

FACILITATORS AND ADVOCATES: HOW MAINLINE PROTESTANT CLERGY RESPOND TO HOMOSEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT: *This article analyzes how thirty mainline Protestant clergy who addressed homosexuality in their local congregations positioned themselves within their congregations on the issue. Regardless of their positions, all of the pastors first situated the root causes of religious and broader societal conflicts over homosexuality in an emotion, fear, which they understood as their congregants' fears of sexuality, gay and lesbian people, misinterpreting scripture, and the unknown. Based on their understandings of these fears, clergy then drew from their individual cultural "toolkits" to construct personal "strategies of action" via personal identities as facilitators, quiet advocates, or more outward advocates around homosexuality in their congregations. The authors analyze the processes by which clergy constructed these identities, with particular attention to the strategies of action attendant within each identity category. This analysis advances substantive knowledge about how clergy respond to homosexuality in local congregations and theoretical knowledge about how religious leaders construct personal identities as one "strategy of action" (among many) when addressing controversial social issues in local religious organizations.*

Keywords: religion; homosexuality; mainline Protestant clergy; religious identity

Homosexuality is currently one of the most controversial social issues in the United States, inside and outside of religious organizations. In recent years, many religious groups have considered their positions on the issue including whether they should permit gay and lesbian people to be religious leaders or to be married or have commitment ceremonies in their traditions. While some groups on the left and the right have settled these questions, many in the middle, including mainline Protestant denominations, representing an estimated 22 million members, are

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in the midst of long and divisive debates (Anderson 1997; Beuttler 1999; Burgess 1999; Koch and Curry 2000; Stephens 1997; Udis-Kessler 2002; Wood 2000).

Mainline Protestant clergy have been highly involved in denominational debates about homosexuality.¹ Progressive clergy have led special interest groups designed to change national denominational policies, support gay and lesbian people, and welcome gay and lesbian people into their congregations. More conservative clergy have also spoken out about the issue—especially the consequences of ordaining practicing gays and lesbians. At the denominational level, these debates have appeared to provide at least some support for arguments about broader national “culture wars,” first discussed by James Davison Hunter (1991).

A growing body of research considers how clergy address homosexuality at the denominational level, but significantly less is known about how clergy respond to the issue within their congregations. Although clergy deal regularly with conflicts about worship styles, lay leadership, church organization, and other issues internal to local congregations (Becker 1999; Becker et al. 1993; Chaves 2004), homosexuality presents unique challenges because it is controversial at multiple levels of society—in local religious groups, national religious organizations, and society more broadly (Ammerman 2005; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Moon 2004; Stein 2001). Some clergy have studiously avoided the issue as a result, concerned that even bringing it up could threaten the stability of their congregations, cost them their jobs, or lead to public outcry they would be unable to contain (Olson and Cadge 2002). Others have engaged the subject occupying a range of social roles in the process (Ellingson et al. 2001; Hartman 1996).

This article contributes to a growing body of literature about homosexuality in mainline Protestant denominations an analysis of how clergy position themselves and negotiate their personal identities around the issue in their congregations. We specifically examine how thirty mainline Protestant clergy in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Methodist Church, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America living in a major metropolitan area in the Northeast addressed homosexuality in their congregations. Theoretically, we consider what this case illustrates about how clergy draw from their personal “tool kits” to construct what Ann Swidler (1986) calls “strategies of action” in response to particular problems, in this case homosexuality, a potentially controversial social issue. While some clergy hosted congregational studies or other educational programs as one such strategy (Cadge, Day, and Wildeman 2007; Cadge, Olson, and Wildeman 2008), we pay particular attention here to the personal identities clergy develop as facilitators, quiet advocates, or more outward advocates and the strategies of actions they understand to be attendant within each identity category. This approach follows that of other sociologists of religion and culture (Becker 1998; Eliasoph 1999; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) and builds on the ways scholars understand how local religious leaders respond to other controversial social issues (Findlay 1993; Friedland 1998; Hertzke 1988; Morris 1996; Smith 1996; Wood 1970, 1972).

We argue that local clergy conceptualize conflicts over homosexuality in terms of an emotion, fear—fear of sexuality, gay and lesbian people, misinterpreting

scripture, and the unknown. By arguing that everyone who participates in conversations about homosexuality is afraid of something, clergy make the subject more personal than structural or institutional and attempt to find common ground among congregants that can lead them to deeper understandings. In this process, pastors construct personal identities as facilitators, quiet advocates, or more outward advocates. Facilitators, motivated primarily by a desire to educate, create congregational spaces in which people can learn and speak honestly about homosexuality. Facilitators aim to include people with a wide range of opinions in these conversations, their primary goal being education and the free exchange of information. Advocates, motivated largely by a desire for change, take positions about homosexuality and work to advance those positions. Some try to make changes in their congregations by indirectly advancing their positions, while others aim for broader social change by advancing their positions more publicly in their congregations, denominations, and communities. The range of personal identities and corresponding strategies of action clergy assume illustrates, and may inform, larger studies of how local clergy respond to homosexuality and engage with other controversial social issues in their midst.

The Context

Religious leaders have been involved in controversial social issues and debates since the earliest years of the American republic. They were centrally involved in debates about slavery, temperance, and women's rights, for example (Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson 1999; Lipset and Raab 1970; Wuthnow 1988). In the past fifty years, clergy played nationally visible roles in the civil rights movement, the nuclear freeze movement, and the sanctuary movement for refugees during the Reagan administration (Findlay 1993; Friedland 1998; Hertzke 1988; Morris 1996; Smith 1996). In addition to their roles in broader public debates, clergy also played important roles in their national and local religious organizations as these and other issues were debated. Some clergy were centrally involved in local debates about civil rights, the Vietnam war, and other issues, while others avoided such controversial topics (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Cavendish 2001; Cohn 1993; Fetzer 2001; Findlay 1993; Morris 1996; Quinley 1970; Stark et al. 1971; Tygart 1973; Wood 1970, 1972).

Homosexuality is the most recent in a long line of controversial issues that have confronted religious leaders and members of the American public. Like previous issues, homosexuality is controversial at multiple levels of American society. To a degree not evident in earlier issues, however, religious ideas and arguments are central to many of the debates about homosexuality taking place outside of religious centers, from Anita Bryant's campaign in the 1970s to recent efforts around same-sex marriage (Fetner 2001). Like many debates about homosexuality, recent debates about same-sex marriage include not only religious players but mobilization through religious organizations, like the Catholic Church (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Mello 2004; Strasser 1999).

Since the Stonewall riots in 1969, often described as the start of the gay and lesbian rights movement, religious organizations have been engaged in national

debates about homosexuality. On one side of the issue, liberal Quakers passed motions affirming the civil rights of homosexuals in the early 1970s and same-sex marriages were approved by some meetings as early as 1973 (Frost n.d.). New religious organizations like the Metropolitan Community Church and Dignity in the Catholic Church also emerged for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people (Cadge 2002; Perry 1990; Warner 1995). On the other side, groups like the Southern Baptist Convention and other evangelical religious organizations made public statements calling homosexuality a "sin" and supported therapeutic efforts they argued enable gay people to come out of the "gay lifestyle" (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988). In between these extremes is a third group of organizations, including mainline Protestant denominations, in which the issue of homosexuality is a subject of ongoing controversy in national religious bodies. Grassroots organizations exist on all sides of this debate in mainline Protestant denominations and the subject is studied, debated, and fought about at regular national denominational meetings (Cadge 2002).

A growing body of research describes conflicts and debates about homosexuality in mainline Protestant denominations by focusing on national events (Beuttler 1999; Burgess 1999; Koch and Curry 2000; Stephens 1997; Udis-Kessler 2002; Wood 2000). Some scholars stress that these national debates polarize conflicts around homosexuality in individual denominations while others emphasize that the national debates help preserve unified denominations by enabling the moderate or loyal middle to exert greater influence (Wellman 1999; Weston 1999). Fewer scholars have considered how local congregations are responding to homosexuality—and none of these studies have considered more than a few congregations (Cadge 2005; Ellingson et al. 2001; Moon 2004). Limited survey data suggests that homosexuality has been addressed in sermons in some portion of congregations, and a number of case studies focus on congregations that are in conflict about homosexuality or have already taken a position on the issue (Hartman 1996; Presbyterian Panel 1999). While these studies begin to illustrate local responses, their attention to just one or two congregations does not allow for comparison of how larger numbers of congregations and clergy respond to homosexuality and what factors shape their responses.

Relatively little previous research specifically considers the roles clergy play in their congregations' responses to homosexuality and how they negotiate these roles. Research by Olson and Cadge (2002) shows that many clergy are concerned about homosexuality in their denominations and congregations but says little about how clergy understand the issue and what positions they take around it. The ways clergy position themselves around homosexuality are important because they are likely to shape how people in their congregations and beyond think about the subject. In local congregations, clergy may occupy any number of roles. At one end of a broad continuum are those who play almost no role, saying nothing (or as little as possible) about homosexuality. At the other end of the continuum are clergy who are very involved with the issue and take positions, host related events, or become involved in related organizations in their congregation or local community. Most clergy likely fall somewhere between these two extremes, though little data addressing these questions have been gathered.

Ann Swidler's (1986) approach to culture, and particularly her concepts of the "tool kit" and "strategies of action," helps to theoretically conceptualize how clergy position themselves around homosexuality and develop personal identities around those positions in their congregations. Clergy draw from their personal "tool kits" or "symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people use in varying degrees to solve different kinds of problems" as they decide how to respond (Swidler 1986: 273). We consider the range of actions clergy and congregations take, including congregational studies, educational programs, and so on, in a separate article (Cadge, Olson and Wildeman 2008), focusing specifically here on the identities clergy develop in these processes. We call these "identities" rather than "roles" to indicate the conscious decisions clergy make to adopt them. These identities illustrate "strategies of action" as some clergy primarily aim to facilitate educational processes around homosexuality while others act as both quiet and outward advocates on the issue. Our approach here builds on previous research that extends and applies Swidler's definition of "culture work" to a variety of group-level social interactions (Eliasoph 1990; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

RESEARCH METHODS

We focus on how the pastors of thirty mainline Protestant congregations that recently addressed homosexuality negotiated their responses to the issue in their congregations. All of these congregations are located in the urban and suburban areas surrounding a large northeastern city that has not been a center of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered activism in recent years. We include congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ($n = 10$), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America ($n = 11$), and United Methodist Church ($n = 9$) because these are the three mainline Protestant denominations that have been locked in the most prolonged and divisive debates. The pastors interviewed include seven women and twenty-three men. We compare clergy in these denominations to one another because each has a similar national position on homosexuality as well as similar formal organizational relationships between congregations and denominations in which national policies are binding for local congregations. If the national leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for example, decide that clergy are not allowed to marry same-sex couples, all of the clergy in the denomination are required to follow that rule. The debates about homosexuality in the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran denominations have been especially vigorous, as a result, because of the tight organizational ties between national policies and local actions. These three denominations are also similar in that each has made some effort to have local congregations and clergy study and respond to homosexuality in recent years.

We located congregations where the issue was addressed with the guidance of regional denominational representatives. In one denomination, a regional representative gave us the names of a broad range of congregations she had recently invited to an educational event about homosexuality. At another we contacted all of the congregations that had recently borrowed materials about sexuality from the regional denominational library. At the third we contacted the few congregations

suggested by denominational representatives and then built a snowball sample of congregations that had addressed the issue. In each denomination, we located additional congregations through our initial contacts, ending up with snowball samples designed to include congregations that had addressed homosexuality in a range of ways. These data enabled us to consider variation in how clergy responded to homosexuality in their congregations. These comparisons do not, however, enable us to assess what factors lead some clergy and congregations rather than others to address the issue in the first place. A much larger survey of congregations is needed for that. While it is impossible to assess the extent to which these congregations are representative of those in this region and the region representative of other regions across the country, the range of responses to homosexuality we document indicate that we contacted a diverse set of congregations, though those that are clearly on the more liberal side of the issue.

At each of the congregations selected for study, we contacted the senior minister by mail or telephone and, in the summer of 2004, conducted a semistructured interview with her or him by telephone. We also gathered materials from the pastor, such as sermons, study guides, and the response booklets some congregations compiled after completing studies of homosexuality. To better understand the regional contexts, we also interviewed regional denominational representatives and representatives of local denominational gay rights groups in the area. Interviews lasted about one hour and were transcribed and inductively coded along relevant themes, first in a broad sense and then in more detail as additional analytic themes emerged from early analyses (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

This analytic approach allowed us to hear how the pastors responded to homosexuality, in their own voices, and to document more variation in how these clergy are responding than would be possible through detailed ethnographic research of fewer congregations. Given that little previous data have been gathered about clergy or congregations' responses to homosexuality, this approach further enabled us to ask open-ended questions and gather more detailed information than would have been possible through a larger survey administered to more congregations with close-ended questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All of the clergy interviewed had, by design, addressed the issue of homosexuality with their congregation in some way in recent years.² Nearly all of them (more than 80 percent) had addressed the topic publicly through sermons, Sunday school classes, or specific studies on the subject. Some came to the issue because of events in their congregations while the majority, about two-thirds, focused on it in response to national denominational study and debate about the topic. Clergy initiated events in the congregation around homosexuality in about half of the congregations, and lay people or denominational leaders brought the subject to the fore in the other half (Cadge, Olson and Wildeman 2008). While some of the clergy wanted to bring up the subject of homosexuality, others were hesitant because they wanted to avoid controversy. In almost all of the congregations, clergy quickly discovered that church members had diverse opinions about

homosexuality. In order to analyze how clergy respond to homosexuality, we first examined how clergy understood homosexuality and why they understand it to be the subject of so much controversy.

Fear as a Unifier

The clergy interviewed were nearly unanimous in describing the source of conflicts over homosexuality as an emotion—fear—which they described as fear of sexuality, of gay and lesbian people, of misinterpreting scripture, and of the unknown. Understanding conflict in this way allowed clergy to personalize the issue and neutralize or depoliticize it before responding as facilitators or advocates, as is evident in the following examples.

Nearly all of the pastors interviewed spoke of the fear congregants have about sexuality generally, and gay and lesbian people specifically, as what they see as the root source of the controversy over the issue. Clergy rooted congregants' fears of sexuality in what is taught about it in both the church and society. The pastor of a midsized suburban congregation described the "terrible fear of their own sexuality" people have to face, a fear that sets off "a keg of dynamite—unbelievable anxiety." Some see this fear based in people's own uncertainties about their own sexuality. One minister explained: "People are so afraid, I think because there is something in each and every one of us that questions our own sexuality and sexual orientation . . . it is a fear." Another agreed: "I think that people are afraid somehow that this [questioning their own sexuality] is something that might happen to them." Others place the fear in the messages the church sends about sexuality. A Methodist minister saw congregants' fear of sexuality based in what she sees as the church's silence around the issue: "I think traditionally the church has been . . . anything having to do with sex, it's such a taboo thing." Others point to the confusing messages about sexuality present in American society more generally. A Presbyterian minister explained, "America has a real sickness about sexuality—huge mixed messages."

Other pastors spoke more specifically about the fears congregants have of gay and lesbian people, especially gay men.³ A Presbyterian minister said that in his congregation, "I think there's a lot of fear. I think there is a lot of ignorance and sense of the gay and lesbian community—but especially the gay community—being predatory if you will." A Methodist minister described similar stereotypes held by people in his congregation in this way: "Well, if you're gay you're also a child molester. You're a predator of children and all of those things are all blurred together . . . they [church members] don't think of people covenanting together and being in love with each other. They only think of gay bars and drag queens."

In addition to the fears surrounding sexuality that pastors interpret as underlying these conflicts, they spoke at length about the fears congregants and clergy alike have that result from the challenges homosexuality presents to scriptural interpretation. Many clergy spoke about the fear they shared with congregants about misunderstanding the Bible on this topic. Pointing to what he sees as scriptural ambiguity, a Lutheran minister described how "the Bible really does not have anything to say against it [homosexuality] but I'm not sure it has anything to

say for it." A Presbyterian minister spoke about the fear and ambiguity around other topics he feels result from interpreting the Bible in a particular way around homosexuality. "From a theological perspective," he explained, "if you say that homosexuality is a natural and beautiful thing blessed by God then you basically have to throw out two thousand years of Christian teaching and really three thousand years of Judeo-Christian moral theology. That's a big deal." Fear ran beneath all of the ways the clergy interviewed spoke about scripture and the ambivalence they and their congregants feel about how to understand homosexuality.

The final source of fear that pastors described as influencing their understanding of homosexuality was the broadest—fear of the unknown. Many spoke about the lack of information they and congregants have about homosexuality and the "radical cultural shift" many have observed in their lifetimes around this issue: "Its such a radical cultural shift . . . from what most of us have grown up thinking is a traditional relationship between the sexes." A number of clergy pointed to all of the issues homosexuality touches on, calling it a "Pandora's box." As a Presbyterian minister explained, "I think there are significant and larger issues involved . . . it is more than just people get to sleep with whoever they want to sleep with. I mean the reality of it is [that it is about the] nature of marriage, sexual mores . . . even the nature of what it means to be human." Many, if not all, of the issues that come out of the Pandora's box when homosexuality begins to be addressed are frightening, this pastor explained, and challenge his own understanding of the world and the world as understood by church members.

Fears of sexuality, gay and lesbian people, misinterpreting scripture, and the unknown are powerful personalizing tropes through which clergy described their own understandings of homosexuality and the conflict about the issue in the church and society. By viewing the issue of homosexuality through an emotion, fear, clergy name it, personalize it, and then begin to neutralize it by talking about it as something that everyone fears in some way. Clergy emphasize fear as the emotion that underlies the issue, helping them create common ground among people and helping them recognize—if not understand or agree with—where another person is coming from. This attempt to neutralize the issue is an essential first step in responding to the issue of homosexuality in their congregations according to the clergy interviewed, because they almost all lead congregations that include people with diverse opinions about homosexuality and this awareness of common fears creates some initial common ground.

Clergy Responses

As they drew from their cultural "tool kits" to respond to homosexuality in their congregations, clergy used "strategies of action," constructing identities as facilitators, quiet advocates, or more outward advocates around the issue in the process. Each strategy of action is connected to a particular way clergy negotiated an identity around homosexuality and acted on that identity in interactions with congregants. Based on the data we gathered from individual clergy, there are not obvious patterns by gender, denomination, tenure in the congregation, or other individual factors that explains where clergy fit in this typology. Likely these

decisions were influenced by a range of congregational and more local contextual factors (see Ellingson et al. 2001) that require more ethnographic data collection than was possible in a project with the number of congregations studied here.

Facilitators

The largest fraction of clergy described themselves as facilitators and emerged in this analysis primarily as educators, facilitating study and conversation about homosexuality among people in their congregations with different positions about homosexuality. Many pastors described themselves as people who could bring information about homosexuality to their congregations and help congregants understand it, especially scriptural materials. A Presbyterian minister said that he tries to bring them (church members) "a faithful exposition of the scripture. I try and bring them materials perhaps that I'm reading that considers the matter and its relationship to the church and the ministry of the church."

Rather than just bringing information, other clergy worked to engage people on both sides of the issue. "If the denomination makes a pronouncement" on homosexuality, one minister explained, "we're not going to champion one side or another. We're going to champion listening to each other . . . you need the dialogue, you need the tension. In order to be the body of Christ . . . you need people with different viewpoints." Another minister agreed: "I think you need to talk more [in congregations]. I think to just go to our separate camps on the issue [of homosexuality] and throw stones is a kind of ignorant approach. I think we need more dialogue. I think we need more programs where we can honestly talk about what we know."

While some clergy facilitated conversations around homosexuality only when the issue came up in their congregations, others more actively challenged or pushed congregants into considering the topic. A Methodist minister, for example, described mentioning homosexuality in the context of other conversations in the congregation. "If we're doing a Bible study or something," he explained, "I try and push it. If it says love one another . . . I try to push who the one another is." Another minister saw his role not simply as facilitating communication between people with different positions about homosexuality but as "challeng[ing] people to think." He does not advance a particular viewpoint but wants people to "wrestle" with the topic: "I see myself raising or bringing it [homosexuality] before people, trying to get people to wrestle with it so that at least they haven't just said, 'well, this is the way it is and that's it.'" He aims to make people think through the issue, taking "a journey" to get to their personal position.

Acting as facilitators who see themselves called to create neutral spaces in which any position about homosexuality can be presented was not easy, and a number of the clergy interviewed spoke about actively trying to be sure that a range of viewpoints were presented in conversations on the subject. Lutheran pastors spoke in the most detail about these challenges because many of them had recently completed congregational studies of homosexuality at the request of their national denominational leaders (Cadge et al. 2007). A Lutheran minister in a large suburban congregation described his role in the congregational study that

took place at his church, saying "I really saw my role as helping everyone have a sense that their view was heard and appreciated . . . I really listened carefully so that in my view as people left there they would have heard their view be stated with some credibility." He worked hard to create balanced dialogues so that, in his words, "people could understand why someone could hold that view and be a Christian." He was clear throughout the process that he was not, in his words, "advocating for the church to do this or that."

Once discussions of homosexuality began, facilitating balance was a challenge for some clergy. One minister said that she went into her congregation's study of homosexuality with "fear and trembling," feeling that her responsibility was to create a space in which any perspective could be respectfully articulated: "I felt that my role was to let people say whatever they needed to say as long as it was respectful and to never really say 'that's wrong,' but to say 'that's one way people look at it.'" Because this was not easy, the minister decided to lead the study with two lay people. This provided both support and the guarantee that different people's voices would be heard. Another pastor spoke about how rather than leading a study of homosexuality in his congregation, he participated as a kind of theological consultant. He described feeling awkward as the conversation started to veer off in one direction or another:

I might hear a facilitator lead in a different direction that was clearly the facilitator's opinion and I'd want to rein them back into a more middle of the road, 'listen to everybody' kind of position. . . . At the same time, when I would hear strong opposition . . . that could be interpreted as derogatory even to people who disagree, I almost felt the need to jump in to defend people that might have been hurt by these statements.

The best he could do, this pastor explained, was to keep the conversations as respectful and representative of multiple positions as possible.

Clergy who adopted identities as facilitators saw themselves as responsible for bringing educational material about homosexuality to the attention of their congregations. Some felt that bringing this material to their congregants' attention was enough, while others made concerted efforts to engage people in discussions and study processes around the subject. While some responded to the issue only when it was raised directly, others brought the topic of homosexuality up themselves in other contexts when they felt there was an opportunity for education. Facilitators were unified in the extent to which they saw themselves as responsible for creating open and neutral educational spaces where people with a range of opinions about homosexuality could study and learn about the topic. Their own personal opinions on the subject very rarely had a place in such a forum.

Quiet Advocates

While some clergy mainly functioned as facilitators, others negotiated identities more as advocates within their congregations. In contrast to the pastors described above, who did not reveal their personal positions about homosexuality or only did so long after their congregations had considered the issue, a second group of

clergy quietly advocated for their own positions. A Presbyterian minister who felt that the denomination should accept gay and lesbian people into all areas of church life quietly advocated for gay and lesbian people by directly personalizing the issue, inviting a lesbian friend to attend the congregation and to get involved with the youth. People were uncomfortable at first, but then, this minister explained, they got to know this person and “before long she just became one of the family and she didn’t have the label lesbian, she had the label of Beth.” This minister gradually made her personal position more public and after a few years mentioned homosexuality in a sermon. While the congregation did not start out agreeing with this minister’s position on homosexuality, the strategy of action she adopted—gradually introducing the subject of homosexuality and a lesbian church member—had what she called “a percolating effect” through which the issue became less controversial.

Another pastor also served as a quiet advocate for gay and lesbian people by narrowing the range of people who were welcome at his church. This minister led a congregational study about homosexuality that, when it started, included people with a wide range of opinions about homosexuality. As the study progressed, however, people with more conservative positions stopped attending. When asked why this was the case, he said that he had a role in it. A woman the minister described as a “hard nosed conservative” spoke a lot in these meetings. At the last meeting she attended, the minister responded to her positions saying, in his words:

there are some churches that would see [it as] an abomination that you [this woman] are seated at this table because you’re a woman and women should not be in discussion. It should be left to the men to decide . . . they would say the Bible is perfectly clear about that as it is perfectly clear on homosexuality.

This woman responded by saying that people who think that are wrong, but she did not return to the study. Like at the congregations Penny Edgell describes that needed to come to new understandings about race, this minister acted as an advocate in his congregation as he juxtaposed homosexuality with women’s issues and made advocacy-oriented arguments in favor of his positions around homosexuality in the church (Becker 1998).

Pastors’ attempts to be quiet advocates were not always accepted by their congregations and sometimes led to controversy. One of the United Methodist ministers interviewed decided to conduct a study of homosexuality using the materials the denomination put together in 1994 for that purpose. He had a strong opinion about the subject and led the study against the advice of lay leaders. Church members got into big disagreements, which the pastor was not able to keep civil, in part because he was so committed to his own position. In the end, twenty to thirty people left the congregation. In retrospect, the minister points to challenges implicit in trying to be a quiet advocate. “If you’re going to lead something in this area [around homosexuality],” he now advises his colleagues, “I would try to set all your personal stuff aside . . . I know I overreacted at times.” In sum, he feels like clergy are on stronger footing as facilitators dedicated to education or as outward advocates who make their positions clear. His attempt to position himself as

a quiet advocate had unintended consequences because he was not able to set his personal views aside, and he advises other clergy not to follow his example.

Outward Advocates

A third group of clergy positioned themselves as outward or more public advocates as their congregations responded to homosexuality. These individuals took clear positions around homosexuality in their congregations, denominations, and broader communities, positioning themselves as people committed to creating broader institutional change. A Lutheran minister who had served his congregation for more than ten years spoke eloquently about his responsibilities in this regard—describing his position as both a “prophet” and a “priest.” The prophet, he explained, “is the one who challenges the congregation to see where God is leading, and the priest is the one who holds people’s hands in the midst of those changes.” While this minister feels called to support people wherever they are in their considerations of homosexuality and other difficult issues, he also said he feels a responsibility to challenge them as a “prophet” to be who God wants them to be—people who fully accept gay and lesbian people into their congregations and denominations. The pastor of a small Presbyterian Church also felt competing responsibilities. On the one hand, she described the responsibility to educate people about homosexuality. On the other hand, she described a responsibility to change the church so that gays and lesbians can be ordained, just as others changed it so that she could be.

All of the pastors in this group spoke outwardly about their positions on homosexuality, though in different forums. Some were primarily involved with this issue in their local congregations. A Methodist minister, for example, saw his role as “stating my case as I’ve developed it over the years and sticking with it.” He clarified that he cares about what his congregants think about homosexuality, but if their thinking is very different from his own and the issue is important to them, he feels comfortable suggesting that they look for another church. Other clergy brought up homosexuality and their position on it when they were considering going to work at their congregations. Although they did not want it to be a “hobby horse” issue, they wanted to feel comfortable speaking and teaching about it based on their personal position. Other clergy in this group, like one Presbyterian minister, promoted institutional change in numerous venues. This minister spoke openly about allowing the full participation of gay and lesbian people in her congregation and is on the national committees of related special interest groups. Some, like one Methodist minister, have been arrested as a result of their activism and spend much of their time advocating on behalf of gay and lesbian people in their denominations.⁴

Unlike the facilitators who largely aim to create neutral spaces for study and education around homosexuality, the quiet and more outward advocates state their positions about homosexuality in quieter and louder ways and negotiate identities with their congregations around those positions. While some aim to educate, all are concerned about creating change around homosexuality in their congregation, denomination, and/or society that allows for the greater inclusion

of gay and lesbian people. This study illustrates how clergy adopt these identities and strategies of action. Larger, more systematic surveys of both individual clergy and congregations need to be conducted to determine what factors lead clergy to fall into each of these roles. This analysis suggests that the intersection between the strength of pastors' personal positions and the degree to which they make them known ultimately determines the social role they occupy. Individual factors like previous experience around social justice issues, previous exposure to issues around homosexuality, theological training, and congregational factors like history of involvement in social justice issues, theological orientation, and so on also likely have an impact on clergy's roles and need to be further investigated.

CONCLUSIONS

Homosexuality, like civil rights, women's rights, and other social issues before it, is currently one of the most controversial issues in religious organizations and society more broadly. While some religious groups have settled the issue for now, others are pursuing the topic through studies, conversations, and debates. While scholars have considered how that process is taking place in mainline Protestant national denominational bodies, few studies have investigated how local congregations are responding to the debate and specifically what role clergy are playing in the process.

Unlike the "us versus them" culture wars framework that has dominated much of the national denominational debate, we find that local clergy situated the causes of debates over homosexuality in terms of an emotion, fear, that personalized and then neutralized or deescalated the debate and set the stage for local study and conversation. While the clergy were not uniform in what they believe congregants are afraid of, their understandings center on questions about sexuality, gay and lesbian people, scriptural interpretation, and a host of other unknown factors the issue of homosexuality often brings to the fore.

Unlike national denominational debates, local congregations do not have clear rules and procedures for study and debate (Wood and Bloch 1995). Clergy created these rules as they negotiated their own identities and strategies of action in response to homosexuality. While a broader sample of congregations is necessary to determine how clergy avoided addressing homosexuality when it was brought up in their congregations, this study delineates a typology of roles clergy occupy in congregations that do address the subject. As clergy drew from their personal "tool kits" to enact "strategies of action" or do what Ann Swidler (1986) more broadly calls the "culture work" of responding to homosexuality, the clergy interviewed developed identities as facilitators and quiet or more outward advocates around homosexuality. The facilitators, or "priests," felt called to create the most neutral spaces possible for consideration of homosexuality and to actively work to be sure a range of positions are presented in those discussions. The advocates, or "prophets," in contrast, felt called to state their own positions around homosexuality and to work quietly or more outwardly for social change most especially in the church but also in society. Both social roles result from and describe the personal identities and "strategies of action" clergy adopt around the issue in their congregations, communities, and denominations.

Mainline Protestant clergy and other religious leaders had and continue to have the opportunity to shape public opinion about a range of social issues in the United States today. Substantively, this article increases knowledge about how clergy negotiate their positions around homosexuality in local congregations, a topic about which social scientists know little. Theoretically, this study broadens knowledge about how religious leaders respond locally to issues that are controversial at multiple levels of society by illustrating the range of ways clergy negotiate personal identities around the issues and act on those identities in their local congregations. As local and national debates about homosexuality continue, this article further suggests that some clergy will probably continue to address the issue quietly in their congregations while others will speak more broadly in their communities in an effort to create institutional change. Religion has been and remains a significant predictor of public opinion about homosexuality, and clergy have the potential to influence public discourse about homosexuality, as they have historically influenced discourse and action around other social issues.

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NOTES

1. The majority of mainline Protestant denominations have focused on gay men and lesbians rather than also including bisexuals and transgendered people in their considerations of homosexuality. We focus largely on gay men and lesbians in this article as a result.
2. A few clergy interviewed had been at their congregations for less than one year. In these cases we asked them what they knew of how homosexuality had been addressed in the congregation in the past and what, if anything, they had done since arriving at the congregation.
3. Despite an emphasis on queer theory and the limits of binary approaches to sexuality in much academic writing about sexuality in the past twenty years, it is important to make clear that all but one or two of clergy interviewed conceived of sexuality in binary hetero/homosexual categories (Gamson and Moon 2004).
4. All of the outward advocates interviewed were advocating on the gay supportive side of the debate. This could have been an artifact of the way the sample was gathered, specifically that it only included clergy who had addressed homosexuality in their congregations. Outward advocates on the other side of the issue might be less likely to address the topic with their congregation. Alternately, this could represent something about mainline Protestant congregations more broadly and the kinds of public advocacy that is welcome. Additional study is needed.

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