues about contentious socio-moral issues—grounded in unbending beliefs about the divine—to a large and diverse array of citizens on a weekly basis (Olson 2009). In the ongoing public debates about homosexuality, people in general—and religious leaders in particular—often are portrayed as being uniformly on one side of the issue or the other. It is true that many religious leaders remain firmly opposed to homosexuality, fighting to preserve the traditional (heterosexual, nuclear) model of family, whereas many others are no strangers to gay pride celebrations, “welcoming” congregational initiatives for gay people, and even high-profile flouting of their religious traditions' formal policies on matters such as blessing same-sex unions (Anderson 1997; Cadge 2002; Cadge and Wildeman 2008; Creech 2011; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Moon 2004; Olson and Cadge 2002; Smidt 2004; Wood 2000). However, American religious leaders' opinions about homosexuality are far more wide-ranging than conventional wisdom might suggest, and many clergy are uncertain about what they think about the issue and how they ought to approach it in their professional role (e.g., Anderson 1997; Ammerman 2005; Dillon 1999; Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Moon 2004; Wood 2000). Just as many citizens have ambivalent attitudes about questions concerning gay rights (Craig et al. 2005), so too we ought to expect clergy to face challenges in coming to term with the subject.

Studies show that clergy who address homosexuality tend to do so pragmatically and as a result of a great deal of deliberation, focusing primarily on grappling with the issue in light of the professional constraints they face (Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Djupe et al. 2006; Moon 2004; Olson et al. 2011; Olson and Cadge 2002). Clergy are constrained by pressures from “above” (those created by the religious traditions within which they serve) and pressures from “below” (those unique to their own congregations). The twin constraints often work in tandem as well. Calfano's (2009) work shows that clergy are quite responsive to pressures exerted by both their religious traditions and their congregations when deciding whether to preach about a particular topic; another study shows that national religious elites'

framing of the issue exerts a significant effect on how clergy address it in their local congregations (Cadge et al. 2008). Personal style matters, too (Craig et al. 2006; Francis and Robbins 2002). Some clergy view themselves as educators and thus tend not to take clear normative positions on the issue, while others see themselves as advocates, speaking and acting accordingly (Cadge and Wildeman 2008). Moreover, individual clergy's approaches to homosexuality should naturally vary by religious tradition, geographic location, and pastoral approach, as well as in accordance with their personal social networks (Buzzell 2001; Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Ellingson et al. 2001; Hartman 1996; Kirkpatrick 1993; Olson et al. 2006; Schwartz 2010; Sherkat et al. 2010; Whitehead 2010; Wood and Bloch 1995).

Understanding uncertainty in clergy's opinions about homosexuality, as well as any hesitation they might feel in publicly sharing these opinions, is essential to a broader comprehension of how religious leaders influence public opinion about homosexuality. Therefore, we analyze expressions of uncertainty in clergy's attitudes and actions¹ regarding homosexuality. We analyze interviews with forty Christian clergy leading congregations in the vicinity of one large southeastern city. A substantial majority (seven in ten) of the clergy we interviewed were not sure of their opinions about homosexuality, whether and how to take action with regard to the issue, or both. Rather than asking which factors lead clergy to espouse certain opinions, which is the norm in public opinion research, we allow clergy to describe their opinions for themselves, listening specifically for how certain they are in their personal opinions and (quite separately) in their decisions about taking action pursuant to the issue. We are especially concerned with understanding when, why, and how clergy encounter uncertainty about dealing with the matter of homosexuality in their professional capacities. Understanding such uncertainty adds an important layer to our knowledge of how clergy, as key opinion leaders (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Olson 2009) on a highly emotional issue of public debate, approach homosexuality. We are convinced of the analytic value of establishing a framework that provides space for uncertainty in our growing understanding of the relationship between religion and public opinion about homosexuality. This research note is designed to propose the outline of such a framework that may be useful in future studies of how religious groups and individuals manage the issue of homosexuality.

Research Methods

We gathered our data through in-depth interviews with forty clergy serving congregations in large religious traditions. Our qualitative methodological choice was motivated in part by the fact that the closed-ended survey questions used in public opinion research do not allow the complexity of individual attitudes about issues like homosexuality to emerge (but see Craig et al. 2005). Our sample includes Catholic priests ($N = 11$), Episcopal priests ($N = 12$), Southern Baptist ministers

¹ We conceive of "action" broadly, including preaching a sermon about the topic to involvement in social change organizations. See Olson (2009); Olson et al. (2005); Smidt (2004) for various accounts of the range of political actions in which clergy might engage.

($N = 12$), and ministers in the United Church of Christ ($N = 5$).² We chose to interview clergy in these four religious traditions for three reasons. First, we wanted our sample to be broadly representative of theological and political diversity. Since we were especially interested in clergy's attitudes about homosexuality, we included a tradition that is largely unsupportive of gay rights (the Southern Baptist Convention), one that is largely supportive (the United Church of Christ), and two that are wrestling with the issue either publicly (the Episcopal Church) or less formally (the Roman Catholic Church), acknowledging and recognizing natural variation in clergy's opinions about homosexuality within each tradition. Second, we intentionally chose large religious traditions because we were interested in the constraints clergy face from above (the teachings and expectations of the larger religious organizations which they serve) and from below (their congregations). Third, we selected two hierarchical traditions (the Episcopal and Catholic Churches) and two traditions that follow a more congregational model of organization (the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Church of Christ).

To minimize variation on other possible independent variables, all interviews were conducted in the vicinity of one large, diverse southeastern city. We opted to conduct our study in the Southeast because we assumed that issues of sexual morality and family structure would be especially fraught in the most morally conservative region of the United States (Chinni and Gimpel 2010; Silk and Walsh 2008). We selected one particular metropolitan area both because of its relative cultural and political diversity with the understanding that we are trading breadth for depth. Our findings may not be directly generalizable to other geographic settings, but our choice to base our study in the conservative Southeast enhances the likelihood that clergy do, in fact, face a wide range of uncertainties in deciding how to grapple with homosexuality. Random samples of congregations in each of the four religious traditions were drawn from the population of congregations in each tradition in the telephone area code(s) for the metropolitan area, based on denominational listings. All respondents were either the sole or senior pastors or priests of their congregations. We invited individual clergy to participate through a recruitment letter. Only three of the clergy we contacted declined to participate, citing personal health or scheduling challenges. This high participation rate is typical of studies of clergy (e.g., Smidt 2004), who simply tend to be generous with their time. The fact that one of us is affiliated with a university in the Southeast also probably contributed to our legitimacy with potential respondents, as we mailed the invitation letter on Clemson University letterhead. Moreover, each individual who completed an interview received a \$20 gift card.

Between July and September 2007, two interviewers conducted 1-h, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each respondent. Of the 40 interviews, 19 were conducted in person at the respondent's churches and 21 were conducted by

² We aimed to include equal numbers of clergy in each religious tradition. However, there are relatively few UCC congregations in the Southeast, so our sample includes nearly the complete population in the metropolitan area.

telephone.³ Interview questions asked about personal background and beliefs and actions with regard to marriage, divorce, and homosexuality (see Appendix for full interview guide). We asked respondents what responsibility they felt (as clergy) to talk about social issues and about aspects of their work and congregational life that make such talk difficult.

The sample included thirty-seven men and three women. The clergy ranged in age from 35 to 75, with an average age of 50. All of the Catholic priests were single; 83 percent of the Protestant clergy were married. One-third of the respondents had grown up in the state where the interviews were conducted. All but four had earned at least one graduate degree (primarily the M.Div.), and one-quarter held a PhD or D.Min. The respondents had been clergy for between six and 42 years, 21 years on average. They had held their present position of senior pastor or priest for an average of 6 years (with a range from 6 months to 20 years). We did not collect data on the clergy's racial and ethnic backgrounds. The congregations ranged in size by tradition. On average, Catholic congregations had 1,680 families, Episcopal congregations had 700 individuals, Southern Baptist congregations had 730 individuals, and United Church of Christ (UCC) congregations had 320 individuals.⁴ Almost all congregations whose clergy we interviewed were larger than the national median of 75 regular participants.⁵

Interview data were coded inductively following a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990). We read and coded transcripts for any articulation of uncertainty or indecision regarding the issue of homosexuality. Emergent from this process was the finding that clergy cited uncertainty most often in two general ways: (1) uncertainty in their personal *feelings* about homosexuality, and (2) uncertainty about how to *act* with regard to the issue. We subsequently coded the interview transcripts again, concentrating specifically on these two manifestations of uncertainty. On the basis of this coding, we categorized the forty clergy narratives into three groups, which are described below.⁶

Types and Sources of Uncertainty

Seven in ten clergy we interviewed expressed uncertainty about homosexuality, either in terms of their personal beliefs, actions, or both. As described in Table 1, exactly half of those interviewed (20 clergy) were uncertain about their personal opinions, while slightly more than half (21 clergy) revealed uncertainty about taking action regarding homosexuality. Table 2 indicates that 13 clergy (a plurality) were uncertain on both counts; eight others were uncertain about action only, and seven

³ The interviews were conducted both in person and over the telephone both for convenience and to test whether respondents would be more or less forthcoming in the two formats. We concluded that there were no major advantages to either interviewing technique.

⁴ This figure excludes one UCC congregation with an extremely large membership.

⁵ This figure is provided by Chaves (2004): 18, on the basis of data he collected for the 1998 National Congregations Study.

⁶ A fourth group of clergy expressed no uncertainty regarding either their attitudes or actions. We use these clergy as an implicit reference group and do not detail their attitudes or actions here.

Table 1 Overview of clergy's experiences of uncertainty

	Uncertain in opinion	Uncertain about taking action
Catholic Church	5/11	7/11
Episcopal Church	8/12	8/12
Southern Baptist Convention	4/12	4/12
United Church of Christ	3/5	2/5
Total	20/40	21/40

Source: Compiled by authors from interviews

Table 2 Typology of uncertainty

	Uncertain in opinion and action	Uncertain in action, not opinion	Uncertainty in opinion, not action	No uncertainty
Catholic Church	4/13	3/8	1/7	3/12
Episcopal Church	5/13	3/8	3/7	1/12
Southern Baptist Convention	3/13	1/8	1/7	7/12
United Church of Christ	1/13	1/8	2/7	1/12
Total	13	8	7	12

Source: Compiled by authors from interviews

were unsure of their personal opinions only. Twelve clergy expressed no uncertainty whatsoever. Mainline Protestant (Episcopal and UCC) clergy were more likely to express uncertainty in their personal opinions, while clergy in traditions that are currently wrestling with the issue (the Episcopal and Catholic Churches) were more likely to be grappling with whether to take action about homosexuality.

Sources of Uncertainty in Personal Opinions

Clergy who expressed uncertainty about their personal opinions regarding homosexuality did so around several themes, including the question of whether homosexuality is innate or chosen, mismatches between moral opposition to homosexuality and positive experiences with gay people, inability to understand same-sex attraction, indecision about the appropriateness of same-sex marriage, and general wrestling with the issue either presently or in the past. For example, a Catholic priest expressed his personal lack of clarity over whether homosexuality is innate or a choice: "I don't think there's been enough study about all this for us to have really any definite answers about it, whether its something that is inherited, its something that is genetic, or its something that's learned" (C19).

An Episcopal priest with relatively conservative views on homosexuality described the struggle he has experienced as a result of having gay friends. "I had some very good gay friends," he explained, "Some who died and I mourn them. You know, I mourn their loss and wish that their lives had gone on and on and on, and that they hadn't been involved in unhealthy sexual practices. But they were.

You know ... I'm conflicted about this" (E21). A UCC minister summarized the struggle he faces regarding homosexuality: "Scriptures help us to understand some of the questions, our own experience helps us to understand, our looking at nature and science helps us to understand what I think is a terribly complicated and challenging issue.... this is one of the questions of our day that we will for the rest of our lives continue to struggle with" (U5).

Sources of Uncertainty about Taking Action

Just over half of the clergy interviewed expressed uncertainty about whether and how to take action in relation to homosexuality; this type of uncertainty took several broad forms. Episcopal clergy were especially likely to mention anxiety about blessing same-sex relationships, which is unsurprising given recent denominational strife over precisely this matter (Kirkpatrick 2008). One priest explained how he would respond if a same-sex couple asked him to perform a commitment or marriage ceremony for them. "Most of the time," he said, "I think I would say, you know, I'm too unresolved on this issue, and you might find a better pastor and celebrant who wouldn't make the ceremony have an awkward feel to it by their own misgivings. I'm sorry to say that, I love you both, but I—that's just sort of where I am. That would be a very uncomfortable thing to have to say" (E6).

Likewise, clergy across traditions reported uncertainty about whether and how to welcome gay men and lesbians into their congregations. A Catholic priest shared a particularly illustrative story about his experiences with a lesbian couple and their children. He felt he was welcoming them to a space in which he and they could respect each other but disagree, but the family saw it otherwise and left the parish (C28). While this priest was trying to determine how to welcome a lesbian family, a UCC minister at the other end of the ideological spectrum was wondering how to welcome gay people to his church in greater numbers. His congregation recently had voted to become an open and affirming congregation (one that publicly welcomes gay men and lesbians). In light of that decision, "now that we've got more gay folks coming in, it's made [longtime church members] a little bit nervous and so, you know, they're like, 'We don't want to become a gay church'" (U1). Although this particular minister personally was eager to welcome more gay people, he shared the concern of some of his longtime members that welcoming them "too much" might result in their overtaking a church that had mostly heterosexual members.

Combinations of Uncertainty

Rather than trying to outline the factors that create uncertainty in clergy's opinions and actions regarding homosexuality, we examine the specific forms the uncertainty tended to take. Of the 28 clergy who expressed some form of uncertainty, those in the largest group (thirteen respondents, as shown in Table 2) were uncertain about *both* their personal opinions and their actions; eight were resolute in their personal attitudes but uncertain about their actions, and seven were undecided in their

personal opinions but clear about whether and how to take action. Clergy in each of the four religious traditions were included in each subgroup, so the pattern clearly is unrelated to ecclesiastical factors. This result shows that clergy across the theological spectrum wrestle with how to approach challenging socio-moral issues. We consider each subgroup in turn, mindful that clergy are situated between the positions and actions of their church bodies (pressures from above) and the composition and specific needs of their individual congregations (pressures from below). Their opinions and actions regarding homosexuality, therefore, are not theirs alone but negotiated in, and reflective of, the pressures that emanate from national and local contexts alike (Calfano 2009; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Jelen 1993; Olson et al. 2005).

Uncertainty about both Opinion and Action

Of the four subgroups presented in Table 2, the largest group (thirteen clergy) expressed uncertainty about both their personal opinions and whether and how to take action about homosexuality. Most of their uncertainties had to do with whether homosexuality is innate or a choice, how to approach same-sex marriage, and how to integrate positive experiences with gay people with the conviction that homosexuality is immoral. Patterns within this group vary by church body, reflecting ecclesiastical differences both in the current status of internal debates about homosexuality and broader models of conflict resolution. Episcopal clergy, for example, focused heavily on same-sex marriage, often framing experiences of sorting out their feelings about this matter in positive terms. One priest called himself a “work in progress” regarding same-sex marriage (E10); another said he was on a “journey” and thinks same-sex marriage might be something new that God is doing in the world rather than an aberration (E6). In explaining their uncertain opinions, Episcopal clergy pointed to contextual factors, particularly fear about how their viewpoints would be received by their congregations (E21).

Catholic priests framed their experiences quite differently, focusing much more on whether homosexuality is innate or a choice and on their own felt lack of authority to answer this question. Like many Catholic priests, the ones we interviewed tended to claim that scripture is not an absolute authority, often taking a hermeneutic (contextualized and historicized) approach to the Bible (see Craig et al. 2006). Constrained by their hierarchical church polity and its nuanced but unambiguous stance on homosexuality, Catholic priests also expressed uncertainty about taking action on homosexuality-related matters. Contextual factors, particularly an absence of direct cues from superiors about the appropriateness of taking action, seem to underlie Catholic leaders’ dual uncertainties. Not unlike some of the Episcopal priests we interviewed, Catholic priests tended to explain these personal uncertainties as part of searching “processes.”

The few Southern Baptist pastors who expressed uncertainty along both dimensions evinced it quite differently than did clergy in the other three church bodies. Consistent with evangelical Protestantism’s theological strictness, Southern Baptist pastors displayed substantial discomfort with ambiguity (see Francis and Robbins 2002). Some described uncertainty about their personal opinions as a

“trigger” for hesitance regarding their actions, which results in inaction. When asked what he teaches about homosexuality in his congregation, for example, one Southern Baptist pastor replied, “I don’t. I mean I—really I—I believe you should only teach the things that you believe and can preach with authority. And I simply do not have my own mind made up at this point. It’s not that I think it is too inflammatory an issue—it’s one about which I think the jury is still out” (S16). Clearly expressing his desire for clarity about the moral bases of homosexuality later in the interview, this pastor stated: “I wish I could say I had my mind made up on it, but I simply don’t” (S16). Unlike their counterparts in other traditions, Southern Baptist clergy with unsettled positions on homosexuality did not consider their uncertainty as part of a positive “learning process.” Instead, they hoped fervently for more definitive answers. Again, this desire is consistent with the evangelical tradition of seeking clarity and right-and-wrong answers.

Uncertainty about Taking Action Only

Eight clergy experienced uncertainty about whether and how to take action in relation to homosexuality despite espousing clear, settled personal opinions about the issue. These clergy emphasized broader factors related to contextual constraints and their dual roles as pastoral and prophetic leaders (Djupe and Gilbert 2009) that complicated their decisions about taking action in their congregation or in public arenas.

Two Catholic priests, for example, were largely accepting of homosexuality personally. One insisted, “God doesn’t make junk,” and alluding to the Kinsey scale of sexuality, said: “There’s a degree of homosexuality and heterosexuality in everybody except your most extreme person” (C14). Another proclaimed: “Vive la difference!” when discussing his personal opinion, later stating his belief that homosexuality is innate. “I don’t say this glibly, but I’ve never known anybody who says I wish that I was homosexual,” he explained (C2). When asked about their actions regarding homosexuality, however, both were profoundly less certain, discussing at length the challenge of translating their personal views into actions in the context of cross-pressures from above (the Church hierarchy) and below (their parishes). The first priest took cues from his parish, acting on “emergent” matters (he mentioned “politics” and “affluence” as examples) rather than homosexuality. He said he was willing to talk about homosexuality in his parish, but if asked about same-sex marriage, he would “probably would do a little bit” of skirting of the issue because he saw it as a “sore” and all-consuming topic (C2). The second priest largely agreed, preferring to avoid the issue of homosexuality due to the divisions it creates (C14).

Central to these Catholic priests’ narratives are rich descriptions of how they reconciled their personal acceptance of homosexuality with a range of parish contingencies and inadequacies on the part of the Church in dealing with the subject. The common thread was the priests’ emphasis on how their pastoral approach of preaching openness and accepting individuals allowed them to express their personal beliefs in otherwise conflicted contexts. Specifically, one priest was convinced that fewer costs follow from acting on the issue when he takes a “pastoral

approach,” since most “people don’t live under a mushroom” and are aware of homosexuality (C2). Another priest went on to explain that his bishop⁷ also came from a pastoral perspective and was open to parishioners participating in gay pride events. A different bishop, he explained, “could raise proverbial hell about it,” pointing again to the ways in which supervisors and other individuals further up in the Catholic hierarchy contextually shape priests’ decisions about actions (C14).

The Episcopal clergy in this group expressed great certitude in their acceptance of homosexuality; however, they were uncertain about taking action because of congregational concerns about how to deal practically with same-sex marriage. As one priest explained: “Now I have to say that in my own church ... because of its very conservative history and process of gradual change, I wouldn’t dare perform a same-sex blessing in church” (E23). Elaborating further, he said if he agreed to perform a same-sex blessing, he would probably lose thirty percent of his members. As the leader of a congregation that historically has been divided on this issue, this priest saw himself in a mediating role, attempting to “repair damage” and ensure the survival of the congregation, which precluded him from taking action regarding homosexuality. Likewise, a second Episcopal priest was personally accepting of homosexuality but constrained in his actions by congregational context. He said he personally would like to teach about homosexuality and take part in gay pride events, but was hesitant to do so because he did not think his congregation was ready. Describing the contextual contingencies of a less-than-willing congregation, he stated: “It’s not about me, it’s about the community. I said I hope in time [the congregation] will get to the point where you know when you’re ready. But I can’t make that move for you” (E19).

What is common across both the Catholic and Episcopal clergy is their emphasis on the contextual factors that make the translation from clear personal beliefs to actions difficult. These constraints include the authority of national and international church bodies, scripture, and the composition and needs of particular congregations. Even though only one UCC minister and one Southern Baptist pastor fall into this category, they too pointed to contextual factors as limiting their actions regarding homosexuality, specifically the racial and ethnic composition of their congregations. Both congregations are largely African American, and public opinion data shows that African Americans are more likely than whites to have negative opinions about homosexuality (Loftus 2001). As the minister of the UCC congregation explained about blessing same-sex unions, “You know, I have not here at the church interestingly enough. But if I were, honestly, I would, I would just caution the persons that given the context of where we are, and the virulent homophobia, to the point of violent homophobia ... in the black community” (U4). The Southern Baptist pastor echoed the challenges of taking action regarding homosexuality in largely African American churches, saying that they tend to be silent on the topic (S2.13).

⁷ We use the term “bishop” here in a generic sense to avoid identification of the city under study as part of a diocese or an archdiocese.

Uncertainty in Opinion Only

The final subgroup comprises seven clergy who expressed uncertainty about their personal opinions but not their actions. The most important factor in understanding this variety of uncertainty is to note how the clergy personally experienced it and how comfortable they felt in expressing it. Overall these clergy were not troubled by their unsettled opinions about homosexuality. Instead, they described themselves as on a “journey,” in a place of “engagement,” dialogue, or conversation, all descriptors presented with positive connotations. A Southern Baptist minister, for instance, began talking about homosexuality by noting: “there are still struggles in my mind.” He continued, explaining that he did not hesitate to talk with other people about the issue or make his own uncertainty clear. “I try to my best to be honest with what I’ve concluded and honest about what I’ve yet to figure out.... I’m on a journey with God. What I believe today about this issue I may not be believing tomorrow ... as I continue down the pathway of maturity” (S19). He shared that people in his congregation responded differently to his actions: “I think for those who are willing to be honest with me, they agree in the struggle. I think for many who get nervous when life is not quite as neat as they want it to be, they get real scared” (S19). This minister is unique in our Southern Baptist sample; he was the only representative of his denomination to present himself as being comfortable with the level of ambiguity he felt about homosexuality.

A UCC minister took a similar approach. He labeled human sexuality as one of the “most difficult religious issues of our time” and described himself as someone without clear answers, particularly about same-sex marriage (U5). Like the Southern Baptist minister, he said he shared his uncertainty openly with his congregation: “I’m still struggling with [same-sex marriage] and I have admittedly, you know, shared that perspective with the congregation. And so our exploration, if you will, of sexuality and homosexuality in the context of that, is very much an ongoing process. What I have committed us to do and the church has responded favorably to it, is we’ve made a covenant to continue to journey together in terms of our understanding” (U5).

We were struck by the extent to which clergy with uncertain personal opinions about homosexuality seemed to experience such uncertainty as a positive process rather than problematic turmoil. They straightforwardly took action about the issue by sharing their own unsettled opinions with others, citing the benefits of being open about their indecision. Their narratives illustrate the fact that not knowing what one thinks about homosexuality does not necessarily trigger uncertainty about action—and that expressing uncertainty publicly is itself an act of significance.

Conclusion

This research note contributes to existing knowledge about religion and homosexuality in the contemporary United States by examining, in terms of opinions and actions, various ways in which uncertainty manifests itself in Christian clergy’s perspectives on homosexuality. Our finding that seventy percent of the clergy we

interviewed were uncertain about some aspect of their opinions or actions regarding homosexuality is substantively significant in its own right. Conventional wisdom might suggest that religious leaders would display greater certainty around socio-moral issues than the population at large, but our findings indicate otherwise. Clearly there are many clergy across religious traditions who lack clarity in their personal and professional opinions either about the morality of homosexuality or how best to approach discussing and taking action pursuant to it. The sources of their uncertainty are varied, as are the dimensions along which they express it, how comfortable they are with it, and the contexts they point to as shaping it. Although some of these uncertainties tend to be expressed differently across religious traditions, ecclesiastical context by itself does not determine the types of uncertainty clergy experience with regard to homosexuality.

We are left with three conclusions regarding religious leaders' perspectives on homosexuality. First and most broadly is the importance of allowing conceptual room for uncertainty and acknowledging the processual and multivalent nature of complex social and moral issues. Contemporary scholarly work on public opinion about complex and controversial issues such as homosexuality calls for more research that assumes neither one-dimensional nor dichotomous beliefs and attitudes. In a sense we are calling for a post-“culture wars” approach to understanding socio-moral conflict at the elite level. Hunter (1991) emphasizes that the intractability of conflicts about issues such as homosexuality is due to the clarity with which battle lines between two well-defined sides (the “orthodox” and the “progressives”) are drawn. The validity of Hunter's theory at the mass level has been well challenged (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Evans 2003; Fiorina 2010), but its applicability at the elite level should come under greater scrutiny as well. We contribute to this discussion by considering the multiple ways in which clergy express uncertainty about homosexuality, and by beginning to develop an analytic framework for understanding these nuances.

Second, this research is broadly suggestive of how contextual constraints (from above and below), clergy's dual roles as pastoral and prophetic leaders, and their personal orientations to experiences of uncertainty (as a positive journey) shape clergy's beliefs and actions regarding homosexuality. Our study adds to the growing body of literature establishing the relevance of contextual factors in shaping clergy's political attitudes and actions (e.g., Calfano 2009; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Olson et al. 2005). We also contribute to an empirical literature that is beginning to document how these contextual factors shape the ways in which uncertainty about socio-moral attitudes is experienced. It is our hope that work on attitudinal uncertainty regarding homosexuality will continue, with both qualitative and quantitative methods well suited to the task.

Finally, our project contributes to a deeper understanding of attitudinal uncertainty in general by showing that unsettled belief about homosexuality (and presumably other topics) does not necessarily trigger uncertainty about action, or vice versa. By uncoupling beliefs and actions, we are able to begin crafting a framework with sufficient precision to capture individuals' lived experiences of uncertainty about socio-moral issues. It is our hope that future studies will develop such a framework in greater detail and depth so that we might achieve a more

nanced understanding of the many dynamics that shape religious leaders' perspectives on homosexuality, as well as the possible causal mechanisms that might link aspects of the contexts within which they live and work with their experiences of uncertainty in opinion and action.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Background

1. By way of introduction, a few facts about your background: Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school? And how did you decide to become a pastor/priest? How long have you been a pastor/priest?
2. How long have you been at this parish/congregation and how did you come to this particular parish/congregation? (What were the most important factors that caused you to come to this one and not another?)
3. How would you describe this parish/congregation (in terms of size, demographics, socially active/not, more on the liberal or conservative side)
4. Before we get into my specific topics: What issue, or set of issues, concerns you most in this day and age?

Social Issues

Now, I'll ask some questions about how you think about marriage, the family, and sexuality.

Marriage

1. Can you tell me about what you teach in your congregation about marriage? (Where do these teachings come from? What are they based on?)
2. How do you share your opinions about marriage with people in your congregation?

Divorce

3. What do you teach in your congregation about divorce?
 - How does what you teach compare with your own beliefs about divorce?
 - What do you understand the Bible to say about divorce?
4. Have your own beliefs about divorce changed over time? How/why?
5. Do you share your opinions about divorce with your congregants freely? Why or why not?

6. Do you have divorced people in your congregation/parish? How are people who are divorced treated in the congregation? What do you think it is like for them?

Homosexuality: Beliefs

7. How about homosexuality: what do you teach about homosexuality in your congregation?
8. What do you believe about homosexuality?
 - What do you believe the Bible says about homosexuality?
 - Do you believe homosexuality is innate or a choice?
9. Is there any difference between what your tradition/denomination says/teaches and what you believe about homosexuality?
 - (If so:) What is the difference? Does that mean that you must make choices between what you say/teach in your congregation and what you believe? What choices? What is that like for you?
10. When do you remember first being aware of homosexuality (and/or of gay/lesbian/bisexual people)?
11. Thinking back, has your thinking evolved or changed? How? What were the main influencers?
12. How was homosexuality – or sexuality, more generally – addressed in your religious training? Are there certain things that you read or studied?

Homosexuality: Actions

13. Do you share your opinions/views about homosexuality with your congregants freely? How/in what contexts (e.g., in sermons, adult education classes, casual conversation with congregation members)? Why?
 - (If so:) How have people responded to what you have said? Your congregants? Your colleagues? Superiors/supervisors (if appropriate)? (If so:) What is the difference? Does that mean that you must make choices between what you say/teach in your congregation and what you believe? What choices? What is that like for you?
 - (If not:) What do you think would happen if you did? What would your congregants say? Your colleagues? Superiors/supervisors?
14. Do you have any people in your congregation/parish who are homosexual/gay/lesbian? How are they treated in the congregation? What do you think it is like for them?
 - Do you have people in your congregation/parish who have family members who are homosexual/gay/lesbian? What has been your experience with them?

15. Is your congregation involved in discussion/debate about homosexuality in some way? (What is the nature of the discussion/debate?)
16. Do you share your opinion/views about homosexuality with people outside the church? How? Why? (On what occasions?)
17. In your view, are there more costs or benefits for you of speaking publicly about homosexuality? How so?
 - Do you know anyone who has risked/jeopardized their career, position, or peace of mind by taking one position or another?
18. Have you taken any public actions around the issue of homosexuality? (For example, signed a petition, spoken at a rally, distributed related materials through your congregation, etc.)
19. Have you been asked to bless or officiate a same-sex union? (If so:) What was that like for you? (If not:) What would be your response and why?
20. (If in process with regard to homosexuality:) Where do you expect or hope to be when you come through the process? What do you see as the likely destination?

Social Issues, Generally

21. Would you say you have a responsibility as a religious leader to speak about these or social issues? Why or why not?
22. What are the barriers to speaking to your congregation about these issues?
23. Would you say religious leaders make unique contributions to public discussions of social issues? How would you describe those contributions?
 - Do you think the public hears religious voices around these issues differently from secular ones? Why do you say that?
24. Is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't talked about?

Demographics

Gender; age; marital status; how long have you been a pastor/priest; how long have you been at this parish/congregation; highest degree earned

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