


Congregation Over Denomination: Analyzing Psychological Reactions to a Church Ruling on Same Sex Marriage

CLARA L. WILKINS 

*Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences
Washington University in St. Louis and
Department of Psychology
University of Washington*

JACLYN A. LISNEK

*Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences
Washington University in St. Louis and
Department of Psychology
University of Virginia*

KIMIA SAADATIAN

*Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences
Washington University in St. Louis and
Department of Psychology
Stanford University*

LERONE A. MARTIN

*John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics
Washington University in St. Louis and
Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education
Institute
Stanford University*

In 2019, the United Methodist Church (UMC) voted to maintain their stance of prohibiting the ordination of gay clergy and the performance of same-sex marriages within the church. As part of a multi-method study, we hosted focus groups, interviews, and conducted surveys with 54 individuals from four UMC churches to assess attitudes about the outcome of the vote. Consistent with hypotheses, the majority expressed disappointment and evidence of having resolved cognitive dissonance that arose from continued church attendance. Both quantitative and qualitative measures indicated a tendency for participants to disidentify with the global church and denomination but to strengthen their commitment and ties to their more LGBTQ-friendly local congregations. We identified themes of resilience, community, and increased activism. We discuss implications for other organizations grappling with the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities as well as implications for political polarization more broadly.

Keywords: *Christianity, sexual orientation, cognitive dissonance, mixed-methods.*

“The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

How do individuals contend with membership in values-based organizations whose policies conflict with their personal values? This situation can arise for members of a myriad of groups (e.g., interest clubs, sports teams, members political parties, or even members of churches). Understanding how individuals navigate the discomfort can teach us about responses to threat and social identity processes that inevitably arise in humans navigating a complex social world. While

Acknowledgments: This research and participant compensation was funded by a grant to Drs. Clara L. Wilkins and Lerone A. Martin. The grant was part of the Self, Virtue, and Public Life Project, a 3-year research initiative based at the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing at the University of Oklahoma and funded with generous support from the Templeton Religion Trust. There are no conflicts of interest. The authors thank Zoey Deutsch for assistance with data collection, Sarah Gaby and Shellae Versey for their feedback on previous drafts, and the UW ADVANCE Write Right Now program for its support.

Correspondence should be addressed to Clara L. Wilkins, Psychology Department, University of Washington E-mail: claraw@uw.edu

we believe the processes we explore are likely generalizable and common, we explore the specific manifestations of incongruent group/individual attitudes in a sample of United Methodists.

The polarizing words quoted above are from the United Methodist Church's (UMC) Book of Discipline—its official doctrine (Book of Discipline 2016). The church's stance on sexuality has long caused significant contention within the Methodist community. Many have opposed the policy (e.g., a transgender deacon was commissioned in 2017; Hahn 2017), but others have enforced the official stance (e.g., numerous gay priests have been defrocked; Banerjee 2004; *The New York Times* 1971). Given the varied views, UMC Council of Bishops proposed allowing individual pastors to decide their stance of LGBTQ+ issues (Ring 2018). The 2019 special session of the General Conference, was meant to resolve the contention by putting the issue to a vote. In February 2019 the UMC voted to maintain this language and their official stance of not allowing “self-avowed and practicing homosexual” clergy nor same-sex marriages (SSMs) to be performed within the church and to strengthen penalties for disobedience (McFarlan Miller 2019). The so-called “Traditional Plan” passed by a narrow margin (53 percent in favor) and reflected a significant divide between the relatively liberal United States and the global church.

We conducted semi-structured focus groups and interviews with politically liberal Methodists from four churches in the Saint Louis, Missouri Metropolitan area to assess how individuals made sense of the vote. We asked how they felt about the Traditional Plan. We wondered how the relatively progressive Methodists explained discrepancies between their personal beliefs and the Church's stance on same sex marriage and sexuality. We were particularly interested in the psychological tension we imagined would arise given the relatively liberal leanings of local parishes in the urban metropolitan area and the Church's more conservative international stance. Specifically, we imagined that U.S. Methodists might experience and attempt to resolve cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), or psychological discomfort, from maintaining a connection to a denomination with explicit values that contrast with their own. Thus, our interviews highlighted questions that captured potential methods of dissonance reduction.

What is Cognitive Dissonance and why might United Methodists have Experienced it?

Cognitive dissonance is an aversive psychological state that arises when one's beliefs are inconsistent with behavior (Festinger 1957). For example, individuals who are asked to lie about enjoying a dull task in exchange for a small payment, rate it as more enjoyable than those who receive greater compensation: the former having had to rationalize their actions to a greater extent than the latter (who could use compensation as rationale) (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959). Similarly, smokers, aware of health risks, rationalize their behavior and display logical distortions. For example, they rate their personal risk of lung cancer as lower than the risk to the average smoker (e.g., McMaster and Lee 1991).

Dissonance is a psychologically aversive state that people try to avoid or resolve by attempting to restore consistency (see Festinger 1964). Cognitive dissonance can be reduced in several ways including: (1) changing behavior to be consistent with cognitions (for smokers, this would mean quitting), (2) changing cognitions to be consistent with behavior (smokers believing that smoking is less dangerous than before they started smoking), or (3) by adding consonant cognitions (smokers may consider the benefits of smoking to outweigh health risks).

In the case of the UMC vote on the future of sexual minorities in the church, we imagined that Methodists we sampled in the United States would have relatively favorable attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities (compared to the global church). Attitudes toward same sex marriage are relatively positive in the United States and have become increasingly favorable in the last decade (Ofosu et al. 2019). Furthermore, we sampled Methodist churchgoers from the relatively liberal St. Louis Metropolitan area (Pew Research Center 2014). Our sample's evaluations likely stand in contrast to global attitudes, which tend to be more negative. For example, although the Traditional Plan passed with majority support, most U.S. United Methodists reject the Traditional

Plan (Holland 2019). Furthermore, many nations, including several in Africa, explicitly criminalize same-sex behavior (see *Free and Equal: United Nations for LGBT Equality* n.d.). Thus, we anticipated that there would be a disconnect in attitudes toward sexual minorities between our sample and the global church. Specifically, we expected our participants to have more liberal attitudes than the global church and thus, that they would experience dissonance in response to the passage of the Traditional Plan, which they would subsequently need to resolve.

Extant qualitative research has utilized a cognitive dissonance framework to make sense of how individuals reconcile the disconnect between their own beliefs about SSM and official church doctrine (e.g., Edwards 2016; Patterson and Price 2012; Pitt 2010; Ross, Lelkes, and Russell 2012; Woodell and Schwadel 2020). For example, Edwards (2016) examined how black pastors rationalized their support for President Barack Obama after he expressed more favorable views on same sex marriage. Many pastors maintained their political support despite the disconnect with their religious beliefs. These pastors resolved dissonance by creating a separation between politics and religion (e.g., they described Obama as “the commander in chief” instead of the “commander in priest”). They also minimized the importance of SSM relative to other issues affecting the black community and church. Although these strategies made sense for these pastors in the context of an election, the specific strategies were not available for members of the UMC, for whom the issue of SSM was directly connected to church doctrine and thus, inseparable.

No research, to our knowledge has explicitly examined identification as a dissonance-reducing outcome. Our unique focus is on a psychological analysis of the consequences of the disconnect and how that shapes individuals’ understanding of religion and identification. For liberal UMC members, continued church attendance would lead to tension that they would need to resolve. Even if their local congregation was relatively liberal, they would have to rationalize being part of a denomination with values that conflict with their own.

How might Liberal UMC Churchgoers Reduce Cognitive Dissonance?

As described above, cognitive dissonance could be mitigated by changing behavior or cognitions (beliefs). A straight-forward behavior change would be to alter church-attendance or to leave the denomination. In fact, the UMC has already split based on the issue of same sex marriage (Shimron and Miller 2023). In fact, as of July 2023, over 6000 congregations have disaffiliated with the UMC (Smith 2023). Furthermore, longitudinal studies of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) emerging adults reveal that many leave formal religion as they encounter church environments hostile to their sexual identities (Woodell and Schwadel 2020). Because we recruited participants in churches, our participants likely relied on other methods to reduce tension.

Liberal participants, who maintained church attendance, would likely need to rationalize that behavior by changing or adding consonant cognitions. There are several ways this could manifest. We predicted that participants would resolve conflict primarily by changing their identification, or psychological connection, to the denomination. We hypothesized that participants would create a greater mental separation between the local and global churches to identify more strongly with their local congregations and less with the denomination. In other words, they would focus more on their local practice rather than the global Church’s theological stance as the former was closer to their own beliefs.

We predicted that for LGBTQ+ Christians, the UMC adoption of the Traditional Plan would be particularly distressing and lead to a stronger disconnect between local and global church identification. For this group, the plan directly threatens their identities and limits their full participation within the church. According to the rejection identification model (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey 1999), one adaptive way individuals cope with the experience of bias is by identifying more strongly with their minority identities. For LGBTQ+ United Methodists, experiencing sexual and gender prejudice might lead them to identify even more strongly with their sexual orientation or with their local community/congregation (if the latter are LGBTQ+ affirming).

For churchgoers, stronger identification with local congregations could also translate into greater commitment to social justice values and on efforts to change the denomination from within.

Regardless of sexual and gender identity, churchgoers might feel the need to justify their stances on SSM by adding consonant cognitions supported by scripture. That is, without the legitimacy of the broader denomination, participants might have felt compelled to look to a higher power to rationalize their beliefs. These predictions are supported by extant evidence on Christians whose views differ from the formal doctrine (see Pitt 2010; Ross, Lelkes, and Russell 2012; Yip, 1997, 2002). These individuals often must adopt beliefs that rationalize their stance. For example, gay men who attend churches that stigmatize sexual minorities critique the validity of the Church itself (e.g., they believe the institutional Church cannot be trusted on issues related to sexuality given the ways in which it historically failed on issues related to race during slavery; Yip, 1997, 2002). Similarly, black gay men denigrate the anti-gay messengers they encounter in church (Pitt 2010); they question the speaker's understanding, morality, and motive for conveying anti-gay messages. These strategies are also consistent with a tendency to see "true religion" as being consistent with one's own perspective. For example, Ross, Lelkes, and Russell (2012) show that when Christians recognize that their views differ from the gospel, they alter the importance of those issues, and project their own beliefs onto Jesus. Specifically, liberal Christians believe that Jesus has more liberal views than their own on issues related to economic inequality, and conservatives assume Jesus has more conservative views than their own on issues related to sexuality. Thus, UMC churchgoers may describe their stance on SSM and LGBTQ inclusion as being more consistent with the Gospel than the UMC's views.

Overview and Predictions

We utilized post positivist (see Levitt et al. 2017) and anthropological approaches for our methodological frame. We were interested in explaining our sample's reactions to the vote to make sense of how other religious communities might respond to issues around LGBTQ inclusion. We were simultaneously careful to not constrain our interpretations based on strong *a priori* predictions and allowed participants to express their personal experiences of the vote.

We conducted interviews with UMC attendees months after the plan was adopted, so we anticipated that they would have had to reduce cognitive dissonance that arose from continued connection to the UMC. We were open to witnessing multiple methods of dissonance reduction but anticipated evidence that participants were making a significant distinction between local and global churches and that they were using biblical justifications for their beliefs. In other words, we hypothesized that we would witness evidence of dissonance but were open to multiple manifestations.

METHODS

Participants

We recruited a sample of self-identified Christians at UMCs to participate in either a focus group or an individual interview. We recruited from four churches in the Saint Louis area from September to December of 2019. Three churches have statements supporting LGBTQ+ people on their websites. Two churches explicitly identify as reconciling (i.e., as welcoming of all regardless of gender identity and sexuality; Reconciling Ministries Network n.d.) and one congregation from our sample signed an open letter (Northaven 2019), affirming support of LGBTQ+ and in

opposition to the Traditional Plan. Thus, we expected the samples recruited at these churches to have a relatively liberal stance on human sexuality.¹

A total of 54 participants completed individual or group interviews and the pre-interview survey. After removing two participants for missing survey data and one underage participant, our data consisted of 51 surveys and 53 interviewees. These participants ranged in age from 20 to 78 ($M = 49.04$, $SD = 15.01$). They represented a variety of gender identifications (49.02 percent female, 45.10 percent male, 1.96 percent transgender female, and 3.92 percent other). They were predominantly white (88.0 percent), with 6.0 percent identifying as African American, 2.0 percent as Asian, and 4.0 percent as multiracial or other. Most identified as heterosexual (52 percent), 24 percent identified as gay, 8 percent as lesbian, 2 percent as bisexual, and 14 percent reported something other than the options given (i.e., they wrote in “queer,” “asexual,” “demi-sexual”). Approximately half (48.0 percent) had a 4-year college degree and most identified as Methodist (70.0 percent). Three participants identified as Catholic, two identified as Eastern Orthodoxy, one identified as Anglican, one identified as Calvinist, one as Baptist, 6 identified as “other” (two wrote in “Non-denominationalism,” and there were several other write-ins including: “Mennonite,” “Seventh-Day Evangelist,” “Unitarianism,” and one specified “[it’s] hard to identify as a Methodist right now—so just Christian”). One person did not respond to the question about their denomination and one response was incorrectly recorded. Our sample identified primarily as mainline (as opposed to fundamentalist): only four participants answered affirmatively to both questions assessing fundamentalism (see measures outlined below).

Procedure

After obtaining Institutional Review Board Approval, we contacted seven UMCs in St. Louis County, Missouri who had participated in research for a previous study (Wilkins et al. 2022) and asked if they would allow us to survey their congregants about the church vote. Of the seven contacted, four agreed to participate in the focus groups and interviews. Research assistants scheduled sessions by contacting participants by email². Our research team also recruited participants in person after church services. Of the 54 people who participated, 10 were one-on-one interviews, 2 were joint interviews, and 42 were recruited as part of a focus group (ranging in size from 4 to 11 people). Most sessions were conducted at churches, six participants were interviewed in the psychology research lab, and one interview was conducted in a participants’ home. The different interview formats were adopted to facilitate participation for the greatest number of participants (e.g., some individuals were not available during the focus group time or preferred to speak with a researcher individually). Regardless of the group size/format, researcher questions were identical.

Participants were given an ID number on a name tag as they entered the interview sessions. Before the sessions began, participants read and signed a consent form and then filled out a paper survey. They did not record any personally identifying information (only their ID number), and they were asked to place completed surveys in an envelope. Thus, participants understood that their survey responses were effectively anonymous. Once participants completed the surveys, a member of the research team read a script with relevant information about the session (see <https://osf.io/f87dn/> or the Supporting Information for the full interview script) including that the session would be audio recorded. Participants were instructed to refer to themselves and others using ID numbers only to ensure anonymity of the transcripts. Participants answered 10 interview

¹Although it is unclear why we were unsuccessful in recruiting more conservative congregations, we infer that they were reluctant to participate because they assumed researchers had liberal perspective on LGBTQ issues given our association with the University.

²We had contact information from individuals who had volunteered their information in the previous study.

questions and were compensated \$20 cash for their time. The interview transcripts ranged in time from 17 to 62 minutes (not including consent or survey).

Audio recordings of sessions were first transcribed using the Wreality software (Transcribe by Wreality 2021). Research assistants assured accuracy by checking transcripts against audio recordings. The research team compiled a set of recurring and interesting general themes. We coded a random set of transcripts to narrow the coding scheme and to identify subthemes. Next four hypothesis-blind research assistants (not interviewers or transcribers) used the qualitative coding software ATLAS.ti to independently code the transcripts. Transcripts were coded in interview-session units. They started with codes generated by the primary research team (e.g., international split and church community support; see full list of themes on OSF (https://osf.io/s8a2t/?view_only=0b48e3b056c74a26a4450b74033bdc38)). We cross-checked the materials coded by the investigators and the assistants and found a high reliability. The only instances where the codes did not fully match were when one person assigned more codes to an excerpt. In cases like this, a third coder resolved discrepancies. Ultimately, only codes identified by two individuals were used in the analysis.

The correlations between individual codes were assessed by examining the code co-occurrence table printed from ATLAS.ti. The code co-occurrence table displays the frequency of themes along with instances where multiple themes overlap in one coded segment (See code co-occurrence table at https://osf.io/s8a2t/?view_only=0b48e3b056c74a26a4450b74033bdc38).

Measures

All pre-interview survey measures and interview questions are posted on OSF (https://osf.io/s8a2t/?view_only=0b48e3b056c74a26a4450b74033bdc38). All items were completed on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* unless otherwise indicated.

Identification

Participants completed a four-item measure from the identity centrality subscale (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992) assessing their identification with religion and the Methodist denomination (e.g., “My religion is an important reflection of who I am.” “In general, my being Methodist is important to my self-image.”). They answered one item that assessed identification with their specific church: “How strongly do you identify with your church?”

Church Name

Participants reported the church they attend most frequently.

Denomination

Participants reported the Christian denomination they most strongly identify with.

Fundamentalism

Participants reported whether they identify as a fundamentalist Christian by answering two questions: (1) “Do you consider yourself a fundamentalist Christian?” and (2) “Are you someone who believes in the literal truth of the Bible? (e.g., Genesis 5:27 that Methuselah died at the age of 969 years old).” Participants could either answer “Yes” or “No” for each.

Demographics

Finally, participants reported their demographic information. We collected participants’ age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, education level, and political orientation. Political orientation was reported on a scale from 1 = *very liberal* to 7 = *very conservative*.

See Table 1 for means, scale reliability (α), and correlations between measures.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables

Variables	2	3	4	5	6	α	Mean (<i>SD</i>)
(1) Religious ID	.12	.14	.04	-.19	.05	.65	5.83 (0.99)
(2) Methodist ID	–	.31*	.15	.04	.007	.88	4.34 (1.69)
(3) Church ID	–	–	-.21	-.20	.06	N/A	5.94 (1.32)
(4) Fundamentalist (1 = yes, 2 = no)	–	–	–	.70***	-.35*	N/A	N/A
(5) Fundamental truth of Bible (1 = yes, 2 = no)	–	–	–	–	.48***	N/A	N/A
(6) Political orientation	–	–	–	–	–	N/A	2.44 (0.95)

Note: * $p < .05$;
 *** $p < .001$.

Interview Questions

Research assistants asked participants 10 questions including: “What are your personal thoughts and feelings about the decision?”, and “What do you think should happen next within the UMC?”. You can find the interview questions (the full script) at [https://osf.io/s8a2t/?view_only = 0b48e3b056c74a26a4450b74033bdc38](https://osf.io/s8a2t/?view_only=0b48e3b056c74a26a4450b74033bdc38).

RESULTS

After coding the data based on our primary research questions, we identified broad themes including (1) how participants made sense of the vote, and (2) how the vote shaped identification with the denomination and with local congregations. Participants spontaneously raised other themes related to (3) allyship and positive outcomes of the vote, and they discussed (4) what is next for the Church. We organize results based on these broad themes.

Making Sense of the Vote

To understand how people made sense of the vote, we asked: “What are your personal thoughts and feelings about the decision? What do you think the passing of the traditional plan communicates about LGBT people in the Church? What do you think scripture says (if anything) about this plan or excluding LGBT individuals from the church in general?”.

During interviews no one expressed support for the Traditional Plan. Instead, it was clear that our sample was disappointed by the plan’s passage and particularly with the message it conveyed. For example, a cisgender, heterosexual woman said, “I’m really disappointed in that greater message, that large decision, and that greater whole of the Methodist Church, doubled down, and how that caused such pain in the community that I’ve been a part of...” Another woman agreed: “I’m disappointed. Very, very, disappointed, and angry just because I feel our church is so progressive and welcoming and... our mission statement is that we’re a church without walls or borders. And so [the vote] goes against everything that I think our congregation feels.” A gay man added, “I think that the really sad disappointing part is there’s people in places throughout the world [and] in the United States that need to be known and accepted and loved, and then they’re not going to get that because of a decision that was made overall by people that don’t have much personal connection or understanding.” Thus, participants from the churches we sampled were not representative of the global UMC denomination where most delegates voted in favor of the Traditional

Plan (although, they are more like U.S. United Methodists (Religious Landscape Study 2014)). Instead, they expressed concern about the exclusion of sexual minorities and asserted that plan policies were inconsistent with their beliefs.

While disappointment with the vote was widespread, the outcome was especially difficult for LGBTQ+ participants as their identities were directly delegitimized by the vote. A 30-year-old self-identified queer participant, for example, highlighted sorrow about no longer having the church as a refuge: “I think that being queer is already hard out in the world. But to not... have a community where you could breathe fresh air and go and heal from the past hurts.”

In addition to expressing disappointment with the vote, many participants reflected on what caused delegates to favor the traditional plan. Participants of multiple gender identities and sexual orientations blamed subjective interpretations of the Bible for the outcome. Although many delegates who favored the Traditional Plan cited scripture for their reasoning (United Methodist Videos 2019), most of our sample argued that scripture does not condemn homosexuality. Participants insisted that the Bible should be interpreted with contextual, cultural, and historical factors in mind. In fact, one argued, “the whole Methodist tradition is based on not just the Scripture. It’s based on Wesley’s teaching... where traditions and common sense and scripture and all of that [come together] ... I don’t think in our tradition that the Bible is the sole source of our idea of how things should be.” In other words, they voiced discomfort with literal interpretations of the Bible, (which is consistent with the overwhelming nonfundamentalist identification reported on the survey). And they used the denomination’s own framework to refute the outcome. In so doing, they attempted to create a narrative of institutional and religious legitimacy for their perspectives and in opposition to the Traditional Plan.

Other participants argued that the selective focus on biblical passages without attention to context was simply a way to justify bias. A 48-year-old heterosexual cisgender man, claimed of the Bible, “It’s like a Rorschach test; you can look in there and find anything you really want... This [prejudice] is a human problem. God has nothing to do with it.” Another participant argued: “You know, no one could just be like, ‘I don’t like queer people; they freak me out’... They had to say, ‘God says this is wrong’.” In other words, participants saw the Bible as open to interpretation and as being used to justify sexual prejudice that exists in human readers; they did not see the Bible as a source of bias.

Our participants also highlighted perceived hypocrisy in Traditional Plan supporters’ biblical justifications. They noted for example, that there are other biblical passages that many Christians simply ignore (e.g., not eating shellfish). A 53-year-old, asexual transgender woman clarified that many people “pick and choose out of the Bible and to fit [their] narration... When people start to pick their command and see if anybody knows their 613 Commandments in the Torah. And if you want to start picking and choosing the ones you like, that’s fine, but you had bacon for breakfast. Do you like your crab legs? Do you have any tattoos?” In other words, this person noted the selective attention to particular Bible verses in order to justify exclusion.

Our participants overwhelmingly described scripture as focusing primarily on love and as highlighting inclusion of the oppressed. This sentiment was expressed by both cisgender heterosexual participants (e.g., “[God] said everyone is welcome, come as you are, and only I can judge.”) and LGBTQ+ participants (e.g., “The main two Commandments are love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor.”).

Many participants (13) mentioned at least once (some, several times) that financial interests also played a role in the church vote. They argued that the outcome was evidence that the Church was not staying true to God. A 57-year-old cisgender man claimed, “as somebody who’s lived my life in the church...church doctrine [is] more and more, a cynicism in me says, ‘it all has to do with control of power and pensions in the Church and nothing to do with saving people’s souls.’” A 38-year-old cisgender lesbian stated, “Acts of resistance, they’re hard...to do as a church because a lot of it comes down to money and assets.” A 66-year-old gay cisgender man complained, “They’re excluding me, but they still will take my money. You know, it’s okay for

me to give to the church, but they don't want to recognize me fully." Thus, rather than perceiving the vote outcome as divinely inspired, several perceived financial greed as the motivation.

Others argued that the outcome reflected a disconnect between the North American and global UMC. At least 10 participants highlighted that African delegates, in particular, were inclined to support the Traditional Plan because they were constrained by local laws or customs regarding LGBTQ+ people. A 42-year-old, gay, cisgender man said "... it's a very different place for someone to be gay or transgender in Africa.... the life and the culture there is not the same as it is here [in the U.S.]. So, I think that the church here probably voted in one direction, whereas the church representatives in Africa would... have different concerns than those here." A 57-year-old, self-identified queer, nonbinary participant similarly noted, "[The vote] has shined a light on a problem that's there because the Methodist Church is such a big church.... This church is so large, that we are in connection with countries that you can be killed for being gay. We can't get married [in UMC churches because of the vote] ...[but in other places] you can be killed. They [African delegates] can't pass this [can't support same sex marriage]. I feel for them. And having this large denomination, I think causes that problem." In other words, some participants attributed the outcomes to African delegates, but they did not necessarily condemn them for it. Instead, they noted constraints that lead to the outcome.

But others placed the blame almost entirely on African churches and noted how things would be better without those Methodists. For example, a white 32-year-old straight, cisgender woman said, "We've got this worldwide network, some of those things don't work in other countries.. so maybe we were better off when we were just us." A 66-year-old, gay, cisgender man questioned, "How can you be so narrow-minded? And why is Africa deciding what the United States is going to do? You know if we have to do America and then let Africa do their own thing, that doesn't really affect me." Thus, some directly blamed African delegates for the outcome and stressed that the outcome would have been better without the African delegates.

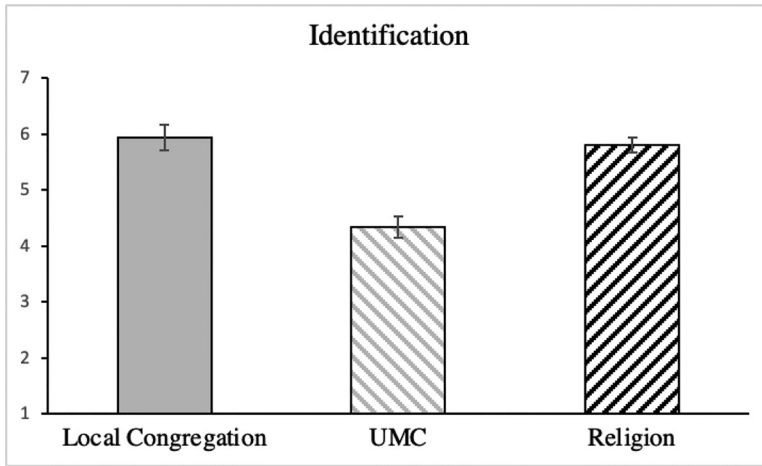
Others recognized factors working within the United States that led to the vote. One person acknowledged that "there are many churches within the United States who still want to retain [the] tradition." In other words, he argued, sexual prejudice is not restricted to the African continent. Another participant explicitly disagreed with group members who attributed the outcome to African delegates: instead arguing that it was a function of conservative interests in the United States. The 24-year-old gay, cisgender man argued, "What really [drove the vote] was... the conservative, traditional U.S.-based folks who were just able to ... somehow tap into people's fears, give arguments to the rest of the denomination on the global scale and say 'side with us'... The blame doesn't go internationally on the global church. I think it all went down... with the conservatives in the United States kind of trying to influence everyone else." So, a subset placed more responsibility on U.S. Methodists.

In sum, while there were varying attributions for the vote, our sample expressed that the outcome was wrong. They were disappointed with the passage of the Traditional plan, and yet they maintained church attendance. This likely aroused dissonance that they may have resolved by adding consonant cognitions. They did this by describing the vote as being motivated by problematic biblical interpretations, financial interests, the global church, and conservative interests operating in the United States.

Identification with the Local Church and United Methodist Denomination

We predicted that Methodists in our sample would identify more closely with their local (more liberal) community than the broader denomination after the vote in order to resolve tension arising from a mismatch between their beliefs and continued connection to the UMC. This hypothesis was supported by our quantitative analyses (based on survey responses). Participants reported identifying significantly more with their individual church ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.32$) than

Figure 1
 Identification with church, religion, and local congregation
 Note: Error bars represent standard error of the mean.



with the broader Methodist denomination ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.69$), $t(50) = 6.36$, $p < .001$. Participants also reported identifying significantly more with their religion ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 0.99$) than the UMC denomination³, $t(50) = 5.74$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1).

We also wondered whether participants' identification with their church, religion or with United Methodists varied based on sexual orientation. It is conceivable, for example, that sexual minorities might identify even less with the denomination than straight participants in response to the ruling. However, analyses revealed that the groups (straight vs. LGBT) did not differ in identification (as determined by between subjects t -tests on each measure of identification p 's $> .16$). In other words, identification did not significantly differ based on sexual orientation. Furthermore, irrespective of sexual orientation, our sample was inclined to identify more with their local church than the broader denomination (there was no significant interaction between sexual orientation and ID at the church level vs. denomination, $F(1,49) = 0.68$, $p = .41$).

This analysis is consistent with our expectation that identification with the broader denomination would suffer because of the vote outcome. But the analysis was cross-sectional rather than assessing change over time (pre-vote to post-vote). It also does not include a control group to compare identity levels. It is also possible that regardless of Church policy, individuals identify more with their local parishes than their denomination (e.g., Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson 2007). Thus, it was important for us to examine participants' narratives about their relationship with local versus global churches and to examine whether they are consistent with this quantitative analysis and with the predictions that the distinction would be exacerbated by the vote.

In the interview sessions we asked: "Does the outcome of the vote affect the extent to which you feel connected to the UMC? To your church? How (if at all) does the vote affect your religious faith?"

Qualitative interviews corroborated our inferences about participants' attitudes toward the church: suggesting that participants mentally distinguished their congregations from the denomination. Multiple participants described a disconnect between their individual faith and the political structure of the religion. They expressed that, "Church doctrine has nothing to do with my relationship to God." And "The vote to keep the Traditional Plan affects my trust in the larger

³These results were the same when restricting analyses to participants who explicitly identified as United Methodist.

Methodist system. It doesn't affect those things that are most important to my faith and my spirituality." Another agreed saying, "I was disappointed in the denomination as a whole but I still knew we were what we are, and as long as I had my immediate church as part of my support system, [the vote] wouldn't change my faith at all." A gay, cisgender, man said, "The vote doesn't change how I feel about the church and worshipping... It just changes how I feel about the organization, the structure, the, you know, powers that be."

In addition to mentally separating the local parish from the broader church, other participants described greater identification and commitment to local parishes in response to the vote. For example, a lesbian woman shared, "I feel less connected to the global church and more connected to my local church." Another added that if there were ever conflict (e.g., a potential split in the denomination) between the local congregation and the broader church, they would pick the local community saying, "If I have to choose between my church and the conference, I'll choose my pastor... So, if they [the pastor] go, I go..."

Consistent with primary predictions, participants reported stronger identification with their individual congregation and weaker identification with the broader UMC. This separation of spiritual practice from religious institution is consistent with previous research on sexual minority Christians. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians tend to leave church (presumably because of conflicts between doctrine and their sexual identities), but they do not alter their prayer practice (Woodell and Schwadel 2020). In the current case, the vote did not change UMC churchgoers' faith, but it did increase their psychological distance with the broader United Methodist denomination.

Allyship and Positive Outcomes of the Vote

Given increased identification with local parishes, it is no wonder that many of our participants subsequently highlighted increased commitment to their local congregations. After all, psychological consistency would necessitate increased behavioral commitment to the local parish following an increase in psychological connection (i.e., greater identification). So, even though our sample overwhelmingly expressed disappointment with the vote, many also highlighted the ways in which it brought about favorable community outcomes: including increased allyship, social activism at the congregation level, and enhanced commitment to their local parishes.

We asked people how the vote affected their own behaviors, for example, "What plans will you personally take (if any) in response to the vote? Does anyone plan on taking any sort of action or making any sort of changes in response to the vote?"

Several straight participants highlighted how the vote outcome made them aware of the increasing importance of allyship to LGBTQ+ members of their communities. For example, a 37-year-old cisgender heterosexual woman noted, "As an ally, it's kind of helped me reconfirm the drive to serve here. ... It just gives me that extra push to [make] sure I make eye contact and smile at everyone who walks in the door... to shake hands to meet people, to learn people's names." A 65-year-old cisgender straight woman added, "It's drawn us a little closer, and we've become a little more intentional in making sure that people know that, you know, it's come as you are. We open our doors to you. You're welcome here." In other words, in some ways, the perceived hate from the vote motivated participants to be extra conscientious about showing love within their local church communities.

Some congregations made group decisions about their stance on LGBTQ+ issues and opposition to the Traditional plan. One participant stated, "I think it's telling that when we [specific congregation] took that vote [to become a reconciling congregation]. It wasn't saying to the pastor 'Okay, you decided to take this risk.' It was us taking that risk with the pastor and being able to say that we are here, and you're not going to be left out like paint to dry... We'll take care of you... It's not just the leader of the church deciding this is what we're going to do. I think it took everybody being able to say we're all taking this risk, and we're all going to take care of

each other. That's what happened." In other words, the whole community decided they would act together against the denomination's stance and to also face consequences as a community.

LGBTQ+ participants expressed feelings of genuine acceptance on the part of allies, and that acceptance, in turn, spurred greater commitment to fight for justice. Rather than pushing her away from the community, a queer woman expressed of the vote: "The decision in [an] odd way had the opposite effect. It didn't push me out but drew me in and [made me want] to know more and fight within the denomination to bring about change." Holding onto the support he has within his church, a gay man said that his church is "stronger than ever [by using their voices] to affect positive change." Thus, many felt motivated to act and resist what they perceived as an illegitimate outcome at the broader church level.

Participants were sure to add that their resistance to the vote is biblically inspired, as is their activism. For example, one person noted: "I think it is our responsibility to make sure that our voices [are] out in the public, speaking with a religious voice, not just a religious liberty voice, but a theologically informed, biblically literate voice, that says the church is a place for healing and wholeness for [we are] all made in the image of God, and gays and lesbians, just as heterosexuals, are made in the image of God."

While some rooted activism in scripture, other participants described their increased church commitment in response to their local pastor's leadership. One gay man (a member of a reconciling Church) noted, "Pastor ... said this is a hill he's willing to die on, and I thought... if this church is willing to stand with me, then I need to be willing to stand with them." The individual went on to describe how he decided to become a formal member of the church after the pastor's stance: "So as a result of that stance, I... made the decision to join the church, made a decision that we would be a part of something that was going to be different, was going to be counter-religious to the denomination or counter [to] what a lot of churches are doing and that we would be part of the change, a part of the noise." This individual saw the pastor's dedication as a sign that he too should commit to both the local parish and to fighting inequality through formal membership and activism. So, rather than withdrawing in response to the vote, allyship drew some in.

The vote also forced people off the fence and seeming neutrality. One participant explained the response from their pastor: "Most all of the pastoral staff wrote some type of comment after [the vote]... about how their spirit was broken... and support for the LGBTQ+ [community]. To me, that was a benefit from the negative... Most of us had never heard our pastoral staff say some of the things that they [said] in support [of] us." Even though the motivation was unfortunate, participants communicated that the additional support was welcomed.

Participants had to rationalize not leaving the church despite disagreement with the vote, and one way they did this was highlighting positive outcomes that came from it. They described stronger local community and greater commitment to local parishes and to LGBTQ+ activism. So, rather than just compartmentalizing political and religious issues (e.g., Edwards 2016), they expressed even greater engagement and unification of the two.

What's Next for the Church?

We asked participants to highlight what they perceived would be the next steps for the church. We asked, "What do you think should happen next within the UMC? What do you think your church specifically should do?"

In response, approximately half of participants suggested the possibility of a church split based on LGBTQ+ issues. They said for example, "I think [the outcome of the vote] is going to divide the church so that you know, we will self-sort ourselves into those who are open and affirming and those who are not. And, congregations will divide on those lines." Similarly, a participant who identified as a heterosexual cisgender woman said: "I don't think it's hard for me to imagine... that it [next steps] wouldn't involve the split at some point—simply because I do feel like feelings are very strong... I left a denomination over this issue, that I knew was

not going to move—not in the foreseeable future.” In fact, another straight cisgender participant (a 46-year-old man) noted discussions about a split were already underway: “[Discussions] are going on right now, as discussions are being held all across, at least the state of Missouri. . . and I imagine all across the United States.”

Even though the future of the denomination was unclear at the time of the interviews, others noted they had more clarity about their individual church’s future (than about the broader church/denomination). A heterosexual cisgender woman expressed hope for a more inclusive congregation saying, “I fully expect that we will move forward with becoming a reconciling congregation.”

As explained earlier, leaving the church is one behavioral method of resolving the dissonance associated with being connected to a denomination with conflicting values. But, because we recruited participants in churches, we did not necessarily expect the topic of leaving to be highlighted in discussion. Nevertheless, several people raised the issue of leaving either the denomination or the local church in response to the vote. For example, one participant noted that they anticipated that LGBTQ+ Christians would leave the denomination. This straight cisgender man elaborated, “[The plan works to] exclude [LGBTQ+ people] from the Church, make[s] them feel they’re not welcome, keeps them out of the Church, make[s] them go to other Churches that do want them.” Others noted that they had seen movement away from the UMC playing out. “I’ve seen people who are very dedicated and loyal to the Methodist Church, who are now doubting that God loves them because of a decision made by people. . . . and I’m seeing more and more leave now than I saw even right after the conference. . . I see more people on social media leaving.” A 56-year-old queer woman, visiting a St. Louis Church at the time of the interview, described having left a different church because of its stance on sexual and gender diversity, “For us, [the vote] made us feel more disconnected from the denomination and from our local church. We left. And because we live in Jefferson County, there aren’t many alternatives. There aren’t churches that are affirming. And so, it was very painful to have to leave. . . . It always is.” In other words, multiple participants described the dissonance-reducing behavioral strategy of leaving.

Four participants described how the vote would not just discourage sexual and gender minorities from being a part of the church, that it would likely push away younger people as well. When asked, “What are sources of threat to Christianity or Christians?” One responded, “[God is] so much bigger, and limiting Him to these certain rules is pushing people away. Pushing people away from God and Christianity in general—especially young people. Young people are walking away from churches in higher numbers than ever before, and this is the first time in history that people of a college-age who leave church are not coming back.” In other words, this person asserted that the policy would lead to church decline—not only for sexual and gender minorities but also of others sympathetic to the LGBTQ+ cause. Another described a similar concern regarding the Church’s future. This participant, a 59-year-old straight cisgender woman said: “If you look at membership in churches, and churches surviving, which is one piece of it. . . if you look at the Pew research on what Millennials believe and their just general mistrust of institutions in general, um the church will do itself in. . . Churches will close because millennials don’t trust and [they] won’t be the next generation that steps up to keep the church going. So, you know [what is a] threat to churches? Churches themselves if. . . we can’t find a way to navigate where the larger flow of justices are.” A gay man even described the vote outcome as a “nail in the coffin.” In other words, many associated the decision as an indication of the Church’s decline.

Regardless of whether a split occurs, many expressed concern about maintaining a global commitment. A 59-year-old straight, cisgender woman raised concerns that if progressives split from the bigger denomination, that they would still maintain moral responsibility to African churches. She said, “There are lots of LGBTQ Africans from the Methodist Church, that . . . if progressives pull out, I think we leave that very vulnerable population there because the conservative American missional movement in Africa is not slowing down.” This participant suggested

that progressives should stay involved in the conversation to facilitate the safety of LGBTQ+ Methodists across the world.

To avoid losing support, a handful of participants emphasized the need for UMC churches to not only accept LGBTQ+ members but to really include them. A heterosexual cisgender woman noted, "I always go back to tolerance because I don't want you to tolerate me. I don't even need you to respect me, you know, I don't even need you to affirm me. I just need you to respect my choices. Respect my choices and include me as a member of the community. So that's what affirming is. It means that you have all the rights and privileges that everyone else in this community has." Others noted that acceptance means moving away from gender or sexuality-blind statements. For example, a heterosexual cisgender woman specified, "I think our church should be more willing to listen to people who are struggling with us and not just make a blanket affirmation that everybody's great." Another clarified: "actually listen and appreciate [our] differences." In other words, they wanted explicit recognition.

In sum, many participants foresaw a Church split. They anticipated that conservative stances on same sex marriage would alienate younger church members and lead to the Church's demise. Nonetheless, several insisted on not abandoning LGBTQ+ members of the global church. LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ participants alike, explicitly communicated a desire for differences to be recognized. The expression of concern for LGBTQ+ individuals in the global church is another manifestation of greater commitment to the cause and an example of a behavioral strategy to decrease cognitive dissonance.

DISCUSSION

We sought to understand how churchgoers made sense of the UMC adoption of the Traditional Plan, which solidified the exclusion of sexual minorities in the church. Our sample was almost exclusively disappointed by the outcome. They assumed that supporters of the Traditional Plan had used biblical justification for doing so, but our sample overwhelmingly rejected those literal interpretations of the Bible: believing that supporters of the Traditional Plan misquoted the Bible to justify their own bias. Many noted the importance of financial interests in determining Church law and how it was shaped by African delegates (whose views on sexuality are likely driven by local/legal constraints). Participants highlighted how their religious tradition (UMC) and the Bible were more consistent with their own accepting stances—perhaps to further justify their perspective and add consonant cognitions.

We sampled from relatively liberal urban metropolitan churches and thus anticipated that participants would resolve dissonance by shifting their identifications with local and global churches. Both quantitative and qualitative responses were consistent with our hypotheses. On average participants identified more strongly with the local community than with the broader denomination, and several described identifying more strongly with their local community after the vote. This is also consistent with a greater emphasis on local versus global norms.

Although clearly disappointed, many of our participants also described positive outcomes that resulted from the vote. In many ways the passage of the Traditional plan strengthened commitment to local congregations, allyship and activism. It also forced people, particularly local leadership, to take a stance (as opposed to expressing neutrality).

Participants' shifting identities and tendency to highlight beneficial aspects of the vote could be interpreted as an effort to maintain optimism in light of disappointment and as a means of reducing cognitive dissonance. These participants remained members of churches with unfavorable denominational rules, so they may have had to add consonant cognitions to help justify their decision to stay. They could rationalize the decision to remain with their congregation and commitment to the cause by feeling an increased connection and emphasizing greater importance of LGBTQ+ rights.

Finally, other participants described worrying that the vote would contribute to church decline. Specifically, they mentioned that a conservative stance might alienate younger church members. This perspective is consistent with recent sociological theory and evidence that the Religious Right contributes to religious disaffiliation (Braunstein 2021; also see Woodell and Schwadel 2020). In other words, participants were right to think that religious conservatism leads people (not just sexual minorities) away from the church.

Our mixed method approach likely informs the experiences of many United Methodists in North America who were disappointed with the vote, but our study is not without limitations. Perhaps, the most obvious relates to sampling bias. We recruited participants who attended UMC churches, so we were unable to capture perspectives of those who left the denomination upon learning the vote outcome. Furthermore, our work informs responses of relatively liberal urban church members, but we do not know how conservatives responded. Those with traditional views on same sex marriage were, no doubt, pleased with the outcome, and thus, likely did not experience any identity conflict or need to resolve dissonance.

Another methodological limitation regards our focus group format. For convenience, we grouped participants based on the church they attended. This means that members of some focus groups may have known each other, and social desirability concerns may have played a role in what they expressed. We took several measures to decrease concerns about responding in socially appropriate ways. For example, we asked participants to refer to one another using numbers only (so the transcript remained anonymous). We also varied group sizes and interviewed some participants alone. Despite the heterogeneity of formats, many of the themes were the same across groups: boosting our confidence that social desirability was a relatively minor concern. Furthermore, social desirability concerns were irrelevant for the anonymous survey. Participants completed measures individually and placed them in envelopes that were never tied to identifying information. The survey results (identification with church, denomination, etc.) were consistent with the qualitative results and thus, provide multi-method support for our conclusions.

Our research has important implications for understanding how individuals respond to attitude polarization and how structures shape beliefs. Numerous studies have examined how the legalization of same sex marriage in the United States shifted attitudes on SSM (e.g., Aksoy et al. 2020; Ofosu et al. 2019; Tankard and Paluck, 2017). That work, for the most part, reveals that SSM legalization was associated with increasingly positive attitudes. However, for some groups, it was also associated with backlash (Ofosu et al. 2019). Analogously, Wilkins et al. (2022) argue that the 2019 UMC vote likely led to polarization; those committed to LGBT inclusion were disappointed with the outcome, and those opposed likely felt vindicated. This probably led to attitude polarization between groups. The current research provides further evidence of potential polarization (at least among relative liberals). Our participants described increased commitment to their churches, to allyship and activism because of the vote. It is likely that conservatives also felt strengthened in their attitudes since they were sanctioned by the Church. Ultimately, this likely contributed to the church split. Our description also informs similar processes occurring in other churches grappling with LGBTQ+ inclusion (e.g., Reformed Church in America; Post 2022, or churches split on other ideological issues, e.g., The Southern Baptist Convention's inclusion of women ministers; DeRose 2023).

This research also has implications for political polarization and behavior more broadly. For example, one could consider the structure of a congregation as analogous to a city or state and the UMC as the country. Even if a voters' views are not supported by the larger/more powerful governing body, they may choose to remain in the country, or they may choose to repatriate (e.g., as many Americans do following presidential elections; Singer 2022). If individuals remain, they must alleviate the dissonance they experience—perhaps by using the methods we describe: identifying more closely with their local leaders or consuming more partisan news sources. On a larger scale, one could imagine how identification and news consumption could contribute to

increasing political polarization (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016), which is a significant social issue in the United States threatening the structure of democracy (Baldassarri and Page 2021).

On a more historical scale, one could consider how our results, while focused on same sex marriage, could also inform historic reactions to church ideology related to slavery. For example, Christian slaveholders who were members of congregations that condoned slavery had to add cognitions to justify their stance (e.g., not only believing that the Bible justified slavery, but by dehumanizing slaves to justify their behavior toward them). This perspective is consistent with accounts that depicted Christian slaveholders as particularly cruel (e.g., Douglass 1845; Jones 2021).

Future research can examine how the UMC split impacts attitudes toward both LGBTQ+ individuals and Africans. As described above, it is likely that members of the Global Methodist Church (the new conservative break-away denomination; McFarlan Miller 2021) will solidify their negative attitudes toward sexual minorities. However, it is also possible that some of the relatively liberal United Methodists will also increase their negative attitudes toward perceived outgroups: African Methodists. Several of our participants blamed African delegates for the vote outcome, so it is likely that Africans would also be blamed for a church split. It would be interesting to examine whether that blame gets translated into more negative racial attitudes or xenophobia among U.S. Methodists.

CONCLUSION

The UMC February 2019 vote that buttressed the ban on SSM and gay clergy had a significant impact on members of four St. Louis Churches. These churchgoers were relatively liberal, and thus disappointed with the outcome. But rather than leaving the denomination, the outcome drew them closer to their local community and increased their desire to fight for justice. Thus, this work demonstrates that although religion can be used as a justification for exclusion, it can also increase commitment to justice (Wilkins and Martin 2023).

REFERENCES

- Aksoy, Cevat G., Christopher S. Carpenter, Ralph De Haas, and Kevin D. Tran. 2020. Do laws shape attitudes? Evidence from same-sex relationship recognition policies in Europe. *European Economic Review*, 124, 103399. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2020.103399>
- Baldassarri, Delia, and Scott E. Page. 2021. The emergence and perils of polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 118(50):e2116863118. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116863118>.
- Banerjee, Neela. 2004, December. United Methodists Move to Defrock Lesbian. *The New York Times*. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/03/us/united-methodists-move-to-defrock-lesbian.html>. Accessed July, 2023.
- Book of Discipline. 2016. *Cokesbury*. <https://www.cokesbury.com/book-of-discipline-book-of-resolutions-free-versions>. Accessed January, 2022.
- Branscombe, Nyla, Michael Schmitt, and Richard Harvey. 1999. Perceiving pervasive discrimination among African Americans: Implications for group identification and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77(1):135–49.
- Braunstein, Ruth. 2021. A theory of political backlash: Assessing the religious right's effects on the religious field. *Sociology of Religion* 83(3). <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srab050>
- DeRose, Jason. 2023, June 14. Southern Baptists say no to women pastors, uphold expulsion of Saddleback megachurch. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/14/1182141691/southern-baptist-convention-sbc-women-pastors-saddleback-megachurch>. Accessed January, 2022.
- Dougherty, Kevin, Byron Johnson, and Edward Polson. 2007. Recovering the lost: Remeasuring U.S. religious affiliation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46(4):483–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2007.00373.x>
- Douglass, Fredrick. 1845. *Narrative of the life of Fredrick Douglass, an American slave*. Boston, MA: Dover Publications.
- Edwards, Korie. 2016. The space between: Exploring how religious leaders reconcile religion and politics. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55(2):271–87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12256>
- Festinger, Leon. 1957. *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Festinger, Leon (Ed.). 1964. *Conflict, decision, and dissonance* (Vol. 3). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Festinger, Leo, and James Carlsmith. 1959. Cognitive consequences of forced compliance. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58(2):203–10.
- Free and Equal: United Nations for LGBT Equality. n.d. Criminalization [Fact sheet]. [https://www.unfe.org/system/unfe-43-UN_Fact_Sheets_-_FINAL_-_Criminalization_\(1\).pdf](https://www.unfe.org/system/unfe-43-UN_Fact_Sheets_-_FINAL_-_Criminalization_(1).pdf) Accessed January, 2022.
- Hahn, Heather. 2017. Transgender person commissioned as Deacon: The United Methodist Church. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170605173827/http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/transgender-person-commissioned-as-deacon>. Accessed January, 2022.
- Holland, Mark R. 2019. 76 percent of U.S. Annual Conferences reject traditional plan. *United Methodist Insight*. <https://um-insight.net/api/content/743a6cf8-99a8-11e9-a592-12f1225286c6/> Accessed June, 2020.
- Jones, Robert P. 2020. *White too long: The legacy of White supremacy in American Christianity*. Simon & Schuster.
- The New York Times. 1971, June 3. Homosexual minister is ousted by Southwest Texas Methodists, sec. Archives. <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/03/archives/homosexual-minister-is-ousted-by-southwest-texas-methodists-action.html>. Accessed January, 2022.
- Levitt, H. M., S. L. Motulsky, F. J. Wertz, S. L. Morrow, and J. G. Ponterotto 2017. Recommendations for designing and reviewing qualitative research in psychology: Promoting methodological integrity. *Qualitative Psychology*, 4, 2–22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/qap0000082>
- Levendusky, Matthew, and Neil Malhotra. 2016. Does media coverage of partisan polarization affect political attitudes? *Political Communication* 33(2):283–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1038455>.
- Luhtanen, Riia, and Jennifer Crocker. 1992. A collective self-esteem scale: Self-evaluation of one's social identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 18(3):302–18.
- McFarlan Miller, Emily. 2021, March 2. Conservative United Methodists plan breakaway denomination. *Christian Today*. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/march/conservative-umc-split-postponed-global-methodist-church.html> Accessed March, 2021.
- McFarlan Miller, Emily. 2019, March 7. The Splainer: What happened at the United Methodist General Conference? *Religion News Service*. <https://religionnews.com/2019/03/07/the-splainer-what-happened-at-the-united-methodist-general-conference/> Accessed March, 2020.
- McMaster, Christine, and Christina Lee. 1991. Cognitive dissonance in tobacco smokers. *Addictive Behaviors* 16(5):349–53. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0306-4603\(91\)90028-g](https://doi.org/10.1016/0306-4603(91)90028-g)
- Northaven. 2019. An open letter to the bishops of the South Central jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church. https://www.northaven.org/all-arewelcome?fbclid=IwAR2ntG3ldoEXJsqbQdvpJJPheZjAxxk3E5m4_7ktUR4I6vrDYDH7PUInXg Accessed March 2020.
- Ofosu, Eugene K., Michelle K. Chambers, Jacqueline M. Chen, and Eric Hehman. 2019. Same-sex marriage legalization associated with reduced implicit and explicit antigay bias. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116(18):8846–51. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1806000116>
- Patterson, Richard, and Joseph Price. 2012. Pornography, religion, and the happiness gap: Does pornography impact the actively religious differently? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51(1):79–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2011.01630.x>
- Pew Research Center. 2014. Party affiliation among adults in the St. Louis Metro area. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/metro-area/st-louis-metro-area/party-affiliation/> Accessed January, 2022.
- Pitt, Richard N. 2010. Killing the messenger: Religious Black gay men's neutralization of anti-gay religious messages. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49(1):56–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01492.x>
- Post, Kathryn. 2022, January 7. Reformed Church in America Splits as Conservative Churches Form New Denomination. *Religion News Service*. <https://religionnews.com/2022/01/07/former-rca-churches-form-new-conservative-denomination/>. Accessed January, 2022.
- Reconciling Ministries Network. n.d. <https://rmnetwork.org> Accessed June 2020.
- Religious Landscape Study. 2014. *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/> Accessed June 20220.
- Ring, Trudy. 2018, May 5. Methodist Bishops back choice on LGBT clergy, same-sex marriage. *Advocate*. <https://www.advocate.com/religion/2018/5/05/methodist-bishops-back-choice-lgbt-clergy-same-sex-marriage>. Accessed January 2022.
- Ross, Lee D., Yphtach Lelkes, and Alexandra G. Russell. 2012. How Christians reconcile their personal political views and the teachings of their faith: Projection as a means of dissonance reduction. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109(10):3616–22. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1117557109>
- Shimron, Yonat, and Emily Mcfarlan Miller. 2023, January 24. United Methodists lose 1,800 churches in split over LGBT stance. *Christianity Today*. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/january/umc-churches-leave-global-methodist-denomination-schism.html>. Accessed January 2023.
- Singer, Colin. 2022, July 20. Americans leaving U.S. for Canada in greater numbers since Biden's victory over Trump: Canada immigration and visa information. Canadian Immigration Services and Free Online Evaluation. <https://www.immigration.ca/americans-leaving-u-s-for-canada-in-greater-numbers-since-bidens-victory-over-trump/>. Accessed July, 2022.

- Smith, Peter. 2023, July 6. United Methodists lose churches in schism over LGBTQ rights. *PBS NewsHour*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/united-methodists-lose-one-fifth-of-u-s-churches-in-schism-over-lgbtq-rights> Accessed July, 2023.
- Tankard, Margaret E. and Elizabeth Levy Paluck. 2017. The effect of a supreme court decision regarding gay marriage on social norms and personal attitudes. *Psychological Science*, 28(9), 1334–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617709594>
- Transcribe by Wreally. 2021. <https://transcribe.wreally.com/transcriptions>
- United Methodist Videos. 2019, February 25. General Conference 2019 Video [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONb80WcICyY> Accessed June 2020.
- Wilkins, Clara L., and Lerone Martin. 2023. Harnessing religious teachings to reduce sexual prejudice. *Journal of Moral Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.21100047>
- Wilkins, Clara L., Joseph D. Wellman, Negin Toosi, Chad Miller, Jacklyn A. Lisnek, and Lerone A. Martin. 2022. Is LGBT progress seen as an attack on Christians?: Examining religion/sexual orientation zero sum beliefs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000363>
- Woodell, Brandi, and Philip Schwadel. 2020. Changes in religiosity among lesbian, gay, and bisexual emerging adults. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59(2):379–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12653>
- Yip, Andrew K. 1997. Attacking the attacker: Gay Christians talk back. *The British Journal of Sociology* 48(1):113–27.
- Yip, Andrew K. T. 2002. The persistence of faith among nonheterosexual Christians: Evidence for the neosecularization thesis of religious Transformation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41(2):199–212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00111>

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.