

“Such Were Some of You”:
Crisis and Healing in the Lives of Same-Sex Attracted Christian Men

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Abstract

Using person-centred ethnography and narrative analysis, this work provides an account of how 16 same-sex attracted Christian men retrospectively constructed experiences of sexual-moral crisis and healing. The first of its kind to explore such experiences in their entirety and reflect on the relationships between various successes, failures, events, and encounters therein, it outlines a shared narrative structure composed of: 1) early experiences of anomie and difference, 2) the unmaking of self and world with the emergence of same-sex attraction, 3) a phase of personal disintegration and ineffective coping, 4) the quest for new possibilities and engagement with various remedial institutions, 5) personal commitment to particular redressive strategies, 6) experiences of healing; and 7) the call to performance and service in the wake of crisis. The author argues that sexual-moral crisis cannot be solely attributed to religiosity nor resolved through evasive strategies of self-bifurcation and denial. Rather, overcoming this conflict requires a reconstruction of self and world capable of restoring personal integrity and bringing the spiritual, moral, and sexual selves into harmonious alignment. This task is primarily social and entails the appropriation of public symbolic devices – explanatory models, plots, and metaphors - to reconfigure one's experience of self and world. The author outlines three distinct figures that emerge from this transformative process: the sexual ascetic, the ex-gay man, and the gay survivor. Each is associated with a distinct understanding of self and embodies a unique sexual, moral, social, and spiritual existence. Drawing on theories of reading, the author argues that these divergent approaches reflect four considerations: the persuasiveness of the remedial discourse, its relevance to subjective experience, its socio-political acceptability, and its perceived therapeutic efficacy. Ultimately, participants in all three groups described remarkably similar experiences of healing and characterize their current lives as highly satisfying despite complex experiences of growth, loss, and continued struggle. The work effectively eschews binary approaches to sexual orientation and encourages the reader to recognize a diverse array of sexualities, spiritualities, moralities, and selves present in contemporary North American society. Implications for policy development, ethical debate, and psychological practice are discussed.

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Dedication

To the storytellers of this world, who generously share their lives with others, and to those who have long nurtured my curiosity and creativity: Jim, Bev, Luke, Jake, and Michel.

⁹Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹²And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.
(1 Cor. 6:9-11 English Standard Version)

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The current work explores experiences of homoeroticism in the lives of conservative Christian men. It attends to how this phenomenon emerges in the lives of such men, how it engenders experiences of personal and social crisis, and how individuals ultimately emerge from this predicament by turning to redressive institutions and appropriating new ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Before turning to the data, it is important to situate the current investigation within a particular sociocultural and historical context and position it within the existing research literature and the multitude of approaches used to study sexual experiences. This introductory chapter provides an overview of how homoeroticism has been discursively constructed by religion, psychology, and human rights movements in the global West before describing the existing research literature pertaining to Christian experiences of homosexuality and its limitations. The chapter closes by outlining the epistemological footing and theoretical framework on which the current investigation rests and providing a brief overview of the research approach used to recruit participants and collect and analyze data.

Plato, Paul, and Freud: A Brief History of Western Homoeroticism, Christianity, and Psychology in the West

As local and global understandings, values, and practices influence the meaning of individual experiences, situating the current project within a particular historic period or sociocultural field is essential to understanding the full significance of contemporary sexual experiences. ‘Homosexuality’ is not an ahistorical constant but a dynamic cultural form that has been constructed and socially managed in different ways across time and space (Foucault, 1976/1990; Nye, 1999). Attending to the different forms this phenomenon has taken over time, allows us to deconstruct this concept and reveal its culturally constructed nature. As the understandings, values, and practices of one epoch continue to inform those of succeeding generations (Foucault, 1976/1990, 1985; Stiker, 1999; Taylor, 2004), tracing the history of how different societies have thought about and managed the question of same-sex sexuality also prepares us to better see “the numerous faces of a problem [or topic] that is still before us” (Stiker, 1999, p. 13).

An overlapping succession of figures of homoeroticism have appeared throughout the history of the Western world, embedded in particular discursive traditions. In early Greece (roughly 776 – 323 BCE), male-male love¹ was deemed far superior to the ‘common’ love of women (Crompton, 2003). These unions were pervasive throughout society and the notion of

‘homosexuality’ as a specific sexual orientation or category of person was absent (Foucault, 1984/1990). In contrast, the inhabitants of ancient Judea (900 BCE – 600 CE) adopted an unambiguously negative attitude toward male-male love. As Crompton (2003) explained, the Holiness Code of Leviticus (written around 550 BCE) condemned same-sex activity. In chapter 20, the punishment of death was proscribed for those who engage in such sexual behaviours: If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them (Lev. 20:13, as rendered by translators of the King James Bible, in Crompton, 2003, p. 33). As the child of Judaism, early Christianity (1-565 CE) inherited a wealth of negative attitudes towards sexuality. Sexual abstinence was the Christian ideal promoted by Paul the Apostle, with sex between married heterosexual couples deemed permissible only if aimed at procreation (Brown, 1999; Crompton, 2003)². As Christianity spread swiftly throughout the West, so too did its negative view of male-male love.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, medieval Europe (476 – 1321) was ruled by various tribes that held widely varying attitudes toward male-male love. Prohibitions against homoerotic acts and relationships were generally lacking and the policing of sexuality generally fell to priests, who proscribed various forms of penance for homoerotic behaviour. This plurality receded during the Holy Roman Empire, when strict Christian orthodoxy limited acceptable forms of sexual expression to procreation-driven, vaginal sex, and church councils issued laws condemning homoeroticism and rendering such acts punishable by death (Payer, 1999). By the tenth century AD, church compendiums and literary works alike had begun to refer to ‘sodomites’ as a distinct class of demonic and ominous beings who were blamed for the troubles of the empire and the historical disasters of Christian theology (Crompton, 2003). Although a Latin cultural renaissance at the turn of the millennium temporarily revived Greek homoerotic themes (Crompton, 2003), church and state continued to work together to condemn homoeroticism, marrying religious condemnation to secular law throughout the late Middle Ages and early modern period (14th – 17th centuries).

During the Renaissance period, a rebirth of classical culture weakened religious influence and inaugurated another short period of tolerance for male-male love that was soon eclipsed by the Reformation. With the Reformation, homonegative sentiment deepened in northern Europe and both Protestants and Catholics issued and enforced harsh laws against homoeroticism. Yet,

despite the centrality of theology during this period, alternative understandings of homoeroticism grounded in early forms of psychological theorizing – such as Bernardino de Siena’s claim that sodomites had a distinct psychological profile marked by scorn for females - also appeared at the margins of social discourse (Crompton, 2003). In the Enlightenment era (18th century), religious influence waned in Europe and the development of the scientific method intensified the sexual sciences. Marquis de Sade first elaborated the notion of a sexual orientation during this time, noting: “these desires are the result of our constitution to which we contribute nothing and which we cannot alter” (as cited in Crompton, 2003, p. 523). With the rise of sexual science, homoeroticism was increasingly reimagined as a social problem or a psychological vice, yet the impact of this new discourse on policy and law varied greatly throughout the Western world.

For the Western European bourgeoisie of the 19th century, sexuality became an object of intense fixation and a means of self-affirmation. Sexual pleasure was not to be renounced, but responsibly managed to maximize the health, hygiene, and hegemony of the bourgeoisie class (Foucault, 1976/1990; Mort, 1999; Segalen, 1999; Weeks, 1999). In time, this hygienic sexuality was extended to the lower classes in the interest of national security, nation-building, and public health. As the state took charge of the sex, it produced an explosion of sexual technologies, surveillances, disciplines, and knowledges (Foucault, 1976/1990) and the construction of sexual norms and perversions intensified (Chauncey, 2006; Katz, 1999; Mondimore, 1996; Nye, 1999). ‘Heterosexuals’ and ‘homosexuals’ were constructed as distinct categories of persons and one’s sexual ‘type’ was increasingly considered an essential aspect of personal character (Birken, 1999; Foucault, 1976/1990). Sexual acts became personages and internalized self-discipline largely replaced the overt policing of sexuality (Foucault, 1976/1990; Nye, 1999). In this new, normalizing society, sexuality became the purview of the technicians of the self - sexologists, psychiatrists, and social workers (Birken, 1999).

In the early 20th century, Victorian morality gave way to a culture of personal fulfilment that encouraged sexual expression and openness. Sexual discourses continued to proliferate and scientists intensified their contributions to the emerging sexual ethic. Notably, Freud (1905/1999) proposed that homoeroticism was caused by the arresting of the sexual instinct in an infantile, anal stage of libidinal development as a result of certain early life experiences (as cited in Drescher, 2001). Although Freud’s view on the psychological health of same-sex attracted individuals was ambivalent³, later theorists used his case descriptions to present homosexuality

as an inherently pathological condition (Drescher, 2001; Mondimore, 1996). As psychoanalysis came to dominate the theory and practice of psychology, Neo-Freudian homonegativity flourished and the medicalization of homosexuality prompted a search for causes and cures. Biomedical research looked to hormones and other biological mechanisms to explain the origin of homoerotic desires (see Byne, 1999) while psychoanalysts proposed theories of early childhood development, parental psychopathology, and family dysfunction (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2006; Drescher, 2001). The theories of Rado, Bieber, and Socarides become especially influential (see Cianciotto & Cahill, 2006; Drescher, 2001a). Rado proposed that parental efforts to prohibit child sexual activity caused fear and resentment of the genitals of the opposite sex and an aversion toward heterosexual functioning. Bieber continued this theme of parental blame, announcing that parental psychopathology and family dysfunction were responsible for homosexuality, while Socarides argued that dominating mothers and absent, weak, detached, or sadistic fathers were responsible for same-sex attraction.

In response to these newly constructed etiological theories, a host of biological and psychoanalytic reparative therapies (interventions intended to treat the underlying pathology believed to cause same-sex attraction and restore heterosexual desire) were developed and employed throughout the 20th century⁴. Drug, hormone and surgical treatments were common throughout the first half of the century and same-sex attracted individuals were subject to everything from hormone injections and the administration of metrazol (a convulsion-inducing agent) to testicular transplantation, castration, and lobotomization (see King & Bartlett, 1999; Murphy, 1992). Later in the century, psychological treatments became much more common as therapists explored the potential of hypnosis, fantasy satiation, behavioural conditioning, and long-term psychoanalysis for treating homoerotic desires (King & Bartlett, 1999; Mondimore, 1996; Murphy, 1992; Smith, Bartlett & King, 2004; Tozer & McClanahan, 1999). Outcome measures for these early interventions belied a general lack of efficacy and numerous harms were reported by those undergoing such therapies, including phobic anxiety toward men, suicidal ideation or attempt, increased aggression, an inability to reach orgasm in homosexual acts, depression, psychosis, an inability to form emotionally rewarding relationships with men, and several deaths caused by the inhalation of vomit or adverse drug reactions during aversive conditioning treatments (King & Bartlett, 1999; Murphy, 1992). Despite mounting evidence of

ineffectiveness and numerous reports of harm, variations of these interventions persisted within psychological practice throughout the 20th century.

Yet, while the bulk of the research in the 20th century associated homosexuality with inherent sickness and suffering, alternative perspectives began to emerge in scientific and clinical writings that challenged discourses of pathology and abnormality and encouraged the de-medicalization of homoerotic drives. In 1948, biologist Alfred Kinsey argued that homoerotic activity was relatively common throughout American society and that frequent reports of both heterosexual and homosexual behaviours in participants' sexual histories challenged prevailing ideas about a stable, dichotomous, and essential sexual nature (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1999; Mondimore, 1996). In 1958, psychologist Evelyn Hooker convincingly disputed notions of inherent pathology by reporting that psychological adjustment ratings for homosexual men were not significantly different from those of their heterosexual peers and that experts could not reliably identify homosexual individuals through psychological testing alone (Mondimore, 1996). A few years later, Erving Goffman (1963) argued that the poor psycho-emotional health evidenced by some homosexual men and women was best explained by the stigma and moral violence these persons endured in their daily lives. Together, these and other influential studies worked to normalize same-sex attraction within the psychological sciences and helped legitimize the burgeoning gay rights movement.

Outside of science and medicine, the 1960s and 1970s were host to a transformative period of human rights activism (Taylor, 2004) and an unprecedented phase of sexual libertarianism (Nye, 1999). In North America, a police raid on the Stonewall bar in New York City in 1969 gave birth to a new phase of the gay liberation movement, which sought to reduce or eliminate the negative criminal, psychiatric, and social sanctions surrounding homosexuality. After mounting successful protests against police harassment, activists successfully convinced the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in 1973. Despite this change in official discourse, numerous psychologists continued to advocate for the diagnosis and treatment of homosexuality as a psychological disorder. In 1992, these dissidents formed the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) to advance their cause. Drawing heavily on the neo-Freudian theories of Elizabeth Moberly, this organization maintained that physical or emotional separation from the same-sex parent in childhood impaired proper gender identification and socialization,

eventually leading to an ‘eroticized envy’ of other males and the desire to acquire masculinity through homosexual behaviour (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2006; Mondimore, 1996). Consequently, the treatment of homosexuality from this perspective involved the rebuilding of non-sexual male bonds between men (see Mondimore, 1996; Tozer & McClanahan, 1999).

While psychologists and activists generally worked to promote a healthy image of homosexuality throughout the latter part of the 20th century, conservative Christian groups mounted a campaign of resistance against the naturalization and normalization of homosexuality (Balmer & Winner, 2002). Yet, Christian approaches to homoeroticism during this period were not entirely dismissive and condemnatory. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the North American Jesus Movement brought many members of the youth counterculture into Christian churches⁵. This wave of new converts spurred the development of various nondenominational Evangelical churches with a particular outreach to marginalized groups. The desire to evangelize deviant groups and bring same-sex attracted men into the fold of the church wrought the development of the Evangelical ex-gay⁶ movement during this time (Erzen, 2006). In 1976, Exodus International became the first North American organization solely devoted to helping Christians overcome homosexuality. As Erzen (2006) notes, the majority of the organization’s leaders and founders were themselves ex-gay Christians who pledged to uphold “God’s standard of righteousness and holiness, which declares that homosexuality is sin” and affirm “HIS love and redemptive power to recreate the individual” (p. 33).

In the following decades, the ex-gay ministry movement steadily increased its North American presence by establishing various publications, weekly meetings, personal counselling services, and residential programs. As mental health professionals renounced medicalized perspectives on homoeroticism, ex-gay ministries increasingly took over sexual reorientation efforts in the United States and Canada, supplementing psychoanalytic theory and conversion therapy techniques (including teaching and reinforcing gender appropriate behaviour, developing non-erotic same-sex friendships, exploring and healing dysfunctional parental relationships, reframing homoerotic desire as pathology and homosexual acts as sin, compulsion, or addiction, examining possible causes of homosexuality in the client’s life, and aversion therapy procedures) with behaviour modification efforts (including accountability programs, embodying heterosexuality and ‘proper’ gender roles, and avoidance of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons and activities) and rituals of religious intensification (including prayer, bible study, Christian

service, community support, and indoctrination) (Erzen, 2006; Cianciotto & Cahill, 2006; Fjelstrom, 2013; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006). These organizations encouraged Christian communities to welcome lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons into the fold and help them to repent for their (sinful) homoerotic behaviours, shed unrighteous homosexual identities, avoid additional same-sex acts, and possibly alter their desires (Erzen, 2006; Gerber, 2009).

As normalized perspectives on same-sex attraction and the idea of an innate sexual orientation became increasingly accepted within Western industrialized nations throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Pizzuto, 2009), Christian ambivalence toward homoeroticism intensified. Various interpretations of scripture emerged engendering a host of different attitudes toward homoeroticism and opening up new possibilities for same-sex attracted Christians within the church (Balmer & Winner, 2002; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Moon, 2014; O'Brien, 2004; Pizzuto, 2009). While certain Christian individuals, groups, congregations, and denominations continued to decisively condemn homosexuality as biblically untenable, others affirmed the authority of scripture while offering alternative interpretations of passages traditionally thought to condemn homosexuality⁷. Still others argued that although scripture might condemn homosexuality, such works reflect a particular historical context and are not necessarily relevant to contemporary Christian life. These individuals noted that a wealth of biblical laws and commandments that were once held sacred were widely ignored by contemporary Christian believers⁸. Some Christians also maintained that while some scriptural passages might condemn homosexuality, they should not eclipse Jesus' overarching message of love and liberation. Lastly, many Christians began insisting on the separation of homosexual behaviour and identity, allowing LGB individuals to be construed as persons afflicted by a spiritual 'trial' or 'condition' for which they must not be condemned so long as they work to avoid sinful homosexual acts. In this formulation, homoerotic desire is stripped of inherent sin but continues to represent a devalued condition and potential source of spiritual alienation (O'Brien, 2004). While each of these perspectives have been observed in contemporary Christian discourse since the latter part of the 20th century, Moon (2014) notes that the proportion of American and Canadian Christians that have held, avowed, or acted on such views at any point in time is largely unknown.

Within this increasingly varied and fractured theological context, 'affirming' or 'welcoming' Christian ministries developed within both the United States and Canada (Johnston & Jenkins, 2006). This movement was comprised of a variety of denominations, congregations,

churches, and programs (both sanctioned unofficial) that embraced a positive, supportive, and accepting attitude toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. It also included religious spaces specifically designed to meet the needs of LGBT Christians. Founded in California in 1986, The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) was the first LGBT-specific Christian denomination in North America. This international Protestant denomination developed “a specific and intentional outreach to/with homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people” (MCC, n.d., para. 6) and helped inaugurate a new, specifically LGBT Christianity in the latter part of the 20th century.

In contemporary Canadian and American society, the discursive landscape surrounding homoeroticism is perhaps more varied and complex than ever before. While there is a strong movement toward normalization and increased acceptance of LGBT persons within both Canada and the United States (Pew Research Center, 2013; Smith, 2011), discourses of sin, pathology, unwellness, and inferiority persist. In the early moments of the 21st century, debates within the Christian community are perhaps more heated, varied, and divisive than ever before. Although the MCC has grown to over 240 congregations worldwide (MCC, 2013) and affirming Christian resources have appeared within almost every facet of the Christian community (Institute for Welcoming Resources, n.d.; O’Brien, 2004), institutionalized homonegativity persists within Christian culture (Balmer & Winner, 2002) and the belief that homosexual men are deviant, sinful, disgusting, and dangerous remains commonplace amongst contemporary Christians (Walton, 2006). For many, LGBT persons continue to be seen as a threat to the traditional family structure and core family values at the heart of conservative Christianity (Ganzevoort, van der Laan & Olsman, 2011; Super & Jacobson, 2011). Yet, at present, Christian positions on homosexuality have moved well beyond the ‘pro-gay’ / ‘anti-gay’ dichotomy to include celebrating homosexuality as a special gift from God, promoting the full acceptance of LGB persons within the church, advocating for qualified acceptance of LGB individuals (acceptance of LGB people, but not in sexual relationships), silent avoidance of this topic, the non-punitive rejection of LGB persons (love the sinner, hate the sin), and the punitive rejection of sexual diversity (homosexuality is a sin and is punished by an eternity in Hell) (Moon, 2014; Super & Jacobson, 2011). Each of these views represents a different understanding of homosexuality, the morality of same-sex behaviour, and the worth of LGB identities.

Current attitudes within secular psychology are decidedly less varied. In 1998, the American Psychiatric Association declared their formal opposition to any psychiatric treatment based on the assumption that homosexuality was a mental disorder or that the patient should attempt to change his or her sexual orientation. The American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009) similarly condemned sexual reorientation efforts, noting that such interventions: “are unlikely to be successful and involve some risk of harm” (p. V). Yet, despite having officially embraced a healthy, normalized view of same-sex attraction, medicalized perspectives continue to be present at the margins of the psychological community and some clinicians continue to practice conversion therapy (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2006; Mondimore, 1996; Tozer & McClanahan, 1999). Religious services intended to help same-sex attracted Christians pursue ‘biblically appropriate’ sexual identities and behaviours also continue to flourish within Canada and the United States (see, for example, Courage, 2015; Desert Stream, 2014b; Exodus Global Alliance, 2015a; North Star, n.d.). By 2012, over 250 ex-gay ministry programs were known to be operating within Canada and the United States (Exodus International, 2012). A decade and a half into the 21st century, conversion therapists and members of the ex-gay ministry movement thus remain committed to helping those with unwanted same-sex attraction pursue sexual ‘wholeness’. Although the possibility of altering one’s sexual orientation continues to circulate within the ex-gay ministry movement, the discourse of this institution has increasingly shifted away from talk of a sexual ‘cure’ to promote the importance of ‘managing’ homoerotic desires and identifying with God as opposed to homosexuality (Creek, 2013; Fjelstrom, 2013). Psychological themes of arrested development and sexual brokenness have also intensified within the ex-gay movement as leaders increasingly appropriate neo-Freudian concepts to explain and treat homosexual desire (Fjelstrom, 2013).

In recent years, secular and religious sexual reorientation programs have become the focus of intense ethical debate within the United States and Canada. Clinicians and researchers who oppose such practices argue that the ex-gay ministry movement is discriminatory and oppressive – that it serves to subvert the pro-gay agenda and mobilize resentment against pro-gay advances (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2006; Tozer & McClanahan, 1999). They also maintain that service conducted by licenced professionals are unethical, doubly deceiving the client into believing that homosexuality is a pathological condition and that it might be changed (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2006; Haldeman, 1991; Morrow & Beckstead, 2004; Murphy, 1992; Tozer &

McClanahan, 1999). Conversely, proponents argue that homosexuality is a form of unwellness and that individuals living with unwanted same-sex desire have the right to access appropriate care and assistance. Various clinicians and researchers also advocate for the availability of sexual reorientation programs based on the benefits reported by some clients (Throckmorton, 1998, 2002; Yarhouse, 1998). Here, the refusal to honour requests for conversion therapy is considered an affront to individual freedom and religious diversity (Miranti, 1996; Murphy, 1992; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002). Outside of academia and clinical practice, this topic has increasingly garnered the interest of mainstream society, drawing both support and criticism from the public (Besen, 2003; Eckholm, 2012; Paykamian, 2013; Taylor, 2013). However, recent state and provincial bans on conversion therapy for minors and scathing critiques of these practices in the popular press highlight an increasingly strong aversion to these practices within the general public (see, for example, Eckholm, 2012; Hawkes, 2015; Ling, 2015; Serwer, 2014; Shear, 2015; Tannehill, 2015). At present, this debate persists, raising interesting ethical and practical questions about individual rights, cultural sensitivity, religious freedoms, and identity politics.

In sum, historical figures of male-male love have varied greatly across time and space and within particular societies. Homosexuality has variously been conceptualized as an expression of honourable love, a deplorable sin, a psychological illness, and an essential aspect of the self. Yet, in all eras, it has received a great amount of reflection, attention, and management. In all eras, it has also been the subject of multiple discourses expressing a variety of attitudes and beliefs. Although every era has given rise to a dominant discourse peripheral voices and dissidents have always been present. Moreover, while older discourses might lose some of their influence, they rarely disappear altogether and often reappear in later periods. Lastly, it is evident that homophobia has been a staple feature of Western society throughout the vast majority of its history – particularly in Christian contexts. For conservative Christian men who experience same-sex attraction, personal suffering and the search for remediation often result. In what follows, I provide a sketch of the current scientific literature pertaining to experiences of same-sex attraction within the North American Christian community.

Contemporary Christian Experiences of Homosexuality: The Existing Research Literature

As the preceding historical analysis confirms, Christian experiences of homosexuality have long been marked by tension and stigma. In the social sciences, the intersection of religion and homoeroticism has garnered increased interest in recent decades. Research has consistently

shown that religiosity is associated with more conservative sexual attitudes, greater sexual concerns, and increased rates of homonegativity (Cowden & Bradshaw, 2007; Finlay & Walther, 2003; Fisher, Derison, Polley, Cadman & Johnston, 1994; Larsen, Cate, & Reed, 1983; Reed & Meyers, 1991; Yip, 1999). For same-sex attracted men and women, religious stigma often contributes to internalized homonegativity, exacerbates individual suffering, and places the individual at risk of social violence or rejection (Barton, 2010; Lease, Horn, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Although Christian beliefs and communities can be a valuable source of support for those experiencing homoerotic desires, they have also been shown to engender troubling experiences of distress, stigma, fear, rejection, and judgement (Barnard, 2009; Barton, 2010; Buser, Goodrich, Luke, & Buser, 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; McQueeney, 2009). Several analyses have shown that same-sex attracted Christians have been subject to intentional or unintentional religious abuse in spiritual communities as leaders and peers oppress and manipulate individuals through threats, coercion, rejection, or condemnation (Johns & Hanna, 2011; Pitt, 2010; Super & Jacobson, 2011).

Experiences of conflict. While some same-sex attracted Christians have been found to evidence no ill effects associated with the emergence of homoerotic desires, others have reported experiencing profound inner conflict between their sexual and religious identities (Anderton, Pender, & Asner-Self, 2011; Barton, 2010; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Gold & Stewart, 2011; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Levy & Reeves, 2011; McQueeney, 2009; Rodriguez, 2010; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Walton, 2006; Wilcox, 2009; Wolkomir, 2006). Rodriguez (2010) noted that this conflict was defined not only by the clash between gay and religious identities, but also by the anxiety and distress that arises in the person experiencing such conflict. In cases where sexual-religious identity conflict develops, same-sex desires are believed to be sinful and at odds with what it means to be a 'good Christian'. This sense of being at odds with the will of God has been linked to painful feelings of fear, shame, guilt, horror, anxiety, self-loathing, worthlessness, confusion, and emasculation amongst same-sex attracted Christians (Barton, 2010; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; O'Brien, 2004; Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Sumerau, 2012; Walton, 2006; Yip, 1999). Anti-gay denominational teachings, scriptural passages, and congregational prejudices are reported to be the primary sources of sexual-religious conflict (Schuck & Liddle, 2001) and experiences of religious rejection, condemnation,

or abuse related to homosexual urges or behaviours have been shown to greatly exacerbate personal distress (Super & Jacobson, 2011). As Subhi and Geelan (2012) explained, this conflict has both intrapersonal and interpersonal facets. Religious-sexual identity conflict has been shown to be particularly distressing in cases where the individual's family and community are religiously devout, uphold traditional values, and devalue homosexuality (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Wolkomir, 2006). As sexual-religious identity conflict persists over time, research has shown that many individuals descend into a state of despair and anxiety marked by feelings of fragmentation, depression, hopelessness, secrecy, and alienation and are at increased risk of sexual and relational impairment, substance abuse, suicidal ideation or attempts, and other self-destructive behaviours (Barton, 2010; Ford, 2001; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Pitt, 2010; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Super & Jacobson, 2011). Beset by such profound suffering, same-sex attracted Christian men and women are desperate to resolve sexual-religious identity conflict and restore a sense of peace to their lives and selves (Johnston & Jenkins, 2006). Such individuals have been shown to utilize a variety of conflict resolution strategies to cope with or overcome sexual-religious identity conflict, detailed below.

Embracing LGB identities and constructing a new spiritual life. Research has shown that some same-sex attracted Christians choose to embrace LGB identities and alter their religious beliefs and affiliations as a means of resolving the conflict between their spiritual and sexual identities (Anderton et al., 2011; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Garcia, Gray-Stanley, & Ramirez-Valles, 2008; O'Brien, 2004; Pitt, 2010; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Sherry et al., 2010; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Sumerau, 2012; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien & Williams, 1994; Walton, 2006; Wolkomir, 2006). This approach takes a number of forms. Some same-sex attracted Christians report having abandoned all ties to religious institutions, teachings, and practices in favour of an atheist LGB existence (Anderton et al., 2011; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Lalich and McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; O'Brien, 2004; Pitt, 2010; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Yip, 1999). Yet, for many, the prospect of shedding the Christian worldview or leaving religious communities of belonging proved untenable. As O'Brien (2004) explained, abandoning this system of meaning entails the threat of being "cast adrift in a sea of meaninglessness – which may be even less tolerable than the knowledge that one is potentially damned" (p. 185). Others have noted that abandoning

Christianity and embracing an LGB identity also opens the individual up to the risk of community and familial rejection and the loss of valued relationships (Anderton et al., 2011; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2010).

Reports have shown that a number of same-sex attracted Christians choose to distance themselves from disaffirming churches and embrace alternative spiritual or religious beliefs and practices (Anderton et al., 2011; Barton, 2010; Dalh & Galliger, 2009; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Miller, 2007; Shallenberger, 1996; 1998; Walton, 2006; Yip, 1999). Although this approach has been found to take various forms, it invariably entails a critical evaluation of Christian homonegativity that reduces the tension between the religious and sexual identities. For example, Walton (2006) described how a group of Evangelical Christians successfully integrated their religious and gay identities by critically reinterpreting Biblical texts, framing homonegative religious institutions as separate from God, and constructing homosexuality as a product of God's will. Yip (1999) provided a similar account of a group of gay Christian men who managed religious stigma and developed a positive, integrated identity by rejecting the church's position on homosexuality, framing the church as sexually ignorant, asserting that all sexualities are part of God's creation, and insisting on the fallibility of the church and its misinterpretation of key biblical passages concerning homosexuality. Shallenberger (1996; 1998) described analogous processes of questioning, reintegration, and reclaiming as integral to the spiritual transformation of LGB Christians.

Investigators have found that many same-sex attracted Christians continue to participate in religious institutions while working to reconfigure their spiritual identities, beliefs, values, and practices in the face of crisis. While some individuals joined welcoming congregations or denominations (Anderton et al., 2011; Dahl & Galliger, 2009; Pitt, 2010), others personally embraced a more affirming theology and worked toward change within their religious congregations (Doyal, Papparini & Anderson, 2008; Lease et al., 2005). A number of LGB Christians have also been shown to embrace congregations or para-church organizations with a specific LGB outreach, such as the MCC, Affirmation (Mormon), or Dignity (Catholic) (Anderton et al., 2011; Rodriguez & Oullette, 2000). Conversely, some same-sex Christians report having been put off by such radically liberal spaces, choosing to join alternative conservative Christian institutions that are more accepting of sexual diversity. For example, Lalich and McLaren (2010) described how a subset of Jehovah's Witnesses embraced other

world-rejecting religions after embracing LGB identities. Pitt (2010) similarly noted that many of the gay Christian men he interviewed still preferred to participate in relatively dogmatic and moralistic churches after embracing an affirming view of homosexuality.

Still other same-sex attracted Christians have been shown to abandon organized religion altogether in favour of a more personal, individualized, and egalitarian spirituality (Anderton et al., 2011; Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliger, 2009; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Gold & Stewart, 2011; Johns & Hanna, 2011; Levy & Reeves, 2011; O'Brien, 2004; Pitt, 2010; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Super & Jacobson, 2011). These individuals embraced an orientation to the divine grounded in themes of love, respect, acceptance, and compassion and explicitly downplayed the need to rely on church teachings or religious authority to determine the will of God. In some instances, this spiritual shift entailed the adoption of emancipatory or liberationist theology, which values God's love and acceptance while simultaneously promoting an awareness of Christianity's history of oppression and the need for collective resistance to homonegative discourse (Johns & Hanna, 2011; O'Brien, 2004). While the specific religious and spiritual transformations described in the literature are numerous, this strategy generally entails the construction of God as affirming of all sexualities and the delegitimization and discrediting of stigmatizing texts, biblical interpretations, and religious institutions.

Rejecting the LGB identity and pursuing sexual suppression or change. Rather than altering their spiritual selves, some same-sex attracted Christians tried to reject gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities by changing or suppressing their homoerotic desires or behaviours (Anderton et al., 2011; Barton, 2010; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Pitt, 2010; Seegers, 2007; Subhi & Geelan, 2012). Several reports have indicated that same-sex attracted Christians often ask God to alter their desires or attempt to deny their sexual urges in the hopes that they will eventually abate (Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Pitt, 2010; Subhi & Geelan, 2012), however, detailed information on the experiences and outcomes of such coping techniques is lacking. Accounts of those who attempt to circumvent homoerotic identities, behaviours, and desires through heterosexual marriage are equally limited. Several investigators have reported instances where same-sex attracted Christians have married individuals of the opposite sex in the hope of shifting their desires or passing as heterosexual (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Walton, 2006). Unfortunately, these descriptions

provide little insight into these unions beyond noting that they generally fail to alter participants' homoerotic desires and often intensify feelings of personal distress.

A great deal of attention has been paid to those who seek to resolve sexual-religious identity conflict by altering their sexual preferences with the help of conversion therapists or ex-gay ministry services (Barton, 2010; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Erzen, 2006; Fjelstrom, 2013; Haldeman, 2004; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Pitt, 2010; Tozer & Hayes, 2004). Such sexual reorientation efforts have been studied from multiple angles. Early studies focused on the efficacy and outcomes of conversion therapy, exploring changes in clients' reported sexual thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and attractions (Adams & Sturgis, 1977; Bieber et al, 1962; Clippinger, 1974; James, 1978; Socarides, 1978). These early studies reported some evidence of sexual change amongst clients. For example, Bieber et al. (1962) reported that 13% of clients exhibited exclusively heterosexual behaviour and 13% exhibited bisexual behaviour at a 5-year follow-up and Socarides (1978) found that 44% of long-term psychoanalytic conversion therapy clients developed 'full heterosexual functioning'. A meta-analysis conducted by James in 1978 further concluded that approximately 35% of homosexual clients 'recovered', 27% 'improved', and 37% 'did not recover or improve' from conversion therapy efforts. Yet, although they suggested sexual reorientation services might prove effective for some clients with unwanted same-sex attraction, a lack of clear variable definition was endemic to these early studies (Spitzer, 2003) and "rigorous examinations of indices of sexual orientation were rarely, if ever" undertaken (Jones & Yarhouse, 2000, p. 121).

More recently, Shidlo and Schroeder (2002) reported that 87% of conversion therapy clients considered their reorientation efforts to have been 'unsuccessful'. Amongst the 13% of clients who considered themselves 'successful', reports of ongoing homosexual behaviours and the need to manage persistent homoerotic urges were common. In 2003, Spitzer argued that although reports of complete sexual reorientation were uncommon in his study (11% of males and 37% of females), the majority of conversion therapy clients claimed to have shifted from a predominantly or exclusively homosexual orientation prior to therapy to a predominantly or exclusively heterosexual orientation in the past year. Clients variously reported having experienced changes in their sexual behaviour, identity, or patterns of attraction, arousal, fantasy, or yearning. At the turn of the century, numerous empirical reviews concluded that it appeared as

though homosexual orientation could be changed to some degree, in some people, through therapeutic intervention (Jones & Yarhouse, 2000; Goetze, 2001; NARTH, 2000).

Recent outcome investigations specific to Christian ex-gay ministry programs have produced similarly mixed results. Nicolosi, Byrd, and Potts (2000) reported that amongst those clients who had previously defined themselves as ‘entirely homosexual’, 11.6% considered their sexuality unchanged after ex-gay ministry program participation, 11.3% defined themselves as almost entirely homosexual, 24.2% thought of themselves as more homosexual than heterosexual, 16.7% reported being almost entirely heterosexual, and 17.6% stated they were now exclusively heterosexual⁹. Other investigators have found that ex-gay ministry clients report being more heterosexually oriented at the time of study than at age 18 (Schaeffer, Hye, Kroencke, McCormick & Nottebaum, 2000) and that nearly 60% of male and 71% of female program participants had abstained from homosexual acts in the past year (Schaeffer, Nottebaum, Smith, Dech & Krawczyk, 1999). Generally speaking, ex-gay ministry participants report higher rates of heterosexual identification relative to a matched sample of lesbian/gay-identified peers (Throckmorton, 2002) and longitudinal and retrospective studies continued to suggest that changes in sexual attraction, infatuation, fantasy, and orientation are possible for at least some ex-gay ministry clients (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Jones & Yarhouse, 2011). Yet, while some individuals report having experienced some degree of sexual change (identity, behaviour, desire) as a result of conversion therapy or ex-gay ministry interventions, experiences of complete reorientation are exceedingly rare. Moreover, changes in sexual identity and reports of reorientation ‘success’ often lack any corresponding shift in homoerotic desires or behaviours.

In recent years, a number of analysts have suggested that these programs are better thought of as sites of identity reconfiguration and behavioural management than spaces of ‘sexual reorientation’ (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Borowich, 2008; Ford, 2001; Haldeman, 1991; 1994; Halpert, 2000; Isay, 1998; Schroeder & Shidlo, 2001; Shidlo & Schroder, 2002; Weiss, Morehouse, Yeager & Berry, 2010). Consequently, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to outcomes beyond the realm of sexual desire, identity, and behaviour. These studies note that clients attribute numerous psychological, relational, emotional, and spiritual benefits to conversion therapy and ex-gay ministry experiences, including improved self-acceptance and self-esteem, increased trust of the opposite sex and enhanced (platonic) same-sex relationships, greater emotional stability, decreased depression, improved gender esteem and

identity, enhanced sense of belonging, hope, and support, and improved relationships with God (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Nicolosi et al., 2000; Spitzer, 2003; Weiss et al., 2010).

Throckmorton and Welton (2005) reported that those who had successfully reoriented their sexuality or were in the process of reorientation largely considered conversion therapy helpful. Interestingly, even those who fail in their reorientation attempts and subsequently embrace LGB identities often report having valued their conversion therapy or ex-gay ministry experiences and attained a variety of benefits therein, including social connection, feelings of acceptance and support, and having one's gay/lesbian identity (counter-intuitively) validated by sexual reorientation programs (Beckstead & Morrow, 2014; Flentje, Heck & Cochran, 2014; Weiss et al., 2010).

Conversely, a growing body of research has highlighted multiple harms associated with sexual reorientation efforts. Personal accounts have detailed how unsuccessful change efforts have negatively impacted the lives of clients and their families (Duberman, 2001; Ford, 2001; Isay, 2001). Clinicians have also attested to the harms that can result from unsuccessful sexual reorientation efforts, including depression, guilt, shame, grief, internalized homophobia, low self-esteem, immasculinity, induced intimacy avoidance, and sexual dysfunction (Haldeman, 2001). Empirical research with clients has also revealed a host of potential harms associated with sexual reorientation efforts (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Throckmorton & Welton, 2005; Weiss et al., 2010). These include psychological and emotional suffering (feelings of disappointment, dehumanization, guilt, confusion, fear, failure, loneliness, and inauthenticity; experiences of depression; decreased self-esteem; increased self-loathing and internalized homophobia; suicidal ideation or attempts; gender-norm anxiety), social harms (lost loves and friendships, enhanced family dysfunction¹⁰, decreased capacity for same-sex intimacy, feelings of alienation and loneliness, problems in relationships with children¹¹), opportunity costs (wasted time and resources, loss of romantic relationship opportunities, delay of life experiences and skill acquisition), sexual impairment (distorted perceptions, sexual dysfunction), and spiritual harms (loss of faith, a sense of betrayal by religious leaders, anger over the use of theology to disparage homosexuality, excommunication following treatment failure). Nicolosi et al. (2000) reported that 7.1% of participants felt they were worse off following conversion therapy experiences and Flentje, Heck, and Cochran (2014) found that such interventions were often associated with increased

shame and diminished mental health in the lives of those who subsequently embraced LGB identities. Conversion therapy experiences thus consist of a dizzying array of benefits and harms that are not easily accounted for by clients' ultimate identity outcomes (ex-gay or LGB).

A number of researchers have moved away from outcome studies altogether to explore alternative aspects of sexual reorientation experiences. Studies of client characteristics and motivations have found that high religious affiliation, fundamentalism, and an intrinsic religious orientation have all been shown to increase the likelihood of engaging in sexual orientation change programs (Flentje, Heck & Cochran, 2014; Karten & Wade, 2010; Maccio, 2010; Spitzer, 2003; Tozer & Hayes, 2004; Weiss et al., 2010). For those experiencing sexual-religious identity conflict, feelings of shame, anxiety, and inner tension are often the most immediate motivators of ex-gay ministry participation (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Wolkomir, 2006). Yet, other motivations also exist that may or may not be associated with religiosity, including the desire to attain or maintain a heterosexual marriage and family life, feeling disconnected from other males, experiencing or believing the gay lifestyle to be emotionally unsatisfying, having internalized homonegative attitudes, feeling disconnected from the gay community, or fearing or experiencing social rejection (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Flentje, Heck, & Cochran, 2014; Karten & Wade, 2010; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Spitzer, 2003; Tozer & Hayes, 2004; Weiss et al., 2010; Wolkomir, 2006).

Social constructionist investigations have also illuminated the role of narrative, identity, and bodily discipline in conversion therapy and ex-gay ministry programs. As early as 1980, Pattison and Pattison credited the sexual changes reported by ex-gay ministry participants to a process of 'folk healing,' whereby ideological commitment spurred the reorganization of personal behaviour, cognition, emotional responsiveness, and social interaction. Robinson (1998) similarly argued that the adoption of a new interpretive schema that makes sense of same-sex attraction and offers hope for change was a crucial catalyst in the sexual reorientation process. Attuned to the centrality of identity reconstruction and religious conversion in ex-gay ministry programs, Ponticelli (1999) identified five factors that contributed to the construction of an ex-lesbian identity: 1) the adoption of a new universe of discourse, 2) the reconstruction of one's personal biography in line with an ex-lesbian identity, 3) the adoption of a new explanatory framework for important life issues, 4) acceptance of the new ex-lesbian role, and 5) developing emotional ties to other group members. Shidlo and Schroeder (2002) similarly described how

those who consider themselves to have been successful in ex-gay ministry programs essentially developed a sexual management plan that included an explanatory framework and cognitive and behavioural tools to cope with (and potentially diminish) same-sex desires and behaviours. Beckstead and Morrow (2004) also argued that ex-gay ministry programs helped facilitate a ‘process toward congruence’ whereby participants overcome dissonance and create a positive sense of self by accepting and reframing same-sex attractions, embracing sexual identities and behaviours congruent with their values, and redefining their ethics and spirituality. They note that such experiences can prove beneficial to those who embrace both ex-gay and LGB identities by providing an opportunity to positively transform self, relationships, sexuality, and spirituality.

Ethnographic investigations of ex-gay ministry experiences have similarly highlighted the centrality of identity work and behavioural management in these contexts. Wolkomir (2006) described how ex-gay ministry clients worked to transform their stigmatized identities into moral ones using the symbolic resources offered by the group. The normalization and externalization of homosexuality and the reinterpretation of same-sex attraction as a moral struggle was deemed central to this transformative process, allowing participants to look more positively upon their selves and desires and overcome inner conflict. Gerber (2011) highlighted similar experiences of destigmatization in the narratives of ex-gay ministry clients. She identified the democratization of sin, the prioritization of action over thought, and the medicalization of homoeroticism as important processes that facilitated the development of a more positive self-concept amongst ex-gay participants. Globally, she reported that these programs helped clients eschew feelings of personal culpability while simultaneously encouraging them to take responsibility for overcoming same-sex attraction by exerting their will to righteousness in the face of temptation. Here, processes of ideological commitment and behavioural perseverance are once again considered central to experiences of transformation. During her time in an American residential ex-gay ministry program, Erzen (2006) similarly observed that narrative reconstruction and identity work were central to this intervention and described how clients learned to reframe homoeroticism as a sin or temptation of the past while simultaneously developing a new, theologically compatible ex-gay identity. She highlighted the role of body discipline, social relationships, and spiritual development in this space and described how ‘successful’ participants developed both a new identity and a sense of religious belonging. Creek and Dunn (2012) also highlighted the role of narrative reconstruction in ex-gay settings, noting that the ‘testimonies’ of

ex-gay men and women exhibit a distinct narrative structure that conforms to program ideology. This basic plot involves: 1) a description of early childhood experiences believed to have caused homoeroticism, 2) experiences of suffering as a gay/lesbian individual, 3) an intensification of problems that culminates in a breaking point, and 4) finding happiness in a Christian identity.

Embracing the LGB identity and avoiding homoerotic acts. Much less attention has been paid to those who accept the immutability of their desires and embrace LBG identities (privately or publically) while simultaneously avoiding homosexual acts and relationships (Creek, 2013; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; O'Brien, 2004; Wolkomir, 2006). Scarce investigations of this strategy note that it entails a marked distinction between homosexual urges and acts. While those who embrace this approach to conflict resolution do not consider homoerotic desires to be (in and of themselves) morally problematic, homosexual acts and relationships are construed as unambiguously sinful. Such individuals must therefore work to avoid all homosexual acts while embracing sexual celibacy or pursuing romantic relationships with persons of the opposite sex.

Although celibate gay Christian men (closeted or otherwise) are often mentioned in the literature (Gold & Stewart, 2011), little is known about the lives and experiences of those who embrace this strategy. For example, O'Brien (2004) simply notes that it involves "accepting the definition of an afflicted self, donning a cloak of shame regarding one's homosexuality (or, minimally, a cloak of sickness), and embarking upon the struggle indicated by this affliction" (p. 187). In a uniquely detailed study of this population, Creek (2013) reported that celibate gay Christian men work to defensively manage their desires using a variety of strategies, including humour, social support and accountability, and avoidance. She also described how the relationships between celibate Christian gay men and heterosexual conservative Christians, ex-gay Christians, gay-affirming Christians, and secular gay males are marked by a complex blend of identity/connection and tension/conflict. A noteworthy study by Ganzevoort et al. (2011) similarly described how some same-sex attracted Christian men and women downplayed homosexual identity elements while embracing a devout religious life and framing their desires as part of the ongoing Christian struggle against sin and temptation. These reports pointed to a distinct group of same-sex attracted Christians who continue to frame same-sex behaviour as morally wrong while attempting to live righteously and in obedience with God's will, accept divine forgiveness for past mistakes, and avoid succumbing to sexual temptation in the future.

Compartmentalizing LGB and religious identities. Lastly, several reports have indicated that some same-sex attracted Christians cope with sexual-religious identity conflict by compartmentalizing their religious and sexual identities (Anderton et al., 2011; Dahl & Galliger, 2009; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Pitt, 2010; Rodriguez & Oulette, 2000; Seegers, 2007; Valera & Taylor, 2011). These individuals essentially construct double or parallel lives and selves, keeping their sexual orientation secret in Christian contexts and their religious identities veiled in LGB communities. Researchers note that these men and women essentially work to ‘pass’ as devout heterosexuals at church while maintaining homosexual (and often atheist) identities outside of the Christian community. Such ‘identity commuting’ necessitates strict rules and practices to keep these two worlds and selves separate (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Pitt, 2010; Valera & Taylor, 2011). Pitt (2011) noted that this strict division could be particularly difficult for religious leaders and those seeking to establish sexual and romantic relationships with other Christians. Ganzevoort et al. (2011) similarly noted that this strategy is likely of limited long-term utility, as it becomes increasingly difficult to keep the Christian/heterosexual and secular/homosexual selves, worlds, and relationships separate over time.

Multiplicity, shifting strategies, and the ongoing nature of conflict resolution.

Several researchers have highlighted the multiplicity of conflict resolution strategies employed by same-sex attracted Christian men in their attempts to mediate personal crisis (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Fjelstrom, 2013; Gerber, 2011; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; O’Brien, 2004; Pitt, 2010; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Walton, 2006; Wolkomir, 2006; Weiss et al., 2010). Some have also described the shift participants undertake in moving from one strategy to another. For example, Johnston and Jenkins (2006) and Subhi and Geelan (2012) described a number of individuals who left unsatisfying sexual reorientation programs to pursue lives as openly gay men and women. Fjelstrom (2013) similarly described how some sexual reorientation clients embraced heterosexual identities (and, in some cases, married members of the opposite-sex and bore children) for a period of time before ultimately choosing to live as lesbian, gay, or bisexual men and women in light of troubling experiences of inauthenticity, disconnection, fracture, and repression. Walton (2006) also noted how a group of same-sex attracted Christian men went from rejecting to accepting homosexual identities after a period of inner turmoil and, in several cases, failed heterosexual marriages.

An increasing number of analysts thus contend that sexual-religious identity conflict resolution is an ongoing process marked by shifting strategies and a history of resolution efforts (Anderton et al., 2011; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Subhi & Geelan, 2012). Beckstead and Morrow (2004) explained that same-sex attracted Christians often go through a period of “swaying between extreme, ‘all-or-nothing’ lifestyles and wavering between ex-gay, ‘out’ gay, or celibate identities” (p. 673) before deciding on a particular mode of conflict resolution. Several analyses have also pointed to the multiplicity of institutions and support mechanisms same-sex attracted Christians look to in their attempts to resolve sexual-religious identity conflict, including ex-gay ministry programs, religious groups, texts, or advisors, and secular mental health supports (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Bent-Goodler & Fowler, 2006; Buser et al., 2011; Johns & Hanna, 2011; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011; Super & Jacobson, 2011).

Limitations of the Current Literature

Despite the increased attention to sexual-religious identity conflict in recent years, many aspects of this experience remain unknown, under-researched, or poorly understood. Notably, the existing literature tends to be outcome focused, with little attention paid to the process of sexual-religious identity conflict and resolution, individual experiences of this event, or the pathways, nodes of resistance, and transformative moments that defined the journey toward various ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Few investigations have attended to how sexual-religious identity conflict develops in the context of individual lives and how it shapes the everyday experience of participants beyond themes of tension and suffering. Is the emergence of conflict a homogenous phenomenon, as insinuated by Levy and Reeves (2011) and O’Brien (2004), or are there variations in this experience? If variations are present, are they attributable to others - as Subhi and Geelan (2012) suggest – or are there other intrapersonal and contextual factors that influence how this phenomenon is experienced and understood? How does this conflict impact the spiritual, social, and sexual lives of same-sex attracted Christian men? Brief mentions of ‘sexual experimentation’ (Ganzevoort, 2011) and ‘asexuality’ (Fjelstrom, 2013), religious ‘participation’, ‘abandonment’, or foreclosure’ (Yip, 1999), and divine ‘distance’, ‘desertion’ or ‘condemnation’ (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; O’Brien, 2004; Super & Jacobson, 2011) notwithstanding, little is known about the spiritual, sexual, and social contours of the conflict period beyond its characterization as a time of immense personal suffering. As Anderton et al.

(2011) note, “researchers have jumped ahead to identifying... conflict resolution strategies before more fully exploring or understanding what this experience is like” (p. 267).

Detailed analyses of the process and experience of conflict resolution are similarly lacking. There is a need to provide a clearer account of how individuals construct ‘successful’ or ‘acceptable’ (and, by extension, ‘failed’ or ‘dissatisfying’) experiences of conflict resolution in different circumstances. What does it mean to ‘resolve’ sexual-religious identity conflict using different strategies? What do participants wish to accomplish or avoid by embracing particular approaches? What gains accrue to those who successfully overcome this conflict? Do different strategies impart similar gains or are they characterized by unique benefits? Do some entail a greater risk of personal harm or suffering? There is also a tendency to explore various resolution strategies in isolation, despite reports of multiplicity and variety. None of the processual models developed in the literature have attended to how different attempts to resolve sexual-religious identity conflict relate to one another or inform subsequent actions. For example, although Beckstead & Morrow (2004) highlighted a host of possible resolution strategies and trace participants’ movements between various options, a holistic understanding of how these various resolution attempts interact with and influence one another is lacking.

The literature also fails to provide a clear account of why individuals end up adopting certain strategies or embracing particular discourses. For example, Levy & Reeves (2011) simply noted that participants reached a point where they “identified a resolution to this conflict” (p.63) and Creek (2013) explained that, in many cases, “ex-gay explanations of desire or strategies for dealing with desire fell short” (p. 126). Such statements provide no insight into how or why particular strategies and discourses are being embraced by some individuals and rejected by others. Why do certain individuals wind up embracing different lives, selves, spiritualities, and sexualities? Why do certain approaches to conflict resolution prove successful for some individuals and fail to provide relief for others? What factors are being used to evaluate various approaches to conflict resolution? Who is involved in this process? What events, experiences, forces, or encounters account for the decision to abandon a particular redressive approach aside from experiences of ‘non-change’ in ex-gay ministry or conversion therapy contexts (Fjelstrom, 2013; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006)? Is the same evaluative framework applied to all strategies or does it vary? Can any patterns be observed in preferred modes of resolution over time? It is not enough to note that identity resolution is a “long and difficult journey, fraught with inner

turmoil” (Walton, 2006, p. 3). We must explore how this process plays out in individual lives, where particular stories diverge, and what factors might account for such differences.

Moreover, much remains unknown about the experiences of individuals who manage or overcome this conflict without adopting an affirming LGB identity or pursuing homoerotic relationships. Generally speaking, there is a dearth of empirical reports dedicated to those who embrace ex-gay identities, sexual celibacy, heterosexual marriage, or compartmentalization. As Creek (2013) observed, the vast majority of the literature is based on the retrospective accounts of individuals who embraced LGB identities and altered their spiritual and religious existence accordingly (see, for example, Anderton et al., 2011; Fjelstrom, 2013; Gold & Stewart, 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Pitt, 2010), including existing models of conflict resolution (Garcia, 2008; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011). While these studies are of immense value, they provide little insight into how other groups experience sexual-identity conflict and resolution. As Brzezinski (2000) argued, there is a need to include those ‘outliers’ who do not integrate their same-sex attractions into a pro-LGB identity in models of identity development and conflict resolution. While several authors (including Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Creek, 2013; Ganzevoort et al., 2011) have started to provide some insight into the development of ex-gay, celibate-gay identities, and commuter identities, much more research is needed to further our understanding of these alternative modes of conflict resolution and how they impact the spiritual, sexual, moral, social, political, and ideological facets of participants’ lives. Investigations that include individuals who have embraced a variety of conflict resolution strategies will allow us to elucidate what is unique to, or shared between, these approaches. It will also allow us to determine whether any are particularly dangerous, ineffective, or beneficial. Although engaging in identity compartmentalization, pursuing heterosexual marriage, or embracing ex-gay or celibate-gay identities are often constructed as inferior resolution strategies (see, for example, Gold & Stewart, 2011), it remains uncertain whether these approaches are truly inferior or whether this negative characterization is an artefact of sampling bias and the tendency to recruit affirming LGB individuals to this stream of research. By exploring alternative forms of conflict resolution in detail, we are better positioned to reflect on the similarities and differences between these strategies and consider their relative advantages or disadvantages.

Outcome studies, though numerous, also tend to be heavily focused on sexual and religious variables. More detailed analyses of the social, political, moral, and romantic

experiences of men and women who embrace various conflict resolution strategies are needed to round out our understanding of these strategies. For example, little is known how same-sex attracted men and women experience heterosexual marriage and family life beyond the fact that these relationships are marked by ongoing ‘challenges’ and often fail in the face of persistent homoerotic desires (Creek, 2013; Fjelstrom, 2013)¹². Moreover, few investigators have attended to how ex-gay and celibate LGB individuals experience conservative Christian environments. While Creek (2013) notes that the social position of celibate gay men is characterized by complexity and ambivalence, further research is needed to explore how these individuals relate to conservative Christian peers and communities and what challenges they face therein. To date, outcome and model studies have also tended to focus on a protracted timeframe (see, for example, Anderton et al., 2011; Jones & Yarhouse, 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Weiss et al., 2001). Such studies have generally failed to attend to how life before the emergence of homoeroticism and after crisis resolution shapes the meaning and significance of sexual-religious conflict. They have also failed to provide a detailed assessment of the long-term benefits and challenges associated with different resolution strategies (including heterosexual marriage or compartmentalization) and have been incapable of commenting on how an individual’s spiritual, moral, social, political, and sexual existence might change over the course of this experience and in response to new encounters, realizations, experiences, or events.

The current literature also lacks attention to how the lives and experiences of same-sex attracted Christian men play out after conflict resolution. Several authors have made note of ongoing challenges (including relationship problems), experiences of loss, harm and suffering (including spiritual losses and self-esteem issues), and instances of post-traumatic growth (including enhanced spirituality) reported by individuals in the wake of conflict resolution (Barton, 2010; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Fjelstrom, 2013; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Gerber, 2011; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Levy & Reeves, 2011; O’Brien, 2004; Pitt, 2010; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Wolkmoir, 2006). Yet, these piecemeal observations provide little sense of what it means to live as an ex-gay, celibate-gay, gay affirming, or compartmentalized man or woman in the long-term. What troubles are resolved by various resolution strategies? Which persist? Are the benefits of particular approaches maintained long-term? How does the distribution of losses, gains, and struggles differ across various conflict resolution strategies? How do individuals manage ongoing challenges and losses? Although most researchers have stopped short of

analyzing the post-resolution lifeworld, there is much to be learned from attending to the spiritual, social, moral, political, psychological, emotional, and sexual contours of this phase. For example, while Weiss et al. (2010) reported that many ex-gay leaders and therapists are past clients of sexual reorientation programs, little is known about how these individuals make the shift from client to leader and what compels them to serve others in this way.

There is also a pervasive tendency to frame sexual-religious identity conflict and resolution as an ‘intrapersonal’ or ‘individual’ event within the current literature (Subhi & Geelan, 2012). For example, Levy & Reeves (2011) described this process as one of “internal conflict resolution” (p. 64) and O’Brien (2004) stated, “the path to resolution is a solitary one” (p. 186). This perspective not only limits our understanding of sexual-religious identity conflict and resolution, but also ignores the fact (well established by cultural and social psychologists) that all experience is simultaneously private and public, personal and interpersonal. There has been little attention to the sociocultural aspects of this phenomenon, including how it influences, and is influenced by, local institutions, power networks, cultural forms, and interpersonal relationships. Even where authors have explicitly noted that this experience is shaped by personal, social, and contextual factors (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011), there has been a tendency to focus on the individual at the expense of interpersonal and cultural factors. A relatively small number of studies have explored how family members (including parents, spouses, and children) and conservative Christian, affirming, and secular LGB communities and relationships impact and are impacted by sexual-religious identity conflict (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Lease and Shulman, 2003; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Walton, 2006; Wolkomir, 2009). While we know that same-sex attracted Christians often experience stigmatization and rejection from parents (Bubhi & Geelan, 2012) and religious communities (Barnard, 2009; O’Brien, 2004), it is uncertain whether such dark interactions capture the entirety of the social landscape. Are same-sex attracted Christians simply ‘social cast offs’ (O’Brien, 2004), invariably “rejected, humiliated, and victimized” (Lalich & McLaren, 2010, p. 1306) by religious peers and family members? Are the social challenges and consequences of sexual-religious identity conflict stable or do they vary throughout this experience?

It is also necessary to develop a clearer understanding of how various institutions – and the discourses they promote - impact and influence the experience of conflict and its resolution, both in the short-term and the long-term. While past research has attended to the role of sexual

reorientation programs and mental health services in the process of conflict resolution, little has been written about the influence of other local institutions and discourses, including those of the sexual sciences, popular culture, conservative Christian organizations, and affirming Christianity. For example, although affirming congregations have been said to play an “important role” (Levy & Reeves, 2011, p. 66) in LGB conflict resolution, the nature of this influence (or, in some cases, lack of influence) remains largely ambiguous. Moreover, while past research has shown that LGB Christians often report positive experiences with secular counselling and therapy, disturbing encounters marked by professional stigma, bias, or violence related to their spiritual or sexual identities are also apparent (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Buser et al., 2011; Johns & Hanna, 2011; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). Such negative encounters engendered feelings of shame, grief, frustration, invalidation, resentment, distrust, and confusion and warrant further attention across a broader sample of respondents (Buser et al., 2011). Dedicated studies of ex-gay ministry experiences are also lacking relative to investigations of conversion therapy programs, despite the fact that spiritual interventions are quickly overtaking their secular counterparts as the primary providers of sexual reorientation programming (Throckmorton & Welton, 2005).

Existing institutional analyses have also tended to focus on the role of a particular service, organization, or movement in helping individuals resolve conflict while ignoring the significance of other institutional encounters or past attempts at redress. For example, although Beckstead and Morrow (2004) noted that many same-sex attracted Christians come into contact with various institutions in their search for conflict resolution (including religious counselling and secular therapy), their analysis focused on ex-gay ministry experiences and made little mention of the contribution of other resources. How does this dynamic institutional and strategic multiplicity influence the trajectory of conflict resolution? Might some institutional contacts – devalued in the short term – prove beneficial in the long-term? Past research has also tended to present a binary vision of particular institutions as inherently destructive and others as inherently productive, despite research pointing to varied experiences with affirming Christianity, liberal theology, secular psychology, and conservative Christianity. Affirming congregations are generally said to promote the integration of sexual and religious identities while non-affirming faiths are said to inflict psychological pain and distress and put the individual at risk of spiritual harm (Buser et al., 2011; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Super & Jacobson,

2011). Additional research is needed to explore such varied experiences and determine whether the characterization of particular institutions as more or less helpful or dangerous is warranted or simply an artefact of sampling bias. Do conservative Christian institutions have anything positive to offer or are they purely spaces of ‘abuse’, ‘stigma’, ‘trauma’, ‘rejection’, and ‘marginalization’ – the ‘last citadels’ of gay oppression (Hartman, 1996)? Under what circumstances can engagements with conservative Christian and ex-gay ministry institutions prove helpful or productive? Conversely, if affirming congregations and secular psychological services are so productive and healing, why are these resources not embraced by all same-sex attracted Christians? What explains the disdain certain same-sex attracted Christians evidence for these liberal, affirming resources and the tendency for many to reject LGB identities (Walton, 2006)? Does the tendency to recruit LGB Christians to studies of sexual-religious identity conflict eschew some of the benefits of conservative Christian spaces or instances of social violence that occur in affirming or secular spaces (see, for example, Garcia, 2008; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Sherry et al., 2010; Sumerau, 2012)? How we can account for such a wide variety of individual experiences in ex-gay ministry, secular therapy, and affirming Christian settings? Are some individuals more apt to benefit from specific programs or services? Are others more likely to be at risk of harm? What factors underlie such varying outcomes?

A number of important issues and crucial questions thus remained to be explored. Generally speaking, there is a need to construct more experience or person-centered accounts¹³ of sexual-religious identity conflict grounded within the rich and nuanced context of individual lives and reflective of the various modes of resolution available to participants. This requires attending to the processual features of this experience and how participants make sense of the various changes and transformations that characterize their lives. It also entails a detailed exploration of the similarities and differences between individual instances of sexual-religious identity conflict and resolution and the various social, cultural, and personal factors that influence this experience. Such an approach is capable of providing rich insight into how experiences of conflict play out over time and shape participants’ everyday lives and understandings of self and world. It also provides an opportunity to make sense of the factors, experiences, and encounters that characterize different experiences and outcomes and enables the researcher to explore the unique lifeworlds of those who adopt different resolution strategies.

Although the gaps in the literature are numerous, the current investigation issued from a particular theoretical perspective and the desire to produce a portrait of sexual-religious conflict that attended to personal experience, individual variations, and the influence of the local social, political, and cultural context over time. This included attention to how same-sex attracted Christians interacted with, experienced, and evaluated various assistive resources and redressive strategies on their way to embracing particular ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Although particular emphasis was placed on ex-gay ministry experiences, the researcher was also intent on exploring any other resources or strategies utilized before, after, or alongside these services, the relationship between various remedial events and techniques, and the process by which participants decided between multiple approaches to resolution. This processual, experience-centered investigation was intended to produce new insights into sexual-religious conflict that would allow clinicians and policy-makers to better understand the challenges, priorities, and aspirations of those experiencing sexual-religious conflict and facilitate improved outreach and political decision-making in this area. It will also hoped that the analysis would enable those living with sexual-religious conflict to explore new possibilities for their lives and better appreciate the costs, benefits, and challenges of particular resolution strategies. Lastly, the researcher hoped that this work would provide insight into how experiences of sexual-religious conflict relate to, and are reflective of, important social, cultural, ethical, and political realities in Canadian and American society. Below, I outline the conceptual mosaic that guided the current work, delimiting the field of research and providing particular lines of investigation.

Research Orientation

Social constructionists hold that meaningful reality is dependent upon a human consciousness (Crotty, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005; Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985). Although there are objects in the world that may be pregnant with *potential* meaning, they remain vacant of actual meaning and the world remains devoid of meaningful reality until a conscious, interpreting agent engages with them (Crotty, 1998). The transactional construction of knowledge is accomplished through the process of *intentionality*, which proposes a radical interdependence of subject and object in the act of meaning construction. From the concept of intentionality comes the core principle of constructionism: the notion of multiple realities (Ponterotto, 2005). The goal of constructionist research is thus not to approximate a single, objective reality but to try and interpret the meanings given by actors to objects and events within a particular situation (Geertz,

1973). Such a stance does not, however, condemn us to rampant individualism. Actors construct meaning within particular social and symbolic contexts and through engagement with other human beings (Crotty, 1998). Consequently, social constructionism offers a means of studying human experience that is simultaneously social, cultural, and individual.

In order to explore how meaning is attributed to ex-gay ministry experiences, I have developed a theoretical model that incorporates elements of interpretive, phenomenological, and critical research traditions. The crux of my theoretical model is Kleinman's theory of moral experience (1995, 1999). This theory was chosen to guide the current investigation for two reasons. First, Kleinman's approach is broad. He traces several key features of human experience and brings together a variety of social science theories into a unified model of how human beings experience the world. By attending to the cultural, social, and embodied aspects of experience and how these influence the way we think, feel, value, behave, interact, and express ourselves in local and global worlds, this approach allows for a rich and nuanced consideration of Christian experiences of same-sex attraction from a variety of perspectives. Second, Kleinman's theory highlights the moral dimensions of human life, attending to how individual experiences are always connected to larger moral conflicts, debates, panics, negotiations, ideals, deliberations and dilemmas in local and global worlds and how social and symbolic influences crystallize into particular moral stakes in the context of individual lives. As Stiker (1997) noted, this moral focus is especially important in studies of difference, where the dominant moral order is threatened by atypicality.

Kleinman (1999) defined experience as “the felt flow of interpersonal communication and engagements” (p. 358). These engagements, take place within ‘local worlds’ – the mundane, everyday social spaces in which human lives take form. Here, personal experiences are characterised by an orientation of overwhelming practicality. Kleinman (1999) noted: “What so thoroughly absorbs the attention of participants in a local world is that certain things matter, matter greatly, even desperately” (p. 360). Experience is inherently moral because people are deeply engaged stakeholders in their own lives – they are driven by the pursuit of ‘the good life’ (variously defined in different cultural contexts) and their experiences are evaluated relative to this goal. Here, moral experience departs sharply from ethical discourse. Where ethical discourse represents the abstract codifications of universal values by cultural elites, moral experience is concerned with practical engagements in a particular local world and is situated in the context of

specific lives, bodies, relationships, networks of power, and cultural systems. As individuals attempt to achieve a “life worth living” (p. 364), moral experience may prove unethical, just as the ethical may be irrelevant to moral experience (Kleinman, 1999).

Other scholars have further elucidated the form and structure of experience. Turner (1986) distinguished between *mere* experience, characterized by an engagement in the flow of experience, and *an experience*, which stands out against the background of routine and demands reflection. *An experience* is both formative and transformative – it is a distinguishable, isolable sequence of external events and internal responses that disrupts routine experience and serves as an initiation into a new lifeway. Such experiences are life changing. They proceed from a stage of initial shock, through rumination, to meaningful interpretation. It is these interrupted and interpreted moments – the *an experiences* of a person’s existence – that are available to the researcher as data. As Mattingly (1998) argued, the stories our participants tell us about a particular experience cannot be anything but distortions of the past, adapted to the particular rhetorical context of telling and subject to clarifications, elaborations, condensations, moralizations, and other imaginative processes. This, she says, is because meaning is not available to the actor in the midst of an experience which is formless, fragmented, fleeting, and ungraspable – he or she cannot yet know what consequences will follow this action, the ‘ending’ from which current events will derive their significance. Thus, experience as ‘felt flow’ – as it is - is always inaccessible to both the participant and the researcher. The expression of an experience – its aesthetic synthesis – is the only thing to which the researcher can attend. However, these expressions cannot be considered to be a purely individual accomplishment. As Good (1994), Mattingly (1998) and many others have noted, cultural meaning systems, and local aesthetic forms in particular, play a large role in shaping this performance.

Experience, for Kleinman (1999), is the “medium in which collective and subjective processes interfuse” (p. 359). Cultural meaning systems, and local aesthetic forms in particular, play an important role in the interpretation and representation of significant life experiences (Good, 1994; Kleinman, 1999; Mattingly, 1998). As Geertz (1973) explained, humans are physically “incomplete” and “unfinished” animals (p. 46), having sacrificed biological control for symbolic dependence. Without direction from cultural patterns, human experience would be shapeless and meaningless and human behaviour would be ungoverned, chaotic, and pointless. Cultural systems complete human life by providing symbolic patterns *of* (understanding) and *for*

(behaviour) the world (D'Andrade, 1984; Geertz, 1973). Religion is one such cultural system – it affirms something about the fundamental nature of life and reality. Geertz (1973) noted that we are driven to religion by problems of meaning (e.g., bafflement, suffering, and ethical paradox), and that our confidence in these systems is justified by reference to authority. The religious worldview has an enduring impact on believers' actions and experiences, giving meaningful form to intellectual, emotional, and behavioural tendencies in accordance with the depth, consistency, and pervasiveness of their religious engagement. Religious meaning systems also constitute an important part of the local moral imaginary and impact how individuals interpret their selves, lives, and experiences.

Local plots and narrative resources also serve as models of and for the world. Individuals create meaning out of their experiences and their selves largely by bringing narrative resources to bear on their lives (Good, 1994; Ricoeur, 1986/2007; Todorov, 1968/1981). Our past experiences are rendered meaningful through the process of emplotment and represented to self and others as personal narratives. Fernandez (1974) and Ricoeur (1983) described emplotment as the creative process by which the chronological (plot) and the non-chronological (figures of rhetoric) are brought together to create a meaningful story. As Ricoeur (1983) noted, this fusion is at the heart of semantic innovation and is responsible for providing narrative with its transformative qualities by creating new understandings and life possibilities. This representation is not a mirror of some objective reality, but a creative and imaginative activity whereby meaning is imparted and coherence is constructed where none inherently exists (Becker, 1999; Frank, 1995; Good, 1994; Kristeva, 2001; Mattingly, 1998). Within such narratives, the self emerges as an aesthetic amalgam of disparate images, memories, experiences, signs, and metaphors that are made meaningful in the process of narration (Crites, 1986; Daniel, 1984; Geertz, 1973; Kristeva, 2001; Peacock & Holland, 1993; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Singer, 1984). The self is not solely the source of narration, but its product as well. It is a narrative phenomenon that is under continuous reconstruction and vulnerable to the influence of social forces (Daniel, 1984; Kleinman, 1988, 1995; Mattingly, 1998; Singer, 1984). Yet, the storied nature of human life is not solely oriented toward the past. Pre-reflective experience is itself structured by personal narratives, which project into the void of the future and guide the present in search of particular endings (Becker, 1999; Crites, 1986; Frank, 1995; Kristeva, 2001; Mattingly, 1998).

Unfortunately, although humans live in search of particular endings, things do not always go as planned. Life offers resistance to narrative projects and often thwarts hoped-for endings (Becker, 1999; Kleinman, 1995; Mattingly, 1998; Turner, 1986). At times, individuals are able to overcome such challenges and realign themselves with culturally normalized, moralized, and idealized narratives. Other times, such realignment proves impossible and personal narratives collapse, resulting in profound suffering. In moments of narrative collapse, life is rendered meaningless and the body is left without a desired future to guide its actions (Becker, 1999; Frank, 1995). People come to feel disoriented as a sudden preoccupation with body, culture, and self engulfs their attention. This process is referred to as the *unmaking* of one's lifeworld, that is, the world of our common, immediate lived experiences (Good, 1994). The ambiguity, meaninglessness, and stagnancy associated with narrative collapse necessitate the construction of a new personal narrative capable of accommodating unexpected life events (Mattingly, 1998) and re-establishing a connection to local norms (Becker, 1999; Turner, 1986). In all societies, marginal narratives (Bruner, 1991) provide alternative plots and life metaphors that can be used to transform experiences of disruption, mediate disjuncture and incorporate difference, and reconnect the self to the dominant cultural order (Frank, 1995). Such processes of narrative reconstruction are often highly interpersonal, involving the persuasive influence of local healers (Mattingly, 1998) or the creative capacity of collective rituals (Fernandez, 1974; Turner, 1982).

The inter-subjective nature of experience is not, however, limited to collective sharing of symbolic forms and the creative co-construction of meaning. It also reflects the multiplicity of force relations that shape individual experience. Although Foucault (1976/1990) noted that power exists in both positive (productive) and negative (repressive) forms, people tend to be controlled more by accepted cultural 'truths' than by the repressive force of laws in their everyday lives. Particular ways of generating meaning or constructing what is 'good', 'normal', and 'right' become naturalized and normalized in local settings, driving alternative interpretations to the margins and placing limits on what is considered an acceptable narrative, self, or life project. Inter-subjectivity is thus both creative and constraining (Kleinman, 1995; Peacock & Holland, 1993). Normalized plots and interpretations are used to seduce people into particular ways of life and deter them from others (Kristeva, 2001; Mattingly, 1998). Yet, wherever there is power, resistance can be seen in acts of overt defiance, passive noncompliance or disbelief, or tactical subversion (Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1976/1990; Kleinman, 1995).

Individuality is also important. The experiences an individual has lived through and made sense of provide him or her with a specific interpretive ‘lens’ – a distinct framework for making sense of future events (D’Andrade, 1984; Geertz, 1973; Obeyesekere, 1981). Meaning is thus simultaneously shared (through the influence of collective symbols) and private (due to the individuality of the interpretive frame formed by the sum of all previous experiences). The human body is also an integral part of the felt flow of lived time and space (Csordas, 1990; Langer, 1989; Strathern, 1996). In our everyday lives, things happen to our bodies and the stories we tell of our experiences represent an aesthetic synthesis of embodied sensations and imaginative processes (Mattingly, 1998; Murray, 1986; Sarbin, 1986; Steele, 1986). Conversely, particular narratives create specific bodies through their directive functions, leading to new forms of embodiment (Good, 1994; Mattingly, 1998). The body is deeply implicated in power networks. As the locus of control, it is subject to processes of normalization and discipline (Foucault, 1976/1990; Gutting, 2008; Mauss, 1979), but can also become a site of resistance (Littlewood, 2002; Obeyesekere, 1981). In this sense, human experience (sexual and otherwise) is ‘sociosomatic’, linking culture and body (Kleinman, 1999).

By attending to both meaning and power, I situate myself at what Ricoeur (1986/2007) referred to as ‘the crossroads of two hermeneutics’: suspicion and understanding. When used in isolation, both critical and interpretive approaches have distinct limitations. They risk failing to explore the power networks that influence embodied experience and representational processes or ignoring how individuals resist, manage, and transform dominant discursive practices and creatively construct their experiences within power networks. The critical-interpretive model outlined here allows for a detailed exploration of the individual in context, revealing how cultural systems, local aesthetic forms, and political networks combine with subjectivity, self, and corporeality form distinct modes of human experience. It avoids stereotyping experience by exploring the contributions made by an individual’s unique past, traits, capacities and circumstances. Simultaneously, it avoids rampant idiosyncrasy by exploring macro-social, political, and historical factors, which contribute to lived experience in common ways.

This comprehensive model draws attention to the psychological, emotional, social, cultural, political, spiritual, and bodily aspects of sexual-religious identity conflict. The research questions arising from this model reflect the multifaceted nature of experience – with its personal and socio-cultural aspects - and the need to attend to how sexual-religious identity conflict plays

out and changes over time. This includes attending to how participants position and make sense of this experience within their personal narratives, how they construct sexual-religious identity conflict and various processes of conflict resolution, how they experienced encounters with various remedial institutions, how this event shaped their experience of self and spiritual, social, political, moral, sexual, psycho-emotional, and ideological existence over time, and what this experience has meant for their lives and selves at the time of interview. Given the aforementioned need for additional analyses of ex-gay ministry services, special attention was given to personal experiences of such services.

Research Approach

My methodological approach followed from the theoretical model outlined above and the desire to investigate how the personal, social, political, and cultural contours of sexual-religious identity conflict play out over time. A person-centered ethnographic approach was used to generate a description and analysis of participant experiences and elucidate the interaction between the individual and the larger sociocultural context (Hollan, 2001, 2005; Levy & Hollan, 1998). Person-centered ethnography (Hollan, 2001; 2005; Levy & Hollan, 1998) represents an experience focused (as opposed to concept or theory driven) way of describing and analyzing human behaviour, subjective experience, and psychological processes. It places the interaction between the individual and his or her socio-cultural context at the center of the research endeavour and attends to “how the individual’s psychology and subjective experience both shapes, and is shaped by, social and cultural processes” (Hollan, 2001, p. 48). Central to this approach is an engagement with participants as both informants and respondents – as persons capable of both producing knowledge about the local cultural system and its social processes and serving as a discreet object of study given his or her particular experiences. As Hollan (1998) explained, this constant movement between the descriptive and phenomenological allows for a rich consideration of the individual in context and the ways in which they embrace, transform, or resist cultural and social discourses, practices, and moralities. While attending to force networks, person-centered ethnography calls on researchers to abandon unreflective reliance on experience-distant concepts in favour of personal stories that reveal how individuals themselves construct the “emotional saliency and motivation force of cultural beliefs and symbols” rather than making apriori assumptions about their significance (Hollan, 2001, p. 49). It allows the researcher to explore the influence of various cultural forms, power relationships, and normalizing or

disciplining forces without losing sight of individual interpretive processes or neglecting the creativity, diversity, and complexity of human experience.

Hollan (2001) noted that person-centered ethnographers can investigate experience by exploring the stories people tell about their experiences, attending to the behavioural aspects of everyday daily life, or focusing on the corporeal body as both the ground and origin of experience. The current investigation takes a narrative approach, exploring how experiences of sexual-religious identity conflict and resolution are constructed in personal narratives. In this approach, participants to engage in an aesthetic process, producing a narrative account that reveals how the interviewee understands the connection between past, present, and future. This approach is capable of providing insight into individual variations and elucidating how socio-cultural forces shape individual experience. Although it precludes participant observation and the rich insights that can emerge from this technique, a narrative approach nevertheless allows the researcher to explore aspects of participants' everyday practices, routines, and behaviours, corporeal experiences, processes of embodiment, and institutional encounters during the interview process.

Recruitment

For the purpose of the current study, individuals who had experienced sexual-religious conflict and ultimately embraced various ways of thinking, feeling, and being were recruited for research participation. Those with past ex-gay ministry experience were particularly sought after given my desire to explore the relationship between these institutional encounters and other healing resources or lived experiences. To better understand ex-gay ministry services, I also sought out key informants from the ex-gay ministry movement and the ex-gay survivor movement (composed of past ex-gay clients who felt harmed by these practices) to help contextualize the research and enhance my understanding of this spiritual-therapeutic phenomenon. San Francisco, California, was chosen as the study site based on sampling convenience. This area possessed a high concentration of both ex-gay ministry services and ex-gay survivor activists at the time of the research project. Recruitment activities took place from January 2011 through April 2011 and consisted of two distinct recruitment stages. In stage one, recruitment partnerships were created with three local ex-gay ministry organizations and two international ex-gay survivor organizations as a means of generating a diverse sample of participants who had adopted various conflict resolution strategies.

Organizations were provided with a brief introduction to the study and invited to distribute a recruitment letter to eligible individuals (Appendix A). Organizational leaders, therapists, staff members, and critics were also invited to participate in the study as key informants given their intimate knowledge of the current ex-gay ministry movement. This initial stage of recruitment garnered seven key informants - five of whom were currently involved with the ex-gay ministry movement and two who were involved with the ex-gay survivor movement. One key informant who had personally struggled with sexual-religious identity conflict and previously been a client of ex-gay ministry services also chose to be interviewed as a participant in the study. Aside from this dual informant-participant, the first round of recruitment did not garner any additional participants¹⁴. In the second stage of recruitment, an additional 15 participants were procured through Internet forums and mailing lists targeting individuals who had struggled with sexual-religious conflict or participated in ex-gay ministry programming. Group moderators were provided with a copy of the recruitment letter and invited to post a call for participants asking any interested parties to contact the researcher. Although the researcher had originally intended to recruit all participants from the San Francisco Bay area, these geographical limits were dropped when they were deemed to be a barrier to adequate recruitment.

Participants

The findings presented here are based on a sample of 16 Caucasian men recruited from across the United States ($n = 13$) and Canada ($n = 3$). Participants ranged from 29 to 65 years of age ($M = 46.6$ years, $SD = 11.2$). One had been born in the 1940s, five in the 1950s, four in the 1960s, four in the 1970s, and two in the 1980s. At the time of interview, seven of the men were married to females, two were in committed romantic relationships with males, one was engaged to marry a male, and six were single. Four participants had previously been married to female ($n=3$) or male ($n=1$) partners but were divorced at the time of interview and one was widowed after the death of his common-law husband. Heterosexual marriages ranged from 2-36 years in duration ($M = 14.9$ years, $SD = 12.9$). Six of the men were fathers and the number of children reported by participants ranged from one to five children ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.3$). When asked about their current religious identification, participants identified as atheist ($n = 1$) Seventh Day Adventist ($n = 3$), Anabaptist ($n = 1$), Evangelical ($n = 1$), Christian ($n = 2$), liberal Christian ($n = 2$), spiritual ($n = 1$), Quaker ($n = 1$), Anglican ($n = 1$), Baptist ($n = 1$), Southern Baptist ($n = 1$), and Conservative Protestant ($n = 1$). All participants had received some postsecondary education.

Five had attained bachelor's degrees and eight held master's degrees. Participants reported having engaged in between zero and four episodes of ex-gay ministry programming ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 1.1$). Those who had participated in such interventions had last done so from 2-26 years prior to the interview ($M = 10.3$, $SD = 7.0$) and between 21 and 56 years of age ($M = 34.7$, $SD = 12.5$). A full outline of participant demographics is presented in Table 1. At the time of interview, 11 of the men described having previously spoken publically about their experiences with same-sex attraction and 10 were actively involved in advocacy and leadership roles within Christian, ex-gay, or ex-gay survivor settings¹⁵.

Data Gathering

Contextualization. Hollan (1998) argued that interviews must be augmented with “traditional community studies that elucidate context, determine the issues to be covered in the interviews, and make the interviews intelligible” (p. 335). An investigation of the context of sexual-religious conflict and the ex-gay ministry movement in particular was undertaken before, during, and following interviews. This included reviewing historical information and contemporary literature, exploring resources for conflicted same-sex attracted Christian men in person and online (including LGB affirming, ex-gay, and ex-gay survivor organizations), and attending an ex-gay ministry conference in California. Institutional interviews with key informants from both ex-gay ministry and ex-gay survivor organizations were also undertaken during the contextualization process. These activities helped inform participant interview questions and contextualize the emerging findings.

Instruments. Demographic questionnaires (Appendix B) and contextualization interviews (Appendices C and D) were used to collect contextual data from key informants. These interviews focused heavily on the goals, activities, discourses, stakes, politics, understandings, practices, and meanings present in ex-gay ministry services and ex-gay survivor movements. Specifically, key informants were asked to reflect on how they, and the ex-gay or survivor organizations they represented or participated in, construct sexuality, homosexuality, morality, personal rights, personhood, ‘ex-gay’ and ‘ex-gay survivors’; understand the effectiveness of sexual reorientation therapies and other assistive services or institutions; and position themselves within various socio-political debates relevant to experiences of sexual-religious conflict.

Research participants were asked to complete demographic questionnaires (Appendix E), life history interviews (Appendices F and G), and semi-structured interviews (Appendices H and I). The life history interview explored how participants constructed sexual-religious conflict, their experiences with various modes of resolution, and their encounters with therapeutic or assistive institutions within the context of their ongoing lives. This included attention to life before conflict and to the goals, challenges, losses, and gains that defined their current lives. This interview provided insight into how individuals were creating meaning out of experiences of sexual-religious conflict by bringing local narrative resources (plot and figures of rhetoric) to bear on their unique lives and experiences. It also provided an opportunity to explore how participants construed the impact of various social, political, institutional, and cultural forces on their lives and revealed novel interests, stakes, meanings, and lines of investigation which fell outside of the (always partial and inadequate) theoretical model described above. In the mode of Flick (2009), a ‘generative narrative question’ was used to stimulate the life history narrative. Participants were asked to present the story of their life, with a focus on their sexual-religious struggle and ex-gay ministry experiences, from their earliest memories through the present and into their hopes for the future. Where necessary, the researcher engaged in ‘narrative probing’ (Flick, 2009), asking for elaboration on under-developed portions of the narrative and seeking clarification as needed.

Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to explore specific aspects of participants’ experiences with sexual-religious conflict and ex-gay ministries in greater detail, investigate particular attitudes, opinions, moral judgements, stakes, theories, and conceptualizations of life, sexuality, and spirituality more thoroughly. Semi-structured interview questions were largely theory driven – oriented to questions and concerns arising from both existing literature and the theoretical model outlined above (Flick, 2009). These included questions about the moral discourses, cultural meaning systems, and socio-political forces that impacted personal experiences of conflict, the institutional activities and ideologies encountered by participants throughout this experience, the processes of transformation that allowed participants to overcome this struggle, and the nature of everyday life after conflict. Within each broad category of interest, questions of varying specificity were used to prompt personal reflection in accordance with Levy and Hollan’s (1998) approach to person-centered interviewing. Various categories were first broached with a general query, allowing for the

widest possible range of answers. More specific questions followed where necessary to ensure all aspects of a particular experience or phenomenon were adequately covered. Semi-structured interview questions moved between the informant and respondent modes (Levy and Hollan, 1998), allowing participants to both comment on their own personal experiences and provide a general description or assessment of various events, experiences, institutions, or objects. The interview also included various episodic questions (Flick, 2009), in which participants were asked to describe particular events or routines detail to provide the researcher with a sense of what it means to participate in various activities or live in certain ways. Throughout the interview, participants were also frequently asked if they had anything else to share about a particular topic, theme, experience, or event that was not covered by the interview schedule. Together, these three instruments helped situate experiences of sexual-religious conflict ex-gay ministry experiences within a particular sociocultural context and individual life while also gathering a wealth of information on particular aspects of this experience.

Procedure. Prior to the first meeting, potential participants were provided with a description of the purpose and procedure of the study, given a copy of the consent form (Appendix J), and invited to ask questions about the project. Those who wished to participate signed and returned their consent forms before the first meeting, where both the consent form and study procedure were reviewed and individuals were reminded that they were free to withdraw at any time during the research process or to refuse to answer any questions before data collection commenced. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. Leaders were interviewed in person in their private offices or in meeting rooms secured at local public libraries. As local recruitment efforts stalled, the vast majority of client interviews (15) occurred over the phone due to travel constraints (as opposed to in person, as originally intended). Data were collected using a portable tape recorder and transcribed following each interview. At the end of the study, participants were provided with a debriefing form (Appendix K) and the opportunity to review their transcripts prior to release (Appendix L). This study was approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Appendix M) and adhered to all ethical guidelines as outlined by the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement of Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans and the University of Saskatchewan Policy for Research Involving Human Subjects. All participants were assigned pseudonyms and potentially identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Given the wealth of information accumulated, only participant data was analysed in detail for the purposes of the current work. Key informant data was used solely to inform the construction of research instruments and contextualize emerging findings.

Semi-structured interview data. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed according to a three-phase process of semantic, conceptual, and comparative analysis. Semantic analysis involved exploring the meanings constructed within each interview through a progressive thematic coding process (Flick, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). The researcher first thoroughly explored each case, reading through the transcripts and becoming familiar with the data. The data was then subject to ‘open coding’, wherein the researcher noted the various concerns, states, opinions, theories, felt experiences, and events described throughout the transcript. Throughout the coding process, disturbances in communication (hesitations, stammering, interruptions, incompleteness, or abrupt switches), paralinguistic phenomenon (voice, breath, resonance, pitch), and visual data (body movements, facial expressions, body posture) were considered alongside the written text as sources of additional meaning (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004; Levy & Hollan, 1998). Attention was also paid to what was not talked about during the interview. As Levy and Hollan (1998) explained, these omissions, gaps, or moments of brevity or vagueness are extremely analytically informative, pointing to aspects of the taboo or unsaid or revealing discrepancies in what researcher and participant deem important to the unfolding narrative. After initial open coding, the researcher combined similar codes to create higher-order categories. Lastly, focused coding produced analytical dimensions of even greater abstraction and allowed the research to develop a description of the central themes, concerns, opinions, and stakes that characterized each narrative. In the final step of semantic analysis, the researcher considered the relationship between different themes and systems of meaning within each case, attending to various contradictions, tensions, and congruencies within the data as outlined by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2004).

The researcher then engaged in a conceptual analysis of semi-structured interview data, exploring the relationship between the themes identified in each case and pertinent ideas drawn from the theoretical model and beyond. This mode of analysis was not limited to the concepts outlined prior to data collection, but proceeded in an open-ended, dialectical fashion that respected the dynamic engagement between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the

researcher. Often, the emerging data inspired new conceptual connections and additional theories and ideas were introduced to aid in the interpretive process. This mode of analysis allowed the researcher to generate new meaning by reflecting on the relationship between abstract, experience-distant concepts and individual stakes, concerns, priorities, experiences, opinions, and understandings. During the third phase of analysis, comparison between cases was introduced. Specific cases were brought into dialogue with one another to reveal commonalities and points of departure. This comparative analysis allowed the researcher to explore patterns in the data related to various personal and contextual factors and develop a portrait of “the social distribution of perspectives on a phenomenon or a process” (Flick, 2009, p. 318). This three-phase process (semantic, conceptual, and comparative analyses) generated a series of thorough case descriptions, provided information on how the data related to existing theories and concepts, and produced an outline of the similarities and differences between individual participants.

Life history interview data. Life history interviews were analyzed using a slightly more complex three-step process. In the first step, each life history narrative was independently subject to syntactic, semantic, and conceptual analysis. During syntactic analysis, the researcher created a structural outline of the narrative, chronologically delineating meaningful life events and subsequently segmenting the narrative into key experiential units by identifying key turning points and agents of change (Flick, 1999). From this, a general summary of the participant’s experiential history and life trajectory was created, with attention paid to important narrative elements of plot, flow, and subjunctivity¹⁶ throughout (Good, 1994; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). Semantic and conceptual analyses were then conducted on each narrative segment according to the procedures described above.

During the second phase of life history interview analysis, the researcher considered the relationship between the thematic and syntactic analyses, attending to the form and distribution of themes throughout various narrative segments and to transformations of meaning and experience at different points in the story. This process allowed the researcher to explore how particular stakes, concerns, opinions, emotions, understandings, and experiences might have changed over the course of the participants’ life. By bringing meaning and plot into dialogue with one another (Good, 1994), the researcher considered how the major themes of the narrative were temporally organized and related to transformative moments in the life history and how the narrative as a whole was related to collective cultural categories, institutional discourses, and

prototypical plots. This process provided rich insight into the “intersection of personal experience, historical circumstances, and cultural frame” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004, p. 136) within each life history narrative. In the third phase of life-history interview analysis, the researcher again compared across cases, attending to similarities and differences in the syntactic and semantic aspects of the narratives and revealing instances of plot-line divergence that illuminated individual differences in experiences of sexual-religious conflict (Buser et al., 2011).

Global analysis of the research data. During the global analysis of the research data, the researcher considered the relationship between the life history data and the semi-structured interview data and placed the findings as a whole in dialogue with existing concepts and theories and contemporary cultural and political debates. Looking across cases, she engaged in a process of contrast and comparison, considering the links between particular plots, meanings, and experiential trajectories and specific ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. This analysis revealed how participants’ lives, selves, and hopes for the future were related to key aspects of their lived experiences and sociocultural context. It provided insight into how particular encounters, events, interpretations, and sociocultural forces impacted the conflict resolution strategies embraced by certain individuals and shaped the contours of their social, sexual, spiritual, moral, and political existence. Lastly, the researcher attended to how the data as a whole challenged, confirmed, or complicated aspects of the existing research literature, related to various concepts and theories outlined in the theoretical model, oriented the researcher toward additional theories and ideas, illuminated particular aspects of Canadian and American culture, and contributed to contemporary ethical and policy debates within Western societies. The results of this contextualized, person-centered analysis are presented in the following chapters.

¹ As ‘homosexuality’ did not appear in the discursive landscape at this time, I have purposefully avoided the use of this term through the early historical summary.

² Although Jesus was silent on the topic, a number of other important Christian figures evidence a negative view of male-male love. In Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans*, he fiercely accused those who are not of Jewish or Christian faith with a whole catalogue of moral delinquencies, beginning with same-sex sexuality:

For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly. (Romans 1:26 – 7, as cited in Crompton, 2003, p. 114)

³ Freud considered homosexuality to be a case of arrested development that – although not inherently pathological – was often tied to negative psychological symptoms and might be overcome through psychoanalysis (Drescher, 2001; King & Bartlett, 1999). Freud can be easily portrayed as both violently homophobic or a closeted friend of gays through selective citation. Ultimately, he did not consider arrest at the anal stage of libidinal development inherently pathological, but neither did he find it particularly healthy.

⁴ The term ‘reparative therapy’ will be used to reference various forms of talk therapy used by secular psychologists to treat homoeroticism prior to the removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1973. ‘Sexual reorientation’ will be used throughout to denote any attempt – secular or spiritual – to shift a person’s sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. The term ‘conversion therapy’ will be used to refer to various forms of contemporary secular therapy intended to alter a person’s sexual orientation. Sexual reorientation services offered by conservative Christian organizations will be referred to as ‘ex-gay ministry programs’ throughout.

⁵ As Erzen (2006) explains, Evangelical leaders reacted to the ‘excesses’ of the time by seeking to recruit hippies, drug users, the homeless, and homosexuals using new-age tactics such as ocean baptisms, exuberant prayer meetings, Christian rock musicians, hippie liaisons, and beachside Jesus houses.

⁶ The term ‘ex-gay’ is used to refer to individuals who previously considered themselves to be ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian,’ or ‘bisexual’ or engaged in homoerotic acts but who no longer define themselves in this manner or engage in such behaviours. It is also used to describe the body of teachings, programs, and resources dedicated to helping individuals overcome homosexuality.

⁷ For example, there are those who argue that Leviticus 20:13 prohibits only incestual homosexuality, that the sin that brought divine wrath upon Sodom was not male-male sex but a lack of hospitality, and that the words *maloki* and *aresenokoitai* in Corinthians and Timothy may refer to pederasts, prostitutes, or masturbators and not ‘homosexuals’ as they are generally translated (Balmer & Winner, 2002).

⁸ Including prohibitions against eating rare steak, wearing mixed fabrics, and having marital intercourse during the menstrual period (Balmer & Winner, 2002)

⁹ These numbers do not add up to 100% because not all participants responded to every question.

¹⁰ Family harms are attributed to expressions of resentment following the treatment ‘failure’ of a loved one and the attribution of homosexual desire to parental harm or incompetence.

¹¹ Some participants reported that their therapist had caused them to fear that they would become child molesters.

¹² An insightful report from Wolkomir (2009) on the wives of ex-gay men is a notable exception.

¹³ That is, those that attend closely to how participants’ themselves generate meaning out of sexual-religious identity conflict and critically evaluate how these situated meanings resonate with established concepts and theories.

¹⁴ Ex-gay survivor leaders chose not to disseminate a general call for participants given the emotional and psychological vulnerability of certain members – particularly those who had recently left the ex-gay ministry movement. The failure of this recruitment strategy in ex-gay organizations remains largely inexplicable.

¹⁵ Such experiences of storytelling, advocacy and leadership are detailed in Chapter 13.

¹⁶ Subjunctivity refers to the process by which storytellers actively maintain multiple interpretations of particular events to contend with ambiguity and uncertainty (Good, 1994).

Sexual Storytelling: Prelude to the Data

“I’m sort of unique ... my experience is, is unlike the template.” – Theo

The stories described here are tales of disruption. They depict lives thrust into crisis by patterns of desire at odds with personal understandings of normalcy, goodness, and health. They also illustrate heroic efforts to move forward with life and pursue a sense of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness in the face of chaos, confusion, and suffering. For all of their nuances, the narratives of Christian men who have experienced same-sex attraction reflect a common processual form of disruption, limbo, and redress. This basic tripartite structure has been found to underlie a host of transformative life experiences, including rites of passage (van Gennep, 1909), rituals (Turner, 1974; 1982), social dramas (Turner, 1974; 1982), and personal life crises (Becker, 1999; Good, 1994; Mattingly, 1998; Turner, 1986). In all cases, an initiating event disrupts the usual or anticipated flow of experience, giving way to a period of chaos and ambiguity until a new stasis is reached through redressive processes.

Although human life is characterised by a dynamic blend of change and stability, being and becoming, some experiences prove particularly poignant, standing out as key formative moments in individual lives (Turner, 1986). For Christian men who experience homoerotic desires, sexual-moral crisis was one such moment. Each part of the thesis follows the men through a particular phase of this transformative experience, highlighting the movements of the men from disruption, through a period of limbo, toward healing and redress. In Part 1, I describe how the emergence of same-sex attraction was experienced as a disruptive event within individual lives already marked by suffering and anomie. Facing profound distress, the men first attempted to move forward by engaging in acts of supplication and denial, limited by their rigid and bifurcated understandings of sexuality, morality, and normalcy. When these early efforts failed to return a sense of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to their lives, participants descend back into chaos.

Confronted by a lack of acceptable options, they reached out to others and entered a liminal period of training and healing. In Part 2, I discuss how they were exposed to new ways of thinking, feeling, and being proffered by various redressive institutions and outline the dynamic processes of evaluation, experimentation, and reflection that followed. Eager to resolve the tension caused by their same-sex attractions, the men played with various new ways of being and

engaged in sustained reflexive activity, carefully evaluating previously taken-for-granted moralizing and normalizing ideologies.

In part 3, I describe how participants ultimately committed themselves to particular modes of redress. By enacting new ways of worldmaking, they succeeded in remaking their lives and selves and altering their experience of homoeroticism - without necessarily ridding themselves of homoerotic urges or overcoming all losses and challenges. In time, each participant reached a new stasis where order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness returned to everyday life. Yet, these individuals were not the same as they had been before sexual-moral crisis. Both the trajectory of their lives and their understandings of self and world were transformed by the experience of disruption. In the wake of this experience, they were new men with new life projects¹⁷. Together, the following chapters reveal processes of personal transformation that culminate in three unique figures: ex-gay men, gay survivors, and sexual ascetics. These groups represent three distinct post-crisis realities, each with its own sexual, moral, spiritual, ideological, and sexual contours and prototypical narrative form. To aid the reader in tracing the various movements, strategies, and encounters detailed in the following chapters, a graphic representation of each narrative is presented in Figure 1¹⁸.

¹⁷ The term 'life projects' is used throughout to denote the many goals and accomplishments that comprise the sought after future to which participants' lives and actions are oriented in the present (see, for example, Becker, 1999; Frank, 1995). The sum of these projects represent the selves and lives to which individuals aspire – the hoped-for endings of their life narratives.

¹⁸ This figure is intended to accompany the text. It is largely unintelligible without reference to the details of the text and is intended to summarize shared or divergent movements, strategies, and encounters across particular phases or stages of participants' narratives. The reader is urged to read each chapter in detail before turning to the figure to explore the similarities, variations, and individual patterns characteristic of each phase.

Part One

Chapter 1 ~ Life Before Homoeroticism: Order and Anomie

“I envy people who had really great childhoods, but... I was happy to grow up and get away from being a kid.” – Matt

In the early moments of their personal narratives, the men reflected on their lives before the emergence of homoeroticism. Here, they worked to construct the background against which these desires would emerge, contextualizing the impending crisis in a particular spiritual, social, and cultural context and embedding this event within the trajectory of a specific life course. Although comments on this period of life were typically short and circumscribed, the narratives evidenced a remarkable degree of similarity at this stage and consistently pointed to two distinct themes: Christianity and experiences of personal and interpersonal suffering.

Children of God

“I’ll start off that I was raised in a conservative Christian home.” – Ned

All of the men described Christianity as an important feature of their early developmental environment. They noted that they were raised in Christian homes and communities and had been active members of the church from a young age. Here, they positioned their stories within a distinctly Christian cultural space, anchoring their early narratives within a particular ideological and moral framework. For most, the significance of this faith tradition to the unfolding story was so obvious that narrators refrained from elaborating on the topic. Often, they simply stated that they had been raised in a particular Christian faith, occasionally adding in additional details about the denomination they ascribed to, the family members that had introduced them to the church, or how their family had come to be involved with a particular denomination. As Seth simply stated, “I grew up very, very conservative Protestant.” Two of the men, Brad and Rodney, highlighted a tradition of spiritual leadership within their immediate family, pointing to a legacy of Christian service as forming part of their family identity. Rodney noted: “mom and dad were both pastors... so I grew up in a Christian home. I grew up with the knowledge of God, with the knowledge of Jesus Christ.” These historical reflections reinforce the centrality of faith within the early home environment and highlight a family legacy of church involvement.

Prior to the emergence of homoeroticism, faith was largely described as an unreflective practice and family tradition. As Ned recalled, “I would attend church with my mom... and also my grandmother made sure I attended churches... so I was always into church.” Deep reflections on faith or one’s personal relationship with the divine were generally lacking in early stories¹⁹.

Rodney described the casual, uncritical appropriation of faith that was characteristic of his youth: “It was more of a cultural thing... I kind of recognized that he [Jesus] ... had a message and a redemptive, uh, story... but that’s kind of as far as I went... in my young mind.”

Ned similarly noted, “Looking back on that, I would say now that they’re very, um, conservative, fundamentalist, but at the time, I, uh, I just understood them to be Christian churches.” In narratives of youth, spirituality was largely laconic.

These faith discussions served to ground participants’ narratives within a particular ideological, social, and moral context. In all cases, Christianity pervaded the early developmental scene, shaping participants’ early understandings of self and world. As Brad explained: “I grew up in the church and there wasn’t really a time that I can remember where faith wasn’t central in my life. It was kind of like oxygen... you know, all around me.” Rodney similarly affirmed: “I grew up knowing that there was a God... that Jesus died on the cross to save me from my sins... I grew up knowing Christian culture and in Christian community and in Christian fellowship.”

Distress and Disorder

“There are not many memories that I associate with my childhood that were what I call ‘pleasant’ memories.” - Walter

Stories of life before the emergence of homoeroticism were also invariably marked by the presence of various forms of interpersonal distress. Participants spoke of family dysfunction, social rejection, and sexual victimization as dark features of their early developmental period.

Family dysfunction. Fourteen of the men (Charles, Jed, Jordan, Rodney, Adam, Theo, Todd, Walter, Seth, Brad, Mason, Matt, Josiah, and Ned) described troubling aspects of parental relationships or home environments. They detailed the ways in which their family life fell short of what they considered to be ideal parenting practices or a healthy family life, highlighting experiences of abandonment, abuse, neglect, and dysfunction. As Theo noted: “I came from a sort of – I guess you would say a dysfunctional family.” Here, the family is constructed as a space of distress, debility, and disorder.

Three of the men – Theo, Todd, and Walter – described experiences of parental abandonment, noting how one or both of their biological parents had left them at an early age. Theo recalled that his birth father abandoned their family when he was seven years old, leaving him confused about what had happened: “We children really had no idea what was going on, except that he was gone.” Todd described growing up with the knowledge that he had been put

up for adoption after being born to an unwed mother: “In the ‘50s, white women either did a shotgun wedding or they gave away the baby. You just didn’t keep babies in those days.” Walter similarly explained that his aunt and uncle had adopted him after the family learned his birth mother had been physically abusing him during his first year of life.

Three others – Matt, Mason, and Adam – recounted troubling experiences of emotional and physical abuse within the home environment. Matt recalled childhood maltreatment from the hand of his father, noting, “I was... abused as a kid by my father. Uh, there was a lot of neglect.” For Mason, parents and siblings were equally implicated in ongoing emotional abuse related to his perceived gender nonconformity: “My family was extremely cruel to me, made fun of me. It was really horrible.” Adam noted that his siblings mistreated him throughout his early years, subjecting him to various forms of “emotional abuse” he attributed to his father’s insistence that he was the smartest of the children. He explained, “My earliest memory was being hated.” Here, the family environment is portrayed as alienating, neglectful, and abusive.

Yet, not all reports of familial dysfunction referred to experiences of abandonment or outright emotional or physical abuse. Much more frequently (8 cases), familial problems were described in terms emotional and relational ineptitude. As Charles noted, “My parents didn’t understand emotional issues and the process of allowing children to feel... it wasn’t an environment where children could talk... about their feelings and issues – even though there was a lot of love.” Jed similarly noted, “We were not an emotionally engaging family.” Within such discussions, fathers were frequently portrayed as insensitive, emotionally unavailable, unkind, and lacking important parenting skills. Nine of the men (Charles, Jed, Jordan, Rodney, Adam, Seth, Brad, Josiah, and Ned) described their relationship with their biological, step, or adopted fathers as deficient or detached. As Jordan explained, “I did not connect with my Dad, maybe as a little boy should, and just never felt connected to him.” Similarly, Seth noted, “I barely remember, um, being with him a whole lot... I just remember him being icky and gross. So I remember – at a very young age – pushing away from him.” Only one of the men described their relationship with their mother in terms of dysfunction. Charles described his mother as exhibiting a pattern of maternal excess throughout his early life, recalling: “My mother was very emotionally needy. For much of my childhood I sort of felt consumed by her.” Here, his mother is constructed as the pathological reversal of cold and distant fathers - her emotional engagement and desire to bond construed as overwhelming and overpowering.

Thus, in the vast majority of cases, the family was constructed as a flawed developmental context. This is not to suggest that discussions of family life were entirely negative. For example, despite a lack of father-son bonding, Mitch noted that his home life was “fairly normal” and Jordan described growing up in an environment that was “more on the functional side of dysfunctional” despite a lack of paternal bonding. As Charles explained, family life cannot be easily characterized in entirely negative or positive terms: “There was kind of like this dichotomy between love and family dysfunction.” Moreover, despite early experiences of abandonment, Todd and Walter note that they were relatively content in their adoptive families. As Todd noted, “I had a stable home and was raised by parents who truly loved me.” Nonetheless, elements of family disorder, dysfunction, and distress remained powerful themes across the narratives prior to the emergence of homoeroticism.

Difference, rejection, and alienation. Feelings of abnormality and anomaly were the second most common source of early suffering and distress, appearing in nine narratives (Adam, Walter, Seth, Brad, Matt, Jed, Jordan, Josiah, and Rodney). From an early age, these men described feeling different from their male peers and siblings. This sense of difference preceded the emergence of homoerotic desire and was associated with particular impressions, traits, interests, and ways of relating that seemed to set them apart from other young boys.

Three of the men – Adam, Matt, and Rodney – constructed this early sense of difference as ambiguous and inchoate. They recalled a mysterious sense of being unlike their peers, but found they were unable to formulate the nature of their anomaly. Matt recalled: “looking into the mirror and looking at myself and thinking, you know, you’re different than the other boys in your class or the other kids on the playground – there’s something different about you.” Rodney echoed this theme of mysterious peculiarity, noting that “there was something festering inside” of him in his youth that he could not clearly identify. In six other cases (Jed, Brad, Josiah, Seth, Jordan, and Walter), feelings of deviance and aberration were clearly associated with a lack of conformity to local gender norms. These men noted that their early interests, activities, skills and traits placed them distinctly at odds with what was considered typical of young boys their age. Recalling a powerful sense of gender nonconformity in his youth, Walter explained: “By the time I was three years old, I was running around the house screaming, um, ‘I don’t wanna be a boy! I wanna be a girl!’” Jed also noted that he never felt at home in the world of young boys: “I was not interested in athletics... I was more comfortable with the things that girls in my

neighbourhood did... I remember [thinking]... ‘What’s wrong with me?’” Engaging in activities locally construed as ‘feminine’, preferring the company of females to males, and possessing qualities stereotypically associated with femaleness served to alienate participants from boyhood norms and feelings of normalcy. As Josiah recalled: “I remember feeling very gender atypical... I would love playing house with my next door neighbour who was a young girl.” Seth similarly described growing up with a profound sense of gender ambiguity, noting: “I never felt like a boy. I didn’t feel like a girl, but I didn’t feel like a boy. Like, if there were a third gender in the world, I would fall into that category.”

Such feelings of deviance and abnormality were associated with experiences of personal and social suffering to varying degrees. Walter reported: “I used to ... stand in front of the mirror and I would punch myself in the face and say, you know, ‘God, why was I born, um, a boy? ... I am supposed to be a girl?’” Jed similarly recalled moments of immense personal distress: “[I remember] crying and... saying... to God: ‘God, it seems like I have everything it takes to be a girl but nothing it takes to be a boy. Would you change me into a girl?’” Difference was also associated with social violence in the cases of three men – Walter, Brad, and Jed – who described being bullied and taunted by peers as a result of their gender non-conformity. Walter explained, “People [were] just out of control, rude and mean. I mean they talk about bullying today, *I* was bullied.” Brad similarly reported: “I was always the kid who didn’t fit in... I didn’t like sports... I always wanted to sit around and read... so I got called names like ‘fag’ and ‘gay’ and ‘wimp’ and sissy.”

Sexual victimization. Lastly, five of the men (Charles, Jed, Theo, Brad, and Paul) described experiences of sexual victimization in their youth that preceded the development of homoerotic desire. Descriptions of these difficult experiences varied from detailed accountings (Theo, Brad, Charles, Jed) to brief mentions of sexual victimization that did not invite further discussion (Paul). Both the perpetrators of this abuse²⁰ and the duration of sexual violence²¹ varied across participants. These experiences were constructed as highly distressing and damaging. As Charles simply stated, “Children don’t want or need sex... something very important is taken away from you and it affects the way that you see yourself and the world from there on.” This victimization wrought feelings of shame, guilt, confusion, anxiety, and worthlessness. As Theo noted, the complex emotional suffering resulting from this experience included confusing feelings of abandonment when his abuser moved on to another victim: “The

scout master had actually found a younger boy and had begun a relationship with him... probably more [damaging] than the molestation that went on was the, the feeling of rejection.”

None of these men described having received any psychological care or support in the aftermath of these painful life experiences. Two of the men –Brad and Theo – recalled having reached out for support to no avail²². Brad noted that when he later tried to tell a trusted adult about the abuse he had suffered, he was fearfully rebuffed: “I tried to tell one of my Sunday school teachers what had happened and she – when she realized I was talking about sex, she said, ‘That’s dirty, don’t talk about that.’” Theo similarly tried to report his abuse to his mother and brother only to find they did not believe him: “I think their reaction was that they thought I was trying to get some attention of some kind and so it was more of a ‘Don’t talk about this – don’t say anything about it’ kind of deal.” After years of keeping his victimization a secret, Charles explained how he began to initiate age-inappropriate sexual acts with other children. Deeply ashamed by his behaviour and failing to recognize the impetus to such acts, Charles described how his parents had similarly missed an important opportunity to support him in overcoming his abuse: “My father shamed me for doing that without understanding that I had been sexually abused – they didn’t know... I needed counselling and I got shamed.” For these young men, the failure to receive adequate support compounded the distress of sexual abuse.

Setting the Scene: The Function of Early Childhood Stories

“my childhood.... ahhh, yeah, it wasn’t a fun time... It wasn’t a very happy time.” - Matt

Early narratives were rooted in shared themes of faith and suffering. The men defined their childhood as saturated by Christian culture and grounded in a particular religious cosmology. They also contextualized their unfolding stories in a history of pain, distress, difference, rejection, and maleficence. Although the degree of suffering varied dramatically, each of the men reported particular troubling experiences in childhood that served to destabilize their early lives and characterize childhood as a fearful, traumatic, and unhappy time. In the vast majority of cases, experiences of distress preceded the emergence of same-sex attraction and grounded the impending sexual crisis in lives already touched by pain and suffering.

These early narratives – and the themes of faith, distress, and disorder they contain – serve two important functions. First, they contextualize the impending sexual-moral crisis in a particular ‘lifeworld’²³ marked by an uncomfortable opposition between order and anomie. Participants’ early lives are characterized by the contrast between the structure, stability, unity,

righteousness, harmony, meaning, and rigid morality of Christian cosmology and the disorder, fragmentation, deviance, confusion, and maleficence of their private lives. From this perspective, impending homoeroticism threatens to further alienate these men from the structure, normalcy, and righteousness of the Christian order and intensify their contact with chaos, anomie, abnormality, and evil. By setting the development of same-sex attraction against this particular mosaic of order and anomie, righteousness and evil, purity and pollution, participants highlight what is at stake in impending experiences of sexual-moral crisis and provide the reader with a better appreciation to the significance of events to come.

Second, these themes foreshadow particular decisions, behaviours, and understandings that unfold throughout the course of the narratives developed later in their lives. In subsequent chapters, I describe how the force of Christian belief shaped the trajectory of sexual crisis and help seeking. I also explain how early experiences of difference, parental incompetence, peer rejection, and sexual abuse later served to legitimize particular sexual discourses by providing a convincing link between personal experience and abstract ideology (at least for some men, for some time). Ultimately, these shared childhood experiences take on radically different significance as they become embedded in the distinct redressive narratives appropriated by sexual ascetics, gay survivors, and ex-gay men. For now, we must content ourselves with recognizing these shared themes and await the unfolding of their full significance in the context of a whole, coherent narrative structure. I turn now to a description of the crisis phase and highlight how the emergence of homoeroticism served to (further) unmake the lives of these young Christian men.

¹⁹ Two of the men, Brad and Josiah, represented exceptions to this pattern, noting how childhood experiences of sexual victimization, disability, and parental fear caused them to develop a complex and reflective faith at an early age. Brad recalled developing an ambivalent attitude toward God as a result of the sexual abuse he suffered at 8 years of age:

Something really bad had happened to me, and I hadn't been protected from it, therefore I must be bad... [so my] spiritual life became all about being – trying to be good enough to earn God's love... so I became like this uber-Christian child... [but] in fact I was very angry at God.

For Josiah, God manifested as a powerful force in his life at an early age, helping to calm the fear and anxiety he lived with as a result of his poor relationship with his stepfather and the struggles of cerebral palsy. He recalled his first encounter with the divine at an early age, noting:

I actually experienced, um, what I still consider a conversion when I was five years old... this sense of fear just sort of lifted off, because it was like someone came up behind me and gave me a hug even though there was no one there... a very, sort of, vivid experience of being loved.

Soon after this powerful experience, he became determined to become involved in church leadership, noting that he first felt "a call to ministry" at 6 years of age.

²⁰ In the case of Brad and Jed, the perpetrators of this abuse were older male peers. Charles described having been victimized by a female family member and Theo reported suffering sexual abuse at the hands of a male scout troop leader. Paul did not identify the perpetrator of the childhood sexual abuse he suffered.

²¹ The duration of sexual molestation ranged from a single incident (Brad) to a pattern of ongoing victimization lasting months or even years (Jed, Charles, and Theo). The duration of the abuse experienced by Paul was unclear

²² It is unclear whether the others ever reached out to anyone for help during childhood.

²³ The sum of all distinct lifeworlds - specific social and symbolic contexts - make up an individual's life. These include the worlds of school, religion, art, theater, work, sports, family, etc. (Good, 1994).

Chapter 2 ~ Sexual-Moral Crisis and the Unmaking of Self and Future

“The boys started taking an interest in the girls, but not me.” - Theo

Participants described the emergence of same-sex attraction as a destructive and undesirable event. The phenomenology of sexual-moral crisis took on three distinct forms: coterminous with the emergence of homoerotic desire, delayed by a lack of recognition, or delayed by moral ambiguity. Yet, in all cases, it signified a breach of the normal and good and wrought powerful feelings of grief, confusion, and anxiety. Participants invariably entered into a period of limbo where past, present, and future collapsed into narrative chaos and life and self were stripped of their previous meaning and order.

The Emergence of Crisis: Disruption and the Course of Recognition

“Oh no, not this! Please, not this!” – Matt

As Shweder et al. (2003) explained, “To suffer is to experience a disvalued and unwanted state of mind, body, or spirit” (p. 76). For all participants, sexual-moral crisis arose from the experience of sexual urges and behaviours that are personally interpreted as deviant, immoral, or threatening. Yet, within the data, three distinct crisis trajectories were evident. For some, the embodied experience of same-sex attraction was immediately associated with notions of sexual deviance, the stigmatized figure of ‘the homosexual’, and the threat of social stigma. Here, the onset of crisis largely coincides with the emergence of same-sex desire. For others, homoerotic urges and homosexual behaviours were not initially interpreted as indicative of difference, deviance or immorality, thereby delaying the onset of sexual-moral crisis. In such cases, suffering is postponed until a connection is made between ones own desires and acts and the stigmatized persona of ‘the gay man’. Still others recognized their attractions and behaviours as ‘homosexual’ in nature but remained uncertain about the moral implications of this development for a period of time, again delaying crisis. Below, I describe these three modes of crisis in detail.

Sexually awakened to despair: Crisis as coterminous with emerging homoeroticism.

In seven of the narratives (Adam, Theo, Seth, Matt, Paul, Charles, and Jordan), embodied experiences of same-sex attraction, which typically occurred in pre-teen and early teen years (ages 9-14)²⁴, were promptly associated with the stigmatized figure of ‘the homosexual’ and devalued by the individual. For these men, emerging homoerotic desires were experienced as abnormal, immoral, and unnatural from their earliest emergence. As Seth recalled: “When I would have wet dreams...[it was] men that I would dream about... I didn’t want to have those

dreams and I would wake up really disturbed.... It terrified me. I didn't want those feelings.” Matt similarly noted: “I started to crush on boys in school... and I wasn't having crushes on the girls... [I] felt like it was a personality flaw.”

Charles was unique amongst participants in having developing an attraction to both males and females. Yet, as with the others, his homoerotic desires caused him great distress: “I never, ever wanted to be gay... there was something inside of me that said, you know, ‘this isn't right, this isn't who you are.’” In these narratives, the emergence of same-sex attraction, the association of these desires with difference, deviance, and the stigmatized figure of ‘the homosexual’, and the negative evaluation of the sexual self coincide in relatively short order. Crisis is relatively swift and unambiguous.

The labelling of desire: Crisis as delayed by non-recognition. For another seven men (Ned, Josiah, Brad, Todd, Walter, Mitch, and Jed), the experience of sexual-moral crisis was delayed by a period of indifference, insignificance, or uncertainty. For crisis to occur, sexual acts and urges must be interpreted as deviant, disturbing, or threatening. In these seven cases, homoeroticism did not immediately provoke a sense of chaos, loss, and suffering because it remained disconnected from clear signs and images of sexual deviance. Josiah noted that, for many years, he failed to recognize his urges as sexual in nature. Recalling his early attraction to a particular male cartoon character, he explained: “I didn't know, until I was 12 or 13 years old that it was even possible to get crushes on your own gender.”

Four others (Mitch, Todd, Walter, and Jed) recognized their embodied impulses as sexual, but failed to connect their homosexual desires to local discourses and images of ‘homosexuality’. In such cases, homoeroticism remained divorced from sexual stigma and devoid of any negative connotations for a period of time. For example, Mitch recalled having unreflectively masturbated to male fantasies for many years before he realized such urges were indicative of ‘homosexuality.’ These men lived unreflectively with homoeroticism for various periods of time, unaware of any threat posed by their urges. As Ned explained: “I had same-sex attractions, but I didn't necessarily recognize that as ‘gay’”. Three of these men – Todd, Walter, and Jed – also described engaging in homosexual acts during this period of moral banality. Todd recalled engaging in homoerotic acts he assumed were normal and typical at the time: “I used to fool around in bed with my younger cousin... I loved holding him, being in bed without any clothes on, fooling around and different things.” Walter similarly described delighting in

homoerotic acts during adolescent camping trips: “[the other boys] were you know, teaching me about masturbation and all kinds of... sexual... things. So we couldn’t wait to go on weekends together so that we could go sexually exploring at night”. Such behaviours remained divorced from any stigmatized sexual forms or notions of deviance. As Todd noted, “The word ‘homosexuality’ – I didn’t even know what it was.” Walter similarly affirmed that adolescence was “a time where guys would go ahead and explore each other sexually, um, and think nothing of it”. Lacking any frame of reference or connection to the stigmatized persona of the ‘gay’ man, this youthful homoerotic behaviour was typical, ordinary, and unproblematic.

Brad and Ned recalled a slightly different experience. These men both recognized their urges as sexual in nature and sensed that their desires somehow marked them as different from their peers, but long remained uncertain about what exactly this meant for their selves and lives. Brad noted, “I didn’t even have words to describe what I was experiencing, but I knew something was different.” Here, a vague sense of anxiety precipitated the experience of crisis. Brad noted how receiving frequent taunts of ‘fag’, ‘gay’, and ‘sissy’ by his peers seemed to mark him as different and degrade him in a way he did not fully understand. Over time, Todd also developed similarly ambiguous and troubling feelings of difference related to his desires: “Words like ‘gay’ or ‘fag’ hadn’t even been invented yet, but I definitely felt like a queer duck with my sexual attraction to my own sex.”

After a phase of moral ambiguity or banality, all seven of these men ultimately connected their embodied desires to the stigmatized persona of the ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay’ man and interpreted their urges as deviant, unnatural, and sinful. For Mitch, Josiah, and Brad, the recognition of oneself as ‘homosexual’ was sudden and shocking. As Josiah explained: “All of a sudden ... it was like a snap sort of sensation in my head, and I sort of said to myself, ‘Oh my God, I have a crush on my classmate!’ ... [it was] a terrifying experience for me.” Brad describes a similar experience of shock and alarm: “[I] started looking up these words and found that fagot was slang for ‘homosexual’ ... [so] I looked up ‘homosexual’ ... and kind of had this ‘Aha!’ moment of, ‘oh *that’s* what I am... Crap!”

For Todd, Jed, Walter, and Ned, a sense of crisis emerged more gradually, preceded by a period of growing anxiety and concern wherein the hope of spontaneous heterosexual development grew increasingly faint. As Jed recalled: “I was ... trying to date... [but] never really connected with a girl... all this was kind of like inside of me –this *lack* of attraction

towards the opposite sex and this increasing attraction to the same gender.” Despite growing concern, Jed noted that he never thought of himself as ‘gay’ until he was asked by a classmate about his sexual orientation in his college years: “she says, ‘Um, Joe is gay and he likes you. He wants to know if you’re gay.’ ... I was just stopped dead in my tracks... I had to ask myself... ‘Am I?’” Through this experience, Jed finally realized that his patterns of desire were ‘homosexual’ in nature – an insight he described as profoundly unsettling: “[It] was a bit of a trauma to my psyche... as you can imagine.” Walter similarly described only gradually coming to realize that his sexual desires were fundamentally different from those of his peers. He recalled how his peers began to take an interest in girls and no longer wanted to engage in same-sex behaviour: “All of a sudden, a year or two into that, these guys are like, ‘Oh no, I don’t want to do that anymore. I have a girlfriend.’” For a while, he held out hope that he too would develop an interest in females: “I’m thinking, okay, you know, ‘I’m waiting. It’s going to happen to me. I’m going to have these natural desires that they seem to be having. It’s going to happen any day now.’” When these urges failed to emerge, Walter started to realize that his sexual nature was different from his peers: “I began to realize that I was pretty much fitting the description of what was described in the Bible as a ‘homosexual.’” Yet, like Jed, he noted that he did not acquire the terminology to make sense of his sexual difference until college: “[this guy] finally just flat out said to me, ‘Walter, you’re gay.’ And I said, ‘I’m what?’ And he says, ‘You’re gay.’ And I says, ‘What is that?’ ... I had no idea what that was and what it meant.” Todd similarly stated, “I thought it was just a phase that would pass, and that I was a late bloomer.” For Todd, the hope of heterosexual development persisted into adulthood, until an encounter with a female prostitute at age 23 convinced him of his lack of heterosexual desire: “that was the first time I’d had sex with a woman and the reality set in like a ton of bricks.”

In these narratives, the emergence of homoerotic desire did not immediately culminate in sexual-moral crisis because these embodied urges were not initially recognized as reflective of ‘homosexuality’. In such cases, crisis was delayed – sometimes for many years. Consequently, sexual-moral crisis generally occurred later in the lives of the men in this group. Five were well into their late teens or early twenties when they first experienced the shock and disruption of sexual-moral crisis. These stories highlight the ambiguous nature of sexual urges and acts and the role of social discourses and peer interactions in imparting meaning to such experiences.

Experiential clarification: Crisis as related to a shift in moral perspective. For the two remaining participants - Rodney and Mason - crisis was associated with morally clarifying experiences. These men had come to understand their sexual urges and behaviour as reflective of 'homosexuality', but – in contrast with their peers – this realization was not considered immediate cause for concern. Here, crisis is kept at bay not by processes of non-recognition, but by moral ambiguity. For a period of time, these men adopted a curious, experimental attitude toward their sexual urges, unconvinced that homosexuality was a morally problematic state. It was not until particular experiences convinced these men of the immoral nature of homosexuality that such urges and acts were construed as problematic. As Rodney increasingly experimented with homoeroticism in college and began immersing himself in the local gay community, he suddenly began to experience feelings of corruption and moral defilement: “there was something in what I called my ‘God void’ at that particular time... There was something that was just not right about it.” This growing sense of spiritual distance and moral panic negatively impacted how he evaluated his desires and wrought a sense of sexual-moral crisis where none had previously existed. For Mason, a negative sexual encounter with an older male at age 15 was described as the catalyst for crisis. He recalled: “my first [sexual] experience [was] with an adult... and it was a bad experience, and I decided I couldn't be one of them. I just couldn't be a... the term I knew then was ‘queer’.” For these men, unpleasant individual experiences rendered homoeroticism problematic in their lives and wrought a sense of crisis.

Three Roads to Crisis

“I remember feeling, ‘Oh my God’... I cannot believe this” – Josiah

The three distinct experiences of crisis evident in participants' narratives challenge standardized models of crisis onset (see, for example, O'Brien, 2004; Subhi & Geelan, 2012) and point to variability in how this experience unfolds in individual lives. Yet, despite different developmental trajectories, all of the narratives attest to the interdependence of three key interpretive factors in the development of sexual-moral crisis: 1) the presence of embodied homosexual desires, 2) the recognition of these urges as indicative of 'homosexuality' and reflective of the figure of the 'gay man', and 3) the negative evaluation of homoeroticism as an unnatural, immoral, or undesirable state. They highlight the amorphous nature of embodied sensations and the importance of cognitive frames, secular norms, and collective moral discourses in the experience of crisis. Homoerotic urges and acts have no inherent moral value;

they are rendered meaningful by acts of interpretation. Where homoeroticism is connected to a local system of meaning that devalues this mode of sexual desire and expression, crisis ensues. Here, meaning is largely developed through the process of identification-recognition, the mental act of “joining together images,” which allows one to identify an ambiguous entity by some identifying characteristic or trait – in this case, sexual and romantic attraction toward other males (Ricoeur, 2004/2005, p. 12).

Within every local world, particular social identities garner distinct moral statuses and are capable of enhancing or diminishing the status of the person. To connect oneself to a class of beings socially and culturally constructed as good, right, and respectable is to metaphorically elevate the self. To associate oneself with a spoiled identity is to diminish the self. In the context of participants’ lives, homosexuality was religiously, socially, and culturally cast as a spoiled identity. When the self becomes associated with such a stigmatized identity, a sense of panic, anxiety, fear, or grief ensues. Yet, although processes of identification-recognition (Ricoeur (2004/2005) have established a degree of association between the self and the stigmatized figure of ‘the homosexual’, the ‘truth-recognition’ of this association remains to be determined. In truth-recognition, the relationship between object and category is brought “under the sign of truth” and its veracity is accepted and affirmed by the individual (p. 6). In the early moments of crisis, recognition remains at the level of identification – the reliability of the mark remains uncertain and contested and the possibility of error or misrecognition remains. Over the course of the following chapters, we see how the men explore the status of their sexual urges and consider whether homosexuality is the truth of their being or a tragic perversion of their truth - whether it is fundamental to the self or capable of extrusion and remediation.

Recognition thus serves as the bridge between embodied experiences and stigmatizing discourses. The fusing of images requires that the individual possess a semantic network that includes ‘homosexuality’ as a distinct sexual identity that can be brought into dialogue with the self. As the narratives attest, recognition can be thwarted by a dearth of homosexual terminology, signs, discourses, and images or delayed by personal processes of uncertainty, hesitation, and doubt. Where such processes are absent or delayed, homoerotic desires remain banal, posing no threat to the self. While one might presume that a greater visibility of gay life and culture in both American and Canadian society over the past few decades would increase the likelihood that individuals would quickly connect their same-sex attractions and activities to discourses and

representations of homosexuality, this did not appear to be the case in these narratives. Some older participants, born in the 1950s, described recognizing their attractions as ‘homosexual’ almost immediately while some of the youngest participants, born in the mid 1970s, pointed to delayed processes of recognition and identification. Yet, this process of symbolic fusing and the metaphoric extension of significance from category to self was not the only pathway to crisis. For Josiah and Mason, it was not abstract discourse but personal experiences of distress that served to mark homoeroticism as an undesirable state. Here, crisis is spurred not so much through the application of negative signs to the self through symbolic extension, but by crediting homosexuality with personal experiences of pain, suffering, and distress (Csordas, 2002). Sexual-moral crisis is thus occasioned by interpretive and evaluative acts that involve a complex intermingling of embodied sensations, local meaning systems, processes of recognition, and individual experiences. Wherever homosexuality is adjudged deviant, wrong, or undesirable, crisis emerges.

Cause for Concern: Exploring What is at Stake in Homosexuality

“I thought I was going to hell... [I] had all kinds of conflicts about that, emotionally” – Brad

Although the development of sexual-moral crisis followed three distinct trajectories (coterminous with the emergence of homoeroticism or delayed by non-recognition or moral ambiguity), it was invariably associated with the evaluation of homoeroticism as a devalued or problematic state. This negative interpretation was itself the product of Christian sexual morality, secular heterosexism, the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the seemingly incompatible nature of homoeroticism and valued life projects. In all cases, Christian sexual ethics played an important role in the negative evaluation of homoeroticism. Participants had invariably been raised in conservative Christian environments, where attitudes toward homosexuality were overwhelmingly unfavourable and same-sex attraction was linked to notions of ungodliness, sin, temptation, and evil. For example, Theo described having been taught from a young age that same-sex eroticism was “not God’s intent.” Christian homonegativity was not limited to Sunday service, but permeated throughout much of participants wider social environment, becoming reinforced by parents and peers. As Seth noted, “the way I grew up was – it was the whole thing where you put all the gays on an island and blow it up... that was the way that my family and surrounding, you know, friends at church felt.” Brad similarly recalled such messages being reinforced in the home: “one time my mom had overheard my brother talking about

homosexuality, I remember her screaming ... saying how disgusting that was – to never talk about that again.”

Set against a backdrop of pervasive Christian sexual morality, homoeroticism prompted fear and anxiety over the moral and spiritual status of the self. These desires symbolically linked the self to images of evil, wickedness, and abomination, compromising participants’ sense of goodness, purity, and righteousness. As Brad recalled, “I just felt like no matter what I did I could never be worthy of God.” Homoeroticism also served to alienate these men from the divine. Adam reported, “I grew up believing how evil it was. And, um, so I – I was kind of, felt distant from God during that time.” Josiah similarly described how his desires seemed to distance him from God and threaten his moral development: “Throughout my youth, there is this very vivid sense of ... Jesus’ presence around my life, and really wanting to be a pastor... to serve God... [But also] this dark and evil, demonic sort of attraction to men underneath.”

Religious concerns also prompted anxiety over the next life as the association of the self with themes of evil, wickedness, and sin left the future of one’s soul uncertain. In crisis, the threat of hell loomed large, threatening participants’ eternal well being. Brad recalled how his church described those who engaged in same-sex acts as destined to “burn in hell for eternity” and Paul expressed that he was “afraid of going to hell.” Todd similarly worried about his fate in the next life: “No way was I ever going to get to heaven. God had a black ticket book up there with a detailed record of all my bad deeds, and when He came back I was going to fry.” Here, the men highlight the cosmological significance of homosexuality and the threat of eternal damnation. Within the conservative Christian worldview, homosexual behaviours are a transgression of the cosmological order and the will of God that is personally horrifying and deeply anxiety provoking (see Douglas, 1966; Kristeva, 1980/1982). As Subhi and Geelan (2012) described, such Christian homonegativity is grounded in the dual understanding of homosexuality as both unnatural and scripturally condemned.

Yet, despite the important role played by Christian homonegativity, it was clear that faith was not solely responsible for the experience of sexual crisis. Half of the men also spoke about the role of heterosexism, secular homonegativity, and cultural norms in their negative interpretation of their desires. As Paul noted, crisis cannot be attributed solely to the appropriation of the conservative Christianity worldview: “I couldn’t say it was simply Jesus and my faith... that’s what I was telling myself: ‘Oh! It’s because I’m a Christian!’ I was avoiding

reality... that there were so many other factors that played into it.” As Adam explained, negative attitudes toward same-sex attraction were also prevalent in secular society: “‘Gay’ in that day was a veritable insult; you didn’t want to actually associate with those kinds of people.”

Participants also spoke to the force of heteronormativity, explaining how images of ‘the good life’ in both Canada and the United States revolved around heterosexual relationships and family life. As Paul recalled, “Over and over I was told that, and shown, and it was demonstrated that being heterosexual, being in a heterosexual relationship, being identified as a heterosexual was the idealized norm and everything else was ‘less than.’”

Throughout their development, participants had internalized the idea that heterosexuality was normal and natural and homosexuality was deviant and unnatural. As Charles explained, “I never saw myself being married to another man – to me, it was foreign, it was unnatural.” As a result, homosexual urges were constructed as a defect – a sign of personal brokenness. As Matt explained, “When I realized that I had an attraction towards the same sex, I viewed it as just another personal flaw.” Adam similarly recalled, “I thought there was something wrong with me.” Social norms and the desire to fulfill local ideals played a profound role in the experience of crisis and the feelings of anxiety, shame, and self-loathing associated with homosexuality.

Participants also noted a distinct lack of role models in their youth that might have helped mediate the heteronormativity and homonegativity of their early developmental environment. As Matt recalled, “this was before *Will and Grace* and before, like, any sort of visibility [of sexual diversity]... ‘the gays’ were seen as some sort of threat.” Paul similarly noted that the world he grew up in “wasn’t gay-affirming at all”: “I don’t remember any positive gay role models growing up – in the media, in the community – nowhere.” Jordan echoed this sentiment, explaining that sexual diversity “wasn’t at the forefront like it is in society today.” In their youth, local homosexual discourse was limited to themes of taboo, prohibition, and the unthinkable. As Walter explained, “There wasn’t anything that had begun to, uh, lean towards discussing or exposing anyone with those types of desires, like in the media or on television in sitcoms or anything.” At the moment of crisis, most participants not only lacked exposure to discourses that constructed homosexuality as healthy or normal, but were also devoid of any connection to gay communities and thus afflicted with a profound sense of isolation. Walter recalled wondering if he was “the only person on earth with that particular problem” and Seth similarly described feeling like he was “the only guy who ever dealt with it [same-sex attraction].” Consequently,

homoeroticism proved to be a deeply alienating experience that seemed to preclude all possibility of normalcy, goodness, and belonging.

Paul described how the North American AIDS crisis also contributed to his internalized homonegativity and exacerbated his sense of panic during this period. He recalled: “[There were] lots of negative messages about being gay that I got from school, from society, from church... when I was a teen also was when the AIDS crisis became a big deal.” Throughout his adolescence, powerful images of disease, death, and dying – combined with the moral panic and theological condemnation of homoeroticism that accompanied the AIDS crisis (see Mondimore, 1996; Watney, 1999) – intensified his sense that homoeroticism was at odds with health, happiness, and holiness²⁵.

Lastly, same-sex attraction not only compromised participants’ sense of normalcy and goodness in the present, but also threatened to thwart their individual goals and valued personal projects. For these men, nothing less than the pursuit of happiness (closely tied to images of heterosexual marriage and family life) was at stake in the experience of sexual-moral crisis. As Charles explained, “I wanted to be married. I wanted to have a family. I wanted to have children.” Jordan echoed this sentiment, noting, “It’s... part of the American dream. You find someone... you get married, you have a family, and you procreate.” As Brad explains, homoeroticism seemed to eschew all prospects of an idealized life: “marriage and family... in my culture, that was everything... And, in my mind, marriage and raising children as a gay person wasn’t possible before.” Those interested in pursuing church leadership – Josiah and Brad - further noted that their same-sex desires not only threatened their familial aspirations, but also their career goals. As Brad explained, “I was like, ‘There is no way I can be a full-time minister... people like me don’t become pastors. People like me get burned at the stake!’”

Together, religious ideologies, secular norms, health discourses, and the threat to personal projects combined to cast homosexuality as an undesirable state. Interestingly, the same multiplicity of forces was evident in the narratives of participants born in the 1970s and 1950s. This suggests that understandings of sexual normalcy and morality and the desire to align oneself with local ideals represent fundamental, enduring problems confronted by Canadian and American men at the end of the 20th century. As Paul explained, these factors “all impacted each other, wove together – kind of became the perfect storm.” This multiplicity attests to the influence of both positive and negative forces of social control in the experience of crisis.

Christian prohibition and secular stigmatization served to deter individuals from embracing homoeroticism through methods of denial, prohibition, exclusion, and the threat of social punishment – what Foucault (1976/1990) referred to as negative or anti-energetic forms of power. However, the men also highlighted the role of positive forms of power – those that work by enticing individuals into certain ways of being through norms, ideals, and the inducement of pleasures (Foucault, 1976/1990). Contrary to what many might assume, Christian ethical codes and other forms of repressive social control were not solely responsible for the negative evaluation of homoeroticism. The desire to be normal, good, and righteous and to ‘live up’ to internalized heteronormative ideals and masculine norms contributed as much to the experience of crisis as the anti-energetic forces of repression. As Goffman (1963, p. 128) observed: “In an important sense there is only one unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, Northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective.” For this reason, I have opted to use the term ‘sexual-moral crisis’ as opposed to the more common ‘sexual-religious identity conflict’ throughout. It is not only righteousness that is at stake, but also one’s health, happiness, normalcy, masculinity, and future aspirations. Although several researchers have previously noted the contribution of various moral factors to the experience of crisis (see, for example, Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Fjelstrom, 2013; Sumerau, 2012), there is a marked tendency for this phenomenon to be reduced to its religious facets. By framing this experience as a moral (as opposed to strictly religious) event, I explicitly acknowledge how various formulations of ‘right living’ inform crisis and mark same-sex attraction as a threatening life event.

It is equally important to note that experiences of crisis were intimately tied to the sense of being at odds with one’s *own* moral proclivities and the tendency (postulated by labelling theorists) for individuals to view themselves as they know or imagine others do. Although it is common for researcher to attribute sexual-moral crisis to external forces of stigma and oppression, as though personal suffering was inflicted *on* same-sex attracted Christians by knowing others, participants in the current study consistently pointed to internalized homonegativity as central to the experience of crisis. Where past researchers have argued that crisis results from “the stigma imposed... by the Church” (Yip, 1999, p. 47) or the manner in which “Christian ideologies about sexuality are imposed upon society” (Walton, 2006, p.14), the

current narratives affirm that sexual-moral crisis is grounded in an experience of self-dissatisfaction. The suffering experienced by participants is not solely attributable to ‘imposed’ values or the fear of social rejection, interpersonal violence, or public condemnation. It also reflects a process of self-stigmatization and self-denigration wherein the undesirability of homosexuality is not simply something others believe, but a fact held to be true by participants themselves. In fact, had these attitudes been construed as ‘other’ to the self, the experience of crisis might not have been so grave, its resolution so complex. Later, we see how participants succeeded in transforming their understanding of self and experience of homoeroticism by resisting stigmatizing labels and discourses and separating themselves from those who construed them as sinful or inferior beings. Below, I describe the psychological and emotional experience of disruption and the period of limbo that followed this existential rupture.

The Collapse of Past, Present, and Future: Life in Limbo

“The depression sank deeper. I began even to have thoughts in my head – ‘Why don’t you just take your life?’ ‘Why don’t you just end your life?’” – Jed

Sexual-moral crisis was described as an experience of disjuncture. As the men came to understand their sexuality as indicative of difference, evil, abomination, and defect, their sense of self and future collapsed. As Becker (1999) explained, this sense of collapse is a characteristic feature of disruptive life events: “When disruption occurs, the temporary or permanent destruction of people’s sense of ‘fit’ with society calls into question their personhood, their sense of identity, and their sense of normalcy” (p. 30). Here, morality and righteousness were also at stake. Where participants had previously considered themselves normal, good, healthy, and holy, they suddenly saw themselves as deviant, unnatural, and transgressive beings, at odds with local norms and the Christian moral order. This emerging sense of otherness, sinfulness, and brokenness was profoundly distressing to participants, who described being beset by feelings of fear, shame, self-loathing, anxiety, and horror. As Brad recalled: “My church... talked about how they [‘sodomites’] were going to burn in hell for eternity... it was pretty traumatic realizing that these people that I knew my family and my church hated so much, was actually me.” Josiah similarly noted, “It was not a liberating sort of thing; it was a twist in my gut sort of thing.” For these men, homosexual urges and behaviours - personally deemed abnormal and immoral - served to alienate the individual from typical developmental trajectories, norms, and moral standards and unmake their understanding of self.

In addition to feeling at odds with their own understandings of goodness, normalcy, and righteousness, participants also described a profound sense of inner fracture associated with crisis. The body and its sexual urges were constructed as an aversive agent, undermining participants' sense of being an "undivided total self" (Good, 1994, p. 124). These desires and acts were at odds with participants' own spiritual and moral predilections, and this disjoint wrought an uncomfortable and disorienting sense of personal disintegration. As Todd noted, "I just couldn't reconcile it at all." Here, homoeroticism was construed as a threat from within - an aspect of the self that endangers other, highly valued facets of personal identity and wellbeing.

Yet, it was not just participants' sense of normalcy, goodness, righteousness, and integrity that was unmade by sexual-moral crisis, but the future as well. As Becker (1999) argued, unforeseen and life-altering events are often upsetting to individuals because they represent a break in expected life continuity and the "loss of the future" (p. 4). Homoeroticism was at odds with participants' assumption that they would live out their days as heterosexual family men and servants of God and occasioned a painful collapse of the anticipated future. Without a sense of order and hope to guide them forward, participants fell into despair and confusion as they mourned the loss of what was and could have been. As Jed noted, "[It was a] pretty traumatic time - I was no doubt slipping into depression... life... seemed very hopeless." Todd similarly noted that sexual-moral crisis drove him "into a hopeless state of mind."

Struck by the loss of self and future, participants became disoriented within their own lives. Life lost much of its meaning and the men entered into a phase of limbo or 'liminality' (Turner, 1982; van Gennep, 1909), characterized by disorder, uncertainty, ambiguity, emptiness, hopelessness, and powerlessness. As Turner (1982) noted, this liminal period often represents "the acme of insecurity, the breakthrough of chaos into cosmos, disorder into order" (p. 246). In this vacuous space, the men experienced feelings of intense anxiety and despair. Ned described himself as a "nervous wreck" throughout this period and Jed affirmed that it was a "pretty traumatic time." Crisis came to dominate lived reality as individuals wrestled with their new sense of difference and fragmentation and suffered the loss of their expected life course. Confusion was also endemic to limbo. The men found themselves consumed by a meaningless present, where neither past nor future were capable of imparting significance to their lives. As they found themselves want for an explanation of their suffering, the question of 'why me' emerged from the pit of despair. As Todd explained, "I didn't know why I felt this way. I

certainly didn't choose it." Walter similarly noted, "I didn't choose it and so I was pretty, um, upset about why this would be happening to me when, when I didn't – I wasn't planning on this, you know?" As Shweder et al. (2003) noted, such questions are common of crisis: "Human beings... want to go to school when they are miserable. They want answers: What caused this to happen? Why did this happen? Am I responsible?" (p. 74).

Lacking an explanation for their suffering not only left participants with a nagging sense of the unknown, but also made it difficult to determine how best to move forward. In limbo, the future hung in the balance. As Turner (1982) wrote, this is invariably a transitional phase – a time when "the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun" (p. 44). It was evident to participants that they could no longer think of themselves as typical, heterosexual Christian men. Yet, their new social, spiritual, and sexual existence remained uncertain. Unable to imagine a satisfying way forward as same-sex attracted Christian men, they described feeling caught in a seemingly hopeless situation and beset by feelings of anger and despair. Recalling the sense of agitation and hopelessness he felt throughout this time period, Walter noted: "It was a very frustrating time... There doesn't seem to be any cure and you don't know what to do!" Josiah recalled similar feelings of hopelessness and frustration during this time: "I remember feeling... 'what the hell am I gonna do?'"

Confronted by the seeming incommensurability between homoeroticism and their vision of 'the good life' (that is, a typical, normal, healthy Christian life marked by heterosexual marriage and fatherhood) and lacking a clear sense of why they were suffering or how they would move forward, participants found themselves paralyzed by chaos and distress. They described feeling "trapped in the present", without clear recourse to satisfying life options (Becker, 1999, p.120). As Brad explained: "My homosexuality... wouldn't go away... [But] I couldn't disobey my faith... So I had these two things that were opposite and neither of them would go away." Rodney similarly described being at a loss for acceptable ways forward during this period: "I just knew while I really desired this particular act, this particular life, um, that it just wasn't right." This sense of being caught between irreconcilable aspects of the self and devoid of acceptable ways of moving forward was extremely distressing to participants. As Walter noted, "There just really wasn't any help. It was a very *dark* period of my life."

Fearing divine condemnation and social alienation and beset by immense feelings of shame and evil, participants invariably refrained from sexual activity throughout the limbo

phase. As Ned explained, “I was interested in guys... but I never acted on that.” Theo similarly noted that he “had no sexual relationships” during this period and Adam recalled that although he was “curious” about his same-sex desires, he too refrained from all erotic acts. Participants also kept their desires largely secret throughout this phase. They described how the known or assumed homonegativity of friends, family members, and church acquaintances intensified their anxiety through the threat of social loss or rejection. Participants felt compelled to keep their same-sex attractions a secret to protect valued social roles and relationships, hiding their sexual deviance and veiling their taboo desires. Charles explained, “I couldn’t tell [anyone]... because of the shame that comes with having SSA [same-sex attraction].” Matt echoed this sentiment, noting: “I tried to hide it as much as possible, because, to be gay, to be a fag was really the worst thing that someone could be... it was just almost unthinkable.

As participants worked to keep their transgressions secret throughout the limbo period and avoid social rejection, marginalization, or violence, they often worried about the prospect of being found out. As Todd recalled: “I felt hopelessly trapped and fearful to tell anyone my ‘problem.’ I lived in constant state of self-shame and paranoid fear of being found out.” Brad similarly explained, “All my life Christians had been telling me that they love me, but I always thought if they *really* knew who I was they wouldn’t say that.” Some participants described how this concealment left them feeling like ‘imposters’ – deviants who passed as normal while betraying the trust of loved ones. In such cases, sexual opacity exacerbated participants’ sense of moral flaw and intensified personal suffering.

Participants persisted in this state of despair, fear, paralysis, and secrecy for various periods of time. For four of the men (Brad, Charles, Mitch, and Walter), limbo lasted only a short time (days or weeks) before they grew determined to move past this period of suffering. Four others (Jed, Jordan, Josiah, and Rodney) spent several months in this trying state, unable to imagine how to proceed. The remaining eight men (Adam, Mason, Matt, Ned, Paul, Todd, Theo, and Seth) spent between 2 and 10 years in this state, paralysed by distress and confusion and unable to formulate a viable way forward. As Mason recalled: “I slammed the door shut and I wouldn’t do anything. I knew I was attracted but I didn’t know what that meant and I couldn’t be one of them so I just kept dealing with that.” Jed similarly noted, “[I knew] this was not meant for me [life as a gay man]... I was really seeing that but I didn’t know what else to do or be.”

Sexual-moral crisis was thus characterized by a profound intensification of the anomie and disorder that was a part of participants' earlier lives. In crisis, participants became other to God, society, and themselves and descended into a period of profound suffering, confusion, and immobility. As the anxiety and distress of limbo wore on, all of the men eventually realized that they could not persist in this state indefinitely. Rodney remembered thinking, "something has to happen, because I can't - I can't stay in this state of limbo". In time, participants grew determined to act upon their situation, initiating various remedial techniques to escape limbo and restore order and meaning to their lives. In the next chapter, I describe how the men tried to resolve their crises and reconfigure their lives by embracing divine supplication, experimenting with homosexuality, or pursuing heterosexuality.

²⁴ Here, Seth represents an exception, having been in high school when his homoerotic desires first emerged.

²⁵ In the following chapter, I describe how the North American AIDS crisis also played an important role in the lives of other participants who were significantly older than Paul when this illness came onto the scene.

Chapter 3 ~ Moving Forward: Early Redressive Efforts in the Wake of Crisis

“God hated me and I hated myself” – Todd

Eager to quell their suffering and escape the stagnancy, anxiety, and hopelessness of limbo, participants became highly motivated to find an acceptable means of resolving sexual-moral crisis and moving forward with their lives. In the early post-crisis period, they adopted various social positions and sexual personas in an attempt to mitigate disruption and restore a sense of hope, order, and meaning to their lives. In the words of Becker (1999), they initiated the “slow and painful process of re-establishing a sense of future and a sense of order” (p. 120). The redressive techniques described in this chapter represent participants’ early understandings of the options available to same-sex attracted Christian men and their desire to resolve crisis without revealing their desires or seeking the counsel of others. Some turned to God in search of a miraculous resolution to sexual-moral crisis while others chose to pursue heterosexual relationships. Still others chose to explore their homoerotic urges, eschewing their moral and spiritual apprehensions in search of personal satisfaction. Four of the men (Charles, Josiah, Brad, and Theo) described having experimented with more than one potential means of mitigating disruption in the early post-crisis period, desperate to mediate disruption. Yet, not all of the men partook of these early experiments with supplication, heterosexuality, or homosexuality. Convinced that homosexuality, heterosexuality, or supplication would not result in a satisfactory resolution to sexual-moral crisis, four participants (Mitch, Ned, Paul, and Jed) opted to pursue the consultative remedial techniques described in Part 2 of the thesis. Consequently, their voices are absent throughout this chapter²⁶.

The search for redress was a desperate and dynamic process. In what follows, I outline the three techniques adopted by participants in their early attempts to overcome sexual-moral crisis. I describe what drew the men to particular redressive practices and attend to the movements that occurred between these techniques. I also explain how these early techniques invariably failed to provide a lasting, satisfactory resolution to crisis, leaving participants with a renewed sense of hopelessness, chaos, meaninglessness, and disintegration. I close by reflecting on why these early techniques failed to adequately resolve crisis and alleviate personal suffering and outline the need for a ‘3rd way’ beyond the heterosexual / homosexual divide.

Deliver us from Evil: Strategies of Supplication and the Search for Divine Intervention

“I’ll do whatever it takes – just please, please, please make this go away!” – Brad

Facing profound suffering and chaos, four of the men (Brad, Charles, Jordan, and Josiah) turned to God and spiritual healers in search of a miraculous resolution to their sexual-moral crisis. This strategy preceded other early redressive techniques and generally lasted between 1 and 4 years. Here, Charles proved an exception. For roughly a decade, he engaged in both homosexual and heterosexual acts while simultaneously hoping for a miraculous resolution of his homoerotic desires. Unable to reconcile their vision of the good life with same-sex attraction, these individuals called on the power of the divine to rid them of their homoerotic urges. As Brad recalled: “I [started] ... bargaining and pleading with God and saying, ‘Please God. I’ll do anything. I’ll become a missionary to Africa.’ You know, ‘I’ll do whatever it takes – just please, please, please make this go away!’” Jordan similarly noted: “I didn’t know what to do... So, I prayed and prayed and prayed and read the Bible.” In addition to such personal pleas, Josiah sought the help of other Christians to harness God’s healing power and deliver him from same-sex attraction. He recalled inviting others to pray for him, keeping the nature of his struggle hidden in vague terminology: “I had people start to pray for me for, for, what some could have called ‘inner healing,’ or even ‘deliverance from demons.’”

Despite participants’ best efforts, strategies of supplication ultimately proved unfruitful. The men found their prayers unanswered and their homosexual desires unabated. As Charles recalled, “I asked God to take it away... [but] that never worked.” Brad similarly noted, “I had prayed every prayer I could think of and nothing had changed.” Faced with persistent homosexual attractions, these men began to realize that supernatural intervention and spontaneous resolution were not forthcoming. They began to look for other ways of resolving sexual-moral crisis and restoring peace, order, and satisfaction to their lives. Jordan chose to consult religious leaders (see Part 2) while Josiah and Brad decided to explore homosexual acts and relationships and Charles continued to engage in sexual relationships with both males and females. Their early experiences with heterosexuality and homosexuality are outlined below.

From Carnal Satisfaction to Community Integration: Christian Men Experiment with Homosexuality

“I started... getting more acclimated to the gay lifestyle... to a gay identity.” – Rodney

Eight participants (Brad, Charles, Walter, Josiah, Rodney, Matt, Todd and Theo) experimented with sexual and romantic relationships with other males as a means of moving past limbo and restoring meaning to their lives. In the cases of Brad, Josiah, Matt and Theo, this foray into homosexuality lasted only a brief period of time (ranging from a few months to 2 years). Alternatively, Charles, Walter, Rodney, and Todd remained engaged in such romantic and sexual behaviour for a number of years (between 5 and 40). These early homosexual experiences were both clandestine and overt.

Those who embraced the clandestine form (Charles, Josiah, Brad, Theo, and Todd) did not identify publically or personally as ‘gay’, kept their homoerotic acts and relationships largely secret, and avoided engaging with the local gay community. Yet, despite shared clandestine features, important nuances existed in the nature of these covert homosexual experiences. Charles, Todd, and Theo described their engagement with homoeroticism in purely sexual terms, devoid of deep emotional or intimate connection. For roughly a decade, Charles sought secret sexual release with other males while publically maintaining an image of heterosexuality and avoiding all intimate emotional contact with male partners. He recalls: “I didn’t live as an openly gay man. I hid it and, I didn’t really suppress it – I mean I had sex with other boys, guys, men. But I also had girlfriends.” Theo described his sexual relationship with his male roommate in similar unemotional terms, noting that the behaviour was focused on satisfying the need for sexual release rather than a desire for deep intimacy or emotional closeness. Todd also noted that his relationships with other males were purely sexual: “I didn’t live a gay lifestyle. I just went out of town 150 miles from where I lived to the big city and just whored it up once in a while.”

In contrast, Josiah and Brad described clandestine homoerotic experiences that were characterised by deep intimacy and attachment. Josiah noted that he developed a strong affection for another young man during his early college years: “I got involved with a soldier... in hindsight, it was the first time I ever fell in love with anybody.” Likewise, Brad described developing a strong intimate attachment to a male sexual partner in grade nine. Although his young partner considered their relationship solely a means of sexual release, Brad grew deeply

connected to this young man: “To him, it was ‘just looking to get off until... [I] get access to girls.’ But to *me*, it was... life-transforming. ‘I am in *love* and I’m going to marry this person.’”

As they embraced clandestine homoerotic acts and relationships, Todd and Brad distanced themselves from conservative Christianity while others remained embedded within these communities. Convinced that his same-sex behaviour had corrupted his soul, Todd drifted away from the Christian community during this period while retaining much of his Christian worldview. As he explained, “I didn’t storm out the door mad at the church, I just felt I wasn’t worthy... I was going to hell so why bother?” Brad also distanced himself from God and church during this period. Frustrated that God had failed to answer his prayers for sexual change or shelter him from the many experiences of suffering he had endured throughout his young life, he angrily turned away from the divine: “I told God to ‘Fuck off and get out of my life’”. Yet, given the local Christian context and his family’s deep connection to the church, he could not simply renounce his faith. He explained: “When your mom works at a Christian school and your dad is a leader at your church, you can’t just announce, ‘I’m a gay agnostic.’ You would be killed! It’s not an option!””. Despite having secretly turned away from God, he enacted a public façade of devotion and continued to participate in the Christian community throughout his youth.

Despite attaining sexual satisfaction and, in some cases, developing close intimate relationships, clandestine experiences of homoeroticism proved to be an emotionally taxing experience. Their involvement in sexual acts and relationships they believed to be evil, immoral, and unnatural wrought a profound sense of guilt, self-hatred, and disgrace that often overpowered their pleasurable aspects. Raised as devout Christians, they were convinced that such behaviours were not only abnormal and unnatural, but also transgressed the will of God. Theo recalled being troubled by the knowledge that this sexual behaviour was “not what God intended” and Josiah noted that his Christian worldview negatively coloured his perception of his homosexual experiences: “the only framework that I had was, this is *lust*, right? This is inappropriate sexual energy being directed at another human being.” As Creek (2013) notes, the construction of heterosexual marriage as the only appropriate sexual outlet in the conservative Christian worldview means that erotic desires or acts outside of this context are manifestations of ‘lust’. In contrast to love, such experiences of lust are out of control, self-alienating, amoral, and potentially dysfunctional for society. Despite a lack of church attendance, Todd also felt remorse over his homosexual experiences: “I still believed in God, and always had a moralistic look on

life... I thought it was terribly wrong, and I'm a person with a very sensitive conscience and I just couldn't reconcile it at all."

The profound shame associated with these acts fuelled the compulsion to silence and secrecy that defined this form of homoerotic engagement. As Charles recalled, "I perceived what was going on in myself and I didn't like it, so I really didn't tell a lot of people." The threat of social violence also loomed large in the minds of these men. As Josiah explained: "I didn't *dare* talk to my parents about this – especially my stepfather. I literally thought for years that if... [he] found out, he would kill me." Fearing the social consequences of embracing the 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963) of the gay man, these men worked to carefully veil their homoerotic experiences. Brad and Todd were alone in revealing their sexual and romantic experiences to close others during this period. Brad shared his homoerotic attractions with his best friend in grade nine and Todd imparted the news to his dad in early adulthood. In both cases, negative social repercussions ensued. Brad recalled: "I told him that I thought I was gay... a while later, he gathered together a bunch of his other friends... and they dragged me behind the gymnasium of my school and kicked the living shit out of me". After this traumatic experience, Brad refrained from further discussing his sexual desires or behaviours with others: "I just pulled inside myself and I lived in fear that if I tell anyone... I'm going to... lose my friends, get beat up, get maybe thrown out of my house... thrown out of my school and my church". Although Todd suffered no physical violence, he and his father grew distant after his revelation, leaving him feeling "totally rejected." Here, personal experience confirmed the social dangers of sexual difference.

In brief, Charles, Theo, Todd, Josiah and Brad generally maintained a public image of heterosexuality while engaging in covert sexual and intimate relationships with other males throughout this period. Fearing spiritual condemnation (with the exception of Brad) and the social implications of homoerotic acts, they generally keep their homoerotic acts secret during this time. The vast majority (again, with the exception of Brad) did not personally identify as 'gay', but rather thought of themselves as experiencing a sexual 'problem' or 'temptation.' In contrast, three others – Walter, Rodney, and Matt – not only experimented with homoeroticism during this period, but also personally and publically embraced a homosexual identity and integrated into local gay communities. These men were willing to entertain the possibility of living well as gay men and were less anxious and fearful about the opinions of others.

For these men, connecting with other same-sex attracted men proved to be a transformative experience. Recalling his first trip to a gay bar, Walter noted: “I saw that this club was full of all these guys and then he [a gay co-worker] said, ‘you know, all these guys are gay’ and I said, ‘You gotta be kidding me!’” As they increasingly came to know others who shared their sexual preferences, their sense of alienation diminished. As Walter explained: “I thought I was in heaven because I thought I had been – in my mind, I had wondered, of course, if I was the only person on earth with that particular problem.” This community provided the men with a collective gay identity and offered new options for social and sexual connection.

In time, Walter, Rodney, and Matt developed sexual and romantic relationships with other same-sex attracted men. These relationships varied in their duration and intensity of emotional attachment, ranging from casual sexual encounters to intimate relationships lasting many years. For Matt and Walter, monogamous relationships came and went, interspersed by casual sexual experiences. Walter noted: “If I had a partner and we were... monogamous... that was okay but if I was outside of that relationship ... I would go to nightclubs and baths and saunas and parks and you name it.” Alternatively, Rodney quickly formed a relationship with another man that lasted for 18 years: “We owned a home together, we owned cars, we had jobs, uh, we had different responsibilities, we ran a household, um, and we were a couple.”

As they developed romantic relationships with other males and immersed themselves in the gay community, these men began to identify as ‘gay’, asserting their sexual preferences as a defining aspect of self. As Rodney stated, “I was taking on the identity of a gay male – um, expressing myself in ways that I had not expressed myself previously.” They also started to distance themselves from Christianity. Matt noted that he had moved “away from God” during his time in the gay community and Walter described having grown fed up with the condemnatory sexual ethics of the church, which he felt offered no assistance to same-sex attracted men and served only to remind them of their wickedness. Rodney explained how similar experiences of religious condemnation and a lack of support left him frustrated with God: “I was angry at God. ‘How could you – how could you create me this way and hate me at the same time? I don’t understand.’” After vacillating between church participation and renunciation for many years, he too eventually left the church when he grew tired of their condemnatory ethic: “listening to that in chapel... [as] a self-identified gay male, was horrid. It’s like, ‘well... what hope is there for

me?”” Convinced that their sexuality was irreconcilable with Christian ethics and unwilling to subject themselves to further denigration, these men distanced themselves from God and church.

Rodney, Walter, and Matt had long been reluctant to reveal their sexual preferences to parents and siblings given the fear of social rejection or violence. However, as they distanced themselves from the church and increasingly embraced homosexuality on a personal, social, and sexual level, they were eventually compelled to share their sexual identities with their families. In the case of Walter, this revelation wrought no tragic consequences. Although his parents believed homosexual relationships were outside the will of God, his newfound sexual identity did not significantly hamper familial relationships. For Rodney and Matt, the social consequences of this revelation were more substantial. Matt noted that his mother “was devastated” by his sexual revelation. Her ongoing expressions of distress and constant questioning eventually motivated him to move out of his family home. Rodney recalled how his first attempts to engage his parents on this issue had been rebuffed: “I sat down and... said, ‘Um, I think I’m gay’... [and] I don’t think they knew what to do... my dad looked at my mom and he said, ‘Did you call Sears about measuring the windows for the curtains?’”. When they eventually felt compelled to confront him about his emerging sexual identity, his parents affirmed their strong disapproval of homosexuality and asserted that such behaviour would not be tolerated in their home. Consequently, Rodney also chose to leave his family home. Although such negative reactions were difficult to bear, these men remained confident in their new identities and hopeful that embracing their desires would bring satisfaction to their lives. As Rodney explained, “Everything about me was gay. I was loud and proud. Um, I didn’t care if you knew. I didn’t care if you liked it. You know, that was your problem if you didn’t. I was who I was.”

In sum, half of the participants sought to move past limbo by experimenting with two distinct forms of homosexuality. Those who engaged in clandestine homosexual acts and relationships constructed homoeroticism as a personal defect best kept hidden from others. These men lived with feelings of religious guilt, self-loathing, and the fear of social violence throughout this experimental period. Conversely, those who embraced gay identities and lived openly with their desires gradually distanced themselves from the church and lived largely without guilt or shame during much of this period. In such cases, developing a meaningful collective identity and embedding oneself within the gay community helped mitigate forces of homonegativity emanating from church and family. For Rodney, Walter, and Matt, embracing

homosexuality was an empowering experience – at least initially. As Rodney noted, “I sensed a sense of freedom with it... discovering who I was and the whole pushing away from the parents and coming into just who I was.” Walter similarly described feeling “like a bird that had been let out of the cage” and Matt echoed this liberationist sentiment, noting, “I was free and I was out!” Thus, despite a shared engagement in same-sex erotic acts, the tone and experience of this mode of being differed greatly across clandestine and overt groups.

Yet, despite pleasurable experiences of sexual gratification and a sense of empowerment in some cases, all of the men eventually renounced this way of being. Five primary factors associated with the decision to relinquish homosexual acts, relationships, and identities emerged from my analysis: relationship dilemmas, disenchantment with life as a gay man, the desire for incompatible life projects, moral panic, and the impact of divine intervention. Relationship dissatisfaction was central to the renunciation of homosexuality in six of the narratives (Charles, Josiah, Matt, Rodney, Theo, and Brad). For example, Charles described how his sexual pursuits had not wrought any meaningful connections with others: “I was really unsatisfied – not in the sex, not in – it was the relationships with other men that were shallow and empty... it wasn’t the sex that was the problem, it was everything else.” Josiah similarly described how his sexual pursuits lacked deep emotional connection and interpersonal intimacy, noting, “It was never ‘wham, bam, thank you, sir,’ but it was sort of – it felt almost ‘booty-callish.’” Matt also described his relationship with another man as “unsatisfying” and Rodney noted that his connection to his partner of 18 years had become increasingly unhealthy and plagued by “emotional dependency.” Theo similarly noted that his sexual relationship with his college roommate was marked by a complex blend of attraction and contempt that proved highly distressing: “We were *going* to support each other in battling this temptation but we also... gave in to each other to satisfy that temptation... it was... a very painful... [an] emotionally beat each other up but emotionally dependent relationship.” For Brad, the pain of rejection prompted him to turn away from homosexuality: “my partner [said] ... ‘you know that stuff we’ve been doing?... I’ve decided I’m straight now. Never speak of it again.’ And... walked out of my life.”

Those who were gay identified and open about their sexual preferences - Rodney, Walter, and Matt - also described having grown increasingly disenchanted with homosexuality over time. Having battled depression for many years, Rodney described realizing that life as a gay man was not providing him with the peace and satisfaction he craved: “[I decided] I *don’t want* this

element of same-sex attraction... the gay-identified element in my life anymore... It's not providing me with peace and happiness. It's not providing me with an internal sense of wellbeing and security." For Walter, this disenchantment was closely tied to the AIDS crisis and the devastation it wrought within his local gay community. He noted that the carefree lifestyle he had enjoyed for nearly four decades came to a grinding halt in the face of this terrible disease: "My friends began to die left and right and, uh, by the time... 2008 rolled around, every single significant friend of mine that I knew of was dead." At this point, Walter noted that life seemed "empty and meaningless." The emergence of HIV also played an role in Matt's decision to renounce homosexuality. He recalled, "The AIDS crisis just scared the hell out of me." However, the emotional and psychological suffering he observed within his local gay community proved to be the driving factor in his decision to pursue an alternate way of being: "there was a lot of self-loathing... a lot of drinking... a lot of risky behaviour... it just felt... like a very dark way to live. And that was really my only model of what gay life was like." For these three men, personal disappointment, the threat of AIDS, and observations of suffering cast life as a gay man in a negative light and contributed to the shift toward alternative ways of being.

For three others – Charles, Brad, and Josiah – competing life projects played a role in the turn away from homosexuality. Charles noted that these acts and relationships were incompatible with his hope of attaining a heterosexual family life: "I wanted to be married and I wanted to have a family... a natural family – I didn't want to have a gay family or a homosexual family." Brad similarly explained that although he was unconcerned with the spiritual consequences of these acts at the time, homosexuality appeared incompatible with his desire to be a husband and father: "In my mind, marriage and raising children as a gay person wasn't possible." For Josiah, homoeroticism proved to be an impediment to career development and the pursuit of religious leadership. He explained that homosexual acts were expressly prohibited by the behavioural guidelines of the Christian college he had attended for leadership training. When news of his sexual acts and advances reached officials, he was initially given a stern warning and instructed to find "accountability" for his "journey", but was eventually asked to leave the institution when his behaviour persisted. Here, homoeroticism was experienced as an impediment to the good life.

In four cases (Josiah, Theo, Todd, and Charles), moral panic was implicated in the decision to renounce homoeroticism. For these individuals, homoeroticism was constructed as immoral, unnatural, and sinful and engaging in such acts wrought distress and suffering

throughout this period. For example, Todd described having been plagued by feelings of guilt and monstrosity throughout this experimental period: “I would go far away to the big city once in awhile, and cruise for sex. I always hated myself for it afterwards.” Engaging in sexual behaviours that were at odds with personal understandings of normalcy, goodness, and righteousness wore on the mental and emotional wellbeing of these men. Todd noted that such acts began to feel like an “addiction” – driven by the seemingly undeniable pursuit of sexual satisfaction but resulting in immense emotional and psychological suffering. As Theo explained: “I knew that this was not what God intended... [but] that temptation was there.” Over time, these men noted that their lives became characterized by an exhausting and demoralizing pattern of compulsive sexual activity followed by feelings of shame, anxiety, regret, and despair. Reflecting on this distressing period, Todd noted: “I felt drawn and repulsed by it at the same time... I used just about anything that would pour out of a bottle to cope with life.” Josiah remembers this period as marked by experiences of profound guilt and anxiety – what he referred to as “Evangelical panic attacks.” Over time, these feelings of regret and self-loathing grew intolerable and Josiah – like the others – came to the realization that “This has to stop.”

Lastly, five of the men (Rodney, Matt, Brad, Walter, and Todd) described experiences of divine intervention that were central to the renunciation of homoeroticism. Although these men had distanced themselves from God and church while experimenting with homoeroticism, they described how powerful spiritual experiences had convinced them to relinquish homoeroticism, re-establish a relationship to the divine, and pursue a more meaningful existence grounded in the Christian faith. Walter described how God had reached out to him after the AIDS virus had decimated his community: “I was sitting there and I was thinking, ‘okay, everybody is dead and here I am healthy and alive’ and I felt like God was saying to me, ‘Can you hear me now?’” Rodney similarly noted how an encounter with the Lord during a time of relational, emotional, and financial struggle inspired him to leave his male partner and pursue an alternative way of life. He noted, “I knew God was calling... I honestly felt God say... ‘I have something so much better for you. But if you want it, you’re going to have to let go of everything you have now.’” Matt described a similar experience of being called to “clean up” his life and “get right” with God that occasioned a turn away from his local gay community. These moving encounters with the divine brought participants back to God and church after a period of estrangement that ranged from 2 – 40 years.

For Brad and Todd, these divine encounters not only prompted a renunciation of homosexuality, but also pulled them back from the brink of suicide. Brad recalled deciding to end his own life in grade ten: “the pain of all of this became too much... [I] got out a knife and got ready to slit my wrists because I just couldn’t take it anymore.” Yet, twice as he prepared to harm himself, the phone rang. The second time he answered, he experienced a “profound awareness of God being present” and described hearing the “internal voice of God saying: ‘Trust me.’” Struck by this experience, he committed himself to renouncing homosexual acts and reconnect with the Lord. Todd similarly described being drawn back into relationship with the Lord at a time when he was considering taking his own life. He noted, “I was rapidly reaching my breaking point, with nowhere to turn... I sunk into a spiralling depression that left me trying to figure out the best way to kill myself.” At this emotional low point, he too felt God “wooing” him to “the foot of the cross” through Christian outreach. For these five men, the desire to abandon homosexual acts and relationships was motivated in large part by a sense of having been called to a new existence. In these cases, we see how the “local [Christian] explanatory logic” (Good, 1994, p. 141) allowed participants to introduce new possibilities for living well and legitimize particular modes of ‘right action’ through recourse to the divine. Such stories remind us of the subjunctivizing²⁷ power associated with the omnipotence and mystery of the supernatural.

The decision to turn away from homosexual acts, relationships, identities, and communities was thus tied to a variety of personal, social, ideological, and cosmological factors. It was connected with personal perceptions of homosexuality as inherently dissatisfying, unhealthy, and immoral and with local normalizing ideologies that cast homosexuality in an unfavourable light. It was also influenced by the weight of cultural ideals and the desire for a heterosexual family life. Yet, discussions of moral panic and divine intervention also point to the cosmological concerns at play in this decision. Participants expressed their desire to conform to the sacred Christian order, draw close to God, and avoid the threat of damnation associated with homosexual transgression (Douglas, 1966; Kristeva, 1980/1982). This decision involved important personal, socio-political, and cosmological considerations. It was attuned to personal satisfaction, the force of socio-political norms, and the larger cosmological order where good and evil (equated to God and Lucifer) are spelled out in Christian discourse. Having renounced

homosexuality, the vast majority of these men (Brad, Charles, Walter, Josiah, Rodney, Matt and Todd) were unable to imagine satisfying alternatives for their lives. As Brad explained:

[Life once again] became a cycle of me being attracted to guys... confessing in the prayer room... and then five minutes later seeing another guy and being attracted... it just drove me so far into this cycle of despair, that by the end of my freshman year I was starting to consider suicide again, because I just felt like no matter what I did I could never be worthy of God.

Recognizing the need for external guidance and support, these men transitioned out of the phase of independent experimentation and sought new possibilities for their lives through interpersonal consultation (see Part 2). Alternatively, Theo decided to explore heterosexual relationships after turning away from homosexuality. In what follows, I describe participants' experiences with heterosexuality in the early post-crisis period.

Going to the Chapel: Same-Sex Attracted Men Marry Women

"I don't know if the general public knows that there are a lot of guys who are married that have same-sex attraction." – Seth

In the early post-crisis period, four of the men (Adam, Seth, Mason, and Theo) married females. For Theo, pursuing heterosexuality was a secondary strategy that followed unsatisfying experiences with homoeroticism. Deeply ashamed of his past homosexual acts, he vowed to renounce such sinful and deviant behaviour and pursue a righteous, healthy, and normal heterosexual existence: "I went through a period of repentance... [I] really thought that it would be something that... definitely *could* be overcome." For Adam, Seth, and Mason, the pursuit of heterosexuality was the first and only redressive technique implemented in this early exploratory period. For these men, homosexual acts and relationships were morally, spiritually, and socially unthinkable. Seth noted that he "felt so evil inside for having the feelings" and Adam recalling becoming highly sensitized to the social danger of homoeroticism: "I realized 'Hmm... I need to watch,' kind of thing." Personal goals and negative past experiences also contributed to their decision to pursue heterosexuality. Adam described his desire for a traditional nuclear family as an important factor in deciding to marry, noting: "I liked the idea of being married and being a husband and father." For Mason, a distressing experience with homoeroticism in his teen years also served as a deterrent to pursuing homosexual acts or relationships in adulthood. Although Mason chose not to elaborate on the details of this negative homosexual experience, it

had clearly soured his opinion of homosexual acts and relationships. All four of these men thus pursued sexual and intimate relationships with females in search of personal satisfaction and in the absence of appealing alternatives.

These men pursued heterosexual relationships despite strong homosexual urges and a general lack of attraction toward females. Adam and Mason dated multiple women before eventually marrying, while Seth and Theo wed the first and only women they courted. The stories these men told of the courtship period were notably lacking in themes of ‘passionate love’ (i.e., an intense longing for desire with another). In this sense, they deviate remarkably from dominant Western cultural norms – where romantic love is constructed as the only ‘right basis’ for marriage²⁸. When asked why he chose to marry his wife, Mason recalled liking how she brought out his protective, caring nature: “She had a really difficult life ... her mother was a nut case... an alcoholic, and I thought I was going to save her from it.” Seth’s explanation of what drew him to his wife centered on the way she interacted with others and embodied femininity. He noted, “She was just very responsible and thoughtful of everyone. Um, was a good friend to everyone.” He also pointed to his great esteem for her family as playing an important role in this decision: “I loved her family so I knew that when I married her I would marry into her family and I loved her family.” Theo described developing a “deep friendship” with his future wife as she cared for him following a brain injury. Although he felt no attraction to this young woman, he appreciated her caring nature and was flattered by her ardent affection:

To be real honest, at first I thought... ‘this is not the kind of person that I would necessarily want to marry,’ but she just liked me *so* much... and that was very flattering... I responded to that... We had never really, officially dated... We had never even *kissed*... [but] she said ‘yes’ – to the shock of her parents, who didn’t know who I was. Adam’s courtship narrative similarly pointed to the pleasure and esteem associated with being the object of another’s affection: “This girl... *really* liked me... she was *crazy* about me... [so] I thought... ‘I’ll love her back!’” In these stories, love and marriage are not driven by ‘eros’ (i.e., romantic love, based on physical attraction) but rather by ‘storge’ (i.e., companionship or friendship love) and ‘pragma’ (i.e., logical, practical, ‘shopping-list’ love)²⁹.

For the most part, these men kept their homoerotic desires secret from their wives. Adam was alone in having revealed his sexual urges to his partner. As his wedding day approached, he recalled developing “cold feet” and decided to share his sexual struggle with his mother, future

father-in-law, and fiancé. Although surprised, his fiancé was not significantly distressed by this news and his father-in-law was optimistic that Adam could overcome “whatever the trouble was” and make the marriage work and suggesting that he too had personally struggled with same-sex desires. Neither confidant considered same-sex attraction a serious impediment to a happy, satisfying heterosexual marriage. Consequently, Adam noted that the wedding went forward as planned: “We decided, well, you know, we have this done – the wedding’s scheduled and everything and she was willing to go through with it, so I did.”

Despite an absence of heterosexual attraction throughout their lives, two of the men - Adam and Seth - were confident that their patterns of attraction would change after marriage. During his entire heterosexual dating history, Adam had never felt attracted to a woman. He recalled: “When, you know, I’d kind of kiss them goodnight, there was no big feeling to it.” He attributed this lack of sexual response to the Christian guilt that accompanies sex out of wedlock and remained optimistic about the possibility of developing a satisfying sexual relationship with a woman after marriage: “I [thought]... ‘Well this is probably mainly because...[of] my strict religious background... once I’m married... my conscience will give me permission to kiss and cuddle and have sex and so forth.’” His optimism was further buoyed by an account of sexual change he had once encountered in the media: “I read a religious article about homosexuality being curable. And [thought] ‘Oh great!... I’ll get over this!’” Although Seth likewise lacked any heterosexual urges, he too was optimistic that marriage would rid him of homosexual desire and lead to a fulfilling sexual relationship with his wife: “I thought that the marriage would take away my feelings... [that] having sex with my wife... would just take away my feelings.” As was the case with the same-sex attracted Christians interviewed by Felstrom (2013), the men in the current study were thus drawn to heterosexual marriage by a number of factors beyond passionate love, including the desire for companionship, the urge to bear children, wanting to conform to expectations or ideals, the hope that this union might change their sexuality, and a sense of deep connection and love.

Once married, these four men invariably found their sexual relationships with their wives wanting. Adam was distressed to discover he could not sustain an erection during sexual encounters with his wife: “I couldn’t have sex with her. I just absolutely couldn’t! So that was not to her liking... she would try to manually help me and, oh - I didn’t want her to do that!” Theo noted that although he and his wife carried on a sexual relationship, he remained largely

unattached to his wife: “I never had like a huge, huge, unquenchable appetite.” Seth echoed this sentiment, noting that although he and his wife were sexually active, he found he did not “lust” after his wife as he did men. Although predominantly attracted to men, Mason was eager to pursue a sexual relationship with his wife but found she was largely disinterested in erotic activity. He recalled: “I tried to introduce her to other sexual activities... positions... [but] she was stuffy... she would provide it [sex], but, after we had intercourse, I’d go to the bathroom and masturbate... It wasn’t very satisfying.” In all cases, marital sex was constructed as largely unsatisfying. Nonetheless, Seth, Mason, and Theo maintained active sexual relationships with their wives and eventually fathered children.

As they lived as married, heterosexual men, Adam, Mason, Seth, and Theo continued to experience strong homosexual urges. Despite the force of their desires, Adam, Mason, and Seth remained committed to their wives and refrained from engaging in extra-marital homosexual affairs throughout this period. Unable to achieve sexual union with his wife, Adam remained celibate throughout this period. Mason and Seth also refrained from engaging in any partnered sexual acts outside of those with their wives, instead turning to masturbation to satisfy their homosexual fantasies. Mason recalled: “I found excuses to go to the temple, because there’s a temple ordinance that takes place, where a man... [gets partially] naked... [and] I would gawk as much as I could.” For Seth, gay pornography and chat rooms provided an outlet for homosexual energy, but left him feeling guilty and ashamed. For Seth and Mason, homosexual indulgence was limited to fantasy, masturbation, and erotic conversation. For Theo, sexual restraint proved more difficult. Despite his desire to remain committed to his wife, he found himself seeking sexual connections with other males: “Throughout much of my marriage I actually was still battling the same-sex attraction issue and occasionally acting out.” As a married man, he remained trapped in the same cycle of compulsive homosexual indulgence and regret that had characterized his life as a single man (see above): “[I was] like an alcoholic... who knows exactly what he’s doing and, um, he still does it, even though he knows what harm he’s causing other people”.

These men were deeply ashamed of their homosexual urges and acts and feared that revealing their sexual struggle would lead to familial disintegration or community rejection. Consequently, they kept this aspect of self carefully hidden from others. As married men, they easily passed as heterosexual males in the community and, for the most part, their own families

(with the exception of Adam, whose wife was aware of his struggle). Yet, their secret sexual urges and transgressions – though largely unknown to others – proved to be a source of immense personal suffering. These men were plagued by feelings of fraudulence, and inauthenticity. As Mason noted: “You don’t tell people the truth... you hide your feelings... you sneak around, everything is just *horrible*. I kept thinking, ‘I’m living a lie,’ and ‘I’m, I’m not good,’ and ‘I’m bad.’” Theo described a similar sense of fracture and duplicity throughout this period, stating: “I guess you would say I was living a ‘double life’ because I became a deacon – an elder in the church – and... still was occasionally, uh, falling... to the temptation of homosexuality and acting out.” Despite the emotional distress wrought by secrecy, the social risks associated with revelation outweighed the discomfort of duplicity during this period and the men persisted in their veiled state, bearing the emotional burden of imposterism.

Despite living with homosexual desires and troubling feelings of shame, anxiety, and inauthenticity, the men persisted in heterosexual marriages without issue for a period of time until critical events disrupted these relationships and cast doubt on the feasibility of living as heterosexual men. After months of growing emotional distance and sexual dysfunction, Adam’s short marriage descended into crisis when he learned his wife had “found comfort with another man”. For Seth, internal distress provided the impetus to marital disruption. Consumed by persistent feelings of evil, guilt, and dishonesty, he confessed his sexual secret to his wife of five years. He recalled: “I ended up telling my wife that I had same-sex attractions and... we cried together... [But] I told her that I would never do anything with them as far as going out and having sex with guys”. Although his wife was understanding and supportive, this confession ultimately did little to abate his suffering. As Seth continued to experience strong homosexual urges over the next two years, he increasingly questioned the feasibility of the union.

After 23 years, Mason also found his marriage in a state of crisis when he came to terms with the severity and incurability of his wife’s mental illness and recognized the need to move on and focus on his children. Reflecting on this difficult decision, he explained: “I realized, ‘I’ll never make it better.’” After separating from his wife, he continued to pursue heterosexuality for a period of time, noting that this decision was largely automatic and unreflective: “[its] what you’re supposed to do!” However, still lacking any attraction to females, he eventually turned to a gay escort to explore his homosexual urges. This proved to be a transformational experience. He recalled: “From then on, I knew that I couldn’t live the other [heterosexual] life.” Mason

found himself at a crossroads - convinced he could no longer live as a heterosexual man but unable to imagine embracing his urges as a Mormon Bishop. Like Adam and Seth, he was uncertain how to proceed.

For Theo, marital crisis resulted from the public outing of his sexual struggle. After 35 years of marriage, his children had discovered his ongoing extra-marital homosexual acts and shared this information with the local Christian community. This revelation exposed the “double life” Theo had been living for all these years and caused a profound disruption within the family and surrounding community. Thrust into marital chaos, Theo and his wife recognized that he could no longer go on living in a state of duplicity and secret suffering: “it was sort of a ‘now or never.’ You know? Either this *is* something that you can, uh, move beyond or it’s not.” Although he was committed to reuniting his family and repairing his relationship with his wife, he too wondered how he could possibly live as a heterosexual man with persistent homosexual desires.

In sum, these four men had pursued heterosexuality in the hope of aligning their selves and desires with local notions of good, righteous, and normal sexual and romantic behaviour. However, when these unions degraded into a state of crisis in the face of persistent homosexual desires and other challenging life events, the possibility of living well as a heterosexual man was increasingly called into question. Married men – like those who pursued supplication or homosexuality – were thrust back into a state of despair and anxiety, uncertain how to move forward as same-sex attracted Christian men. In the end, supplication, homosexuality, and heterosexuality all failed to provide a lasting resolution to sexual-moral crisis. This raises the question of why these techniques failed and what is missing from early redressive strategies.

Fracture, Denial and Disappointment: Reflecting on the Limitations of Supplication, Homosexuality and Heterosexuality in the Immediate Post-Crisis Space

“This gay thing was not for me and yet life with a woman was not for me either!” – Jed

Sexual-moral crisis was a world-destroying experience that disrupted participants’ sense of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness and eschewed their hope for the future. Yet, rather than remaining passive in the face of crisis, the stories described in this chapter highlight how the men worked to oppose chaos and restore some semblance of order and meaning to their lives. They point to human initiative in the face of suffering: “the living, active, operative present answering to the present that is gazed upon, considered, contemplated, reflected” (Ricoeur, 1986/2007, p. 208). As they sought to escape limbo, participants

experimented with various ways of being in the post-crisis space. They worked to initiating new beginnings - to rid themselves of anxiety and despair by transforming the self and establishing a positive connection to the socio-cultural order. Unfortunately, none of these early techniques proved capable of resolving sexual-moral crisis and restoring peace, order, meaning, and integrity to life. Early attempts at supplication, homosexuality, and heterosexuality invariably gave way to disappointment as life once again collapsed back into chaos, uncertainty, and despair. Rodney noted that he remained in a “constant state of unable to reconcile internal stuff” and Theo recalled that his struggle seemed to be “coming to a real head.” In the remainder of this chapter, I reflect on the failure of these techniques and the need to explore alternative life possibilities.

Early attempts to remake self and life in the wake of crisis represent experiments in the ‘aesthetics of existence’ – they involve “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men... seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (Foucault, 1984/1990, pp. 10-11). Such processes of self-fashioning entail the active, creative appropriation of various local tropes, narratives, discourses, images, and metaphors to give form to self and world. Close analysis of the techniques adopted by participants in the early post-crisis period indicates that they were grounded in a shared, dichotomous or Manichean view of sexuality, morality, and cosmology – what Baumann (2004) referred to as a ‘binary grammar’ of oppositions. In these early moments, heterosexuality was associated with goodness, godliness, normalcy, happiness, and connectedness while homosexuality was linked to immorality, sin, abnormality, sadness and loneliness. In this simplified, polarizing sexual schema, heterosexuality was sacred and homosexuality was taboo. As Needham (1967) argues, such binary moral classifications are common in the human imaginary. We frequently cleave the world into opposites, associating particular phenomena and events with goodness, order, and righteousness and others with evil, chaos, and anomie.

These early modes of self-fashioning thus revolved around two distinct figures: the heterosexual, Christian family man and the godless, hyper-sexualized gay man. Christianity largely informed this divisive sexual-moral framework. As Brad remembered thinking: “I could not be acceptable to God as long I was attracted to the same sex.” Yet, the negative characterization of gay life within this semiotic system was not solely attributed to religiosity.

This bipolar moral schema was also informed by secular heterosexism and homonegativity, a lack of positive gay role models, and negative personal experiences. Within the local sociocultural context, gay men were cast as strange and wicked ‘others’ who lived highly sexualized lives apart from God and church. As Matt noted, “‘The gays’ were seem as some sort of threat, you know, and people that lived in big cities and were trying to wreck families, and that. So, I didn’t want to be that [Matt laughed].” Homosexuality was also construed as incompatible with Christianity and family life. As Jordan recalled thinking, “There’s no way to have same-sex attraction... and live a normal life like my brother and sister – marry, have kids, what have you.” Images of the content, successful, and righteous gay men were absent in participants’ early lives. As Paul noted, “I didn’t know about healthy relationships between gay people... I didn’t believe that I could be gay and happy, because I never heard of anyone who was gay and happy.”

Personal experiences played a role in the moral divide between gay and straight life. Five participants reported that their own experiences with, and observations of, gay communities and homosexual relationships convinced them that gay life was inherently unhealthy, immoral, and meaningless and characterized by superficial pursuits, immense suffering, and unfulfilling relationships. For example, Walter characterized his time as an openly gay man as impious and licentious: “It was about having lots of friends, going out, drinking and drugging... There was, like I say, just no morals.” Jordan affirmed this sentiment, noting that he often found that gay men were: “dealing with drug addiction and alcohol addiction, and the unhappiness, the depression, the gamut of emotional issues... the perversity is much more inflamed, the sexual promiscuity... it’s so much more debase”. Jed similarly described the gay community as emotionally, relationally, and spiritually bankrupt: “I saw a lot of promiscuity... repeated failed relationships... So much unhealth and dysfunction.” These experiences reinforced the sense that homosexuality was inherently incompatible with a satisfying, moral, and godly existence. As Jed noted: “[Homosexuality] was a big turn-off for me. I didn’t see any commitment. I didn’t see any *faith*. I didn’t see any *depth*... I said... ‘If that’s what all these gay people are like, I don’t want this!’”.

In these early moments, images of dysfunction, unwellness, immorality, and spiritual impoverishment thus combined to mark homosexuality as wholly incompatible with images of health, happiness, righteousness, and community. Within this rigid, bifurcated schema,

acceptable means of self-fashioning are severely limited - becoming heterosexual is the only legitimate means of aligning with the good and purifying the self. All other strategies entail some degree of transgression or pollution. The appeal of divine supplication and the prospect of instantaneous sexual shift is, therefore, rather obvious. Unfortunately, miraculous sexual healing was not forthcoming and participants found themselves in need of alternative approaches. Those who embraced homosexuality and heterosexuality within this binary sexual-moral-spiritual rubric fared no better in the long run. Participants were confronted by two limited, truncated options for fashioning their selves and lives: they could either pattern their existence on the image of the heterosexual family man, suppressing their desires and attempting to embody the ideal of the virile, all-American male, or they could abandon their faith and their familial aspirations in pursuit of sexual satisfaction and romantic connection. The first option entailed a life of veiled impurity, the second a life of moral and spiritual transgression. While early experiments with homosexuality engendered profound personal shame and self-loathing (a phenomenon previously noted by Lalich & McLaren, 2010), those married to females felt incapable of genuinely embodying heterosexual ideals and guilty about the homosexual desires they hid from their wives.

In the end, neither of these strategies proved capable of restoring order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to life. In the pursuit of homosexuality or heterosexuality, participants attempted to ignore important aspects of the self – denying their sexuality or their moral and spiritual proclivities. The trouble with such strategies of denial is that they failed to adequately mitigate feelings of shame, fear, and self-loathing. Those who explored homosexuality lived with feelings of sin, monstrosity, or dysfunction while those who attempted to live as heterosexual men struggled with feelings of fraudulence, deception, and powerlessness. Both techniques are marked by an effort to sidestep sexual-moral crisis by discounting the force of homosexual urges or the strength of one's internalized homonegativity. Ultimately, neither of these evasive strategies proved capable of bringing about a satisfactory resolution to crisis. Those who tried to conform their lives to ideals of heterosexuality continued to confront unruly, immoral, and unnatural sexual desires while those who embraced homosexuality were forced to contend with the guilt and anxiety associated with transgressing the moral order. As Todd noted, "You could pick people up left and right. Just go to the bathhouse you could get anybody you wanted. But that – that's a slimeball way to live...it was

totally against my beliefs.” Whether they embraced homosexuality or heterosexuality in these early moments, participants remained at odds with the social, spiritual, and cosmological order. They live as sinners, deviants, and imposters – unable to shake the sense that their sexual urges and behaviours were abnormal, unnatural, and offensive to God. Those who kept their sexual struggle secret were also forced to contend with distressing feelings of inauthenticity and fraudulence. In all cases, participants failed to live up to their own standards of normalcy, goodness, and godliness.

Such strategies of denial are thus truncated and partial. They proved incapable of incorporating various aspects of the self into a meaningful whole and restoring a sense of integrity to everyday life. Homosexual desires, moral convictions, and spiritual predispositions continued to operate in tension with one another and participants remain fractured beings, at odds with themselves. As Todd recalled, “It started a lot of conflicts.” The pursuit of heterosexuality or homosexuality within this bifurcated moral frame also proved incapable of making sense of sexual-moral crisis and meaningfully integrating this experience into participants’ life narratives. In these early, experimental moments, the men pursued particular behavioural and social positions without having made sense of this experience or identified life possibilities outside of the heterosexual/homosexual divide. As such, they were unable to positively integrate same-sex attraction into their existing lives and selves and these strategies could not be maintained in the long-term without engendering significant personal suffering. Eventually, these techniques of denial, repression, and evasion collapsed back into despair and participants came to realize that neither divine supplication nor living as fragmented heterosexual or homosexual men would provide them with the sense of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness they craved. As Josiah explained, participants were again left wondering, “What the hell am I gonna do?” By providing insight into such binary approaches to redress, the current analysis not only reveals why early heterosexual or homosexual projects failed to mediate moral conflict, but also illuminates the challenges of other strategies grounded in a ‘grammar of oppositions’, including the ‘compartmentalization’ of LGB and religious identities (Anderton et al., 2011; Dahl & Galliger, 2009; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Pitt, 2010; Rodriguez & Oulette, 2000; Seegers, 2007; Valera & Taylor, 2011).

Faced with the limitations of supplication, heterosexual marriage, and homoeroticism, participants recognized the need for a new way forward. The next chapter is devoted to describing participants' search for a 'third way' beyond the binary and Manichean heterosexual-homosexual divide that would allow them to integrate disparate aspects of self, positively align themselves with the moral and spiritual order, and make sense of crisis. This search for new life possibilities, termed the neophyte stage, was characterised by an opening of crisis onto the social sphere wherein participants placed themselves under the guidance and tutelage of others and became involved with a variety of redressive institutions.

²⁶ The source of this insight is unclear. As these four men vary in age from 36-52, their recognition of the futility of divine supplication or pursuing heterosexuality or homosexuality while seeking to ignore their homoerotic desires or transgress their own religious and moral proclivities is not easily attributed to historical context.

²⁷ 'Subjunctivity' refers to the construction of various interpretations of lived experiences in an effort to bring meaning to personal experiences and manage the threat of ambiguity and uncertainty (Becker, 1999; Good, 1994; Mattingly, 1998).

²⁸ See Flandrin (1981) and Goodwin (1999) for a thorough discussion of Western marital norms.

²⁹ See Lee (1973) for a discussion of the different facets and forms of love and attachment.

Part Two

Chapter 4 ~ In Search of Assistance: Becoming the Neophyte

“Something inside of me was screaming, ‘help!’ ... I needed someone to talk to, but who?” - Todd

Where homosexuality is considered immoral, ungodly, abnormal, and unhealthy and heterosexuality is construed as the only right form of sexual desire and expression, the opportunities for living well as a same-sex attracted Christian man are severely limited. In this polarized sexual-moral schema, nothing short of miraculous (hetero)sexual shift is capable of providing a lasting and satisfying resolution to sexual-moral crisis. In time, all participants came to recognize the limitations of this binary approach to sexuality, spirituality, and morality and grew eager to locate alternative understandings, images, and forms beyond the rigid heterosexual / homosexual divide capable of restoring hope, order, and meaning to their lives. In the majority of cases ($n=12$), the need for a ‘third way’ was revealed by the failure of early strategies of divine supplication, heterosexual marriage, or homosexual exploration to provide a satisfying and lasting resolution to sexual-moral crisis. Yet, for four others (Mitch, Ned, Jed, and Paul), the need for alternative understandings and approaches was evident from the beginning of the crisis period. These individuals intuitively sensed what their peers learned through trial and error: that attempting to deny the force of homosexual urges or the strength of personal moral and religious convictions would not restore order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to their lives. These four men were equally unconvinced that an act of divine intervention would be the answer to sexual-moral crisis. In brief, they rapidly recognized the need for alternative ways of being that would allow them to integrate their sexuality and morality into a cohesive, harmonious self without ever having experimented with homosexuality, heterosexuality, or divine supplication.

At the beginning of the current phase, all of the participants were thus united in their search for possibilities that transcended the heterosexual/homosexual divide. Having reached an impasse in their redressive efforts, those who had pursued supplication, heterosexuality, or homosexuality in the early post-crisis period joined those who had found themselves without conceivable options from the outset of crisis. At this point, the futility of living in a persistent state of transgression or secret suffering was evident to all and participants were united in a common search for alternative understandings and images capable of restoring personal integrity; making sense of suffering; and positively connecting the self to local norms and values.

In this search, the men transformed themselves into neophytes,³⁰ bringing themselves under the express guidance of local secular and religious experts as they engaged in an active, creative, and collaborative search for new ways of being. They took it upon themselves to reach out to knowledgeable others and expand their understanding of sexuality, morality, and religiosity in the hopes of revealing new opportunities for their sexual, moral, and spiritual lives. This role was adopted out of necessity. It was embraced at a time when the men had exhausted their own coping resources and remained incapable of imagining a satisfying existence as same-sex attracted Christian men. As Jed recalled, “I was finding life, um, was not very hopeful... I didn’t want to go gay ... but what was I going to do? And I couldn’t be married to a woman. So, the impetus, really, was hopelessness I guess.” Jordan similarly recalled becoming overwhelmed by feelings of confusion and hopelessness at the precipice of the neophyte stage: “[I was] really having an issue with same sex attraction... [I] didn’t know what to do with that.”

Finding a new, satisfying way forward meant transcending the rigid sexual-moral schema that associated homosexuality with abnormality, sin, and evil and linked heterosexuality to normalcy, goodness, and godliness. To do so, participants needed to expose themselves to alternative ways of thinking about their situation. As Ricoeur (1986/2007) explained, the search for self is predominantly oriented outside of oneself: “we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works” (p. 87). Although the image of the inward-turning man often dominates popular discussions of self-reflection and identity development, constructions of self are derived from models and figures made available in the social world. Drawing on the discourses, images, and models in the sociocultural milieu can help bring meaning and interpretation to one’s life, as self-discovery is a process of wading through possibilities in search of appetizing and appropriate forms. In Part 2 of the thesis, I describe how participants turned their suffering outward, exposing themselves to new representations and renderings of the relationship between sexuality, morality and spirituality in an attempt to locate new possibilities for their selves and their lives. Other authors have noted that ‘coming out’ (Gold & Stewardt, 2011; Subhi & Geelan, 2012) or sharing one’s secret desires with others (Levy & Reeves, 2011) is a ‘key event’ in the redressive process. Yet, they have provided little insight into the significance of this event beyond noting that it allows others to challenge the individual and provide them with new information (Levy & Reeves, 2011). Here, we see that this social opening was largely motivated by the failure of early, binary redressive strategies and a

desperate search for new forms and that the public exposure that characterised this event was more akin to a call for help than a revelation of the truth of the sexual self.

The Social Opening

“I was empty. Um, I was empty of any resources to help myself” - Jed

The neophyte role marks a remarkable opening of crisis onto the social scene. In their efforts to locate new aesthetic resources and ways of making sense of their suffering, the men reached out to others for guidance. As internal rumination and private contemplation had failed to reveal any viable options beyond supplication, heterosexuality, and homosexuality, this outward turn provided renewed hope for restoring a sense of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to participants’ lives. Yet, it was also fraught with social danger. Aware of the homonegative attitudes that pervaded their sociocultural milieu, the vast majority of participants had long avoided sharing their sexual struggle with close friends, family, and members of the Christian community. Jed, for example, remembers fearing how his father would react if he learned of his same-sex attractions: “I had thoughts in my head like he could throw me out. He could reject me. I could get lambasted here and it could ruin our relationship.” Brad similarly recalled fearing that sexual revelation might mean losing “everything that has ever mattered”.

The homonegativity participants observed in their local church, home, and community environments had long served to limit sexual expression through the tacit threat of social rejection. Past experiences of social exclusion also fuelled the anxiety surrounding sexual revelation. For example, Brad’s memories of having been physically assaulted, Josiah’s experience of having being expelled from Christian college, and Theo’s alienation from his children and grandchildren all served to reinforced the social dangers of revealing one’s desires. In all cases, participants worried that others would respond with anger, shame, and disgust.

Yet, despite these perceived social dangers, the desire to escape limbo and resolve sexual-moral crisis outweighed the threat of social rejection in the neophyte stage. Crisis spilled out onto the social scene in an unprecedented manner as the men anxiously sought guidance, direction, and support from those they deemed knowledgeable about issues of sexuality, morality, or spirituality and capable of revealing new, satisfying ways forward. Here, participants embraced a new, consultative approach to dealing with crisis. As Jed explained: “I just didn’t know where to go and what to do and so I began telling my story.” Participants began to ‘come

out' to others, not as 'gay' men, but as same-sex attracted Christians in need of guidance and support. As Josiah explained:

I couldn't mentally come out as gay, because what I was taught growing up was that the feeling of gay identity meant that you were *internalizing* external temptation... I couldn't call myself gay, but I *could* come out as someone who has struggled with homosexual tendencies and could you pray for me, please?

Paul similarly recalled: "I made it clear that I was not affirming a gay identity or gay desire, instead I was saying that it was evil, it was bad, and I wanted to change." For nine of the men (Mitch, Jed, Jordan, Paul, Mason, Josiah, Theo, Ned, and Charles), this was the first time they had ever willingly revealed their homosexual urges and acts to anyone outside of sexual partners.³¹ Moreover, those who previously shared their sexual secret with others found their circle of confidants widening during the neophyte stage as they sought explicit direction and guidance from others in working through crisis. These revelations marked a distinct social turn in the experience of crisis, as others became allies in the search for redress. Yet, despite a marked social turn, revelations in the neophyte stage remained highly circumscribed and sparing, involving only a handful of trusted individuals.

At the beginning of this phase, participants overwhelmingly looked to other conservative Christians for direction in restoring order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to their lives. Adam was the only exception, having first turned to a secular counsellor in the neophyte stage. Participants reached out to Christian family members, friends, peers, and leaders, desperate to find a way forward.³² Multiple consultations were not uncommon. Ten participants (Brad, Jed, Todd, Seth, Mitch, Ned, Paul, Josiah, Todd, and Jordan) shared their struggle with various Christian individuals during this period. As was the case with previous sexual revelations (see Chapter 3), acts of sexual disclosure within the Christian community were overwhelmingly met with shock, despair, anxiety, and concern throughout the neophyte stage. Friends, family, and clergy generally asserted their disapproval of homosexuality and reinforced the gravity of sexual-moral crisis, although the dramatic quality of these reactions varied across confidants.

Some reactions were particularly intense and emotional. Four of the men (Brad, Matt, Jed, and Jordan) recalled that their family members were visibly devastated by this news. For example, Brad noted that his mother was extremely upset when he told her of his homosexual desires: "she cried and cried and cried for weeks, and then she blamed herself and it was this big

dramatic, traumatic experience for me.” Josiah similarly described revealing his sexual secret to his parents as “a messy conversation” and Jed recalled his sister responding with marked distress and despair: “she was very distraught and emotional and cried dramatically.”

Yet, not all revelations were met with such overt shows of anxiety and anguish. Thirteen of the men (Brad, Jed, Jordan, Mason, Mitch, Ned, Paul, Josiah, Rodney, Todd, Theo, Walter, and Seth) described cases where Christian confidants (including family members, peers, and leaders) responded more warmly and calmly to these sexual disclosures while nonetheless reinforcing the seriousness of their situation and the problematic nature of homoeroticism. For example, Brad described how a young, female Christian confidant had responded to his revelation with care and compassion while also underlining the gravity of his transgression and the need for reparative measure:

Instead of saying, you know, ‘Get out of my car, you freak. I never want to see you again’ - like I was expecting, she said, ‘I don’t know what to say. I don’t understand anything about this. But what I know is that I love you and God loves you and we’re going to get through this together.’

Spiritual leaders tended to similarly reinforce the idea that homosexual desires were abnormal, undesirable, and spiritually worrisome without evidencing any strong feelings of emotional distress or disgust. For example, Todd recalled how a pastor he approached early in the neophyte period responded to his sexual confession with compassion and empathy despite his moral and spiritual opposition to homosexual acts and relationships: “In an outburst of tears I told him I was gay and just didn't want to live anymore... [and] He didn't flinch or draw back... [He just] clasped my big hand between both of his.” Many parents also responded with expressions of concern and disappointment that were markedly less dramatic than those above. For example, Jordan noted that his parents responded with prayer and compassion to his sexual revelation: “I shared with ... my Mom and my Dad, and uh... they prayed for me. And ... my dad cried for me because he felt bad that I had struggled for so long and never told anybody.”

Yet, despite differences in tone and character, the reactions of confidants almost invariably reinforced the sense that homosexuality was a disagreeable, detrimental, unfavourable and – in some cases – horrifying state. Although experiences of outright condemnation or rejection were much more rare than past literature predicted (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Pitt, 2010), Jed was the only participant who described having encountered any affirming responses

during this consultative process. He explained: “I was hearing... some clergy saying ‘it’s okay to go gay,’ others saying ‘it’s not.’ I was hearing from science... ‘it’s okay’... ‘it’s not.’ I was hearing from family, ‘it’s okay’ – ‘it’s not.’ Friends, ‘it’s okay’ – ‘it’s not.’” Experiences with affirming, pro-gay voices were thus exceedingly rare. Although many Christian confidants responded warmly and empathically, they nonetheless reinforced the idea that homosexuality was a threat to spiritual, moral, and social wellbeing. As Gerber (2011) noted, homosexuality is generally construed as “an occasion for compassion and an occasion for concern” (p. 67) within conservative Christian communities. Although confidants often respond warmly, the idea of celebrating homoeroticism was markedly absent. This was not surprising to participants, who had long recognized the pervasive homonegativity that characterized their local sociocultural milieu. Moreover, given that participants invariably shared such negative views of their homoerotic desires at the beginning of the neophyte stage, they were not offended or distressed by such decidedly non-affirming reactions at this time. Participants and confidants shared a common understanding of homoeroticism as an undesirable and potentially dangerous state in need of careful management or reparation. Consequently, participants were neither alarmed nor upset by the homonegative reactions of others. They were not seeking affirmation of their sexual preferences or behaviours. Rather, they sought help navigating the ‘problem’ of homoeroticism and were relieved to have not been rejected outright by peers and loved ones. As Todd recalled, “I felt immense relief that I had finally told someone and they hadn’t reacted like I had leprosy.”

For both participants and confidants, homoeroticism represented a breach of the social, moral, and spiritual order. These urges and acts were taboo – they marked participants as ‘polluted beings’ who must bring themselves back into realignment with the local order or risk being thrust from the group (Douglas, 1966). In the neophyte stage, both participants and confidants recognized the need for purification processes. As Cazeneuve (1971) notes, “Purifications protect the established order against any infringement from that which would transgress or deviate from the order” (translated from French, p. 115). The opening of sexual-moral crisis onto the social sphere radically transformed the nature and experience of sexual-moral crisis, drawing others in as confidants and advisors. Concerned for participants’ personal, social, and spiritual wellbeing, others became invested in the search for redress. As spiritual leaders or concerned loved ones, they felt compelled to assist participants in their attempts to purify themselves and realign with the sacred order.

Yet, outside interest in the purification process also stemmed from confidants' own investment in the sacred order. As Douglas (1966) notes: "The whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship" (p. 3). Others were sensitive to the potential socio-political implications of this revelation and the possibility that the individual might be subject to social violence as a result of their personal breach or incite conflict and dissention within the group (extended family, Christian community, secular peers, etc.). As Turner noted, "Social life ... even its apparently quietest moments, is characteristically 'pregnant' with social dramas" (1982, p. 11). If left unchecked, the transgressive nature of their sexual being risked inciting social conflict and destroying the cohesion of the larger social unit – be it the family or the religious community (see Turner, 1974). Others were thus highly motivated to help participants find a way of resolving sexual-moral crisis and purifying their desires both for the good of the individual and the cohesion of social group.

Concerned about the polluted state of the individual and the potential for social division, confidants were eager to stem the destructive potential of sexual-moral crisis and help participants identify fruitful purification processes. They worked to ward off social disruption and maintain peace within the social sphere by controlling information about participants' sexual breach. As Jordan noted, "My family knew, but I think they were ashamed and embarrassed and didn't want others to know." Matt similarly noted that his sexual preferences remained "a family secret" for many years. Although privacy concerns and familial shame likely contributed to this secretive approach, such protective silencing was clearly oriented toward preventing the breach from spreading beyond the purview of close confidants and inciting social violence against participants. Information control served to preserve the individual's standing within the local community and was explicitly endorsed by loved ones³³.

Confidants were also eager to help participants locate particular purification techniques capable of repairing the breach and realign the individual with the sacred moral order. More often than not, however, confidants found themselves lacking experience with such issues and ill-equipped to provide participants with fruitful guidance or advice. In such cases, family members, friends, and religious leader referred the men to local experts and groups they deemed more qualified to provide effective direction. Through these referrals, the men encountered a variety of purification and healing rituals embedded within a variety of religious and medical institutions. As Turner (1982) noted, all sociocultural groups are equipped with institutions

devoted to mediating a variety of individual crises and social conflicts. These institutions offer specific “modes of confronting, understanding, assigning meaning to, and sometimes coping with crisis” that are sanctioned by the group and communicated to members through various discourses, texts, images, models, and rituals (Turner, 1982, p. 11). Often, societies develop multiple techniques for dealing with the same form of crisis that reflect the different understandings, beliefs, morals, and values present within the group.

Throughout the neophyte stage, participants encountered four distinct redressive institutions: conservative Christianity, the ex-gay ministry movement, affirming Christianity, and secular mental health services.³⁴ Each of these institutions presented neophytes with new ways of understanding the relationship between sexuality, morality, and spirituality and urged them to adopt particular ways of thinking, feeling, and being to resolve sexual-moral crisis. In what follows, I provide a detailed description of participants’ experiences with these four key redressive institutions (Chapters 5-8). I also describe how participants evaluated the discourses and strategies promulgated by these institutions and shifted dynamically between various redressive mechanisms in search of a satisfying resolution to crisis (Chapter 9). As the reader will learn, most participants ($n=13$) consulted more than one type of redressive institution throughout the neophyte stage and several participants ($n=5$) conferred with the same institution on multiple occasions as they struggled to find a satisfying and lasting resolution to sexual-moral crisis (see Figure 1). I close my discussion of the neophyte stage by reflecting on the aesthetics and politics of this period and elucidating the personal, social, and cultural factors that make sense of this complex and dynamic search for a new, more satisfying way of understanding self and world (Chapter 9).

³⁰ Although the search for new ways forward that was characteristic of this stage differs in important ways from classic rites of passage, the term ‘neophyte’ is used to suggest a similar state of searching for new forms and statuses with the help of local experts, leaders, or authorities.

³¹ As described in Chapter 3, Walter, Rodney, Matt, and Todd had previously disclosed their sexual preferences to family members while experimenting with homosexuality. Brad had also revealed his same-sex attractions to a school peer in adolescence, Adam had shared his homosexual attractions with his wife, mother, and father-in-law before his wedding, and Seth had revealed his desires to his wife. Moreover, Theo and Josiah had their sexual secrets revealed by others. Rodney’s struggle had been made public during the disciplinary process undertaken by his Christian college and Theo had been outted by his children.

³² For Charles and Walter, this open consultation was somewhat delayed. These two men are unique in having kept their struggle a secret throughout much of the early neophyte period, only speaking openly about their desires and previous homosexual acts after they had discovered a new direction for their lives (see Chapter 5).

³³ It is unclear whether having this secrecy condoned by others enhanced or diminished the distress associated with this state. It is easy to imagine that social support for secrecy might have legitimized this approach, thus reducing

some of the suffering associated with impostorism. Yet, it is equally possible that encouraging secrecy enhanced the sense of drama and increased individual fear and suffering. Such questions remain to be answered in future research.

³⁴ Two participants, Josiah and Paul, also engaged with deliverance ministry during the neophyte stage – a special form of Christian healing intended to free individuals from the evil demons that are believed to underlie their suffering (see Csordas, 2002). As Josiah noted: “I had people start to pray for me for what some could have called inner healing, or even deliverance from demons.” These practices fall outside the confines of the four institutions I describe in this chapter. As Paul explained: “I got involved with the people that did what was called ‘deliverance ministry,’ what we would call I guess ‘exorcisms’ where they tried to cast out the evil spirits of homosexuality. These were not people who were in the ex-gay movement themselves, and they typically were women who did these services because they weren’t allowed to be real ministers in the church.” These experiences are not explored in the current work as they were relatively rare and were not explored in detail in the interviews.

Chapter 5 ~ A Life Inspired by God: Sites of Christian Purification

“I finally fell at the foot of the cross.” - Todd

When faced with life struggles and difficult challenges, Christians frequently turn to the church for guidance, assistance, and support. In the neophyte stage, many participants consulted non-specialized conservative Christian resources in search of a means of resolving sexual-moral crisis. These faith-based supports lacked any specific focus on same-sex attraction or others sexual issues. Rather, these peer groups and religious advisors utilized generic Christian discourses and techniques to help participants navigate crisis and embrace redressive strategies consistent with church values. The lack of specialization in sexual issues or experience in dealing with homoeroticism distinguished these resources from ex-gay ministry programs, which were specifically designed to assist same-sex attracted Christians (see Chapter 6). These conservative Christian supports were also distinguished from affirming Christian resources (see Chapter 7) by their belief in the sinful nature of same-sex erotic acts.

The conservative Christian supports participants encountered in the neophyte stage universally adhered to a ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’ discourse, whereby individuals with same-sex desires were construed as loved by God but same-sex erotic behaviour was condemned as sinful (Moon, 2014). Although leaders of conservative Christian institutions (including local congregations and para-church support or study groups) maintained that homosexual behaviours were against the will of God and unequivocally transgressed the sacred order, they simultaneously worked to normalize and banalize homoerotic desires. Here, homoeroticism was bifurcated into acts and urges and each sexual experience was attributed a distinct moral status. While homosexual acts were presented as unambiguously sinful, same-sex attractions or urges were not in and of themselves considered transgressive or worthy of punitive action. Although homoeroticism was understood to be an unnatural and degraded state, individuals who experienced such urges were not held responsible for their desires or considered inherently immoral beings. Same-sex attraction was constructed as a sign of the omnipresent forces of evil and temptation that had plagued human kind since the fall³⁵. All human beings were constructed as sinners and God was said to love all his children, yet, homosexual was nevertheless sinful, so people were encouraged to resist temptation. Although same-sex desires were considered perverse within this ideology, they were not construed as grounds for personal condemnation and did not inherently compromise the spiritual or moral status of the individual unless acted on. This

ethical approach represents a complex blend of acceptance and condemnation. Although homoerotic urges are deemed dangerous and undesirable, they are not sins. Rather, they are burdens to bear in the pursuit of righteousness.

This dissociation of homosexual desires from moral culpability and punitive potential represents a rupture with earlier Christian thought, where ‘bad’ thoughts or feelings were sinful in and of themselves and needed to be confessed to religious authorities who could “intervene in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile... [unburdening the individual] of his wrongs” (Foucault, 1976/1990, pp. 61-62). Although all contemporary conservative Christians do not share this moral and spiritual perspective, the discourse of ‘qualified acceptance’ became increasingly prominent throughout the second half of the 20th century and has garnered wide support amongst religious experts and lay people (Moon, 2014; Nelson, 2008)³⁶. This perspective offered a fruitful alternative to the condemnatory theology that dominated the first half of the 21st century and saw same-sex attracted Christians thrust from the church and cast as inherently wicked beings (Moon, 2014).

In conservative Christian groups and mentorship relationships, same-sex attracted individuals were encouraged to pursue a life inspired by God and align themselves with the sacred order. This involved refraining from sinful or polluting behaviours and using Christianity as a framework for rebuilding self and life in the wake of crisis. Essentially, these spaces represented sites of Christian intensification, where struggling individuals could find meaning and direction by drawing near to God and embracing Christian values. Through biblical study, prayer, discipleship, discussion, and spiritual guidance, they were encouraged to deepen their commitment to the Lord and pattern their lives according to Christian principles and teachings. Here, same-sex desires were understood as just one of many immoral and ungodly desires that must be avoided in pursuit of a Christ-like existence. As Gerber (2011) noted, within the conservative Christian worldview “each person... is a sinner in need of a saviour” (p. 26). Thus, while this approach necessarily entailed behavioural renunciation, it affirmed that same-sex attracted Christian men need not live in shame or fear religious ostracism. Here, the possibility of living well as righteous, celibate, same-sex attracted men materialized. Below, I describe participants’ encounters with, and experiences of, these generic Christian resources.

God Help Us: Reaching out to Christian Resources

“I needed end to my confusion. I needed some peace. I needed some hope.” – Jed

Eleven participants reached out to conservative Christian institutions for guidance and support during the neophyte stage (Brad, Mitch, Jed, Charles, Todd, Walter, Jordan, Rodney, Paul, Adam, and Ned). Some joined Christian support and study groups. Others engaged in individual consultation with spiritual leaders in search of guidance on how to understand their sexual-moral dilemma and move forward as righteous men of God. Many made use of both group supports and individual consultation or spiritual counselling. These services were generalist and local, available to all distressed or confused Christians facing any form of struggle within a particular geographical area or congregation. Six of the men who made use of these services were already active participants within the Christian church at the time they decided to seek Christian guidance in navigating sexual-moral crisis (Brad, Mitch, Jed, Adam, Charles, and Ned). These supports were the first resources consulted by Mitch, Ned, and Charles in the neophyte stage. After leaving homosexuality behind, Mitch turned to a local priest for guidance at age 20 (1978). Ned sought the help of local church leaders after publically confessing his homosexual desires at a Christian revival retreat in his freshman year of college (age 18, roughly 1993). Charles became involved with a local men’s Bible fellowship group after graduating from college at age 23 (roughly 2005). Although he used this space to work through his sexual struggle, he did not reveal the specific temptation he was facing to other group members.

Conversely, Jed, Brad, and Adam turned to generic conservative Christian supports after having already consulted other institutions without success. After an unsatisfying experience with affirmative Christian resources (see Chapter 7), Jed joined a small Catholic prayer group on the advice of a Catholic Deacon (age 21, in 1983). Like Charles, Jed chose not to reveal the nature of his particular struggle to other group members. Although Brad was already involved with an ex-gay ministry group (see Chapter 6), he turned to a college Christian men’s group for additional support at roughly age 20 (1996). Adam also joined a local Christian men’s group at age 40 (roughly 1996) after an encounter with a secular counsellor left him convinced he was “homosexually oriented” but unclear about how to proceed as a same-sex attracted man of faith (see Chapter 8). Although this group was not specifically designed to address sexual issues, Adam noted that several group members also struggled with homoerotic urges.

For four others (Todd, Walter, Jordan, and Rodney), engagement with Christian resources during the neophyte stage represented a return to organized religion after a period of lapsed faith or non-participation (see Chapter 3). Walter, Rodney, and Todd had distanced themselves from God and church while exploring homosexual acts and relationships, only returning to the Christian community when homoeroticism proved unsatisfying and God offered them a different way of life. For Walter and Todd, conservative Christian resources were the first (and in the case of Walter, last) resources consulted in the neophyte stage. Walter similarly returned to the Christian community at age 53 (roughly 2008) after the AIDS virus had devastated his local gay community and he felt called to reconnect with God. After decades away from the church, he began exploring conservative Christian sexual ethics and developing a closer relationship to God through solitary study and worship. Eventually, he immersed himself within a local congregation and joined a Christian men's group. Todd also returned to conservative Christianity in the neophyte stage after years away from organized religion. Overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness and contemplating suicide, he turned to Christian leaders and peers in search of guidance and direction at age 28 (year 1980). Jordan found his way back to the church after ending a long-term relationship with another man at age 28 (year 2002). After several unsuccessful experiences with ex-gay ministries at the beginning of the neophyte stage (see Chapter 6), he had spent years vacillating between trying to alter his sexuality and engaging in homosexual relationships. Seeking peace, he sought the counsel of Christian leaders and joined a local men's group in search of new possibilities. Rodney had returned to the church at age 38 (roughly 2001) after God promised him a better life in service of the Lord. He attended a residential ex-gay ministry program on the advice of a Christian counsellor (see Chapter 6) and received support from the local congregation affiliated with this program.

Lastly, for Paul, the turn to conservative Christian resources in the neophyte stage marked an intensified commitment to faith. Although he and his family had been affiliated with Catholicism throughout his upbringing, Paul pursued a more immersive and charismatic faith in the face of crisis. He recalled: "I had determined that I was not going to be gay and part of that choice was to become a born-again Evangelical Christian." He immersed himself in the local Evangelical community at age 17 (roughly 1982) and sought pastoral guidance in addressing sexual-moral conflict.

The nature of personal experiences with conservative Christian resources thus varied across participants. For some it meant utilizing the existing spiritual community for new purposes ($n=6$), while for others it entailed a return to church and God or a new spiritual beginning ($n=5$). Moreover, while many of the men turned to these supports at the very beginning of the neophyte stage ($n=7$), others became engaged with conservative Christian services after alternative institutions failed to present a satisfying resolution to crisis ($n=4$). Lastly, while eight of the men were exclusively involved with conservative Christian institutions during their tenure with these resources, three others (Josiah, Jordan, and Brad) simultaneously sought the assistance of ex-gay ministry services during this time (see Chapter 6).

The remaining five participants (Mason, Matt, Josiah, Theo, and Seth) remained active within their local church communities throughout at least part of the neophyte period, but did not utilize these institutions as active supports in their efforts to resolve sexual-moral crisis. Instead, these men turned to specialized ex-gay ministry programs for guidance and direction (see Chapter 6), keeping their sexual struggle largely hidden from their local congregations throughout the neophyte stage. Although the reason for this decision was not always clear³⁷, Mason and Josiah noted that they had initially turned to local spiritual authorities for support, but found these individuals were unable to provide them with fruitful guidance and preferred to refer them to specialized ex-gay ministry programs. As Mason recalled: “I ended up telling the church and they sent me to this group.” Thus, while some degree of church participation was characteristic of all men throughout the neophyte stage, these spiritual institutions were not always actively involved in participants’ attempts to resolve sexual-moral crisis.

What can the Church do for You? Expectations of Conservative Christian Institutions

“I didn’t anticipate being, uh, ‘healed’ really.” - Adam

Although participants invariably approached conservative Christian resources seeking to escape limbo and restore a sense of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to their existence, individual expectations of these resources varied markedly. The vast majority of participants (Brad, Jed, Charles, Todd, Walter, Jordan, Rodney, Adam, and Ned) did not expect to achieve any radical change in their sexual desires as a result of engaging with these supports. Rather, they sought direction in living well as same-sex attracted men of faith. As Jed explained:

It wasn't about changing my homosexuality - I didn't even know that was an option ... It was just that I was finding life... not very hopeful ... I didn't want to go gay with my homosexuality, but what was I going to do? I needed a saviour – I was lost.

Here, Paul and Mitch prove to be important exceptions. Paul had turned to Evangelical Christianity with the express hope of altering his sexual preferences. His optimism was buoyed by Evangelical leaders, who believed he could reorient his desires by dedicating himself to spiritual growth. Mitch similarly noted that the Roman Catholic priest he sought guidance from was convinced that he could rid himself of homoerotic desire through spiritual devotion and participation in 'masculine' activities. Thus, while the majority of men approached these institutions with diffuse expectations, uncertain what new life possibilities might emerge as a result of these encounters, a small minority had clear expectations of sexual change.

Personal narratives clearly indicate that individual experiences of these resources varied greatly amongst participants. For many, engaging with conservative Christian resources was an overwhelmingly positive experience marked by pleasant encounters and the acquisition of fruitful strategies for resolving sexual-moral crisis. Others found these resources largely unproductive or even harmful. Below, I outline participants' experiences with conservative Christian resources and the role these encounters played in their attempts to resolve crisis.

Fruitful Encounters: Insight, Direction, and Support

"I didn't know what else to do or be. But then I found these answers and direction for my life." - Jed

In total, 10 participants described various gains associated with their time in conservative Christian settings. Paul was the only one who reported no benefit from these resources. Nine of the men (Jed, Walter, Adam, Rodney, Brad, Ned, Todd, Mitch, and Jordan) felt conservative Christian resources had provided them with constructive insights into sexual-moral crisis. Jed and Ned described how these institutions helped clarify the moral status of homosexual acts and allow them to better understand the nature of their struggle. For example, Jed recalls utilizing these resources to work through his moral doubts: "I just came to the conclusion: 'God, I have to find out from you. If gay is okay, then I'm going to go gay. If not, I won't.'" As he engaged in theological study, he came to the realization that homosexual acts were outside the will of God: "the Bible talks about a husband and a wife and how they should relate to one another... gives them direction... but it never talks about... a man and a man together, or a woman and a woman

together.” As he explored Christian theology, Walter reached a similar conclusion regarding the immorality of homosexual acts. For these two men, involvement with Christian literature provided a sense of moral lucidity grounded in the absolute word of God. As Walter explained: “I believe that God neither said too little nor too much. I believe he said exactly what he wanted to say.”

For nine participants (Adam, Walter, Jed, Rodney, Brad, Ned, Todd, Mitch, and Jordan), encountering discourses that promoted a moral bifurcation of homosexual acts and desires proved extremely fruitful. They explained how this powerful ethical tool allowed them to shed painful feelings of inherent wickedness, monstrosity, and immorality and come to see the self in a more positive light. For example, previous to his engagement with these resources, Brad recalled believing that his homosexual desires rendered him inherently offensive to God: “it was not just *acting* on my attractions that were wrong, it was even *having* them in the first place to me was proof that... I was distasteful to God.” As his “whole life and upbringing revolved around following God,” living with these desires had been nothing short of “horrifying.”

Under the guidance of conservative Christian leaders and peers, the men began to deconstruct the idea that homoerotic desires were inherently threatening to their moral character and open up the possibility of seeing the self as good and righteous despite their experiences of same-sex attraction. Mitch recalled how reframing these urges as morally “neutral” and shifting questions of right and wrong to “how you deal with them” allowed him to think more positively about himself and his situation. Adam similarly described coming to realize that he was not an inherently ‘bad’ person just because he was attracted to men during his engagement with these resources: “the action was forbidden but you couldn’t control what happened in your body.”

This new way of framing the relationship between homosexuality and morality served to powerfully mitigate the negative impact of these desires on participants’ dignity and self-esteem. By symbolically divorcing same-sex attractions from homosexual acts and locating the origin of these drives in exterior forces, the men were provided with an opportunity to see themselves as good, righteous Christian men in spite of their desires. Although they had to remain vigilant in their abstinence, such externalizing explanations meant the men did not need to feel ashamed of their sexual temptations or live with feelings of inherent wickedness or depravity. Through this powerful symbolic act, the shame and anxiety associated with same-sex attraction was dramatically diminished and the possibility of living well as righteous Christian men re-emerged.

Yet, although these desires were purged of their inherent sinfulness, they continued to be thought of as deviant, unnatural, and dangerous – powerful urges that inclined the men toward sin. It is important to note, therefore, that while this moral bifurcation allowed for a significant reduction in the stigma associated with homoeroticism, it did not affect a complete banalization of this condition.

The men also described how the normalization of their sexual struggle in conservative Christian settings served to mitigate feelings of radical alterity and reduce experiences of shame and self-loathing. In these encounters, past homosexual acts were framed as no worse than any other sin known to man. Moreover, although homoerotic desires continued to be associated with spiritual danger and the forces of evil, these urges were constructed as no more spiritually threatening than any other form of temptation. For six of the men (Adam, Walter, Jordan, Todd, Brad, Ned), the parallels constructed between homoeroticism and other forms of sin or temptation in conservative Christian settings proved highly rewarding. For example, Todd recalled how learning to appreciate the similarities between his own struggle and those of other Christians provided him with a powerful sense of normalcy: “It’s the same... if you were born with alcoholic desires, or if you... had strong sexual desires for women and rather than just be settled down with one woman... [you] wanted to be runnin,’ you know, everywhere.” Jordan similarly described how coming to realize that his own struggle did not render him inferior to other Christians provided him with a renewed sense of esteem and dignity. As he simply stated: “Everybody’s tempted by something.”

In their encounters with participants, Christian peers often worked to actively orchestrate experiences of identity and equality by creating parallels between their own challenges and the experience of same-sex attraction. For example, Brad recalled how a heterosexual Christian peer had helped him to see his desires as reflective of a common youthful struggle with sexual temptation: “[He] said... ‘I like *girls* a lot! And I’m trying not to sleep with my girlfriend and I suck at it... [and] he’s trying not to watch porn ... and he masturbates a disturbingly lot every day.’” Ned similarly noted that Christian peers and leaders helped him to realize his sexual urges were not fundamentally different from other temptations faced by Christians: “They related to me in the sense that, you know, it was a sexual issue like pornography or premarital sex.”

In these settings, participants learned to deconstruct the special stigma associated with homosexuality and same-sex attraction and eschew long held feelings of moral and spiritual

inferiority. Christian discourses of ‘universal temptation’ affirmed that, since the fall, human beings have been confronted by a variety of appealing behaviours that are not congruent with the will of God - homosexuality being no better or worse than any other form of moral and spiritual struggle. By eschewing notions of extraordinary sin and constructing analogies between homoeroticism and other forms of temptation, participants carried out a ‘metaphoric displacement’ (Fernandez, 1974) of same-sex attraction, imbuing it with new value by connecting it to the familiar and (relatively) banal image of ‘psychological compulsion’³⁸. In doing so, participants successfully shifted homoeroticism from a monstrous aberration to a relatively mundane reflection of human imperfection, shedding feelings of radical alterity and wickedness in favour of a more mundane interpretation of their desires.

Four participants (Brad, Charles, Jed, and Jordan) also described how interacting with other conservative Christian men helped them to develop a more inclusive understanding of maleness and validate their particular way of embodying masculinity. These individuals recalled a long history of feeling alienated from the cult of manhood (see Chapter 1) that had been intensified by their experience of same-sex attraction. As Charles explained: “As a guy with SSA (same-sex attraction)... you feel like you’re on the outside looking in with other men – you don’t feel like them. You feel like you’re different.” In conservative Christian spaces, participants were provided with an opportunity to reflect on issues of gender and masculinity – a process that ultimately allowed them to develop a robust collective identity and better appreciate their own manifestation of maleness. For some, developing close relationships with other men provided a strong sense of collective masculine identity. Charles explained how bonding with other Christian men helped him feel secure in his masculinity: “I felt like one of the guys... I felt secure in my own gender.” Jordan similarly noted that connecting with other Christian men helped him to feel more confident in his gendered identity: “young men... would come to me, asking me about dating women, and girls and all that stuff ... And really what it did is it affirmed my manhood and my identity as a man – as a masculine man.”

These men also recalled how meeting men who embodied diverse forms of masculinity and deconstructing stereotypical images of maleness enhanced their own gender esteem. As Jed explained: “[these men] began to reflect to me the feeling side [of masculinity] - caring, nurturing - yet *strong*, but yet benevolent and nurturing... they began to change my image of a man.” In Brad’s case, explicit affirmations of value from male peers helped validate his unique

manifestation of manhood. He recalled a specific incidence where a male peer had helped reassure him of his unique value by stating: “We have tons of guys we can shoot hoops with and play football with... you’re the only guy on the dorm floor who everyone goes to when they need to talk about what they’re feeling, because you understand emotions.” Having long endured feelings of difference and deviance, these men learned to appreciate their own brand of masculinity and eschew feelings of inferiority. Here again, the work of metaphoric-metonymic predication is evident (Fernandez, 1974). By creatively connecting the self to the rich semantic network of ‘masculinity’, participants were able to see themselves as embodying maleness despite the fact that many of their personal traits deviated from stereotypical images of manhood.

In addition to presenting the men with new ways of thinking about self, sexuality, and morality, conservative Christian supports also provided participants with a valuable sense of belonging and community. Having long felt alienated from other Christians and vulnerable to social exclusion, eight of the men (Ned, Brad, Rodney, Adam, Walter, Charles, Jed, and Todd) explained how experiences of support and acceptance within these spaces helped them to feel like full and equal members of the Christian community. For example, although Brad had long worried about the threat of social rejection or marginalization, he was relieved to discover that his peers embraced him as a valued fellow Christian in the wake of his sexual revaluation. He recalls: “they said, ‘Brad, we love you and you belong here and we’re going to support you... if your family throws you out, then we will be your family... if you don’t have a home... then this is your home!’” Rodney similarly described feeling enveloped with love and support by his local congregation: “They welcomed me. And they loved me... people *knew* what I – what my deal was and they didn’t *care*.” These positive social experiences affirmed participants’ sense of dignity, goodness, and esteem through powerful shows of love and acceptance and convinced participants that they could be part of the Christian community in spite of their desires (as long as they controlled their behaviours). Even those who kept their struggle a secret from particular actors within these spaces attained some of the same benefits of acceptance and integration as their more transparent peers. Jed recalled how the relationships he formed within his Christian men’s group provided him with a valuable sense of belonging: “I don’t know if you could say as strong as love, but [we developed] a great affection and camaraderie... a fondness for one another... It was very life giving.” Todd also noted that being embraced by a community of believers helped counter feelings of alienation and greatly improved his self-esteem: “These

people that reached out to me were very conservative Christians, but they ... they embraced *me*.” Experiences of being accepted and embraced by Christian peers provided participants with a sense of normalcy, value, and belonging and served to combat painful feelings of inferiority and otherness. In the very settings where they had feared rejection and abuse, participants experienced a powerful recognition of their humanity and their dignity (Ricoeur, 2004/2005).

Lastly, seven of the men (Jed, Jordan, Charles, Adam, Walter, Brad, and Todd) described how their engagement with various conservative Christian resources ultimately provided them with new, satisfying possibilities for resolving sexual-moral crisis and moving forward with their lives. In three cases - Jed, Jordan, and Charles - unexpected sexual changes suddenly revealed the possibility of living as a heterosexual man. Although these men had never anticipated that their engagement with these services would alter their patterns of desire, they found their sexual urges shifting as they immersed themselves in Christian communities, connected with male peers, and grew secure in their masculinity. All three found their homoerotic urges diminished during engagement with these services and Jed and Jordan also described developing an attraction to females during this period³⁹. Charles felt that this development was somehow related to his ability to finally form strong, non-sexual bonds with other young men: “When other guys think that you’re gay, they don’t want to be your friend... they’re grossed out... weirded out by you... [the group] was like a fresh start... I was able to develop new relationships that weren’t sexual.” Jed attributed this shift to his newfound dedication to the Lord and pursuit of righteousness: “It was just a matter of me following him [God] in this church community. Following forgiveness and who I am in Christ.” For Jordan, the credit for his sexual transformation was equally split between the relationships he developed in his Christian men’s groups and his concurrent participation in ex-gay ministry programs (see Chapter 6). Speaking to the influence of the former, he noted: “Attending men’s small groups, and men being just men. And teaching me what it means to be a man ... not only continued to affirm my identity, but develop my hunger and desire for a woman.” For these men, unexpected changes in sexual desire generated new interest in pursuing heterosexuality. While this was not the express intent of these resources, participants were pleased with this unexpected outcome and the new possibilities it engendered.

For four other men (Adam, Walter, Brad, and Todd), conservative Christian resources offered an appealing opportunity to resolve sexual-moral crisis by realigning oneself with the

sacred order. Here, the image of oneself as part of the living body of Christ offers a powerful ‘organizing metaphor’ (Fernandez, 1974) for reconfiguring self and life in the wake of crisis. These men were persuaded that embracing a life inspired by God and renouncing all sinful acts – including homoerotic conduct – offered a promising means of moving past limbo and restoring order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to their lives. For Walter, Brad, and Todd, the prospect of living well as celibate men of faith was a new and attractive solution to the enduring problem of sexual-moral crisis. For Adam, the idea of embracing celibacy, faith, and Christian fellowship as a means of overcoming crisis was not new. In the years following his divorce (see Chapter 3), Adam had remained celibate and spent much of his time serving the Christian community. In his case, conservative Christian supports served to reinforce the spiritual, social, and moral benefits of the redressive approach he had adopted many years ago.

In sum, the vast majority of those who consulted conservative Christian resources described numerous benefits associated with these encounters, including the attainment of fruitful new insights, social support and feelings of belonging, and new possibilities for overcoming crisis. A small minority also reported changes in their homoerotic desires that were both unexpected and inexplicable. Yet, not everyone who encountered these institutions described their experience in such positive terms.

Unfruitful Experiences: Confusion, Harm, and Unfulfilled Expectations

“I was looking for a cure wherever I could, and I thought, traditionally, a church would be the easiest place.” - Paul

Three of the men (Ned, Paul, and Mitch) described their engagement with conservative Christian supports as unproductive. Although Ned appreciated the love and support he received from fellow Christians, he found these spaces short on practical advice: “They supported me... but beyond that, they didn’t really know what to...what to suggest to me or anything like that.” Although these supports helped Ned shed feelings of wickedness and inferiority and vastly improved his self-concept, they failed to provide him with adequate guidance on how to manage his persistent sexual urges. Consequently, he remained confused about how to pragmatically move forward as a same-sex attracted Christian man. Cognizant of their limited efficacy, Ned recalled how local church leaders eventually encouraged him to connect with more specialized resources: “They eventually referred me... to these ministries that specialized in homosexuality.”

Having expected conservative Christian resources to alter their patterns of sexual desire, Mitch and Paul were extremely disappointed when these changes failed to materialize. Recalling his disenchantment with these supports, Paul noted: “They wanted to [help], and they thought that just becoming a Christian would be enough... that the better Christian you became, the less gay you would become.” Yet, over time, he came to realize that the prospect of reorienting his sexuality through prayer, worship, and fellowship “wasn’t realistic.” He noted, “I still had the same desires.” Mitch similarly explained how, despite his efforts to intensify his spiritual devotion and engage in masculine activities, his sexual urges remained unchanged: “I picked up weight-lifting and tried to enrol in sports and... [other activities] traditionally done as ‘masculine’... [But] I became increasingly frustrated with my inability to change my orientation.” Like Paul, Mitch found his efforts were in vain.

Although Mitch, Ned, and Paul all lamented the lack of productivity they experienced in conservative Christian settings, Mitch was the only participant whose narrative also described experiences of harm. He explained how the false hope of sexual reorientation - fostered by the priest he had consulted – had negatively impacted his psychological and emotional wellbeing. After five years of trying to alter his desires, he grew agitated and distressed by his lack of change, eventually reaching a point of psycho-emotional burnout: “I became increasingly frustrated with my inability to change my orientation... it all came to a climax where I started becoming psychotic – I started to have a psychotic break with reality... and uh, I entered a mental hospital.” For Mitch, the negative impact of conservative Christian resources went beyond themes of ineffectiveness, resulting in a remarkable deterioration of personal wellbeing.

Our Lord and Saviour: Reflecting on Experiences with Conservative Christianity

“Where He [God] clearly indicates to us what sin is, then we should be trying to avoid sin, rather than caving in to sin.” - Walter

In sum, non-specialized conservative Christian institutions positively benefitted participants by encouraging them to see themselves as good, normal, righteous, and valued in spite of their homosexual urges. These resources facilitated creative acts of spiritual, moral, and sexual deconstruction and remaking that allowed participants to feel better about their lives and selves without necessarily changing their desires. These symbolic manoeuvres opened up the possibility of living well as same-sex attracted Christian men by embracing God and church and turning away from homosexual acts and relationships. In the few cases where sexual changes

unexpectedly emerged, participants celebrated this shift and the alternative possibilities it engendered. Where conservative Christian supports proceeded with the express aim of facilitating sexual reorientation or clients sought pragmatic advice on managing their desires, conservative Christian resources proved much less effective. Ultimately, these supports were most successful when they focused on facilitating positive identity work and spiritual intensification and least beneficial when they explicitly tried to facilitate changes in sexual desire or were asked to provide pragmatic advice on coping with persistent homoerotic desires.

Despite the wealth of positive experiences associated with these resources, Walter was the only participant who immediately appropriated the strategy of celibate devotion and behavioural restraint to resolve sexual-moral crisis. Convinced that to live well was “to live within the confines of God’s word”, he exited the neophyte stage without consulting any other redressive institutions or resources. In Part 3, I discuss how he and others used the strategy of celibate devotion to remake their lives and selves and resolve feelings of confusion, fracture, despair, and disorder. The remaining nine participants felt compelled to consult other redressive institutions in the neophyte stage. Although Todd, Adam, Jordan, Rodney, and Brad felt the ways of thinking, feeling, and being promoted by conservative Christian offered an acceptable means of living with same-sex attraction, they were not yet convinced that celibate devotion offered the best means of resolving crisis. Curious about the prospect of sexual reorientation, Todd and Adam became engaged with ex-gay ministry programs. Likewise, Jordan, Rodney and Brad continued their ongoing involvement with ex-gay ministry programs, hoping to overcome homosexual desires and pursue heterosexual relationships. Despite positive experiences with conservative Christian supports, the prospect of sexual reorientation proved highly appealing and strategies of celibate devotion failed to garner immediate commitment.

Charles and Jed also consulted ex-gay ministry programs after their experiences with generic conservative Christian supports wrought unexpected sexual change. Surprised and perplexed by these changes, they were eager to learn more about the sexual transformation they had undergone. As Charles noted, “I was kind of intrigued. Because all I had ever heard was ‘you’re born gay, you can’t change.’ You know, people who have this are as they are, right?” Convinced that ex-gay leaders possessed this specialized knowledge, they too sought the help of these focused resources.

Conversely, those who were ultimately unsatisfied with conservative Christian supports (Paul, Ned, and Mitch) were forced to look elsewhere for guidance. Frustrated with the unfruitfulness of these supports, Paul and Ned came to the conclusion that church leaders “weren’t really equipped to deal with gay people,” as Paul stated. Still convinced that sexual reorientation was possible given the right guidance and support, these men went on to seek the help of ex-gay ministry leaders they deemed more experienced and knowledgeable in homosexual matters. As Paul recalled, “I decided to look further for experts.” After being released from psychiatric hospitalization, Mitch chose a different route. He distanced himself from the priest who had supervised his reorientation efforts and sought the guidance of secular mental health experts in working through sexual-moral crisis.

In sum, despite a wealth of positive experiences and beneficial outcomes, only one participant was immediately convinced that the ways of thinking, feeling, and being promoted by conservative Christian supports offered the best means of resolving crisis and moving forward with life. In the early moments of the neophyte stage, participants were eager to explore a wealth of possibilities for their lives and locate the most rewarding form of redress. For many, the prospect of sexual reorientation held particular appeal. In the following chapters, I describe participants’ encounters with alternative redressive institutions during the neophyte stage. While some of these encounters revealed additional (and, at times, preferable) opportunities for overcoming sexual-moral crisis, others serve to legitimize the strategy of celibate devotion and reinforce personal commitment to this approach.

³⁵ In Christian theology, the ‘fall of man’, or ‘the fall’, is a term used to describe the transition of the first man and woman from a state of innocent obedience to God to a state of guilty disobedience.

³⁶ Clark & Rakestraw (2008) argue that this perspective has come into dominance amongst authorities: “While conservative Christian ethicists agree that homosexual acts and participation in the so-called gay lifestyle are sinful, they do not generally hold that the condition itself calls down the wrath of God on a homosexual person” (p. 178). This view has also become a common feature of contemporary popular faith discourse (see, for example, Catholic Answers, 2004; Craig, 2008)

³⁷ In the cases of Matt, Todd, and Seth, it was not clear whether the threat of social exclusion or public condemnation was responsible for this hesitancy to seek assistance from local congregations or whether they simply did not feel as though religious leaders or scriptural texts were capable of providing them with effective direction on this issue. Nonetheless, these men were convinced that the church was not the place to work out their sexual struggle and did not actively seek assistance from others in these settings.

³⁸ Like Ricoeur (1986/2007), Fernandez (1974) affirmed that personal identity is constructed through the appropriation of external symbolic forms. He argued “the inchoate pronouns of social life – the ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘he’, ‘it’ – gain identity by predicating some sign-image, some metaphor upon themselves” (p. 122). Fernandez defined metaphor (and metonymy) as “the predication of a sign-image upon an inchoate subject” (p. 120). More specifically, he argued that metaphor is “the predication upon a subject of an object from a domain to which the subject belongs only by a stretch of the imagination” (p. 123) and that metonymy refers to associations based on contiguity within “the same frame of experience” (p. 125). Yet, he confessed, “the distinction between metaphor and metonymy can

be a slippery one” (p. 127). Focusing on the role of metaphor, metonymy, and opposition in the construction of the self, he notes that personal identity arises through relations of similarity and difference with various predicates. Depending on the value of the predicates within the local sociocultural system, such symbolic connections can serve to adorn or disparage the self – enhancing the individual’s sense of worth and value or diminishing their being. In healing settings, such processes of adornment are used to symbolically elevate the self and restore a sense of empowerment and esteem to the participant.

³⁹ Charles had always found females attractive and lived since adolescence with both homosexual and heterosexual urges.

Chapter 6 ~ Restoring the Heterosexual Self: Ex-Gay Ministry Services

“No one is actually a gay person... you were created male and heterosexual and something has confused that.” - Josiah

As noted in the global introduction, the ex-gay⁴⁰ ministry movement is committed to helping Christians with unwanted same-sex attraction pursue sexual ‘wholeness.’ The ex-gay ministry movement is comprised of a network of religious support groups, counsellors, therapists, and authors dedicated to “mobilizing the body of Christ to minister grace and truth to a world impacted by homosexuality” (Exodus International, 2005a, n.p.). Although a general ideology of sexual corruption permeates this movement, subtle differences in how the development of same-sex attraction is understood or which factors are emphasized are evident across particular services, groups, and counsellors. Moreover, while this movement invariably combines aspects of reparative therapy with forms of spiritual healing and worship, the specific practices and activities employed in particular settings can vary immensely (Wolkmir, 2006). Consequently, the following description of ex-gay ministry services includes an elaboration of the generic discourse that guides these interventions and attention to the specific teachings, processes, and activities encountered by participants of the current study.

Within this conservative Christian cosmology, the Old and New Testaments are understood to be the inspired word of God and homosexual behaviours and relationships are considered sinful transgressions. Like all acts that fall outside of God’s plan for moral living, homosexual behaviours are associated with spiritual, emotional, relational, and even physical danger (Exodus International, 2005c). Commenting on the moral tenor of these programs, Theo affirmed: “[There was] a basic agreement of what the Bible says about sexuality... that God intended it to be between one man and one woman in a monogamous, marital relationship.” However, as was the case in non-specialized conservative Christian supports (see Chapter 5), ex-gay ministry leaders endorsed an ethics of qualified acceptance (Nelson, 2008). While homosexual acts were deemed unambiguously transgressive and immoral, homosexual desires were not construed as inherently sinful. In its mission and doctrine, Exodus International (2005a, n.p.) stated: “Homosexual attraction and impulses ... are merely one of many human temptations reflective of our fallen nature. However... choosing to resolve these tendencies through homosexual behavior... distorts God’s intent for the individual and is thus sinful.” As Gerber (2011) explained, “[This process] frees up a significant dimension of homoeroticism from the

burden of sin, relieving participants from guilt or shame arising from desire itself” (p. 38). Like generic conservative Christian supports, the movement also maintains that homosexual acts are no worse than any other form of sin and these desires no more worrisome than any other temptation – a technique Gerber (2011) fittingly referred to as the ‘democratization of sin.’ Here, ex-gay ministry resources make use of the same processes of normalization and banalization used in non-specialized Christian settings.

Despite shared moral and cosmological convictions, ex-gay ministry services deviate from non-specialized conservative Christian supports in their commitment to psychodynamic theorizing and the explicit pathologization of homoeroticism (see Cianciotto & Cahill, 2006; Erzen, 2006; Mondimore, 1996; Tozer & McClanahan, 1999). In ex-gay discourse, same-sex attraction is attributed to the forces of evil and their impact on early childhood development. Homoeroticism is ultimately credited to the fallen state of humanity and the many sins that derail the typical trajectory of human development. As Wolkomir (2006) noted, homosexuality is construed as a sin that results from other sins. Traumatic experiences in early childhood – including a lack of bonding with the same-sex parent, over-involvement with the opposite-sex parent, same-sex peer rejection or experiences of sexual abuse⁴¹ - are thought to disrupt the natural process of gender identity development, leaving some men with a sense of perpetual ‘unmanliness’ and unmet needs for healthy male connection. At sexual maturation, these individuals are said to pursue the satisfaction of needs for male bonding and identity through sexual contact with other men (Erzen, 2006; Gerber, 2011; Wolkomir, 2006).

Participants also recalled how identifying too strongly with females or lacking a proper model of femininity was considered detrimental to the gender identification process. Paul explained, “[We were told] we didn’t have proper gender role modeling. Our dad wasn’t as masculine presenting as he should be. Mom was too masculine-presenting – that kind of thing.” Both mothers and fathers were thus implicated in the over-feminization or under-masculinization of young boys and sexualisation of these needs in later life. As Matt explained: “The basic theory... was that... we were disconnected with our masculine self... identified more with women than with men, and that made other men ‘the other’ that we desired”. Experiences of sexual abuse were also implicated in this process of gender misidentification and sexual confusion. As Paul noted, the means by which these experiences impacted (homo)sexual development was often less clearly articulated than parental and peer influences: “they often said

that sexual abuse had something to do with it, that by being sexually abused – for males in particular – um, being sexually abused by a male, that somehow made you gay.”

Ex-gay clients are thus told that their desires are a perversion of their normal, natural, and righteous heterosexual state. As Brad explained, the ex-gay ministry movement promotes the idea that “No one is really gay”: “You’re just a heterosexual with a homosexual problem.” Paul echoed this statement, noting: “They all believed that it was not a natural state. It’s something bad that happened to create this perversion... emotionally, developmentally, spiritually.” Here, developmental struggles and evil forces are constructed as the harbingers of sexual corruption. As Rodney noted, from this perspective, “homosexuality is... not a *sexual issue*. It’s a *relational issue*... it’s our desire to, to connect with each other in a manner that’s broken.” Although no single, standardized ideology of sexual development exists within this movement (Wolkomir, 2006), common themes of parental dysfunction, peer rejection, and sexual abuse consistently appeared across participant narratives. Brad referred to these factors as “The Big Three”, noting that if you presented with homosexual desires, it was assumed that “you had a bad relationship with your dad, you didn’t connect with your peers growing up, and [or] you were probably sexually abused or molested growing up.” All participants recalled being exposed to causal ideologies that attributed their desires to unmet needs for male bonding and a lack of proper gender identity development. Jordan summarized the causal discourse as follows: “the legitimate need to connect with the same sex becomes sexualized... you’re seeking masculinity, but you’re getting it in inappropriate ways”. Josiah provided a similar summation: “The energy that would be proper hunger for a father’s love has now been sexualized and directed at your peers.”

By associating same-sex attraction with images of dysfunction, harm, and pathology, the ex-gay ministry movement works to medicalize these desires, metaphorically transforming them from a reflection of inherent wickedness and monstrosity to an experience of unwellness. Yet, because they are ultimately grounded in the fallen, sinful nature of humankind, these urges are also metaphorically linked to the forces of evil - associated with the figure of the devil and his corruptive influence on humanity. Here, the contrast between heterosexuality and homosexuality is likened to the polar opposition between good and evil. Paul, Josiah, and Matt also recalled instances where ex-gay leaders attributed homoerotic desires to the direct action of supernatural forces through discourses of demonic possession or spiritual-moral degeneration. As Paul noted: “Sometimes they had spiritual reasons why we were gay and it could be evil spirits or demons. It

could be a curse passed down from our family.” Matt similarly recalled having been told that homosexual urges were a sign that the “devil was coming after you”. These supernatural forces serve a ‘subjunctivizing’ function in ex-gay causal narratives, maintaining various possible interpretations of same-sex attraction the past in an attempt to mediate ambiguity and uncertainty (Becker, 1999; Good, 1994; Mattingly, 1998). In doing so, they enable the model to explain instances of homoeroticism even when particular developmental events are not evident in personal narratives, thereby increasing the applicability and rhetorical force of the discourse.

From this perspective, homoeroticism involves the sexualisation of unmet needs arising from developmental wounds that are themselves attributed to the fallen nature of humanity. It is a form of psychological, emotional, and spiritual brokenness that eschews God’s plan for natural, normal, and healthy (hetero)sexual development. Because homosexual acts are construed as sinful and dysfunctional, engaging in such behaviour is believed to cause personal ruin (Exodus International, 2005b). Themes of impurity, sin, and pathology preclude all notions of living well as a gay man and the lives of LGBT persons are said to be characterized by emotional, psychological, moral, spiritual, relational, and physical unwellness. As Gerber (2011) explained, the gay community “is painted as desperate, pained, lonely, and sad” (p. 68). Johnston and Jenkins (2006) similarly reported that ex-gay ministry leaders and conversion therapists routinely portray gay men as miserable creatures with no hope of happiness. From this perspective, the man who experiences same-sex desires is a damaged person who cannot hope to live a normal, happy, healthy life until he has successfully healed from the damage he has sustained in childhood.

Participants affirmed that they frequently encountered dark images of the gay community in ex-gay ministry settings. The figure of the gay man become symbolically loaded with notions of hyper-sexualisation, promiscuity, disease, depression, loneliness, and dysfunction. For example, Ned recalled how sexual gratification was presented as “the number one issue” in the lives of gay men and Josiah remembered being told, “Most gay men have a new partner every night of the year and... engage in orgies on a regular basis.” Paul similarly noted that the general portrait of gay men presented by ex-gay leaders was “very grim, sad, and very highly sexualized.” Brad noted that the autobiographical narratives shared by ex-gay role models reinforced this portrait of tragedy: “The story always followed a script of ‘When I was in the gay lifestyle I was horrendously unhappy. I had sex with all kinds of strangers. I watched my friends

die of AIDS.’” Here, embracing a gay lifestyle not only meant embracing deviance and going against the word of God, but also forgoing any hope of a typical, happy life.

Although it clearly reinforces and legitimizes Christian homonegativity by drawing on the expertise of psychological theorists (see Certeau, 1984), the pathologization of homoeroticism also serves to further destigmatize this condition and open up the possibility of sexual healing. It allows same-sex attracted Christians to adopt a variation of the Parsonian sick role, wherein they are stripped of all responsibility for their condition and their deviance is tolerated by the group as long as they fulfill their obligation to seek healing (Parson, 1951, 1964). Consequently, ex-gay discourse entails a form of moral banalization not present in non-specialized conservative Christian settings (where the cause of homoeroticism remains largely mysterious). This detailed causal framework also opens up the potential for sexual change and healing. Although the individual is innocent of intrinsic moral flaw, they are deemed capable of, and responsible for, working to overcome past harms and restore themselves to a state of health and purity (Wolkomir, 2006; Gerber, 2011; Erzen, 2006). The goal of sexual reorientation follows intuitively from pathological and medical motifs. Homoeroticism is considered a symptom of disorder and dysfunction that can be remedied, reduced, or – at the very least – managed through therapeutic processes.

As ex-gay leaders consider sin to be central to the development of homoeroticism, realigning oneself with the sacred order and developing a close relationship with God is deemed essential to overcoming same-sex attraction (Erzen, 2006; Gerber, 2011; Wolkomir, 2011). As Wolkomir (2006) noted, “The core ... belief is that, through a close and right relationship with God, homosexuals can experience God’s redemptive love and healing, freeing individuals from homosexuality and allowing them to resume their true heterosexual identities” (pp. 31-32). Participants must purify their lives of sin and work toward a state of righteous patterned after the Lord. This involves cleansing the self of all impurity by confessing past sexual sins, ceasing all transgressive homoerotic acts, and separating oneself from ungodly communities. It also involves embracing the transformative power of the sacred, coming to identify with Jesus, and working to transform oneself in His image (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2006; Erzen, 2006; Exodus International, 2005a). Yet, as both sin and pathology, overcoming homosexuality also requires that participants work toward healing their developmental wounds in an attempt to restore their true, heterosexual nature. This involves developing insight into the origin of one’s desires and

working to heal the root causes of sexual dysfunction. As Gerber (2011) noted, ex-gay ministry programs attempt to “reorient sexual desire by reorienting gender identity” (p. 65).

Although no therapeutic processes are standard across the ex-gay ministry movement (Wolkomir, 2006), participants commonly reported techniques of religious intensification, behavioural control, and masculine identity development as part of their experiences. Participants were encouraged to draw on the power of God and the support of the Christian community in their efforts to renounce homoerotic activities, bringing faith to the fore of their lives and as they disconnected from ‘tempting’ communities, activities, and persons. As Matt explained: “What it basically came down to was you were supposed to lead a Christian life.” To help participants embrace a life inspired by God, ex-gay ministry programs included aspects of formal worship. As Charles noted, “It’s a Christian ministry so... it’s kind of set up like church... there is time for singing and praise and worship and things like that.”

Concepts and techniques borrowed from addictions treatment were also used to help participants refrain from engaging in compulsive homosexual behaviours. Metaphoric-metonymic predication was used to alter the moral status and individual experience of homoeroticism by linking it to medicalized images of sexual ‘compulsion’ and ‘addiction’ (Fernandez, 1974). Participants were taught to identify homoerotic ‘triggers’ and to avoid situations that heightened their desires and the possibility of homosexual behaviour. For example, Mason recalled mulling over his sexual history in an attempt to identify specific triggers and construct personalized avoidance strategies – to discover “what could you do different so you wouldn’t be in that kind of a situation or whatever.” Matt also described learning specific sexual avoidance strategies, “watching your thought patterns and switching them away from, um, lustful thoughts.” As Theo explained, developing strategies of behavioural control was considered essential to overcoming these desires: “You have to learn how to build boundaries.” Here, concepts and practices developed in the context of addictions treatment are used to help same-sex attracted men avoid sinful and dysfunctional sexual behaviour. As Matt explained, these programs were “sort of a mix between a mini church service and an AA meeting.” As with all compulsive behaviours, it was recognised that homosexual ‘relapses’ were likely to occur as participants learned to live without these behaviours. As Rodney explained: “When you are learning how to deal with those deep issues... you don’t get that perfect every time... So... at the beginning... there would be a time of grace... [Like] if you went into rehab for alcohol or

drugs.” Matt similarly noted that sexual slips were expected and tolerated within the ex-gay ministry program he attended: “There was no shame with it... [it was] like someone with a drinking problem going out and relapsing.”

Participants also described encountering techniques and practices intended to help them develop strong masculine identities. As Matt noted: “The healing part... would be to get back in touch with true masculinity... then, once you’re masculine, I guess you would want the opposite of that.” Developing strong male bonds was central to this approach. Brad recalled, “It was all about healing those dead spaces so that your natural heterosexuality could emerge...healing your relationships with your dad, seeing yourself as a male, becoming comfortable in stereotypical male things...[making] friendships with other guys.” Rodney similarly noted that he was encouraged to form deep, platonic relationships with other males by ex-gay leaders: “Relationship wherein you can share... [and] be connected with another... guy, outside of the context of the bedroom.” As Paul explained, these relationships were not only intended to fulfill the need for male bonding, but also provided the men with masculine role models: “They had us find straight men to be friends with in the church”.

Paul and Matt also noted that they were counselled to engage in stereotypically ‘masculine’ activities by ex-gay leaders and subjected to various forms of gender training. Paul noted: “there was a lot of gender lessons – what men wear, how men sit, how men talk, activities that men are in, activities that men are not in.” Matt recalled receiving similar advise on male gender norm conformity: “They suggested hanging out with more men, doing manly things... joining softball leagues, go where the straight men are and hang out with them... [And] around women I was supposed to be - take the lead and be dominant.” This gender role socialization was intended to help the men develop strong masculine identities and ultimately foster the desire for heterosexual contact. Lastly, Todd was encouraged to engage in masturbatory reconditioning (a process wherein he was instructed to fantasize about his wife while masturbating). Although common in the history of reparative therapy, he was the only participant who encountered such behaviourist interventions. None of the men reported having been subject to any biological (hormonal, drug, surgical, etc.) or traditional aversion therapy (electroshock therapy, apomorphine treatment, etc.) techniques.

This redressive approach is thus part supplication, part purification, and part therapy. The individual must discipline the body and purify the self in pursuit of a righteous, God-like

existence. The exercise of the will is central to this task. As Jordan explained, “Someone has to have the willingness or desire to walk in healthy heterosexuality.” Charles similarly noted that the individual must possess “a motivation to do the program and to do the work.” Yet, God is said to help the individual by providing him with the necessary strength and perseverance required of this undertaking (Erzen, 2006; Wolkomir, 2006). Overcoming homosexuality thus entails dedication and hard work and a fruitful partnership between client, counsellor, and God. As Jed explained, all three of these parties have an important role to play in successful overcoming same-sex attraction: “hopefully all of that works together and brings about change.”

This hope for change has long characterized the appeal and intrigue of ex-gay ministries. Leaders interpret biblical passages as a sign that liberation from same-sex attraction is possible⁴² and promote the stories of those who have gone on to marry and father children as evidence of their success (Erzen, 2006). As Wolkomir (2006) noted, “It is this idea – that individuals can be freed from slavery to their sexual sins – that is captured in the [foundational] organization’s name [‘Exodus’]” (p. 31). Yet, ‘success’ in this context is not limited to the eradication of homosexual desire or the development of strong heterosexual urges. Exodus Global Alliance recently affirmed that changes in sexual identity, behaviour, lifestyle, relationships, and desires are all important events (2015b) that enable “growth towards Godly heterosexuality” (para. 8). Here, successful reorientation is marked not only by changes in sexual desire, but also by a “growing capacity to turn away from temptations, a reconciling of ones identity with Jesus Christ, being transformed into His image” (Exodus Global Alliance, 2015b, para. 8). From this perspective, “healthy marriages as well as a Godly single life are good indicators of [sexual] transformation” (Exodus Global Alliance, 2015b, para. 8). Thus, while the possibilities of attaining a satisfying heterosexual relationship or shifting one’s desires have drawn much attention and interest, the pursuit of sexual ‘purity’ or ‘wholeness’ in ex-gay ministry settings is not solely focused on these outcomes. For many, successfully overcoming these desires will mean gaining control over ‘compulsive’ homoerotic urges and living in the image of God. Here again, metaphoric images of oneself as part of the ‘living body of Christ’ are used to transform the individual through the pursuit of a Christ-like existence (Fernandez, 1974).

Lastly, it is important to note that the credentials of ex-gay ministry leaders, experts, authors, and counsellors are variable and often ambiguous. The vast majority of ex-gay authorities encountered by participants had personally struggled with homoeroticism or other

sexual challenges in their own lives. Yet, aside from such experiential expertise, the qualifications of leaders and advisors remained largely unclear. It is likely that at least some of the men who engaged in individual counselling worked with trained Christian counsellors⁴³. It is also likely that many group leaders had received training some form of leadership training, particularly in cases where standardized program plans were used⁴⁴. Yet, the specific qualifications of those in positions of authority often remained obscure, both to myself and, it would seem, participants. As Paul explained, clients, religious leaders, and loved ones generally assumed ex-gay leaders were sexual “authorities”, never questioning their qualifications.

In what follows, I outline participants’ expectations of, and various forms of engagements with, ex-gay ministry resources. I then describe their personal experiences with these resources, attending to aspects of ex-gay ministry programs that were beneficial or productive as well as those that proved ineffective or even harmful. I close by reflecting on how key individual variables help make sense of individual differences in client outcomes and experiences.

A Place for Men Like Me: Encounters with the Ex-Gay Ministry Movement

“I remember one of the church bulletins, there was a notice about this new group that was starting for people that were struggling with homosexuality... I thought it was God telling me, you know, ‘here is a path that, you know, you can take to get out of this!’” – Matt

Throughout the neophyte stage, 15 of the men became involved with ex-gay ministry services (all but Walter). These resources occupied various positions in the trajectory of the neophyte stage. For four of the men (Mason, Seth, Theo, and Matt), ex-gay ministry services were the first resources consulted in the neophyte stage, independent of other supports. Four others (Jordan, Rodney, Josiah, and Brad) consulted ex-gay ministry services in tandem with other institutional supports at the beginning of the neophyte stage. Jordan and Rodney engaged with conservative Christian resources in tandem with ex-gay programming (see Chapter 5), while Josiah paired these resources with secular mental health services (see Chapter 8). Throughout his lengthy tenure in the ex-gay ministry movement, Brad supplemented these services with conservative Christian supports and, later, secular mental health services (see Chapter 8). The remaining seven men (Todd, Ned, Adam, Mitch, Charles, Jed, and Paul) had previously consulted other institutions before connecting with the ex-gay ministry movement. Paul, Ned, Charles, Todd, and Jed sought the help of ex-gay leaders when generic Christian resources proved unfruitful, dissatisfying, or incapable of making sense of their sexual

experiences (see Chapter 5). Adam and Mitch turned to these resources having previously consulted both secular psychology and conservative Christian institutions.

Participants also came into contact with ex-gay ministry resources through various means. Four of the men (Ned, Mason, Josiah, and Jordan) were referred to these services by local church leaders, who felt incapable of advising them on issues of homosexuality. Ned attended a weekly group program in Oregon from 1995 to 1997 (roughly age 20 - 22) and Mason briefly participated in a weekly meeting group in Arizona in 1999 (roughly age 54). Josiah attended individual ex-gay counselling in Alberta, Canada from 2000 to 2002 (roughly age 19 - 21). Jordan described having engaged with ex-gay ministry resources on several occasions. He first underwent individual ex-gay counselling in California from 1990-1991 (age 17-18), reading ex-gay literature on the side. When his boss mistakenly accused him of engaging in homosexual acts a few years later, he recalled deciding to explore life as a gay man: "If I'm going to be criticized for being a homosexual and suffer the consequences of one, I might as well go after my heart's desire!" However, after his first penetrative sexual encounter with another man, he was overcome by moral panic and briefly joined an ex-gay ministry group in California in 1999 (age 25). When he later fell in love with a man he met online, he once again lived as an openly gay man for three years. When this relationship grew dissatisfying, he left his partner, turned his life back over to God and began participating in another ex-gay ministry group in California in 2003 (age 29).

Four others (Brad, Seth, Todd, and Rodney) became involved with the ex-gay ministry movement on the advice of esteemed Christian peers, counsellors, and family members. A Christian peer helped Brad connect with ex-gay ministry literature while he was still in high school in the mid-1990s (around age 16). He later became involved in a group program from 1996 to 1997 while attending college in Illinois (age 20 to 21) and continued to take part in retreats, conferences, and online support groups for several years after leaving this group (until 2003, age 27). A peer also referred Seth to an ex-gay ministry group in Michigan in 2005 (age 27). When his sexual desires and distress persisted after this initial intervention, he subsequently consulted an individual ex-gay counsellor in Michigan before returning to group programming from 2008 to 2009 (age 30 to 31). Todd first encountered ex-gay ministry resources in the form of self-help audiotapes in the early 1980s but did not become seriously involved with this movement until a Christian peer urged him to pursue individual ex-gay counselling in California

in 1982 (roughly age 30). When it became clear in 2008 that his heterosexual marriage was being negatively impacted by his persistent homoerotic urges, Todd returned to individual ex-gay counselling (age 56). After leaving his gay partner of 18 years, Rodney was introduced to the ex-gay ministry movement by a Christian counsellor he had sought to help him work through his separation. Together, they located a residential ex-gay ministry program in California, which Rodney attended in 2002 (roughly age 38).

The remaining seven participants (Adam, Theo, Charles, Mitch, Matt, Paul, Jed) discovered ex-gay ministry supports independently through church advertisements ($n=2$) or independent research ($n=5$). Beginning in 1997 (roughly age 41), Adam briefly participated in two ex-gay ministry groups in Florida and Tennessee. Matt also attended an ex-gay ministry group in Illinois from 1986 to 1988 (age 19 to 21) while also participating in various ex-gay conferences throughout this period. Paul first engaged in a group program in New York from 1985 to 1987 (age 20 to 22). When his heterosexual marriage ended five years later, he participated in a residential ex-gay ministry program in Tennessee from 1996 to 1998 (age 31 to 33) and two international ex-gay ministry group programs in 1996 (at age 31) and 1998 (at age 33). Mitch briefly attended an ex-gay ministry group in California in 1991 (at age 32) after his secular psychologist's advice to pursue life as an openly gay man proved unsatisfying (see Chapter 8). He soon quit this group and resumed life as an openly gay man until his father's death in 2006 inspired him to join a second ex-gay ministry group in California at age 47. Mitch noted that his father never approved of his sexuality and that his death wrought complex feelings of shame, loss, and regret. Although he had briefly encountered the ex-gay ministry movement in the 1990s, Theo did not become seriously involved with these resources until his children exposed his ongoing homosexual struggle in 2007 (age 52). At this time, he sought the help of an ex-gay ministry group based in Oklahoma. Lastly, Charles and Jed came into contact with the ex-gay ministry resources while searching for information that would explain the sexual changes they experienced during their time in conservative Christian men's groups (see Chapter 5). Jed engaged with a variety of ex-gay conferences, classes, and texts beginning in roughly 1985 (age 23) and Charles enrolled in a weekly group program in Virginia in 2007 (age 25) after having explored a variety of ex-gay literature and attended several conferences.

Individual experiences with ex-gay ministry resources thus differed greatly in terms of timing, format, and pattern of consultation. The men encountered a variety of different ex-gay

ministry resources throughout the neophyte stage. Although weekly group programs were most common ($n=12$), participants also engaged with residential services (where participants lived with other same-sex attracted clients and engaged in intensive, on-site ex-gay ministry programming) ($n=2$); individual counsellors ($n=5$); conferences and retreats ($n=3$); texts, workbooks, and audiotapes ($n=5$); and online support groups ($n=1$) throughout the neophyte stage. Although most weekly groups were specifically focused on issues of unwanted same-sex attraction, some provided support to Christian men and women facing a variety of forms of sexual and relational ‘brokenness’, including pornography addiction, adultery, and compulsive masturbation. Five of the men (Brad, Charles, Jordan, Mitch, Theo) participated in groups that embraced the standardized programs created by Desert Stream Ministries. All groups were lead by ex-gay counsellors or leaders, who typically also met with participants for individual counselling sessions outside of group meetings.

The majority of participants ($n=10$) consulted with more than one form of ex-gay ministry programming throughout the neophyte stage and several ($n=4$) engaged with similar types of resource on more than one occasion. While some men described single encounters with ex-gay ministry resources, patterns of recurring consultation were thus much more common in the current data. For three of the men, the ongoing use of these resources was interrupted by several years where they pursued homosexual relationships (Jordan and Mitch) or attempted to live as heterosexual, married men (Paul). Below, I describe what participants hoped to accomplish by engaging with ex-gay services.

Individual Expectations and the Mood of Ex-Gay Ministry Consultation

“I wanted to find out whether or not it was true that God can heal the broken... no matter what it is. Sexually, in my case.” - Theo

Participants approached ex-gay ministry services with a variety of expectations and perceived options. Although the prospect of radically reorienting one’s desires proved highly enticing, not all participants were convinced such a transformation was possible or necessary to life a fulfilling life. Some adopted a curious, experimental approach to these resources, unsure what – if anything – they might contribute to the search for redress. Others were confident in the prospect of reorienting their desires and incapable of imagining alternative means of successfully resolving sexual-moral crisis. Paul and Josiah were both examples of the latter approach to ex-gay ministry services. Paul recalled being “very hopeful” that he would shed his homosexual

urges and develop an attraction to females. Having benefited from religious healing of a physical malady in his youth, Josiah was similarly optimistic that ex-gay counselling would provoke a miraculous “change” in his sexual desires. Both were confident in the prospect of sexual change and eagerly looked forward to a life free of homoeroticism.

Although Brad, Ned, and Todd had initially been sceptical of the prospect of reorienting their desires, they found their doubts soon dissipated as they met with confident leaders and were exposed to a host of ex-gay ministry success stories. Brad recalled, “I saw that the leader was married... saw how happy he was and it was like, ‘Well, maybe there is hope.’” Todd similarly described growing confident in the possibility of sexual reorientation after meeting with an ex-gay therapist: “I believed that for... many years, hung on to that hope.” Here, feelings of doubt gave way to fervent optimism as the men became entrenched in the ex-gay ministry movement.

Six others (Theo, Matt, Mitch, Rodney, Seth, and Jordan) described approaching these resources with a curious attitude and tempered expectations. Although these men were eager to resolve sexual-moral crisis, they were unsure what to expect from ex-gay ministry services. Matt described approaching these resources without any strong expectations of sexual change: “I was fairly sceptical... it was an experiment... I was sort of like, ‘Okay, let’s see if this actually works.’” These men entered into ex-gay ministry services hoping to find some guidance or benefit, without highly specific expectations. Rodney noted that he was “exhausted with just the whole gay everything and willing to listen to whatever it was they had to say”. Jordan similarly recalled vaguely hoping these resources would somehow “make a difference” in his life. Although Mitch hoped these resources would rid him of homosexual desire, he notes that he was not fixated on this outcome and willing to entertain a host of other possible benefits: “[I thought maybe I would] meet a Christian lesbian woman... and get married and work on each other’s problems...(or) have a platonic relationship with some other ex-gay male that would satisfy my desires without breaking any religious laws.” Although the prospect of sexual reorientation was highly appealing, these men were prepared to embrace less dramatic forms of personal growth and change and entertain various means of resolving sexual-moral crisis.

The remaining four men (Charles, Jed, Adam, and Mason) were unique in having identified satisfying opportunities for resolving sexual-moral crisis prior to ever engaging with ex-gay ministry services. Charles and Jed had already experienced significant shifts in their patterns of sexual desire (see Chapter 5) and were confident in their ability to pursue

heterosexual relationships. In fact, Charles was in a serious relationship with a woman when he decided to join an ex-gay ministry group. Adam and Mason had also identified satisfying possibilities for their lives. Having long lived as a celibate Christian man, Adam knew that he could live a satisfying life without sexual fulfillment and Mason had increasingly considered leaving the church and pursuing a homosexual relationship since divorcing his wife. For Adam and Mason, ex-gay ministry programming offered one last opportunity to be dissuaded from resigning oneself to celibacy or pursuing life as a gay man. As Mason noted: “I thought, maybe, maybe, maybe they can tell me something that will change my mind.” Confident in their ability to create satisfying lives with or without the help of the ex-gay ministry movement, these four individuals adopted a more casual and detached attitude toward these resources that was lacking in the sense of urgency, anxiety, and desperation described by many of their peers.

Participants thus approached ex-gay ministry resources with a variety of expectations and aspirations and in the context of different imagined life possibilities. The fact that many of the men did not anticipate radical sexual change or had already experienced a shift in their sexual desires was interesting given that ‘sexual reorientation’ is widely assumed to be the intent of ex-gay ministry participation in both the research literature and popular culture. In the conclusion of this chapter, I describe how these differences in expectations greatly impacted how participants evaluated ex-gay ministry services. For now, I turn to a description of participants’ experiences with ex-gay ministry resources, beginning with the satisfying and beneficial aspects of these programs before turning to discuss those that were troubling or harmful.

Insight, Esteem, and Connection: Positive Experiences with Ex-Gay Ministry Services

“It opened my eyes [to the fact] that God values... a homosexual just as much as a heterosexual.” - Seth

All of the men who engaged with ex-gay ministry resources described aspects of these experiences that were enlightening, enjoyable, or beneficial. Six of the men (Charles, Jed, Jordan, Rodney, Theo, and Seth) noted that ex-gay ministry resources provided them with new, fruitful insight into the nature of sexual-moral crisis. They described how the ideologies promulgated by this movement allowed them to make sense of their desires and the suffering they had endured. For example, Brad described how ex-gay ministry discourses allowed him to understand the relationship between his experiences of sexual abuse, parental distance, and peer rejection and his homosexual urges: “I was like, ‘Wow! That’s three for three for me! This

makes total sense!” Rodney similarly explained how ex-gay ministry teachings not only illuminated the origins of his desires, but also made sense of the dissatisfaction he experienced while living as a gay man: “They helped me to see ... that [what] I was trying to do in acting out within same-sex relationship... was really establishing an intimacy level with another man.” By locating the origin of their attractions in key developmental events, ex-gay discourses allowed these participants to make sense of an experience previously characterized by ambiguity, senselessness, and chaos. As Good (1994) noted, the ability to label and name one’s suffering is a powerful healing act that helps to ground the reconstruction of the lifeworld and mediate feelings of chaos and meaninglessness – a point discussed further in Chapter 13. For Jed and Charles, ex-gay discourse also provided insight into how they had managed to affect change in their patterns of attraction. As Jed recalled: “They were putting some names to ‘defensive detachment’ and ‘contempt’ and ‘forgiveness’ and ‘masculine identity’ ... it was getting a name to it, getting shape and form to it.”

Four of the men (Jordan, Matt, Theo, and Seth) also noted that these programs helped them to eschew feelings of radical difference and moral inferiority by constructing parallels between their own struggles and those of their heterosexual peers. For example, Jordan recalled how coming to identify with heterosexual group members who struggled with other sexual issues helped him to shed painful feelings of otherness: “We all have issues that we can either deal with in appropriate or inappropriate ways... that was a huge help... [to] realize that I’m not different from any other man.” Theo also noted that his participation in ex-gay ministry programs helped him to realize that his sexual struggle was no worse than those of his Christian peers: “The truth of the matter is that sexual problems are sexual problems, regardless of what your temptation or sexual attraction is.” Matt similarly appreciated the democratization of sin and temptation within these settings: “The struggle with homosexuality was just another struggle... like alcoholism, or gambling... it was like, ‘this is my struggle that I’ll have to deal with, but... it’s not worse than any other sin.” By reinforcing the idea that all Christians face challenges and temptations, ex-gay leaders encouraged participants to see themselves as equal to their peers despite their sexual struggle. Here, creative processes of metaphoric-metonymic predication allowed participants to identify with other men and normalize and banalize their struggle in a manner similar to that described in the context of generic conservative Christian supports (see Chapter 5).

Parallels with non-specialized conservative Christian resources are also evident in

participants' comments about the value of masculine identity development. Five of the men (Brad, Jordan, Rodney, Matt, and Seth) noted that ex-gay ministry resources improved their gender identity and esteem and helped them to rethink masculinity. Rodney, like many others, described having long felt painfully at odds with typical Western images of masculinity: "In our culture... [you] get, uh, the football player image, the Marlboro man, just this whole loner type of a rough and tough tumble." Yet, by connecting with supportive peers and working to deconstruct rigid gender norms in ex-gay settings, these men grew more confident in their masculinity. Brad recalled: "What they taught me was the confidence to say, 'Even if I'm not a jock-playing guy, I am still male. And I have something to offer in that.'" Seth similarly described how his involvement with ex-gay ministry programs helped him to redefine masculinity and develop a shared identity with other males: "It helped me see that I am a man because God made me a man... [that] the defining characteristics of men isn't hunting and fishing and drinkin' beer and watching the Superbowl."

By expanding their definitions of masculinity to include their own ways of thinking, feeling, and being, these men grew more confident in their ability to relate to other males and subsequently found themselves developing more satisfying relationships with their peers. As Brad explained, "I started to process how I saw myself as other... and how I had no real safe male friendships because I feared men, and felt like I wasn't like I was one of them." Matt similarly described how reworking his understanding of masculinity during his time with ex-gay ministries allowed him to identify with and better interact with "straight" men: "It cracked that, um, sort of 'ghetto' mentality... that I could only hang out with gay people, or I could only hang out with women who were accepting of gay men." For these men, learning to embody and identify with masculinity without conforming to stereotypical images of maleness provided an important boost to their self-esteem and their relationships. Through metaphoric extension and the transcendence of rigid gender binaries, participants were able to see themselves as reflecting a valid form of masculinity that connected them to other males and reduced feelings of difference and otherness (Becker, 1999; Fernandez, 1974).

Although the benefits of ex-gay ministry services described to this point have been similar to those identified in conservative Christian settings, the specialized nature of these resources also provided participants with particular benefits not observed in generic Christian spaces. A profound sense of safety and security was one such benefit. As spaces specifically

designed for those experiencing same-sex attraction or other forms of sexual brokenness, ex-gay ministry services provided participants with unique, marginal Christian spaces where they could be open about their sexual desires and experiences without fear of reproach. Nine of the men (Adam, Brad, Jordan, Matt, Mitch, Paul, Rodney, Theo, and Seth) described this capacity for safe, candid self-expression as an important benefit of ex-gay ministry spaces. Brad explained, “For the first time, it gave me a safe space where I could say ‘This is who I am’... ‘this is what I am feeling’.” Jordan similarly noted: “It was a safe place to share. You could be open... you wouldn’t be made fun of or mocked or anything... they weren’t there to judge.” Ex-gay ministry resources provided a secure sanctuary within the Christian community where participants could reflect candidly on their experiences and work to restore order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to their lives without the threat of social ostracization or religious condemnation. As Matt explained, “[it] was a way to be out, where same sex attraction wasn’t this dirty little secret and it was actually talked about.” Whereas personal experiences of homosexuality are typically veiled and silenced in Christian institutions, ex-gay ministry spaces created a unique social opening where these topics could be recognized within the church and given voice in the spiritual community (see Douglas, 1986). Here, the silencing force of stigma receded and, as Theo reported, the men were able to “share openly the things that they would feel uncomfortable telling anyone else”.

The specialized nature of ex-gay ministry services also allowed some men to experience a powerful form of connection and shared identity. Eleven participants (Adam, Brad, Charles, Mason, Matt, Mitch, Ned, Paul, Rodney, Theo, and Seth) attested to the value of locating a community of same-sex attracted peers who had shared their experiences of confusion and suffering. These encounters affirmed that participants were not alone in their struggle and helped mitigate feelings of otherness and the pain of social stigma. As Ned stated, “It was great being with other people and knowing that I wasn’t the only Christian out there who experienced same-sex attraction.” Paul similarly explained: “There was this relief of being among other people who were Christians who were struggling. It just gave you a sense of like ‘I’m not the only one in the world’ – ‘I found my people,’ in a way.” Listening to the stories of other same-sex attracted Christian men also helped participants validate and legitimize their own sense of confusion, fear, anxiety, and distress by connecting these emotional states to shared experience of sexual-moral crisis. Here, participants broke through the isolation of private suffering and developed an

empowering sense of solidarity, camaraderie, and collective identity. As Rodney explained: “I was just so happy that I found a place that understood what I was going through, that I couldn’t stand it... I really just related with the connectedness of ‘we are in this together as a whole.’” Through such ‘mirrored exchanges’ (Devisch & Gailly, 1985), participants attained a powerful recognition of their shared dignity and humanity. Speaking to the invaluable nature of this community, Brad noted: “That ministry probably saved my life... having that kind of safe space where people listened... without judgment and I felt commonality with other men, um – pulled me back from a pretty scary place.”

Eight of the men (Brad, Adam, Paul, Josiah, Rodney, Theo, Todd, Seth) also explained how the emphasis on overcoming traumatic or troubling past experiences and pursuing a greater state of emotional, psychological, and relational wellbeing in these settings proved to be of benefit to their lives. Brad, Paul, Adam, Josiah, and Rodney explained how ex-gay ministry counselling and group work provided them with a unique opportunity to reflect on and work through experiences of childhood sexual abuse and parental neglect. Brad noted: “I started to process through being abused and how that wasn’t my fault...even though my body had responded during it.” Adam similarly described how reflecting on and speaking about his troubled childhood in the context of group programming proved to be a cathartic and healing experience: “I started telling my story, remembering and telling them about [how] my earliest memory was of my older siblings, um, treating me with contempt... [and] I started (laughs), started to quiver and cry.” Josiah also noted that his individual ex-gay counsellor helped him to better understand his challenging relationship with his stepfather and realize the value in distancing himself from this painful relationship: “That was a very ‘haaahhhhh,’ you know, deep sigh sort of moment – that, ‘oh, I have permission to do that.’” For these men, ex-gay ministry services provided a unique opportunity to make sense of troubling past events, re-examine social obligations, and attribute new moral value to personal experiences.

For four of the men (Theo, Seth, Matt, and Josiah), learning to forgive oneself for sexual sins was also an important part of ex-gay ministry participation. These individuals recalled being encouraged by ex-gay ministry leaders to excuse past sexual indiscretions and accept God’s grace⁴⁵ and love in spite of moral missteps. Here, sin and transgression were constructed as a typical feature of human life and sexual ‘falls’ were construed as a normal part of the redressive process. As Theo explained, “A huge amount of the study involves being able to accept

forgiveness, being able to forgive yourself, being able to accept forgiveness of God.” Josiah described embracing the forgiveness of God as a transformative experience that allowed him to come to terms with his sexual past: “In that moment, I knew that I was forgiven for everything in the past... I had never experienced such a sensation of being clean.” Seth similarly described how ex-gay leaders helped him learn to forgive himself for sexual indiscretions committed during his time in ex-gay ministry programs: “While I was going to therapy, I cheated... and it was just a rough, horrible part of our marriage... but... since I did it while I was going to therapy, I had the resources to work through it.” Learning to forgive one’s past sins and embrace the grace of God served to powerfully mitigate feelings of shame, regret, and self-loathing related to past sexual transgression.

Five others (Rodney, Theo, Todd, and Matt) described how contemplative activities, group discussions, and collective healing processes allowed them to grow and develop as individuals in ways beyond sexual functioning. Rodney described how participating in a residential ex-gay program, where men worked together to support one another in their sexual struggle, helped him to become more confident in himself and less self-centred in his relationships: “[I became] more comfortable with who I am... it grew me up relationally and emotionally.” Theo described how being encouraged to talk about his failings and fears taught him to be more emotionally expressive, humble, and comfortable with vulnerability: “It was a very emotional thing to...figure out how to open up to people and share private things about myself or failures... you have to criticize your, your arrogance, you know, to be able to open up.” Todd also noted that engaging in reflective activities and talking about his struggle helped him to get acquainted with his own psychological and emotional needs: “It put me into more self-focus.” For Matt, engaging in processes of self-contemplation in ex-gay programs allowed him to identify and correct various self-defeating behaviours: “I really did need to slow down and... get my life together a little bit... [so] I went back to college... buckled down... got better grades, I needed to clean up, you know, stop the drinking, stop the smoking.” As they reflected on their lives and considered who they were and what they hoped to become, others accessed the fundamental healing properties of narrative and its ability to transform the self by imparting meaning to the past and direction to the future (see Good, 1994). For these men, ex-gay resources proved to be a boon to their psychological, emotional, relational, and physical wellbeing. As they reflected on their lives and considered who they were and what they hoped to

become, others accessed the fundamental healing properties of narrative and its ability to transform the self by imparting meaning to the past and direction to the future (see Good, 1994).

Lastly, four of the men (Rodney, Theo, Jed, and Jordan) reported that these resources enabled them to refrain from homosexual activity and attain a positive shift in their desires. They described how learning and implementing various forms of sexual self-management reminiscent of the ‘relapse prevention’ strategies used to treat addiction were an important aspect of this achievement. Theo explained how he learned to identify ‘homosexual triggers’ and avoid acting on his sexual temptations: “Once you identify those triggers... once you’ve learned the techniques for recognizing the cycle [of compulsive sexual activity] and once you have an exit strategy in place... and you use it. You get yourself out.” As he refrained from homosexual acts, he found his homosexual desires diminished over time: “Going through that process over and over and over again basically... sort of rewires the brain... rewires your wants and needs for different things.” Other participants similarly described how refraining from homosexual acts, resolving feelings of inadequacy and emasculation, fulfilling the need for healthy male bonding, learning to reframe homoerotic desires as indicative of developmental dysfunction, and experiencing the healing power of God wrought a shift in their sexual urges. Jordan noted that “God healed and restored” his sexuality and that “going through these different [ex-gay] programs and counselling was... instrumental” in that process. Although Jed had already experienced a significant shift in his desires while attending non-specialized Christian resources, he too found that the insights and techniques he garnered in ex-gay ministry spaces brought further changes to his sexuality: “[That] just solidified the journey I was on... All this psycho-educational and relational stuff just *leaped* me forward again in my recovery, in my identity, in my feelings, and in my behaviours.” Here, ex-gay ministry programs were credited with helping participants alter their sexual behaviours and embodied desires. Yet, it is important to note that none of the men characterized these changes as indicative of a radical reorientation of their desires. These changes – although meaningful – were not representative of a generalized sexual ‘cure’, wherein all traces of homoeroticism were eradicated and strong heterosexual urges emerged. As Jordan explained, “The program in and of itself, didn’t quite fix me.”

In sum, all who engaged with ex-gay ministry resources reported positive or fruitful aspects of these encounters. These benefits aligned well with those previously identified in the literature and help to establish a pattern of positive gains associated with these services.

Interestingly, comparative analysis also revealed that a number of these gains were akin to those reported in conservative Christian settings. This overlap is likely attributable to the discursive overlap in both settings that encourages same-sex attracted men to see themselves as good and Godly in spite of their desires. Yet, in the vast majority of cases, these reported benefits were unrelated to any changes in sexual desire. The positive impact of these resources was more commonly reflective of their ability to help participants make sense of suffering; eschew feelings of shame, alterity, and alienation; attain an enhanced state of social, emotional, psychological, and physical, wellbeing; and feel understood and respected by their Christian peers. While some of these benefits were related to specific sexual-moral theories or reorientation techniques, many resulted from simply providing participants with an opportunity to meet other Christians who shared their struggle and reflect on their situation in a safe community. In this sense, their value was largely tied to their unique ability to provide participants with direct peer support and opportunities for candid disclosure, reflexivity, and dialectical dialogue. Yet, these resources were not devoid of negative aspects. I turn now to a description of experiences of dissatisfaction and harm in ex-gay ministry settings.

Nonsensical, Ineffective, and Destructive: Negative Experiences with Ex-Gay Resources

“It didn’t work. It absolutely would not work. None. Zilch. So it just made me all the more frustrated, you know?” - Todd

Eleven of the 15 men who engaged with ex-gay ministry services identified unfruitful, frustrating, or harmful aspects of these resources (Brad, Mason, Matt, Mitch, Ned, Paul, Josiah, Adam, Todd, Seth, and Charles). Dissatisfaction with the causal theories, sexual ethics, and restorative processes promulgated by ex-gay leaders was the most frequent source of critique, appearing in eight narratives (Adam, Brad, Ned, Mason, Matt, Mitch, Josiah, and Todd). Adam, Mason, Ned, and Todd recalled growing sceptical of ex-gay ideology soon after becoming involved with these resources. Mason recalled feeling as though the ideas he was exposed to in these settings grew increasingly peculiar and suspect over time: “The more things I heard, the more I was like, ‘this is bizarre, this is really stupid.’” Ned, echoed this sentiment, noting that the peculiar blend of theology and psychology he encountered in ex-gay services was confusing and off-putting: “It seemed very bizarre... [that] 2000 years before psychology... the Bible writers... were somehow justifying these [psychological and developmental] theories, you know?” For these men, ex-gay ministry discourse simply did not make sense.

Adam, Todd, Ned, and Mitch grew suspicious of ex-gay ministry ideology when they found these abstract causal theories failed to resonate with their own experiences. For example, although Adam admitted his dad “was kind of a harsh father,” he struggled to understand how this relationship could account for his sexual preferences given that his siblings were all heterosexual, noting: “He didn’t get along with *any* of us and most of them are straight!” Mason similarly recalled how ex-gay causal discourses failed to resonate with his own vision of his upbringing: “They made it sound like... you’re gay because your mother was strong and your father was weak... [But] I never saw my mother as strong and my father weak. I never did see that.” Ned also explained how discourses of early childhood dysfunction rooted in parental abandonment conflicted with his own interpretations of having been raised well by a single mother: “I was proud of the way I was raised... not insecure about my masculinity or anything like that ... I felt like I turned out great.” For these men, the disparity between personal experiences and abstract discourses called the veracity of ex-gay ministry theories into question and engendered an early sense of discomfort with the movement.

Two others - Brad and Ned - found that ex-gay ideology fit well with their own past experiences, but grew suspicious of this discourse as they watched peers struggle to relate to various causal theories. Brad explained, “I started meeting other friends whose dads were their best friends and who were homecoming king in high school, and who had never been sexually molested. And I started saying, ‘Your theory doesn’t work for them!’” Even more disturbing to Brad was the pressure some participants felt to conform to this causal narrative, even if it meant fabricating a history of traumatic events: “They were constantly being told: ‘you must have something. Look for repressed memories.’ And you know, some of the guys even started making up stories about being abused just so they could kind of fit into the mindset.” Ned similarly recalled how the desperate search for some discreet cause of homoeroticism seemed to stretch the ex-gay model beyond all legitimacy: “Sexual abuse... your father... your mother... childhood trauma... prenatal influences... they would kind of ... throw out all sorts of things at you and hope that one would stick.” Like Brad, he sensed that many participants “felt pressured” to identify childhood experiences that could explain their desires – even in cases where no obvious connection seemed to exist. Consequently, he too grew increasingly sceptical of this ideology. Johnston and Jenkins (2006) similarly noted that ex-gay leaders and conversion therapists would often chastise clients for being unwilling to recognize or address developmental ‘issues’.

In time, six of the men (Brad, Mason, Matt, Mitch, Ned, and Todd) also grew critical of the redemptive discourses and redressive techniques promoted by ex-gay ministry leaders. For example, Todd recalled how the redressive imagery used by his ex-gay counsellor struck him as callous and mechanistic: “His answer was ‘Well I just need to re-program you’ and I told him, ‘I’m not a computer!’” Mitch similarly recalled wondering how the activities promoted by ex-gay leaders could possibly alter his desires: “it was just singing songs and saying prayers, and confessing your sins... [there was] little in the way of practical advice”. For Brad, Mason, Matt, and Mitch, getting to know the individuals lauded as ‘success stories’ within the ex-gay ministry movement also casted doubt on the transformative potential of these resources. Mason recalled how a guest speaker’s description of his ‘success’ in overcoming homosexuality poignantly highlighted the limited effectiveness of ex-gay ministry services: “He says... ‘Since I’m married... [whenever] I think I might get in trouble... I call a friend and then he checks on me ... to make sure that I didn’t get in trouble.’” To Mason, this man’s story seemed to provide evidence that lasting sexual change was not possible: “That really convinced me that they’re amok... that tells me that you can’t cure it – they’re telling you that you can cure it but you can’t!” Matt similarly recalled how hearing the story of a particular ex-gay woman left him sceptical of genuine sexual change and critical of the ex-gay ministry movement: “She was engaged to get married, she had no sexual feelings for the guy, but she knew that on her wedding night, God would provide those feelings. And that was really scary to me.”

Brad grew particularly discouraged over the possibility of genuinely reorienting his desires when he learned that many supposed ‘success stories’ within the ex-gay movement were continuing to engage in homosexual acts:

This one guy was... [always] talking about how God has changed him... and I know just too well that he is hooking up with prostitutes in West Hollywood. And I’m like, ‘Wait a minute... what we’re selling and what we actually live out does not actually match up!’ Mitch described making similar observations in his own ex-gay ministry group: “this one guy... would go to the ministries and he would participate fully, and then, maybe an hour later... go into a public restroom and have sex... with a man.” The struggles and discrepancies evident in these and other ‘success stories’ cast doubt on the prospect of ‘overcoming’ homosexuality.

The curtailing of critical thought was also described as a troublesome aspect of ex-gay services by six of the men (Brad, Mason, Mitch, Ned, Paul and Josiah). These individuals

recalled how ex-gay leaders and authorities frequently delegitimized participant's own insights and proved averse to scepticism and critical reflection. For example, when Brad considered renouncing all change efforts and pursuing a life of devout celibacy, ex-gay leaders delegitimized this option and insisted he continue working toward sexual change:

I started... saying, 'You know what? I'm gay... I'm not going to be in a relationship, but I don't have to be in denial of who I am... [But] they [leaders] called it idolatry... taking on a false name... You had to always call yourself straight and... work towards change.

Mason, Mitch, Ned, Paul and Josiah explained that ex-gay leaders worked to limit critique and dissent by attributing scepticism and resistance to personal deficits, including a lack of faith, disagreeableness, denial, and psychological unwellness. For example, Mason noted that when he questioned the scriptural basis of Christian homonegativity, program leaders classified him as 'difficult': "I was considered 'the trouble maker.'" Ned similarly recalled ex-gay leaders attributing his scepticism to personal shortcomings: "They never told me I couldn't ask questions... [but] they kinda commented that I did need to have a better attitude... or that I needed to pray for more faith." As Paul explained, ex-gay leaders effectively limited critique and dissent by construing doubt and disbelief as signs of psychological and emotional unwellness: "We were constantly told we couldn't trust ourselves... our reactions, because we were sinful, we were sick, we were addicts... [there wasn't] a problem with the teaching or the practice... there was a problem with *us*." Fjelstrom (2013) similarly described the active discouragement of dissent in the context of religious and secular sexual orientation change programs.

The sense of having nowhere else to turn also helped keep clients from overtly challenging ex-gay leaders or expressing dissent. As Paul explained, the idea of being forced out of this community of peers proved a powerful deterrent to outright resistance: "If you don't [agree], then you had to leave... [So] I pretty much always came back around and said, 'Well I must be wrong. I must be resistant. You must be right. Let me try.'" Here, participants highlight various means by which those in power worked to deter participants from engaging in critical thought and keep individuals reliant on these resources. Such experiences proved profoundly disempowering. They suggested that the men were incapable of generating insight into their own lives and incapable of resolving crisis without their support. By silencing dissent, delegitimizing personal insights, and invalidating other forms of redress, ex-gay leaders worked to keep participants engaged with the movement and committed to overcoming homosexuality.

Eleven of the men (Brad, Charles, Mitch, Mason, Seth, Paul, Matt, Josiah, Todd, Adam, and Ned) described being disappointed by a lack of change in their sexual desires. Brad recalled, “I’d been working through the system. And I was getting healthier and better and saner, but I wasn’t getting any ‘straighter’.” Mason similarly noted, “I was still attracted to men – they, they, they were doing nothing to change it.” In time, these men started to accept that their basic patterns of desire were inherently unmalleable. Matt explained: “it became clearer that, well, there really wasn’t going to be change... it’s just something I’d have to struggle with for the rest of my life.” Although Charles had personally experienced a transformation in his sexual urges prior to ex-gay ministry participation, he was similarly disappointed by the lack of progress evidenced by his peers. He noted, “it was frustrating for me because I had already healed from same-sex attraction and changed and I... expected these guys to also change, and they didn’t.” Personal experiences of ineffectiveness confirmed participants’ emerging doubts about ex-gay ministry resources and forced these individuals to relinquish the hope of sexual reorientation.

Faced with the unfruitfulness of their reorientation efforts, five of the men (Matt, Ned, Paul, Todd, and Mitch) began to see the ex-gay ministry movement as a deceptive ruse that had negatively impacted their sexual, relational, psychological, and emotional wellbeing. Four (Matt, Ned, Paul, and Todd) recalled engaging in risky sexual behaviour throughout their time in this movement as a means of dealing with the anxiety and pent-up sexual energy associated with their reorientation efforts. Ned explained how anonymous sex became a means of coping with the failure of his reorientation efforts: “Towards the end... I was, um, just so focused and depressed about the whole thing that I... um, act[ed] out in... sexually dangerous ways.” Todd similarly attributed his foray into anonymous and risky sexual activity to feelings of disappointment and failure: “I was very self-loathing... like, ‘How come this isn’t working?’... I felt so cotton-pickin’ defeated that the only time I actually fell and had sex with a guy was during the time I was going to those sessions.” Paul described how his futile attempts to repress his sexual urges while in ex-gay ministry programs similarly caused him to seek release and self-castigation in unsafe sexual practices: “Either I was experiencing this compulsion to go out because I was denying myself... and so the pressure was building - or else I felt so much shame about who I was that I wanted to punish myself.”

Here, the men construct ex-gay ministry resources as having paradoxically triggered the very sexual behaviours they sought to eliminate as feelings of frustration and worthlessness

drove them to risky sexual outlets. These individuals continued to feel drawn to homoerotic acts, but were incapable of experiencing these encounters as anything other than failure and sin as a result of internalized homonegativity. The compulsive and clandestine nature of these acts rendered the men vulnerable to sexually transmitted illnesses, physical abuse, and other forms of relational harm. They also reinforced participants' inability to adhere to the standards of goodness, normalcy, and health described by ex-gay leaders and embodied by successful peers and wrought profound feelings of shame, remorse, and indignity. Todd noted, "I felt so guilty and loathed myself so much for that fall that I didn't know what to do." These acts thus left participants with a profound sense of failure and worthlessness that further diminished their fragile self-esteem.

Matt, Mitch, Ned, Paul, and Todd also described how the desperate pursuit of sexual change had consumed their lives and left them feeling frustrated, anxious, exhausted, and depressed. As Mitch explained: "You're constantly in your head, trying to repress those impulses, so you only have 2/3 of your brain left to deal with life... it makes you a very tense, angry person... it frustrated me... [I was] tied in knots." As they failed to attain any tangible shift in their desires, many grew depressed and despondent. Matt noted, "What I started to feel towards the end of this process was just numb... I had beaten down my sexuality so much that I was starting to feel nothing." Ned similarly noted: "I didn't feel that I was a Christian... a good Christian at least... I really... took home the message that I was a sexually broken person, that I was not, um, a true masculine." Paul also recalled slipping into despondency: "Depression, suicidal tendencies, confusion, uh, self-hatred – these were a lot of the feelings I felt towards the end of my time [in ex-gay ministries]." For three of the men - Todd, Ned, and Paul – the belief that they were to blame for their lack of reorientation success further diminished their self-concept and wellbeing. As Todd recalled, "The fact that it didn't happen just set me up for further defeat inside, and thinking, 'Well, I just ain't try hard enough.'" He noted that this attribution was reinforced by his ex-gay counsellor, who insinuated he was not genuinely trying to change: "He said, 'If you're not serious about this. I can't really help.'" Ned similarly noted that he felt like he "was a failure for not continuing the program" and achieving sexual change.

Unfortunately, experiences of harm were not limited to participants themselves. Three of the men (Matt, Paul, and Todd) described how their encounters with the ex-gay ministry movement also ended up harming those they loved. Paul and Todd explained how these

resources had briefly led them to believe they had been ‘cured’ of their homosexuality and helped them feel confident in the prospect of heterosexual marriage. They explained how this false confidence inspired them to enter into heterosexual unions that ultimately proved unsatisfying and distressing for both partners. Paul recalled how, at age 25, he felt certain that he had overcome homosexuality: “I thought I had beaten the gay thing for the most part... I decided to marry a woman from church... I had convinced her that God had changed me, and I felt... changed enough to get married.” Although his attraction to his wife was largely platonic, the fact that “she wasn’t *that* interested in a sexual relationship” bolstered his confidence that he could make the relationship work. Todd similarly believed he had been cured of his homosexual desires when he developed a sexual attraction to a female after his time in ex-gay services. He recalled his surprise and delight over this development, noting: “I was head over heels in love and with someone of the opposite sex!” Convinced they had successfully ‘reoriented’ their sexuality with the help of ex-gay ministry services, these men eagerly entered into married life.

Yet, to their profound dismay, both Paul and Todd soon discovered their homosexual desires had not abated. Despite caring deeply for their wives and establishing a sexual relationship with their spouses, both experienced a resurgence of homoerotic desire and began engaging in secret homosexual acts within the first two years of marriage. Paul began engaging in extramarital affairs with other men while Todd started masturbating to gay porn. Todd recalled, “I took up the pattern of masturbation... [carried on] my own secret affair with myself.” These secret sexual acts caused the men a great deal of distress and disappointment. They felt they had failed themselves and their wives and sunk into a profound state of despair, guilt, and self-loathing. As Paul noted, “I felt particularly hopeless... I contemplated suicide.” Their marital relationships also began to suffer from what Todd termed a growing “intimacy vacuum,” caused by their secret sexual struggle and lack of heterosexual desire. Paul recalled, “No matter what she could do with her hair and her body, I never was interested in her sexually, and that was a bit demoralizing for her.” Over time, these marriages became characterized by growing resentment, distance, and distress and participants were plagued by feelings of imposterism.

Eventually, both men shared their ongoing struggle with their wives and returned to ex-gay ministry programs in a desperate attempt to reorient their desires and save their marriages. Yet, in the end, neither was able to rid themselves of homosexual desires. Paul’s wife left him when she discovered he was once again engaging in extramarital homosexual acts while Todd

and his wife decided to stay together and pursue some way of making their relationship work. In both cases, the men lived with the guilt of having hurt their wives and not lived up to their own claims to have been ‘cured’ of same-sex attraction. As Paul noted, “There was a lot of guilt and shame all around that ‘we could of done more, we should have done more,’ instead of actually being pragmatic and saying, ‘Maybe this wasn’t workable.’” Here, the mistaken sense of having been ‘cured’ of same-sex attraction culminated in years of marital strife and individual suffering.

Matt and Paul also described how their engagement with the ex-gay ministry movement had harmed their parents. They explained how their mothers and fathers came to feel responsible for their sexual struggle after being exposed to ex-gay causal discourses. As Matt noted, “She [his mom] was hearing those theories, too, so she probably felt like part of it was her fault.” Paul similarly described how taking part in family healing activities offered by ex-gay ministry services proved highly distressing for his parents: “They were devastated... for several days [after] they weren’t even eating properly... they were dejected and quiet and depressed... they were feeling very guilty and ashamed and it sort of deepened this separation that we had for a time.” He noted that his mother was particularly impacted by feelings of guilt. As Paul noted, “It’s a very big teaching in the ex-gay movement that women - the wives, the mothers - are to blame.” Here, we see that the harms associated with the ex-gay ministry movement occasionally extended beyond individual participants, negatively impacting parents and spouses.

In summary, many participants felt ex-gay ministry services failed to provide a convincing and satisfying means of resolving sexual-moral crisis. In cases where participants worked fruitlessly to reorient their desires or mistakenly believed they had been ‘cured’ of same-sex attraction for a period of time, the possibility of serious sexual, relational, emotional, and psychological harm also emerged. To my knowledge, the compulsion toward risky sexual behaviour, the possibility of inflicting pain and suffering on marital partners, and the guilt and remorse associated with unsuccessful heterosexual marriages are risks that have not been widely recognized as potential ex-gay ministry harms. These experiences should be further explored in future research. Together, such stories of distress and disempowerment reveal a darker side of the ex-gay ministry movement, highlighting its capacity to intensify personal suffering and introduce new forms of distress.

A Fruitful Encounter, a Waste of Time, or a Harmful Hoax: Reflecting on the Benefits and Dangers of Ex-Gay Ministry Resources

“You have that simultaneous feeling of nostalgia and revulsion at the same time... that’s very hard to pick apart.” - Brad

All of the men who participated in ex-gay ministry programs described particular benefits and positive experiences associated with their time in ex-gay ministries. These programs proved valuable in helping participants make sense of their suffering, feel better about themselves and their situation, and attain various forms of personal and interpersonal growth. A small minority also reported a change in their sexual desires. Yet, experiences of confusion, disappointment, and harm were also prevalent in ex-gay ministry settings. Eleven of the men described troubling experiences that casted doubt on the veracity of ex-gay ministry ideology and the ethics and effectiveness of these programs. For some of these men, ex-gay ministry services became sites of disempowerment, deception, and harm. Ex-gay ministry experiences were thus typically associated with a blend of benefits and harms. Yet, in each case, the relative balance of these positive and negative elements and the intensity of particular experiences contributed to the global evaluation of these resources as beneficial, wasteful, or destructive. For seven of the men (Jed, Jordan, Rodney, Theo, Seth, Charles, and Brad), ex-gay ministry encounters were construed as overwhelmingly positive and constructive. Although these men identified various limitations, weaknesses, or flaws in ex-gay ministry programming, they generally felt their involvement with this movement had improved their wellbeing and provided them with useful tools for mediating sexual-moral crisis. Five others (Josiah, Adam, Mason, Mitch, and Matt) constructed ex-gay resources as largely unproductive. Although these individuals did not feel significantly harmed by their time in the ex-gay ministry movement, they felt these services contributed little to their search for redress and new ways forward. The remaining three participants - Todd, Ned, and Paul - described their experiences with ex-gay ministry services as profoundly destructive. These men not only felt these resources had failed to prove them with a satisfying and lasting means of resolving crisis, but also considered themselves and others to have been significantly injured throughout the course of their reorientation efforts.

Close analysis suggested that four key factors impacted how participants experienced and evaluated ex-gay ministry resources: 1) program expectations, 2) the presence or absence of satisfying life alternatives, 3) personal understandings of what constituted a ‘successful’ outcome

of ex-gay ministry participation and 4) how individuals made sense of failed reorientation efforts. In narratives of ex-gay ministry encounters, participants explicitly or implicitly imbued these factors with causation and determinacy during the employment process, casting them as key forces in the unfolding of personal experience. Those who considered ex-gay ministry resources to have been a net benefit to their wellbeing and search for redress (Brad, Rodney, Theo, Jordan, Seth, Charles, and Jed) evidenced particular key features that set them apart from ambivalent or aggrieved peers. Generally, these men entered into ex-gay ministry services with modest expectations (Brad was the only exception). They approached these resources with an open, curious attitude - hungry for new insights and redressive tools but not overly fixated on the prospect of radical sexual change (Charles and Jed had already attained significant changes in their sexual desires and the others recalled entering with tempered expectations). Consequently, these individuals found great value and satisfaction in the various social, emotional, psychological, and sexual benefits of ex-gay ministry programs, despite the fact that their homoerotic urges generally persisted. Here, moderated expectations bred satisfaction.

Those who constructed their experiences with ex-gay ministry resources in terms of ineffectiveness and implausibility (Josiah, Adam, Mason, Mitch, and Matt) generally entered into ex-gay resources with the explicit goal of reorienting their desires. In contrast with the group described above, these men were exclusively interested in the possibility of radical sexual reorientation and explicitly opposed to the idea of pursuing an elaborate program of self-denial or celibate devotion. As Josiah recalled, "I'm like, 'I don't want to sit there half healed my entire life'... [It is] heterosexuality or bust, you know?" Yet, despite their express interest in reorienting their sexual desires, these men remained markedly sceptical of this possibility (with the exception of Josiah). For these men, sexual reorientation was constructed as a 'Hail Mary'⁴⁶ – highly unlikely to succeed but worth attempting given the value of the outcome. These men also differed from both those described above and those described below in having previously identified (and, in some cases, even experimented with) alternative means of satisfactorily resolving sexual-moral crisis that did not entail a radical shift in their desires. Adam had grown comfortable with the prospect of devout celibacy and Mason had started to consider leaving the church to pursue an openly gay life. During their time with secular counsellors (Chapter 8), Josiah and Mitch had also been introduced to the possibility of living healthy, satisfying lives as gay men. Mitch and Matt had also explored gay identities, relationships, and communities in the

past, suggesting a degree of flexibility in their life projects and personal understandings of ‘successful’ crisis resolution. Although these men would have welcomed a total reorientation of their desires, they were able to imagine a multiplicity of possibilities for their lives beyond heterosexuality. Here, scepticism and the presence of other viable alternatives protected participants from the harms associated with doggedly pursuing sexual reorientation efforts to no avail. Because their future happiness did not depend solely on reorienting their sexual desires, these men were quick to excuse themselves from ex-gay ministry services when their urges proved immutable. As such, their stories were devoid of themes of devastating disappointment, long-term struggle and strife, or experiences of significant psychological, social, emotional, or sexual harm. As Matt noted: “I can see if I’d been it for decades that I’d be probably pretty screwed up, but... I was sort of in and out and... even when I was in it, I was fairly sceptical.” Here, ex-gay services were construed as a relatively benign waste of time. As Mitch explained: “I don’t know if they did any real damage, I was just wasting my time... wasting my life which is a – a precious gift... [it was] like throwing food away, you know?”

Ex-gay ministry resources had the most negative impact on those who had expected to experience a radical reorientation of their sexual desires, defined ‘success’ in these contexts solely in terms of sexual change, and were incapable of imagining other satisfying means of resolving sexual-moral crisis outside of heterosexuality (Todd, Ned, and Paul). Desperate to reorient their desires, these individuals stubbornly pursued sexual change for many years at great personal cost. When these changes failed to emerge, these men were left feeling profoundly disappointed and foolish. They felt deceived and profoundly harmed by ex-gay ministry leaders, who had encouraged them to develop false expectations and persist in programs that only left them feeling broken, defeated, and worthless. For these men, ex-gay services were spaces of destruction, deception, and self-castigation. As Todd explained, “I really felt that the whole experience was just more harmful than helpful... I was just so torn down at the end.”

By exploring the patterns implicit in ex-gay ministry experiences, various risk and protective factors came into view. Broad and fluid definitions of what it meant to ‘successfully’ overcome same-sex attraction, moderated expectations for sexual change, and the presence of viable life alternatives outside of heterosexuality all served to shield participants from the potential dangers of ex-gay ministry resources. Conversely, narrow and unmitigated expectations of sexual reorientation – particularly in the absence of other life possibilities – rendered

participants vulnerable to harm and disappointment. Despite the presence of various qualifying statements, the ex-gay ministry movement continued to be associated with powerful images of destruction and restoration. Like a phoenix rising from the ash, many men imagined themselves emerging from ex-gay services as new, heterosexual beings. It was this very image of radical transformation that had motivated many individuals to engage with such resources. Yet, in the current context, we see that participants related to this image differently. For the first two groups of participants described above, the prospect of total sexual reorientation was a utopia - an idealized outcome worthy of pursuit even though it was unlikely to be realized and alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and being might need to be considered (including devout celibacy, gay life, or embracing less radical forms of sexual change). For the last group, consisting of Todd, Ned, and Paul, radical sexual reorientation was *the* goal of redress. Here, sexual attraction was the sole barometer of success and any transformations of self, world, and cosmos outside of this narrow focus were perceived as largely irrelevant and unsatisfying. There was no ‘good life’ outside of heterosexuality. This ‘can and must’ attitude left these men vulnerable to experiences of disempowerment and harm in ex-gay ministry programs. Having embraced an understanding of themselves as broken, pathological, and corrupted, they found themselves trapped in a state of perpetual unwellness, unable to restore order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to their lives without an experience of radical sexual renewal. In such cases, the stakes were high and the possibility of disappointment was great. Reflecting on the disappointment and distress of his program peers, Charles noted, “they went through the program thinking that they were going to... magically become straight and they didn’t. And so they got upset by that.”

The current analysis thus indicates that the prospect of reorienting sexual desire is a risky element of ex-gay ministry discourse. It also implies that managing client expectations and urging individuals to consider other satisfying possibilities for their lives that transcend married, heterosexual life could help mitigate the risk of harm in these settings. Some leaders appeared to have embraced this protective ethic. For example, Seth noted that the leader of his ex-gay ministry group cautioned against expectations of radical sexual change, noting that few, if any, men ever completely reoriented their desires. Instead, he encouraged participants to think more positively about their desires, develop a close relationship with God, and refrain from homosexual acts. Although Seth – like many others - experienced no change in his desires, his time in the ex-gay ministry movement was free of experiences of harm or feelings of deception.

However, Josiah's experience suggested that clients might develop narrow and fervent expectations of sexual reorientation despite leaders' and counsellors' attempts to manage their expectations and promote various means of 'successfully' overcoming homosexuality. He recalled his ex-gay counsellor warning him that 'success' in this context often means learning to control homosexual urges: "[He said] we can give you the ability to live well...meaning, you don't act on your sexual impulses until heterosexual feelings emerge or don't, but, you can still live a full and productive life, even if they don't." Yet, despite these qualifications, Josiah remained convinced that he would experience a radical change in his desires for many years.

Prior to disbanding, Exodus International also embraced this ethic of moderated expectations and explicitly advised individuals against working with any counsellor who claimed they could "Definitely eliminate all attractions to your same gender" or promised participants they would "definitely acquire heteroerotic attractions" (Exodus International, 2010, n.p.). Yet, in the context of specific ex-gay ministry programs, Ned, Brad, Todd, and Paul recalled how ex-gay leaders worked to buoy or enhance their expectations of sexual change. For example, Ned recalled, "My [original] goal wasn't to go from gay to straight, but... I was counselled that - because I started the program so young - the odds were ... better that I would overcome my homosexuality and become heterosexual." Paul noted that he spent many years involved with the ex-gay movement before leaders ever seriously spoke to him about the prospect of not attaining sexual change: "This was the first time I ever heard that said to me. Up until then... [For] like 15 years - I had been told, promised, that some sort of miraculous transformation could happen."

Moreover, many participants noted that despite officially recognizing various forms of 'success' and publically disclaiming any promise of sexual reorientation, the ex-gay ministry movement continued to promote heterosexuality as a possible – and preferred – therapeutic outcome. For example, Theo recalled that although the ex-gay leaders he encountered "did not promise" radical sexual change, they maintained that such a transformation was possible with sufficient effort: "they said basically 'Only God can do this, but we're here to walk with you through that if that's what you really want. But if you don't really want it, it won't happen.'" Ned similarly noted that although the leaders of his program were careful to state that going "from gay to straight ... wasn't the point of their ministry", stories and images of transformation dominated the ex-gay movement, suggesting that reorientation was both possible and preferable: "The implication was that most of the successful people – 'successful' would become um,

straight... specially, those that actually were younger... [but] they were very careful about not promising that specifically.” Brad also affirmed that ex-gay success stories clearly positioned heterosexuality as the ideal therapeutic outcome, “If you ask them, ‘what does success look like?’, they will never say, ‘You will get married and have kids,’... that narrative would never be emphatically stated, but [it]... went underneath everything.” These mixed-messages cast doubt on whether efforts to manage individual expectations in ex-gay spaces are genuine and earnest.

The ex-gay ministry movement thus seemed to have been saying two things at once - promoting the hope of radical sexual change while dutifully noting that sexual reorientation (at least in terms of desire) might not be possible for everyone. Here, participants faced a double bind – they were told not to expect radical sexual change while simultaneously being led to believe that such an outcome was a reflection of ideal effort, dedication, and connection with God. By continuing to promote cases where participants have developed opposite-sex attraction or married females as models of ‘success,’ the movement bred hope of attaining a heterosexual existence. This hope of radical sexual change was a powerful rhetorical tool. It drew individuals into the program and thus had obvious political and economic implications. However, as Gerber (2011) noted, the movement was forced to contend with the reality that many men fail to attain such changes and thus had to expand the constellation of ‘signs of success’ to include lesser gains and ward off attributions of ineffectiveness. Here, the movement was confronted by the simultaneous need to inspire hope (for the purpose of recruitment) and temper expectations (to avoid accusations of duplicity and fraud). The resulting discourse is one that paradoxically affirms that changes in desire are possible, yet exceedingly improbable.

Ultimately, the possibility of radically reorienting one’s desires and attaining genuine heterosexuality – no matter how rare – provides incentive to engage with and persist in these resources. For those desperate to find a resolution to sexual-moral crisis, even faint possibilities of change are embraced with desperation and warnings about excessive optimism often fall to the wayside. The fact that others have seemingly been able to attain such a transformation also provides a powerful source of motivation, convincing strugglers to persist in their efforts. By drawing people in and keeping them engaged with programs, the spectre of the phoenix provides leaders with an important opportunity to convince conflicted individuals of the value of a Christ-like existence. It is a highly pragmatic tool that allows Christians to garner an audience with those who are considering leaving the church – to ‘get a foot in the door’ at an opportune

moment. For this reason, the prospect of radical sexual reorientation – no matter how unlikely in practice – continues to be an important part of ex-gay ministry discourse. Yet, while the prospect of sexual reorientation continues to be a powerful recruitment tool - and has long been the primary focus of researchers, journalists, and critics - a narrow focus on sexual change does not do justice to the complex array of harms and benefits outlined by participants and provides little insight into the rich meaning of these experiences in the context of individual lives.

In fact, the current analysis suggests that the question of whether or not ex-gay ministry programs ‘work’ is dizzyingly complex and nuanced. It requires attention to individual expectations – which, as noted above, vary immensely – and to the various ways in which ‘sexual change’ is operationalized by individual participants (as identity, desire, or behaviour). In the conclusion, I reflect further on the complexity of what counts as a ‘successfully’ ex-gay ministry experience and take issue with the tendency to delegitimize individual claims to sexual change in both scholarly writing and the popular press.

In the end, the ex-gay ministry movement was the last institution consulted by Seth, Jed, Jordan, Rodney, Theo, Charles, Adam, Todd, and Brad in the neophyte stage. In Part 3, I describe how six of these men used various insights and techniques acquired during their time in the ex-gay ministry movement to overcome sexual-moral crisis by embracing sexual asceticism (Seth) or ex-gay life (Jed, Jordan, Rodney, Theo, and Charles). Having experienced no change in their desires, three others - Adam, Todd, and Brad - reverted back to ideas and techniques first encountered in non-specialized conservative Christian settings (see Chapter 5), joining Seth and Walter in the pursuit of sexual asceticism. Six others (Mason, Mitch, Matt, Ned, Josiah, and Paul) felt compelled to consult additional institutions after their experiences with ex-gay ministry services proved ineffective, disappointing, or harmful. Lacking any shift in their desires, these men had come to accept the immutability of their sexual preferences and the futility of change efforts. As Mitch explained, “it’s like trying to change your brown eyes into blue eyes – not gonna happen!” Yet, unlike their peers, they remained uncertain how to best resolve sexual-moral crisis and move forward with their lives. Finding themselves in need of further guidance and support, they turned to affirming Christian institutions and mental health professionals. Their experiences with these alternative institutions are described in the two following chapters

⁴⁰ The term ‘ex-gay’ is not used or endorsed by everyone involved with this movement. Many individuals feel that this label misrepresents the work done by the movement, reducing their efforts to attempts to alter patterns of sexual

desire. Critics of this terminology also note that many individuals who consider themselves ‘ex-gay’ do not claim to have experienced any radical change in their sexual desires. Despite these critiques, I have chosen to use this terminology because it is recognizable to individuals within the movement and beyond and because it reflects the language of the movement at the time when most participants were involved with these resources.

⁴¹ In cases of sexual abuse, acts committed by opposite-sex perpetrators are thought to produce an aversion to the opposite sex and heterosexuality. Experiences of abuse at the hand of same-sex perpetrators is thought to ‘confuse’ sexual development, causing young people to believe they were meant for such acts (see Wolkomir, 2006).

⁴² Several of the men noted that ex-gay ministry leaders were particularly fond of a verse in First Corinthians that was said to speak to the potential for sexual change. Walter explained, “Going to First Corinthians ... God says right there, you know, ‘These kinds of people will not come into heaven’ and it lists drunkards and swindlers and, uh, homosexual offenders and prostitutes and I mean the list goes on. And then, the next – in verse 10 or 11 – I guess it is 11 – that says, ‘*But* some of you were this.’ And so it tells – you know, his word is telling us right there that ... the holy spirit can get through to an individual and help them recognize these things, then that begins the road back to doing God’s will.”

⁴³ Christian counselors are church leaders or laypersons trained in psychological counselling and therapy methods. Christian counsellors combine secular psychological techniques with Christian values and faith-based healing approaches in clinical practice. Although the American Association of Christian Counsellors (AACC) does not advance any particular understanding of homosexuality, this group is decidedly anti-affirmative. The AACC code of ethics states that this organization does “not condone or advocate for the pursuit of or active involvement in homosexual, bisexual, or transgendered behaviours or lifestyles” (AACC, 2014, p. 15). Until 2014, the AACC code of ethics supported the use of reparative therapy, noting:

(We) differ, on biblical, ethical, and legal grounds, with groups who abhor and condemn reparative therapy, willingly offering it to those who come into counselling with a genuine desire to be set free of homosexual attractions and leave homosexual behavior and lifestyles behind. (2004, p. 8)

In 2014, the organization ceased advocating reparative therapy and instead urged same-sex attracted Christians to pursue “sexual celibacy or biblically-prescribed sexual behavior” (AACC, 2014, p. 15).

⁴⁴ For example, Desert Stream Ministries has long offered standardized program plans and leadership training for those seeking to assist Christians with unwanted same-sex attraction. Their programs - Living Waters and CrossCurrent – have had immense influence within the ex-gay ministry movement and provide the foundation for many group programs (see Desert Stream, 2014a; 2014b, 2014c).

⁴⁵ In the Christian worldview, ‘grace’ refers to the free and unmerited favour of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015).

⁴⁶ A ‘Hail Mary’ pass is a very long forward pass in American football, made in desperation with only a small chance of success, especially at or near the end of a half.

Chapter 7 ~ Gay is Okay: Encounters with Affirming Christian Resources

“I’m a gay man and I need somewhere to stay” – Josiah

Numerous participants encountered affirming Christian supports in the neophyte stage. ‘Affirming,’ ‘open,’ and ‘welcoming’ services and spaces support the full inclusion of LGBT persons in Christian congregations, groups, and institutions. This movement is united by the belief that the love of the Lord is inclusive of all sexualities and that homosexual relationships are not inherently sinful or unrighteous (Metropolitan Community Churches, 2010). Christians who adhere to this moral framework believe that homophobia is a reflection of human politics and the fallibility of earthly beings, not the will of God. Affirming Christians lament the use of scripture to illegitimately “justify hatred, condemnation and exclusion of God’s lesbian and gay children” and call on the faithful to recognize that “such hurtful things are not a reflection of Christ... the way God wants the church to be, or... what the Bible really says” (West, 2010, p.1).

In these affirming Christian spaces, participants were encouraged to overcome sexual-moral conflict by adopting a new understanding of sexual morality and letting go of the idea that homoeroticism was inherently displeasing to God. From this perspective, homosexuality and righteousness were not mutually exclusive. Leaders, advisors, and peers within this movement worked to convince those experiencing sexual-moral crisis that their suffering was caused not by an immutable contradiction between the sexual and moral-religious selves, but by a misinterpretation of scripture and institutionalized Christian homonegativity. Here, conflict dissolves as homosexuality is symbolically shifted into the realm of ‘good sex’ and Christian homonegativity is reframed as a reflection of human politics and oppression as opposed to a sacred truth. In worship services, biblical study activities, support groups, and casual encounters, affirming Christian leaders and peers promoted the idea that it was possible to live as an openly gay man while retaining one’s faith and connection to God. In what follows, I describe participants’ encounters with the affirming Christian movement and elucidate how these experiences shaped the search for redress.

A Fresh Perspective: Personal Encounters with Affirming Christianity

“I was like, ‘I’m gonna get good information’... So I would read pro-gay, liberal, or even Evangelical books... not letting my mother and... my pastor know... walking out of the library that I worked at with a book slipped into my knapsack without actually signing it out.” - Josiah

Seven participants (Jed, Mason, Mitch, Matt, Ned, Josiah, and Paul) sought the guidance of affirming Christian institutions during the neophyte stage⁴⁷. For six of these men (Mason, Mitch, Matt, Ned, Josiah, and Paul), these encounters were occasioned by the failure of ex-gay ministry programs and conservative Christian institutions to provide an acceptable means of resolving sexual-moral crisis. After unsuccessful efforts to alter their sexuality, these individuals had come to accept that their sexual desires were most likely a permanent feature of their existence. Yet, they found the prospect of sexual discipline and restraint promoted by both non-specialized Christian resources and ex-gay leaders to be highly unappealing. Consequently, these six men turned to affirming Christianity in search of a new perspective on sexual-moral crisis that would open up alternative possibilities for living well with their desires.

Three of these men (Mason, Matt, and Mitch) became involved with local MCC congregations. Mason first sought support from the MCC at age 54 (roughly 1999) and occasionally attended another welcoming with his sister thereafter. At age 21 (1988), Matt joined a local MCC chapter after leaving the ex-gay ministry movement. Mitch first became involved with the MCC at 24 (1983) after a secular psychologist advised him to embrace his desires (see Chapter 8). However over the next two and a half decades, he oscillated between living as an openly gay man and attempting to alter or repress his desires (age 31-31, 1990-1991). During those periods where he embraced his desires, Mitch was involved with the MCC. Whenever he pursued sexual change or repression, he withdrew from affirming supports. Mitch eventually returned to the MCC for good after he renounced all hope of reorientation at age 49 (2008).

After distancing themselves from ex-gay ministry programs, three others (Ned, Josiah, and Paul) first began exploring the sexual and moral ideology of affirming Christianity through individual study before connecting with any formal organizations. Ned first started reading texts and essays written by affirming Christian writers at age 22 (1997) and became involved with a local MCC congregation soon after. Josiah began secretly exploring affirming Christian literature at age 21 (2002) after his experiences in the ex-gay ministry movement made it clear his preferences were unlikely to change and a secular mental health counsellor piqued his interest in

the ongoing debate over the moral status of homosexuality within the Christian community (see Chapter 8). Impressed by affirming arguments, Josiah later joined an affirming congregation and attended a national conference of the MCC. Paul similarly began studying affirming theological perspectives on homosexuality and critical perspective on religion after leaving the ex-gay ministry movement. He later became active in a welcoming branch of the Religious Society of Friends at age 37 (2002).

The vast majority of those who sought out affirming Christian supports (6 of the 7) thus embraced these resources later in the neophyte period, when encounters with conservative Christianity and ex-gay ministry services proved unsatisfying and unproductive. Jed is unique in having consulted affirming Christian resources early in the neophyte stage – prior to his involvement with conservative Christian supports or ex-gay ministry services. At 21 (1983), he joined a support group for same-sex attracted Catholic men that espoused an affirming approach to homosexuality: “There were circles within the Catholic church that were promoting gay and same-sex relationships as okay by God and blessed by God... I was like, ‘maybe that’s an option for me.’” Whereas most participants also became involved with affirming Christianity after having exhausted conservative Christian resources, Jed began his search for an appropriate means of resolving sexual-moral crisis in these gay-positive spaces. I now turn to a description of participants’ experiences with affirming Christian resources.

Insight and Esteem: Positive Experiences with Affirming Christianity

“Bless God they exist!” - Josiah

The affirming Christian movement encouraged participants to question the spiritual truths and ethical assumptions they had acquired over the course of their lives, consider other theological perspectives, and reflect on their personal understandings of faith and morality. For five of the men (Ned, Paul, Mitch, Mason, and Josiah), this reflexive practice proved highly rewarding and liberating. The men learned to take ownership over their spiritual and moral lives, shedding disagreeable practices or beliefs and developing their own theological interpretations and understandings of good and evil. As Ned explained, “it was really helpful... to have the freedom to develop my own doctrine, or explore... what my faith was about without having to... support a specific doctrine.” Through processes of critical deconstruction, affirming supports helped participants destabilize received religious and ethical wisdom and open up a space for individual critique and creativity. As Josiah recalled: “All of a sudden... there was this

awareness... that there is a debate in the Christian community, about how to take the passages that allegedly apply across all time and all places.” Paul similarly described how affirming resources helped him realize he had been in a “biblically induced coma” throughout much of his life: “I was not thinking clearly for myself. I was trusting other people’s opinions before mine and really putting myself at risk because I felt like I needed to do something drastic in order to have God in my life.” In this new, creative and critical space, participants felt free to develop their own moral and spiritual worldview without seeking the approval or validation of religious authorities. They attained a form of spiritual liberation that forcefully undercut the power of religious dogma and empowered the men to construct their own spiritual-moral schemas.

These same five men (Mason, Mitch, Ned, Paul, and Josiah) explained how engaging in processes of critical reflection and religious deconstruction ultimately helped them shed feelings of internalized homonegativity and think more positively about their desires. As they came to appreciate the contested nature of good and evil within the Christian community, the absolute connection between homosexuality and notions of sin, evil, corruption, and impurity was increasingly weakened. They began to shed negative sign-images of the sexual self as dangerous or wicked in favour of more positive metaphoric predicates, greatly altering the moral valence of these urges. As Josiah explained, letting go of images of personal monstrosity and the fear of condemnation and embracing a more positive view of his sexuality was not a quick and easy process. He remembered being highly critical of this movement during his early encounters: “Romans 1 says it’s a sin across *all times and all places*... So these Liberal people are trying to give me an excuse to sin, damn them!”⁴⁸. However, as he persisted in his study and reflection, he eventually encountered a convincing affirmative interpretation of this passage that radically altered his understanding of homosexuality: “I read this and I’m feeling shock ... I sort of looked up at the ceiling and said, ‘So, Lord, I guess that means that I – that I’m gay.’” Mason, Mitch, Ned, and Paul also came to realize that homosexuality was not immoral or displeasing to God as they consulted affirming Christian resources and engaged in their own critical study of conservative Christian homonegativity. Mitch came to realize that the Bible was “really kind of silent on the whole issue” of same-sex attraction and Paul recalled how connecting with affirming resources helped him to see conservative Christian homonegativity as a reflective of human politics - not the will of God: “you can be gay and it’s [morally and spiritually] okay.”

In addition to benefiting from pro-gay theories and biblical interpretations, Ned recalled how getting to know a variety of gay Christian men in affirming spaces allowed him to embrace a more positive image of his desires: “Learning that the stereotypes that the ex-gay ministries portrayed about gay people... *weren't* necessarily true - that not all gay men are promiscuous... [that] you can have faith... that was helpful for me.” By meeting happy, healthy, and successful gay men of faith, Ned was able to let go of negative images of gay life as inherently unhealthy, unsatisfying, and immoral and think more positively about the prospect of an openly gay life. For these five men, affirming ideology helped neutralize the threat of Christian homonegativity by associating it with erroneous theological interpretations, oppressive human politics, and inaccurate stereotypes. These resources ultimately allowed participants to embrace a more positive view of their desires and shed painful feelings of sin and evil.

Four of the men (Mason, Mitch, Ned, and Josiah) also noted that affirming Christian leaders and peers provided them with an invaluable sense of acceptance and support during this difficult time. Mason recalled how the support and encouragement of affirming Christians helped empower him to weather his ex-communication from the Mormon church (a consequence of his stated intention to embrace a homosexual identity and pursue homoerotic relationships) with dignity and integrity: “They were very supportive and the pastor was... with me... when the church had the excommunication.” Mitch similarly noted how affirming Christian leaders and peers embraced him and made him feel welcome and accepted – even when he had trouble accepting himself: “It’s a gay Christian church, so they’re obviously very, very supportive... They welcomed me with open arms, and they welcomed me *back* [after intermittent attempts to alter his desires] with open arms.” Ned also recalled how “helpful” it was to be able to integrate into a faith community where his sexual desires were not stigmatized or demonized, and Josiah remembered how valuable the support and reassurance of this community proved during this difficult time of spiritual and moral transition: “They would basically confirm... [That] someone who is gay – is in a homosexual relationship – is not a sinner by virtue of being in a homosexual relationship.” Here, participants explain how this welcoming spiritual community provided them with invaluable forms of support, encouragement, and belonging that eased the social, psychological, and emotional transition away from homonegative Christian environments. This movement affirmed that same-sex attracted Christians were valued by God and church and insisted that participants were the moral and spiritual equals of their heterosexual peers.

In sum, affirming Christian services provided sites of spiritual and ethical deconstruction, reflection, and reconfiguration that revealed the possibility of living well as gay Christian men. In these spaces, other Christians not only provided participants with new insights and valuable sources of support as they transitioned from one spiritual-moral lifeworld to another, but also served as positive role models, exemplifying the possibility of living well as a gay Christian man. Affirming Christian communities provided these men with an unqualified affirmation of their worth that eschewed any need for sexual change or restraint. Yet, as with other institutions, not all experiences with affirming Christianity were fruitful, satisfying, and productive.

Blasphemy, Ignorance, and Absurdity: The Trouble with Affirming Christianity

“I was just like... ‘there’s nothing authentic here’ ... it just couldn’t speak to me.” – Jed

Five of the men who consulted affirming Christian texts, leaders, and services (Mason, Josiah, Paul, Jed, and Matt) described experiences with this movement that were troubling or distressing. Mason, Josiah, and Paul expressed concern over experiences of alienation and discrimination in affirming Christian settings that ran counter to the inclusive ethic of the movement. Despite its claim to be ‘affirming,’ Mason noted that the congregation he occasionally attended with his sister⁴⁹ remained clearly divided along sexual lines: “I have felt like, ‘We have our straight members and we have our gay members.’ I never felt fully accepted. It’s ‘us’ and ‘them.’” Although they publically endorsed discourses of inclusivity and equality, Mason noted that many members of this congregation evidenced a palpable homonegativity: “[It was] like: ‘We know you’re there, we know you’re gay, that’s okay, but just don’t touch me.’” Here, Mason pointed to a caesura between official discourse and the everyday practices, attitudes, and actions of non-LGBT Christians. Within this ‘affirming’ space, aversion, fear, and aggression toward gay men persisted beneath a thin veneer of congregational acceptance.

Josiah and Paul similarly pointed to a disturbing disjuncture between the inclusive ethic of affirming congregations and the exclusionary practices and negative attitudes embedded in these institutions. Josiah described how the acceptance of gay men within affirming spaces was generally limited to those whose lives and relationships conformed to traditional, heterosexual ideals. He noticed that heterosexual Christians were most accepting of gay men who expressed a desire for monogamy, marriage, and a suburban family lifestyle and found that those who deviated from these norms were often marginalized in affirming spaces: “Only a *certain kind* of homosexual is truly going to be comfortable [in affirming Christian spaces].” He also observed

that affirming Christian leaders and allies often evidenced a highly stereotyped view of gay men and a limited understanding of sexual and gender diversity: “most affirming congregations are less informed than they would like to think... they don’t know how to process transgender identities and they don’t know how to talk about bisexuality. It’s not even on the map.” Paul echoed this concern, noting that affirming congregations often lack the understanding, education, and experience to create genuinely affirming spaces for their LGBT peers: “they are *welcoming* - ‘We want you to come!’ - but they... end up being *un-affirming* in so many ways, because of ignorance.” Here, participants explain how persistent homonegativity and sexual incompetence continue to preclude many affirming congregations from living up to their inclusive ethic.

In describing various experiences of refusal, avoidance, and denial, Mason, Josiah, and Paul highlighted the truncated forms of acceptance and persistent normalization forces at play in affirming Christian spaces. They underscored how heterosexual Christians often continue to distance themselves from gay peers through both physical separation and an express unwillingness to learn about sexual diversity or recognize the validity of various sexual forms. As Paul explained, they have not been willing to do “the work to be *able* to be affirming” in the sense of genuinely recognizing the other. In these examples, wilful ignorance and hesitation reveal the limits of acceptance in affirming Christian spaces and the continued presence of a less obvious mode of homonegativity (Desjardins, 2002; Ricoeur, 2004/2005). Participants also described how normalizing forces undercut the inclusive ethic of these resources, suggesting that only certain forms of sexual difference are acceptable to Christian peers – namely, those that conform to local ideals and values (monogamy, family, marriage, etc.). In this sense, affirming resources often reinforced heterosexual norms with varying degrees of subtlety (Desjardins, 2002; Halperin, 2012). While Mason, Josiah, and Paul gained valuable insights and support in affirming Christian spaces, they were nonetheless troubled by the persistent conservatism of affirming ideology and the movements frequent failure to fully implement inclusive ideals.

Jed and Matt were also critical of affirming Christian resources, but for reasons very different from those described above. Where Mason, Josiah, and Paul expressed dissatisfaction with the comprehensiveness of affirming Christian ideology and the limited implementation of its inclusive ethic, Jed and Matt took issue with the basic theological principles of the movement. For these men, affirming theology seemed a bizarre and desperate attempt to illegitimately circumvent the word of God and validate sinful behaviour. To them, the notion that God

approved of homosexuality appeared to be in direct contradiction with clear and unambiguous denunciations of such acts and relationships throughout Christian scripture. Consequently, Jed felt that the affirming Christian support group he attended was “not following the church’s teachings.” Matt similarly felt these ideas were in direct contradiction with sacred texts that unmistakably condemned homoerotic acts. He noted: “I...can’t read the Bible and think that it supports gay activity... it’s pretty blatant in a lot of parts that uh, it doesn’t support it.” For these men, affirming Christianity ideology represented a ridiculous and absurd attempt to legitimize sexual sin by blatantly misinterpreting biblical passages and promoting spiritual untruths.

In addition to these ideological misgivings, Jed and Matt also felt that some of the practices and priorities of affirming denominations were obscene and disrespectful to God and the Christian community. For example, Jed lamented that the support group he attended was more attuned to the pursuit of sexual and romantic connection than religious devotion, describing the group as essentially “a bar without the alcohol.” He was also uncomfortable with the political activism of the group, which he felt overshadowed the pursuit of spiritual growth: “They were more interested in pulling their picket signs out and... what bars they were going to go... what they were going to find in bed.” Matt similarly described the sexual permissiveness of the MCC as strange and off-putting: “I was just turned off to it... at that time, I was just like, ‘This is blasphemous!’ (laughs)... they have like ‘Leather Sunday’... and I thought, ‘This is just screwy.’” Here, the beliefs and forms of worship encountered in affirming Christian spaces deviated too far from participants’ own scriptural interpretations and practices of devotion. Illegitimate and blasphemous, affirming Christianity was considered to be a negative deformation of Christianity – a ‘distortion’ of truth (Goodman, 1978). For these individuals, authentic Christianity was decidedly homonegative and the liberating discourse promulgated by affirming congregations and groups was nothing more than an elaborate mode of self-deception. As such, these men reported no benefits associated with their time in affirming resources.⁵⁰

The critiques launched against affirmative Christian resources are thus grounded in two very different modes of concern. While Mason, Josiah, and Paul embraced the fundamental project of affirming Christianity but raised questions about how willing and able their peers were to adequately support the inclusion of gay men in the church, Jed and Matt criticized the legitimacy of the basic revisionist project inherent to these supports. Here, institutional critique took on two opposing forms as one group advocated for a more radical revisionism and another

challenged the basic legitimacy of any such doctrinal reinterpretation. In these critical commentaries, affirming Christianity is variously construed as too liberal and not liberal enough.

Liberation from Stigma or Dangerous Charade?

“We welcome gay and lesbian people... but there’s this [problematic] assumption... that gay and lesbian people want to get married, that their sex lives basically look the same as straight people... [that] they’re ‘just like us.’” – Josiah

For some, encounters with affirming resources facilitated a powerful experience of liberation from religious authority and Christian homonegativity within a community of supportive peers. Here, participants were able to reimagine homonegativity as an illegitimate form of oppression born of human politics and come to think more positively about their selves and their desires. For Mason, Mitch, Ned, Paul, and Josiah, these encounters ultimately opened up the possibility of living well as gay Christian men. In Part 3, I explore how these individuals used this emancipatory ethic to work through sexual-moral crisis and embrace their desires.

Conversely, for Jed and Matt, the idea that homosexuality could be compatible with the will of God proved entirely indigestible. These men considered affirming Christianity to be a lesson in blasphemy and spiritual corruption - a ridiculous farce where tradition was haphazardly reinvented to justify the pursuit of pleasure. Consequently, they rejected this revisionist project and sought other ways of mediating crisis. Exposure to alternative theological positions solidified Jed’s dedication to conservative Christian cosmology and he subsequently turned to non-specialized conservative Christian supports in search of guidance (see Chapter 5). Yet, in the case of Matt, this theological multiplicity left him questioning the legitimacy of the Christian worldview and the value of organized religion in general. In Part 3, I describe how he moved past crisis by embracing an openly gay lifestyle and identity and renouncing all ties to organized religion. The stories of Jed and Matt provided rich insight into the limitations of affirming faith resources in helping conservative Christians overcome sexual-moral conflict and the challenges this movement faces in drawing same-sex attracted believers into the fold. These findings are important given the scant attention given to this topic in past research. While this revisionist project proved unthinkable for Jed, the deconstruction of religious certainty and authority appeared to have gone further than intended in the case of Matt, causing him to ultimately abandon all religious belief in favour of a secular cosmology.

Like all other resources consulted in the neophyte stage, encounters with affirming

Christianity therefore proved diverse and complex. Yet, despite variability in the evaluation of these resources, encounters with affirming resources proved fruitful and transformative for all participants. For some, it opened up the possibility of embracing homoeroticism by embracing the theology of affirming Christian reformists or renouncing religion altogether. For others, it served to reinforce the legitimacy of conservative theology and the preposterousness of theological revisionism. In this sense, the detour through affirming Christian resources represents a key turning point in the lives of all men. For those who go on to embrace homoeroticism, it serves as a rite of passage (van Gennep, 1909) inducting them into a new spiritual and sexual existence. For others, it inadvertently serves as a rite of intensification, enhancing participants' commitment to conservative Christianity and homoerotic renunciation as a result of its failure to convince these men of the legitimacy of the revisionist project. In all cases, encounters with affirming Christianity profoundly influenced the trajectory of the men's lives and shaped where they ended up at the end of the neophyte stage (as described in Part 3). I now turn to consider participants' experiences with a second affirming resource consulted in the neophyte stage: secular mental health resources.

⁴⁷ The notable absence of most participants in this chapter is further explored in the global conclusion.

⁴⁸ Here, Josiah referred to a passage that appears in The Epistle to the Romans, the sixth book in the *New Testament*, which stated: "26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error" (Rom. 1:26-27, New International Version).

⁴⁹ This welcoming congregation was one in which the majority of members were non-LGBT.

⁵⁰ Although not explicitly construed as a benefit, Matt's suggestion that these experiences played a role in his eventual rejection of Christianity point to the transformative potential of this resource. This notion of 'success through failure' is discussed more thoroughly in Part 3.

Chapter 8 ~ Turning to the Profane: Encounters with Secular Psychology

“My orientation was normal... I can live in healthy relationships... this is what they’re telling me.” - Josiah

Secular mental health services (including psychiatrists, counsellors, and psychologists) were the only non-Christian supports approached by participants during the neophyte stage. Since 1975, the American Psychological Association (APA) has affirmed that same-sex attractions, feelings, and behaviour are normal variants of human sexuality and that “homosexuality per se implies no impairment in judgment, stability, reliability, or general social or vocational capabilities” (Conger, 1975, p. 633). Consequently, this professional body is opposed to reparative therapy, in both its secular and religious forms (APA, 2012). The American Psychiatric Association (1998) embraces an analogous position while the American Counselling Association (Whitman, Glossoff, Kocet & Tarvydas, 2006) promotes a normalized, healthy understanding of same-sex desire but stops short of explicitly opposing sexual orientation change efforts. This affirming attitude clearly distinguishes secular mental health services from ex-gay ministry programs, Christian counsellors, and conservative Christian supports (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Although homosexuality is considered a benign sexual variation, secular clinicians and researchers recognize the potential for same-sex attracted individuals to experience personal suffering and internal conflict related to their deviation from religious ideals and secular norms. In its most recent guidelines for clinical practice, the APA (2012) affirmed that “living in a heterosexist society inevitably poses challenges to people with nonheterosexual orientations” (p. 12) and encouraged clinicians to “consider the influences of religion and spirituality in the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons” (p. 20) and be attuned to “the rejecting and hurtful religious experiences that their lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients may have had” (p. 21). From this perspective, the experience of sexual-moral crisis and accompanying feelings of shame, sin, and self-loathing are all unfortunate by-products of cultural and institutional homonegativity.

Secular psychologists are encouraged to adhere to the *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients* (APA 2000; 2012) and expected to utilize evidence-based theories, facts, and techniques in their interactions with LGBT clients. To combat experiences of distress, they are advised to affirm and support LGB individuals and actively address the stigma, discrimination, and prejudice such persons encounter within larger

society (APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009). Treatment is generally aimed at helping clients “overcome negative attitudes about themselves” (p. 13). Where religious conflict is present, the “integration of these sometimes disparate but salient aspects of identity is often an important treatment goal” (APA, 2012, p. 21). In such cases, the APA advocates for a culturally sensitive and client-centered approach to mediating sexual-moral tension characterized by unconditional acceptance and support, the development of active coping skills (including cognitive reframing, enhancing affective expression, and developing techniques to deal with losses), and the use of identity exploration and development techniques intended to help clients “explore a wide range of options... without prioritizing a particular outcome” (APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009, p. 4). The role of the secular psychologist is to provide same-sex attracted Christians with “a safe space where the different aspects of the evolving self can be acknowledged, explored, and respected and potentially rewoven into a more coherent sense of self that feels authentic to the client” (p. 4).

Like their affirming Christian counterparts, secular professionals therefore aim to help clients emancipate themselves from internalized homonegativity and mitigate the tension between their religious and sexual selves. However, where affirming Christianity uses pro-gay theology to morally validate homoeroticism, psychologists present a naturalized view of homosexuality. These emancipatory institutions thus differ in how they define truth and legitimacy and validate their respective discourses. Where affirming leaders work to legitimize homoerotic acts and relationship within the realm of Christian cosmology, mental health experts ground their arguments within an alternative, naturalized world. These secular professionals also differ from Christian counsellors, who approach psychology from a biblical perspective and integrate religious values and practices into therapeutic practice. Regardless of their personal spiritual proclivities, mental health clinicians rely on science and empiricism to inform their understanding of sexual diversity and the services they provide to clients.

In My Professional Opinion: Personal Encounters with Secular Psychology

“I would read everything I could get my hands on, from mainstream psychology... because I was like, ‘Okay, I’m going to balance this shit out.’” - Josiah

Seven of the men (Adam, Mason, Ned, Paul, Brad, Josiah, and Mitch) turned to secular mental health experts during the neophyte phase.⁵¹ As with other redressive institutions, the

position of these resources within the global trajectory of the neophyte phase and the pattern of consultation varied amongst participants. Secular psychology was the first resource consulted by Adam, who sought the help of an individual therapist at age 27 (1983) when his brief marriage fell into chaos. Josiah also consulted mental health experts at the beginning of the neophyte stage while simultaneously participating in ex-gay ministry counselling. From roughly age 19 to 21 (2000 to 2002), he conferred with social workers, counsellors, and clinical psychologists on the advice of his stepfather, who was unaware that mainstream psychology no longer considered homosexuality a mental disorder. After abandoning the ex-gay ministry movement, he also explored secular research and theories in an attempt to better understand his desires.

Three others (Mason, Ned, and Paul) became involved with secular psychology after unsatisfying experiences with conservative Christian resources and ex-gay ministry services. These men had experienced no changes in their desires as a result of their reorientation efforts and considered the prospect of devout celibacy largely unappealing. Consequently, they found themselves in need of alternative techniques for resolving sexual-moral crisis. After leaving ex-gay ministry programs, all three consulted secular mental health professionals while simultaneously exploring affirming Christianity. Mason recalled having first sought individual counselling services at age 54 (in 2000) while Ned and Paul simply noted that they engaged these services soon after leaving the ex-gay ministry movement at age 22 (1997) and 33 (1998), respectively.

Lastly, Brad and Mitch described turning to secular mental health resources on several occasions throughout the neophyte stage. Brad noted that he repeatedly sought the help of secular counsellors and psychologists from age 20 to 27 (1996 – 2003), but failed to mention exact dates. He also noted that he learned a great deal about how secular psychology understands and approaches homosexuality when he pursued a master's degree in counselling (roughly age 24, 2002). Although he remained peripherally involved with the ex-gay ministry movement at the time, he had long given up the hope of sexual reorientation. Mitch first came into contact with secular psychology at 34 (1983) when his efforts to alter his desires with the help of a local priest proved devastating to his mental health and resulted in psychiatric hospitalization (see Chapter 6). After this episode, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and brought into regular contact with secular mental health clinicians. In these encounters, he often discussed his sexual-moral conflict with psychologists, psychiatrists, and counsellors and received advice and

information related to his ongoing struggle. It should be noted that, with the exception of Josiah, participants were largely uncertain about the specific qualifications possessed by mental health service providers. These professionals were generally referred to as ‘counsellors’ and ‘therapists’ and the nature of their training and accreditation remained largely obscure even in cases where they used regulated terminology (such as ‘psychologist’). I now turn to a description of the men’s experiences with secular mental health supports.

It’s Science! The Benefits of Secular Mental Health Services

“I went to see a counsellor, and, the counsellor helped me to realize that repressing me – repressing myself - was hurting me emotionally and psychologically.” - Mitch

All seven participants (Adam, Josiah, Mason, Mitch, Brad, Ned, and Paul) described beneficial aspects of their encounters with secular mental health supports. Four (Adam, Josiah, Mitch, and Brad) described how these professionals provided them with new insight into their sexual preferences and experiences of suffering, shame, and conflict. Josiah, for example, referred to his meeting with a clinical psychologist as “one of the most educational experiences” of his young life: “This woman just sat down with me and started giving me facts about homosexuality... if she mentioned something that she saw in my eyes that I didn’t understand... she would supply additional information.” Paul explained how secular clinicians helped him understand the negative impact of homonegativity on his self-concept and wellbeing: “[You] kind of get a sense of understanding where your conflict comes from - in that we live in a kind of society that clearly is at war against gay people.” In these secular spaces, the men were provided with new perspectives on the nature of their desires and the causes of their ongoing distress. Notions of evil and dysfunction were replaced by ideas of political oppression and participants came to see themselves as scapegoats and victims of human polemics.

For those who engaged with psychological services prior to or alongside ex-gay ministry programming, these insights also served a protective function. Adam, Josiah, Mitch, and Brad noted that the information they received from secular mental health experts helped deter them from doggedly pursuing unproductive sexual change efforts and shielded them from painful experiences of disappointment by moderating their expectations. They recalled how psychologists and counsellors had warned them that their sexual preferences would most likely remain stable and that the chance of developing heterosexual attraction was negligible. As Adam recalled, “He [the psychologist] figured that my gay orientation was permanent and not

changeable and so, you know, I shouldn't look for any cure." Josiah similarly recalled his counsellor expressing doubts about his ongoing efforts to alter his sexuality through ex-gay ministry services: "She said, 'What are you going to do... down the road when you've spent all sorts of money on ex-gay therapy and your sexual orientation hasn't shifted?' And, I said... 'I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.'" Mitch also remembered a secular clinician warning him that sexual reorientation programs were largely ineffective and often harmed clients "emotionally and psychologically."

Brad and Josiah also described how their own exploration of contemporary psychological research and theorising served to radically delegitimize ex-gay discourse and hasten their exit from this movement. Brad explained how his graduate training in counselling psychology helped him realize that many of the causal models, facts, and statistics he had been exposed to in ex-gay ministry settings – including the idea that “the average gay person has their life span shortened 20 years” - were unsupported by contemporary scientific research. When he confronted ex-gay leaders about the inaccuracy of their information, he was met with disinterest and contempt: “there was always the ‘Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa’ and they would keep using it.” Such purposeful distortions and inaccuracies contributed to Brad’s growing discomfort with, and distrust of, ex-gay ministry programs and he terminated his involvement with this movement soon thereafter. Josiah similarly noted how his own encounters with secular therapists and scientific literature powerfully delegitimized the ideologies and practices of the ex-gay ministry movement and enabled him to better understand the contempt ex-gay leaders expressed for secular psychology: “Why do the ex-gay people hate the American Psychological Association so much?... because they would say that the ex-gay therapies... [are] destructive, you know?” Although these warnings and counter-discourses did not prevent these men from engaging with ex-gay ministry services, they helped participants develop a healthy degree of scepticism that deterred them from becoming fixated on reorientation efforts and mitigated feelings of personal failure by attributing program ineffectiveness to a flawed therapeutic process.

Together, affirmations of normalcy, healthiness, and naturalness; the presence of positive gay role models; and the deconstruction of negative LGBT stereotypes also inspired five of the men (Josiah, Ned, Mason, Mitch, and Paul) to think more positively about their desires and shed feelings of abnormality, deviance, and wickedness. For example, Josiah recalled how empirical research findings dispelled his belief that homosexuality was associated with pedophilic

tendencies: “Fundamentalists were *convinced* that pedophilia and homosexuality were related... [the] ‘gateway to the recruitment’ sort of argument, right? And she [secular clinician] just said, ‘No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! ... 97% of convicted pedophiles are straight men.’” By presenting participants with naturalized and normalized images homosexuality, secular mental health experts helped assure the men of their health and wholeness. As Ned explained: “Basically, he [secular counsellor] just reassured me... that I *was* fine. (Laughs) That I wasn’t... um... ‘broken’ as the ex-gay movement led me to believe.” Paul similarly described how secular counselling helped him overcome feelings of deviance and brokenness by encouraging him to think “more objectively” about his sexuality. Ultimately, these recourses encouraged participants to embrace an affirming attitude toward their sexuality by supplying banalized and naturalized ideologies of sexual variation that enjoyed the legitimacy of objective science. This exposure to secular sexual theory and research served as a powerful antithesis to internalized homonegativity, gradually opening up a reflective space where participants could consider the possibility of living well as gay men. As Josiah noted, “All of a sudden, I had some pictures that I couldn’t really process at the time of what a healthy homosexual life might look like.”

Secular mental health supports thus worked to dissociate homoeroticism from notions of sin and pathology and reconstruct this sexual state as reflective of normalcy, health, and naturalness. This new discourse was not embraced without hesitation. For example, Josiah recalled having initially construed this naturalized discourse as a blasphemous invitation to sin: “At the time, I was just like, ‘Pfffttttt!’ ... this is straight from the devil’s mouth!” Yet, in time, many came to embrace this new, naturalized moral discourse. This symbolic transformation positively impacted participants understanding and experience of their desires, improved their self-concept, and left them feeling optimistic about the prospect of a satisfying, openly gay life. Yet, experiences with these resources were not universally positive. I turn now to consider instances of frustration and harm in secular mental health encounters.

Clinical Blunders: Insensitivity and Stigma in Secular Psychology

“They were very patronizing towards me and it made me angry.” - Brad

Themes of clinical insensitivity, alienation, and stigmatization arose in four of the narratives (Josiah, Brad, Mitch, and Mason). Three of these men - Brad, Josiah, and Mitch - described how secular mental health experts had failed to recognize and respect their religious views and personal goals during clinical encounters. Brad and Mitch lamented that particular

professionals seemed incapable of appreciating how much Christianity influenced their everyday lives and understandings of self and world. As such, they were unable to fully appreciate the significance of sexual-moral conflict or the seriousness of participants' suffering. Brad recalled how various secular counsellors had insensitively dismissed his faith as naïve and trivial: "I went to go see gay counsellors in my journey and told them... 'Here is the issues, this is what I'm going through' and... [had] them say, 'Your religion is stupid - throw it out and just be gay.' He also described how certain professionals downplayed the gravity of his predicament and made light of his moral trepidations: "one psychologist... told me that all I really needed was to go get laid that weekend and everything would be fine... I felt profoundly disrespected in that situation." Frustrated by these experiences of insensitivity and condescension, Brad turned away from secular clinicians in indignation.

Mitch similarly noted that a psychologist he encountered early in the neophyte stage failed to appreciate the profound spiritual, emotional, psychological, and social significance of his desires and the depth of his inner conflict. Convinced Mitch would be happier as a gay man and failing to appreciate the complexity of his suffering, this expert advised him to renounce his faith and embrace his desires. Unfortunately, living as an openly gay man did nothing to mitigate Mitch's internalized homonegativity. He recalled, "He convinced me to go into the gay community... [but] the problem [was]... I accepted it at an intellectual level, but I didn't really accept it in my heart." Although he was behaviourally engaged in the gay community, Mitch continued to experience painful feelings of shame and self-loathing. His fundamental moral orientation toward homosexuality had not changed and he continued to live a fractured and conflicted existence. Eventually, he grew "frustrated with trying to meld into the gay community" and returned to the ex-gay ministry movement. By failing to comprehend the depth of Mitch's internalized homonegativity, this clinician prematurely pushed him into a way of being in conflict with his own moral principles and prolonged his suffering for many years.

Although he never felt disrespected in clinical encounters, Josiah also sensed that secular mental health workers struggled to appreciate the full significance of his moral dilemma and the extent to which his worldview had been shaped by conservative Christian morality and ex-gay ministry ideology. He recalled: "I had this tug of war... between this very... conservative Evangelical theology, versus this very practical, empirical, 'sexual orientation doesn't change, deal with it Josiah.' [the voice of his secular counsellor] Um, and, I would feel so much stress."

Although he respected the frankness of his secular counsellors, he often felt these experts failed to appreciate the extent to which his cultural world differed from their own: “

She would say, ‘Josiah, I’m a social scientist. What am I going to conclude based on your entire sexual history? ... And I was like, ‘You’re going to conclude that I am a homosexual.’ And she said, ‘Thank you. We understand each other.’ And I said, ‘*No we don’t*. Because my sexual orientation *can* change.’

Here, Brad, Mason and Josiah highlight the difficulties some clinicians face when confronted by clients whose moral proclivities and worldviews differ from their own.

While the aforementioned criticisms point to issues of cultural and religious insensitivity, Mitch and Mason spoke to encounters with secular professionals that were marked by subtle forms of homonegativity and stigmatization. Mitch noted that he encountered counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists throughout the neophyte stage that evidenced a decidedly negative attitude toward homosexuality: “I have been involved with mental health services for many years... some of my therapists and psychiatrists are very supportive of me being gay, and some *weren’t* supportive.” He noted that being exposed to such varying perspectives within the mental health community exacerbated his own sense of confusion and uncertainty and contributed to his ambivalent movement between the gay community and the ex-gay ministry movement for more than 35 years.

Mason also described encountering more subtle themes of heteronormativity and homonegativity in his experiences with secular mental health supports. He explained how clinicians’ eagerness to clarify their own sexual identities proved divisive and alienating: “The counsellor would say to you, ‘I’m not gay, but I have friends that are’ ... [and] immediately you’d get the same impression, like ‘Well, we have them and we have *them*.’” Mason felt these sexual revelations were unnecessary, divisive, and detrimental to the therapeutic relationship. Such declarations served no therapeutic purpose and seemed to alienate him from heterosexual supports, obscure his fundamental humanity, and betray a sense of subtle discomfort on the part of clinicians. As he simply stated: “I don’t care if you’re not [gay]. I care that you’re accepting.”

Here, the men highlight blatant and subtle experiences of insensitivity, stigma, and alienation in clinical encounters and raise important questions about the implementation of affirmative values in secular mental health services. Although Mitch’s experiences date back to the 1980s and 1990s, the stories shared by Brad, Josiah, and Mason point to problems of cultural

insensitivity and clinical ineptitude that persist well into the 21st century. Such experiences garnered painful feelings of frustration, shame, and indignation. As Brad simply noted, “[It is] like - ‘You are not listening to me when I’m telling you what my experience is and what I’m desiring in this!’” By failing to respond sensitively to participants’ sexual and spiritual concerns, these clinicians engendered experiences of indignity and alterity that exacerbated clients’ suffering and alienated them from potentially valuable mental health supports.

The Truth Shall Set you Free (?): Emancipation, Insensitivity, and Dehumanization

“[I] am as cautious of gay-affirming therapy as I am of ex-gay therapy if it starts from the point of ‘I am the expert... and I’m going to make you what you should be.’” - Brad

The normalized and banalized discourse promoted by the APA offers an alternative framework for understanding homosexuality. It eschews questions of good and evil with themes of naturalness and inevitability and positions science (as opposed to faith) as the ultimate arbiter of truth. Yet, while clinicians are encouraged to help clients ‘integrate’ their sexual and religious identities (APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009; APA, 2012), participants’ narratives evidence little of this assimilative ethic. Rather, they suggest that secular mental health experts tend to let their own interpretations stand in stark contrast to conservative Christian ideology and ex-gay discourse. Those who had already started to embrace a more liberal, affirming theology (Mason, Ned, and Paul) noted that encounters with secular psychology intensified their criticism of religious and secular homonegativity and hastened their attitudinal shift. However, those who remained more committed to the conservative Christian worldview – at least initially – described this ideological and moral disjuncture as off-putting and lamented the lack of sensitivity and recognition clinicians exhibited toward their own values, priorities, and understandings.

Thus, while exposure to this affirming discourse and the insights and possibilities it generated ultimately proved beneficial to all participants, not every clinical encounter was considered to have been helpful. Several participants encountered professionals who exacerbated their sense of difference; delegitimized their vision of self and world; and belittled their values, beliefs, and life projects. Here, professional ideals of cultural sensitivity, affirming engagement, and client-centered care (APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009; APA, 2012) were unrealized in psychological practice. In their efforts to liberate participants from what they considered ignorant and oppressive discourses and

institutions, these clinicians powerfully delegitimized – and in some cases, even ridiculed – participants’ own spiritual, sexual, and moral truths. They also failed to recognize how renouncing Christianity in pursuit of homosexual identities and relationships often meant defying God, letting go of a valued system of meaning and order, alienating oneself from loved ones, or condemning oneself to eternal damnation. Such demeaning and disempowering acts risk offending clients and thwarting important opportunities to help same-sex attracted Christian men mitigate crisis and work toward a greater state of wellbeing.

In the place of a non-judgemental process of identity ‘exploration’ and the ‘weaving’ of new forms of self, clinicians tended to present their ideology as an absolute truth that must be embraced by clients if they hope to successfully move beyond crisis. Here, conservative Christianity – as a whole - is constructed as false, oppressive, and destructive and secular psychology is presented as true, liberating, and healing. While this approach might mitigate unrealistic (and potentially destructive) expectations of sexual reorientation and help participants develop a more positive understanding of their selves and desires, it also carries a risk of harm if participants feel their own systems of meaning are disrespected, denigrated, or delegitimized in the process. Here, a basic paradox is revealed at the center of secular mental health services. While clinicians presumably feel the need to assert their own, naturalized discourse as indisputably right and true in an attempt to convince participants to abandon homonegative attitudes and oppressive systems of meaning, this approach risks denigrating and insulting the very clients they hope to help. In such cases, practitioners end up harming clients and alienating them from secular supports by making insensitive and indefensible claims to absolute truth and moral superiority (Taylor, 1999).

The preceding analysis provided further insight into the experiences of same-sex attracted Christians in secular mental health settings and supported past reports that much work remains to be done if secular psychology, counselling, and psychiatry are to be truly welcoming for both same-sex attracted individuals and conservative Christians (see, for example, Buser et al., 2011; Johns & Hanna, 2011). These stories revealed certain ideological and moral tensions that permeate clinical encounters with conservative Christian clients and raised important questions about how mental health professionals might bridge this divide to help those in crisis pursue optimal wellbeing. In the global conclusion of the thesis, I return to issues of cultural sensitivity

and diversity in psychological practice and consider ways of improving the service network by employing approaches developed in the fields of cultural anthropology and biomedical ethics.

For the vast majority of participants, secular mental health supports were some of the last institutions consulted in the neophyte stage. As he persisted in his graduate studies and learned more about contemporary psychological perspectives on homosexuality, Brad eventually terminated his involvement with the ex-gay ministry movement and choose to embrace a life of devout celibacy. Mitch Ned, Paul, Josiah, and Mason gradually warmed to the affirming, naturalized ethic promoted by secular psychology and ultimately choose to live as openly gay men. Adam was the only participant who consulted alternative supports after his encounter with secular mental health services. After his time in individual counselling, he briefly participated in the ex-gay ministry movement before ultimately embracing devout celibacy. In Part 3, I describe how these men transformed their lives and selves by embracing these distinct modes of redress. Having explored individual encounters with all four of the primary institutions consulted during the neophyte stage, the next chapter provides a reflection on the global dynamics of the neophyte stage and the evaluative forces and structural considerations that make sense of the dynamic movements within this phase.

⁵¹ In line with APA policy statements, the vast majority of secular mental health supports presented homosexuality as a natural and normal form of sexual expression. Yet, some of the professionals consulted by Mitch proved to be an exception. Moreover, the moral framework used by the mental health practitioner Adam consulted with is unclear. While this clinician affirmed that his desires were likely unchangeable, Adam does not elaborate on how this counselor positioned these attractions relative to notions of normalcy/abnormality or good/evil.

Chapter 9 ~ New Possibilities, Dead Ends: Reflections on the Neophyte Stage

“I needed end to my confusion. I needed some peace. I needed some hope... I was empty of any resources to help myself.” – Jed

The neophyte stage was a creative, reflexive period of life where participants reflected on their understandings of sexuality, morality, religion, self, and world and sought new forms and possibilities for their lives in the face of two, seemingly immutable, aspects of self. They sought to exploit the “openings, possibilities, indeterminacies” inherent in all human experiences that render them amendable to new interpretations and modes of stylization (Ricoeur, 1986/2007, p. 81). Overcoming crisis, disorder, and disintegration required an aesthetic response capable of transcending the rigid sexual-moral binary that associated heterosexuality with goodness, order, and righteousness and homosexuality with taboo, evil, and anomie. In the neophyte stage, participants sought new ways of stylizing the experience of crisis and homoeroticism and restoring order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to their lives.

In the search for new ways forward, crisis opened onto the social sphere and participants came into contact with various redressive institutions. The images, discourses, texts, models, and metaphors promulgated by each of these institutions combined to create a distinct “proposed world” (Ricoeur, 1986/2007, p. 86) - a particular rendering of reality that participants were encouraged to appropriate and inhabit as a means of resolving crisis and restoring meaning and order to their lives. Each resource provided participants with different ‘ways of world-making’ (Goodman, 1978). They invited the men to imagine “new possibilities for being in the world” (Ricoeur, 1986/2007, p. 86) and provided distinct templates for making sense of the past and moving into the future. Yet, these discourses were not only imbued with (potential) meaning, but also with rhetorical force. As Ricoeur noted, all discourse “intends things, applies itself to reality, expresses the world” (p. 85). The world of the text is meant to be convincing – it reflects the power of persuasion imminent in symbolic action and the political interests of those who produce and disseminate such cultural products (Csordas, 2002). Each discourse not only imparts meaning to suffering and opens up possibilities for remaking self and world, but also lends support to particular political agendas. In this sense, the institutions encountered by participants in the neophyte stage are all centres of knowledge-power (Foucault, 1976/1990). They produce particular portraits of sexual-moral crisis that have both aesthetic and polemic properties.

Although each institutional discourse addressed itself to suffering and positive transformation, the selves and worlds they constructed differed greatly. Conservative Christianity, the ex-gay ministry movement, affirming Christianity, and secular psychology present four competing visions of reality, each vying to be recognized as right and true within the local sociocultural sphere. In this politicized arena, authorities work to enhance the rhetorical force of their preferred discourse by tapping into the persuasive potential of science, human rights discourse, or religious cosmology (Certeau, 1984; Csordas, 2002; Taylor, 1999). Friends, family members, peers, and loved ones also throw their support behind particular ways of worldmaking, seeking to buttress the legitimacy of their own worldviews and avoid the possibility of social fission (Turner, 1982). Faced with a multitude of forms and images, the men must evaluate these proposed worlds and decide which, if any, they will choose to inhabit as a means of overcoming sexual-moral crisis. This not only entails adopting a particular stylistic approach to experiences of homoeroticism, but also taking a political stand on issues of sexuality, faith, and morality. While some of the men gravitated toward a particular ways of understanding self and world, others turned away in search of other possibilities. This raises the question of why certain aesthetic devices and redressive tools were appropriated by some participants and rejected by others. If all profess to represent the truth of sexual-moral crisis and claim they are capable of adequately resolving sexual-moral crisis, how can we account for such variable individual preferences and dynamic movements throughout the neophyte stage? Why do some participants become ‘disillusioned’ by certain strategies (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004)? How are we to explain why particular individuals embraced certain understandings, approaches, and redressive techniques and spurned others? How do we make sense of institutional ‘successes’ and ‘failures?’ What factors are at play in the evaluation of particular proposed worlds? Such questions have hitherto remained largely unanswered. While past authors have pointed to various factors related to the adjudication of particular resources, no comprehensive evaluative model exists. Moreover, no research has looked at redressive decision-making in the context of multiple forms of help-seeking. In what follows, I reflect on the neophyte stage from the narrative perspective of reader response theory as a means of illuminating the decisions and dynamic movements that characterize this phase of life.

Is this Me? Participants as Readers

“As reader, I find myself only by losing myself. Reading introduces me into the imaginative variations of the ego.” – Paul Ricoeur, (1986/2007, p. 88)

If “the text is the medium through which we understand ourselves” (Ricoeur, 1986/2007, p. 87), the phenomenon of reading represents a logical approach to exploring how participants evaluated the various texts, models, theories, and teachings they encountered throughout the neophyte stage. Reader response theory holds that the meaning of a particular discourse is not fixed, but rather open to “an unlimited series of readings” (Ricoeur, 1986/2007, p. 83). Although the author(s) might intend to impart particular messages to the audience, meaning of the text emerges only in the dynamic confrontation between the world of the text and the world of the reader. Consequently, similar texts, images, and discourses – and the worlds they create – are interpreted differently when brought into dialogue with particular lives, experiences, and worldviews and in the context of specific socio-political spaces. By calling our attention to the interpretive process, reader response theory invites us to explore what is at stake in adopting or refusing particular aesthetics tools and redressive techniques and consider how certain intrapersonal and interpersonal factors might contribute to the success or failure of the rhetorical project in the context of individual lives. Using this approach, I was able to identify four key factors used to evaluate the appeal of various institutional ideologies: plausibility; relevance; socio-political acceptability; and therapeutic efficacy⁵². By making these considerations explicit, we not only reveal what is at stake in the neophyte stage, but also enhance our understanding of the processual flow of this stage and the patterns of consultation and decision-making evident therein.

Is the discourse credible and legitimate? Questions of plausibility. First and foremost, institutional texts had to be plausible. This consideration is one of basic credibility. It asks whether the world constructed by the discourse is believable or unimaginable, true or false, veracious or deceptive. It refers to whether or not the discourse is deemed capable of bringing about a positive transformation of self and wellbeing. As Csordas (2002) explained, the neophyte must “be persuaded that healing is possible, that the group’s claims in this respect are coherent and legitimate” (p. 27). To be persuasive, the discourse itself must make sense to the reader – it must present a convincing portrait of sexuality, morality, and spirituality and inspire confidence in a brighter future.

Upon encountering various discourses, the participants tried to make the text come alive in their imagination – they attempted to envision a world where the ways of thinking, feeling, being, and doing suggested by the discourse would bring an end to sexual-moral crisis and restore a sense of wholeness, goodness, normalcy, and happiness to their lives. Where institutional texts, images, and discourses proved highly convincing, they offended no unyielding beliefs and presented a persuasive and satisfying vision of self and world. As Rodney noted, “What I found was the stuff they (ex-gay leaders) were saying just made sense.” Where institutional discourse proved unpersuasive, the world of the text proved unbelievable, unthinkable, or incoherent. Reflecting on the same ex-gay discourse, Ned noted, “I just kind of felt it being a bit silly... kind of psychobabble type of talk.”

Institutional discourses were frequently rejected because they lacked internal coherence, contravened deeply ingrained values, or violated existing understandings of sexuality, morality, and cosmology. For example, Todd had trouble accepting the notion – promoted by ex-gay leaders - that all humans are inherently heterosexual and that “no one is *really* gay.” Although he “tried to believe” this assertion, he could not imagine a world in which this would be true. Where a particular redressive discourse violated participants’ existing worldview or appeared to contradict itself, it was cast as fraudulent, false, meaningless, and nonsensical. As Goodman (1978) argued, “A version is taken to be true when it offends no unyielding beliefs and none of its own precepts” (p. 17).

Rarely, however, does the text stand alone in the rhetorical project. Throughout the narratives, leaders, advisors and clinicians used a variety of rhetorical strategies to convince neophytes of the legitimacy and efficacy of their preferred discourse. They attempted to enhance the credibility of particular ways of worldmaking by linking them to the sacred word of God, the objectivity of secular science, or the trustworthiness of the ‘expert’. Where science, scripture, and expertise were respected as legitimate sources of truth, these associations increased the credibility of the discourse. For example, associating sexual or moral ideas with biblical passages proved to be a powerful rhetorical strategy in both affirming and conservative Christian settings. For the believer, the legitimacy of God’s word is beyond reproach. As Walter stated: “I see the Bible as being the most credible piece of information on this earth.”

Conversely, when the truth of scientific or religious discourse is called into doubt or the legitimacy of individual expertise is questioned, the rhetorical force of the text suffers. For

example, when Brad realized that many of the ‘facts’ presented by ex-gay leaders were not supported by psychological science, his confidence in this discourse was irreparably shaken: “I’m like, ‘This is meaningless research! This is made-up!’” Such instances of extratextual contradiction bred doubt in the neophyte stage. Where science and religion or the opinions of various ‘experts’ were observed to be in conflict, presumptions of absolute truth were forcefully destabilized (Certeau, 1984). Sometimes participants responded by reaffirming their allegiance to their existing vision of self, world, and cosmology, rejecting new insights in favour of continuity. In other moments, they embraced alternative interpretive frames in light of convincing new evidence.

Exemplary cases also contributed to the rhetorical force of institutional discourses, serving as testaments to the truth and efficacy of particular proposed worlds and the dangers or risks inherent in others. Leaders and authorities frequently used both success stories and apocalyptic narratives in their attempts to convince participants to embrace particular discourses and reject others. Where models of success appeared happy and satisfied, their lives validated the legitimacy of particular redressive discourses. For example, Jed noted that the men and women he encountered within a conservative Christian prayer group helped convince him that following Jesus would bring positive change to his life: “They were joyful people, content people, happy people - people at peace... Jesus [was] doing *really good* things in their lives... so [I] was like, ‘Wow – this is really good stuff – this is... what I need.’” Conversely, where models and peers were perceived to be unhappy, unfulfilled, or dysfunctional, they casted doubt on the veracity of institutional discourses and their capacity to improve participants’ lives. For example, Jed reported that his observations of gay men in affirming congregations convinced him that these individuals were not as happy or peaceful as leaders made them out to be: “There’s so much *hostility* and *anger* and *hiding*, and yet saying you’re free... I just knew ‘No. Un-huh!’” Here again, contradiction breeds suspicion.

Yet, in a Christian world inhabited by supernatural forces, questions of credibility extended beyond human logic or observable evidence. For believers, the sense that God approved or disapproval of a particular discourses played an important role in evaluating its legitimacy.⁵³ As Rodney explained: “Some would say... ‘I just went with my gut’... but I think it was a God thing... I *knew* that God was calling... I thought... ‘this is where He wants me to go. This is what has to happen.’” Here, experiences of the sacred served to legitimize particular

discourses and provide participants with a reassuring sense of certainty and confidence. Conversely, where encounters with the sacred made it clear that a particular way of thinking, feeling, and being was unacceptable, these options were powerfully delegitimized. For example, Jed recalled how God made it clear that he was not to pursue homosexuality or embrace an affirming ideology: “I heard God [say]... ‘It’s not my design, my intent for you. Follow me.’ ... I was *clear* at that point that that was not... the path that I was... supposed to go [down], and I agreed to that.”

In sum, questions of credibility concern the ability of the discourse to draw the men into the world of the text and convince them of its truthfulness, rightness, legitimacy, and ability to bring positive change in their lives. Credibility was the most basic evaluative standard used throughout the neophyte stage. At the very least, readers had to be convinced that the discourse was not, in the words of Mason, “a bunch of hooey.” Those who were persuaded of the discourse’s abstract plausibility and general credibility would go on to consider whether or not it was capable of making sense of their unique lived experiences. Conversely, those who remained unconvinced of the veracity of particular discourses or their ability to positively transform their lives were forced to turn elsewhere for inspiration.

Does it make sense of *my* life? Questions of personal relevance. Where questions of plausibility were largely abstract and concerned the degree of fit between participant’s existing worldview and the world of the text, this consideration attends to issues of personal “relevance and revelation” (Goodman, 1978, p. 19). The question of relevance is particular to the individual and explores the extent to which a specific discourse resonates with the participant’s understanding of the past and generates new meaning in their lives. The men entered the neophyte stage not as empty vessels, but as thoughtful and reflective individuals who had already constructed particular truths about their selves and lives. Discourses that conflicted with important aspects of participants’ own autobiographical understandings were often discarded. For example, Todd noted how ex-gay causal discourse failed to resonate with his own childhood experiences: “They kept trying to convince me that there’s some disconnect with your father. And that may be the case, but it sure wasn’t in my own. I don’t fit that template!” Conversely, discourses that resonated with participants’ own experiences and understandings of the past tended to be highly convincing. For example, Josiah noted how the perceived correspondence between ex-gay causal discourse and his own past experiences reinforced the legitimacy of this

ideology: “If you want a checklist of the evangelical ex-gay stuff, I’m a checklist like right down the line – like tic, tic, tic, tic in terms of, you know I totally fit the profile they construct for a homosexual male.” Here, new aesthetic forms fused with existing understandings of life and self to transform personal narratives, imparting new meaning to a life previously characterized by mystery and senseless suffering.

Personal relevance thus concerns the ‘biographical suitability’ of institutional discourses and the degree to which they are capable of accounting for a unique array of personal experiences, accommodating existing self-truths, and generating new meaning in personal narratives. When a discourse succeeds in organizing existing information about the self under a new frame or image, it provides a powerful and satisfying sense of coherence to personal narratives. As Goodman (1978) reported, considerations of resemblance and comprehensiveness are as important to “the informativeness and organizing power of the whole [discursive] system” (p. 19) as those of basic credibility. Even the most plausible aesthetic devices are of little practical use if they fail to make sense of, and bring new meaning to, the life of the reader.

Taken together, considerations of plausibility and personal relevance point to the fusion of horizons – the productive meeting of text and reader - that is at the heart of the phenomenon of reading. Participants approached redressive institutions with various preconceptions about self and world that profoundly influenced the interpretive project. At times, a particular discourse fit well with existing understandings of self and world and succeeded in transforming the experience of crisis. In other cases, the text failed to have its intended influence on the reader. Here, the discourses met with resistance generated by alternative interpretations, contradictory truths, and incompatible lived experiences. Previous understandings ultimately held firm and the rhetorical project collapsed in the face of unbending beliefs about self, world, and spirituality. When confronted by a particular text, the degree of fit with existing meaning systems and biographical constructions thus greatly impact the interpretive project. However, the act of reading is also impacted by the socio-political context.

What are the social implications? Questions of socio-political acceptability. In Chapter 2, I described how the experience of crisis is intimately tied to local norms, values, understandings, and ideals. Participants suffer because they find themselves at odds with what is locally considered good, normal, right, and true and are confronted by the threat of social exclusion. Each of the discourses encountered in the neophyte stage (celibate devotion, ex-gay

reparation, affirming Christianity, and secular emancipation) promoted a particular way of being that was not only cosmological, but also social and political. Participants, as well as advisors and loved ones, were keenly aware that different redressive forms entailed particular socio-political consequences. Within the conservative Christian world, it was evident that the transgression of the sacred sexual order would not be tolerated – participants could either bring themselves in line with Christian cosmology or be thrust from the group (Douglas, 1966). Concerned about participants' wellbeing and fearing the dissolution of family, peer, and community bonds, interested parties encouraged the men to realign themselves with the sacred Christian order and purify themselves of sexual sin. They urged participants to pursue modes of redress that were in line with local values and discouraged them from considering those that transgressed or delegitimized the conservative Christian worldview. This evaluative consideration concerns the relationship between the redressive discourse and the local cosmological order and highlights the rhetorical force of the threat of alienation and the promise of reincorporation.

For spouses and girlfriends, homoeroticism was an immediate danger to the long-term viability of the family unit. Unsurprisingly, these individuals expressed a strong preference for modes of redress that preserved the integrity of these relationships. Seth, Theo, Paul, Charles, and Todd noted that their female partners encouraged them to pursue sexual reorientation or discipline in the neophyte stage. For example, Theo explained how his wife not only supported his involvement with ex-gay ministry programs, but also became involved in the movement herself: “[She] went to what they call the ‘wives group,’ which is a small group designed to help wives understand and be supportive of their husbands efforts to get free.” Paul’s wife also became actively involved in his sexual reorientation efforts. Anxious to help him avoid temptation and overcome his desires, she started to police his behaviour in an attempt to help him conform to the guidelines outlined by ex-gay ministry leaders: “She became more of a... prison guard than a partner ... she would double check our finances and make sure there were no strange purchases or money.” Anxious over the potential breakup of their marriages and families, wives worked to reinforce the rhetorical project of ex-gay ministry and conservative Christian institutions, encouraging their partners to embrace sexual reorientation or devout celibacy and renounce behaviours that would disrupt the peace and security of the family. Here, they became invested in the purification process as supports and monitors.

Parents, siblings, and Christian peers also expressed their preferences for modes of redress in line with their own moral, spiritual, and sexual truths. Like wives and girlfriends, friends and loved ones threw their social influence behind those discourses and strategies that were least disruptive to church and family – that is, those that promoted self-purification through sexual change or celibacy. Matt recalled his family being very supportive of his involvement with a local ex-gay ministry program: “[They were] all for it! They thought it was a good thing.” Josiah similarly noted that his mother urged him to pursue ex-gay ministry counselling: “My Mom said... ‘It has to be Christ-centered counselling because ‘the world’ – understood as... the part of reality controlled by the Satan – ‘will tell Josiah that he’s normal and that’s not biblically appropriate.’” Paul also recalled how members of the Christian community reinforced his internalized homonegativity and supported his desire to alter his sexuality: “I was saying that it was evil, it was bad, and I wanted to change. And that was often affirmed by people.”

Within the church, Paul noted that Christian peers and leaders became “spiritual mentors” and religious “cheerleaders,” encouraging the men to pursue ways of thinking, feeling, and being in line with conservative Christian ethics. As Paul explained, “It was... positive reinforcement, like, ‘You’re doing the right thing.’ ‘This is something that really pleases God’... ‘I really respect you.’ It was constantly reinforced – I’m doing the right thing.” Todd similarly recalled how Christians peers encouraged him to stay involved with the church and continue his quest for righteousness during moments of uncertainty: “Every time I said ‘I’m not good enough to come back to church, I’m going to hell,’ she [a respected Christian peer] would respond, ‘No you’re not! God isn’t through with you. You are going to make it.’”

Most often, social support for sexual change or celibate devotion was grounded in a commitment to conservative Christian sexual ethics. As Seth explained, “A lot of my friends are religious and they are not gay affirming... they believe that that lifestyle isn’t what God intended and so they are more supportive in my efforts to have a relationship with God.” However, support for ex-gay and conservative Christian resources was not always tied to concerns about Christian sexual ethics or notions of homosexuality as wrong, sinful, abnormal, or unhealthy. Seth explained how his father – who had left his own family to pursue a gay relationship – tried to dissuade him from repeating his mistake. He recalled his father warning him, “Don’t ever, ever leave your family... it’s not worth it.” The peer support he received during his time in the ex-gay ministry movement also reflected similar concerns over the potential breakup of his

family: “They don’t want to see me leave my wife and kids in order to go after the gay lifestyle.” Paul also noted that his parents’ were supportive of his sexual reorientation efforts for reasons largely unrelated to Christian sexual ethics: “they believed that I would probably be happier if I were straight, mainly because of the pressure non-straight people get in our world.” Ned similarly noted that his mother and sister supported his engagement with ex-gay ministry resources out of blind desperation and a concern for his mental and emotional health: “My poor family, they didn’t really understand what... the ex-gay ministry was.” Thus, while family members tended to support strategies of sexual discipline or reorientation over other forms of redress, this preference was not always driven by spiritual ethics or express homonegativity.

In addition to actively supporting particular redressive techniques, loved ones, family members, and Christian peers expressed their strong disapproval of alternate forms of redress. Mitch recalled how his father’s obvious homonegativity had been an important factor in his frequent attempts to alter his desires: “He tolerated me being gay, but he never really accepted it.” In some cases, peers and loved ones issues threatened various forms of social violence in an attempt to discourage participants from pursuing socially contentious modes of redress – that is, those that involved embracing homoerotic desires or a more liberal, affirming faith. For example, Theo recalled how his attempts to reorient his desires were motivated by the palpable threat of social loss: “[I feared] I was going to lose everything that actually *was* really important to me... family, reputation, uh – everything.” Parents and siblings also worked to deter the men from embracing homosexual desires. Jed recalled being acutely aware that his relationship with his parents would suffer if he choose to pursue homosexuality: “I was like, ‘Okay, I know exactly where my mom and dad stand’ ... if I go gay... it won’t come into my mom and dad’s world – my family world.” Josiah noted that his mother also made her disapproval of homosexuality known throughout the neophyte stage: “she’d be like, ‘*You* do not disgust me, I love you, you are my son, but ... that *behaviour* is disgusting. It is the *lust* of the flesh and you need to repent.’” Mitch similarly described feeling pressured to pursue modes of redress in line with familial values and beliefs: “I was schizophrenic... had a hard time holding down a job, and so I had to live with my parents... since they never really accepted me being gay, it put a lot of pressure on me to... resist it.” In such cases, the threat of familial rejection and the fear of disappointing loved ones were palpable and highly influential.

Exclusionary church policies also exerted a powerful influence over those who felt called to church ministry, dissuading them from embracing their desires and limiting their redressive options. For Brad and Josiah, the knowledge that homosexual acts and relationships would preclude them from becoming leaders in conservative Christian denominations reinforced the sense that sexual reorientation or discipline were the only feasible options for resolving sexual-moral crisis. Josiah remembered feeling as though his career aspirations hinged on his ability to overcome his desires and prove he was worthy of church leadership:

I have to prove myself to my college, because my college can give me a degree which means now I am ordained, which means I can become a pastor. And this is what I *have* to do when I grow up, because that's what God says that I should do.

Early in the neophyte stage, Brad similarly believed that pursuing sexual purity was the “only way to get to this thing [a job in the church]... that was so soulfully required.” Here, institutional policies served to powerfully support particular forms of redress while delegitimizing others.

Few of the individuals approached during the neophyte stage did not adopt an explicitly polemic stance toward the resolution of crisis. In rare occasions where others affirmed their unconditional love and respect for participants, the fear of social alienation or violence diminished and participants were able to consider techniques that transgressed conservative Christian sexual ethics. For example, Ned felt confident his family would love and support him regardless of the path he chose: “I never had any doubt that she [his mother] would... accept me if I... came out gay or anything like that... but she was uh, concerned – very concerned about me.” Brad similarly noted that although his mom was initially distressed by his sexual struggle, she had always maintained that she would love him, “no matter what.” His father also expressing his willingness to love and support him through any decision he made, having assured him: “You will always be my son and I will always love you.” These affirmations of value, belonging, and love helped to eschew fears of abandonment and embolden the men to remake their lives in accordance with their own needs and moral inclinations.

Throughout the neophyte stage, various social and political forces thus worked to channel the men toward certain redressive strategies or deter them from pursuing others. Through a combination of push and pull processes, participants were frequently encouraged to adopt ways of remaking self and world that aligned with their own spiritual, moral, and sexual beliefs and supported particular social and political agendas. Throughout the neophyte stage, the threat of

isolation, rejection, and marginalization diminished the appeal of certain redressive discourses, while the promise of belonging, inclusion, and love rendered other options highly attractive. In this polemic space, participants were explicitly sensitized to the frontiers of socio-political acceptability. As Adam recalled: “Given the fact that I was celibate, I didn’t have any of my family really condemn me for it... [but] some of them would’ve been quite disappointed and probably upset if I become sexually active.” Paul similarly sensed that the acceptance and support of his Christian peers was dependent on pursuing particular forms of redress: “I was saying that it was evil, it was bad, and I wanted to change... if I had said, ‘I have these desires and I want to pursue them’... that would be a different story.” Within particular social groups, participants recognized that the willingness to negotiate was limited, the margins of unacceptability were clearly defined, and the threat of social violence was omnipotent.

Here, the aesthetics of existence confronts the socio-political realities of everyday life. By publically announcing their departure from local sexual norms, participants not only accessed support and guidance, but also brought themselves under the surveillance of others. The search for appropriate modes of redress is thus both poetic and political. It involves a creative play of forms that is supported, limited, and shaped by a variety of socio-political forces. The phenomenon of reading takes place within a particular socio-political context where local norms, values, and understandings serve to limit the number of acceptable redressive options. Participants are sensitized to the fact that only certain means of resolving crisis will be deemed legitimate and acceptable by family members, friends, and Christian peers. Consequently, the search for an appropriate and appealing redressive discourse is not solely a matter of truth or applicability. It is also shaped by political considerations and a desire for social belonging.

Am I being helped? Questions of therapeutic efficacy. Ultimately, participants entered into the neophyte stage searching for guidance and assistance. Although what they were searching for was not always clear, they shared an eagerness to alleviate personal suffering and improve their wellbeing. In this search, they invariably encountered discourses, texts, metaphors, and images in the neophyte stage that were remedial in nature – that promised to improve participants’ lives. Consequently, participants expected their engagements with these intuitions and their appropriation of various discourses to engender some sort of positive change in their sexual, psychological, social, or emotional wellbeing. The final consideration in the reading process thus refers to questions of therapeutic utility or efficacy – the extent to which a particular

discourse was considered to have positively impacted participants' lives. This consideration attends to the phenomenological aspects of the reading process – to the “nature of participants’ experiences with respect to encounters with the sacred, episodes of insight, or changes in thought, emotion, attitude, meaning, [or] behavior” (Csordas, 2002, p. 12).

Each redressive discourse offered new images of self and world intended to positively transform their experience of self and world. As participants engaged with the world of the text, they looked for evidence of its remedial efficacy – what Fernandez (1974) referred to as its “power to change our moods, our sense of situation” (p. 129.) To be considered legitimate and effective, neophytes had to be convinced that *something was happening* in these encounters – that they were “experiencing the healing effects” of the discourse (Csordas, 2002, p. 27). Where such changes were believed to be present, the legitimacy of the discourse was enhanced. Accounts of increased insight, improved self-esteem, changed attitudes, enhanced psychological and emotional wellbeing, altered sexual desires and behaviours, and enhanced relationships attested to the transformative potential of particular discourses. Spiritual gains - including increased faith, an enhanced connection with God, and reassuring encounters with the divine – were also interpreted as signs of therapeutic efficacy. These otherworldly gains were considered signs of God’s favour and served as a testament to the “explicitly religious” nature of various experiences of healing (Csordas, 2002, p. 2).

Conversely, where participants failed to experience positive change and personal growth, the veracity and effectiveness of the discourse was called into doubt. For example, Mitch noted that despite his confidence in the veracity of ex-gay ideology and earnest pursuit of sexual reorientation, a lack of sexual change slowly eroded his confidence in these supports: “I would have been willing to go for it if it worked, but the fact of the matter is, nothing worked!” Todd similarly lamented the ineffectiveness of ex-gay ministry services: “it’s like putting a round peg in a square hole... it was just not working.” In both cases, efficacy was understood to mean significant change in one’s pattern of sexual desire and both men were left feeling disappointed. Where expected positive changes to emotional, psychological, interpersonal, sexual, and spiritual wellbeing were lacking and personal expectations were not met, frustration and doubt soon followed. In time, the absence of satisfactory levels of positive change called particular remedial discourses into question and prompted the search for alternative forms of redress.

It is important to note that the threshold of significant change differed between participants and across various redressive contexts. What counted as meaningful change or significant personal growth in a particular setting was ultimately up to the individual. The standards of effective therapeutic intervention were not fixed, but fluid, subjective, and variable. For example, speaking to interpretations of therapeutic efficacy in ex-gay ministry settings, Charles noted:

[Some] would define success as coming into a greater understanding of themselves and why they are the way they are. Others might define success... as diminishing same-sex attractions and increasing opposite-sex attractions. Still others might... define success as a closer relationship with God. It might not have anything to do with same-sex attraction. Where discourses promised too much or failed to manage client expectations, they were particularly likely to engender disappointment and feelings of inefficacy. For example, in Chapters 5 and 6, I described how a lack of sexual change left many participants dissatisfied with conservative Christian supports and ex-gay ministry programs despite the fact that they were often associated with a variety of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and spiritual benefits. The chance that a redressive discourse will be experienced as 'successful' is thus increased when definitions of 'healing' are broad and clients are able to see clear evidence of their improvement and decreased where success is obscure or narrowly defined.

In sum, the ability to effect positive change in the lives of participants is the ultimate test of a remedial discourse. Where they occur, improvements in wellbeing complete the rhetorical arc, providing definitive evidence of the legitimacy of the redressive discourse. Conversely, the absence of improvement undermines the rhetorical force of the discourse and calls the legitimacy of the institution into doubt. Participants are motivated to engage with these discourses by the promise of a better life. Without evidence of therapeutic efficacy, personal commitment to the discourse wavered and participants were forced to seek other forms of help. I now turn to a discussion of how these four considerations (plausibility, relevance, acceptability, and efficacy) reflect a 'rightness of fit' and provide insight into the processual features of the neophyte stage.

‘Rightness of Fit,’ Rhetoric, and the Phenomenon of Reading

“There is no ‘right way’ to live for anyone in this world because its all shaped by... our faith and our environment and your upbringing.” - Seth

The neophyte stage was characterized by exploration and commitment. Participants were eager to locate new ways of thinking, feeling, and being that would improve their lives and adequately resolve sexual-moral crisis. Throughout this period, they were exposed to a host of discourses that revealed a variety of proposed worlds and selves and promised to restore order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to their lives. Confronted with a host of transformative discourses, participants were tasked with the responsibility of choosing between these alternatives. Analyzing how participants assessed and responded to each discourse reveals a great deal about what is at stake in sexual-moral crisis and what counts as a satisfying form of resolution. In the process of reading, questions of plausibility, relevance, acceptability, and efficacy intermingled to form a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted appraisal framework. The features of the text, the disposition of the reader, and the socio-political context of reading all played a role in shaping how neophytes received the discourse.

If there is no singular, discoverable ‘truth’ of homosexuality, but rather a “vast variety of versions and visions” emerging from innumerable “frames of reference” (Goodman, 1978, p. 3), then we must admit that what is at stake in the evaluation of a particular discourse is not its agreement with ‘the world’ as it stands but rather the extent to which it presents an image of self and world that is persuasive, applicable, acceptable, and satisfying. It is not a question of ascertaining *the* truth of homoeroticism, spirituality, or morality, but of selecting between a series of worlds, each of which encompasses its own *truths*. As Goodman noted, “These versions... have no truth value in the literal sense” – they are “depictions rather than descriptions” and our perceptions of them are informed not only by their internal workings but also “by circumstances, and by our own insights, interests, and past experiences” (1978, p. 3). The phenomenon of reading is not grounded in a search for objective veracity, but in the pursuit of a certain ‘rightness of fit’ – a way of imagining self and world that makes sense to the participant and is capable of imparting meaning to past experiences, connecting them with others, and bringing positive change to their lives. As participants work to find a discourse that ‘fits’ with their particular needs and circumstances, questions of coherence, acceptability, relevance, and utility are as important as those related to truth and falsity. As Goodman (1974)

stated, “Truth is often inapplicable, is seldom sufficient, and must sometimes give way to competing criteria” (p. 107). What is most important is not whether a particular discourse is ‘true,’ but “what it can do” (p. 129). Together, the four concerns outlined here form an individualized, situated model that acknowledges the multiple forces at play in the evaluation of redressive discourses and the visions and versions of self and world they entail.

By explicating the evaluative considerations at play in the neophyte stage, we gain insight into the intrapersonal and interpersonal forces that impact the decision to adopt a particular discursive template to remake self and world. We begin to elucidate – in a limited, provisional manner – the question of why certain men embrace particular forms of redress over others. The fact that questions of plausibility, relevance, politics, and efficacy enter into the decision-making process is not, in itself, surprising. This evaluative framework does, however, provide the ‘black box’ of programmatic success/failure with a tentative sense of order and substance. While past researchers have variously noted that ex-gay ministry ideology must make sense to clients, improve their self-concept, seem applicable to self, and convince clients that sexual change is possible (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Fjelstrom, 2013; Gerber, 2011; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Wolkomir, 1996) and Ganzevoort (2011) reported that divine encounters can play an important role in legitimizing certain resolution strategies, the framework advanced here provides a unique, comprehensive model of the evaluation process that is equally applicable to all modes of redress.

By pointing to the reflective, critical, and active nature of decision-making in the neophyte stage, this framework also eschews the notion that participants are passive recipients of various worldviews or that they are ‘brainwashed’ by secular or spiritual authorities. The reader is active and engaged in the interpretive process – he must be convinced of the value of a particular discourse before he will commit. This point is further elucidated in the global conclusion of the thesis. This evaluative framework also provides insight into the patterns of decision making evident in the neophyte stage and the trajectory of individual narratives. I close this chapter by considering how these four evaluative considerations illuminate the processual features of the neophyte stage.

Preference and Necessity: Toward a Processual Account of the Neophyte Stage

“It was almost like flipping a switch ... I tried this [sexual reorientation] ... it just didn’t work. Okay, so move on ... continue your life as, as a gay person in the best way that you can.” - Matt

By attending to how the search for ‘rightness of fit’ played out over time, I was able to elucidate some basic processual patterns in the neophyte stage. What at first appeared to be a chaotic search for new ways of thinking and being revealed itself to be highly pragmatic, intuitive, and predictable when the context of crisis and the relative costs and benefits of various modes of redress were considered. Here, the dialectic between preference and necessity, continuity and discontinuity is key.

The institutions consulted during the neophyte stage are of two basic types: those that support conservative Christian sexual ethics and construct homosexual acts as sinful and dangerous (non-affirming) and those that transgress this sexual ethic and construct homoeroticism as morally and spiritually benign (affirming). Non-affirming resources (ex-gay ministries and conservative Christianity) are sites of purification where participants are encouraged to realign themselves with the sacred order as a means of overcoming crisis (Douglas, 1966; Good, 1994). Conversely, affirming resources (affirming Christianity and secular mental health) urge participants to transcend the conservative Christian worldview and alter their moral assessment of homosexuality (Becker, 1999). The former are culturally conventional in the sense that they affirm the status quo and encourage individuals to conform to the local order while the latter are unconventional in the sense that they encourage participants to challenge or resist conservative Christian norms, values, and ideals. The fact that certain discourses were grounded in conventionality and realignment and others in resistance and transcendence not only accounts for why some resources were frequently used in tandem (conservative Christian and ex-gay ministry resources; affirming Christianity and secular psychology), but also helps make sense of preferential patterns of consultation.

Participants clearly favoured strategies of realignment (those promoted by conservative Christian organizations and ex-gay ministry programs) at the beginning of the neophyte stage (Jed and Adam being the only exceptions). This is not surprising given that they are minimally disruptive to participants’ worldview and social existence. As Becker (1999), Good (1999), Goodman (1978) and others have noted, customary ways of envisioning self and world tend to develop a self-perpetuating momentum and grow resistant to change over time. As Goodman affirmed, “Reality... is largely a matter of habit” (1978, p. 20). Consequently, the pull of continuity is strong and humans tend to shy away from radical change in the face of life crises. The preference for more conventional forms of redress also reflects the human inclination toward

conformity and the tendency to strive for normalcy and belonging in the face of crisis. As Goffman (1963) noted, it is only natural that those who bear such discrediting personal attributes would try to correct these aspects of self. When faced with catastrophic life events, individuals most often attempt to overcome the threat of destruction, difference, and marginality by bringing their lives and selves back in line with local norms (Becker, 1999; Frank, 1995; Good, 1994). External social pressure further adds to the force of habit and the weight of internalized norms, reinforcing the conformist tendency. As Csordas (2002) noted, our ‘primary communities of reference’ – those that most shape our understandings of self and world – play a central role in both defining when we are in need of healing and determining when we have made an acceptable recovery. Here, both ‘crisis’ and ‘redress’ are locally defined and what counts as a successful outcome is intimately tied to local understandings of what is good, normal, and healthy.

Given the sociocultural context of crisis and what we know about typical approaches to personal chaos and catastrophe, the initial preference for modes of redress grounded in conservative Christian realignment is largely unsurprising. There is a strong social selection pressure favouring such techniques throughout the neophyte stage that is jointly attributable to interpretive habit, internalized social discipline, and external social pressure. In the early moment of the neophyte stage, both the individual and the group were invested in maintaining the status quo and avoiding radical revisionism on an ideological, personal, or social level. Participants’ first instincts were to realign themselves with the local cosmological order and avoid alienating themselves from others or subjecting their worldview to critical scrutiny – both of which require letting go of comforting roles and truths and moving toward the disquiet of the unknown. As Christians, the men and those they confided in also shared a particular penchant for Christian healing that reinforced the appropriateness of these spiritual redressive techniques. They had grown up hearing stories of Christian healing and possessed an “expectancy or ‘faith to be healed’” that predisposed toward these resources (Csordas, 2002). Josiah described this expectancy as the sense that “God is near you... around you... loves you... and [will help you] kick the devil’s ass.” Theo described it as the belief that “only God can free you” from suffering and temptation. Together, predisposition and pragmatism accounted for participants’ initial preferences for ex-gay ministry and conservative Christian redressive techniques.

Yet, this is not to suggest that human beings are tied to tradition. When realigning oneself with the local moral order proves unsatisfying or untenable, those in crisis will transcend their

previous - largely habitual – ways of understanding self and world and consider new possibilities for their lives (Becker, 1999; Frank, 1995; Good, 1994; Goodman, 1978). As Goodman (1978) affirmed, “Truth, far from being a solemn and severe master, is a docile and obedient servant... even the staunchest belief may in time admit alternatives” (p. 18). Where conservative Christian supports and ex-gay ministry services failed to provide an adequate resolution to sexual-moral crisis, participants turned to alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and being grounded in a radically different cosmology. Because they transgressed the local status quo, these alternatives were socially dangerous. Affirming approaches also necessitated a radical revision of participants’ worldview that including recognizing Christian authorities, communities, and institutions as potentially oppressive and fallible and adopting a critical interpretation of sacred texts. In short, it required individuals to give up the security of religious hierarchy, authority, and fundamentalism. Consequently, this shift was not taken lightly. Only when conventional approaches failed were participants willing to go through the radical reorganization of self, world, and sociality needed to embrace affirming options.

This shift from realignment to transcendence marks an important rupture in the lives of many participants where they become motivated to transcend conventionality and risk social alienation in search of personal wellbeing and contentment. In this moment, they recognize the limitations of the conservative Christian worldview and appreciate the value of constructing a new vision of self and world. The failure of non-affirming approaches thus occasioned a collapse of the previous social, moral, spiritual, and ideological lifeworlds and created an opening for unconventional, affirming approaches to mediating crisis. Yet, not all participants were free to pursue their desires. Throughout the neophyte stage, those who were married were unwilling to sacrifice marital and familial unity in pursuit of personal pleasure. Only in cases where their wives initiated divorce did those who were unsatisfied with conservative Christian and ex-gay approaches subsequently embrace their desires.

Taken together, the movements of the neophyte stage are characterized by a dynamic relationship between preference and necessity. The men preferred to resolve crisis by bringing their thoughts, feelings, urges, and behaviours back in line with the local moral order. Yet, where realignment proved unsatisfying and marital and familial obligations did not preclude the pursuit of affirming options, conventionality was transcended and new ways of imaging self and world were embraced. The failure of conservative Christian and ex-gay resources to improve personal

wellbeing and eschew suffering caused some men to critically reflect on the truth and legitimacy of the conservative Christian worldview. This ‘critical preparedness’ empowered these men to transcend conventionality and embrace the new ways of envisioning self and world promoted by affirming Christians and secular psychologists. However, when these affirming resources appeared too early in the neophyte stage, participants had not yet undergone such critical deconstruction and therefore lacked the sceptical preparedness needed to embrace affirming ideas and images. Devoid of religious misgivings, affirming approaches remain unthinkable. By considering what is at stake in various redressive discourses, it is therefore possible to impart a sense of order to the seemingly chaotic movements of the neophyte stage. While a wealth of forces (both intrapersonal and social) worked to maintain the status quo and urge the men toward strategies of realignment, personal dissatisfaction with conventional discourses, emerging scepticism over the legitimacy of conservative Christian sexual ethics, and the absence of interpersonal barriers to gay life (marriage and family) ultimately led many participants to embrace affirming Christianity or secular emancipation.

In sum, the neophyte stage was a period of reflexivity and apprenticeship, where participants trafficked in public symbols, images, metaphors, texts, and discourses in search of new ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Much was at stake in this quest: personal integrity, social belonging, and the ability to see oneself as connected to the local sociocultural order all hinged on their ability to locate satisfying aesthetic forms capable of remaking self and world. Here, they found themselves driven by the desire for personal wellbeing and social connection and constrained by cognitive habits, cultural norms, and social forces. Despite an early preference for realignment, many moved on to consider more critical and transgressive approaches in the face of persistent dissatisfaction and ongoing suffering. In the end, all of the men committed to a particular mode of redress they felt best ‘fit’ their need for truth, meaning, connection, and positive change. In the next chapter, I explore how the men appropriated various insights, images, forms, and techniques garnered in the neophyte stage to reconstruct self and world and move past crisis by embracing ex-gay life, sexual asceticism, or an openly gay existence. Each of the redressive strategies ultimately adopted by the men entailed a distinct pattern of benefits, losses, and challenges. Yet, in the end, all participants managed to emerge from crisis and restore a sense of normalcy, goodness, dignity, and meaning, and integrity to their lives.

⁵² Although some of these factors (plausibility, relevance, and efficacy) are implicit in the forgoing description of participant experiences (Chapters 5-8), the influence of socio-political norms and inter-personal dynamics is elucidated here for the first time.

⁵³ Here, I refer to experiences of being called out of the gay life and back to the church by God prior to the neophyte stage (Chapter 3) and to encounters with the divine during the neophyte period.

Part Three

Introduction to the Redressive Phase

“Sexuality has... three areas. There’s behaviour, there’s identity, and there’s feelings. And so recovery has to do with working on those three areas.” - Jed

In the neophyte stage, participants encountered various texts, discourses, models, images, and metaphors that opened up new possibilities for their lives. Confronted by a multiplicity of options, they were tasked with assessing the ‘fit’ between these discourses and their own interpretative horizons, socio-political projects, personal experiences, and redressive goals. Ultimately, each participant committed themselves to a certain way of thinking about and responding to crisis. In Part 3 of the thesis, I describe how the men creatively appropriated various symbolic devices and practical techniques to construct new patterns of and for the world (Geertz, 1973) and restore a sense of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness to their lives.

I begin by describing the three basic approaches to resolving crisis embraced by participants in the redressive phase: sexual asceticism, gay emancipation, or heterosexual restoration (see Chapter 11). Each strategy entailed a distinct rendering of reality and a particular understanding of what it meant to ‘live well’ as a same-sex attracted Christian man. Consequently, each was associated with a unique pattern of benefits, sacrifices, and challenges. In Chapter 12, I explain how the implementation of these various forms of redress impacted participants’ sexual, spiritual, and social existence and imbued them with particular understandings of self and world. Yet, despite profound differences in how these groups approached the remedial project, I insist that many of the benefits and outcomes described by participants were remarkably similar across different strategies. In Chapter 13, I describe the shared benefits of asceticism, ex-gay life, and sexual emancipation, while also pointing to ongoing challenges and losses related to sexual-moral crisis and the call to service that frequently resulted from this experience.

Chapter 10 ~ Three Approaches to Redress

“I’ve been afforded opportunity through this struggle... to really look at things ... to develop a good way of going about things ... a more noble life – the true way.” - Jed

Throughout the neophyte stage, the men encountered a variety of models for living well as same-sex attracted Christian men. Seeking to move past crisis, they explored potential redressive strategies and eventually committed to one of three basic forms: sexual asceticism, heterosexual restoration, or homosexual emancipation. Each of these three basic approaches reflected a blend of ideas and techniques drawn from various sociocultural institutions. I now turn to a description of the distinct ways of thinking, feeling, and being embraced by participants in the redressive phase, starting with sexual asceticism.

Living for the Lord: Embracing (Homo)Sexual Asceticism

“[The] opposite of homosexuality is not heterosexuality but it is holiness and being drawn into that personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” – Walter

Five of the men (Brad, Todd, Walter, Seth, and Adam) embraced sexual asceticism in the wake of the neophyte stage. This approach is characterized by a unique combination of acceptance and restraint that reflects an unwillingness to abandon Christian sexual ethics and an inability to alter homosexual desires. These individuals came to accept that same-sex attraction was a persistent and unalterable feature of the self. As Walter noted, “There isn’t a magic wand that you wave... there’s not a magic pill that you [can] take... that makes you heterosexual.” Here, the hope of sexual reorientation had been abandoned in the face of unanswered prayers and unproductive ex-gay ministry experiences. As Todd explained: “I tried it for years... this, ‘Oh, you weren’t born this way’ ... ‘You can change it’... [But] I finally just let go of all of that... [I realized] I’m going to have to just accept what I am.” Seth similarly noted, “I would take a pill that would make me un-gay if I could but there isn’t such a thing.”

For these men, a lack of sexual change (either through reorientation programs or divine intervention) proved to be an important turning point in the search for redress that occasioned the acceptance of homosexuality as an immutable aspect of the self. Brad recalled, “I started to come to peace with, you know, this is who I am and these are the feelings that I have.” Seth similarly described coming to realize, “That’s part of how I am made up ... it’s just part of who I am.” These men embraced the idea that their urges were indicative of a specific, immutable sexual ‘orientation’,⁵⁴ that – whether biological or developmental in origin – was unlikely to change.

Consequently, they embraced this sexual identity personally and publically. Todd explained, “[I] sort of resigned myself to the fact that this doesn’t go away... [I] finally said, ‘Yeah, I’m gay. That’s it, period.’” Seth similarly began to think of himself as “a homosexual man ... in a heterosexual marriage.” These statements reflect the idea that humanity is largely bifurcated into two classes of sexual beings (homosexual and heterosexual), each reflective of some fundamental characteristic that distinguishes them from the other. Such understandings align with those dominant in contemporary North American popular culture, where ‘homosexuality,’ ‘heterosexuality,’ and ‘bisexuality’ are understood to represent three distinct classes of persons.

Yet, despite having embraced aspects of popular sexual discourse, ascetic men continued to be morally opposed to homosexual acts and relationships, convinced that such behaviours were sinful and against the will of God. As Seth explained, “I think the Bible is very clear on homosexuality... it wasn’t intended by God.” They also continued to believe that sexually active gay men were generally unhappy and unhealthy. For those who had never explored such relationships, this negative perception was largely based on outside reports. For example, Adam noted that what he heard of gay life convinced him that it was a dark and dissatisfying way of life that did not align with his personal goals and values: “I think that their relationships often are brief ... [that] gay relationships generally last a lot shorter a time... [and] I don’t think I’m the kind of person to bounce around from one relationship to the next.” For others, this aversion was largely tied to negative past experiences. For example, Walter recalled having witnessed a great deal of suffering and risky behaviour during his time in the gay community and noted that he felt lucky to have escaped with his life: “Fortunately, I survived that... because it is rather deadly.”

For those who were married – Seth, Todd, and Brad – familial obligations also precluded the possibility of pursuing homosexual relationships. These men were committed to their wives and intent on refraining from any sexual or romantic acts that would compromise the unity of the family. As Seth explained, “I want the family lifestyle, I don’t want to live a gay lifestyle and just be after sex... I just can’t imagine the loneliness I would go through not coming home to see my kids... [and] wife every day.” Todd similarly noted that he would never risk unsettling his family to pursue a homoerotic affair: “My wife trusts me and I don’t want to do anything to violate that trust... No woman should have to share her husband with another man.”

Brad’s decision to marry a woman he met through an online ex-gay ministry support group near the end of the neophyte stage similarly bolstered his commitment to avoiding

homosexual acts. The two began dating without any hope that their relationship would alter either of their sexual preferences. He noted, “We were dating with the understanding that I’m gay and she’s a lesbian, and this isn’t about changing our orientation – it’s about the fact that we have this amazing bond and connection and let’s see where that goes.” When they decided to marry, both he and his wife were comfortable with the possibility that their marriage might not involve a sexual relationship: “If we were both going to be celibate, being celibate together would be a whole lot more fun than being celibate separate. So, what did we have to lose?” Once married, he also became committed to his wife and intent on avoiding all extramarital sexual acts: “For me to be involved in any relationship, whether it’s gay or straight... my relationship with my wife would be ruined.” For husbands and fathers, the moral obligations of family life added to the dissuasive force of religious homonegativity, negative images of gay life, and troubling past experiences.

For ascetic men, experiences in the neophyte stage had both confirmed their true (homo)sexual nature and reinforced the impossibility of embracing their desires. These men were thus confronted by an aspect of self that demanded to be acknowledged but could not be performed – a truth that could not be actualized. In short, they *were* what they could not *be*: gay men. Convinced that they could neither rid themselves of homoeroticism nor engage in sexual acts that would violate their spiritual, moral, and familial commitments, ascetic men were forced to find a way of reconciling these seemingly contradictory aspects of self. Ultimately, redress became a question of prioritization. These individuals recognized that they were many things – Christians, fathers, husbands, friends, and gay men. They also acknowledged that certain facets of their being were in contradiction with one another. There was, therefore, a need to decide which aspects of self would take precedence in shaping the contours of everyday life and guiding their lives forward.

Ascetic men ultimately resolved sexual-moral crisis by privileging interpersonal roles, spiritual commitments, and personal wellness over sexual satisfaction. Here, moral deliberation culminated in a personal commitment to pursue acts and behaviours that nourished spiritual growth and familial cohesion and refrain from those that threatened to diminish personal wellbeing or family unity. In the redressive period, the lives of ascetic men therefore became overwhelmingly oriented toward God and family. As Seth explained: “When I think of long term, it is... always of... family and God. Not seeking out men... would I like sex with a man

today? Well yes, I would!... but that doesn't help my marriage.” For those without families, the pursuit of righteousness becomes the guiding force of the ascetic life. As Walter noted, “The goal for me is to live... the way that God intended for me to live.” In redress, ascetic men chose to forego homosexual gratification in favour of personal health, righteousness, and familial cohesion. Determined to live in accordance with the will of God, they embraced images of self as ‘family man’ and ‘the living body of Christ’ in pursuit of a righteous, Christ-like existence.

Yet, this form of redress involves more than the brute sacrifice of sexual gratification. To simply avoid homoerotic acts does nothing to defuse the self-loathing and social stigma associated with homosexuality. To manage these threats, ascetic men engaged in various symbolic techniques acquired from different sociocultural institutions throughout the neophyte stage. They neutralized feelings of shame and sinfulness by appropriating the moral bifurcation of homosexual desires and acts promoted by ex-gay and non-specialized conservative Christian institutions (see Chapters 5 and 6). They affirmed that one crossed into the realm of sin only when desire gave way to action and argued that homoerotic urges were of no (im)moral consequence in and of themselves. As Adam explained, “I was convinced that the action was forbidden but you couldn't control what happened in your body.” This symbolic technique allowed ascetic men to acknowledge their homosexual orientation without compromising their sense of themselves as good and righteous men.

Ascetic men further neutralized the threat posed by past homosexual acts and ongoing homoerotic desires by appropriating discourses of universal temptation and the democratization of sin commonly promulgated in ex-gay ministry and conservative Christian institutions. In doing so, ascetic men stripped homosexuality of its special moral status and framed it as no worse than any other unholy temptation or sinful act human beings must overcome in an imperfect world. Walter explained how he started to see his own struggle as no more egregious than any other temptation: “I have a brother-in-law whose got a major problem with diet. So I talk to him sometimes about that being... just as sinful as – or a weakness just the same as what my weakness would be.” Brad similarly stated, “I started to say, ‘You know what, I'm attracted to guys. I don't have to hate myself for that. Everyone's attracted to something that isn't good for them, you know?’” Ascetic men rejected the notion that their desires consigned them to the bottom of the Christian moral hierarchy. They worked to deconstruct images of moral gradation and promote a sense of equality amongst unhealthy, ungodly, or immoral urges. As Seth

explained, “It’s not like He [God] thinks less of a gay man... it’s not ‘one is better than the other,’ it’s [all] just sin in his eyes.” Here, the special fixation on homosexuality as particularly immoral or spiritually threatening is recast as illogical and unwarranted.

This mode of redress enabled ascetic men to resolve sexual-moral crisis without altering their sexual urges, abandoning their moral principles, or eschewing their commitment to conservative Christian ethics. In the absence of a ‘cure,’ this approach offered ascetics an opportunity to live well as gay men by sacrificing homosexual pleasure in the interest of goodness, godliness, and connectedness. They were able to accept their homosexual orientation, while simultaneously constructing themselves as good, righteous, and godly – an achievement that had hitherto eluded them throughout the crisis period. Although they must avoid immoral homoerotic acts, ascetic men need not alter their sexual desires or castigate themselves for their current temptations or past misdoings. As Walter explained, “[I don’t] have to get married... [or] have strong attractions for the opposite sex... to live within the confines of God’s word.”

For ascetic men, homosexuality becomes a ‘cross to bear’ - a burden or trial that, though not inherently sinful, must be carefully managed in pursuit of goodness and godliness. Here, redress entails remaking one’s life in the image of Jesus Christ and refraining from all sinful behaviour. As Walter explained, “It’s about living a life for Christ, as opposed to living a life that is based on my [sexual] *feelings*.” Brad similarly described the dual themes of acceptance and sacrifice inherent in this mode of redress: “[Homoeroticism is] a part of my life... that attraction doesn’t force me to act or define who I am... I don’t feel shame or have to hide it, but... that doesn’t mean... [I am] going to hook up tonight.” This strategy does nothing to change the nature of participants’ sexual urges, but rather works to render life as a same-sex attracted Christian man morally acceptable and behaviourally manageable through a combination of symbolic manoeuvres and disciplinary techniques. It transforms their sexual struggle from a shameful to a moral activity by focusing on their ability to live in accordance with God’s will.

In this approach to redress, the sexual self – though recognized as unquestionably ‘homosexual’ in nature – was not considered definitive of or central to personal identity. As Brad noted: “‘Gay’... would be in my second ring *out* of identity... It’s something that I happen to be, that I’m kind of neutral about, rather than something that I’d say is *truly* definitive of who I am.” Seth echoed this sentiment, noting, “That’s part of how I am made up, but that doesn’t define me.” For these men, faith and family were firmly positioned at the core of personal identity. As

Walter explained: “my ‘orientation’ is not a ‘homosexual’ orientation. My orientation in my life now is God’s orientation. I’m oriented to the cross of Jesus Christ.” By neutralizing the moral threat of homoerotic desires, prioritizing faith and family within life and self, and engaging in sexual discipline, ascetic men were able to acknowledge the (homo)sexual self without compromising spiritual or familial goals or undermining their sense of themselves as righteous, good, and godly. Although these desires would always be present, they need not define the self or doom the person to spiritual and social ruin. As Todd explained: “You can’t stop the birds from flying over you, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.”

Embracing Homosexuality: The Sexual Emancipation of Gay Survivors

“A gay man can be... liberal, he can be conservative, he can be religious, he can be atheist. He can be whatever he wants, except for one thing: he can’t be straight.” – Mitch

After the neophyte stage, six men (Mason, Mitch, Ned, Paul, Matt, and Josiah) chose to embrace their sexual urges and live as openly gay men. Once again, the decision to embrace this way of thinking, feeling, and being was impacted by failed reorientation efforts. These men noted that unfruitful experiences with ex-gay ministry movement convinced them that their desires were an immutable aspect of self. As Mitch noted: “the years I spent trying to change my orientation were just a total waste of my energy... it’s part of your basic nature.” Mason similarly explained, “If you’re truly gay, you’re truly gay. And nothing’s going to change.” Consequently, they renounced all hope of altering their sexual preferences. Like ascetics, they embraced the notion that they possessed a particular, unalterable sexual nature that clearly separated them from their ‘heterosexual’ or ‘bisexual’ peers and precluded them from pursuing heterosexual relationships. Yet, unlike ascetics, these individuals construed all attempts to manage or change their desires as an inherently harmful process of self-subjugation and framed themselves as survivors of oppressive institutions and belief systems, including conservative Christian churches and ex-gay ministry programs⁵⁵.

Unlike ascetics, who constructed sexuality as more peripheral to the self, survivors positioned the sexual self as central to their being. Josiah, for example, described coming to understand himself as “a gay man – front and center.” They also believed that any attempt to alter, hide, or suppress this core feature of personal identity would corrupt personal integrity and result in personal harm and discontent. These men attributed the suffering and dissatisfaction they had endured throughout the neophyte stage as a sign of the dangers of a fractured and

disintegrated life. Mitch, for example, noted: “Whenever I was trying to change my orientation, my life went downhill. I lost jobs, or I lost friends... my life just seemed to go bad.” Here, sexual change and repression are deemed equally hazardous and unproductive. Both meant living in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction, disintegration, and inauthenticity. As Mitch recalled, “When I was trying to change my orientation, my life went downhill. I lost jobs, or I lost friends... my life just seemed to go bad.” For these men, homosexuality is construed as a definitive feature of the self and any attempt to repress, deny, or alter these desires is considered detrimental to personal integrity and wellbeing.

In the wake of the neophyte stage, survivors were thus convinced that sexual change was impossible and self-denial was unsatisfying and destructive. Faced with a sexual orientation that could be neither altered nor repressed, they grew sceptical of the homonegative discourses and institutions that had long prevented them from embracing their desires. After years of fruitless struggle and profound suffering, they began to doubt that God would want them to live in such a state of perpetual shame, frustration, and self-loathing. For example, Josiah recalled growing increasingly doubtful that God had any concerns about his sexual preferences: “[I thought] maybe God doesn’t care, per se, about whether Tab A goes in Slot B.” They also grew weary of the pathological discourses promoted by the ex-gay ministry movement as they started to embrace the idea that their urges were nothing more than a simple variation in sexual preferences. Lamenting the fear-mongering nature of these resources, Matt explained: “They [ex-gay ministry leaders] made it so complicated and so...negative... [when] it’s really very simple... I mean... it’s not like, you know, I was into crocodiles or something.”

Ultimately, these men embraced a variety of naturalized and normalized discourses promoted by affirming Christians, secular psychologists, and aspects of popular culture. They reconstructed their homosexual desires as a morally benign feature of the self and let go of the idea that they needed to change or repress their sexuality in order to attain a sense of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness. As Ned recalled: “[I realized] it’s just a natural variation... a normal part of creation... that is no ‘better’ or ‘worse’... compared to heterosexuality.” As Paul similarly noted, “It was like my brain dropped back into my head... suddenly ... I came to my senses ... ‘You can be gay and it’s okay.’” No longer concerned that their desires represented a spiritual or moral threat, survivors not only renounced all *hope* of sexual change, but also the *desire* for such a shift. Emboldened by their new, affirmative

understanding of homosexuality and the sense that they had lost many years to unnecessary suffering and self-loathing, survivors decided to pursue a life of sexual authenticity (i.e., one that reflected what they considered to be their true homosexual nature). As Mason recalled, “[I decided] I am attracted to men, I’m going to act on it, and whatever it means, that’s what it means.”

Seeing their homosexual behaviours and desires in a new, positive light and reflecting on the destructive consequences of sexual repression and change efforts also led survivors to reframe past experiences with homonegative institutions in terms of oppression, coercion, and persecution. They affirmed that conservative Christian homonegativity was reflective of earthly discrimination and human interest rather than the true will of God and lamented that religious leaders had falsely promoted a doctrine of hate grounded in scripture. Mason described coming to realize the many ways in which the church disciplines its members through fear and the threat of damnation: “They say if you do these things... you don’t get to go to the highest kingdom when you die... they try to work you... on that, until... you realize, like, ‘Oh, you guys are full of... hooey!’” They also came to understand the ex-gay ministry movement as an attempt to legitimize Christian homonegativity through recourse to psychological pseudo-science – what Paul called “re-fried Freud.” As Josiah explained, “The statistics that he [ex-gay counsellor] was giving me *are wrong*. And the reason why he gave me these statistics was to reinforce my conviction that homosexual relationships were destructive.” Here, homonegativity was reconstructed as a tool of oppression with no legitimate grounding in Christian theology, secular science, or contemporary psychology. Once considered ‘true,’ these illegitimate and inhumane attitudes were recast as part of an oppressive machinery that was, in the words of Paul, “trying to silence and oppress and *destroy* gay lives”. Here, homonegativity is reimagined as a form of false mystification that must be rejected in pursuit of peace, satisfaction, and integrity. For survivors, overcoming sexual-moral crisis is a process of self-actualization – of discovering and embracing the truth of the sexual self.

I am Heterosexual: The Case of Ex-Gay Men

“Same-sex attraction is caused by wounding... to heal you have to get to the wound.” – Charles

For the five remaining men (Charles, Jed, Jordan, Rodney, and Theo), resolving sexual-moral crisis entailed embracing heterosexuality as the truth of the self. Like their ascetic peers, ex-gay men remained morally and spiritually opposed to homosexual acts and relationships in

the wake of the neophyte stage. As Jordan noted: “Look at the whole biblical myriad. We see man and woman at the beginning ... Sarah and Abraham ... Solomon and his wife ... Nowhere ... do we ever hear of homosexuality as an acceptable form of relationship.” Theo similarly affirmed that scriptural references present a “clear cut” condemnation of homosexual behaviour: “It is covered in the New Testament in a very graceful and *loving* way but it [is] clearly pointed out that ... this is sinful.” Ex-gay men were also likewise convinced that homosexuality was inherently unsatisfying and destructive – an assessment that issued from negative past experiences (see Chapter 3), distressing observations of gay men (see Chapters 2 and 3), and ex-gay ministry ideology (see Chapter 6). Ex-gay men were convinced that heterosexuality was the only right, true, and natural sexual orientation and that any deviation from this pattern was attributable to the corruptive forces. From this perspective, same-sex attraction was a sign of unwellness and disordered relating, not the truth of the self.

Here, the naturalized and normalized figure of the contemporary ‘gay’ man was constructed as a mystifying discourse – a secular ruse that unnecessarily condemns those with same-sex attraction to a life of sin and suffering. Ex-gay men maintained that these urges were foreign to the self and that popular notions of an inherent ‘homosexual orientation’ were part of a large-scale deception that tricks same-sex attracted men into mistaking symptoms of distress for their own sexual truth. Jordan, for example, affirmed that notions of benign sexual variation are “ridiculous”: “People are not born gay ... the homosexual community is living in deception.” Charles expressed a similar incredulity, noting that gay men are “not *born* with those feelings: “You’ll hear adults say... ‘I felt like I was gay since I was five years old.’ [But] children don’t want or need sex ... it wasn’t sexual – it was a deep need for bonding.” For these men, secular notions of benign variation have the same dangerous and deceptive status Christian homonegativity held for gay survivors – in both cases, a particular vision of reality risked condemning same-sex attracted men to a life of unnecessary suffering.

In the lives of ex-gay men, notions of pathology, sin, destruction, and mystification thus intermingled to deter them from embracing their sexual desires. As Jed noted, “Right, wrong, sinful – all that stuff, I just say, ‘It’s not what [man] was designed or intended for!’” For Theo, experiences of familial rejection and a longing to unite with his children also played an important role in the decision to renounce all homoerotic behaviours. Like ascetic men, they were decidedly against the idea of embracing their urges and living as openly gay men. Yet, they also

affirmed that homoerotic desires were no worse than other compulsive drives and homosexual behaviours no more repugnant than other sinful acts. As Rodney explained: “We all have hurts and pains and angst that we... try to... ‘medicate’... in many, many, many, many ways. Some people are alcoholics. Some people, by the same token, are workaholics.” However, unlike ascetics, ex-gay men rejected the idea that their desires were indicative of a distinct homosexual orientation. They were convinced that these urges were grounded in perversion and disorder and could not be embraced as the truth of the self any more than a headache or a heroin addiction. For these men, embracing a gay identity was as unthinkable as pursuing an openly gay life.

Equally unappealing was the prospect of living a life of sexual discipline. Although ex-gay men acknowledged that some individuals might never free themselves of homoerotic desire, coming to identify with brokenness or growing content with sexual self-discipline were considered antithetical to God’s will. This would have meant dooming oneself to a state of perpetual unwellness and appropriating a false identity. For ex-gay men, homoeroticism was neither the truth of the sexual self nor something one should simply seek to live with – it was a reflection of perversion and unwellness that called for reparation. As Charles affirmed, “You have same-sex attraction because you are *wounded*.” Instead, these individuals committed themselves to the pursuit of sexual wellness and truth (that is, heterosexuality). As Rodney explained, “I want to be... whole. Complete.” This restorative process involved reconfiguring their sexual identities to reflect one’s true, heterosexual nature and pursuing health and righteousness in all aspects of their lives.

Adopting a heterosexual identity was central to this redressive approach. As Jed noted, “I, you know, came into my heterosexual identity.” Jordan similarly recalled having embraced his true, heterosexual identity after years of misidentifying himself with his homoerotic desires: “I’m not characterized... by sin. That’s not my identity... I am a heterosexual male.” Ex-gay men firmly identified themselves as heterosexual men who, as a result of past harms and the sinful nature of man, live with a history of homosexual behaviour and/or ongoing homoerotic temptations. Although the vast majority (all but Charles) of ex-gay men continued to experience some degree of same-sex attraction following the neophyte stage, they maintained neither their desires nor their past behaviours were reflective of who they were or what they wanted for their lives. As Jed explained: “It’s not going to be like I never had sex with a man for six years... [But] I’m light years away from... a gay identity or a *want* for homosexuality or a *want* for a gay

identity.” Jordan similarly noted, “I don’t characterize myself as a gay man, a homosexual man, because I’m not.” Ex-gay men annexed images of homoeroticism from the core of their identities and situated heterosexuality at the center of their being. They redefined themselves as normal, moral, and godly heterosexual men who struggled with extraordinary homosexual urges as a result of traumatic childhood experiences and unmet socialization and bonding needs. Here, firmly identifying with heterosexuality and its positive moral correlates and constructing homoeroticism as a residual symptom of deviant development neutralized sexual-moral conflict by bringing the truth of the sexual self into alignment with personal understandings of the good, right, and true.

Although identity work and sexual discipline were central to this mode of redress, ex-gay men noted that this positive transformation involved much more than adopting a new identity or refraining from homosexual acts. Jordan noted that it went beyond choosing to “avoid sin at all cost” and Charles similarly affirmed that this process was “not *just* about sexual functioning. Rather, this approach to redress involved a radical realignment with health, holiness, and truth similar to that described by ascetic men. As Theo noted: “you... decide, ‘I really am going to try and make my life Christ-like’ ... [and that impacts] how you treat people, how you talk to people, where you go, how you spend your time... what your life goals are.” Appropriating the healing motifs of ex-gay ministry programs, these individuals dedicated themselves to the ongoing pursuit of sexual wholeness and spiritual righteousness. Whereas ascetics and gay survivors accepted (or even celebrated) the sexual self in its current form, ex-gay men continually sought to overcome homosexuality by healing the wounds of the past (those experiences believed to be responsible for homoeroticism) and enhancing their sense of masculine identity and connection. They also worked to pursue spiritual growth and an enhanced state of righteousness, turning to the church for guidance as they attempted to remake their lives in the image of Christ. As Rodney explained, “I really started to *follow* the teachings of Christ, and *follow* Christianity.” Theo similarly described using Christian principles and teachings to transform his life into a testament to goodness and virtue: “It’s [Christianity]... something that you can constantly measure everything about life against ... something that is *so* strong and so grounded against which to test every decision ... you have a role model... Jesus Christ.” Although these men acknowledged that they might never fully overcome homosexuality and affirmed that they would never reach a state of righteousness akin to Jesus Christ, the pursuit of optimal health and virtue

drove them forward and provided direction for their lives. As Jordan explained, the pursuit of these ideals came to permeate all aspects of their lives and restored a sense of meaning and order to their existence: “[I decided I’m] going to promote God in my life ... I want to do activities that are going to be *healthy*, that will be *good*, that will grow me mentally, spiritually, physically, and emotionally.”

Three Worlds, Three Selves, Three Sexualities

“People have... answered this question in different ways... it’s your choice which of them you follow... you decide which route is best for what you need to do.” – Brad

Ascetics, gay survivors, and ex-gay men embraced three distinct ways of responding to sexual-moral crisis in the redressive phase. At the heart of each of these approaches is a distinct ‘program of truth’ (Veyne, 1983/1988) – a particular rendering of reality grounded in a distinct organizing metaphor. In each of these symbolic worlds, homosexuality becomes a different object with a unique relationship to the self and a distinct motivational force. For (homo)sexual ascetics, homoeroticism is constructed as a dangerous aspect of the self that threatens one’s social, spiritual, and moral existence – a threat from within. Although ascetic individuals identify as ‘gay’ men, other aspects of personal identity (e.g., social roles, Christianity) are considered much more definitive of the self. Here, homosexuality is true of the self but not all encompassing. For survivors, homosexuality becomes a banal variation on a basic human capacity. It is both the truth of the sexual self and a central node of personal identity. For ex-gay men, homosexuality is a sign of harm and corruption that should not be mistaken for the truth of the self. Here, homosexuality is thrust entirely from the self, recast as a peripheral symptom of unwellness, and relegated to the realm of misunderstanding and illusion.

In all cases, the experience of sexual-moral crisis arose from the recognition that one’s own sexual desires were reflective of those associated with the stigmatized figure of the gay man – what Ricoeur (2004/2005) referred to as ‘identification-recognition.’ Participants created a symbolic connection between their own embodied states and the devalued cultural schema of ‘homosexuality,’ thereby diminishing their own self-concept. Yet, throughout the neophyte stage, the ultimate legitimacy of this association was in question. Recognition remained at the level of identification (as opposed to truth), where the reliability of the mark was uncertain and contested and the possibility of misrecognition remained. In the redressive phase, ascetics and gay survivors brought the relationship between the self and the figure of the ‘homosexual man’

“under the sign of truth” (Ricoeur, 2004/2005, p. 6). In this process of ‘truth-recognition,’ ascetics and survivors affirmed that they *were* gay men – that they were exemplars of this sexual category. Here, the signs and marks of homosexuality were deemed legitimate and homosexuality was considered the truth of the self. However, in the lives of ex-gay men, such truth-recognition never came to fruition. Instead, the apparent association between the self and homosexuality was judged to be erroneous – an example of misrecognition. Here, the mark (e.g., homosexual behaviours, homoerotic desire, apparent difference) was considered illusory and ex-gay men affirmed that they were not *really* what they worried they might have been (gay men). In the context of the current analysis, sexual identity-recognition thus only proceeded to truth-recognition in certain cases. In other instances, the concern that one might be homosexually oriented was constructed as a prolonged experience of misrecognition. The truth of the self was heterosexuality – anything else is a mistake.

Each program of truth was also imbued with a particular motivational force and drives different behaviours and endeavours in the redressive phase. Implicit in each of these renderings of reality was a particular matrix of moral imperatives – a unique pattern for living well as a same-sex attracted man. Where homosexuality represented a threat from within, it had to be carefully controlled through disciplinary processes. Where it was considered a morally neutral or positive aspect of the self that had been unfairly stigmatized by oppressive institutions, it was to be embraced. Where it was considered a reparable symptom of harm and corruption that risks endangering the person, it had to be carefully managed or thrust from the self. Embedded in each program of truth was a distinct remedial strategy that flowed logically from its basic premises; sexual emancipation for survivors, sexual self-discipline for ascetics, and sexual restoration for ex-gay men. These various understandings and approaches were themselves grounded in three distinct root metaphors that shaped the experience of self, crisis, and redress: the sacrificial hero (who, like the saint, privileges spiritual supplication over earthy contentment), the liberated minority, and the chronically ill man.

Although each of these redressive approaches were heavily influenced by particular institutional ideologies encountered by participants in the neophyte stage, none were reducible to these forms. Embedded in each approach was a rich fusion of concepts, images, and strategies drawn from various redressive institutions and the wider sociocultural sphere. Ascetics combined the moral bifurcation of homosexual acts and desires and democratization of sin (present in both

ex-gay and non-specialized Christian settings) with Christian motifs of universal temptation and spiritual trial, ex-gay themes of sexual compulsion, and secular notions of sexual immutability and orientation. While Creek (2011) previously noted that ascetic men (what she referred to as ‘type Bs’) simultaneously embrace popular discourses of ‘sexual identity’ and Christian homonegativity, the preceding analysis suggests that a number of additional influences further structured this mode of redress and rendered gay identities habitable to such men. Survivors blended affirming Christian discourses with the sexual essentialism of mental health experts and the critical, defiant discourses of secular human rights. Lastly, ex-gay men fused ex-gay ministry ideology with Christian images of secular ‘mystification’ and secular discourses that warn of the dangers of homosexuality. All three approaches to redress thus reflected a host of images, ideas, and techniques harvested from various secular and Christian institutions and the wider sociocultural system. To reduce these three distinct ways of thinking, feeling, and being to any one institutional template would eschew the rich bricolage of influences inherent in each approach. Speaking to the multitude of influences encountered in the neophyte stage, Jordan noted, “All of those pieces kind of stayed with me.”

To associate a particular form of redress with a single institutional discourse is thus to gloss over the impact of various institutions and experiences on the redressive project. Each approach was shaped by, and reflective of, the total matrix of participants’ experiences in the neophyte stage – both ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’. Within this exploratory phase of life, unfruitful or harmful encounters exerted a powerful influence over the trajectory of the redressive process, closing off particular possibilities and futures and solidifying the men’s commitment to alternative pathways. Where affirming Christian institutions were deemed absurd and blasphemous or secular supports experienced as naïve and insensitive, participants turned away from these resources. Similarly, where non-specialized Christian supports and ex-gay ministry programs proved harmful or ineffective, participants were eventually induced to consider affirming options. Interestingly, survivors often spoke of how disappointing experiences with ex-gay ministry programs played an important role in their decision to embrace life as gay men. As Ned noted: “[there is] no longer a curiosity anymore, in terms of whether or not I could ever change orientation... I just kind of frame it as part of my coming out process and discovering the things that I truly believe.” Mason similarly noted that his experiences with ex-gay ministry programs helped solidify his commitment to affirming approaches: “Good came out

of it. Because the more you saw, the more you discussed and listened... you see that people are caught up in lies ... It confirmed that I'm going the right direction, I'm doing the right thing."

Three others (Matt, Brad, and Paul) similarly affirmed that although these programs did not impact their sexual urges, they helped them to move toward a more affirming position by encouraging openness and a less stigmatized view of homosexuality. As Matt explained:

in a strange way, it was sort of part of my personal self-acceptance... I was moving where it wasn't in the shadows anymore... it was sort of my first step towards real self-acceptance - you know, where, here I am, in a church setting, talking about my struggles... and this is a sin just like anything else, and this is who I am... In 2011, that doesn't sound like a big deal, but in 1986, that was a pretty big step forward.

These cases exemplified how ex-gay ministry programs inadvertently encouraged some men to embrace their desires and move toward an affirming position by destigmatizing homosexuality and facilitating important early steps toward self-acceptance. They also illustrated how experiences in the neophyte stage often had a powerful impact on participants, even in cases where they did not embrace the particular ideas, understandings, and techniques promoted by a specific group or institution. Here, we see that program 'failures' were not trivial or inconsequential, but often had an important influence on the trajectory of participants' lives.

Sexual asceticism, ex-gay life, and sexual emancipation thus represented three distinct modes of resolving participants' sexual-moral crisis. Each approach entailed a fusion of symbolic tools drawn from across the sociocultural sphere and represented a distinct way of thinking about same-sex attraction and constructing 'the good life'. The preceding analysis supported the argument that sexual asceticism should be recognized as a distinct mode of redress and collective identity (Creek, 2013; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; O'Brien, 2004; Wolkomir, 2006) and provided additional insight into this way of reimagining self and reality. Creek (2013) previously distinguished ascetic individuals from ex-gay men and women by their adoption of LGB identities, their belief that same-sex desire is not inherently sinful, their opinion that same-sex attracted Christians should not try to change their desires, and their understanding that same-sex urges will never abate. Yet, both ex-gay and ascetic participants in the current study generally agreed that same-sex desires (though perhaps not ideal, normal, or natural) were not inherently sinful and that such urges were likely to persist throughout a person's life. In addition, some ascetic men continued to believe that sexual change was possible

and desirable for certain individuals, despite their own lack of reorientation success. In her conceptualization, Creek (2013) also described ascetic individuals and gay survivors (what she referred to as ‘side As’) as differing only in their belief about the morality of homosexual acts. Yet, the current analysis suggests that these three collective identities (ex-gay, survivor, ascetic) were also distinguished by distinct root metaphors and constructions of same-sex attraction (as trial, pathology, or inherent essence) and the unique position and role of sexuality within personal constructions of the self (defining or peripheral). Further research is needed to explore additional variations and similarities amongst these three distinct modes of redress. In the next chapter, I describe how the men implemented these redressive approaches in their everyday lives and how the particular ways of thinking, feeling, and being they entailed reverberated across participants’ lifeworlds. As will become evident, the unique social, spiritual, and sexual consequences of these strategies further demarcate ex-gay men, homosexual ascetics, and gay survivors as distinct collective identities and social figures.

⁵⁴ Sexual orientation is understood as an enduring personal quality that inclines individuals to be romantically and sexually attracted to men, women, or individuals of both sexes. Although research has demonstrated that sexual orientation ranges along a continuum, it is usually discussed in terms of three categories: heterosexual, gay/lesbian, and bisexual (APA, 2008).

⁵⁵ Individuals and groups of persons who feel they have been harmed by the ex-gay ministry movement have increasingly embraced the term ‘survivor’ to illuminate their personal experiences of oppression and subsequent liberation. This term has generally replaced the previous label of ‘ex-ex-gay’ and has been used frequently in the literature to refer to those who feel harmed by ex-gay ministry programs (see, for example, Ford, 2001; Fjelstrom, 2013). This label was also used by participants themselves to refer to their past experiences and present realities. For example, Paul explained:

We didn’t like being known as just ex-ex-gay, um, because that wasn’t clear enough about what our experience was. We wanted it to be known that we went through an ordeal and we were survivors, much like someone who was a cancer survivor or a rape survivor – that we went through something that was fairly traumatic.

It is not intended to suggest that all ex-gay ministry clients experience harm, that these experiences were wholly negative in all cases, or that ascetic and ex-gay men have not lived through trying experiences and episodes of social violence. Rather, it is intended to convey the extent to which contemporary human rights themes of oppression, discrimination, and liberation saturate these narratives and inform experiences with both ex-gay ministry and conservative Christian institutions.

Chapter 11 ~ Implementation Effects

“Whatever the issue is, someone has to come to the realization that they want to change or make a difference.” – Jordan

In the early moments of the redressive phase, participants committed themselves to particular ways of thinking, feeling and being inspired by their experiences in the neophyte stage. Some embraced (homo)sexual asceticism while others decided to pursue openly gay lives or live in accordance with their true, heterosexual nature. This initial commitment was followed by efforts to transform one’s life and self in line with these preferred strategies. As Wolkomir (2006) affirmed, “Remodelling the self requires more than just a good cognitive blueprint; it requires careful execution” (p. 119). In the current study, as in the analysis by Gerber (2011), participants pursued various ideal states by exercising the will and actively reconfiguring their existence in accordance with renewed images of the ‘good life’, variously defined. As Jordan explained, “It’s kind of like getting a... textbook education of what a man is, but then you’ve got to go out and *do* it. You’ve got to live it... emulate it.” As participants worked to implement these strategies and bring an end to sexual-moral crisis, their lives changed dramatically. In this chapter, I describe how embracing particular programs of truth and modes of redress shaped participants’ sexual, social, and spiritual lives and wrought a unique constellation of losses, gains, and challenges.

Sex and Romance

“When it comes down to sexuality... it’s really important that people find their own way that’s comfortable for them.” – Paul

Each redressive approach was associated with distinct sexual and romantic motifs. In this section, I describe the sexual behaviours, erotic desires, and romantic unions characteristic of (homo)sexual ascetics, gay survivors, and ex-gay men.

Diving into the dating pool: Sex and romance in the lives of gay survivors. Mason, Matt, Mitch, Ned, Paul, and Josiah were determined to emancipate themselves from internalized homonegativity and embrace a life of authentic sexual self-expression in the redressive phase. Their early attempts at sexual and romantic connections were characterised by a blend of excitement and anxiety. These men were essentially new to the world of homoeroticism and gay romance (with the exception of some limited past experiences in the cases of Josiah and Matt) and uncertain what to expect or how to proceed. As they entered the dating scene, survivors

encountered various challenges. Some of these trials were unrelated to their experiences of sexual-moral crisis or their history of internalized homonegativity. For example, several described difficulties in finding attractive partners or developing meaningful and satisfying intimate relationships. Mason, for example, noted that his first homosexual relationships were emotionally and psychologically unsatisfying, despite a strong sexual connection: “I think your first partner in a gay relationship is based on hot and heavy sex... you come in heat, and then, when that’s over like, it’s like ‘Oh, this is a dumb thing.’” Others described how particular personal characteristics impeded them from forming satisfying relationships with other men. For example, Mitch noted that the interpersonal challenges associated with schizophrenia “significantly hampered” his dating life and Josiah recalled how navigating faith issues often proved challenging. Josiah recalled how identifying as a devout Christian alienated him from the majority of his gay peers, who were largely irreligious and often hostile toward Christianity: “[Most gay men] are lapsed Christians who haven’t been able... to maintain themselves in a Christian tradition and be out and fabulous at the same time.” He explained how this spiritual conflict often complicated his romantic relationships with other men and had occasioned the breakdown of one of his earliest long-term relationships: “My last serious boyfriend was an atheist... [and] he was not okay with the fact that I was going to be an Anglican priest ... teaching something that is fundamentally delusional, you know, in his perspective.” The LGB Christians consulted by Subhi and Geelan (2012) and Walton (2006) described similar experiences of religious stigmatization in LGB communities. In their efforts to form sexual and romantic connections with other men, survivors thus encountered a variety of common relationship issues that were largely tangential to the experience of crisis or their history of homonegativity.

Yet, survivors also encountered relationship challenges that were directly related to their history of internalized homonegativity and experiences of sexual-moral crisis. Four (Ned, Matt, Paul, and Josiah) described finding it difficult to shed the negative images of gay life they had internalized during their encounters with conservative Christianity, ex-gay ministries, and various forms of secular homonegativity. In sexual or romantic situations, these participants were confronted by deeply ingrained homonegative images, discourses, and beliefs that wrought intense feelings of shame and moral panic. For example, Ned explained how notions of sin and pathology stayed with him for many years and long hindered his sexual and romantic

development: “Although I questioned their [ex-gay ministry] message about homosexuality, I still took it to heart... [still] took home the message that I was a sexually broken person.” Matt similarly recalled how internalized homonegativity long hindered his sexual satisfaction: “It just took a lot of the joy out of sexuality for me... for years and years afterwards.” Although these negative images and attitudes issued from various sources, experiences with the ex-gay ministry movement were described as particularly destructive in this regard. As Matt noted: “A lot of my paranoia about AIDS and STDs was the result of what I learned in ex-gay ministries... [that] same-sex involvement was dirty and against God’s will... It’s taken me a long time to... come out of that.”

The shedding of homonegative thoughts, feelings, and images proved more difficult than these survivors had anticipated. After years of sexual repression and self-loathing, letting go of images of sin, pathology, and deviance and truly embracing homosexuality at an emotional, physical, and psychological level was not an easy task. As Matt noted, overcoming the idea that homosexuality was “something to *struggle* with... instead of something to celebrate and to embrace and to enjoy” involved a great deal of psychological and emotional work: “Once you consider something a problem, it’s hard to think of it in any other way.” Josiah similarly explained: “When you grew up thinking that homosexuality is primarily caused by a demon, this is quite hard to get over... experiencing your sexual orientation as a gift, where everybody... would say, ‘You are being corrupted by the devil.’” After years of associating homosexuality with the miasma of evil and the brokenness of pathology, the men had developed an embodied aversion to these acts that was not easily overcome. Several survivors acknowledged that the support of professional psychologists was essential to moving past internalized homonegativity throughout the redressive phase. As Paul reported, “I’ve been through a lot of counselling, specifically about the ex-gay treatment I had.”

Two others - Matt and Ned - noted that experiences of sexual-moral crisis and persistent efforts to alter or repress their desires had left them feeling relationally immature relative to other gay men. Entering the dating pool as an adult, Matt felt experientially disadvantaged relative to his peers, many of whom had been engaged in romantic and sexual relationships with other men since their teens. He recalled feeling profoundly unprepared and naïve, noting: “I didn’t really know how to be in a relationship... I grew up with *no* gay role models, I never saw a gay relationship, had no idea how it was supposed to work ... how to do it.” Ned similarly explained

how the years he spent in the ex-gay ministry movement had not only exacerbated his internalized homonegativity, but also greatly hampered his sexual and romantic development and rendered it difficult for him to meld into the gay dating community. He noted: “I was celibate and abstinent for many years... I probably spent the first 10 years after I left [ex-gay ministries]... going on maybe one or two dates and that was it ... It kind of stunted me.” For these men, sexual-moral crisis and encounters with particular redressive institutions had long distanced them from the gay community and prevented them from developing age-appropriate sexual and romantic capacities. When these men were finally ready to embrace their desires, feelings of sexual-romantic immaturity added to the anxiety and apprehension of dating. These men describe a form of ‘socialization into incompetence’ (Langness & Levine, 1986) tied to their engagement with homonegative institutions and lack of contact with the gay community.

In sum, by constructing homoeroticism as good, right, and normal, gay survivors gave themselves permission to enact their gay identities and pursue sexual and intimate relationships with men. Yet, overcoming years of internalized homonegativity and integrating into the gay dating community often proved challenging. While Mitch and Mason embraced this new way of being with relative ease, other men struggled for some time before they started to feel comfortable and competent in their sexuality. Yet, in the end, all survivors successfully integrated into the dating scene and pursued sexual and romantic relationships with other males.

A life of (homo)sexual discipline: The case of ascetics. For Adam, Brad, Todd, Walter, and Seth, homosexual desires were spiritually and socially dangerous. These urges threatened to alienate them from God and compromise their pursuit of personal righteousness and familial wellbeing. Sexual self-discipline was thus central to lives of ascetic men. Here, living well entailed sacrificing personal pleasure in pursuit of spiritual and moral betterment. Although they did not blame themselves for their urges, ascetic men took full responsibility for managing their desires, developing techniques of sexual restraint and purging their lives of immoral sexual acts. As Adam explained, “the *feelings* are not a choice, but the action or the behaviour is a choice.” These men worked hard to restrict sexual expression and gratification to those ‘right acts’ that fall within the margin of Christian sexual ethics and marital obligations. Consequently, their sexual lives were largely characterized by regulation and restraint.

As they worked to transform their lives in the image of God, ascetic men implemented a variety of techniques intended to help them resist homosexual temptation – many of which they

continue to use to this day (see Chapter 12). Some of these disciplinary procedures were spiritual in nature and attuned to images of homosexual desire as an evil temptation that issued from malevolent forces. Others were largely secular and oriented toward the construction of homosexuality as a compulsive behaviour or addiction. Still others defied clear classification, simultaneously approaching homoeroticism as satanic enticement and secular craving.

Turning sexual temptation over to God was a common strategy used by four ascetics (Todd, Adam, Walter, and Seth). This technique involved fostering a relationship with God and resting in the assurance that He would enable the individual to withstand sexual temptation. Here, ascetic men sought to appropriate the power of the divine to oppose maleficent forces. They recruited God as a powerful ally in the struggle to maintain sexual purity and engendered a powerful sense of security and confidence. As Walter explained, “He [God] tells us we’ll be tempted. But He also tells us to hand all those things over to him and to live according to his will ... And as long as I do that, I’m very safe with him.” Seth felt similarly empowered by his relationship with God: “I feel secure in that... I don’t have to be good on my own.” In turning their desires over to God, these men entered into a deeply empowering partnership that inspired them to pursue the path of righteousness with confidence. This recourse to supernatural forces proved to be a powerful subjunctive device (Good, 1994), allowing participants to cope with the stress and uncertainty of sexual discipline by linking their struggle to the possibility, power, and mystery of the divine.

In their efforts to pursue sexual purity, ascetic men also engaged in processes of spiritual intensification, embedding themselves in the Christian community and devoting much of their time and energy to religious worship, study, and service. For example, when asked how he managed his sexual urges, Seth noted that he tried to “focus on God during the day” and “listen to music that would honour him.” In such acts of spiritual intensification, participants not only reinforced their connection to God and his healing power, but also distracted themselves from their urges by engaging in mundane tasks. As they filled their spare time with religious pursuits, the men left little opportunity for homosexual desire to take hold of their imagination. As Walter explained, “My focus is more about living for Christ and finding out more and more about *how* He wanted me to live ... I’m so busy now that... I *really* don’t stop and think about the sexual aspect much.” In a life saturated by spiritual devotion and Christian worship, there is little opportunity to stray from the path of righteousness.

As ascetics intensified their involvement with the church and shared their struggle with peers, they also developed sympathetic networks that encouraged them to pursue sexual purity and resist the temptation toward sin. Walter explained how these peers helped him cope with the loneliness of living a single, celibate existence: “[most] people go home to their children and to their wives and their partners, whereas someone who has had this lifestyle is coming home... to nothing ... [and] that leaves the door wide open to even *more* temptation.” Christian peers and family members worked to hold these men accountable to the ascetic project and support them in overcoming their desires. Religious intensification therefore had spiritual, social, and psychological facets. It not only allowed the individual to draw nearer to God and further benefit from his healing power, but also placed the ascetic man under the explicit surveillance of others and pragmatically altered the flow of everyday life to avoid sexual temptation.

Other disciplinary techniques were more explicitly oriented toward the psychology of temptation and desire. Ascetic men worked to purify their thought life by focusing their attention on non-erotic topics and activities and forcing homosexual memories and images from their minds. Todd, for example, described working long hours to keep his mind off sexual temptation: “If I keep busy enough and making money then it doesn’t bother me so bad... I get more therapy out of a \$1000 cheque than anything I can think of!” Adam similarly described immersing himself in images of nature and the universe to distract himself from sexual desire: “I have to get back to... Hubble space telescope pictures or other nature pictures... That’s what I need to concentrate on.” In addition to filling their lives and minds with nonsexual pursuits, ascetics also carefully monitored their cognitive activity and worked to purge their minds of homosexual themes and images. As Adam explained, “I have to castrate myself psychologically over and over... I have to turn off my sexuality entirely to ignore this stuff.”

Ascetic men also worked to identify and avoid homosexual ‘triggers’ - particularly tempting experiences, events, and objects that threatened to weaken their resolve and occasion homoerotic activity. The Internet was frequently described as a potent source of temptation. Walter, for example, noted that he used to explore Craigslist, “Just looking for anybody, you know, who was looking for a good time.” After renouncing homosexual acts and committing himself to God, he carefully avoided any website that contained such personal advertisements. Seth similarly noted that his computer was equipped with a program that blocked him from accessing homoerotic websites or images. Jed spoke to the need to reconfigure everyday life to

avoid homoerotic stimuli, be it sexually-charged situations, erotic imagery, or personal fantasy: “Behavioural changes [were important] – whether that’s drinking... gay bars... masturbation, porn, fantasy, acting out - all that.” For Todd, foregoing close, intimate relationships with other gay men that risked sparking sexual attraction or behaviour was also important: “It would be nice to just have some guy to cuddle and feel close to... But I know that’s probably playing with fire, so I don’t touch it.” This pragmatic avoidance helped deter the men from activities and situations that would inflame their temptations and threaten the pursuit of purity.

Finally, ascetic men used strategies of cognitive interruption and semantic reframing to manage ongoing temptation in their everyday lives. Cognitive interruption involved acknowledging the physical beauty of a particular man without allowing oneself to indulge in erotic fantasies or dwell on homoerotic desires. For example, when confronted by an attractive man, Brad noted that he would simply recognize their physical appeal and then move on with the business of everyday life: “I just acknowledge them [homoerotic desires]... I see a guy who’s hot, I just go, ‘Oh, that guy’s hot!’... I’m still free to go... ‘I’m attracted to that guy’... that doesn’t mean we’re going to hook up.” Adam similarly described acknowledging his attraction before putting the issue out of his mind: “If I see somebody attractive, *by chance*, in public, I just [say], ‘Oh yeah. He’s cool. Okay. Go on.’... You don’t need to stare. You don’t need to lust. But you can *notice*.” In addition to disrupting any tendency toward lustful rumination, ascetic men also minimized temptation by framing embodied physical attraction as an experience of admiration or an opportunity for divine reverence. For example, Seth described transforming these attractions into affirmations of God’s power: “If you want to take a look at a guy who is walking down the street... just say, ‘That’s a beautiful man that God made!... God made that and God is a wonderful God!’” Walter similarly noted that he tries to see God’s glory in the attraction he feels toward particular males: “I say, ‘Yeah, this guy is really a nice looking guy... it’s amazing that God has created such beautiful creatures!’ And give the credit to God and go on about my business.” Through these techniques of cognitive interruption and reframing, ascetic men limit the power of temptation by circumventing lustful thoughts and homoerotic fixation.

Together, these various disciplinary techniques helped ascetic men manage sexual temptation and avoid homoerotic acts. In all cases, developing a personal relationship with God was deemed crucial to the pursuit of sexual purity. As Walter explained: “The more that I started to getting to know him, the *less* that lifestyle... that pattern of living had control over me and it

had to do with surrendering that [to God].” Yet, resisting sexual temptation was also the purview of the individual. Ascetic men took personal responsibility for their sexual behaviour and remained vigilant over their desires. While God empowers those earnestly seeking change, it is ultimately up to the individual to purify the sexual self by neutralizing the danger inherent in idle hands and wandering minds, reconfiguring everyday life to avoid triggers, and working toward spiritual and moral growth. Under such conditions, temptation is given no room to flourish.

Yet, despite utilizing many of the same disciplinary techniques, the pursuit of sexual purity was experienced differently by individual ascetics. For Brad, sexual self-discipline was largely effortless and emotionally unchallenging. Although he continued to find males attractive, he was married and committed to his wife in the redressive phase and experienced few strong urges to engage in homosexual behaviours. When confronted by homoerotic desires or attractive males, he felt no desperate compulsion to act on his urges and experienced no feelings of guilt or anxiety. These attractions were simply part of his everyday life. For Todd and Walter, sexual self-discipline required a heightened level of vigilance but remained manageable and largely unproblematic. Both continued to experience a strong urge toward homoerotic satisfaction, but felt confident in their ability to adeptly resist such impulses by consistently applying strategies of sexual self-discipline. Here, a sense of disciplinary proficiency helped minimize the fear and anxiety associated with homoerotic desires and allowed the men to feel empowered by, and proud of, their skilful self-control.

In contrast, Seth and Adam described their attempts to manage compulsive homosexual desires as an emotionally and psychologically trying experience. Although these men continued to experience strong homoerotic urges, they struggled to attain the same level of regulatory mastery described by their peers. Struggling to avoid homoerotic imagery and fantasy on a daily basis, they felt ashamed of their inability to purge these temptations from their lives and continued to be distressed by what they felt were ungodly urges. Adam noted, “A lot of times [I] looked at them [homoerotic images] and then felt slightly *aroused*... [and I would think] ‘Well, I’m horrible’ and ‘I shouldn’t do this... not supposed to be getting aroused at the sight of a man!’” Seth similarly described how homoerotic urges and images occupied much of his mental life and were a source of ongoing distress throughout the redressive phase. He remembered thinking, “Why not just go live it [gay life] and go to hell? Because I am going to go to hell anyways.” For these men, acute homoerotic urges combined with ineffective

management attempts and lingering feelings of shame and self-loathing rendered the ascetic project highly dark and distressing. Although all ascetic men were committed to the pursuit of sexual purity, particular individuals thus experienced this project very differently. While Brad described this process as a relatively tranquil exercise of self-discipline, others conjured images of the anxious addict, desperate to hang on in a world fraught with danger and temptation.

Although ascetic men described sexual-self discipline as a more or less comfortable exercise, all remained committed to avoiding homosexual acts in the redressive phase. For Walter and Adam, this meant living a virtually sexless existence. As unmarried gay men with no heterosexual urges, they were devoid of morally acceptable opportunities for sexual gratification. Since leaving the gay community and returning to the church, Walter had lived without sexual pleasure – a situation he anticipated would persist throughout his life: “I want to live according to what He [God] has instructed me to live. And if that means that I’m going to be celibate for the rest of my life, then, yeah.” Adam also pursued celibacy in the redressive stage. Unable to perform sexually with his ex-wife and deterred from masturbation by religious guilt, he noted that he had never experienced orgasmic release: “I tried various times, through jacking...masturbating. And had an erection and that was it. And sometimes I couldn’t manage that because my conscience comes and – ‘Whoa! You’re not supposed to do this!’ And so, you know... I don’t.” Like Walter, he was convinced he would live out his days in celibacy: “I’m not attracted to the ladies and I am so conscientiously against gay sex that – well I, I don’t think I could ever do that.” For these men, the pursuit of sexual purity entailed a sexless existence.

This is not to suggest, however, that the lives of ascetic men were uniformly devoid of sexual pleasure. While all renounced partnered homosexual acts, many continued to garner sexual pleasure through other outlets. Those who were married (Brad, Seth and Todd) engaged in sexual acts with their wives. Seth noted that he and his wife had always enjoyed an active and satisfying sexual relationship despite his homoerotic desires. This pattern continued throughout the redressive period. Brad recalled how developing a sexual relationship with his wife – who considered herself a lesbian at the beginning of their marriage – had proved trying. The two had relied on humour and open communication to confront potentially awkward situations and explore their sexual possibilities as a couple: “There’s been times when... I’m just not getting it up and my wife will just laugh at me and say, ‘Sorry, I’d grow a penis if I could!’... [Or] I’m like... ‘I’m growing some man breasts here if that makes it easier’ and she’s like, ‘No, that

doesn't help!" Although initially cumbersome, Brad and his wife eventually grew to enjoy their sexual experiences together: "It probably took us six months... to really have anything approaching good sex. There was a lot of experimentation... [but] it wasn't an embarrassing or a shameful thing." Over the years, their sex life had improved immensely.

Conversely, Todd noted that his sexual relationship with his wife had steadily declined over the course of their marriage – a phenomenon he attributed to a blend of declining interest and aging: "We don't have sex anymore ... You might say I'm just sort of – I'm not that interested and she can live without, so that's the way it is." Devoid of marital sexual pleasure, Todd noted that he occasionally masturbated to homoerotic images to attain sexual release: "I fall back into pornography once in a while". Although somewhat "embarrassed" by these acts, he felt homoerotic masturbation provide a morally acceptable way of satisfying his erotic urges without crossing into the sinful realm of adultery and homosexuality: "I can look her [his wife] straight in the eye and say, 'I've been faithful to you all these years except for in my mind and what I do with my hands and myself... that's the extent of it.'" The ascetic pursuit of sexual purity does not, therefore, necessarily entail a life devoid of sexual expression. Rather, it requires limiting sexual expression to those acts that fall within the purview of moral and spiritual acceptability. As marital status and understandings of 'moral' sexual behaviour varied across members of this group, so too did the nature of sexual expression. Various renditions of sexual asceticism were thus evident in the redressive phase. Although some entailed complete sexual celibacy (Adam and Walter), others permitted specific sexual acts, including masturbation (Todd) and heterosexual marital behaviour (Brad, Todd, and Seth). Asceticism is thus not necessarily defined by wholesale sexual renunciation, but by the avoidance of sexual acts that contravene the individual's spiritual and moral proclivities or threaten to destroy familial unity.

While embracing asceticism had little effect on Todd and Seth's sexual relationship with the wives, the transparent nature of this redressive strategy greatly improved their emotional closeness. They explained how, throughout the crisis period, sexual secrecy and the desperate pursuit of reorientation had diminished their relationships with their wives. In redress, they noted that embracing the immutability of their desires and being open with their wives immensely benefitted their marriages. Todd recalled having emotionally distanced himself from his wife throughout much of their marriage, ashamed of his homosexual urges and indiscretions and frustrated by his inability to change. In redress, he and his wife came to accept that these urges

would be an ongoing feature of their marriage and began to rebuild their emotional closeness through openness and empathy. This new, pragmatic approach helped to restore their emotional intimacy and renewed their romantic connection: “[It was] like the year we met all over again!” Seth similarly explained how coming to terms with his sexual orientation and being more open about his sexual struggle enabled he and his wife to regain the trust and intimacy they had lost over the years. By affirming their commitment and dedication to one another in the face of immutable homosexual desires, these couples were able to restore a sense of security, closeness, and mutual support to marriages long troubled by distance and opacity.

In sum, ascetic men framed homoerotic urges as a spiritual and moral trial that requires sacrifice and self-discipline. These urges provided an opportunity to move closer to God and further the pursuit of righteousness. However, the threat of failure introduced anxiety into the ascetic project. Ascetic men managed this anxiety by utilizing disciplinary techniques to manage homoerotic desires in everyday life. Some also sought sexual release through alternative outlets, including masturbation and heterosexual marital acts. Ultimately, what set this group apart from their gay and ex-gay peers was not simply the fact that they limited the expression of their sexual drives. Ex-gay men, gay survivors, and most human adults place limits on their sexual behaviour and exhibit some degree of erotic austerity. What made these men quintessentially ‘ascetic’ was 1) that they imposed these privations on themselves as a form of worship – as a sign of their devotion to God and 2) that they sacrificed the totality of their true (homo)sexual nature in the process. As self-acknowledged gay men, ascetics sacrificed the sexual self as a means of honouring God and the sanctity of the marriage bond. This was not the case with gay survivors, who restricted their sexuality as a matter of personal preference or in accordance with established terms of monogamy. It was also not the case with ex-gay men, who avoided noxious and deceptive homosexual acts in pursuit of truth and optimal wellbeing. Neither survivors nor ex-gay men sacrificed the truth of the sexual self as an act of divine worship. Ascetic men were thus distinguished by their radical and devotional acts of sexual self-immolation.

The heterosexual projects of ex-gay men. Ex-gay men were unique in possessing heterosexual identities. Throughout the redressive phase, these five men (Charles, Jed, Jordan, Rodney, and Theo) worked to bring their erotic and romantic lives in line with their sexual identities by renouncing homosexual acts and pursuing or maintaining heterosexual relationships. The relative ease or difficulty of this project was closely tied to the degree of

sexual shift experienced in the neophyte stage. Although all five of the men had attained some change in their patterns of desire, Charles was the only ex-gay man who felt he had shed all homoerotic urges. He explained, “[By] getting my needs met with the men in my life and healing the wounds, the first thing that left completely was the homosexual desires... I no longer had the desire to go and have sex with other men.” As Charles had previously been attracted to both males and females, the loss of homoerotic desire left him solely interested in women. The remaining four men continued to live with various levels of homoerotic desire in the redressive phase. Moreover, while Jordan and Jed had grown attracted to women during the neophyte stage, Theo and Rodney continued to lack any significant homoerotic drive. Although he and his wife were sexually active, Theo continued to lack any generalized attraction to females: “We were always sexually active and still are, but I ... never had like a huge, huge, unquenchable appetite.” Most ex-gay men – with the exception of Charles – thus continued to experience patterns of sexual desire that were antithetical to their heterosexual identities and threatened their spiritual, moral, psychological, and relational wellbeing. Consequently, these men embraced religious and secular disciplinary techniques similar to those used by their ascetic peers in an attempt to manage these incongruent and dangerous temptations.⁵⁶ Yet, unlike most ascetics, ex-gay men construct the process of self-discipline as largely devoid of emotional distress or psychological struggle. This easier relationship to homosexual renunciation is likely attributable to the fact that ex-gay men construed these urges as pathology and dysfunction rather than a true and enduring feature of the self (as was the case with ascetics). Here, avoiding homoeroticism was not about self-sacrifice, but avoiding dangerous, deceptive, and compulsive sexual temptations that threatened to compromise the pursuit of personal and social wellbeing.

In redress, ex-gay men were intent on maintaining or developing romantic relationships that reflected their true, heterosexual nature. As a married man, Theo was intent on repairing his relationship with his wife after years of secrecy and the destruction wrought by extra-marital homosexual affairs. Like Todd and Seth (see above), he described having turned inward throughout the crisis period, closing himself off from his wife in a way that fostered marital estrangement and resentment: “I was... not in a position to be honest with her... I was working on [my sexual] issues by myself – with her shut out... [so] we had an opportunity for a lot of bitterness and distance to grow.” In the redressive stage, he adopted a more transparent and open approach to his sexual struggle that drew his wife in as an active support and fostered the

redevelopment of trust, intimacy, and mutual support in their relationship. Reflecting on the benefits of this approach, he noted: “when you’re married and you’re trying to maintain two lives and you’re being deceitful and secretive and then your attention goes to yourself instead of to other people... I was too self-focused [before]”.

Those who were unmarried began pursuing heterosexual relationships in the redressive phase. Early in the redressive phase, Charles grew close with a young Christian female who was unfazed by his past homosexual behaviour and supportive of his desire to pursue ongoing healing. He recalled: “I told her within a couple of weeks about... the SSA [same-sex attraction] and how this is going to be a part of my life and... she accepted me and, um, supported me and um, encouraged me”. In time, the two were married. Conversely, Jed, Jordan, and Rodney were content to live as single heterosexual men for several years after redress. Jed recalled: “I, you know, came into my heterosexual identity and lived as a single man very happily.” In time, Jed and Jordan were married to females while Rodney continued to look forward to meeting the women God had chosen for him to marry.

The sexual and romantic lives of ex-gay men were thus driven by their heterosexual identities. Although they lived with a history of homoeroticism and ongoing homosexual desires, ex-gay men considered themselves to be unambiguously heterosexual and kept discrepant urges in check by utilizing a variety of disciplinary techniques and focusing their energy on the pursuit and maintenance of heterosexual relationships. Here, sexual identity and behaviour were brought into harmony with one another and ex-gay men affirmed their status as heterosexual beings.

Three sexualities. From shared homoerotic urges, three distinct sexualities emerged in the redressive stage. Using the grid of desire, behaviour, and identity, we can trace the unique contours of each group within the sexual matrix. In terms of identity, both survivors and ascetics defined themselves as ‘gay’ men while their ex-gay peers identified with heterosexuality. Yet, survivors were the only men engaged in homoerotic acts. Ex-gay men and sexual ascetics lived in a state of complete asexuality or limited their sexual behaviour to acts deemed appropriate within the confines of heterosexual marriage (that is, sex with their wives or, in the case of Todd, homoerotic masturbation). Yet, despite differences in sexual identity and behaviour, participants in all groups typically continued to experience some level of homosexual attraction (with the sole exception of Charles). What distinguishes these sexual categories is not so much their embodied urges, but rather the role homoeroticism plays in their sexual and romantic lives and

understandings of self. I now turn to consider how these various forms of redress impacted the spiritual lives of participants.

The Spiritual Correlates of Redress

“The church, as a whole, still has a lot to learn.” – Rodney

Sexual shifts were not the only changes associated with redress. Embracing asceticism, emancipation, or heterosexual restoration also profoundly altered the spiritual lives of participants. In some cases, redress wrought an intensified relationship to God and church. In other instances, it culminated in new theological perspectives. Here, I describe how participants’ spiritual lives were impacted by the experiences and insights they acquired in the neophyte stage and the life changes they implemented throughout redress.

In God (but not necessarily church) we trust: The spiritual lives of ascetic and ex-gay men. The spiritual transformations experienced by ascetic men (Adam, Todd, Walter, Seth, and Brad) and ex-gay individuals (Charles, Jed, Jordan, Rodney, and Theo) in the redressive stage were remarkably similar. With few exceptions, these men affirmed that the insights and experiences they had garnered as a result of sexual-moral crisis enhanced their relationship with God while diminishing their confidence in the church and its authorities. Eight of these men (Adam, Todd, Walter, Brad, Jed, Jordan, Rodney, and Theo) felt that God had helped them successfully emerge from sexual-moral struggle – an attribution that brought them into deeper relationship and obedience to the Lord. For Walter and Adam (both ascetics), the sense that God had saved them from a life of sin, meaninglessness, and suffering in the gay community and restored them to the path of righteousness deepened their commitment to the Lord. As Walter explained, “Out of that came, um, the commitment to [divine] obedience.” For Todd and Brad (also ascetics), developing a more positive attitude toward their desires allowed them to finally appreciate the support they had received from the Lord and draw closer to the divine. Where they had once constructed their ongoing same-sex attraction as a sign of divine abandonment or disregard, they now thought of their struggle as a lesson in trust in the Lord and his wisdom. As Todd explained, “I kept praying, ‘God change me’ ... [but] God seemed to say to me, ‘Todd, I have changed you, but not maybe completely the way you want... My grace is sufficient. My strength is made perfect in your weakness.’” Brad similarly described having long resented God for not releasing him from his homoerotic desires: “It made me angry... I’d been praying... for years and had got nothing.” However, as he came to accept these urges as a part of himself that

was not inherently evil or sinful, he began to understand how God had been with him throughout his struggle, keeping him safe and leading him toward an empowering state of self-acceptance: “I honestly believe I’m alive today, and would not be if it had not been for my faith and for a very real God who was active and involved in my life.” In coming to realize that their desires were not a divine punishment or sign of celestial abandonment, but rather a call to commitment, trust, and relationship, these men found their connection with the Lord was greatly intensified.

Jed, Jordan, Rodney, and Theo (all ex-gay men) also described experiences of divine assistance and grace throughout their struggle that had served to strengthen their commitment to the Lord. As Rodney noted, “I see God’s providence the whole way through... giving me what I needed when I needed [it]... I trust what God has said to me, what He has done for me in the past.” Jed similarly credited his faith and relationship with God with helping him work through crisis and embrace his true, heterosexual nature: “It’s what brought me *out* of that same-gender attraction ... it’s been, I think the central - central to my recovery.” For Jordan, a sense of divine grace and forgiveness endeared him to the Lord. Referencing a biblical passage, he explained, “Jesus... said, ‘There are two debtors: one owes a lot and one owes a little. If both debts are forgiven, which one is going to be more grateful? The one who had the larger debt forgiven.’”

In the case of ex-gay and ascetic men, perceptions of divine grace and assistance thus commonly strengthened participants’ faith and connection to the Lord. Seth (ascetic) and Charles (ex-gay) were the only exceptions to this pattern. Charles constructed the sexual transformation that propelled him out of crisis in psychological, as opposed to spiritual, terms. Consequently, his relationship to God was largely unchanged by the redressive process. For Seth, a lingering sense of divine indifference and abandonment continued to complicate his relationship with God. He found the sexual self-discipline required of asceticism immensely challenging and was unable to understand why God refused to free him from his suffering. Although he tried to frame his struggle as a trial that promised to fruits of spiritual growth, he often grew frustrated with his sexual burden, noting, “It’s just really hard to want to have a relationship with God when he has denied me so many times. When I have asked him to free me from it.” The persistent feeling of having been burdened with unnecessary suffering and denied spiritual release complicated Seth’s spiritual life and left him with a lingering sense of bitterness: “I try to focus on God during the day.... [to] honour him.... [but] I have a lot of feelings of irritation towards God.” Unlike other

ascetics, Seth struggled to find evidence of meaningful divine assistance. Consequently, his relationship to the divine was somewhat diminished.

While redress differentially impacted their relationship to the divine, ascetic and ex-gay men described a shared discontentment with conservative Christian institutions and their hostile and stigmatized approach to issues of same-sex attraction in the wake of redress. Both groups were convinced that homoerotic desires were not inherently sinful and that homosexual acts were no more egregious than any other form of sin. As they compared their own constructions of homosexuality and morality with those espoused by conservative Christian leaders and authorities, they grew critical of the stigmatized and exoticized understandings promulgated in conservative Christian spaces. For example, Walter (ascetic) lamented how church authorities seemed to go out of their way to depict homoeroticism as a singularly wicked affliction: “They... caption it with - this [is] ‘weird’ or ‘disgusting’ - like an undesirable people.” Jordan (ex-gay) similarly criticised the church for actively promoting the idea that “if you’re a homosexual, you’re deplorable”. Rodney (ex-gay) described his frustration with Christian leaders, who perpetuated a moral “double standard” by harping on homosexuality while ignoring a wealth of heterosexual sins: “I had to be abstinent and non-sexual ... or I was going to go to hell. [But] standing beside me is the couple that’s not married that’s living together. What are you saying to them?” Adam (ascetic) was particularly annoyed by leaders’ frequent use of scripture to reinforce themes of intolerance and otherness in the church, including biased interpretations of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah that exacerbated Christian homonegativity: “People think, ‘Oh... homosexuality. That’s why they got killed’ ... [But] we’re talking about gang rape, which may have ended in murder ... most gay guys don’t believe in gang rape *or* murder!”

Ascetic and ex-gay men also lamented the sexual ignorance they witnessed in Christian institutions. Having learned a great deal about homosexuality through their own struggles, participants began to realize how unversed most Christians were with issues of sexual diversity. Todd complained that the average Christian “just doesn’t understand” homosexuality and Walter expressed his frustration with spiritual leaders who expected that gay men would spontaneously develop heterosexual feelings upon returning to church: “[When] you go under that water for baptism, they think you’re going under gay and you’re coming out straight!” Walter noted that such erroneous beliefs were both ridiculous and dangerous: “[God] promises... all kinds of things for us but he doesn’t say, ‘There, I’m going to turn you into a heterosexual now.’” Charles

echoed this sentiment, noting: “The church historically has been terrible at this issue. They don’t *understand* it ... [They believe] if you just say the prayers, read the Bible... and repent... you’ll be fine.” He insisted that such naivety not only breeds false expectations, but also leaves men and women feeling like failures when their desires do not abate.

In the wake of redress, ascetic and ex-gay men were confronted by the distance between their own understandings of homosexuality, spirituality, and morality and those commonly promulgated in Christian institutions. This discrepancy – combined with experiences of stigmatization and troubling observations of sexual naivety - left ascetic and ex-gay men feeling uneasy with the church and its approach to sexual diversity. They started to realize how profoundly conservative Christian churches had failed their same-sex attracted members. They also began to see the extent to which Christian institutions were implicated in their own personal suffering. Instead of embracing same-sex attracted men and women with dignity and love, the church had long subjected these individuals to exclusion and other forms of inhumane treatment. As Rodney explained, “I recognize how *badly* the church missed it when it comes to this issue and it grieves my heart... so many of those men and women in the Castro have had dealings with the church that are painful.” Theo argued that the very existence of ex-gay ministry programs highlights the profound failure of conservative Christian churches to offer a supportive, safe, and loving environment for same-sex attracted men: “I wish we didn’t have... ex-gay ministries... I wish the church would stand up and take its responsibility seriously with this issue... the church has failed miserably.” Having come to terms with their own desires, ascetic and ex-gay men were deeply troubled by the unnecessary suffering Christian homonegativity had wrought in their own lives and those of others living with same-sex attraction.

In redress, ascetic and ex-gay men thus evidenced a pattern of simultaneous spiritual intensification and decline facilitated by the symbolic separation of God and church. While redress brought most of these men closer to the Lord, experiences of sexual struggle also illuminated problematic misunderstandings and troubling injustices within the church. These issues served as new points of contention between themselves and the larger Christian population, setting them apart from their peers. In the wake of redress, ascetic and ex-gay had thus grown closer to the divine and more critical of earthly religious leaders. While God was more beloved and trusted than even before, the legitimacy and authority of the Church was seriously diminished. Although Christian faith remains fundamental to pursuit of the good life

for both ascetic and ex-gay men, experiences of stigmatization and misunderstanding left many disillusioned with the church. As Walter simply stated, devoted same-sex attracted Christians continue to encounter “lots of bumps in the road as far as dealing with church”.

In all cases, embracing asceticism or ex-gay life was associated with the development of a more reflective spiritual existence – one in which religious authority was no longer accepted at face value. Seth described developing a more sceptical attitude toward the church as a result of his experience, noting: “[Before] I was more ‘religiously blinded’ ... I didn’t think things through as much on my own. I just listened to what... my church leader said and just did it ... Now it’s not so much that way.” Brad similarly noted: “The dissonance between who I knew myself to be and what my faith told me forced me to think much deeper and really challenge my beliefs and my values.” For Adam, not only the legitimacy of church authorities but also the veracity of sacred texts came under question. He noted that he has a “few more problems with the Bible” at this point in his life: “you try to match up all this observable science with this book [the Bible] and you have some problems”.

As Christian individuals marked by homoeroticism, these men lived outside the norms of the church. From this vantage point, they were optimally positioned to observe the potential of religious institutions to cause emotional, spiritual, and psychological suffering. While faith continued to be at the center of their everyday lives and pursuit of righteousness, ascetic and ex-gay men were deeply troubled by the way homosexuality was handled within conservative Christian communities. Having become sensitized to the perils of moral arbitrariness, authoritarianism, and stigma, they embraced a more reflective spirituality grounded in a personal relationship with God and removed from the rigid sexual ethics of the church.

Religion as oppression: The case of gay survivors. The spiritual transformation of gay survivors (Mason, Matt, Mitch, Ned, Paul, and Josiah) involved a decisive break with conservative Christian institutions. Aware that conservative Christian leaders and peers would not support their desire to live authentically and express their true, homosexual nature, survivors distanced themselves from these groups. Mason, for example, recalled how his newfound confidence in his sexuality and his unwillingness to conform to the sexual ethics of the Mormon Church occasioned a logical break with this spiritual community: “I refuse to belong to a church that tells me I have to lie [about my sexuality], so I’m outta there!” Paul similarly recalled how his own break with conservative Evangelicalism was occasioned by his growing self-acceptance

and the realization that he would never be accepted as a gay man in this space: “I couldn’t even really be a member of the church as a gay person... [even] as an ‘overcoming’ gay person – someone’s who is trying to not be gay... [I bumped] into glass ceilings.” Having reimagined their homosexual desires as normal, natural, and good, survivors were no longer willing to repress their sexual selves to secure church membership or tolerate a state of qualified acceptance within conservative Christian communities. Like ascetics and ex-gay men, survivors therefore recognized an insurmountable conflict between their own sexual and moral worldviews and those promoted by conservative Christian institutions. Yet, while ascetic men remained immersed within these institutions, survivors turned away from conservative Christianity, empowered by the positive reconstruction of their sexual selves. While most left quietly, Mason publically defended his decision to pursue an openly gay life in Mormon excommunication court. He recalls: “I don’t have to attend, but I did ... because I was that comfortable with my decision and who I was... I went in there knowing they cannot hurt me.”

Although characterized by a break with conservative Christian churches, the spiritual transformation of gay survivors entailed much more than a separation from these institutions. Like ascetic and ex-gay men, survivors grew critical of institutionalized religious homonegativity and lamented the negative impact it had on their own lives. Yet, survivors’ critique of Christian homonegativity was more radical than that of their ascetic and ex-gay peers. While the others complained of moral hyperbole and the stigmatization of uncontrollable urges while maintaining that homosexual behaviours were sins, survivors questioned the moral and religious significance of such acts. They believed that proscriptions against homoerotic behaviour were a feature of human intolerance and a misrepresentation of the will of God in human politics. Survivors also felt personally misled by conservative Christian leaders and their ex-gay ministry affiliates, who, in proclaiming that homosexuality was immoral and deviant, had exacerbated their pain and suffering. As Ned noted, “I wasn’t – I didn’t feel that I was a Christian, uh, a good Christian at least, and um, and I really felt like I was, um, pretty broken.” Paul similarly explained how his engagement with conservative Christian institutions during the neophyte stage hampered his self-confidence: “It reinforced the belief that I was *woefully* broken and desperately needed to be fixed and it kind of reinforced the sense that I was spiritually disabled.”

As they came to appreciate the role of organized religion in broad systems of sexual oppression and their own past suffering, survivors experienced a profound spiritual crisis. The

sense of having been deceived and harmed by conservative Christian leaders and their ex-gay partners occasioned feeling of distrust, anger, and resentment and profoundly shook survivors' confidence in the church and its religious authorities. Survivors began to think of conservative Christian institutions as sites of repression and mystification, where leaders promoted untruths in pursuit of particular political ends. They imagine themselves to have been victims of a repressive spiritual machine, were Christian authorities had used their spiritual beliefs to coerce them into going to war against themselves and engaging in self-destructive patterns of thinking and behaving. For survivors, this sense of spiritual harm and deception initiated a process of deep spiritual reflection. Here, much more than sexual ethics was at stake. As Matt recalled, "that sort of began the beginning of questioning for me - questioning a lot of the tenets of the church and the church itself and I just re-thought everything." As Josiah simply stated, "Pandora's box was opened". For the first time in their lives, survivors questioned the basic legitimacy and goodness of conservative Christianity. As Ned explained, this crisis occasioned a profound exercise of spiritual reflexivity that is rare in the lives of conservative Christians: "you're raised into religion, you don't necessarily have the capacity or the opportunity to really objectively look at some of the doctrines and beliefs that you were raised into."

As survivors deconstructed the absolute truth and goodness of conservative Christianity, they were forced to negotiate a new spiritual existence and relationship to the sacred. In this critical and creative space, they existed in a state of pure potentiality - detached from formal religious institutions and free to explore new spiritual possibilities without the threat of social rejection or community alienation. For Matt, spiritual reflection ultimately occasioned the collapse of all personal faith. He became convinced that Christianity promoted a false and distorted view of the world – an erroneous reality, noting: "I saw the church for what it is... I dug in to the Bible... dug into what was really being taught, and realized that... a lot of it doesn't make any sense." For Matt, the Christian worldview was suddenly devoid of veracity. Once the unquestionable truth of the cosmos, Christian discourse now seemed a fictitious and oppressive ruse that threatened to ruin the lives of gay men. While this was a difficult revelation, Matt noted that letting go of Christian ideology ultimately freed him from feelings of spiritual torment and greatly improved his life: "I couldn't understand why God was tormenting me with my sexuality. I felt like there was a God, but he was not helping me... [Now] I realize... there is no personal God, so there's no one to fail me!" Although many gay men are able to incorporate Christianity

into their lives through affirming reinterpretations of the Bible, it was clear to Matt that Christian sacred texts did not support such behaviour: “I can’t read the Bible and think that it, um, supports gay activity ... it’s pretty blatant in a lot of parts that uh, it doesn’t support it.” As the validity of the Christian worldview was – in Matt’s opinion - grounded in a coherent cosmology presented in traditional texts, one could not reject the part without compromising the whole. As he noted, “To cherry pick out of that book the parts that somebody likes and present those as ... the whole story...I don’t believe it. I either buy the package, the *whole* package, all of the teachings, or I don’t.” Here, the rejection of Christian homonegativity proved fatal to the entire Christian worldview and Matt was transformed into a ‘non-believer.’

In the wake of intense spiritual reflection, the remaining five survivors (Mason, Mitch, Ned, Paul, and Josiah) continued to believe in an omnipotent God and endorse much of the Christian worldview. As Josiah noted, throughout the tribulations of sexual-moral crisis and in spite of his growing trepidations with the church, his connection to God never faltered: “You have the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit has you and doesn’t let go.” Paul similarly confirmed that his connection to the sacred remained resilient in the wake of redress: “I wanted to be an atheist for a time, but it just wasn’t realistic for me because I’m just kind of an existential person... faith is a very important thing to me.” Although these individuals continued to feel empowered by faith and confident in aspects of the Christian worldview, they were sensitized to the potential for religious authority to serve as a means of social control and source of human suffering. Here, negative religious experiences were unambiguously associated with the earthly realm and the human tendency toward prejudice, religious dogmatism, and uncritical obedience to authority. Paul described how exclusionary discourses and religious dogmatism are used by Christian leaders to “oppress” various groups: “People like to say they know what God wants or believes and it’s, it’s a great way of maintaining power and control.” Mason similarly described how dogmatic beliefs and uncritical obedience to authority can cause great personal harm: “People are hurt by it, because ... you’re taught that ... the Mormon Church is right and true ... so if they teach you that gay is wrong, it’s got to be wrong, and that’s where the struggle is.” Survivors affirmed that naïve deference to religious authority put gay men at risk of spiritual discrimination and coercion. As Paul recalled, “I was not thinking clearly for myself. I was trusting other people’s opinions before mine and really putting myself at *risk* because I felt like I

needed to do something drastic in order to have God in my life.” Here, survivors highlight the dangers of spiritual conformity and the potential for inhumane treatment in dogmatic institutions.

As they worked to construct a new spiritual life, these men evidenced a shared commitment to faith communities that eschewed fundamentalism, exclusion, and hierarchy and embraced critical thinking, inclusivity, and egalitarianism (where all believers were considered capable of generating valid spiritual insights and theological interpretations and spiritual ‘truth’ was not the sole purview of experts and authorities). Josiah gravitated toward the Anglican Church where he continued his Christian leadership training and theological study. Here, he felt free to engage in critical discussion and authentic self-expression without the threat of exclusion or stigmatization: “There’s much less of a sense of ‘line up or die.’” His spiritual life was no longer driven by denominational guidelines or authorities, but rather by his own intuitions and experiences of the divine: “[I am attuned to] the voice of *God* rather than the voice of the church ... [its] not about compliance with the *rules*.” Paul similarly noted that being “properly aligned to the teachings of God as prescribed by the church” was no longer the guiding force in his spiritual life. In the wake of redress, he had gravitated toward a more intimate and contemplative faith focused on direct communication with the sacred and individual theological study. He described this spiritual transformation as a shift from looking “externally to other people and books” toward a faith that is “guided from within.” Eventually, he found a home in the Religious Society of Friends, where he was encouraged to seek out the inner voice of God to guide his spiritual practice.

In contrast, Mitch, Mason, and Ned gradually moved away from organized religion, choosing to construct their own spiritual belief systems outside of any denominational or institutional structure. In this process, the men fused a variety of sacred images, ideas, and discourses drawn from various religious traditions with aspects of affirming Christianity to create a unique spiritual bricolage that was inclusive, direct, and highly sceptical of institutional dogma and religious authority. Mason described this new spiritual matrix as a blend of personally meaningful cosmological ideas grounded in the basic tenets of respect, love, and compassion: “I think about reincarnation ... about Christianity ... about the New Age movement ... the key thing to me is to be kind and loving to my neighbour.” Ned described a similarly flexible and contemplative faith where all notions of spiritual ‘truth’ were vanquished: “I still appreciate certain aspects of Christianity ... [but] I don’t view ... the Bible as a guide book... or as being

inerrant like I was raised to believe.” Reflecting on the direct and personal nature of his new spiritual life, Mitch noted that he is now oriented toward “how God speaks to you in your heart.”

Thus, whether they chose to remain engaged with organized religious institutions or carve out their own belief systems, survivors who continued to believe in the sacred embraced a much more critical spirituality existence, where Christian texts and teachings were no longer considered to be reflective of moral certainties or undeniable facts. As Josiah explains, this spiritual transformation was a life-altering experience: “All of the sudden it falls... the world... the structure that I was using to run my life ... it’s a total breakdown, except that Jesus Christ is the center of it... more beautiful than he’d ever been.” Here, negative past experiences bred institutional scepticism, moral ambiguity, and the desire to take personal ownership over one’s spiritual life and culminated in a relationship to the divine that was much more reflective, and direct than in the past. As Ned described, “I am much more cautious about... blind faith... I still am very interested in Jesus and his teaching... I’m, just more careful and cautious now as to how... I apply that in my life.” Paul similarly noted: “It’s about hearing that inner voice and having peace with oneself... that’s probably been the most fundamental shift in my faith.” Here, spirituality is freed from earthy subjugation, dogma, and the dangers of human politics. Where they had once looked to religious authorities for validation and guidance, survivors now relied on their own moral and spiritual impressions, understandings, and intuitions and personal communication with God to guide them toward righteousness. Spiritual life is orientated away from religious authority toward a dynamic process of personal reflection and divine consultation.

In sum, the experiences and insights developed by survivors throughout sexual-moral crisis and redress not only occasioned a separation from conservative Christian institutions and communities, but also radically altered their relationship to religious institutions, ethics, and authorities. While Matt chose to renounce all religious belief, most survivors embraced a more egalitarian, reflective, and direct spiritual life that was largely emancipated from forces of institutional control, religious dogmatism, or authoritarian influence. Here, spirituality was transformed from a hegemonic and dogmatic code into a dynamic patchwork of personally meaningful beliefs, values, and ideas grounded in survivors’ own moral sensibilities. As Mason noted: “I belong to the Church of Choice. I choose bits of everything, whether it’s Christian, Muslim, Buddhism... whatever fits my life and confirms I’m a good person.” Broadly speaking,

survivors took ownership over their spiritual existence as part of the redressive process, engendering an enlightening and revitalizing experience of spiritual renewal.

Growth, revisionism, and scepticism: Spirituality in the redressive phase. Themes of spiritual intensification, theological revisionism, and institutional critique were interwoven in the narratives of ascetic, ex-gay, and gay men. In all cases, redress proved to be a spiritually volatile period. Past beliefs, values, and commitments were subject to critical scrutiny and subsequently strengthened or diminished in light of the role God and church were believed to have played in the experience of crisis and its successful resolution. Where God was seen as having positively contributed to redress, a deeper relationship with the Lord resulted. As Rodney (ex-gay) noted, “My faith in him has grown because He has proven himself. God has proven himself over and over and over and over to me.” Where God’s support was seen as lacking, a more complex relationship to the divine emerged. Similarly, where conservative Christian communities were experienced as spaces of support and good guidance, individuals remained committed and connected to these institutions. Where they were construed as spaces of oppression and mystification, they were criticised from within or abandoned in favour of a secular existence or an alternative spiritual community. Yet, despite a wealth of individual differences and nuances, redress was invariably associated with the development of a more critical and reflective relationship to conservative Christian discourse, structure, and expertise. Participants unanimously condemned the homonegativity that thrived in conservative Christian spaces, despite ongoing disagreements over the moral status of homosexual acts.

Much past research has focused on the tendency of LGB Christians to embrace a spirituality marked by decreased biblical literalism, the separation of God and church, the recognition of human fallibility, and the adoption of an internal locus of authority in the wake of sexual-moral crisis (see, for example, Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Levy & Reeves, 2011; O’Brien, 2004; Sumerau, 2012; Walton, 2006; Yip, 1999). However, the current analysis suggests that all three redressive strategies engendered significant spiritual transformation and that certain aspects of this sacred reconfiguration were shared across these various approaches. In all cases, redress was associated with the critique of conservative Christian homonegativity and the adoption of a more sceptical approach to religious truth and authority.

The Social Implications of Redress

“I needed to be connected to other people.” – Brad

These three modes of redress also greatly impacted survivor's social existence, introducing new challenges and opportunities. These new ways of thinking, feeling, and being altered existing relationships, improving social connections in some instances and hampering or obliterating them in others. Yet, these various approaches to redress also inspired new social connections and brought participants into bonds of intimacy, care, and support with others who shared their unique experiences or views of self and world.

Carving out a space for sexual ascetics. In the wake of redress, the social lives of ascetic men revolved around the institutions of church and family. These groups not only represent the relationships of highest value to ascetic men, but also the social spaces where their desires prove most threatening and problematic. Within the Christian community, ascetics encountered a complex blend of inclusion and marginality. In the pursuit of goodness and godliness, they immersed themselves in conservative Christian communities, sharing their struggles with leaders and peers to various degrees⁵⁷. In these religious spaces, they found they were largely accepted and supported by their peers. Brad explained, "People were just – they kind of just accepted me." Seth described having received a great deal of encouragement from Christian peers, noting: "I've got several guy friends who know my whole story and are pretty supportive... they're always willing to listen to me... I can call them up and talk with them about it." Walter described a similar sense of being valued and respected by his local congregation: "all the people in my church have been very supportive. They've been very kind and very helpful and we have Bible studies together." After years of fearing they would be dismissed and condemned for their desires, ascetic men were relieved to find that their sexual preferences did not alienate them from the Christian community. Such experiences of acceptance validated their position in the faith community and affirmed their inherent goodness and value.

Yet, while themes of approval, warmth, and support were common in conservative Christian settings, participants also described memorable experiences that reveal the marginal and precarious position of ascetic men within these faith communities. Walter, Todd, and Brad described key encounters that revealed the ongoing social divide between gay Christian men and their heterosexual peers and highlighted persistent issues of distrust, alienation, and discrimination within seemingly accepting and supportive Christian communities. Walter recalled an instance where members of his congregation insinuated that he might be a danger to children as a gay man: "I was told I was being 'watched'... And I said, 'Are you equating me to

a pedophile?’ And they said, ‘Well, yes, aren’t most homosexuals pedophiles?’” In suggesting that Walter posed a special threat to the youth of the congregation, his extraordinary status within the community of believers is laid bare. Todd similarly recognized the limits of Christian acceptance when a young man he had been mentoring cut off contact after learning of his sexual preferences. He recalled, “he kind of rejected me... and I was kind of depressed... over that. ‘Cause, you know, I love this kid like a son.” Although he tried to assure the young man of his intentions, the relationship proved irreparable: “I said... ‘I’m the same guy [as] before... Nothing’s changed except your knowledge’... [but] he thinks I’m trying to make him this gay lover.” In both cases, perceptions of sexual threat prevent ascetic men from being recognized as, or feeling like, fully and ordinary members of the conservative Christian community.

For Brad, embracing a public gay identity had several social costs. First, it proved to be a powerful barrier to church employment. Although he refrained from homosexual acts, acknowledging his desires put him at a structural disadvantage within the Christian leadership community. He recalls: “When I graduated... [I] discovered that being an openly gay Evangelical youth pastor is *not* a great way to get hired in the Baptist church”. Desperate to find work, he was forced “back into the closet” for a period of time. It was only after he received his master’s degree in counselling and married his wife that Brad eventually found work with a specialized Christian ministry that engaged in spiritual outreach to same-sex attracted youth. Second, this public revelation cost him many close relationships developed with other conservative Christians during his time in the ex-gay ministry movement (a cost also identified in the work of Creek, 2011). Here, separation was occasioned by differing opinions on how to best resolve sexual-moral crisis and threat asceticism posed to the ex-gay worldview. Those who remained invested in the possibility of sexual reorientation were committed to the understanding of homoeroticism as pathology. By separating themselves from those who chose to pursue asceticism, ex-gay men were able to protect and insulate their own vision of the cosmos from the destabilizing force of alternative understandings. In all cases, the symbolic or literal separation of ascetic men from their peers is motivated by a protective instinct, although the perceived threat differs dramatically across various situations (sexual defilement versus spiritual perversion or the collapse of absolute truth).

Such stories of dismissal and denunciation suggest that the lives of ascetic men are characterized by a dynamic interplay of acceptance and intolerance and reveal the dangers of

sexual revelation. While peers and leaders professed to accept and support the individual, subtle and blatant forms of homonegativity and delegitimization revealed the marginal status of these men within Christian society. Although ascetics preferred to think of themselves as typical Christians, devoted to God and family, delegitimizing encounters with peers powerfully eschewed all notions of equality and reinforced the sense that gay Christian men are inherently dangerous and inferior (despite their sexual self-discipline). No matter how dedicated they might be to pursuing sexual purity and righteousness, a certain stigma adhered to these men. They are polluted by their desires – relegated to the fringes of the Christian community and marked as ‘different’ and ‘dangerous’ by those around them. As Walter explained: “I am, if you will, ‘tainted’ or ‘handicapped.’” Todd noted that such delegitimizing experiences are profoundly distressing: “I think that’s the hardest thing to bear ... [that] it changes someone’s whole perception of you.”

Through their own experiences and their observations of others, Brad, Walter, Todd, and Adam became highly attuned to the potential dangers of sexual revelation in Christian communities. While Walter and Brad were determined to confront this stigma, the threat of marginalization deterred Todd and Adam from being more open about their desires within conservative Christian settings. As Adam explained: “I don’t want them to get ideas and spread rumours... I’ve had concern that I might get less hugs if folks knew my orientation ... they might be more scared of me.” Todd similarly emphasized that the fear of social ostracization kept him from sharing his sexual identity with the entirety of his local Christian community: “I’ve never felt that stigma because I’m not out... [but] that is a *nagging* question... what if they knew?... would [I] still be loved and trusted in the church... if everyone knew the rest of the story?” For these ascetic men, the fear of ostracization and discrimination persisted into the redressive phase. Here, sexual secrecy continued to serve a protective function, safeguarding the individual’s place within the Christian community. Together, these stories point to the difficult and precarious position of sexual ascetics within the Christian community, where reassuring experiences of acceptance and support intermingle with troubling instances of distrust, invalidation, intimidation, and discrimination. Although they are accepted into the fold of the church, ascetic men often remain marginal within its borders – pressed into silence by the fear of rejection or set apart as suspicious or inferior beings.

Ascetic men were also forced to renegotiate important relationships with family and friends as they embraced this mode of redress. Having come to terms with their homosexual desires and identities, ascetic men shared their experiences with family members and were relieved to find that parents, siblings, spouses, children, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and close friends were overwhelmingly accepting of their sexuality and supportive of their ascetic goals. For example, Adam recalled his family having been largely unfazed by his sexual revelation: “Given the fact that I was celibate, I didn’t have any of my family really condemn me for it.” Todd similarly noted that his sexual preferences had no negative impact on his relationship with his children and soon became a source of playful banter: “There was this one boy that my daughter liked and I... [started] teasing her to ask if he’s got a brother!” Despite strong fears of paternal rejection, Brad’s father also responded positively to his revelation: “[He] called me up... and says, ‘You know, I’m not good at explaining things or talking about feelings. There’s a lot of stuff... I don’t understand, but... you will always be my son and I will always love you.’” In the familial context, ascetic men were overwhelmingly met with shows of acceptance and support.

Interestingly, the only point of contention in familial settings arose when particular relatives suggested that ascetic men would be better off if they embraced their desires and lived as openly gay men. For example, Adam noted, “The liberals in my family... [would say] ‘Why don’t you just go along and get yourself some companionship... enjoy that part of life?’” Seth similarly noted, “[Those] who were more gay affirming said... I would only have true happiness if I pursued that lifestyle [a gay relationship].” In such instances, loved ones expressed their desire to see the men live happy, satisfying lives. Yet, these statements highlight the disjuncture between the observer’s vision of reality and the world of ascetic men and evidence the failure of certain relatives to appreciate participants’ strong spiritual-moral aversion to homosexual acts. Such statements powerfully invalidate the ascetic lifestyle and worldview, suggesting that same-sex attracted men cannot live true, satisfying lives without engaging in homoerotic relationships. Here, family members engage in forms of liberal delegitimization that are no less distressing to ascetic men than those of their homonegative Christian peers.

In sum, it is evident that ascetic men were able to locate various sources of encouragement and acceptance within church and family. Christian peers, religious leaders, family members, and close friends affirmed that ascetic men were valuable members of familial and spiritual groups and the fear of outright social rejection began to dissipate. As Brad

explained, “The fear that if people knew about me I was going to be thrown out started to reside.” Yet, while heterosexual peers, leaders, and family members were capable of offering support and encouragement, such individuals were largely incapable of understanding ascetic men’s experiences. As Seth noted, “They don’t really *get it*.” Seeking to connect with others who shared their experiences, a number of ascetic men sought out marginal communities where they could connect with other gay Christian men. Todd and Adam become involved with online support groups for Christians living with same-sex attraction and Walter developed connections with a handful of other celibate gay men of faith. In the wake of redress, Brad also joined an online ex-gay ministry support group as a means of secretly connecting with other same-sex attracted Christian men who had embraced their orientation and abandoned the prospect of sexual change. Here, he and other ascetic men created a hidden community of support at the margins of the ex-gay ministry movement, ‘refunctionalizing’ (Zumthor, 1990) these social spaces to meet their own needs for social connection and support.

In these peripheral communities, ascetic men were able to discuss their discontentment with the church, reflect on their unique sexuality, and garner support in the pursuit of ascetic aspirations from others who shared their experiences. Emboldened by a sense of camaraderie and privacy, they reflected on the experience of crisis and shared their deepest regrets, fears, and hurts without the fear of upsetting loved ones or inciting social panic. For example, Todd described how this online group provided him with a unique space for discussing the challenges, frustrations, and uncertainties of inter-orientation marriages with other gay married men: “[Sometimes] I say, ‘Are we fooling ourselves all these years so that we can be successfully married and just so we can continually have a lifetime of repressed sexual feelings?’” These safe spaces were particularly important for those who remained largely closeted in their local communities. As Adam noted, gathering with other gay Christians can be extremely risky for those who do not wish to publically reveal their identities: “I know one gay man that lives close by ... [but] he doesn’t want to associate with me... he doesn’t want anyone to decide that he may be gay... [that’s] an illustration of the context.”

These groups and forums also provided ascetic men with pragmatic guidance and emotional support in their pursuit of righteousness and sexual purity. Here, peers encouraged one another to remain diligent in the pursuit of goodness and godliness and offered practical suggestions for managing sexual desires. Here, a communal approach to redress emerged out of

the shared experiences of ascetic individuals. As Walter explained, “our main focus and our main support is... with each other and with staying in contact and direct communication with Jesus Christ every day.” In these peripheral communities, ascetic men were provided with a unique opportunity to experience unqualified belonging, shared identity, and mutual understanding. Surrounded by other same-sex attracted Christian men, they gained access to feelings of equality and normalcy that subtly eluded them in other social settings. Where ascetic men lack access to such spaces, a pervasive sense of alienation is evident. Reflecting on his lack of interaction with other gay Christian men since leaving the ex-gay ministry movement, Seth noted: “now that I’m not involved in anything, I again feel isolated and lonely – really lonely... for companionship.” These networks supplemented the support of Christian peers and family members, providing the men with a space where they could engage in acts of full disclosure that might prove dangerous in everyday life and experience a radical normalization of their being in the company of their peers. As Todd simply stated: “I don’t know what I would have done without it.”

In summary, ascetic men were forced to renegotiate their place within the social fabric as part of the redressive process. While Lalich and McLaren (2010) previously noted the ‘complex’ situation of celibate gay men within the church and the value of finding others with shared experiences, the preceding analysis provided new, detailed information on the social losses and forms of delegitimization experienced by ascetic men in Christian communities. It also highlighted the challenges of liberal invalidation faced by such men in their encounters with affirming peers and loved ones. For the most part, long-harboured fears of social rejection and ostracization were unrealized in the wake of sexual revelation. Ascetic men were largely embraced and supported by Christian peers and loved ones alike. Yet, glaring instances of rejection, suspicion, discrimination, and delegitimization highlight important nodes of resistance within the social sphere. They reveal the extent to which certain individuals denied ascetic men’s claims to ordinariness, goodness, and equality and continue to construct them as belonging to a particular class of being defined by their deviant sexual preferences. Fortunately, the availability of marginal communities helped to ease this social tension and quell feelings of isolation by providing ascetics with a group of peers who validated their claims to moral and spiritual equality. By combining such marginal spaces with the support of family and church, ascetic men were able to maintain valued connections while developing safe spaces of free expression, critical contemplation, and unmitigated acceptance.

A whole new world: The social lives of gay men. When survivors decided to pursue a life of authentic sexual self-expression, they were frequently met with shows of social acceptance and support. Parents, siblings, and extended family members often reacted positively to survivors' new sexual identities and romantic relationships. Paul recalled how his mother was extremely supportive of his sexual burgeoning sexual identity, noting: "When I came out finally gay and told her I'm going to stop the ex-gay thing, she said, 'Well, it's about time.'" When Mason came out to his adult children, they too were happy to see him embracing his sexual preferences: "[My daughter said], 'You're the best dad in the world. You don't need to live a lie.'" Matt and Ned noted that their parents were similarly supportive of their decision to renounce sexual change efforts and embrace life as openly gay men. Matt recalled: "I said, 'You know, I tried Exodus... [But] I'm dating this guy,' and, she's [his mom] like, 'I know'... and we sort of reconciled... she was really supportive of my relationship... she came around."

Although many of family members had previously expressed their disapproval of homosexual relationships, their attitudes gradually shifted as they observed the suffering and distress survivors endured throughout their attempts to alter or suppress their desires. Ned, for example, explained how his mother's understanding of homosexuality and the possibilities available to gay men changed after watching her son struggle fruitlessly with sexual reorientation efforts: "[I shared] my experience with the ex-gay group... how I felt that it... had harmed me... I think she treasured that I did my best and was happy that I was moving on with my life." Paul similarly noted that his family had grown concerned about his wellbeing throughout the crisis period and were relieved to learn that he had decided to embrace his desires: "I was... becoming so depressed that they were just *grateful* to have me alive and whole - even if I were gay." As they came to appreciate the immense pain associated with sexual secrecy and suppression, these relatives grew supportive of sexual emancipation. As they observed the psychological, social, and emotional benefits of this approach, family members were further convinced of the benefits of sexual self-acceptance. As Paul noted, "They [his siblings and parents] have met friends ... and seen how my life has really opened up since I've come out."

Yet, not all familial encounters were characterized by positive experiences of acceptance and affirmation. Three survivors – Josiah, Mason, and Mitch – noted that certain relatives reaffirmed their disapproval of gay relationships and behaviours upon learning of survivors' intentions to embrace their desires. Although Josiah was convinced that he was "not a sinner by

virtue of being a gay man”, his mother and stepfather disagreed and expressed their strong distaste for his newfound sexual and romantic life: “I couldn’t talk to my parents... without homosexuality coming up. So, I just sort of disengaged, except on birthdays or major holidays.” After several years of distance and infrequent contact, Josiah and his mother reconnected after he became engaged to his male partner (the wedding was later called off). He learned that she had been engaged in research and reflective thought over the course of the preceding years and had come to a more tolerant view of homosexuality: “unbeknownst to me, [she had been] talking to folks and doing her own thinking.” Although they disagreed on issues of Christian sexual ethics, she expressed her desire to be involved in Josiah’s life and her willingness to support his marital union. Here, a mutual willingness to respect alternative theological interpretations and sexual ethics allowed Josiah and his mother to rebuild their relationship and participate in each other’s lives without agreeing on the moral status of homosexuality. He noted:

To this day... [I] don’t know if she... thinks that I’m a sinner for wanting to be in a gay relationship... but her language has shifted. She used to say... ‘The Bible *says*.’ Now she will say, ‘I *understand* the Bible to say,’ which is a huge difference.

Although this arrangement falls short of identity affirmation, Josiah is largely content with the situation and proud of the shift his mother has undertaken. Mason similarly noted that his brother has come to tolerate his sexuality despite a strong personal aversion to homosexuality: “He... accepts that I *am* [gay]. I just think he doesn’t *like* it.” Mitch’s parents and siblings exhibited a similar pattern of homosexual tolerance, maintaining a relationship with their son and brother while refusing to recognize his sexuality as good, right, or normal: “they tolerated it, but they never really accepted it... right up to the day he [his dad] died ... I think he had it in the back of his mind that somehow this was all a phase.” Here, family members evidence a desire to sustain their relationships with survivors in the face of radically different opinions on the moral status of homosexuality. However, not all family members were interested in maintaining their relationship with survivors in the wake of redress. Josiah noted that his stepfather was unwilling to associate with a sexually active gay man and the two subsequently severed their relationship.

Sexual emancipation thus resulted in a variety of familial outcomes that ranged from affirmation and support to rejection and abandonment. Interestingly, the fear of familial alienation – so pervasive throughout the crisis and neophyte stage – only comes to fruition in the case of one survivor (Josiah). In the vast majority of cases, survivors’ struggles and

experiences had transformed how close relatives understood the relationship between spirituality, sexuality, and morality and shifted their attitudes toward homoeroticism. Not only participants but also entire families were thus transformed by sexual-moral crisis. Although many relatives expressed a clear preference for sexual reorientation or repression in the neophyte stage, family unity and the wellbeing of the individual ultimately took precedence over religious codes and secular norms. Although the circumstances varied, survivors generally remained embedded within the family unit. Even in cases of mere tolerance or partial acceptance, where affirmation of one's sexuality was not forthcoming, family members evidenced their willingness to reinvent their values, worldview, and self in an attempt to accommodate gay loved ones. Such creative accommodation is a powerful affirmation of love. It entails nothing short of the reordering of the cosmos to maintain a valued connection to gay survivors. In short, conservative Christian sexual ethics did not have a uniform, negative impact on family unity. Where valued relationships were at stake, family members evidenced a willingness to variously abandon, eschew, transform, or transcend Christian sexual ethics in support of loved ones. As Matt noted: "We all evolved." Such familial responses support Foucault's (1976/1990) argument that power is not uniform in its effects and draw our attention to the mediating influence of love and connection within force networks and the omnipresence of resistance in human politics.

Survivors' experiences in conservative Christian settings were decidedly less varied. The decision to embrace gay identities and relationships had a uniformly devastating impact on the men's relationships with conservative Christian peers. The institutional de-affiliation described above severed a wealth of previous of Christian friendships. As Ned noted, "we kind of... just let the friendships end." Although this loss of faith-based relationships was expected, some survivors noted that it was an emotionally difficult process nonetheless. Mason recalled, "Even the friend I used to hang around with, play racquetball, that kind of stuff - all of a sudden, that's just gone... It was hard, because I enjoyed... talking and visiting with this guy." Matt similarly noted that the loss of close relationships with other Christians formed during his time in the ex-gay ministry movement was a challenging experience: "The people in the groups don't want to associate with the people outside, 'in the lifestyle'... there's that shunning aspect to it that's all too common with religion... that's the sad part of it." Renouncing conservative Christian affiliations and embracing an openly gay life invariably shattered interpersonal relationships grounded in a shared religious identity. As Ned noted, such friendships are "based on being

conservative Christian... [and] since I was questioning the Christian doctrine... we didn't really didn't have a friendship anymore." Paul similarly recalled: "As soon as I said... 'I'm gay and that's who I am'... The church relationships I had... *all* dissolved... I lost... every significant Christian friend... some of whom I knew for years and thought of as... brothers and sisters." Here, the desire to protect conservative Christian ideology from the destabilizing threat of affirming influences necessitated a purging of survivors from homonegative communities.

Yet, while survivors endured a host of social challenges in the wake of redress, they also developed new relationships with gay peers and allies. For Paul, Matt, and Josiah, the thought of connecting with other gay men had initially proven daunting. In addition to being largely unfamiliar with the social aspects of homoeroticism, these men had been exposed to a host of negative gay images throughout their early developmental years and the crisis period (gay men as hyper-sexualized, perpetually unsatisfied, and unhealthy in mind, body, and soul). The idea of integrating into the gay community was, therefore, an unnerving prospect riddled with psychological and emotional challenges. As Paul explained, "I would look for the worst things, and as soon as I saw it I was just like, 'See, this is what I was told!'" After having long harboured negative images of gay life, survivors understandably struggled to meld into local communities. Here, the remnants of a dark and narrow vision of gay life complicated survivors' efforts to connect with their gay peers. As Matt noted, "I saw it as this really narrow way to live and I didn't want to be part of it." Paul similarly explained that it took him a number of years to "trust the gay world".

For these anxious individuals, the media provided a safe and comfortable introduction to the gay sociality and community. Here, survivors were able to explore representations gay lives and relationships in a safe and socially unthreatening manner. As Paul noted: "Various movies were really helpful... [or] just, a gay love story... or poetry by a gay poet... [That] was really helpful to me... [it] kind of broaden my understanding." Josiah also explained how media representations provided him with a safe introduction to various aspects of homosexual friendships and intimate relationships: "Watching 'Queer as Folk' ... you have no idea... how helpful it was... it tackled all sorts of shit!" These media representations both reduced survivors' social anxiety and helped them shed stereotyped views and appreciate the beauty and diversity of gay lives. As Josiah explained: "I'd have tears in my eyes... because there were just moments

that spoke so deeply to something that I'd believed before [homosexuality is dark and sinful] that I didn't have to believe now."

Despite various reports of anxiety, all survivors eventually reached out to gay peers and allies and carved out a comfortable niche for themselves within local gay communities. In all cases, this new social reality took on different contours. For example, Mason had been eager to find a means of connecting with other gay men outside of the bar scene: "[I wanted] other things to do besides just go drink and meet people for sex." In time, he located various groups and communities that aligned with his own values and interests: "I found that there's much more in the community... besides just going to the bar... I joined a gay softball league, and I joined a gay bowling league." Having become interested in sexual politics, Paul chose to become involved in the local gay rights movement. As survivors embedded themselves in affirming spaces that fit well with their life projects, they experienced a profound sense of belonging and connection. As Mason recalls, "I just...stepped in that, and I had a wonderful experience ... I changed my whole life." Gay peers and allies also helped survivors overcome residual feelings of shame and pathology and free themselves from stubborn gay stereotypes. Josiah recounted how gay friends and lovers helped him overcome internalized homonegativity by affirming his sexuality and encouraging him to let go of self-defeating attitudes and ideas: "I'd be crying and ... [my friends would say] you know, 'You're fine ... Stop thinking that heterosexuality is better ... *Stop doing that to yourself.*' And it as sort of like getting cold water in your face." Paul described how meeting a variety of LGBT persons with different backgrounds, beliefs, and lifestyles was a "therapeutic experience" that invalidated simplistic stereotypes of gay life and convinced him that gay life was not all "grim, sad, and ... sexualized". Ned similarly explained how connecting with a host of healthy and happy gay men allowed him to see that his life as a gay man could be anything he wanted: "that was helpful for me...learning that the stereotypes that the ex-gay ministries portrayed about gay people *weren't true*... [that] not all gay men are promiscuous, and... you can have faith." Matt echoed this sentiment, noting: "I [began to realize that] a lot of the things I thought went hand in hand with the gay lifestyle were just personal choices... [and] didn't have to be part of my experience." Such findings support Beckstead and Morrow's (2004) argument that same-sex attracted Christians in crisis can benefit from meeting healthy and happy gay men. Just as encounters with 'unwell, 'unsatisfied', and 'immoral' LGB persons early in the crisis phase had confirmed negative stereotypes and intensified individual aversion to

homosexuality in certain cases (see Chapter 3), meeting LGB men and women with enviable spiritual, moral, relational, emotional, and psychological lives helped to destabilize this negative characterization and reframe homosexuality as a viable life possibility.

Integrating into local gay communities and forming relationships with other LGBT persons therefore proved to be a complex process for survivors, who were forced to overcome a wealth of psychological and emotional hurdles in their efforts to connect with peers and allies. As Paul explained, “I had to overcome a lot of prejudice and suspicion and stereotypes of what I thought it was to be gay and what I thought a gay man was.” Although the notion that a gay man can be and do whatever he wants seems rather obvious, survivors described this realization as a new, liberating flash of insight. Matt, for example, noted that the recognition that there was no “gay template” - no singular “gay lifestyle” or “way to do it” - was a life altering experience. Yet, as survivors overcome feelings of shame and social anxiety, let go of stereotyped images of gay life, and formed bonds with other LGBT persons, they grew increasingly confident in their new sexual identities and were able to pursue relationships and social projects that reflected their unique preferences, values, and desires.

New relationships with peers and allies played an important role in helping survivors move forward as confident gay men. Yet, some survivors felt there were important aspects of their lives and experiences that LGBT persons without a conservative Christian background could not possibly understand. Like some of their ascetic peers, Paul, Ned, and Josiah sought out marginal communities where they could connect with other gay men who had come out of conservative Christian communities and ex-gay ministry experiences. As these men located other gay survivors in person and on the Internet, they developed a similar sense of camaraderie, mutual recognition, and shared identity as was described by ascetic men. As Paul noted, “We found a certain kinship because... we were [all] in this really weird in-between place. We definitely weren’t ex-gay, and we definitely were gay, but we had a different way of looking at it.” Ned similarly noted, “It’s a pretty... unique experience and it can be very lonely... [so] it’s reassuring to know that there’s people out there that... have done this [left the church to pursue gay life].” Josiah echoed this sentiment, noting that this marginal community provided him with unique space where he could celebrate his faith without criticism or disparagement from secular LGBT peers. He noted that, as a queer man of faith, he often encountered negative responses to his spiritual status within the gay community: “[They would say things] like... ‘don’t you know

that God hates us?... Those guys that wrote the Bible... they're queer haters. What the fuck are you doing there?" For survivors, the opportunity to meet with other gay Christian men provided a unique opportunity to express both the spiritual and sexual aspects of their being and have their identities and challenges recognized by others.

Within these marginal spaces, survivors were also able to safely reflect on their past experiences and ongoing challenges with others who understood their unique situation. As Paul noted, "We spent time processing it [their experiences of sexual-moral crisis]... we like to think of it as *unpacking*. We had to unpack our stories." Ned also described how helpful it was to be able to talk to other people who had been through similar experiences: "[We] pretty much kept each other sane." Like sexual ascetics, survivors thus pointed to the formation of a shared collective identity and the development of a sense of belonging, understanding, safety, and support as important benefits of these marginal communities.

Embracing gay identities and relationships thus entailed a dynamic array of social losses, gains, and transformations in the lives of survivors. Despite having harboured a profound fear of rejection throughout the neophyte stage, survivors found that experiences of familial alienation were exceedingly rare. Relatives generally came to accept that homoerotic desires were a permanent and immutable feature of survivors' existence and variously affirmed or tolerated their new gay identities and relationships. Conversely, this approach to redress uniformly devastated survivors' relationships with conservative Christian peers. Throughout the narratives, individual instances of acceptance or rejection were related to the strength the interpersonal bond and the degree of commitment to Christian ethics. While even the most devout mothers, fathers, and siblings tended to favour familial connection over Christian ethics, more distant relatives, peers, and friends were much more willing to abandon these relationships in support of ethical principles. Although such social losses were often disheartening, survivors affirmed that there was no value in maintaining a relationship with individuals who could not support their sexual identities and relationships or (at the very least) respect their life choices. As Mason noted, "If they're uncomfortable with me, then it serves no purpose to continue being friends with them... I am not going to change their mind and I'm not going to allow them to hurt me." Survivors limited the sense of grief associated with particular social losses by constructing these relationships as destructive and unhealthy. Such losses were also largely offset by the creation of new, satisfying and affirming relationships with gay peers, allies, and fellow survivors.

In choosing to sacrifice their place within the Christian community in pursuit of sexual authenticity, survivors were thus forced to undergo a profound and deeply challenging process of social reconstruction. Separated from conservative Christian communities that had long served as the crux of their social existence, survivors found themselves cast adrift. As Ned recalled, “I was just kind of out there.” Although rebuilding a sense of community and bonds of support proved to be a daunting process, survivors ultimately succeeded in forming new, satisfying connections with gay peers and allies that restored their sense of belonging and powerfully affirmed their value as gay men. They cleansed their social networks, freeing themselves from homonegative relationships and communities and developing supportive ties to affirming individual. In doing so, survivors insulated themselves from sexual stigma and created a safe and supportive community within which to rebuild their social existence.

Healing relationships: The social lives of ex-gay men. After redress, ex-gay men (Theo, Rodney, Jed, Charles, and Jordan) were largely open about their past sexual struggle. They were proud of their success in having overcome homosexuality and shared their stories with others with others freely and openly. As Charles noted, “I started telling everyone of what happened and how I changed because I felt *proud* of it – felt like I was able to beat this.” Like ascetic men, ex-gay individuals found that family members, friends, and Christian peers generally responded positively to such revelations and offered their support in helping the men pursue the path of righteousness. As Jordan noted, “I may feel a little awkward... [but] I’ve actually been very pleasantly surprised at their response.” Whereas ascetic men recounted particular experiences and observations of alienation, delegitimization, and suspicion that ran counter to the general Christian ethic of support and acceptance, ex-gay men reported no such negative social consequences within the church context.

Moreover, four of the men noted that particular familial relationships had improved in the wake of redress. Jed, Jordan, Rodney, and Charles noted that their connection with their parents had been greatly improved as they came together in pursuit of healing and heterosexual restoration. Charles, for example, described how the redressive process brought him closer to his parents as they worked to overcome past challenges: “I’ve done healing work with my family of origin, with my parents... I’ve resolved those conflicts and I’ve dealt with those issues.” Jed similarly noted how his parents’ support throughout redress brought him into deeper relationship with his mother and father: “[We started] talking about real things, deep things... my dad

became much more supportive of me and focused on me and attentive to me... [our relationship has] grown a lot.” Jordan similarly noted that the time he spent with his parents throughout redress greatly improved his relationship with his father: “I got to really develop a relationship with my Dad and connect... that relationship has been healed and restored.” While the men attributed this renewed connection to relationship work, it is reasonable to assume that the very decision to renounce homosexuality played an important role in repairing these bonds reducing moral conflict within the family. Whereas revelations of same-sex attraction had occasioned immense familial distress for Rodney, Jordan, and Jed, the decision to embrace heterosexuality enabled these parents to come alongside their sons and support them in the pursuit of a projects that aligned well with their own moral priorities.

Yet, despite being overwhelmingly accepted and supported by family and close peers, ex-gay men faced experiences of delegitimization within the wider social realm. Those who spoke openly about their experiences described how personal claims to have overcome homosexuality were often met with hostility and incredulity by secular liberals and conservative Christians alike. Theo described having been mocked and ridiculed by those who believe his sexual identity is a ruse: “I’ve been taunted... made fun of on the Internet. I’ve had people harass me... I’ve had threats against me... a lot of nasty stuff.” Rodney described similar experiences of invalidation within the Christian community: “I have gone toe to toe with... [people who say] you know, ‘You can’t change that!’” Although ex-gay men considered themselves heterosexual men who – as a result of particular life events – happened to live with a history of homosexual behaviour and/or ongoing homoerotic desire, they confronted individuals in both secular and Christian society who vehemently denied their constructions of self and sexuality. Although such delegitimizing experiences typically occurred outside participants’ core familial and social networks, they nonetheless proved distressing and frustrating. As Jed explained, “There’s much opposition and little support to men and women who seek sexual purity or wholeness.” In Chapter 14, I describe how those who became spokespersons for the ex-gay ministry movement and the lifestyle and identity it promotes faced intense delegitimization in the public realm

Ex-gay men neutralized such acts of delegitimization and invalidation by framing their critics as ignorant or psychologically defensive. Rodney attributed this hostility and disbelief to the invisibility of ex-gay men in everyday life and the tendency for the public to assume that homosexuality is the immutable and undeniable truth of all persons who experience same-sex

attraction. He believed that if people could come to know ex-gay men, they would see that they were living authentic and satisfying lives: “I think that they just really need to look at who we are as people... Look at our lives – the way that we live, the stories that we tell, the truth that we now live in.” Jordan similarly attributed this delegitimization to ignorance and inexperience: “They really don’t know the truth... they haven’t experienced it.” Theo echoed this sentiment, noting that such criticism arises from a lack of understanding about how ex-gay men live and understand self and world: “Most people – when I have an opportunity to actually sit, talk, and explain things to them... come away saying, ‘Well, you know what, I really never thought of it that way!’... they accept.” Theo also suggested that such hostile reactions might arise from detractors’ own sexual insecurities: “They don’t know me. They only say that because they have wounds that are unresolved.”

Ex-gay men deeply resented these invalidating acts, which they considered both fickle and unreasonable. Jed observed that such accusations of fraudulence and inauthenticity are offensive and unverifiable and would likely not be levelled against those struggling with other temptations: “How do you tell when a person is in denial or lying - whether they’re recovering from alcohol or their eating disorder, their greed, their gambling?” He explained that debates about sexual ‘truth’ are necessarily perspective-dependent and largely unproductive: “I can say to an individual that’s gay identified, ‘You’re in denial about your *heterosexuality*... That is *truly* who you are’... it’s like a ‘touché’ thing.” Jordan similarly pointed out that – from his perspective – openly gay men are “deceiving themselves” into accepting a false homosexual identity. Here, the men speak to the impossibility of ever fully authenticating the experience of another – an issue that has long been an object of human reflection and frustration⁵⁸.

Thus, while heterosexual restoration proved to be a highly agreeable approach to redress in the context of church and family, the lives and identities of ex-gay men were highly contested within the public sphere. Ex-gay men came into conflict with other individuals and groups who disagreed with their interpretations of self and sexuality and sought to have their own versions of truth, normalcy, health, and goodness universally endorsed. Like ascetics, they continued to be marked by homoeroticism in the public realm and struggled against delegitimizing and distressing constructions of their being. Yet, as was the case with ascetics and survivors, ex-gay men also found comfort in marginal spaces, becoming active in the ex-gay movement and connecting with those who shared their experiences (see Chapter 14).

Rite of passage or permanent liminality? The social complexities of redress. Redress required participants to renegotiate their place in the social fabric. The ways of thinking, feeling, and being they embraced in this period aligned them with particular factions of the socio-political landscape and brought them into conflict with others. Experiences of schism, division, and separation were evident as survivors severed their ties to homonegative individuals and institutions and ascetic and ex-gay men abandoned all connections with the gay community in pursuit of celibacy or heterosexuality. Yet, experiences of social fusion, stability, and integration were also common throughout the redressive period. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the strength of familial bonds overcame the divisive force of homonegativity and religious dogma, protecting participants from the threat of social alienation and solidified their position in the group. Contrary to the insinuations of past researchers, those who made their homosexual desires or identities public in the current project were not invariably ‘cast off’, ‘rejected’, ‘humiliated’, or ‘victimized’ by conservative Christian communities, congregations, peers, or loved ones (see, for example, O’Brien, 2004; Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Many remained active within the church and embedded in Christian support networks. Participants also developed new relationships through redress, melding into supportive communities and connecting with others who shared their ways of thinking, feeling, and being.

Yet, not all of the social changes that appeared in the redressive phase are captured well by such images of fission or fusion. Although they continued to participate in conservative Christian communities, ascetic and ex-gay men described experiences of delegitimization and discrimination in the church that clearly set them apart from their peers. These findings support previous observations of the inferior status accorded celibate and ex-gay men within Christian communities relative to heterosexual peers (Creek, 2011; Moon, 2014). Josiah and Mason (both survivors) similarly described relationships with non-affirming relatives that were characterized by a certain degree of distance, dis-ease, and discomfort. These stories point to ambivalent social experiences that occupy a gray area between outright rejection and unmitigated acceptance. They are representative of a form of marginal or partial inclusion, whereby participants are neither ousted nor recognized as moral equals.

The frequent turn to marginal spaces, where participants could encounter those ‘like them’, similarly highlights the men’s precarious position ‘betwixt and between’ different worlds (Turner, 1967). Ascetics, ex-gay men, and gay survivors are all marked by their struggle – they

do not live in the same world as those who have not experienced sexual-moral crisis, be they ‘gay’ or ‘straight’. Moreover, their sense of self and belonging is under constant attack from those who question their self-control, sexual authenticity, or political allegiance and continuously demarcate them as ‘other’ within both secular and Christian environments. In many ways, participants’ lives reflect what Turner (1974) referred to as ‘permanent liminality.’ Although ascetic and ex-gay men continued to participate in conservative Christian communities and survivors remained embedded within the family, the men often failed to attain the same status as those without a history of homoeroticism – at least in the eyes of certain group members. Similarly, while survivors became active in local gay communities, those who continued to affirm Christian identities were often viewed sceptically as turncoats and co-conspirators in the oppression of LGBT persons. In these spaces, participants were not – and perhaps will never be – acknowledged as equal to their peers.

The phenomenon of marginal inclusion highlights the conflicting impulses experienced by individuals and groups confronted by sexual ascetics, ex-gay men, and survivors with a history of conservative Christian involvement. While family networks, secular gay communities, and conservative Church groups all wished to retain valued members and embrace new potential recruits, they struggled to fully embrace those whose past or present ways of thinking, feeling, and being differed greatly from their own norms, understandings, and ideals. Consequently, participants from all three groups were often obliged to occupy a liminal position within ‘welcoming’ communities. Such marginal inclusion represents a compromise between the extremes of fission and fusion that allows groups to spare participants the violence of outright rejection without fully acknowledging their constructions of self and world. This paradox of inclusion and exclusion provided families, churches, and secular communities with a means of integrating those who have been polluted (by homoeroticism or conservative Christianity, depending on the perspective) into the group while simultaneously marking them as different and potentially dangerous. It is a strategy of accommodation, whereby the other is integrated without being fully recognized as ‘one of us’. As Ravaud and Stiker (2006) reported, such complex social arrangements reflect the tension between normalization and cohesion characteristic of all human groups. They are the result of the simultaneous desire to reduce deviance and sustain social unity. In such cases, “inclusion, like insertion... may merely be synonymous with simple presence, simple admission, simple tolerance” (Ravaud & Stiker, 2006, p. 925). Throughout the

narratives, participants pointed to various instances where a sense of full inclusion suddenly collapsed and the individual was made aware of the extent to which they were being tolerated as opposed to accepted and recognized as equals. Such experiences were particularly common in moments of perceived social danger or unrest. They powerfully illuminated the peripheral status of Christian survivors, ex-gay men, and sexual ascetics within Conservative Christian and secular LGB communities and revealed the ‘uneasy alliances’ (Creek, 2011) forged in the redressive process.

Life, Transformed: Reflections on the Social, Spiritual, and Sexual Correlates of Redress

“there is more to it than ‘are you going to be straight or are you going to be gay?’ ... that’s far too simplistic.” – Seth

As the men embraced sexual recovery, gay emancipation, or asceticism, they experienced a systemic transformation of self and world that extended well beyond sexual identities, desires, and behaviours. Nowhere was the extent of this social, sexual, spiritual, and moral transformation more evident than in the case of gay survivors. While ascetics and ex-gay men continued to endorse the basic sexual ethics of conservative Christianity, working to integrate themselves within this ethical structure by symbolically extending the margins of goodness and normalcy, survivors rejected this framework in favour of an alternative, affirming worldview. This transgressive approach not only wrought a radical reconfiguration of reality, but also brought survivors into direct conflict with the Christian moral order and necessitated a break with the spiritual communities survivors had inhabited throughout much of their lives. By exploring this phenomenon within the context of existing social and political networks, the current analysis also reveals the extent to which individual experiences of crisis and redress transformed entire families and communities. It highlights how various groups and individuals worked to maintain cohesion and connection in the face of sexual diversity by revising their own ways of thinking, being, or doing and also reveals the limits of such social adaptation and the need for fission and separation in particular instances. In the following chapter, I explore the benefits common to these three modes of redress and elucidate the experience of empowerment and healing they wrought in the lives of participants.

⁵⁶ Like their ascetic peers, ex-gay men engaged in techniques of divine appeal, religious intensification, cognitive reframing, avoidance and distraction, and social accountability and support to control their homosexual temptations. Similarities across these groups are undoubtedly attributable to shared experiences with ex-gay ministry and non-specialized conservative Christian supports, where leaders and peers frequently endorsed such techniques.

⁵⁷ Adam and Todd carefully guarded information about their sexual selves, only revealing their struggle with homosexuality to a few, carefully selected, individuals within the congregation, while Brad and Walter were completely open about their sexual past and their ongoing homosexual attractions within the Christian community. Seth occupied a midpoint between these extremes, sharing his sexual struggle with many close Christian friends but choosing not to disclose this information to the congregation at large.

⁵⁸ Participants reflections on the challenge of 'other minds' is reminiscent of a Taoist dialogue described by Okakura (1906/2011, p. 48):

This dialogue recalls that of Soshi (Chuangste), the Taoist. One day Soshi was walking on the bank of a river with a friend. 'How delightful the fishes are enjoying themselves in the water!' exclaimed Soshi. His friend spoke to him thus: 'You are not a fish; how do you know that the fishes are enjoying themselves?' 'You are not myself,' returned Soshi, 'how do you know that I do not know that the fishes are enjoying themselves.'

Chapter 12 ~ New Me, New World: Redress as Growth, Healing, and Sacrifice

“I was able to feel a lot better about myself because I felt whole.” – Charles

As the preceding chapters illustrate, redress entailed a process of systemic transformation that invariably entailed certain challenges and sacrifices. Yet, despite these difficulties, participants affirmed that their lives had been greatly improved as a result of embracing asceticism, heterosexuality, or gay emancipation. In fact, the benefits that accrued to participants evidenced remarkable similarity across these various strategies. In this chapter, I explore how each mode of redress succeeded in restoring hope and meaning to life; alleviating negative psycho-emotional states; and imparting a sense of integrity, goodness, and normalcy to the self. Together, these positive changes engendered experiences of healing and empowerment that left the men feeling more confident about their lives and selves.

Three Paths, One Destination: Common Experiences of Positive Growth

“It was... like a weight off my shoulders.” – Mason

Although asceticism, gay emancipation, and heterosexual restoration involved radically different ways of thinking, feeling, and being, their healing properties were largely shared. These various approaches accomplished similar results and wrought comparable experiences of positive growth to the lives of participants. Below, I describe five redressive benefits common to ascetics, ex-gay men, and gay survivors and outline how they improved the lives of participants.

I understand: Making sense of suffering and restoring hope for the future. In the face of crisis, human beings seek to make sense of suffering, loss, and difference. Troubled by confusion and ambiguity, they try to account for what has transpired and render their lives intelligible and meaningful. By embracing various programs of truth in the redressive phase, participants were able to impart a sense of coherence to their lives by bringing particular narratives, discourses and metaphors to bear on their experiences. Using these aesthetic tools, they were able to emplot⁵⁹ (Good, 1994; Mattingly, 1998; Ricoeur, 1990/1992) their life stories in a way that made sense of their suffering and rendered their experiences comprehensible to others. The causal models and descriptive motifs they appropriated throughout the redressive phase transformed participants’ narratives, reaching backward and forward in biographic time to account for the emergence of crisis and provide hope for the future.

Each redressive approach entailed a distinct origin story that explained the emergence of pain and suffering within the context of individual lives. Ex-gay men attributed their suffering to

destructive childhood experiences that disrupted and confused their sexual development, drawing on psychiatric motifs of social pathogens and interpersonal victimization. For example, Charles attributed his struggle with homosexuality to a lack of masculine bonding and socialization: “All the same-sex attraction feeling came because I didn’t feel like I was a man – I didn’t feel close to my father and get that, masculinity.” Jordan similarly credited the origin of his suffering to a lack of masculine connection in his youth: “It’s quite understandable – I always wanted an older brother or a best friend and never had that.” Those who had experienced childhood sexual abuse (Charles, Jed, and Theo) also wove stories of victimization into the origin stories. Jed, for example, described how having been sexually abused by a male peer had contributed to his gender confusion and eventual development of homoerotic desire: “That put a chasm between me and boys... I felt more estranged from them.” These men used the causal theories and prototypical narratives of the ex-gay ministry movement to re-read the past in terms of sexual corruption, interpersonal harm, and developmental aberration. In doing so, they positioned themselves as innocent victims of social violence and attribute the origin of suffering to others.

The narratives of gay survivors evidenced a very different understanding of the origin of personal suffering grounded themes of sexual essentialism and oppression. Here, the emergence of homosexual desire was construed as a natural unfolding of an innate sexual essence. While this development was not inherently problematic, the pervasive force of stigma, homonegativity, and heteronormativity was said to have negatively coloured survivors’ perceptions of themselves and their desires and wrought immense personal suffering. Survivors recounted early experiences that sensitized them to the fact that difference was socially dangerous and that homosexuality was a particularly despicable form of personal deviance. In doing so, they attributed their suffering to the sociocultural context and the homonegative features of their upbringing. Survivors described themselves as having been conditioned to associate their desires with violence, alienation, and sin from a young age. Moreover, they pointed to a lack of resources that might have mitigated the stress associated with homoeroticism in their youth, including positive gay role models, information on sexual diversity, and access to affirming supports and narratives. This emplotment strategy blended organic metaphors of imminent causality with those of political subjugation, deception, and self-loathing. Here, the origin of suffering was located in a world hostile toward sexual diversity and personal crisis was explained by the vilification and

defamation of a beautiful, natural, and inevitable aspect of the self by cruel and oppressive human forces.

While ex-gay men and survivors presented a confident and coherent portrait of the past, ascetics generally expressed uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the origin of their desires.⁶⁰ They played with discourses of sexual corruption and essentialism simultaneously, speculating about the potential significance of particular experiences without committing to any particular causal theory. For example, Adam toyed with the idea that his father might be responsible for his homosexual urges, noting: “He was kind of a harsh father... that’s a common thread for most gay men... that does fit... [the] difficult father syndrome.” Moments later, he dismissed this ideology, noting that none of his siblings turned out gay. Later, he likened the origin of homoeroticism to that of Down syndrome, speculating about a possible biological explanation: “it must be a birth defect ... human kind has all sorts of birth defects ... sometimes it’s because of drugs or alcohol... [but] sometimes we have no idea why a birth defect occurred. Walter similarly juggled motifs of pathology and destiny. In one moment, he asserted that his mother undoubtedly shaped his sexual development, noting, “If you think about the things that my mother did... how she thought, how she acted, how she behaved... how would that groom an individual to be heterosexual?” Moments later, he suggested that his desires might be attributable to an innate sexual essence: “it is possible to be born with all the propensities that could shape your life into being pretty much gay... [so] I would say that yeah, I was born gay.”

Ascetic stories were tales of mystery and uncertainty. These men had resigned themselves to ambiguity regarding the origin of their desires. As Todd noted, “I don’t know. There’s too many questions I’ve never had answers to.” This narrative subjunctivity is equally present when ascetics speak about the future (see below). Yet, although past and present remained largely shrouded in mystery, this very ambiguity was used to frame the experience of suffering as a spiritual test. For these men, sexual-moral crisis (and life itself) was a sacred trial – a test of their devotion to virtue, righteousness, and the divine. As this trial was constructed as part of God’s plan for their lives, ascetic men resigned themselves to the fact that they might never understand why they have been chosen to bear this burden. As Todd affirmed, “God works in mysterious ways.” For these men, sexual-moral crisis was not a psychological or biological phenomenon, but a supernatural one. Consequently, attempting to understand this experience or predict what might happen in the future was construed as fruitless – such information was not

considered the purview of man. Yet, by constructing their struggle as part of ‘God’s plan,’ ascetics nonetheless imparted form and structure to their lives by linking their struggle to the will of the divine.

Although ascetic men ultimately attributed their struggle to the mysterious will of God, they blamed human prejudice for much of the pain they endured throughout the crisis period. Like gay survivors, they affirmed that Christian and secular homonegativity had exacerbated their pain and self-hatred and recounted jarring experiences of maltreatment throughout their lives. As Walter simply noted: “I was bullied.” These men also spoke to the absence of positive role models or discussions of sexual diversity in their upbringing and how this vacuum had contributed to their confusion and despair. As Todd affirmed, “When I was a kid, nobody talked about it.” Thus, while homoeroticism and the suffering it wrought in the lives of ascetics was ultimately constructed as a spiritual trial, human homonegativity was framed as a social ill that had unnecessarily amplified personal pain and distress.

The development of new understandings of self, sexuality, and spirituality throughout the redressive period thus occasioned a reinterpretation of the past in light of new metaphors and explanatory models. In each of the three participant groups, the appropriation of a particular explanatory framework transformed personal narratives, bringing certain events and circumstances to the fore and obscuring others. Yet, despite marked differences in how they constructed the origin and nature of personal suffering, all three narrative templates succeeded in restoring meaning to a life of suffering. They transformed the ambiguity and confusion of crisis into reasonable and recognizable stories of human corruption, social oppression, or personal trial. In doing so, participants not only attained a satisfying sense of coherence, but also made their experiences accessible to others through the use of common narrative prototypes.⁶¹ As Csordas (2002) explained, this creative process, wherein “the anguished clash of bare life and raw existence emerges from muteness into articulation” (p. 11), allowed participants to cleanse their narratives of senseless suffering and connect their stories to recognizable tropes that can be appreciated and grasped by others.

Yet, this narrative reconfiguration did more than just make sense of personal suffering. The appropriation of new narrative templates and personal metaphors also improved participants’ experiences of the present by providing them with a clear life plan (Ricoeur, 1990/1992) – a coherent pattern “of and for” the world (Geertz, 1973) that not only attributed

meaning to the past but also opened up the hope of a brighter future. In Chapter 14, I describe how participants looked toward the future with remarkable optimism after redress. Whereas the crisis period was narratively defined by the absence of a story that could account for the past and project the individual into the future with hope and confidence (Crites, 1986; Frank, 1995), the appropriation of new images, metaphors, and discourses in redress allowed participants to impart meaning to the inchoateness of personal suffering and save the future from collapse and ruin. Although much has been written about the role of new interpretive schemas in the lives of ex-gay men (see Ponticelli, 1999; Robinson, 1998; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002), the preceding analysis suggests that these symbolic tools were central to all three modes of redress.

I am whole: Attaining peace and personal integrity. As Good (1994) explained, personal suffering – particularly where it involves the body – serves to undermine the individual’s sense of being “an undivided self” (p. 125). Throughout the crisis period, participants lived with a sense of inner fracture and disintegration – a state that early strategies of denial had failed to reconcile (see Chapter 3). In the redressive stage, they succeeded in bringing their sexual identities and behaviours (and, in some cases, desires) in line with their moral proclivities and religious beliefs and restored a sense of personal integrity to their lives. For survivors, this meant developing a new, affirming attitude toward homoeroticism that allowed them to embrace their true, homosexual nature. For ascetics, it entailed a shift in the moral status of homosexual urges and the creation of a vigilant program of sexual self-discipline. For ex-gay men, it meant embracing one’s true heterosexual identity and restricting sexual expression to those behaviours deemed good, right, and true (typically, heteroerotic marital sex).

In all cases, redress enabled participants to feel as though they were living authentically and honourably - that their lives were a reflection of truth, goodness, and righteousness. As Walter (ascetic) affirmed, “I live my life now based on *truth*.” For those who continued to endorse the conservative Christian worldview, the restoration of moral-spiritual-sexual integrity also quelled fears of divine condemnation and wrought a powerful sense of being loved by God. As Walter (ascetic) further noted, “I am at peace with God and I know what He wants of me... I’m devout and dedicated.” Seth (ascetic) similarly explained, “It opened my eyes just to [the fact] that God values... a homosexual just as much as a heterosexual. He doesn’t want you to live apart from him, no matter what orientation you are.”

In redress, participants' sexual, moral, and religious selves thus came into peaceful coexistence, eschewing feelings of internal conflict and contradiction. As Brad (ascetic) noted, "I found a way to fit them in together." Rodney (ex-gay) similarly affirmed, "I was able to reconcile the two." After years spent in a state of inner tension, conflict, and confusion, this newly acquired sense of integrity and wholeness was profoundly satisfying. Charles (ex-gay) noted that he finally felt like a "whole person" and Jed (ex-gay) explained that he felt "more real and authentic" after coming into his "whole self." The painful sense of inner discord finally receded and participants experienced a profound sense of personal harmony and unity. Where crisis narratives were ripe with images of war or battle, life after redress is associated with images of peace and tranquility. Theo (ex-gay) described himself as "living in the light" of truth and goodness after redress and Jordan (ex-gay) noted that, after years of "arduous battle", he had succeeded in finding "inner peace... in an unpeaceful world". Brad (ascetic) similarly noted, "I've been able to come to a peace and acceptance of who I am." Where they had previously suffered from feelings of fracture and contradiction – what psychologists refer to as 'egodystonia'⁶² – participants were now living in accord with their own visions of truth and righteousness and derived deep satisfaction from this sexual, spiritual, and moral integrity. Although the importance of integrating the spiritual and sexual selves has often been noted in the research literature (see, for example, Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Walton, 2006), such coherence has often been constructed as the sole purview of LGB Christians (Ganzevoort et al., 2011; O'Brien, 2004; Pitt, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010; Subhi & Gheelan, 2012; Walton, 2006). The current analysis suggests that a satisfying sense of sexual-moral integrity was achieved in all three redressive strategies via different techniques of moral adjustment, behavioural restraint, and identity prioritization. To speak of only one strategy as representing 'integration' is therefore to deny the powerful sense of coherence and unity described by men in all three groups.

I am good: Overcoming feelings of shame, guilt, and self-loathing. Redress also allowed participants to shed deeply painful feelings of shame, guilt, fear, and self-loathing. For years, these men had associated their desires – and thus themselves – with images of wickedness and monstrosity and lived in a perpetual state of remorse and indignity, ashamed of their homoerotic desires and behaviours and convinced that they were somehow to blame for their suffering. As Paul (survivor) recalled: "The overriding emotion ... through much of those years,

was shame... a deep sense... that there was something *fundamentally* wrong with me ... and that I am to blame for it.” By variously embracing ascetic, gay, or ex-gay life, participants succeeded in eschewing images of inherent monstrosity and evil, relieving themselves of the negative emotional states that accompanied such troubling self-constructions.

Participants were able to restore a sense of goodness and dignity to the self by altering their understanding of sexuality, spiritual, and morality and constructing a more forgiving and flattering personal image. This creative process allowed them to overcome crippling feelings of guilt, fear, and self-loathing and once again feel good about their lives and selves. For survivors, this meant embracing an affirming attitude toward homosexuality that precluded negative characterizations of the self grounded in prejudice and intolerance. As Mason noted, “Once I accepted I was gay... then I’m not ‘bad’ anymore ... I don’t have to beat myself up, like, ‘Oh, God... That’s evil!’ ... [you] *know* that you’re a good person and you’re not junk.” Here, survivors morally exonerated themselves of any wrongdoing by reconfiguring their understanding of homoeroticism and affirming the health and normalcy of their sexuality. Survivors shed all feelings of remorse over past homoerotic acts and experiences. They maintained that they had done nothing wrong and that those who had unjustly denigrated and vilified their sexuality must bear the burden of responsibility for their suffering.

In the case of ascetic and ex-gay men, feelings of guilt and shame were largely overcome through processes of exteriorization. These men constructed themselves as fundamentally good and righteous persons by attributing their homoerotic urges and sexual struggle to forces outside the self - childhood harm in the case of ex-gay participants and the mystery of God and nature in the stories of ascetics. By shifting the origin of same-sex attraction outside of the self and beyond their control, ascetic and ex-gay men eschewed exonerated themselves from any personal responsibility for homoerotic acts and drives. As Todd (ascetic) explained, “someone with same sex attraction doesn't just wake up some morning and says, ‘I think I’ll be gay’ ... It's not something you can turn on and off like hot and cold water faucets!” By placing these desires – and the immoral acts they occasioned in the past – outside of their control, participants were able to shed painful feelings of guilt and remorse. As Brad (ascetic) noted, “It’s a part of my life... [But] I don’t feel shame or have to hide it.” Adam (ascetic) similarly reported, “I used to pound myself over the head when I found some guy attractive. Now ... I don’t feel bad about it.”

In all cases, the self was thus framed as a passive victim of external forces beyond personal control – be it human oppression, parental wounding, peer abuses, or evil forces. This symbolic transference proved to be of great consequence to the wellbeing and self-concept of participants. As Csordas (2002) explained, such external attributions allow those living with a history of suffering and regrettable behaviour to affirm their “basic goodness and self-worth” and connect their struggle to “a larger arena” of spiritual, social, and psychological forces (p. 55). By embracing discourses of oppression, spiritual trial, or sexual corruption, participants not only made sense of their suffering, but also affirmed that they were innocent victims of forces and circumstances beyond their control. By cleansing the self of any wrongdoing, they were able to rebuild their self-concept in a more favourable light and restore a sense of dignity to their everyday lives. As Mitch (survivor) stated, “I feel better about myself [now]... I like myself inside.” Josiah (survivor) similarly noted, “I am happy with *me* – me as a person.” Rodney (ex-gay) echoed this sentiment, noting: “I like *who I am* [now] so much better than who I was.”

Emboldened by this newfound self-confidence, participants grew less fearful of social alienation and increasingly unconcerned with how others would react to their sexuality. Secure in their new understandings of self, world, and sexuality, their social anxiety greatly diminished (without disappearing entirely in many cases). As Paul (survivor) noted, “I know who I am and I’m not going to be shaken by, you know, with the fear, because I just know, ‘I’m okay.’” Mason (survivor) similarly explained, “I don’t have to sneak around, I don’t have to feel ashamed... I don’t care ... they [church leaders and other homonegative individuals] cannot hurt me.” This ability to be more honest about one’s sexuality proved deeply meaningful to participants and vastly improved their quality of life. As Todd (ascetic) explained: “There was something about being closeted that just eats you up inside.” Theo (ex-gay) similarly noted that for those living in sexual secrecy, “your life is built around - who is going to find out? When are they going to find out? What are they going to do about it? ... You can’t live a normal life under those circumstances”. As images and symbols of the self as monstrous, evil, and immoral were replaced with those of goodness, righteousness, and respectability, participants restored a powerful sense of value and dignity to their lives that vastly improving their wellbeing.

I am free: Experiences of liberation. Redress was also universally associated with a sense of liberation from tyrannical forces - of having been freed from bondage and forces of subjugation. For survivors, emancipating oneself from homonegative beliefs and authoritarian

religious institutions was construed as an experience of liberation. As Mason noted: “This whole weight had been lifted off of me... it was freedom... Freedom to *be*, freedom to *exist*.” Matt similarly described how turning away from conservative homonegativity and the idea of an omnipotent God left him with a sense of radical liberty: “There’s no one looking over my shoulder anymore.” Survivors described themselves as having emerged from an ideological prison that had long hampered their development and prevented them from living authentically.

For ascetic and ex-gay men, similar themes of liberation were associated with successfully gaining control over homoerotic urges. Throughout crisis, these desires were experienced as compulsive and overpowering. As Seth (ascetic) noted: “I just couldn't manage and control all this - it was controlling me.” Walter (ascetic) similarly recalled, “[it] really did become... pretty much an addiction.” In redress, a sense of personal empowerment and vigilant self-discipline wrought a sense of freedom from tyrannical desires. As Charles (ex-gay) explained, “I’ve resolved those conflicts and I’ve dealt with those issues... I’ve had a ‘release’ if you will.” Rodney similarly described a sense of emancipation as central to the redressive experience: “It was really about a *freedom*. It was stepping into a freedom for me.” Here, liberation meant no longer feeling enslaved to homoerotic desires. As Theo (ex-gay) noted, “[It is about] being able to go day in and day out without temptation ruling your life.”

In 2013, Creek noted that lust is experienced as ‘out of control’ and ‘extreme’ feeling and that celibate LGB men who gain control over such urges are no longer governed by desires that are ‘apart from the self’. Yet, the current analysis suggests that ex-gay men also define healing largely in terms of liberation from lust as opposed to a radical reorientation of sexual desire. By embracing new understandings of self, sexuality, and reality and making use of pragmatic disciplinary techniques, both ascetic and ex-gay men acquired a valuable sense of mastery and control over their temptations. They described feeling released from the bondage of sexual compulsion and free to pursue a life of truth and righteousness. The idea that sexual self-mastery will bring happiness and fulfillment while failure will result in “enslavement by the passions” (O'Brien, 2004, p. 189) is a common trope within Christianity that undoubtedly prepared ex-gay and acetic men to gain immense satisfaction from the control of sexual impulses (just as human rights discourses of religious oppression played a role in the liberty experienced by gay survivors). In the stories of ascetics, ex-gay men, and gay survivors alike, themes of liberation thus reflected the joy inherent in no longer feeling captive to, or limited by, oppressive forces –

be they religious or sexual.

I am normal, I belong: Eschewing feelings of radical alterity. Throughout the crisis period (and, in some cases, even before), participants described having felt set apart from others - at odds with local norms. In redress, participants from all groups were able to eschew feelings of fundamental difference and develop a sense of normalcy by redefining their desires in a way that connected themselves to the local sociocultural order through affirmations of shared values and struggles. Participants in all groups minimized the difference between their own sexual urges and other forms of desire. Survivors affirmed that same-sex attraction was but one variant of a shared human drive. As Matt explained: “I just have a slightly different preference than maybe the majority, but ... everybody is so different ... it is sort of ‘whatever’... You know, there are people that like olives. Do we *all* have to like olives?” Ex-gay men and sexual ascetics also worked to minimize the disparity between their own struggles and those of their peers by grounding all destructive urges in the sinful and imperfect nature of humankind. As noted previously, some likened homoeroticism to other compulsive behaviours, such as over-eating, alcoholism, and drugs. Others tied their own sexual self-discipline to that of their peers, arguing that some degree of restraint was common to all good persons. As Brad (ascetic) noted: “My younger brother is ridiculously straight... he’ll say, ‘I’m attracted to girls all of the time... I acknowledge that, *but* I don’t *act* on that... I only sleep with my wife’ ... I feel the same way”. By linking their own struggles to those of respected others, ascetic and ex-gay men constructed their lives as reflective of shared earthly challenges and the common pursuit of goodness in a corrupt world. As Jordan (ex-gay) explained: “[One] man, goes, ‘Well, I had an affair on my wife!’ Another man tells me, ‘I’ve got a drug/alcohol problem’... I’m really not that much different... [We all] have issues we can deal with in appropriate or inappropriate ways.”

Participants also worked to impart a sense of ordinariness to their lives by affirming their commitment to a variety of local normalizing ideologies. As Becker (1999) wrote, those faced with difference must find a way to positively reconnect with the dominant cultural order. Throughout their narratives, participants worked to symbolically link themselves to the local order by highlight their alignment with shared values of truth, perseverance, authenticity, loyalty, commitment, and personal responsibility. In doing so, they recognize the extraordinary aspects of their lives and selves while clearly positioning themselves within the margins of normalcy and

goodness. As Rodney (ex-gay) explained, “I can connect in my masculinity with any other man’s masculinity *despite* the things that I like or the things that I do.”

By asserting their fundamental normalcy and eschewing notions of radical alterity, participants from all three groups resisted the reduction of their lives and selves to sexual difference – a process previously observed in studies of LGB Christians (Sumerau, 2012) and celibate gay Christians (Creek, 2013). Although they admitted that their lives were in some ways extraordinary, participants refused to be reduced to ‘otherness’ and insisted on their shared humanity. As Theo (ex-gay) eloquently noted, “I’m a very normal person. I just have what ... felt like an absolutely insurmountable obstacle... [but] wasn’t.” Jordan (ex-gay) similarly stated that, despite his struggle with sexual-moral crisis, he did not “feel different from any other men.” In what follows, I describe how participants’ success in restoring a sense of normalcy, liberty, goodness, integrity and meaning to their lives left them feeling restored and confident in their ability to live well and overcome future challenges.

Order, Adornment, Empowerment and Healing: Reflecting on the Efficacy of Redress

“It’s been a transformation ... a transformation of wholeness and healing in my life.” – Charles

Life experiences that fall outside the ‘typical’ trajectory of human development often thwart personal narratives and destroy the carefully constructed sense of order and identity embedded in these works. Emerging from this narrative wreckage requires that the individual construct a new story capable of accounting for past events, restoring hope for the future, and connecting the self to the local moral order (Becker, 1999; Crites, 1986; Fernandez, 1974; Frank, 1995; Mattingly, 1998). This narrative reconfiguration is fundamental to the healing process, where, as Good (1994) noted, there is “too much at stake to give up hope” (p. 129).

In redress, participants utilized a host of aesthetic tools (ideas, images, plots, models, theories, and figures of rhetoric) to positively transform their understanding of self and world and restore a sense of meaning, order, hope, and dignity to their lives. Although participants made use of distinct root metaphors and modes of emplotment, they invariably succeeded in restoring order to individual narratives and positively shifting the self through quality space. Participants were able to make sense of their suffering and restore their confidence in the future by emplotting their lives according to prototypical plots of ‘divine sacrifice’, ‘emancipation from oppression’, or ‘illness and recovery’. Embedded in each of these plots were key heroic metaphors that work to “move inchoate subjects into an optimum position in quality space”

(Fernandez, p. 124), connecting the self with local norms, ideals, and values and enhancing its moral status. By embracing the persona of the devout ascetic, the liberated minority, or the recovered man, participants ‘adorned’ the self with new, positive images while stripping it of disparaging signs. The net effect was “to move the ‘I’, the ‘he’, the ‘we’ around” in quality space (Fernandez, p. 124), disassociating the self from images of monstrosity, alterity, inferiority, and compulsion, and adorning it with signs of goodness, normalcy, innocence, control, and integrity.

Using distinct explanatory models, plots, and figures of rhetoric, all three groups successfully exploited the transformative potential of narrative to creatively reconfigure their experience of the world and self and remake their lives in the face of crisis. As Fernandez (1964) noted, fusion of ‘symbolization’ and ‘emplotment’ inherent in this process is common to all healing rituals: “any ritual... may be regarded as putting into effect metaphoric predications upon the pronouns participating in the ritual” (p. 125). It is reflective of a common process wherein neophytes enter into the healing process in a state of “anomie, individuation, comparative deprivation, [and] status denial... [marked by] an inappropriate location in quality space, which gives rise to feelings of isolation, disengagement, powerlessness, enervation, dysphoria, debasement, contamination, transgression, etc.” and exit “incorporated, empowered, activated, and euphoric” (p. 125). By adorning the self with positive and empowering images, participants moved themselves into a state of potency, power, and optimism. They not only enhanced their self-image, but also grew confident in their ability to “achieve a state conforming to the image-plan” (Fernandez, 1974) and take control over their lives and selves.

An experience of empowerment was thus endemic to the redressive phase. Although participants affirmed that their sexual preferences and past suffering was largely beyond their control, they took responsibility for pursuing truth, goodness, and righteousness in the redressive phase. The figure of the ‘able man’ –who takes initiative, recognizes his own power and actualizes his ability to intervene and persevere in his own life (Ricoeur, 1986/2007) - permeated the post-crisis lifeworld. Participants affirmed that they were capable of defining and pursuing the good life on their own terms and resisting local norms where necessary. The sense of helplessness and hopelessness that had characterized the crisis period was replaced by a sense of confidence and capability as participants boldly pursued their own vision of the good life. As Charles (ex-gay) noted: “those issues that used to hold me back don’t hold me back anymore”. Matt (survivor) similarly affirmed: “[I] started to realize that... I can do whatever I want”.

Having emancipated themselves from the force of compulsive desire or political oppression, participants attained a sense of security and personal power hitherto absent in their lives. Charles (ex-gay) described how overcoming this struggle left him feeling strong and emboldened: “I see myself today as someone who has really been through the fire.” Paul (survivor) similarly noted, “I think that I have been able to achieve a certain level of *comfort* in my own skin and my identity and a certain *fearlessness* about being who I am and if you can’t take that well, tough shit!” Mason (survivor) echoed this sentiment, describing a similar sense of security and confidence in his new self and life: “I don’t hate them [homonegative persons], but, I’m not going to allow anyone to hurt me [anymore]... I blew the doors off and came out!”

Together, restoring order and meaning to life, enhancing one’s self-concept, and developing a sense of personal empowerment wrought powerful experiences of healing to all participants. As Rodney (ex-gay) affirmed, “I was able to grow and I was able to heal.” ‘Healing’ was, of course, constructed differently by each group of participants. For survivors, it entailed deliverance from oppressive structures, relationships, and beliefs. For ascetics, it meant bringing pathological and compulsive desires under their control and learning to successfully manage a noxious threat to personal wellbeing. For ex-gay men, it entailed an experience of sexual restoration and recovery where participants overcame past wounds to reveal their true, healthy selves. Ex-gay participants were careful to note that the healing they had undergone was not reducible to sexual control or discipline, but indicative of a radical personal transformation. As Theo affirmed: “I don’t adhere to the idea that you spend the rest of your life saying: ‘I’m a homosexual who doesn’t act out’ ... People can achieve lasting change ... You become like everyone else – a Christian who is tempted.” To the extent that divine forces and religious communities were implicated in such positive developments, the experience of healing took on spiritual contours. Such attributions were most common in the narratives of ascetic and ex-gay men. For example, Walter (ascetic) credited God with helping him to pursue sexual purity: “God has kept me on my road in recovery to making sure that I maintain that personal relationship with him.” Seth (ascetic) similarly credited his faith with helping him discipline his desires: “It’s helped me to turn away... from my desires and to look at my being as... more eternal... than just... here and now.”

Yet, in the vast majority of cases (all but Charles), ‘healing’ did not entail the elimination of homosexual desire but rather a transformation of meaning and experience. Participants

‘overcame’ sexual-moral crisis not by restoring themselves to some pre-crisis benchmark or idealized state, but by coming to inhabit a new reality. This mode of healing is characterized by “a transformation of the phenomenological conditions under which the patient [individual in crisis] exists and experiences suffering or distress” (Csordas, 2002, p. 25). Although homoerotic desires persisted, they no longer occasioned unbearable suffering in the lives of participants. For gay survivors, homosexuality was transformed into an aspect of self to be celebrated and appreciated. As Mason noted, “I think it’s cool to be a gay dad!” For ascetic and ex-gay men, homoeroticism became a trait that could be borne without immense fear, self-loathing, or anxiety. As Brad (ascetic) noted, “The part of me that used to be all angsty, worried every time I was attracted to someone... has *long* past.” Overcoming sexual-moral crisis involved achieving a sense of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness – it was not characterized by the “elimination of a thing ... but [by the] transformation of a person, a self that is a bodily being” (Csordas, 2002, p. 3). By creatively constructing new understandings of self and world, participants attained positive changes to their psychological, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing. While the men described themselves as having overcome sexual-moral crisis by aligning themselves with newly discovered truths, the social constructionist sees them as having embraced new versions and visions of reality (Goodman, 1978) that proved successful in improving their quality of life. Interestingly, comparative analyses revealed that the process and experience of healing was remarkably uniform across narratives of gay emancipation, ex-gay life, and sexual asceticism. Participants in all groups described having engendered similar benefits despite marked differences in their approach to overcoming sexual-moral crisis.

Yet, despite having attained many benefits through redress, participants also acknowledged that the process had entailed various sexual, relational, and spiritual sacrifices. Such sacrifices were considered a necessary part of the healing process. The men affirmed that the good life – however defined - was always acquired at a cost. As Rodney (ex-gay) explained: “There will be things that you embrace and there will be things you push away just based on what it is that you’re trying to achieve.” Participants also unanimously reported that such sacrifices paled in comparison to the gains wrought by redress. Reflecting on his decision to renounce homosexuality and follow God, Theo (ex-gay) explained: “The fact of the matter is that, through God’s praise and through his guidance, the list of things you *can* do is much greater than the list of things you *can’t*”. Ascetics also affirmed that the personal growth and social

security they gained through the redressive process was of much greater value than sexual satisfaction. Seth explained that although he often pines for male companionship, the joy of family life greatly overshadows this loss: “I *love* my children and I love my wife... I just can’t imagine the loneliness I would go through not coming home to see my kids every day and seeing my wife every day... just for sex with men.” Lastly, survivors affirmed that the loss of certain social relationships and privileges were tolerable given the vast improvements to life and self they enjoyed after redress. As Paul explained, survivors were forced to abandon heterosexual privilege: “When I was a married man, the world treated me with more respect and was *kinder* towards me. And I had more privilege... more opportunities in the church... I was considered more trustworthy... there was lots of positive credit.” Yet, although Mason and other survivors conceded that leaving the church in pursuit of sexual authenticity was “a difficult road to take”, they found their lives were now infinitely more peaceful and rewarding. Speaking specifically to relationship losses, Brad similarly noted: “The vast majority of people who truly matter in my life... who love me... came to grips with this area of my life... the few people who [did not]... I really don’t miss!”

The men thus framed sacrifice as endemic to the redressive process. They recognized that the good life came at a cost – that it often entailed “giving up one valued condition for another in order to obtain a greater good” (Fernandez, 1974, p. 131). As Theo (ex-gay) simply stated, “We can’t have everything that we want.” Yet, by focusing on the gains they have acquired through redress – including family solidarity, the restoration of meaning and order in everyday life, a sense of personal empowerment, and feelings of goodness, righteousness, and normalcy - participants largely neutralized the pain associated with various losses and sacrifices by embedding them within a global process of growth and development. Sacrifice was thus not a wholly negative experience. By renouncing same-sex acts, ascetic and ex-gay men attained community belonging, spiritual security, family unity, and an enhanced state of personal wellbeing marked by feelings of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness. As Walter (ascetic) explained, these sacrifices were a means to positive change and personal empowerment: “People will say to me... ‘Oh... he’s still gay. He’s just in denial.’ Well... that’s a compliment, because yes, I am in denial... I’m in the denial that God *asks* for us to be in.” Conversely, through particular religious and social sacrifices, gay survivors developed new, satisfying relationships with gay peers and allies and attained a powerful sense of authenticity and spiritual liberty.

In sum, redress invariably entailed sacrifice. Yet, by taking responsibility for their lives and embracing certain calculated losses, participants succeeded in attaining an enhanced state of spiritual, social, and personal wellbeing. As Theo (ex-gay) explained, such sacrifices are a means to a better life: “You’re happier. You’re not fighting depression. You’re not hiding. You’re not lying to people that you love... you start to live... a normal life”. Despite having embraced three very different redressive strategies, participants invariably accessed a variety of shared benefits and attained a common sense of empowerment and healing despite the presence of particular losses. A diversity of means converged upon remarkably similar ends. In the following chapter, I explore how participants reflect on the value and limitations of redress, the nature of the lives they have constructed for themselves, and the ultimate significance of sexual-moral crisis in their unfolding existence.

⁵⁹ Emplotment refers to the process of extracting a configuration from a succession of events (Good, 1994).

⁶⁰ Here, Brad proved to be an exception. Below, I describe how years of reflecting on sexual issues, meeting LGBTQ persons, and studying secular sexual science in the context of his master’s training brought his sexual values and understandings into close alignment with those of gay survivors. Like most survivors, he attributed the origin of his suffering to neither an inborn or acquired sexual preference, but rather to human politics and processes of oppression.

⁶¹ Prototypical plots - what Todorov (1968/1981) referred to as literary ‘types’ – are local narrative forms that individuals use as ‘models’ for shaping their own stories. The familiar nature of these plots within the local sociocultural milieu not only allows participants to impart a sense of ordinariness to their extraordinary lives (as described later in the chapter), but also enhances the reception of such tales during their performance (see below).

⁶² A state of distress that arises when a person's behaviour, thoughts, and attitudes are inconsistent with their ideal self-image – when individuals consciously violate their own system of values or ethics (see Smith, 1980; Lief & Kaplan, 1986).

Chapter 13 ~ How I Live Now - The Complexities of Life after Redress

“I’ve... been able to create my life the way I want it... set it up exactly the way I want it” - Matt

To this point, I have traced the contours of participants’ experiences of sexual-moral crisis, attending to the nuances of this extraordinary event from onset through the search for new ways forward and experiences of healing. In this chapter, I provide a description of how participants reflect on, evaluate, and make sense of this moral experience and what they have made of their lives after crisis. I explore how redress has enabled participants to create lives worth living without fully releasing them from experiences of struggle and suffering. I also attend to how this extraordinary experience has left its mark on the men, reaping both gains and losses and leaving them with a sense of obligation and a call to serve others. As will be evident, the current lives of participants are characterized by a complex blend of healing and chronic struggle, loss and gain, emancipation and obligation.

Life is Good: Peace, Contentment, Security, and Optimism in the Wake of Redress

“I feel like this is probably the best part of my life so far.” – Matt

Across all three groups, themes of peace, satisfaction, happiness, comfort, connectedness, and security characterized discussions of life after redress. Participants invariably affirmed that their mood was greatly improved relative to the crisis stage and that a sense of joy and enthusiasm permeated their present lives. As Josiah (survivor) noted, “It’s a delight to be alive ... my life is joyful and, and life-giving ... I’m happy to get up in the morning and I am happy with *me* – me as a person.” Mason (survivor) similarly explained, “I’m just a happier person!”

Participants across all groups described feeling satisfied with their sexual and romantic relationships at the time of interview. Ascetic (Brad, Seth, and Todd) and ex-gay (Charles, Jed, Jordan, and Theo) participants married to females unanimously described a deep emotional connection with their wives at the time of interview. Those who were married before redress (Seth, Todd, and Theo) felt their unions had been greatly improved by the successful resolution of sexual-moral crisis. Marital relationships once fraught with secrecy and distance were now spaces of comfort, openness, security, and support. As Theo (ex-gay) noted: “Where we are right now in our marriage is the strongest that it’s ever been because it’s based on trust and openness and I’m no longer keeping secrets.... I think we’re closer than we have been in years.” Having made it through sexual-moral crisis together, the spousal bond was revitalized in such cases and both partners were left feeling more supported, understood, and optimistic in the union. Those

who married females during (Brad and Charles) or after (Jed and Jordan) redress described their relationships using similar themes of satisfaction, openness, support, and intimacy. Brad noted, “My wife is my soul mate, and I could not ponder living my life without her.” Jed similarly stated, “[We have] a great sexual relationship, emotional relationship... it’s a great relationship.”

Married ex-gay and ascetic men also invariably affirmed the essential normalcy of their marital relationships. Despite complex sexual histories and (in most cases) ongoing homoerotic desires, they stated that the joys and challenges of their marriages were overwhelmingly ordinary and commonplace. As Brad explained: “The things that my wife and I fight about are not sex... It’s money and whether or not I’m spending too much time in the ministry... where we’re going to spend our vacations... very mundane things.” Todd similarly noted that his disagreements with his wife revolve around parenting challenges – not sexual issues: “She has a whole different way of raising kids than I have... that’s been the biggest moment of contention.” Here, the men symbolically segregated marital strife from past sexual challenges or persistent homoerotic desires and affirmed their capacity to form satisfying relationships with women in spite of their extraordinary sexuality. As Charles noted, “Marriage is hard – I don’t think it has anything to do with my past... marriage is difficult and we need to work through our issues.”

Married men also constructed their sexual lives as relatively commonplace. Charles, Jed, Jordan, Theo, and Seth noted that they enjoyed active and satisfying sexual relationships with their wives. As Jordan simply stated: “My plumbing works as God intended it.” These individuals felt confident that neither their level of sexual desire nor their frequency of erotic contact with their wives differed substantially from that of other married couples. Conversely, Todd and Brad described their desire for marital sexual acts as relatively low. Todd noted that he much preferred to just “cuddle and kiss and all that” and Brad affirmed that his wife was the primary initiator of sexual contact: “If we didn’t have sex, I’d be okay. *She’d* be disappointed, but I’d be okay. I’m all about the cuddling and snuggling.” Yet, even where sexual desire was wanting and erotic activity was relatively infrequent, participants framed their marriages as far from unique. Brad noted that he and his wife (who self-identify as gay and bisexual respectively) are more sexually active than many of his heterosexual peers: “I started talking to my other married guy friends who have kids and [realized] I get way more sex than they do. And they’re both straight in their relationships!” Todd similarly attributed his lack of sexual interest to issues of aging and poor health – problems shared by many of his heterosexual peers: “I take

medications... for my heart. I take antidepressants... so I just have a real rough time with sex all the way around.” Todd and Brad also worked to normalize their marriages by minimizing the importance of sexuality in creating a strong and satisfying marital union. Brad explained: “The heart of marriage is not sex... [it] is intimacy and togetherness and sharing of life for common purpose ... the more comfortable I became with that... [the less I felt] like I had a ‘second class’ marriage.” Here, sexual gratification is constructed as largely tangential to a strong marital relationship and low levels of sexual desire or activity are framed as commonplace.

Married men thus worked to actively eschew the idea that their marriages were radically different from, or inferior to, those of their peers. They negated the idea – common amongst observers - that their struggle with homoeroticism had negatively impacted their marriages and suggested ways in which this experience might have strengthened or benefited their relationships with their wives. Seth (ascetic) described how his homosexual orientation endowed him with particular characteristics that, in some ways, made him a superior husband: “Not to say that heterosexual men aren’t sensitive, but I would say I am more sensitive to my wife and her needs ... [and] I enjoy shopping and... doing things that a lot of guys might not.” Jordan (ex-gay) echoed this sentiment, noting, “Men who deal with same-sex attraction are more in tune with their feminine side ... [that] makes a relationship with a woman even that much more deeper.” Brad (ascetic) also felt that this crisis had benefited his marriage by teaching him the value of open-communication and help-seeking in working through challenges: “we’ve got more baggage than the Queen of England on world tour... [So] we went to pre-marital counselling ... [And we] developed a level of honesty and trust that I think is rare in a lot of relationships.” Given the unique traits and capacities they brought to married life, ascetic and ex-gay men even described having been frequently approached by heterosexual men and women seeking relationship advice. Jordan noted: “I’ve had many heterosexual men come up to me and say, ‘Jordan, you’ve gotta write a book on... romance, how to woo a woman’ ... because I just know how to do that.”

Although ex-gay and ascetic men admitted that an inter-orientation marriage might seem bizarre and unworkable to the outsider, they maintained that these unions were deeply satisfying and profoundly ordinary. Past homoerotic acts and ongoing desires had not prevented them from enjoying physical and emotional intimacy with their wives or forming deep and committed attachments to their partners. Moreover, they suggest ways in which their sexual struggles had contributed to the health of their relationships and prepared them for an enviable married life. As

Brad noted: “my straight female friends say, ‘Where can I find a gay guy to marry?’ Having a husband that’s like emotionally available and can talk about his feelings – that’s worth a whole lot more than orgasms!”

Alternatively, the confidence, integrity, and self-acceptance gay survivors acquired through the redressive process eventually enabled them to develop satisfying romantic and sexual relationships with men. At the time of interview, Matt been happily partnered for over a decade. After years of celibacy and singleness, Ned had also entered into a serious relationship with another man that was going on five years and Paul was engaged to his male romantic partner. Although Mason and Josiah had also been involved in serious gay relationships after redress, both were single at the time of interview. Josiah had recently separated from his long-term gay partner and Mason had lost his lover to Parkinson’s disease.

Like their married peers, survivors described these unions as healthy, rewarding, intimate and secure. Matt noted, “There was... this instant compatibility with him. Instant comfort together that has lasted.” Paul also described his relationship as profoundly satisfying and free of the strife that characterized his previous marriage to a female: “We have... a fairly mature relationship with being honest and talking about things... I think that many second marriages are [more mature]... you kind of know more who you are, what you’re looking for.” Fondly recalling the years he spent with his partner before his death, Mason similarly noted: “We had a great time together and we just enjoyed each other’s company... that last week he was alive... he says, ‘Man, we’ve had a wonderful life. We have no regrets, other than I wish we had more time.’” Like gay and ascetic men, survivors affirmed that the intimate relationships they had developed with other men were overwhelmingly ordinary and made a point of noting how radically these unions deviated from the negative stereotypes of gay life as strange, perverse, unsatisfying, and hyper-sexualized they had encountered throughout their lives (see Chapter 3). Ned noted that he and his partner shared a remarkably “normal life” dominated by “normal, everyday things”: “[We are] just kinda building our lives together.” Matt similarly constructed his relationship as mundane and ordinary: “I’m not leading some crazy, wacky, promiscuous life... it’s very low key.”

Here, survivors asserted that they had attained what they once thought impossible: happy, healthy, and committed homosexual relationships. These relationships flew in the face of dark images of despair, dysfunction, and destruction promulgated by conservative Christians, ex-gay

ministry leaders, and other homonegative groups and individuals. They stood as a testament to the health, normalcy, beauty, and wellbeing of homoeroticism and empowered gay survivors to further overcome feelings of internalized homonegativity and celebrate their sexual selves. For example, Josiah explained how the two years he spent in an intimate relationship with another man allowed him to finally overcome “all the [homonegative] shit” he had “picked up” over the years. After years of being told that homosexual relationships were “vile,” “disgusting,” and “dysfunctional,” he described realizing that his love for his partner was beautiful and that this relationship was no different from that of his heterosexual peers.

Yet, while many participants were engaged in heterosexual marital unions or long-term gay partnerships at the time of interview, not all participants had been involved in – or expressed any interest in pursuing – such relationships. Rodney (ex-gay) was just beginning to enter into the heterosexual dating world at the time of interview. He explained, “I’m asking God to send me my wife.” Although he lacked much in the way of heteroerotic desire, he appreciated the contrast of femininity and looked forward to eventually marrying a woman: “*Seeing* the differences between men and women – [they] are amazing ... it’s not a physical attraction ... it’s more the soul connection ... where you *complement* each other.” Like a number of ascetic men, he maintained that physical attraction and sexual pleasure were not the defining feature of a strong marriage and noted that he was more interested in finding someone with shared interests and values: “I’m at this place where I recognize that the physical body fades. I’m looking at her for her spirit... where is she?... what does she enjoy?” As single gay men, Josiah and Mason (survivors) also looked forward to forming satisfying romantic and sexual connections. Josiah noted he would eventually like to fall in love and settle down with someone: “That would make me very happy.” Yet, not all single men expressed such a desire for long-term, committed romantic relationships at the time of interview. Walter and Adam (both ascetic men) were satisfied living in a state of devout celibacy and sceptical about the prospect of heterosexual marriage. Likewise, given the challenges of schizophrenia, Mitch (survivor) had largely given up on the idea of forming a stable, monogamous relationship with another man and had grown contented with single life: “In the 80s and 90s I really wanted to have a relationship with someone, but now... I don’t mind being single anymore. I – there’s a lot of freedom to it.”

In addition to being largely happy and contented with their present selves and relationships, participants also invariably expressed a high degree of optimism as they looked

toward the future. Josiah (survivor) noted, “I know that there’s a future and I know that it’s a good future... life is joyful and... everything is going to be fine.” Matt (survivor) similarly noted, “I’m in a place in my life where I feel really optimistic.” Although they could not be certain about what the future would bring, participants were confident in their ability to successfully overcome new challenges in the wake of redress. Often, this sense of empowerment was bolstered by personal faith and close contact with the Lord. As Rodney (ex-gay) noted, “I have faith in God... I *know* that *he will provide for me*, whatever that provision means.” Although a sense of uncertainty regarding the future remains, the profound sense of anxiety, hopelessness, and helplessness that characterized the crisis period has been replaced by a sense of poise and self-assuredness. As Todd (ascetic) noted, “God says he’ll supply all our needs... [so I] trust that he would find some way to help me handle it all.”

At the time of interview, a general sense of contentment and optimism characterized all participants. As Paul (survivor) simply stated, “I’m generally pretty hopeful and content.” This phase of life thus stood in stark contrast with that of the crisis period, creating a sense of global reversal within the narratives. The same men who had once lived in a chronic state of suffering, hopelessness, and despair now expressed a zeal for life and an optimistic view of the future. As Jordan (ex-gay) explained, these two periods of life were as different as “night and day.” Participants have moved from a world of pain, hopelessness, fear and suffering into one of joy, optimism, peace, and contentment. Simply put, neither the men, nor the world they inhabited, were the same as before. Walter (survivor) described himself as a “new creation” in the wake of redress and Rodney (ex-gay) noted that he had become a “*completely* different person” as a result of sexual-moral crisis.

Even in cases where participants appeared to be living in ways similar to those previously embraced in the early crisis period, close analysis revealed that important differences eshewed such superficial similarities. For example, while Matt and Josiah (survivors) had been involved in gay relationships prior to the neophyte stage, these early homoerotic experiences had been plagued by feelings of shame, evil, and self-loathing. In the wake of redress, these same men were able to embrace homosexual identities and relationships without a sense of moral debasement or spiritual corruption. Similarly, while Seth, Todd, and Theo had been married to women throughout the crisis period, these unions had been transformed by the redressive process. Once riddled with guilt, fear, and anxiety as they tried to hide homoerotic acts and

desires from their wives and loved ones, married ascetic and ex-gay men were now able to be open and honest with their wives about their ongoing struggles and past experiences. While attempts to pursue homosexuality or heterosexuality were previously associated with feelings of fracture, shame, and impostorism, participants were now able to embrace these relationships as coherent and authentic means of living well in the redressive stage. As Theo noted: “living in the light is probably the greatest benefit that I have... when you are hiding stuff, you’re living in fear... you can’t live a normal life under those circumstances – you’re kind of a fugitive”. The experience of being gay, married, or celibate is not the same in the wake of redress as it was in the early crisis period. The meaning of celibacy, married life, or homosexuality has shifted throughout the course of sexual-moral crisis as these ways of being and relating were stripped of certain negative implications and social and sexual positions once experienced as inadequate, unsatisfying, and inappropriate were now experienced as deeply satisfying. The flow and experience of everyday life and the structure of the self also underwent important transformation as a result of the redressive process. Below, I elucidate how redress allowed the men to move out of a phase of life characterized by liminality and a hyper-fixation on sexuality into a stage dominated by a return to common-sense reality, the experience of a rich and diverse self, and the pursuit of typical, age-appropriate projects.

The Return: Decentering Sexuality and Returning to the Flow of Everyday Life

“It’s just one part of who you – an important part, but it’s just one part.” – Mitch

Since the onset of crisis, participants had been intensely fixated on their sexuality. Homoeroticism and the threat it posed to participants’ spiritual, social, moral, psychological, and emotional wellbeing was at the forefront of their everyday lives and understandings of self. As Good (1994) explained, suffering “breaks into the normal rhythms of life” (p. 131), shaping the world of the individual to itself and becoming an experience of totality. Throughout the crisis period, the sexual self had pushed all other aspects of personal identity into irrelevance as participants became fixated on resolving the conflict between these desires and their spiritual-moral proclivities. This absorption in homoeroticism and sexual-moral crisis had distanced the men from the flow of everyday life and deferred other life projects. Yet, after redress, sexuality no longer occupied this central position in participants’ everyday lives or understandings of self.

With the passing of crisis, participants described how a sense of multiplicity returned to the self. Other facets of personal identity shifted into prominence as the perceived threat of

homoeroticism was neutralized and sexuality no longer occupied the bulk of participants' attention. Across all three groups, self-descriptions pointed to a complex and multifaceted understanding of self and the presence of alternative characteristics deemed more definitive than sexual preferences or behaviours. As Fernandez (1974) explained, the ability "to rescue pronouns from a preoccupation with their parts" (p. 131) is yet another positive function of metaphor and the predication of positive signs on the self throughout the redressive process. For example, when asked how he thought of himself at the time of interview, Adam (ascetic) described himself in terms of valued personal traits and capacities that were decidedly asexual: "I think of myself as a thoughtful and fairly considerate person ... [I] try to be as active as I can be – taking pictures and stuff. And I have a strength of caring." Jordan (ex-gay) described how his own personal identity was grounded in Christian faith: "My identity is in Christ. I'm a child of God." Mitch (survivor) similarly described himself in terms of key personal traits and characteristics without reference to his sexual identity: "I'm educated, I'm single and I have a lot of friends."

This is not to suggest that the sexual self was of no significance at the time of interview. Many participants noted that their sexuality continued to be an important part of their personal identity. This was particularly true for those who identified as gay survivors. Josiah, for example, noted that his sexual orientation was central to his experience of reality: "It constantly colours the way that I'm interacting with people and the way that I see the world." Yet, across all participant groups, life after redress was overwhelmingly characterized by a de-emphasis on the sexual self. Sexuality became embedded within a rich, robust, and multifaceted self where a wealth of traits, roles, and interests vied demanded recognition and attained various degrees of prominence. Josiah (survivor), for example, described himself in complex and varied terms: "I'm gay. I am disabled. I live with cerebral palsy. I am a potential postulate for Anglican ordination... a son... a partner... a grandson... a friend... a theology student." Brad (ascetic) similarly explained, "The most important phrase I use to describe myself is 'youth pastor' ... [but] a hundred other things pop into my head ... my relationship with my wife, my friendships ... my family ... personhood is a complex matrix."

These examples highlight the gradual 'decentering' (see Muenchberger, Kendall, & Neal, 2008) of the sexual self over time. By normalizing and de-stigmatizing the sexual self throughout redress, participants succeeded in diluting its salience and allowing other images, traits, and roles to come into prominence. They now constructed themselves as richly varied individuals and

refused to be reduced to, or defined by, their sexual urges, identities, or behaviours – regardless of their moral evaluation of these aspects of self. As Mitch (survivor) affirmed, “People have to see you as a whole person - not just your sexuality... that’s not the only thing that defines you.” Rodney (ex-gay) similarly noted, “Before... my sexuality was my focus ... now it’s definitely more on the periphery. It’s a part of who I am... everybody has a sexuality about them, but it’s not my focus.” Jordan (ex-gay), echoed this sentiment, stating that one’s sexual preferences are no more definitive of the self than any other trait: “I am a heterosexual male....it’s just like...my skin colour, my hair colour.” Although there were, undoubtedly, moments where the sexual self still came to the fore of personal identity, this facet was no longer at the center of how participants understood or experienced their selves. As Jed (ex-gay) simply noted: “it’s not dominant at all, by any means.” Thus, whether participants considered themselves ‘gay’ or ‘heterosexual’ after redress, they universally rejected the idea that their sexual identities, desires, or behaviours defined who they were. They resisted the metonymic reduction of their being to one, potentially threatening or alienating, aspect of self and instead insisted on a healthy degree of multiplicity, nuance, diversity, and flexibility.

With redress, participants also moved out of the liminal space of reflection, exploration, and experimentation they had occupied since the onset of crisis and back into the common-sense reality of non-dramatic time (Good, 1994). For years, the search for redress had consumed participants energy and replaced the typical flow of ordinary life with a desperate and anxious search for relief. As with other life crises (Good, 1994; Becker, 1999; Mattingly, 1998; Turner, 1986), the future was obscured by the ambiguity of personal suffering and an intense preoccupation with the present arrested any project tangential to the pursuit of redress. After redress, however, the men gradually moved back into the ‘flow of everyday experience’ (Turner, 1969). The dramatic time that characterized crisis and the search for redress came to a close and the men settled back into the patterns of common-sense reality and the flow of the typical life course. This mode of experiencing reality – what Good (1994) refers to as ‘the world of everyday life’ - is characterized by a “natural attitude, one in which objects are taken-for-granted rather than submitted to critical attention... [it is] the world of our everyday activities and projects rather than a world of theory” (p. 124). Here, participants pursued a host of new projects commensurate with their interests, age, and circumstances.

At the time of interview, participants' lives were largely consumed with mundane projects and pursuits. The lives of those who were husbands (Charles, Jed, Jordan, Theo, Todd, Seth, and Brad), gay partners (Paul, Matt, and Ned), or fathers (Charles, Jed, Mason, Theo, Todd, and Seth) were largely oriented toward family obligations. Jed (ex-gay), for example, noted that his daily life revolves around his young family: "[I want to] grow my daughter up to be a beautiful woman of God... [And] grow old with my wife." Charles (ex-gay) similarly noted: "I am hoping... [to] have a little more balance in my life. That's my immediate goal – more time with my wife and family... being a good father to my children and a good husband." Ned (survivor) echoed this sentiment, noting, "My partner and I... just bought a house so we're working on the house." Participants also described being engaged with various forms of personal development, including career advancement, educational upgrading, community building, and skill enhancement. After years of physical unwellness, Adam (ascetic) had dedicated himself to improving his health and increasing his mobility: "I have neuropathy in both feet ... Sometimes hurts real bad just walking in the house ... [but] I'll take the dogs for a little walk outside." Mitch (survivor) described his pursuit of enhanced self-sufficiency and community: "My goal is to find a job and earn the money to do the things in the gay community that I'd like to do... to support myself and be an active member of the gay community." Paul (survivor) also described being engaged with a variety of goals and projects at the time of interview, noting: "I really want to settle into my local community... work on my garden, support my partner, do writing from home... enjoy life and just enjoy my partner and be a good friend to my friends."

The immobilization and fixation that characterized the crisis period had thus given way to new goals and projects after redress that were capable of driving life forward toward a hopeful and varied future. Just as the self was no longer defined solely by sexual desires or behaviours, life no longer revolved around the desperate search for relief and resolution. With the passing of crisis, participants' lives had largely realigned with the typical developmental trajectory that imparts structure to life in North American culture (Rogoff, 2003). Their goals and struggles reflected common challenges, obligations, and aspirations that were largely disconnected from issues of sexuality. Having overcome an extraordinary personal crisis, participants described their lives and selves as overwhelmingly normal and their aspirations as reflective of typical adult life. As Mason (survivor) noted, "I don't base my life just on sex." Matt (survivor) similarly stated, "I have, like, all sorts of different interests, lots of different things that I'm

plugged into.” Where crisis was characterized by singularity and estrangement, life after redress was reflective of multiplicity and an overwhelming sense of ordinariness.

Redress is not Erasure: Ongoing Vigilance and the Mark of Crisis

“I’m tired of talking about it and I’m really ready to move on from it, because I feel like I’ve kind of outgrown it, yet I know that it also marks me.” – Paul

Although life after redress was characterized by a marked decentering of sexuality in the self and a return to the flow of everyday life and typical patterns of human development, participants continued to face ongoing challenges related to issues of sexuality, morality, and spirituality. The vast majority of ascetic and ex-gay men continued to struggle with homoerotic urges and expressed the need for continued vigilance in disciplining these desires (with the sole exception of Charles). As Seth (ascetic) explained: “I’m forever struggling to keep my mind on the right things and what my goals and dreams are.” Likening themselves to addicts or the chronically ill, they reinforced the need to remain alert to the possibility of relapse and recurrence. Eluding to the persistent sense of sexual danger, Jed (ex-gay) noted, “People do relapse ... sometimes years go by and there’s failures.” Although the consistent application of disciplinary tactics had allowed homoeroticism to largely fade into the background of everyday life, the threat of sexual sin and the need for ongoing vigilance remain an enduring feature of the lives of ex-gay and ascetic men. As Theo (ex-gay) explained, “We have to start each day... realizing our own weaknesses, keeping boundaries and hedges in place, having accountability... [you] keep having to deal with it... [but] don’t dwell on it.”

For many (Theo, Walter, Brad, Jed, Jordan, Rodney, and Todd), this process had become easier with practice, age, and the general dampening of sexual desire. Todd (ascetic) noted that pharmaceutical drugs had greatly diminished his sexual urges: “I take medications... psych meds and heart meds. And it just kills my libido.” Theo (ex-gay) explained that sexual self-discipline had largely become a habit over time, hardly requiring conscious effort after years of rehearsal: “Going through that process over and over and over again basically... ‘rewires’ the brain. Or rewires your wants and needs for different things.” Walter (ascetic) similarly explained how refocusing his life on spiritual growth and personal betterment had largely pushed these urges out of his awareness: “the temptations... [are] *there*, but they’re not... there in the way they would be if I cultivated them.” Heterosexual relationships likely played a similar role for married men, who described focusing much their time and energy on their families at the time of interview.

Although Jed (ex-gay) continued to experience homoerotic urges, he noted, “I’m light years away from... a gay identity or a *want* for homosexuality or a *want* for a gay identity... Don’t want homosexuality!” By consistently applying disciplinary techniques, a number of participants thus succeeded in transforming homosexual renunciation into a habit. They had stripped these urges of much of their motivational force and largely neutralizing the threat they posed to everyday life.

Yet, for Seth and Adam (both ascetics), sexual self-discipline continued to be an emotionally and psychologically trying experience at the time of interview. Adam described being plagued by a compulsive desire to seek out homoerotic imagery: “I have this merry-go-round of pictures and guilt and stopping... [for] different lengths of time... [and then] looking at pictures [again]... [like a] ‘picture-aholic’ or something.” When he found himself becoming aroused by these images, he again experienced feelings of guilt and regret: “a lot of times [I have] looked at them [homoerotic images] and then felt slightly *aroused* and - ‘Well I’m horrible and I shouldn’t do this – not supposed to be getting aroused at the sight of a man!’” Seth similarly described a persistent and powerful compulsion toward homosexual acts that occupied much of his mental life and was a source of ongoing emotional and psychological suffering: “I can’t even say how much I am lonely for male companionship ... that’s always beckoning to me.” Thus, while many of their peers gained a sense of freedom through vigilant self-discipline, Seth and Adam continued to be embroiled in a bitter struggle against these urges. Yet, like their peers, Seth and Adam had nonetheless succeeded in avoiding homoerotic encounters and took great pride in their ability to control their urges in pursuit of righteousness and family integrity.

One gay survivor (Josiah) and two ascetic men (Brad, and Todd) also noted that they continued to grapple with sexual ethics at the time of interview. Josiah explained that although he had embraced a generic pro-gay theology in redress, he continued to wrestle with what it meant to live with a “healthy Christian sexuality”, noting: “I have all sorts of questions that causes angst... [I am] still trying to figure out the content.” Brad and Todd also continued to grapple with issues of sexual morality, noting that their opinions on the subject were in a state of flux and revision. In the years after redress, Brad had gradually embraced a pro-gay theology and come to support gay relationships within the church. Yet, he continued to struggle with definitions of sexual and relational morality and how they related to sacred scripture, noting: “The piecing together with how various passages of scripture should best be lived out in the

realities of the modern world is something that I continue to grapple and wrestle with.” While Todd remained convinced that righteous sexual expression “is only for inside the marriage of one man, one woman,” he noted that his attitude toward openly gay Christian men had changed dramatically in recent years: “[previously] I was very anti-gay-rights... [but] I have come totally around. I’m not a gay rights crusader... but the people I used to loathe, I now have the utmost regard for – kind of like God would.” Although these new insights and developments radically transformed how Todd and Brad felt about the sexual choices of their peers and interacted with LGB individuals, they did not shake the men’s commitment to their wives. Brad explained that although he now believed “it’s okay for Christians to marry someone of the same-sex,” this change in attitude had no impact on his own sexual behaviour: “It *would* have been okay for me to get married to a man, but... I married a woman... and marriage is for life... [so] it changes *nothing* about the reality of how I live right now.” Although sexuality was no longer at the forefront of their lives and selves, a number of participants nonetheless continued to reflect on issues of sexuality, spirituality, and morality long after redress and experienced an ongoing transformation of their values and opinions.

A number of participants also described living with various social, sexual, and emotional scars as a result of their experiences of sexual-moral crisis. Two survivors (Paul and Josiah) noted that they continued to struggle with psychological and emotional harms sustained during the neophyte stage. Paul described how he continued to work toward fully transcending the homonegative images and discourses that characterized his “indoctrination” into the ex-gay ministry movement, noting: “I’ve gotten so many negative messages about sexuality that I constantly need to overcome... [particularly] in sexual situations ... I still feel there’s ongoing work to be done to help... straighten me out from that.” Josiah similarly described experiencing some “residual fear” and negativity toward gay life as a result of his past ex-gay ministry experiences that revealed itself in moments of frustration or interpersonal disappointment: “The stuff that I took in in such a vulnerable state... still spins... in my head sometimes. When I break up with a boyfriend ... [I] still sometimes [think]: ‘see, you’re gay – this is what happens to gay relationships.’” Theo (ex-gay) continued to mourn his estrangement from his children. Although redress had brought him closer to his wife, he remained disconnected from the rest of his family: “It [redress] has not brought them... back into my life again, but it does show the determination... that you’re serious about what you want – which is to be what God intended

you to be.” Todd (ascetic) and Josiah (survivor) described struggling with the decision to keep their homosexual identities and desires largely secret in specific social contexts after redress. While sexual secrecy allowed Todd to retain his position in the church, he lived with a sense of inauthenticity and insincerity that was antithetical to his personal values: “It’s been painful to have to hide all this ... usually, what you see is what you get with me... [but this] has got to remain sealed, and that bothers me... I hate it.” Even Josiah, who, for the most part, lived an openly gay life in the Anglican church, noted that he still occasionally encountered situations where he felt compelled to censor his sexual identity and beliefs. Like Todd, he described this protective self-veiling as somewhat frustrating and humiliating: “I am cautious about talking to certain types of conservative Evangelicals about my... opinions... because the fact that I’m gay means that I am not a ‘good Evangelical’... it makes me angry... makes me sad.” While both men were comfortable with their sexual selves and proud of the lives they had created in the wake of redress, Christian homonegativity continued to pervade their everyday lives and limit how they expressed themselves in certain social contexts.

Lastly, some participants lived with the pain of having engendered distress and suffering in the lives of others as they worked through sexual-moral crisis. Theo (ex-gay) noted that he continued to feel guilty about the extra-marital, homosexual affairs that had fractured his family during the crisis period. Seth (ascetic) similarly described a similar nagging sense of remorse tied to his past sexual infidelity and the pain and suffering this had caused his wife, noting: “I know it hurts her deeply.” Paul (survivor) was upset by the knowledge that his sexual struggle had negatively impacted both his ex-wife and family of origin. He noted: “It has been *very* painful emotionally... I feel bad that I put *myself* through so much craziness and *other people*... who I dragged along for the ride.” Matt (survivor) also regretted having introduced other same-sex attracted Christians to ex-gay ministry programs during the crisis period and felt responsible for the pain and humiliation he imagined they experienced in such spaces: “Unfortunately, one of the women that I drug into this group - it took, and she is like a very fundamentalist Christian [now]... So I have a little bit of...[Laughs]...guilt with that.” For these men, the knowledge that their own sexual struggles and redressive experiments had negatively impacted others proved to be an ongoing source of distress.

Thus, despite having moved past acute crisis and returned to the flow of everyday life, participants continued to encounter various challenges related to sexual-moral crisis after redress.

The painful legacy of this experience and the need for ongoing healing, reflection, secrecy, and vigilance suggests that redress did not resolve all issues stemming from sexual-moral crisis. For many participants, healing proved to be an ongoing, perpetual process that continued to shape their identities and everyday lives. Yet, these ongoing struggles were not the only way in which crisis continued to influence participants' lives. After redress, many felt obligated to share their experiences with others and help same-sex attracted Christian men in crisis pursue appropriate forms of redress. Below, I outline how a number of participants returned to the scene of sexual-moral crisis as storytellers, advocates, leaders, and critics.

A Call to Action: Performance, Leadership, and Advocacy in the Wake of Redress

"I know that I have something to offer people ... I have a story to tell." – Rodney

Although a few participants (Adam, Mason, Mitch, Jordan, and Seth) were happy to put their experiences of sexual-moral crisis behind them and move on with their lives, the majority felt compelled to share their stories and help others work through this trying experience. Moved by the sense that their experiences were worth sharing, three ascetic men (Todd, Brad, and Walter), four survivors (Matt, Ned, Paul, and Josiah), and four ex-gay individuals (Charles, Jed, Rodney, and Theo) went public with their stories.⁶³ In private conversations, public presentations, written accounts, and works of art, these men shared their tales of suffering and healing with the world. As Paul (survivor) noted, "[It] was just important to me personally, to tell this story." Theo similarly noted: "I think there is a lot of satisfaction in being able to share something good that has happened to *you* with other people". Turner (1982) noted that such performances represent the final phase of experience – its "proper finale" (p. 13). These acts are motivated not only by the need to articulate the meaning of personal experiences and have the significance of important life events recognized by others, but also by the desire to inspire and assist one's peers (see Ricoeur, 2004/2005). As Frank (1995) explained, "People tell stories not just to work out their own changing identities, but also to guide those others who will follow them" (p. 17). In this sense, "Storytelling is *for* an other just as much as it is for oneself" (Frank, 1995, p. 17).

Through public performance, participants offered their selves and stories as guides to overcoming sexual-moral crisis. They transformed their own experiences of crisis, struggle, and redress into public objects of discussion, contemplation, and debate and created new cultural products that could be taken up and read by others in the throes of sexual-moral crisis. Such acts

were motivated by a desire to improve the lives of others by providing them with models for successfully navigating crisis. As Charles (ex-gay) noted: “I started to tell as many people as possible because I wanted to give others like myself hope – that there *is* hope for change if you don’t want to live this way.” Theo (ex-gay) similarly affirmed, “I feel... a calling to share with people the hope of redemption.” Yet, as models of ‘right behaviour’, these stories also served a rhetorical function. They attempted to seduce others into adopting particular ways of thinking, feeling, and being by promoting certain modes of redress and constructing others as dangerous or ineffective. As Csordas (2002) argued, storytelling is an inherently persuasive act that encourages the reader or listener to embrace a particular vision of self and world. Paul (survivor) affirmed this rhetorical potency, noting: “[I’m] trying to help people to see it in fresh new ways... taking on some passages in the Bible, hoping people see those in new ways.”

In addition to such acts of personal performance, 10 participants (Brad, Paul, Charles, Jed, Rodney, Ned, Walter, Josiah, Todd, and Theo) adopted formal leadership, advocacy, and activist roles within the redressive machinery that serviced same-sex attracted Christian men⁶⁴. These men returned to the socio-political landscape of the neophyte stage as experts, assuming new roles within this familiar milieu. Some became mentors and therapists, helping individuals navigate sexual-moral crisis by providing direct advice, guidance, and support to men and women in the throes of personal suffering. Others became critics or advocates, working to warn their peers of the dangers of particular modes of redressive or improve the treatment of same-sex attracted Christians in various institutional settings.

Three ex-gay men (Charles, Jed, and Rodney) and one ascetic individual (Brad) took on mentorship roles in organizations specifically dedicated to helping Christians work through sexual-moral crisis. Having personally overcome this struggle, they used their own experiences as a guide to helping others overcome crisis and became champions for particular ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Charles, Jed, and Rodney became active leaders in the ex-gay ministry movement after receiving master’s degrees in counselling, education, and divinity respectively. Rodney took over the leadership of a well-established ex-gay ministry program while Jed and Charles became involved with organizations that offered individual therapy and support to those living with unwanted same-sex attraction⁶⁵.

After receiving a master’s degree in counselling, Brad also began working with a Christian outreach organization for same-sex attracted youth. Yet, his work was unique in

promoting the legitimacy and righteousness of a variety of approaches to overcoming sexual-moral crisis – including homosexuality. He recalled how his encounters with same-sex attracted Christian men living in a variety of situations at the beginning of his career had convinced him of the value of different approaches to redress and the need to help individuals pursue healing trajectories tailored to their own understandings of truth and righteousness:

People being celibate, or people getting married to the same sex, or people getting married to the opposite sex... none [of these options] were inherently harmful. What *was* harmful was people feeling like they didn't have *choice*... [So] rather than just say - 'you can't be gay, this is how you can change,' [we]... listen to them and say 'how can we help you put those pieces together in a way that's right for you?'"

While other institutions typically promoted a particular mode of redress, Brad and his coworkers provided clients with “models of different people... [who have] answered this question in different ways”. Yet, despite differences in how they approached the mentorship project, these four men shared a common dedication to helping others navigate crisis.

Six others (Walter, Theo, Todd, Paul, Ned, and Josiah) became involved in the socio-political field of redress primarily as advocates, activists, and critics,⁶⁶ removed from the realm of individual consultation⁶⁷. Two ascetic men (Walter and Todd) and one ex-gay individual (Theo) became advocates for a more positive, dignified, and supportive approach to sexual diversity within Christian institutions.⁶⁸ Although they remained convinced that homosexual acts were against the will of God, these men worked to eschew the special (im)moral status of homoeroticism within Christian communities and help equip the church to serve its same-sex attracted members. Within their local spiritual communities, they tried to convince their peers that this prejudice exacerbated personal suffering and was fundamentally antithetical to the Christian spirit of love and acceptance. As Walter explained, “We've [Christians] done an awful – a huge amount of damage... We've placed, you know, stupid, judgments on them that we have no business placing on them.” Lamenting the unnecessary moral panic that often accompanies revelations of same-sex attraction in the church, Todd similarly stated: “If you told them, ‘Well, I'm a drunk’... or a daughter says ‘I'm pregnant,’ somehow they can handle that... But, boy, you tell them you're gay and... they just go off the edge! They go into hysteria!” These men were intent on helping Christian leaders and peers better understand sexual diversity and respond more humanely and effectively to those dealing with same-sex attraction. Reflecting on the rampant

ignorance and insensitivity that permeates Christianity communities and precludes an empathetic response to sexual diversity, Walter noted: “We can’t... draw people back into the church when the church people are not ready... They don’t know the *first thing* about how to approach a homosexual, and it’s certainly not with a sign that says, ‘God hates fags!’”⁶⁹ These men maintained that the same respect and love should be extended to same-sex attracted Christians as their heterosexual peers and advocated for an end to public shaming and ostracising. As Walter noted, “These are still individuals like other people that are in your church who are loved and need to be loved and recognized as much as any other kind of sinner.”

Josiah (survivor) also became an advocate for same-sex attracted men within the Anglican Church. Like Walter, Todd, and Theo, he pushed for an increased awareness of sexual diversity within the Christian community and tried to “facilitate dialogues” between same-sex attracted individuals and religious leaders. However, unlike Walter, Todd, and Theo, Josiah promoted an affirming approach to gay relationships and hoped to expand the rights and responsibilities of openly gay men within the Anglican Church. For example, at the time of interview, he was part of an initiative that called for the recognition of same-sex marriage within the Anglican Church: “[I] really wouldn’t mind if the Anglican Church started blessing same sex relationships... I’m in *that* debate with both hands stirring!” Thus, while his peers worked toward the dignified inclusion of celibate same-sex attracted men within the church, Josiah hoped to see openly gay Christian men achieve equality with their heterosexual peers.

Lastly, Paul and Ned (survivors) became active in the ex-gay survivor movement, warning others of the dangers of sexual reorientation and helping to develop coping resources for those harmed by such programs. Ned created an online forum where survivors could come together, share their stories, and help one another move toward wellness. He noted that this project was motivated by his own inability to find spaces of support and recognition after leaving the ex-gay ministry movement: “When I started that group... I couldn’t find anyone else out there who had been through the same experience.” With the help of another survivor, Paul co-founded an organization that worked to bring past ex-gay ministry clients into caring and supportive relationships and draw attention to the dangers of these programs. This project was also inspired by personal experiences of isolation, alienation, and indignity:

We thought, ‘we need to help... [survivors] find their voice and process their experience’... We wanted it to be known that we went through an ordeal... [so that when

people] think of the ex-gay movement they don't just laugh... they say, instead, 'Oh I hear that really can be dangerous!'

In the wake of redress, a number of participants thus worked to make their own experiences of crisis and suffering beneficial to others by sharing their stories of success and offering guidance and advice to individuals and institutions. While past researchers have noted the tendency for LGB Christians to become critics of institutionalized homonegativity, discrimination, and sexual ignorance and to advocate for a more respectful approach to sexual diversity within the church (Moon, 2014; O'Brien, 2004; Yip, 1999), the narratives of ex-gay and ascetic men revealed that they were also involved in trying to advance the wellbeing of same-sex attracted men and women within conservative Christian communities. Although they held different opinions of the morality and appropriateness of homosexual acts and identities, members of all three groups felt compelled to improve the situation of Christians dealing with sexual-moral crisis. In these helping initiatives, generative and protective instincts intermingled as participants attempted to recreate positive experiences for their peers while shielding them from harm and destruction. As Paul (survivor) noted, "We feel it's important that we tell our stories so that before someone goes into an ex-gay program, they have a better picture of what they probably will experience." Brad (ascetic) similarly affirmed, "I want to build safe church spaces where kids can explore their faith *within* a church community and not feel threatened within the church – the way that I did." This ethic of helping one's peers reflects the common archetype of the 'wounded healer'. It involves adopting a mode of 'being for the other' and entails a sense of responsibility to the community the suffering (Frank, 1995).

In all cases, the impulse to serve was motivated by a shared sense of capacity, empathy, and obligation. Having gone through this experience themselves, participants felt they had garnered specialized knowledge of sexual-moral crisis that enabled them to advise and assist others. As Todd (ascetic) noted, "God has sensitized me to the plight of somebody else and I can understand what it's to walk in their shoes and maybe I can give them a helping hand." Charles (ex-gay) similarly stated: "I understand what they're going through... because I'm a former homosexual... I am just trying to help other people with the skills and knowledge that have been passed on to me." The impulse to serve also reflected the human capacity for love and the bonds of empathy that arise amongst those beset by suffering (Frank, 1995). It revealed a profound concern for the wellbeing of others and a desire to help those in pain. As Theo explained, there is

great joy in being able “to take something that was bad in your life and use it to try to help other people who struggle with the same thing.”

This impulse to serve also reflected a desire for reciprocity and a sense of obligation to various institutions. As Mauss (1950/1990) explained, the logic of the gift dictates that those who have received support and assistance from others will generally feel compelled to give back. After redress, a number of ascetic, ex-gay, and gay men felt obligated to continue the tradition of service from which they had personally benefitted. Amongst believers, this moral imperative was reinforced by the Christian emphasis on ‘good works’⁷⁰ and the sense of having been called to action by the divine. As Charles (ex-gay) noted, “I felt like it was my calling to go and help other men... [and] women... who are struggling with SSA.” Recalling his initiation into ex-gay ministry leadership, Rodney similarly stated, “I knew God had called me into something... God said, ‘You’re the man. You go.’” The tendency for participants to adopt a mode of ‘being for the other’ in the wake of redress was thus largely over-determined. It issued from an initial sense of empowerment and insight and was further reinforced by a sense of obligation, reciprocity, empathy, and divine calling.

Leaders, advocates, and critics unequivocally affirmed that working to improve the lives of other same-sex attracted Christians or help those in crisis navigate a dark and troubling phase of life was a highly satisfying experience. As Todd (ascetic) noted, “There’s nothing that thrills me more than to find somebody that’s just about ready to end it all... and [knowing] I really helped him.” Jed (ex-gay) similarly described the sense of having positively impacted “*generations* of lives and families” as extremely rewarding. For advocates and critics, having improved the conditions of same-sex attracted men in the church or exposed the dangers of particular redressive programs was likewise a source of immense pride and satisfaction. Paul (survivor), for example, was pleased to know that his organization had inspire certain ex-gay leaders to rethink their intervention practices and acknowledge the harms experienced by some past clients. He noted, “I’ve done more than I expected to do with that, so I have a certain level of contentment.” For Walter, seeing a shift in the sexual attitudes of his Christian peers proved similarly rewarding: “you begin to see people *get it* and you recognize that... [they no longer] see homosexuals as a *threat*.”

However, this line of work was also described as socially and emotionally challenging. Those who worked to promote the equality and dignity of same-sex attracted men and women in

the church noted that their efforts were often frustrated by deeply ingrained homonegative attitudes. As Walter (ascetic) explained, Christians often expressed an unwillingness to explore this topic and frequently invalidated his insights as a result of his sexual past: “You have this element that’s like, ‘Well, why should we listen to you? You’re just a sinner!’” Rodney (ex-gay) similarly noted that ignorance and homonegative attitudes frequently preclude thoughtful discussions of sexual diversity within the church: “there’s still a negative stigma”. Josiah (survivor) also described how advocating for better treatment for LGBT persons in the Anglican church brought him into conflict with both conservative Christians and his gay peers.

Those involved in ex-gay leadership also confronted immense social resistance. They explained that there was a great deal of political opposition to the idea that same-sex attracted men could reclaim their inherent heterosexuality. As Charles (ex-gay) explained, ex-gay ministry programs and the discourses they promote are generally ill-received within secular society: “We’re black-balled in the mainstream mental health communities.” Jed (ex-gay) similarly noted that ex-gay leaders face a great deal of resistance to their efforts: “It’s a very, very tough ministry to be in. There’s a lot being squelched and censored about this message of ‘change is possible, for some’”. Ex-gay leaders particularly resented critics who construed their attempts to help individuals overcome unwanted same-sex attraction as acts of intolerance or discrimination. Jed noted that such negative portrayals of his work were deeply upsetting: “[it] brings me sorrow, and, somewhat, anger.” Charles similarly stated that these accusations were both offensive and preposterous, noting, “Anyone who knows the people who do this work understands that we deeply love... people with same-sex attraction because, well... we *are* those people.”

Those who attempted to bring Christian and LGBT communities and intuitions together in support of same-sex attracted Christians found themselves working within a particularly volatile socio-political landscape. In this field of radically divergent attitudes and understandings, mentors, critics, and advocates confronted various forms of resistance in their attempts to help individuals or initiate institutional reforms. In this intensely charged political sphere, simply initiating a dialogue about sexual diversity proved socially and politically contentious and often wrought denigration and delegitimization from conservative Christians and affirming liberals alike. As Walter (ascetic) noted, “I’m looked at very sceptically by the church but... I’m also looked at by the gay community as a traitor... I’m on a tight wire... I need to pussy-foot around and sugar-coat [everything]... it’s really not a comfortable place!” Josiah

(survivor) similarly described how his attempts to advocate for better treatment for LGBT persons in the Anglican Church brought him into conflict with both conservative Christians and his gay peers. Brad's refusal to promote any particular mode of redress in his counselling work (be it heterosexual recover, gay emancipation, devout celibacy, or an alternative arrangement) also left him estranged from both conservative Christians institutions and affirming organizations: "[it] put us in a weird middle ground where everyone hated us... because we didn't play by the political rules of either side!" He noted that while the conservative nature of his theology alienated him from affirming institutions, which he characterized as "ridiculously liberal", his refusal to cast gay relationships as against the will of God brought him into conflict with conservative Christian leaders. He explained: "[Some of our clients] got married... [some] said... 'I'm going to be celibate'... And some got married to someone of the same gender... We consider *all* of those successful outcomes, which made our [conservative] donors and supporters *furious*." As Brad explained, navigating this space of "conflicting loyalties" was a profoundly strenuous process that required an exhausting level of diplomacy. As they tried to improve the relationship between Christian and LGBT communities and open up new modes of support for men in crisis, these individuals struggled to be heard and respected by anyone on either side of this moral, spiritual, and ideological divide.

Working within the politically charged climate of sexual-moral redress thus posed distinct social and emotional challenges. In this fractured and polemic space, taking a stand for or against particular ways of thinking, feeling, or being brought participants into conflict with those who promoted alternative understandings of the good, right, and true. Leaders, advocates, and activists were forced to contend with forces of resistance, delegitimization, and opposition in the course of their work and had to cope with their marginal status relative to particular institutional entities. In addition to such socio-political challenges, those working directly with men and women experiencing sexual-moral crisis had to deal with the psychological and emotional burden of being exposed to innumerable stories of harm, pain, and suffering – something those without formal mental health training were ill-equipped to manage. As Paul (survivor) reported, "Meeting people who are *so* battered by bad theology and oppression... [is] really painful... I'm not a counsellor... [and] it weighs on me... It's just so desperately sad." Yet, despite the many challenges and sacrifices associated with this type of work, the satisfaction of helping others combined with the sense of doing 'God's work' kept participants engaged in the

redressive sphere. As Charles (ex-gay) noted: “I could have chosen a career that would bring me more fame and notoriety... [But] I didn’t do that because I felt called to this.” Brad (ascetic) similarly reported, “I knew it would be a tremendous sacrifice, personally, emotionally, financially [laughs], career-wise, and yet we [he and his wife] knew that we were called to... [this line of work] and we stepped out into that.”

For those engaged in mentorship, leadership, and advocacy, serving others and promoting social change became an important part of who they are and why they exist. The ability to help others and serve God through a unique calling imparted immense value to participants’ lives and experiences of suffering. The pain they endured was not in vain. Through this challenging life event, they had gained the insight, experience, and impetus needed to help others and transform discriminatory institutions. They became “modern-day Christian soldiers and sacrificial lambs” (O’Brien, 2004, p. 194), possessed of a unique capacity to transform the lives and circumstances of other same-sex attracted Christians. In sum, while the acute distress phase had passed, sexual-moral crisis left an indelible mark on participants that tied them to the community of sufferers. Crisis was not simply a feature of the past. Although it had, in some ways, been resolved, it ultimately had no end. Below, I describe how the complexity of this experience was compounded by the diverse array of gains and losses attributed to this extraordinary life event.

Looking Back: The Global Significance of Sexual-Moral Crisis

“Often we have a pressure to say things are all good or all bad, but... [if] we can celebrate what was good while also acknowledging what was bad – I think that is very important.” – Brad

By the time of interview, participants had gained the distance necessary to reflect on the significance of sexual-moral crisis as a whole and the role this experience had played in shaping their lives and selves. Ultimately, they characterized the legacy of sexual-moral crisis in terms of both losses and gains. The costs of this experience – what marked it as a challenging, painful, and difficult life event – were defined in terms of social losses (a total of 10 participants), diminished wellbeing (3 participants), and a sense of having wasted valuable years of life in a state of suffering, mystification, and unwellness (11 participants). All six survivors (Mason, Matt, Mitch, Ned, Paul and Josiah), three ascetics (Brad, Seth, and Todd), and one ex-gay man (Theo) described the social losses and challenges wrought by crisis as a significant negative product of this experience. Three of the men (Theo, Paul, and Seth) lamented the negative impact this experience had on their relationships with loved ones⁷¹ and gay survivors unanimously

pointed to the difficulties of living in a culture where homonegativity and heterosexuality were rampant. As Mitch reported, “The big negative thing of homosexuality is the homophobia that’s still present in our society.” However, as noted in Chapter 12, gay men were not the only ones impacted by homonegativity and experiences of social delegitimization. As an ascetic man, Todd affirmed that this stigma was the “hardest” part of being a gay man and Walter (also ascetic) lamented the fact that his social status would presumably always be ‘tainted’ by his ongoing desires and past homosexual behaviour. For one ascetic man (Brad) and two gay survivors (Josiah and Mason), discrimination in the workplace proved to be a regrettable aspect of this experience. Brad noted, “Being as honest as I am about my sexuality and my story was probably *not* the best career move... my sexual identity *does* impact my ability to get hired... to volunteer... which is frustrating at times.” Josiah also feared that his sexuality might limit his opportunities within the Anglican Church: “That might make my potential ordination... uncomfortable - the fact that I’m an out gay man.” Even in secular society, Mason reported that he had “lost jobs” because of his sexual identity. For these men, the social implications of sexual-moral crisis loomed large in their global assessment of this experience.

Costs to personal wellbeing were also constructed as significant negative consequences of this experience. One survivor (Paul) and two ascetic men (Todd and Adam) lamented the damage this experience had done to their psychological, emotional, physical, and sexual wellbeing. Todd noted that sexual-moral crisis had wreaked havoc on his emotional health and physical vitality: “I think it’s prematurely aged me... it puts me through mood swings a lot.” Adam similarly affirmed that the stress of sexual-moral crisis had damaged his psychological health and contributed to his persistent lack of vitality: “[I] have wondered whether... the *spiritual* conflict was a significant factor in being low on stamina... [whether] there is a connection between my sexual repression and having a nervous disorder.” Adam regretted that this struggle had kept him from enjoying his own sexuality. He noted: “One thing is [the] frustration of ... ‘why does everybody else get to do this thing but I can’t?’” Paul simply stated that the entire ordeal had been psychologically, emotionally, and physically “exhausting” and had prevented him from enjoying the sort of unreflective, joyful sexual pleasure others seemed to experience. Here, the deleterious impact of sexual-moral crisis on various aspects of personal wellbeing is construed as an important negative outcome of this event.

Lastly, a number of participants likened the experience of their sexual-moral crisis to an existential thief that had robbed them of years of health, happiness, truth, and contentment. Three survivors (Paul, Matt, and Mason), three ascetic men (Walter, Seth, and Todd), and all five ex-gay men (Charles, Jed, Theo, Rodney, and Jordan) spoke regrettably of years lost to unwellness, dissatisfaction, fear, anxiety, and self-hatred. Survivors particularly lamented years wasted trying to repress or alter their sexual desires. As Paul (survivor) explained, “there’s this nine year gap there... that I lost because I was spinning my wheel... I’m 46 and I almost feel like, wait - what? Where did the life go?” Conversely, ex-gay men bemoaned past gay relationships and their participation in LGB communities, which, as Charles explained, were years wasted in “unwholeness or unwellness”. For ascetics, past homoerotic experiences and ex-gay ministry encounters were constructed as equally regrettable, as neither had engendered lasting peace or wellbeing. Men across all participant groups thus lamented the amount of time it had taken them to resolve sexual-moral crisis and attain their particular vision of the good life. Looking back, they wished they had avoided particular redressive perils and years lost to suffering, fracture, unhappiness, and deception. In doing so, they highlighted how the very strategies that were most fruitful for some individuals proved detrimental and regrettable for others.

In these statements, participants provided insight into what was most at stake in the experience of sexual-moral crisis: interpersonal belonging, social status, self-esteem, and personal wellbeing. Yet, participants also invariably highlighted ways in which their lives and selves had been improved by the experience of sexual-moral crisis and homoeroticism. Four survivors (Matt, Paul, Josiah, and Ned) and two ex-gay men (Jed and Jordan) described how this experience had enhanced their general capacity for critical reflection. Matt and Paul described having gained valuable insight into the forces of oppression, inequality, coercion, and injustice that shape human life. As Paul explained: “Because of my experiences I am... more aware than perhaps the average gay white guy about privilege... it’s helped make me become a deeper thinker and not just take things at face value.” Josiah noted that this entire experience had been a valuable lesson in the dangers of blind obedience to authority and the importance of scepticism and suspended judgement: “Once I started thinking in terms of oppression... Pandora’s Box was opened... [I became] much less moralistic.” Ned similarly affirmed that this experience had taught him to think more critically about religion and other supposed sources of absolute ‘truth’. Jed and Jordan also appreciated that crisis had provided them with an opportunity to critically

reflect on their values and beliefs. As Jed noted, “This struggle caused me to really... dig down deep in my soul, my values, my morals, what I believed about myself, about God, about family, about life, about babies, about men – being a man, being a woman.” Here, sexual-moral crisis was credited with having enhanced participants’ willingness and ability to reflect on received wisdom and identify forces of oppression and coercion in everyday life.

Three survivors (Mason, Mitch, and Josiah), three ascetics (Brad, Walter, and Adam) and one ex-gay man (Rodney) also described how this experience taught them to value difference and diversity and helped them to appreciate the profound human capacity for love, beauty, and empathy. Mason, Josiah, and Adam felt homoeroticism had made them privy to forms of beauty lost on their heterosexual peers. As Adam explained, “Part of me feels it’s a positive... [noticing that] there are real good lookin’ creatures out there called men.” Mitch, Josiah, Rodney, and Brad also noted that working through their own experiences of otherness allowed them to better appreciate and value human diversity. As Mitch affirmed, “I realize that I’m different and it’s given me the capacity to respect diversity and to respect people who are different from me.” Rodney similarly reported, “Globally, it’s made me... more aware of just how different we are and just how much God celebrates those differences.” Walter and Josiah further described how this struggle had attuned them to the profound generosity of and empathy of their peers. Walter explained: “There were some really humanitarian types of things that came out of it... these individuals were... able to understand me and [willing to] lend time for understanding me.” Josiah similarly noted how the support of others during this challenging time sensitized him to the lighter side of human nature: “There have been times in my life where I felt so broken that all I can do is sit there and blubber and feel... completely helpless and powerless, and people have chosen to be present.” Here, participants constructed sexual-moral crisis as having better attuned them to the beauty and generosity of their fellow human beings.

One survivor (Josiah), two ascetics (Walter and Todd), and two ex-gay men (Theo and Rodney) noted how this experience increased their ability to empathise with those who suffer, whether it be as a result of sexual conflict or other life challenges. Theo and Josiah explained that they had grown more “compassionate” to the plight of others and Todd noted that he developed “much more empathy” as a result of this experience. For these men, personal struggle had attuned them to the challenges and hardships that unite humankind. In addition to fostering empathy and compassion, three survivors (Mason, Brad, and Josiah), two ascetic men (Walter

and Todd), and two ex-gay individuals (Jed and Theo) noted that personal experiences of fear, desperation, and suffering throughout this ordeal had inspired them to try and make the world a better place – not only for other same-sex attracted Christians, but for all those living in a state of alienation or oppression. As Brad noted, “My experiences in life deeply inform my passion for social justice... that comes out of my own... history of struggles and experiences with being excluded and harmed.” Josiah similarly stated: “I’m much more willing to stick my neck out... when I see something... oppressive ... if I hadn’t grown up in a fundamentalist environment, I wouldn’t feel the need to speak so much about the GLTB issues.” Through crisis, these participants were inspired to become champions of human rights and engaged citizens. As Todd noted, “If there’s any good to all this, it’s [that] God has sensitized me to the plight of somebody else... I can understand what it is to walk in their shoes and maybe... give them a helping hand.”

Lastly, for six of the men (3 ascetics and three ex-gay men) crisis had engendered spiritual growth. These individuals described how sexual-moral crisis had ultimately brought them into closer relationship with to the Lord and clarified the importance of faith and obedience in the pursuit the good life. Seth (ascetic) noted: “This is the one thing that drives me to my knees before God... it’s the one thing I cannot work through on my own. I have to have a relationship with God in order to work through this.” Todd (ascetic) similarly explained, “It probably has brought me... closer... to God... so in that way, maybe I can glorify it.” Rodney (ex-gay) echoed this sentiment, noting: “If I had never struggled with same-sex attraction, I probably would not have the depth of relationship with God that I have.” Here, personal suffering is construed as a path to spiritual growth and obedience. As Charles noted, “The Bible says that Christians go through quite a bit of suffering... to make us closer to the Lord.”

Thus, while sexual-moral crisis proved to be a trying and painful experience, it also helped participants attain an enhanced state of cognitive, moral, and spiritual development. With the reflective distance afforded by time and the passing of acute crisis, participants were able to identify experiences of positive gains and personal growth embedded in this difficult life experience. In doing so, they transformed crisis from a wholly destructive experience into one marked by variety and complexity and mitigated feelings of senseless suffering. As Jordan noted, “You can look at something as a blessing or a curse. And I’d rather look at something as... a blessing and not a curse.” Sexual-moral crisis thus defies easy categorization as tragedy or

triumph. It was characterized by a rich matrix of gains and losses - of growth and destruction. As Paul described, "It's definitely complicated my life, which is both good and bad."

The Good Life (in all its Complex, Challenging, and Unfinished Glory)

"My life story is a mess, and yet, here I am. And it's good." – Josiah

For Christian men, the development of same-sex attraction was invariably a difficult experience. In all cases, it entailed loss, challenge, and suffering. No one escaped unscathed. At times, participants imagined how their lives would have been different if they had never experienced same-sex attraction. They allowed themselves to engage in subjunctive speculation (Good, 1994), wondering 'what if' they had lived ordinary and uncomplicated lives devoid of sexual-moral crisis and its attendant pain, suffering, and alienation. As Paul (survivor) explained, "Sometimes I feel sad. I just kind of wished I lived a basic, simple, normal life." Rodney (ex-gay) echoed this statement, noting: "There's a part of me that's like, 'I just want to be normal... have a wife and two kids and a dog and be settled in a house and go to church on Sundays and just be normal.' You know?" They also wondered about the path their lives might have taken if they had grown up in a more secular, liberal setting. Adam (ascetic) wondered, "What would life have been like if I [wasn't]... brought up in a fundamentalist denomination... [and] told masturbation is forbidden and gay sex is worse? Would I have been able to give myself permission to enter the gay lifestyle?"

In these subjunctive exercises, participants mourned the life that could have been. Yet, while they dreamt of another life, they also affirmed their satisfaction with their current existence and acknowledged the futility of trying to re-write the past. Participants also consoled themselves with the knowledge that their lives might have been much worse if they had confronted certain challenges or embraced particular modes of redress. For example, while he lamented his lack of sexual fulfillment, Adam (ascetic) imagined that pursuing homosexuality would have culminated in a much worse state of affairs: "I've read enough stories about unhappy homosexual lives ... [to know] I might have been worse off had I not grown up as I did [Christian]... [maybe] gotten AIDS... had a series of failed relationships." Jordan (ex-gay) similarly imagined how his life might have been much worse off had he embraced his desires: "Praise God... [that I am not] dealing with drug addiction and alcohol addiction ... unhappiness ... depression - the gamut of emotional issues... [that] I am HIV negative and do not have Hepatitis C!"

For gay survivors, thought experiments involving heterosexual family life engendered similar images of pain and suffering. Matt noted that although he sometimes confronts homonegativity, he imagines he would have been very unhappy living as a heterosexual man: “two kids and a wife and a mortgage... that seems like it can be a really miserable experience, so in a way I feel like my sexuality has... saved me from that.” Josiah similarly affirmed that if he had not been forced to confront this issue after being suspended from Christian college, he too might have become an unhappily married man: “I would probably... be the associate pastor of a conservative Evangelical congregation - married and extraordinarily frustrated.” Thus, while subjunctive exercises allow the men to indulge in fantasies of a less complex life, they also reinforce the extent to which participants have succeeded in making the best of their situation and avoiding a life of profound suffering, pain, and frustration.

While they might have preferred a less complicated life, participants accepted their circumstances and congratulated themselves on having constructed lives and selves that were overwhelmingly good, normal, dignified, hopeful, and satisfying in spite of significant challenges. They were satisfied with their handling of sexual-moral crisis and proud of the lives and selves they had constructed in the wake of redress. They had moved past much of the chaos, suffering, and fear of the crisis period and come to occupy a space of peace, contentment, and optimism. Jed (ex-gay), for example, noted that his life was “very satisfying”: “I *like* the life that I have. I *want* the life that I have.” Mason (survivor) similarly reported, “I’m having a wonderful life... if I was to die today, I could die a happy man!” For Charles (ex-gay), life was nothing short of a dream come true: “I’m living my dream. It’s what I wanted for my life.”

Yet, as noted above, sexual-moral crisis remained a part of participants’ lives after redress. There was a chronicity and perpetuity to their struggle and while they have been able to create meaningful and satisfying lives in the wake of redress, they continued to live with a history of suffering that cast a shadow over their existence. As Paul (survivor) simply stated, “I still feel like there’s this measure of undoing the damage”. Healing in the lives of participants was both actualized and emergent. The men continued to aspire to an enhanced state of psychological, emotional, spiritual, sexual, social, and moral wellbeing while simultaneously revelling in the level of personal contentment they had attained. As Josiah (survivor) noted, “I still *have* those moments where everything isn’t completely at a state of peace inside, but it’s *far, far* better.” Despite being satisfied with their current lives and selves, they continued to pursue

ongoing personal development in a manner congruent with Western ideals of continuous growth (see Becker, 1999). The obligation to serve others also continued to link participants to their own painful past. The call to service was felt as a moral imperative, requiring participants to give back to others until they felt satisfied that they had adequately transferred their insights and skills to the community of suffering and repaid their debt to the healing community. In sum, while redress signalled a radical break with the crisis period, this struggle continued to shape participants' current lives and selves in a number of ways.

Ricoeur's (1990/1992) concept of the 'ethical aim' proves fruitful in making sense of participants' lives at the time of interview. In redress, participants had reoriented their lives toward a distinct 'ethical intention' that was defined by particular understandings of the 'good' and the 'obligatory' and an inherent motivational force (Ricoeur, 1990/1992). Where crisis and suffering were tied to a loss of hope and volition (Crites, 1986; Frank, 1995) – what Ricoeur refers to as the destruction of all “capacity for acting, of being-able-to-act” (p. 190) – redress represented the return of the future and the restoration of personal initiative. Participants constructed a new vision of the good life and reoriented their actions toward new moral projects. With the exception of Matt, this idealized image of self and life was greatly influenced by Christian themes and images. As Theo noted, “Being a Christian means... you strive to be Christ-like.” Yet, it was also oriented toward a host of other earthy or secular pursuits, including parenthood and economic success.

Ricoeur defines living well as “aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions” (p. 172). As ascetics, ex-gay men, and gay survivors pursued 'the good life' (variously defined), their efforts brought them immense satisfaction despite the fact that they continuously fell short of perfection. By investing themselves in particular moral projects, they imparted structure and direction to their praxis and restored a sense of meaning and order to their everyday lives. This commitment to the pursuit of the good was, in and of itself, a remarkable healing event that infused participants' lives with purpose and allowed them to reconnect with 'the good'. As Ricoeur (1990/1992) reminded us, “The right praxis... [is] its own end, all the while aiming at an ulterior end” (p. 173). Although participants might never succeed in fully overcoming the wounds of the past, ridding themselves of temptation, or attaining an idealized state of moral, spiritual, psychological, or emotional development, they were nonetheless able to rejoice in the progress they had made and revel in the fact that their efforts represent an homage

to what is good and true. As Brad (ascetic) explained, “Jesus is the truth and if I stay close to *him*, and navigate my relationship with him then things will be good... I’ll continue to make mistakes but I’ll trend towards good.”

Here, the pursuit of the good life – of a true, moral and righteous existence – is, in itself, a source of immense dignity, meaning, and enjoyment. As Theo (ex-gay) noted, “My ability to see myself as ‘successful’ doesn’t hinge on my being able to say... that I will be temptation free and that I will never struggle.” Although the future remains uncertain and the potential for mistakes and errors abounds, the sense that one is progressing in the ‘right’ direction helps quell the threat of fear, anxiety, and imperfection and leaves participants feeling confident in their lives and selves. As Rodney (ex-gay) affirmed: “Tomorrow, anything could happen. [But] is that going to eradicate... all the strides that I have made?... No! ... I have things that *nobody* can take away from me no matter what happens.” Confident in their ethical aims, participants draw immense dignity, joy, and pride from any indication of progress toward these idealized ends. As Rodney (ex-gay) explained, “Success for me is something that continues to be ongoing... it’s not about getting there, it’s about the journey to it... to be able to constantly grow in something.” Like the mythical figure of Sisyphus as described by Camus (1942/1991), participants revelled in the “internal goods” (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, p. 176) eminent to the practice of the good despite the fact that aspects of their aims remained unrealized or incomplete. As Walter (ascetic) simply stated, the ‘good life’ involves “moving... towards holiness, towards doing what is right... (but) you know, none of us fit that mould perfectly.”

The second half of Ricoeur’s (1990/1992) definition of ethical intent highlights to the social and political contours of the good life. He insisted that the pursuit of the good is not a solely personal endeavour, but involves an obligation to help others and support ‘just institutions.’ Here, friendship, service, and the promotion of social justice form part of the “unfolding of the wish to live well” (p. 183). As participants worked to honour their commitments to family and church, assist others in crisis, or reform prejudicial institutions, they exhibited their commitment to an ethical aim that was not solely individual, but social and political. As Todd (ascetic) affirmed, “We’re here for more than a purpose to serve ourselves – to leave the world a little better.” Living well thus involves acknowledging particular obligations and taking on a just amount of shared burden – it requires that individuals recognize the ‘mutual indebtedness’ that is the basis of all social life. To the extent that they succeeded in serving

others and promoting just causes, participants not only attained a meaningful sense of personal satisfaction, but also left their mark on individuals, families, and institutions (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, p. 196). In service of others, their struggle became a part of something much larger. Their efforts contributed to an enduring good and a grand virtue and conferred a sort of ‘immortality’ on their lives through a legacy of just service.

In sum, life after redress involved a fervent pursuit of the good on an individual, interpersonal, and societal level. It revolved around what Jed referred to as the quest for “a more noble life – the true way.” Here, life and self were given new meaning and order as they became reoriented toward the noble pursuit of a particular ethical aim. Although participants continued to live with various losses and face numerous challenges, the pursuit of the good and just provided the men with a remarkable sense of contentment, security, and confidence in their everyday lives. By dedicating themselves to righteousness, truth, and service, they also succeeded in restoring a sense of dignity, esteem, and value to the self despite past mistakes and ongoing challenges. As Ricoeur (1990/1992) noted, “Self-esteem is the primordial reflexive moment of the aim of the good life” (p. 188). Where participants once considered themselves monsters, the pursuit of an individualized ethical aim has transformed them into moral creatures, dedicated to what is right, true, just, and good.

⁶³ Obviously, if we count their participation in the current project, all participants can be said to have engaged in such acts of aesthetic representation. However, here I am pointing more to a personal impulse to construct a fixed record of personal experience.

⁶⁴ Interestingly, Mason began working with an organization for men living with HIV and AIDS and Jordan became a Christian pastor after redress. Thus, while these men are not involved in services specifically targeting individuals struggling with sexual-moral crisis, they too are involved in the service of their peers (fellow Christians or gay men). In this sense, the call to serve one’s ‘peers’, variously defined, was almost a universal outcome of sexual-moral crisis.

⁶⁵ Charles actively differentiated his own therapeutic practice from that common in more religious-based programs, which he felt lacked therapeutic expertise and proper training: “There needs to be a *therapist* running these groups and not *just* religious people.”

⁶⁶ Again, the division between mentors and advocates or critics is not fixed or rigid. At times, critics and advocates would offer advice to struggling parents or youths they encountered in the course of their lives. For example, Walter noted:

I have someone who’s communicating with me now (online), a mother, and uh, she says, ‘Well I’m not going to stop loving him’ and I said, ‘No, absolutely not... he has to respect your, your environment, um, but you can always tell him and let him know that that you love and care about him very much... that God loves him and always will love him.’

⁶⁷ This is not to suggest that those who act as mentors are disengaged from the larger political scene. In addition to supporting those in crisis, Jed, Charles, Rodney, and Brad also participated in ongoing discussions, debates, and reform efforts within the Christian community and promote the destigmatization of homosexuality within the church and in increase in sexual education amongst leaders.

⁶⁸ More specifically, Walter and Todd worked to promote the dignity of same-sex attracted men in the context of the Seventh Day Adventist church, while Theo advocated for a more positive approach to homosexuality within the Baptist church.

⁶⁹ Here, he makes reference to the infamous Westboro Baptist Church, known for its extreme homonegativity and distasteful public protesting.

⁷⁰ The parable of the Good Samaritan and the other theological passages within Christian scripture reinforce the moral imperative of helping others and call on believers to serve their peers. For example, according to Galatians 5:13, “For you were called to freedom, brothers; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (New International Version).

⁷¹ Theo (ex-gay) explained that his continued estrangement from his children was the most devastating aspect of this experience. Paul (survivor) similarly noted that the failure of his marriage and divorce caused him immense, lingering pain: “It has been *very* painful emotionally.” Seth (ascetic) regretted the damage his struggle had done to his marriage and the pain it had caused his wife.

Global Conclusion

The current analysis generated a number of new insights into sexual-moral crisis in the lives of same-sex attracted Christian men, including how they navigate therapeutic decision-making and institutional supports, why certain redressive techniques prove unfruitful or damaging in the context of particular lives, how this event influences the social and spiritual world of the individual, and what mark this heroic journey leaves on participants' lives and selves. In this final chapter, I explore what this investigation adds to the existing research landscape, how it illuminates certain taken-for-granted aspects of North American culture, and what it means for service development and delivery. I close by briefly discussing the limitations of the current investigation and offering promising directions for future research.

Flow and Form: The Narrative Structure of Sexual-Moral Crisis

The current narrative analysis provides new insight into how participants made sense of experiences of homoeroticism, crisis, and redress by emplotting them according to images of emancipation, sexual healing, or devout sacrifice. Rather than simply focusing on terminal motifs, it attends to the diachronic or syntagmatic aspects of narrative (Mattingly, 1998) – how experience unfolds in time and is related to both past events, experiences, and encounters and hopes for the future. Within this narrative structure, each phase described in the preceding chapters “takes its meaning from an opposition to the elements which precede and follow it” (Mattingly, 1998, p. 41). By closely attending to life before homoeroticism, the many encounters and experiences characteristic of the redressive phase, and everyday life after redress, this analysis provides new information about aspects of sexual-moral crisis that have been frequently glossed over in existing research. Within this expanded narrative context, the meaning of crisis and healing and the significance of various redressive experiments and therapeutic encounters are enriched through the unifying properties of plot. Here, past, present, and future inform and lend significance to one another and we gain insight into the oppositions and similarities constructed by sexual ascetics, ex-gay men, and gay survivors across different events or periods.

Although this analysis highlights important differences in the experience of crisis, personal evaluations of various institutional encounters, and preferred modes of redress, it also points to a generic narrative structure common to all participants. Stories of sexual-moral crisis were invariably composed of a common set of experiential units arranged to convey a sense of growth, improvement, and betterment. A basic plot was common to all narratives, wherein the

protagonist moved from crisis through strategies grounded in oppositional thinking and denial and a necessary search for alternative forms to eventually commit themselves to a new ethical aim. Interestingly, this basic narrative structure was shared by those born as early as the 1940s and as late as the 1980s. Whereas Subhi and Geelan (2012) speculated that older individuals might have a “more difficult experience” working through sexual-moral conflict given that church and society were “much more homophobic in the past” (p. 1398), the current analysis suggests that the goals of redress and the challenges faced by men in crisis differ little between these specific eras. It remains to be seen whether this experience will prove less challenging for same-sex attracted Christian men born in more recent decades.

These narratives are stories of growth, betterment, and advancement. They are stories of healing that convey a sense of positive development across the life course. In the words of Becker (1999), they are ‘ideal’ narratives that reflect the Western preference for progress and linearity throughout one’s lifetime. Yet, upon close inspection, these tales contain a great deal of noise, chaos, and suffering and evidence a history of redressive experiments – both individual and institutional. The tidy, global narrative structure – the *story* implicit in each speech act (Todorov, 1968/1981) – was abstracted out of fractured, messy, and complex lived experiences. They are riddled with false starts, unsuccessful experiments, radical revisions, important nuances and complications that undercut any sense of tidy linearity or finality. They point to moments where hope, contentment, and peace collapse back into crisis, requiring the search for appropriate ways of thinking, feeling, and being to start anew.

By exploring experiences of sexual-moral crisis within an expanded time perspective, the current analysis reinforces the argument that redress is an ongoing process (Anderton et al., 2011; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Subhi & Geelan, 2012) and provides rich insight into the complex array of challenges, sacrifices, and gains that characterize particular modes of redress. It eschews the sense of definitiveness that is typical of reified models (see, for example, Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Creek & Dunn, 2012; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002) and introduced aspects of circularity, indeterminacy, and complexity into our understanding of crisis and redress. Although a seemingly successful approach to redress – be it ex-gay life, heterosexual marriage, Christian celibacy, or homosexuality – might inspire hope and engender satisfaction for a period of time (sometimes decades!), the current analysis suggest that this sense of peace and order can easily give way to a renewed experience of crisis and search for new

forms and figures in the face of new information or experiences, external demands, personal dissatisfaction, or changing circumstances. In the lives of same-sex attracted Christian men, redress often collapses back into chaos. Viewed through the lens of theories of experience, we see that participants experienced a series of narrative collapses (Frank, 1995) as their attempts to remake self and life encountered resistance (Kleinman, 1995) in the form of unanswered prayers, marital collapse, sexual and relational dissatisfaction, unruly sexual desires, social rejection, and spiritual angst. In such moments, promising strategies were abandoned and the search for redress began anew. By looking at the phenomenon of a sexual-moral crisis in a protracted life context, these aspects of dynamism, complexity, circularity, and reiteration are illuminated.

This is not to suggest that the experience of redress is illusory. Redress is a process of transformation. On either side of this rupture, past, present, and future are radically reconfigured and the person's experience of self and world is profoundly altered. With each redressive experiment, a new 'plan de vie' (Ricoeur, 1990/1992) emerged to guide participants' lives forward toward new ends and aspirations. The fact that this process often involved several iterations does not diminish its transformative potency. All experiences of redress were transformative and even failed resolution strategies become part of the move toward genuine truth, goodness, and satisfaction. By looking closely at each of the redressive experiments that figure in participants' narratives and the relationship between various strategies and institutional encounters, it is evident that such past redressive 'failures' were often considered vital to the eventual achievement of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness. Even where they failed to resolve crisis, these experiments provided new insights that shaped the direction of participants' lives and selves. For example, unsatisfying ex-gay ministry experiences often reinforced the immutability of homoerotic desires and legitimized the adoption of alternative strategies in the minds of both participants and their loved ones and encounters with secular mental health experts often introduced powerful seeds of doubt and scepticism that influenced subsequent encounters with ex-gay ministries and experiences of sexual celibacy. Unsatisfactory experiences with heterosexuality, homoeroticism, sexual reorientation, ex-gay life, celibacy, or divine supplication are thus parts of the story that sees participants move from ignorance and suffering to enlightenment and wellness. They reshape the imaginary landscape, introducing new possibilities and foreclosing others.

By exploring the movements between various strategies and situations, the current analysis also succeeds in imparting a semblance of order to the redressive process and making sense of the dizzying array of resolution strategies catalogued in past research. It reveals how participants' early coping strategies tended to reflect a rigid form of oppositional thinking that limited their efficacy and prompted the turn toward more active, public, and integrative techniques. Having recognized the need for a 'third' way beyond this moral binary, participants subsequently evidenced a clear preference for strategies of realignment (those where the individual seeks to align himself with local conceptualizations of the good, right, normal, and true) that were minimally disruptive to their social, spiritual, and ideological existence (namely, sexual reorientation or devout celibacy). Only in instances where strategies of realignment proved dissatisfying were participants willing to transcend previous understandings of self and world in pursuit of order, meaning, integrity, normalcy, peace, and goodness. By exploring how these movements and transformations play out over time, we gain important insight into the force of cognitive habits, cultural traditions, and social conformity pressures and individual resistance to 'affirming' approaches to redress.

The current analysis thus cautions against assumptions of simple linearity and finality and reveals important limitations of static investigations focused solely on participants' present ways of thinking, feeling, and being. In the process of narrative smoothing, which involves selecting, combining, and sequencing particular events to create a meaningful story (Frank, 1995; Mattingly, 1998), a wealth of experience was condensed into a particular plot that conveyed a certain message (Frank, 1995; Mattingly, 1998). Narrators necessarily glossed over certain challenges, failed strategies, false-starts, and experiences of loss and ongoing suffering to reinforce the central theme of the narrative: I have become well. Yet, by pressing for nuance and detail, the researcher was able to highlight a history of selves and sexualities that preceded the current iteration and gain insight into the relationship between past experiments and current forms. A static glance reveals only a particular rendering of reality and fails to convey the many constructions of self and world that have preceded the current moment. Such ahistorical and de-contextual analyses also obscure the significance and import of past iterations and fail to consider how they shape subsequent redressive attempts and imbue the present form with meaning. This history of representations and the dialectics between past and present selves and worlds cannot be ignored as the present derives much of its significance from its position in this

series of existential experiments and from the opposition between the self at the beginning of the story and the end. Simply put, the meaning of crisis and redress cannot be fully understood outside of this narrative whole.

While this narrative approach highlights the limitations of static analyses and provides new insight into the nuances of how crisis and redress unfold over time, it also introduces new challenges. Recognizing that self and reality are not fixed but fluid prevents us from reifying current ways of thinking, feeling, and being into stable truths or ultimate resolutions. The idea of a clearly discernable endpoint in the experience of sexual-moral crisis is negated by a wealth of evidence suggesting that current forms could be supplanted by new ways of thinking, feeling, and being in the wake of renewed dissatisfaction, changes in sexual desire or marital status, or a resurgence of religious orthodoxy in the face of personal catastrophe, old age, failing health, or other transformative life events. Yet, despite this inherent instability, it is highly unlikely that themes of monstrosity and inherent evil – so common in the early moments of crisis – will ever again come to dominate participants' constructions of self. As Todorov (1968/1981) noted, the transformative potency of particular metaphors, images, and plots precludes a return to the past and prevents participants from slipping back into a state of monstrosity.

Nuances: New Insights From an Experience-Centered Analysis

The current work also provides new insights into particular aspects of sexual-moral crisis and ex-gay ministry experiences. To my knowledge, it is the first to highlight frequent experiences of family dysfunction, difference, rejection, alienation, and sexual victimization in the early lives of same-sex attracted men who experience sexual-moral crisis and to describe the tension between order and anomie inherent in participants' early childhoods. The current analysis also provides detailed information on the context within which sexual-moral crisis developed. Like Wolkomir (2006) and Gerber (2011), the current analysis suggests that the experience of sexual-moral crisis in the lives of same-sex attracted Christian men can not be accounted for solely by reference to religious homonegativity. Secular homonegativity, widespread heteronormativity, the prominence of the AIDS epidemic, a lack of sex-positive influences and affirming LGB models, and the sense that homosexuality was antithesis to personal aspirations all contributed to the denigration of this condition. Clearly, conservative Christianity is not the last bastion of homonegativity in North American culture or the sole cause of anxiety and despair in the lives of believers who experience same-sex desires. While Christian

moral codes play an important role in the experience of crisis, individual experiences and the larger socio-cultural and historical context often magnify this sense of disruption and intensify personal suffering.

This work also outlines how the experience of sexual-moral crisis and the search for redress is not a purely ‘internal’ phenomenon (as frequently noted in the literature), but a socio-political processes informed by local attitudes and force networks. It details how participants turned to others in search of guidance and how these trusted individuals not only revealed new possibilities for their lives and selves, but also worked to influence the decision process. It also details how sexual-moral crisis reverberated throughout families and communities and introduces a host of important actors and stakeholders who both shaped, and were shaped by, the experience of crisis, including wives, siblings, children, Christian peers, religious experts, male lovers and romantic partners, LGB acquaintances, and secular friends. By embracing a situated approach to personal experience, the current analysis reveals the dense socio-political context of crisis and the extent to which various forms of interest coalesce around experiences of sexual-moral struggle. Throughout this experience, we see others using their social influence to maintain the status quo and promote particular ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Yet, where certain approaches prove wanting or harmful, we also see friends, family members, and loved ones adapting their sexual, moral, and spiritual understandings in an effort to preserve valued bonds.

Tracing how others responded to crisis and interacted with participants over time reveals a number of nuanced experiences ranging from outright rejection, condemnation, and violence to tempered acceptance, uneasy alliances, and conditional support and unconditional love and acceptance. The infrequency with which participants experienced outright rejection reminds us of the contextualized nature of moral evaluations and the power of love and connection. Throughout the narratives, ethical dogmas were often transcended or abandoned as individuals confronted the possibility of losing or hurting loved ones. Like participants, families and communities were transformed by these experiences as they embraced a variety of means of dealing with sexual-moral crisis. In all cases, the social situation of the participant was transformed by crisis, yet images of rejection, alienation, and loss do not do justice to the nuances of this process. Some heterosexual marriages ended in pain and suffering while others persisted and improved over time. Certain relationships were forever lost while others weathered this moral challenge and grew stronger as a result. In many cases, valuable new connections

were made as participants worked to cleanse their networks of homonegative influences and surround themselves with supportive allies. The challenges survivors faced in melding into LGB communities and relationships were of particular note and warrant much more research and practical intervention. Yet, it is a mistake to assume that only those who leave the church to embrace gay identities and relationships experience social losses and challenges.

This work also provides a wealth of information about the role of institutions in the resolution of sexual-moral crisis and experiences of ex-gay ministry programs in particular. Although the idea that same-sex attracted Christian men are forced into ex-gay ministry programs has become part of the popular imagination, often figuring prominently in media reports (Gerber, 2011)⁷² and occasionally appearing in academic investigations (Flentje et al., 2013), participants in the current investigation described themselves as having freely chosen to participate in such interventions. As Charles noted, “It was completely a personal decision.” While Christian leaders, peers, or family members often suggested these resources and encouraged the men to participate, they maintained that this decision was ultimately driven by their own sense of curiosity and feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and despair. While others played a role in this decision, personal involvement was overwhelmingly attributed to self-interest and the dream of a ‘normal’ life. As Theo noted, “It was a very personal decision but it was very much welcomed by my wife! [Laughs].” It does not, therefore, make sense to speak about the current participants as having been ‘forced’ in these programs. Yet, their involvement seems largely *over-determined* given the sociocultural context of suffering and the perceived lack of alternative options. As Josiah noted, “The final decision to do that was mine, but ... I wanted to feel productive and I wanted to know that my church, and particularly my mother, supported me and so I very gladly entered that counselling.”

As Arendt, (1971) noted, true freedom assumes the ability to imagine alternative projects and ends. Where perceived alternatives are absent, we can speak only of a highly circumscribed liberty. As Ned explained, “I was raised in a conservative Christian environment and considered myself Christian... I didn’t have any other option... in terms of finding support from conservative Christians.” Mitch similarly stated, “I lived in a society that said that gay people were less-than, and I... wasn’t ready to accept that [I was] ‘less-than.’” Here, the notion of free will versus determinism is muddled by the complexity of human experience. Although the men felt a strong pull to these services, the unthinkability of transgressing God’s will or jeopardizing

familial bonds (at least in the early stages of crisis) meant that alternatives were largely absent and ‘free choice’ was severely limited by intense social pressure and powerful ideological constraints. Matt speaks to this complexity, noting, “There was no pressure at all... I mean, [besides] society at large.” The current work also suggests that frequent portrayals of the ex-gay ministry movement (in both the literature and popular media) as invariably promising radical changes in sexual desire or a homosexual ‘cure’ are out of step with varied personal experiences and the shifting discourse of this institution which cautions against such expectations (Creek, 2013). The current narratives suggest that many leaders are sceptical about or even opposed to such expectations. Moreover, it argues that many participants embrace these programs with a variety of expectations, goals, and purposes – many of which are not related to any real hope of radically altering their desires.

As with previous investigations, participants described a host of positive and negative experiences in ex-gay ministry settings and expressed a wide variety of opinions about the helpfulness of these resources (see, for example, Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Throckmorton & Welton, 2005; Weiss et al., 2010). Yet, by attending to the participants’ initial expectations, perceptions of alternative options, and interpretations of failure, the current investigation helps to make sense of individual variations in the perceived harmfulness or helpfulness of these resources. It also helps to identify particular variables that placed individuals at increased risk of harm in ex-gay settings, including high expectations of changes in sexual desire and an inability to imagine other satisfying life alternatives. These same factors - personal expectations and the perception of alternative possibilities - also help explain why clients who fail to experience any change in their desires often nonetheless describe ex-gay ministry experiences as positive and beneficial (Gerber, 2011; Weiss et al., 2010). Those who described these services as ineffective (in altering their desires) yet beneficial (to their lives and wellbeing) were able to appropriate morally banalizing discourses and meet their needs for mutual recognition, belonging, and self-expression within ex-gay spaces while remaining highly sensitive to the diminishing returns of these resources. Such individuals left these resources having attained certain benefits without having accumulated high opportunity costs or internalized feelings of personal failure. Investigating the relationship between personal or contextual factors and reports of harm or benefit allows us to make sense of radically differing experiences in these settings and could prove helpful in preventing client harm. This topic warrants further attention.

Yet, in the end, the ex-gay ministry movement was but one of many institutions accessed by participants throughout the neophyte stage. The current investigation is the first to not only explore the multiplicity of redressive institutions consulted by individuals in the throes of sexual-moral crisis, but also to provide a dynamic account of how participants navigated this multiplicity by drawing on theories of reading (see Ricoeur, 1986/2007). The framework developed in the current work highlights the role of persuasiveness, relevance, socio-political acceptability and therapeutic efficacy in all instances of redressive decision-making and offers a cohesive and comprehensive account of the evaluative process that is applicable to numerous conflict resolution strategies. It looks at how individuals evaluate a particular proffered world and make decisions about the ethical aims that will guide their lives forward in a manner that respects the dynamic interplay between personal preferences, perceived possible, and apparent necessities.

By combining this evaluative model with an attention to contextual factors, we gain insight into the dynamic movements characteristic of the neophyte stage and the effect of past redressive attempts on subsequent decision-making. Although the current data does not lend itself to predictive modelling, certain patterns could be observed within the narratives that impart a rudimentary sense of order to this chaotic period. For example, the narratives highlight a strong initial preference for conservative Christian resources and redressive approaches that were minimally disruptive to the social and ideological landscape (ie., heterosexual restoration or devout celibacy). As sexual change has the added benefit of being normalized, it represents the ideal solution to sexual-moral crisis. Where heterosexual restoration provides a good ‘fit,’ participants eagerly embrace this mode of redress. Failing this, participants are forced to choose between celibacy and embracing an openly gay life. Those who are married inevitably choose asceticism. As Wolkomir (2004) affirmed, divorce and family separation are highly stigmatized in conservative Christian society. Marriage thus serves as a limiting factor in the neophyte stage, largely precluding the consideration of options that would threaten family unity. However, if a wife chooses to leave her husband (as in the case of Paul) or other, non-sexual challenges render the marriage unworkable (as in the case of Mason and his wife’s mental illness), this barrier is eschewed and the possibility of embracing an openly gay life re-emerges.

Attending to how single or divorced men interpreted unfruitful ex-gay ministry experiences also illuminates the redressive trajectories of those who are not married.

Participants who leave ex-gay services feeling harmed and duped enter a period of critical spiritual reflection that generally culminates in a turn away from conservative Christianity toward affirming options. By prompting a reconsideration of truth and morality, failed ex-gay ministry attempts actually facilitate engagement with affirming resources, the adoption of emancipative strategies, and the acceptance of gay identities in numerous cases. By highlighting the importance of this reflexive act, the current analysis sheds light on the counter-intuitive finding that ex-gay ministry programs often strengthen gay and lesbian identities by framing this failure as part of a radical ideological shift (Erzen, 2006; Nicolosi, Byrd & Potts, 2000; Weiss et al., 2010)⁷³. Where unsuccessful ex-gay experiences are not associated with harm or deception and no spiritual-moral crisis or reflection ensues, participants generally reframe same-sex attraction as an ongoing spiritual trial. Whether they are successful or unfruitful, beneficial or harmful, ex-gay ministry experiences are thus a key moderating factor in the redress process, greatly altering the trajectory of individual lives. Where they succeed, they transform participants' understandings of self and world. Where they fail, their ineffectiveness provides an important opening, legitimizing the consideration of alternative options in the minds of participants and, in many cases, their loved ones. Here, being able to say 'I tried' satisfies all curiosity about the possibility of change and permits a consideration of alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and being by all involved.

While a host of options were available to participants, unfruitful past experiences, the threat of social or spiritual alienation, and the force of existing interpersonal commitments thus limited the number of genuinely feasible possibilities. For many, the prospect of destroying family unity, knowingly contravening the will of God, or embracing a way of life devoid of integrity, wholeness, peace, and satisfaction is simply unthinkable. These considerations mark the frontiers of the moral imagination – the lines that cannot be crossed. Here, human creativity is hedged in by pragmatics and restrained by the prospect of unbearable sacrifices.

The current work also provides additional information about various redressive outcomes and personal experiences of healing. Rather than narrowly fixating on sexual desires, behaviours, and identities (as is common in past research), this work attends to various transformations of self and world inherent in the redressive process. It argues that significant spiritual, social, and sexual changes are experienced by ex-gay men, ascetics, and gay survivors alike and describes how a sense of meaning, order, integrity, goodness, liberation, normalcy, and empowerment are

common to all experiences of healing. The finding that participants from all three groups engendered similar benefits as a result of redress and are overwhelmingly satisfied with their lives and selves challenges the insinuation (common in the literature) that ex-gay and celibate individuals have adopted unhealthy, partial, harmful, or inferior resolution strategies (see, for example, Anderton, 2011; Ganzevoort, 2011; Super & Jacobson; Yip, 1999). Although gay survivors certainly enjoy a number of benefits associated with this strategy, the wholesale dismissal and denigration of other modes of conflict resolution is not easily supported by the current data. The results of this person-centered analysis fail to reflect Yip's (1999) image of ascetic and ex-gay men as doomed to a "life of intense alienation or even self-hatred" (p. 48) and challenges the idea that only certain modes of redress are right, healthy, and satisfying. Like survivors, ascetic and ex-gay men were able to create satisfying relationships, embed themselves in supportive communities, and construct overwhelmingly positive and integrated selves. Contrary to what research and popular culture often suggest, growth, dignity, esteem, satisfaction, joy, and love were not the sole purview of gay survivors, even if ascetic and ex-gay men continued to face various challenges and losses.

The binary construction of affirming Christian and secular psychological services as irreproachably productive and empowering and conservative Christian institutions as inherently destructive and damaging – common in the research literature and popular press (see, for example, Anderton et al., 2011; Buser et al., 2011; Johnston & Jenkins, 2006; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Super & Jacobson, 2011) - is equally unsupported by the current research. The foregoing analysis suggests that each of these institutions has the capacity to help or harm under particular circumstances, where participants' horizons of understanding, past experiences, and future aims vary greatly. Throughout the narratives, affirming congregations, ex-gay services, Conservative Christian resources, and secular mental health supports were all variously construed as spaces of development and digression, healing and suffering, connection and alienation, empowerment and oppression, assistance and incompetence. None of these institutions were devoid of experiences of stigma, harm, distress, or invalidation and none were construed as universally beneficial. The depreciation and pathologization of particular modes of redress or institutional support and the need to recognize various means of 'successfully' resolving sexual-moral crisis are further discussed below.

Despite subtle differences in how we understand this category, the current work also supports the Creek's (2013) contention that sexual asceticism represents a distinct collective identity marked by a particular understanding of the relationship between homoeroticism and the self and a unique sexual, spiritual, and social existence. In much past research, this distinction between those who embrace 'ex-gay' or 'ascetic' lives (as defined herein) has been absent. For example, in studies of ex-gay ministry experiences, clients are generally described as becoming either 'gay' or 'ex-gay' (see, for example, Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Gerber, 2011; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Wolkomir, 2006). My sense is that the failure to distinguish these two distinct ways of constructing self and world within the conservative Christian community has contributed to an immense amount of confusion, obscurity, and lack of specificity within the literature by assuming that all same-sex attracted men who believe that homosexual acts are against the will of God inhabit similar lifeworlds. Lastly, the current analysis provides a rich description of the various challenges, losses, and post-traumatic gains that characterise the everyday lives of ascetic men, ex-gay individuals, and gay survivors after redress. This reflection not only highlights the many ways in which experiences of sexual-moral conflict have indelibly shaped participants' lives and selves, but also reveals a common impulse to share one's experiences and improve the wellbeing of other same-sex attracted Christian men.

In sum, this work outlines how individuals succeeded in moving from a remarkably uniform experience of crisis through a common period of chaos and into a shared state of relative contentment, peace, wholeness, goodness, and dignity via three different redressive processes. By combining an attention to the general structure of personal narratives and the rich details of particular events, encounters, and experiences, new patterns and novel nuances emerged. However, there is a need to move beyond an internal analysis of these narratives to consider their relationship to the wider sociocultural system. Attention must be paid to how these three sexual forms are related to the wider cultural scene and how they reverberate within the current socio-political landscape of North American society. By opening my analysis onto the local context, I explore how these seemingly extraordinary experiences illuminate important aspects of North American cultural life, including dominant understandings of sexuality, self, and morality and the politics and polemics of diversity in plural societies.

Three Sexualities: A Cultural Analysis of Sexual-Moral Crisis

The current investigation highlights three sexual figures within contemporary North American society: the same-sex attracted ascetic man, the ex-gay individual, and the gay survivor. This plurality points to the fractured, contested, and polysemic nature of homoeroticism within the contemporary social landscape and to the various collective identities embraced by Christians who experience same-sex desires. It eschews the sense that same-sex attraction is a unified, singular, or closed phenomenon and powerfully illustrates the socially constructed nature of human sexuality. Although homoerotic urges are grounded in a shared corporeal capacity, the significance of these desires and the ways of thinking, feeling, and being they give rise to are human constructions – products of the creative imagination and its capacity to grant meaning to inchoate experiences and pursue particular ends. In the current work, three distinct sexualities grounded in specific sexual identities, behaviours, and understandings are presented. These cultural forms are not only associated with specific ways of sexual thinking, feeling, and doing. They are also representative of two distinct incarnations of modernity. Below, I describe how affirming gay survivors and spiritually conservative ascetic and ex-gay individuals live in different worlds in the wake of redress and how the ways of constructing self, morality, and spirituality characteristic of these groups are reflective of two competing visions of modernity present within contemporary North America.

Plurality is inherent to cultural life. As philosopher Charles Taylor (1999) noted, a plurality of ways of world-making is evident between and within societies, each with “specific understandings of personhood, social relations, states of mind/soul, goods and bads, virtues and vices, and the like” (p. 153). That the human world consists of a “plurality of human cultures” (p. 153) is now an established truism. However, there is often a tendency to frame the dominant values, understandings, and practices of contemporary Western society in acultural terms. From this perspective, the rise of Western modernity is understood in terms of ‘development’ and the supplanting of traditional beliefs and spiritual realities with objective truths and secular reasoning through culture-neutral transformations of rationality and sociality (e.g., secularization or the growth empirical science). Proponents of acultural theories assume that:

Individualism, negative freedom, and instrumental rationality [hallmarks of the dominant Western modernity]... come to the fore because they are what we humans ‘normally’ value, once we are no longer impeded or blinded by false or superstitious beliefs and the stultifying modes of life that accompany them. (p. 165)

Inherent in this acultural view is the notion that, under certain conditions, “all human beings will come to see that scientific thinking is valid, that instrumental rationality pays off, that religious beliefs involve unwarranted leaps, that facts and values are separate” (pp. 154-155).

Rejecting this acultural thesis, Taylor (1999) wrote that, at the precipice of the 21st century, the West was dominated by a new cultural form with its own visions of ‘the good’ that could be compared and contrasted with all others. Refusing to grant Western modernity any privileged, acultural status, he noted that the West has its own moral systems and understandings of self, society, and the good developed throughout the long cultural transition out of Christendom. For Taylor, the contemporary cultural landscape is made up of a patchwork of “alternative modernities” (p. 162) that articulate different, and often conflicting, views of the world arising from their distinct historical trajectories. This is as true within societies as between civilizations. As Foucault (1976/1990), Stiker (1997), Taylor (1999) and others have argued, periods of social change and the introduction of new technologies and ideas do not necessarily have a uniform impact on all members of society. In response to common forces, individuals and groups often find creative ways of responding to historical events or appropriating new ideas, practices, and technologies. In the long march out of Christendom, Western culture has consequently grown fractured and divided as some internal factions have clung to particular traditional ideas, values, and practices, while others have engaged in revisionist projects or embraced new ways of thinking, feeling, and doing. In contrast to acultural developmental theories – which assume that all humans will eventually merge into a “single, homogeneous [Western] world culture” (Taylor, 1999, p. 161) – Taylor insisted that the process of ‘creative adaptation,’ whereby new cultural products are incorporated into existing sociocultural systems in unique ways that reflect the local cultural values, knowledges, and traditions. This alternative, cultural perspective insists that multiple modernities will continue to exist alongside one another. As Taylor (1999) argued, “The future ... will be one in which all societies will undergo change ... and some of these changes may be parallel, but they will never converge, because new differences will emerge from old” (p. 162).

In the context of the current work, it is important to note that, over the last two centuries, Western society has undergone a process of ‘secularization’ characterized, in part, by the retreat of religion from public spaces and the reimagining of Christianity as a certain kind of commitment (as opposed to absolute truth) open to examination and critique (Taylor, 2007). This

process opened up multiple spiritual viewpoints and ushered in an era where ‘believers’ and ‘unbelievers’ coexisted in Western societies. Taylor defined these different orientations toward religion as “different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in own way or another” (p. 5). While believers continued to live in a cultural world enchanted by the supernatural⁷⁴, unbelievers largely turned to reason, nature, and human sentiment to give meaning to their lives. Two distinct cultural systems began to take shape within the Western world that shared much but were marked by “different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding ... life in one way or another” (Taylor, 2007, p. 5) – that of the Christian believer and the secular unbeliever. Believers continued to occupy a world enchanted by divine forces while unbelievers come to occupy a disenchanting modern moral order.

When these different cultural factions were confronted by gay rights activism and scientific discourses that normalized and de-pathologized homosexuality in the later part of the 20th century (see the global introduction to the thesis), they responded very differently as a result of divergent worldviews. Non-believers and secularized institutions underwent a transformative social and ideological shift that propelled the figure of the contemporary gay man – who is considered to be no different from his heterosexual peers save for the different object of his desire – to cultural dominance in both American and Canadian society (see Halperin, 2012; Nye, 1999; Taylor, 2004). Affirming congregations embraced this new sexual form, altering their sacred worldview by symbolically shifting homosexuality from the domain of sin and evil into that of goodness and righteousness and appropriating secular ideas of human rights into Christian practice. However, in conservative Christian communities, demands for recognition and respect from the gay community collided with deeply ingrained theological prohibitions against homoeroticism to generate two alternative (homo)sexual forms: the openly-gay ascetic and the ex-gay man (see Chapter 11 for a detailed description of the spiritual, social, and sexual distinctness of these groups). These forms provided same-sex attracted Christian men with new opportunities to be open about their desires and remain embedded within the church without condoning homosexual acts. They reflect the “creative adaptation” of conservative Christianity to new sociopolitical realities in North American life (see Taylor, 1999).

Contemporary ascetics, ex-gay men, and gay survivors therefore all occupy distinct sexualities made possible by the human rights movement and the profound social transformations it wrought to conservative Christian and secular society in the later half of the

20th century. Yet, having emerged from distinct sociocultural contexts (Christian church versus secular science or human rights), these sexualities bear the indelible mark of their historical past – they are grounded in alternative Western modernities. As such, these sexual forms are not only characterized by different ways of understanding homosexuality and navigating difference, but reflect distinct moral imaginaries, understandings of self, and religious orientations indicative of parallel cultures. Here, we trace the contours of the distinct intentional worlds (Shweder, 1991) – that is, the alternative modernities – inhabited by gay survivors and ex-gay/ascetic men.

The concept of the self is present in all cultural systems – it is a cultural universal. Researchers have argued that selves everywhere have two primary facets: the egocentric and the sociocentric (Geertz, 1973; Kleinman, 1988, 1995; Leenhardt, 1979; Mauss, 1979; Rosaldo, 1984; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Singer, 1984). The egocentric aspect pertains to the inner elements of the self, the uniqueness of the person, and the traits, features and attributes of their consciousness. The sociocentric facet is socially oriented and concerns those aspects of the self that are related to the place within an outer system of social relations (public roles, interpersonal relationships and group statuses). Kirmayer (2007) and others have also noted that the self often includes cosmological aspects, wherein the person is defined by their place in the cosmological order. Despite being composed of similar elements, the self takes on different forms in local settings as a result of its connection to other signs and systems of meaning within the cultural sphere (Daniel, 1984; Geertz, 1973; Leenhardt, 1979; Mauss, 1979; Munck, 2000; Rosaldo, 1984; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). The relative weighting of the private, public, and cosmological facets of the self – their hierarchical position within a larger structure of meaning concerning personhood and social relationships – creates important differences in the self across cultural groups (Shweder, 2003; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). Whereas most societies around the world and throughout history have valorized the sociocentric aspects of the self, and relegated egocentric attributes to the background, the modern Western world gives preferential treatment to the egocentric aspects of the self (Geertz, 1973; Rosaldo, 1984; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). According to this model, the self is independent, autonomous, private, distinctive, stable and inherently valuable – the truth of the self lies in the unique characteristics of the person (Geertz, 1973; Mattingly, 1998; Mauss, 1979; Rosaldo, 1984; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). Yet, within North American culture, there are those that privilege other facets of self, as described below.

The shape of the self in particular cultural settings is closely related to – and mutually influenced by – the local moral imaginary. As Kleinman (1999) noted, the predominance of egocentric aspects of the self in contemporary North American society has meant that “the autonomy of the individual is fundamental to the Western moral outlook” (p. 398). Shweder, Much, Mahapatra and Park (2003) similarly argued that although three moral concerns (i.e., autonomy, community, and divinity) are common to people everywhere, these moral imperatives are differentially privileged in accordance with various conceptions of the self. The moral sphere of autonomy aims to promote “the zone of discretionary choice of ‘individuals’ and to promote the exercise of individual will in the pursuit of personal preferences” (p. 138). This moral imperative tends to dominate in contemporary Canadian and American society, where the egocentric aspects of self are most highly prized. Community morality “relies on regulative concepts such as duty, hierarchy, interdependency and souls . . . to protect the moral integrity of the various stations or roles that constitute a ‘society’ or a ‘community’” (p. 138). Community concerns tend to dominate in cultural settings where sociocentric aspects of the self are of greater importance. Lastly, divine morality aims to “protect the soul, the spirit, the spiritual aspects of the human agent and ‘nature’ from degradation” (p. 138). This moral imperative dominates in societies where the self is considered to be largely a spiritual entity, connected to a sacred order and responsible for bearing a legacy that is elevated and divine.

Cultural groups are also marked by different orientations toward the divine. As Good (1994) argued, although some notion of the divine is present in all human societies, ‘belief’ and ‘knowledge’ represent two different ways of relating to the religious. Where knowledge structures the relationship to the divine, the existence of God is something every reasonable person knows – it is incontestable (Good, 1994). As Taylor (2007) argued, this orientation is pervasive in ‘enchanted societies’, where “human agents are embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporates the divine” (p. 152). Where the orientation toward the religious is characterized by ‘belief,’ the existence of the divine is not taken for granted as an unreflective fact of life. As Smith (1977) noted, the person who ‘believes’ is saying, “Given the uncertainty as to whether there be a God or not, as a fact of modern life, I announce that my opinion is ‘yes’” (as cited in Good, 1994, p. 16). Here, the notion of an “indifferent universe, with God either indifferent or non-existent” is acknowledged as a possibility (Taylor, 2007, p. 273). Taylor maintained that while, in the past, it was “virtually impossible not to believe in

God,” (p. 25) this wholesale religious naivety has largely been supplanted in the West by reflective belief or unbelief and the recognition that other people variously do or do not believe. In such ‘disenchanted’ societies, humans are considered individuals, no longer embedded in “the social sacred” and the “cosmos sacred”, and God is constructed as separate from “this worldly good” (Taylor, 2004, p. 65). In such cultural systems, God is confined to the private sphere and ‘belief’ in his existence is optional. Nonetheless, North American society is still marked by distinct cultural spaces where whole communities relate to religion largely as a tacit fact of life.

Throughout the narratives, it was obvious that gay survivors and ex-gay/ascetic men subscribed to distinct understandings of self and morality and represented different orientations toward the religious that marked them as inhabitants of different cultural worlds – distinct incarnations of modernity running parallel to one another within the same society. Although the majority of gay survivors considered themselves Christians, the moral priorities and definitions of self communicated by these individuals were largely reflective of their grounding in the modern (secular) moral order, where autonomy and egocentrism are prized and the divine is confined to the private sphere and considered an optional form of commitment (see below). These men tended to focus on personal traits, capacities, and interests in their self-descriptions more than their ascetic or ex-gay peers, who often highlighted community roles and cosmological aspects of identity. Even where Christianity continued to be an important aspect of self, it was embedded within a mosaic of other, equally important personal attributes and values (see Chapter 14). For example, Matt described himself in largely egocentric terms, noting, “I have my podcasting part of my life, I have my professional part of my life, I have my relationships... my outside interests – my yoga class... I take a singing class.”

Their discussions of morality highlighted the importance of authentic self-expression and resisting forces of repression and coercion from infringing on the rights of the individual. For example, Josiah noted, “A good life is one where I am ... where I wake up and I am delighted to be who I am.” Matt described personal liberty as central to the good life: “I think freedom is really important...for me anyway. To be able to pursue whatever my interests are ... I think the best thing I can do for other people is just be together myself.” Here, notions of authentic self-expression, self-confidence, and personal contentment came to the fore, taking precedence over divinity and community. Attention to God and others continued to be important, but these relationships and commitments must respect the basic autonomy and dignity of the person and

not infringe on personal rights. As Wolkomir (2006) explained, such values are reinforced in secular therapeutic culture, where the proclivities of the self generally supersede all imposed, collective demands.

As Mitch explained: “The most important thing to living a good life is to be kind and loving to your fellow man, and to love your neighbour as yourself... [and] for others... to respect us [in return] for whoever we are.” Ned similarly affirmed, “The most important thing is living honestly... exploring your faith and journey... and being honest about doubts.” These individuals noted that the experience of a sexual-moral crisis and the reflexive processes born of this event had greatly altered their moral priorities. Paul explained: “When I was a born-again Evangelical Christian and an ex-gay ... I thought *the* most important thing in life was pleasing God... [and] being properly aligned to the teachings [of] the church... [but] that’s totally changed.” As Matt similarly noted, “At this stage in my life, I’m much more inward looking and realize that ... a lot of the things that I was looking for... in Exodus and in the church... I can find within.”

Survivor narratives also evidenced a relationship to the divine characterized by ‘belief’ (Good, 1994) and scepticism. While Matt was the only survivor to have totally renounced his faith, all survivor narratives were marked by an implicit recognition of doubt and the existence of God is framed as an opinion or personal conviction. Here, the spiritual reflexivity occasioned by crisis (see Chapter 12) eschewed the certainty of religious knowledge. As Ned noted, “That’s one thing that I really learned is that it’s okay to have doubts about some things.” For survivors, the appropriation of particular religious dictates, values, ideals, or practices was discretionary, allowing for the wholesale abandonment of the Christian worldview or a recombination of various ‘beliefs’ from throughout the larger cultural system into a unique spiritual-moral mosaic. A process Ned described, “Parting what you do believe and do not believe.”

Conversely, ascetics and ex-gay men lived in an alternative North American modernity – that of conservative Christianity. Here, cosmocentric and sociocentric aspects of the self were generally of greater importance and personal identity was largely defined in connection with God and social actions, roles, statuses, and obligations (see Chapter 14). For example, Seth noted that being a “caregiver” to his children was the most important part of his identity and Jordan affirmed that his spiritual was of utmost importance: “My identity is in Christ. I’m a child of God.” Jed’s response to the question of how he defines himself also reflected this confluence of cosmological and sociocentric elements: “Christian, male, father, husband, friend.”

In line with this cosmological-sociocentric self, ascetic and ex-gay men described a moral imaginary that was more strongly oriented toward God and community than was the case with survivors, and expressed a willingness to privilege these concerns over the pursuit of individual preferences. Throughout ex-gay and ascetic narratives, a sense of duty and obligation to loved ones and the maintenance of tradition and the sacred order were both constructed as upmost importance, although a slight preference for one or the other was visible when marital status was considered. Those who are unmarried expressed a strong commitment to divinity, with community coming a close second. For example, Walter noted: “What is most important to me now is my relationship with Jesus Christ ... that’s the ultimate of... what life is about... living our lives according to *his* will instead of our own.” Rodney similarly stated, “My faith is my life ... living a good life ... is going to be in context of living a life in Christ.” Adam also affirmed that ‘the good life’ is one where you “make it to heaven and be happy on your way there.” Theo similarly stated, “I think that you can’t have what I consider the good life without being willing to give your life over to God.” Those who were married with families similarly affirmed a high divinity orientation, but their moral imaginary also evidenced high regard for community and the seriousness of their commitment to others. Seth affirmed, “To live a good life is to be faithful to my wife and my children and be faithful to God.” Charles noted, “The most important thing in life is your family.” Jordan similarly explained, “I have a relationship with God ... it’s who I am ... that’s my reason to exist ... God ... God and family.” In these cases, the service of others and obedience to God were given precedence over autonomy and the moral imperatives of divinity and community were intertwined and mutually reinforced through the sanctity of the family (see Shweder, 2003). To serve the family and honour marital vows were ultimately to serve God. As Todd explained, “Down deep in my soul, I feel that we’re here for more than a purpose to serve ourselves.” These observations are in line with those of Gerber (2011), who noted that, in the lives of ex-gay individuals, “Personal choice, preference, and desire become less important than using one’s body in the way one believes God intends” (p. 36).

Lastly, in contrast to the sceptical and belief-oriented religiosity of survivors, Christian *knowledge* formed an unequivocal part of reality for ex-gay men and ascetics. The relationship to spirituality here is different than in the case of ascetics. For example, Jordan affirmed that – as a Christian – he stands for “truth and righteousness.” Rodney similarly described his unwavering confidence in the Christian worldview in a manner more akin to a ‘knowledge’ orientation

(Good, 1994): “Because I am a Christian and because it’s like, well I believe that the Bible is God’s infallible word to us.” Thus, despite a great deal of shared cultural features, survivors and ascetic/ex-gay men evidenced distinct understandings of self, morality, and religiosity.

These distinct cultural conceptions are indicative of different cultural realities. They represent two different intentional worlds, characterized by alternative programs of truth, moral imaginaries, constructions of the self, and religious orientations (Shweder, 2003; Taylor, 1999; 2004; Veyne, 1983/1988). What distinguishes ascetics, ex-gay men, and gay survivors thus goes far beyond their ways of imagining homoeroticism or expressing sexual desire to encompass the implicit or tacit ‘background’ understandings and normal expectations that shape the flow of everyday life.⁷⁵ Each of these figures issues from different cultural systems; they are distinct outgrowths of the emergence of human rights discourses and the push for gay rights within both secular and Christian society. Moreover, each makes sense relative to the internal logic of the cultural system from which they originate. In this sense, all are ‘right,’ ‘true’ and ‘good’ when viewed within their own frames of reference. Yet, when viewed from the outside, the truth and goodness of certain forms is often less convincing.

The ways of thinking, feeling, and being appropriated by gay survivors reflect the dominant cultural norm for living with homoeroticism in contemporary North American society. Yet, this sexual form is but one of many sexual forms within the current cultural mosaic. Although it has attained dominance in the current era, it is not reflective of ‘modernity’ or ‘liberalism’ defined in the singular or ‘truth’ defined in the absolute. The ascetic and ex-gay men described here are as ‘modern’ as their more liberal, affirming counterparts. Their existence is evidence of a radical revisionist project within the conservative Christian culture that has opened up new possibilities for gay believers to be open about their sexuality and even advocate for their own vision of ‘human rights’ within religious institutions by reinterpreting sacred texts and challenging established orthodoxy. These particular social, spiritual, and sexual forms were absent only half a century ago.⁷⁶ They are ‘modern’ figures. Like the first Protestants, who created a new faith in reaction to the oppressive force of the Catholic Church, they seek to revise conservative Christianity in order to adapt it to modern times. In this sense, they are also extremely ‘liberal’ relative to those Christians who promote discourses of ‘punitive rejection’, which construes homosexual acts and desires as grave sins punished by an eternity in Hell and

sees same-sex attracted men thrust from Christian communities (Moon, 2014; Super & Jacobson, 2011).

Conservative Christians have produced their own modern, liberal sexual forms in response to the human rights movement. Although they do not coincide with those developed in secular North American society, they share their progressive and emancipatory tenor and reflect the same process of ‘creative cultural adaptation’ (Taylor, 1999) within a parallel cultural world. Gay survivors are not the sole modern, liberal figures or creative reformists – ascetic and ex-gay men have also constructed new, contemporary possibilities for their lives by introducing human rights discourses into the traditional Christian worldview.

Moreover, social constructionists maintain that cultural dominance is not to be confused with objective truth or moral certainty. Although the figure of the gay man whose sexual identity, desire, and behaviours express a consistent orientation toward other males might have attained the status of cultural supremacy in contemporary American and Canadian society, Halperin (2012) indicated that there is no ‘right’ way of living with homoeroticism. Shweder et al. (2003) similarly affirmed that individual wellbeing, social security, and divine connection are all equally respectable moral priorities and that no ‘one way’ of organizing the moral imaginary is intrinsically or objectively more right than another. Reflecting on the self, Gerber (2011) similarly affirmed that no way of constructing personal identity is more or less true: “People are no more ‘ultimately’ their sexual identity than they are their religious identity [or, I would add, social identity]. These are simply two different ways of organizing the self” (p. 223). These distinct sexualities – and the alternative modernities they arise from (Taylor, 1999) – represent a different investment in particular ways of thinking, feeling, and being. None of these ways of world-making are ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ ‘true’ or ‘false’ in the sense of being verifiable in comparison to some acultural, asocial, acontextual reference point (Crotty, 1998; Goodman, 1978). To suggest as much is to pretend access to a privileged view beyond the influence of history, meaning, and language.

Yet, in the sociopolitical context of everyday life, people certainly behave as though they have access to incontrovertible truths and moral certainties and pretend as though dominant cultural forms represent the attainment of acultural objectivity. They defend their own historically-contextualized ways of world-making, normalizing and naturalizing their ideals and stigmatizing alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and being (see Douglas, 1966; Foucault,

1976/1990). These normalizing processes operate as strongly at the margins of society as they do at the center. A host of cultural analysts have convincingly argued that difference and deviance are as ordered, structured, and standardized as cultural norms. As George Devereux explained, "Everything happens like the group is saying to the individual: 'don't do that, but if you must do it, here is how you should do it'" (as cited in Corin et al., 1990, p. 19). Schneider (1976) similarly affirmed, "There is a right way to be wrong; there is a proper way to be improper ... deviance is as normatively regulated as is conformity" (pp. 200-201). Within each society at a particular historical moment, a specific way of being different (in terms of health, ability, sexuality, or gender) is deemed to be the 'correct' way. While the idea that heterosexuality represents a normalized and naturalized cultural ideal is widely recognized, academics and laypersons have been less apt to consider the social regulation of homoeroticism.⁷⁷

Ex-gay men, ascetics, and gay survivors represent three different ways of living with sexual difference grounded in specific cultural meanings, values, and concerns. Conservative Christians and secular liberals each work to defend their respective sexual forms, promoting their own visions of how to live well with same-sex attraction and delegitimizing other forms as erroneous, immoral, or dangerous. Although a great deal of attention has been paid to conservative Christianity's invalidation of gay life, less scholarly work has attended to the forms of delegitimization and derision that issue from secular liberal society. In contemporary North America, ascetics and ex-gay men have increasingly become objects of ridicule, scorn, and disparagement as they have opened up about their lives and shared their stories of sexual-moral crisis. The secular liberal ethic has increasingly promoted the expression and acceptance of a wide array of sexual and romantic identities and lifestyles since the middle of the last century, including (but certainly not limited to) lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transsexual, queer, questioning, polysexual, lithoromantic, demiromantic, graysexual, asexual, and two-spirited. Recently, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network released an infographic specifying no less than 15 variations of sexual-romantic identities and carefully noting that this presentation was "not a definitive model" and that "not all asexuals will identify or agree with the definitions" presented therein (Mosbergen, 2013, para. 5). Yet, the same liberal, secular journalists, academics, and advocates are quick to delegitimize, condemn, and even vilify ex-gay and ascetic men. In this context, individuals who chose not to embrace their homoerotic urges suffer the same fate as transgressive, pre-Stonewall era sexualities, becoming objects of derision and

disparagement (see Halperin, 2012).

The sociopolitical tension surrounding ex-gay and ascetic men has intensified over the past five years. Where previous discussions of these forms were linked to debates about the ethics and effectiveness of sexual reorientation efforts, the increasing vocalness of ex-gay and ascetic men has intensified public critique of these sexualities. Media attention has generally garnered a negative reaction from the public, provoking scorn, derision, rebuke, and acts of censorship. In 2013, a prominent African American gospel singer was cut from a planned Martin Luther King Jr. memorial concert as a result of his public ex-gay identity. The mayor of Washington, DC noted that the move was spurred by public complaints and the desire to avoid “potential controversy” (Sieczkowski, 2013). That same year, the mayor of London prohibited a bus advertisement proposed by Anglican Mainstream (a conservative Evangelical lobby group), which stated, “Not gay! Ex-gay, post-gay and proud. Get over it!” (see Gledhill, 2013). In 2015, ex-gay and ascetic life went mainstream when The Learning Channel (TLC) aired an one-hour special that followed a group of Mormon men married to women entitled, “My Husband is Not Gay.” More than 100,000 people had already signed a petition to cancel the special before it aired in January of 2015 and accusations of ‘bigotry’ were hurled at the network (Green, 2015). After the show aired, media coverage was high and the public weighed in. An article by Slate magazine received over 2,000 comments, many of which lamented the “stupid,” “sad,” “stunned,” “harmful” and “laughable” nature of these men’s lives.

As Green (2015) noted, these incidents point to the growing conflict between “those who demand acceptance of homosexuality and those who find it morally unacceptable” in North American society. In response to such acts of public derision and perceived secular “discrimination,” Voice of the Voiceless was formed in 2013 to “defend the rights of former homosexuals, individuals with unwanted same-sex attraction, and their families” (Sieczkowski, 2013; Voice of the Voiceless, 2015). Gone are the days when this topic was only of interest to mental health professionals and conservative Christians. The public is increasingly weighing in on reorientation efforts, calling for additional legislature prohibiting these programs (Serwer, 2014) and censorship of ex-gay and ascetic stories (Sprigg, 2012). This phenomenon requires careful consideration. What is it about the lives of ex-gay and ascetic men that render them so offensive to the modern sentimentalities? How is it that even the most liberal minds – those who support sexual, gender, and cultural diversity – can express such contempt for these individuals?

In short, how can the profound public disdain of ex-gay and ascetic men be accounted for?

Much of the official opposition to ex-gay ministries and the publicizing of sexual and ascetic stories issues from critics of sexual reorientation change efforts and LGB affirming organizations who fear the promotion of sexual change or repression could threaten their own hard-won rights. While a discussion of whether the rights currently afforded to LGBTQ individuals necessarily require an essentialist view of sexuality is beyond the scope of the current investigation (see Halperin, 2012; Wolkomir, 2006), I contend that it is a mistake to think that these concerns adequately account for the generalized scorn, disdain, contempt, and disparagement of ex-gay and acetic men in secular North American society. In my experience, the stories of ex-gay and ascetic individuals generate negative reactions in audiences from across the sexual spectrum and from all corners of the sociopolitical landscape. Something about ex-gay and ascetic men troubles a great number of people in American and Canadian society – something that touches to the very core of who they are and how they understand the world. This begs the question of why individuals react in such a strong way to these men and – at a more fundamental level – why there is so little discussion about such reactions. It is as though even questioning the hostility and abhorrence of these forms is, in itself, unthinkable – a modern taboo. Although concerns about human rights, the wellbeing of wives and children, or the fear of sociopolitical regression are important, they do not adequately capture the widespread discomfort and indignation associated with these alterative sexualities. Rather, I contend that this hostility and derision can be largely explained by the ways in which ascetic and ex-gay men contradict the modern secular order and threaten to reveal the arbitrariness of deeply valued moral priorities, sexual truths, and understandings of the self (Bataille, 1960; Douglas, 1966).⁷⁸

In this study, ascetic and ex-gay men chose to privilege God and others over the self, eschewing the sacredness of individual self-expression and authenticity in favour of an alternate moral hierarchy. This is potentially upsetting to those living in a secular moral world because it suggests that what they value most – what they in essence *live for* – is not universally experienced as sacred. To deny the supremacy of the autonomous self and restrict the expression of its sexual urges in subjugation to God and community is a form of secular blasphemy. Yet, because even Christian individuals often take issues with ex-gay and ascetic men and acts of sexual self-discipline are widely accepted – even celebrated – within North American society under other circumstances (e.g., marital obligation), this alone cannot account for the negative

reactions ex-gay and ascetic individuals engender. The transgressive nature of asceticism and ex-gay life extends beyond privileging God and other over self to obscure deeply entrenched categories of identity and understandings of sexuality within the Western cultural imaginary.

At a more fundamental level, ex-gay and ascetic men challenge the common-sense understandings of sexuality that underlie much of contemporary social life (just as they simultaneously reinforce these assumptions, as described below). The fractured and fissured nature of these sexualities – where behaviour, identity, and desire fail to reflect a singular object – eschew the binary sexual categories that have been deeply ingrained in the North American sexual imaginary since the 10th century AD (Crompton, 2003). Their patterns of attraction, behaviour, and identity fail to consistently align with ‘heterosexuality’ or ‘homosexuality.’ They are ambiguous sexual beings. As Douglas (1966) noted, classificatory ambiguities are deeply distressing and often taboo. They break down the neat classification of experiences, acts, and persons into the normal / abnormal, pure / impure, good / bad, safe / dangerous and leave a profound feeling of dis-ease, distress, or even panic.

This categorical muddling might have been of little moral significance if sexuality had not come to occupy such an important place in North American understandings of the self (see Birken, 1999; Foucault, 1976/1990) and sexual urges had not been construed as the definitive mark of one’s sexual type. Although researchers and theorists have long criticized static, categorical views of sexuality, noting that such models do not reflect the nuance and plurality of human sexual life, a great many people continue to define themselves according to these categories. Because of this, the blurring of the heterosexual / homosexual binary is not simply a matter of detached categorization. It threatens the very nature of how Canadians and Americans understand themselves – their sense of *who they are*. This confusion of sexual categories is as distressing for some who identify as ‘gay’ as it is for those who identify as ‘straight.’ In both cases, offended or outraged observers feel as though the legitimacy and validity of their very selves are threatened. Where sexuality is construed as a central aspect of self and desires are deemed the most important indicator of this attribute (as opposed to identity or behaviour), those with such same-sex urges are obliged to embrace these desires. To do anything but is to blaspheme the secular liberal moral order, where self-expression is sacred and tantamount.

Yet, rather than choosing to alter or abandon the sexual binary in the face of conflicting evidence or consider different ways of thinking about ‘sexual orientation’ or defining ‘sexual

truth', secular liberal observers and analysts negate the legitimacy of ascetic and ex-gay sexualities in defense of their own sexual identities. Marked by homoeroticism, ex-gay and ascetic men are considered an affront to 'genuine' heterosexuality – they pollute the center. They are invalidated. Yet, in their refusal to embrace gay identities or homosexual acts, they simultaneously offend those who identify as lesbian or gay by rejecting the margin to which they are believed to 'properly' belong (in this sense, their plight is very similar to that of the bisexual individual). Rather than revising rigid categories or markers in the face of alternative experiences, the public resists the dissolution of the sexual imaginary and asserts that ex-gay and ascetic men are either wilful fakes or pitiful victims of mystification and oppression – savages who "remain in the dark" (Shweder, 2003, p. 180). Here, the (liberal) 'white man's burden' (Menon & Shweder, 1998) extends to yet another category of barbarians – the sexually ignorant.

In effect, ex-gay and ascetic men destabilize the sexual ideologies and moral order of liberal secular society, 'queering' the North American sexual landscape. They cast doubt on cherished moral certainties and sexual truths and threaten to invalidate the very understandings of individuals as sexual beings, notably by revealing their arbitrariness and historicity. Such transgressions provoke anxiety, fear, and contempt because they threaten to reveal the ideological nature of goodness, truth, and self. While other cultural systems might respond differently to this diversity, any attempt to destabilize the modern secular liberal order (particularly those issuing from religious spheres) are largely unappreciated in Western society, where claims to have liberated thought from the repressive and mystifying forces of religion wrought a sense of having attained privileged access to the truth (Taylor, 1999). In this sense, the pervasive discomfort wrought by these alternative sexual forms is about much more than the potential loss of human rights. They are experienced by many as an attack on who they are, what they value, and how they view the world.

By attending to the socio-political conflict that surrounds ex-gay and ascetic lives, extraordinary sexualities provide a great deal of insight into the larger contemporary North American culture. Firstly, it reveals that cultural systems – be they Christian or secular – devalue particular ways of world-making as a result of the threat they pose to their own understandings of self, morality, and sexuality. Although the modern secular order has come to dominate the contemporary cultural scene in American and Canadian society, this way of experiencing reality is no less 'cultural' than any other across the world or throughout history. Like all cultural

systems, the secular, liberal Western world presents a particular vision of reality and structures individual behaviour through various ideals and taboos. Here, as in all societies, deviation from sexual ideals or the normalized structure of difference creates personal dis-ease and social tension and renders the individual vulnerable to delegitimization. In this sense, the struggles ascetic and ex-gay men experience in secular society are in some ways analogous to those faced by sexually active gay men in the world of conservative Christianity.

Secondly, it reveals the extent to which North American societies are attached to the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy and largely unwilling to embrace or acknowledge as legitimate constructions that violate this categorical polarity. It points to the new limits of sexual tolerance in contemporary North America. While there are efforts underway to normalize and recognize transgender and bisexual identities (which also transgress established binaries within cultural imagination), such efforts are strongly resisted in relation to ex-gay or ascetic men. This resistance highlights the depth of the societal aversion to those who challenge the unity of sexual desire, identity, and behaviour and, ultimately, the very legitimacy of 'gay' and 'heterosexual' identities. Here, the threshold of contemporary sexual tolerance is laid bare as even some of the most radical 'inclusionists' find themselves hesitant to embrace these taboo forms.

At a fundamental level, the stigmatization and delegitimization of ascetic and ex-gay lives and identities reflects a policing of the margins (see Corin et al., 1990; Schneider, 1976) and the desire to delimit the acceptable sexual forms available to those experiencing same-sex desires. Researchers, popular journalists, and everyday commentators contribute to this project by defining the 'right' way to resolve sexual-moral conflict or live and identify with same-sex desires and construing ex-gay and ascetic men as pathological, inferior, ignorant, oppressed, absurd, or in denial (see, for example, Cruz, 2015; Denizet-Lewis, 2011; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Gold & Stewart, 2011; Yip, 1999). In doing so, both liberal secular analysts and affirming Christian commentators work to purify the margins of vagrant sexualities and uphold an increasingly restricted definition of the 'good life' for those with same-sex desires. Current constructions of the 'good gay man' not only necessarily involve the adoption of an unambiguous gay identity and participation in homoerotic acts and relationships, but also a commitment to monogamy, masculinity, and secularity or – at the very least – a progressive, affirming spirituality (Halperin, 2012; O'Brien, 2004; Sumerau, 2012). Thus, while we have witnessed a proliferation of sexual identities in the 21st century, the 'right way' of embodying

homoeroticism has simultaneously been subject to a number of restrictions and constraints.

The homogenization of gay culture and the rise of a hegemonic homosexuality raise important questions about the rights of particular groups (such as proponents of man-boy love or ‘barebacking’, those ‘too obvious drag queens’, or effeminate ‘fairies’) to have their identities and lifestyles recognized and respected by others or to participate in various communities or movements (Halperin, 2012; O’Brien, 2004; Sumerau, 2012). Like all other ethical injunctions, the *obligation* to embrace particular sexual identities, acts, relationships, and understandings on the basis of homoerotic desire has the potential to oppress and alienate same-sex attracted Christian men. Stigmatization at the hands of secular liberal observers risks re-victimizing ascetic and ex-gay men by specifying that ‘good queers’ (O’Brien, 2004) embrace gay identities, homosexual acts, masculine gender roles, and monogamous relationships and quietly surrender their religious beliefs and values. In the words of O’Brien (2004, p. 181), such oppressive liberalism “denies the rights of those who deviate from new LGB norms to express their identities and have their choices recognized by others”, including (but not limited to) LGB Christians, polyamorous individuals, effeminate gay ‘fairies’ (see Halperin, 2012), and those who identify as ‘queer’ or chose to remain closeted. Although Davis (2002, p. 89) reminds us that “no coalition of identity-based activists or scholars will ever be able to avoid marginalizing and minoritizing *some* groups” and that all movements must necessarily limit the number of ‘acceptable’ identities, the violence of this act and the suffering it engenders in those thrust to the margins must be recognized.

While the preceding analysis provides a means of understanding the tensions that surround ex-gay and ascetic lives by placing these sexualities in the context of alternative cultural systems or incarnations of modernity, it provides little insight into how a society might productively confront these challenges. How are the secular and conservative Christian modernities to coexist? Should a society restrict the freedom of individuals and groups in promotion of a particular sexual ideology? Are individuals to idly stand by while others are harmed, oppressed, and delegitimized? Should members intervene in certain practices or censor particular topics? These questions mark the frontier of the new sexual ethics. Below, I describe how researchers, clinicians, advocates, critics, and decision-makers might begin to engage this problem from a cultural perspective.

Toward an Ethics of Coexistence: A Critical Relativist Perspective on Sexual Diversity

Culture gives meaning to human lives and structures our being-in-the-world (Geertz, 1973). It defines what is sacred and sacrilegious, good and bad, true and unthinkable. The conflict, debate, and violence that often accompany the clash of cultures have often marked the low points of human history. In such moments, the other is constructed as inferior or threatening and efforts are made to annihilate difference through forced assimilation, subjugation, or genocide. Yet, encounters between cultures can also prove generative and satisfying. The ‘other’ is considered attractive, diversity is valued, and each group is seen as having something positive to offer the other. Anthropologists, cultural psychologists, and moral philosophers have long attended to the phenomenon of cultural contact and the dis-ease, anxiety, and revulsion that can result when a group is confronted by practices, events, and social forms that offend their own cultural sensibilities. They have explored the confrontation of different ways of world-making and generated important insights into how to proceed in situations of profound disagreement.

The existence of plural sexualities in contemporary North American society raises questions about how individuals and groups should think about, respond to, and engage with those whose sexual forms and understandings differ from their own. Participants approached this dilemma by balancing critical reflection on particular institutions and redressive forms with recognition of the suffering and striving of the other and their desire to live well in the face of challenging life circumstances. For example, although Rodney (ex-gay) believed homoerotic relationships are outside the will of God, he noted, “I really have a heart for gay community. I see, um, I see that – as a whole – people that really long, like the rest of us, to be loved, to be affirmed, to be in relationship.” Reflecting on those who marry women, Josiah (survivor) similarly affirmed: “It wasn’t acceptable for me ... [but] I think there are people who are happy in an ex-gay life... I can hardly blame people... for wanting to be married... [to have] one-on-one intimacy and support.” Here, participants affirmed their ability to make sense of the life of the other in light of common human needs for community, connection, contentment, and dignity. Reflecting on those who chose to live openly gay lives, Adam (an ascetic man) noted: “The conscientious part of me says ... ‘that’s horrible!’ ... And another part says... ‘If a person can’t handle religion...[or] celibacy - can’t get along with women ... Don’t they have the right to make their own choices?’”

In certain cases, participants were even able to imagine themselves adopting different ways of thinking, feeling, and being had they lived in slightly different circumstances. As Todd

(ascetic) noted: “If there’s two lesbians living together, I’m not going to sit there and preach to them... maybe they got something that deep down inside I wish I had. But... God didn’t want me to do that.” Adam (ascetic) similarly noted, “There might be a few guys out there, um, who actually end up with a happy marriage as a result ... they can make it work for the wife ... I wasn’t able to have sex, but a lot of guys are.” These thought experiments evidence a deep recognition of the dignity and shared humanity of the other. Matt (survivor) explained how he might have ended up in an inter-orientation marriage had he felt differently about child-rearing: “a lot of the *yearning* I think that they [other ex-gay ministry clients] had was not so much for heterosexuality, but... for fatherhood. I didn’t have any desire to have kids, so I didn’t need a woman.” Mason similarly noted: “If you’re born and raised Mormon, it’s really, really tough to... break free from it... family turns against [you]. [But] I wasn’t born [into] that. I converted, so I could convert back out... it was easier.” The men affirmed the power of context and personal experience to define the right and good and limit the individual’s possibilities, noting ‘there but for the grace of God go I.’ This mutual recognition is a necessary precondition for productive contact. It allows for fruitful dialogue and the fusing of horizons. However, it is based on personal experience with a sexual-moral crisis and the moral dilemmas and deliberations wrought by this event. In many ways, participants have become ‘moral experts,’ sensitized to the ambivalences, limits, and contradictions of ethical evaluations and the contextualized nature of the good, right, and true. Their own existential experiments have provided them with unique access to the diverse moral stance that characterizes this domain of experience. As such, they approach this dilemma from a broad and diversified perspective.

Outside observers lack this rich, experiential perspective. Having never experienced a sexual-moral crisis, experimented with various sexual forms, or experienced the fear and anxiety associated with the threat of social ostracization, feelings of hopelessness, or the threat of eternal damnation, many conservative Christians or secular individuals (be they heterosexual or homosexual) struggle to relate to those who occupy these specific sexual forms. Consequently, the respectful attitude with which ascetics, ex-gay men, and gay survivors approach one another – which succeeds in humanizing the other without necessarily endorsing their way of thinking, feeling, or being – is often sorely lacking in both the Christian community and the secular public. Having no first-hand experience with a sexual-moral crisis or the unique challenges this entails, the majority of religious and secular observers struggle to relate to these men.

Fortunately, anthropologists have defined several ways of imagining cultural differences and answering to the other that do not require direct, ‘inside’ experience. Shweder and Bourne (1984) described three interpretive models for understanding difference: evolutionism, universalism, and relativism. The evolutionary approach maintains that the ways of thinking, feeling, and being embodied by others are inferior to one’s self and represent an earlier stage of cultural development. For the social constructionist, this vision is untenable as it suggests the existence of a verifiably normative model. Yet, this theme continues to be popular in contemporary North American society, where many academics and lay people alike lament the continued persistence of religious thought and impatiently await the moment where all of humanity will be united under a rational, secular worldview (see Shweder, 2003; Taylor, 1999). The universalist approach maintains that cultural differences are more apparent than real, allowing one to recognize aspects of shared humanity and identify with the other. Although this approach succeeds in creating high-order generalities and has provided a relatively successful theoretic ground for the contemporary human rights movement, it threatens to bleach all of the rich, nuanced variations that define cultural life out of focus and inappropriately impose outside values and understandings on locals in the name of ‘salvation’ or ‘progress.’

Rather than unreflectively devaluing or denying difference, critical relativists seek to recognize human plurality and promote the validity of various “forms of life” (Shweder & Bourne, 1984, p. 164). This perspective offers a way of approaching the “multiple cultural realities of everyday life” (Shweder, 2003, p. 2) without resorting to fundamentalism or objectivism. Although adherents to this perspective affirmed the existence of some basic cultural universals, they are “suspicious of all totalizing or unitary worldviews and appreciative of variety, diversity, and difference” (p. 2). They affirmed that although abstract ethical codes make an important contribution to the understanding of ‘the good,’ “moral decisions are driven not by abstract values but by practical dilemmas ... [where many] things are at stake in the local politics of interpersonal relations” (Kleinman, 1995, p. 45). In the end, “morality is about persons acting in concrete situations” (p. 45) and ‘right acts’ cannot be understood without reference to the cultural, political, and social context within which they emerge. As such, critical relativists take issue with abstract, totalizing principles wherever they are divorced from the exigencies of everyday life. As Sluga (1993) wrote, wherever philosophers and ethicists “have tried ... to lay down authoritative standards of political [ethical] action ... they have either described useless

utopias or given dangerous instructions” (pp. ix-x). Such analysts point to the potential for oppression, misunderstanding, and suffering wherever one set of cultural values – one utopic ideal – is externally imposed on individuals or groups who inhabit alternative cultural realities.

Although this perspective has been criticized as devoid of evaluative potential, the *critical* relativist approach, outlined by Good (1994), Kleinman (1995), Shweder (2003), and Taylor (1999), infuses a respect for diversity and the recognition of multiple, equally valid worlds with an eye to power and politics and an acknowledgement that force relationships and structural inequalities can limit or oppress human thought, feeling, and behaviour. As Kleinman noted, “The context and processes of moral life involve more than individuals. They are also based in collective orientations, social resources, and intersubjective action” (p. 45). Critical reflection on attitudes, understandings, processes, policies, and behaviours that systemically harm individuals or groups is an important part of this contextual, sociocultural approach to ethical analysis and inter-cultural conflict. Kleinman and other critical relativists affirmed that socio-cultural communities are “sources of suffering at least as much as sources of assistance” (1995, p. 48). Valuing diversity does not preclude such analysts from recognizing the many forms of violence in everyday life – a contextual approach sensitive to the local worlds inhabited by moral actors is as capable of revealing forces of violence, oppression, and alienation as love, inclusion, and support. This perspective does not endorse the unreflective romanticization of all cultural forms. As Shweder (as cited in Kleinman, 1995, p. 63) explained, critical relativism calls for an “elicitation of and engagement with alternative ethical formulations... it is for affirmation of differences, not automatic authorization of any standard of practice as ethically acceptable because it is held by some people, somewhere.” Rather, it precludes judgment from a distance and maintains a sceptical attitude toward all fundamentalist formulations of ‘the good’ and utopic constructions of reality that promise to end all suffering. It asks that all groups examine the cultural presumptions that shape the local moral universe and be willing to keep judgment at bay long enough to foster a deep understanding of alternative ways of world-making and consider the potential value or beauty in other ways of imagining reality.

A critical relativist perspective can help navigate the current tension between various contemporary sexualities in North American society. Although difference is not always problematic, the clash of interpretations wrought by inter-cultural contact can result in feelings of distress and disquiet. Where cultural disagreements occur, critical relativists promote a process

of respectful consultation and dynamic exchange motivated by the goal of shared understanding. This mode of productive contact requires a willingness to suspend all notions of objective truth and moral certainty. Both sides must be willing to take seriously the contention that their world is not *the world* and admit that they do not have access to some sort of non-ideological, acultural truth. Secular liberal society is no different. The ways of thinking, feeling, and being that define secular modernity are no less cultural than those of their Christian peers (see Kleinman, 1999; Taylor, 1999). Once inhabitants of secular liberal society are able to accept that other modernities are not inherently invalid or wrong, they will be able to pursue interactions grounded in curiosity and the desire to understand the other. For critical relativists, an earnest attempt to understand the projects, goals, and experiences of suffering that define the other must precede all inter-cultural debate, discussion, or judgement. Without this basic understanding, meaningful action is impossible. Yet, by fostering an appreciation for diversity and reframing truth and certainty as versions or possibilities, cultural relativism not only allows those living in different cultural realities to consider how they might work toward mutual tolerance, but also asks them to consider how they could grow and learn through contact with the other. If cultural groups are willing to reimagine diversity not as a threat to their own ways of being, but as a potentially productive destabilizing force, they open up the potential for mutual and dynamic growth. As Shweder (2003) noted, the view from ‘manywheres’ allows human beings to better understand and appreciate the value, integrity, and potential limitations or distortions of their own cultural worlds. Cultural diversity provides individuals and groups with an opportunity to reflect on their own conceptions of what is natural, good, true, beautiful, or real and expands their vision of what it means to be a human being in search of ‘the good life’.

This approach is grounded in mutual respect and recognition (see Ricoeur, 2004/2005). It requires a commitment to the idea that “there is plenty of room within the limits of logic and experience for cultural variety, and for the historical creation of different lived conceptions of what it means to be a rational and morally decent human being” (Shweder, 2003, p. 16).

Although one might disagree vehemently with both the ends and means, recognizing that people everywhere seek to live well according to their own frames of reference is an important starting point for attempts to understand the other. Participants exemplified this ethic of recognition throughout their narratives. Although they disagreed with the ways of thinking, being, and doing adopted by their peers, they were able to make sense of these alternative ways of world-making

by grounding them in a legitimate desire to eschew suffering and attain a sense of dignity, goodness, and belonging. In pursuit of mutual recognition and development of inter-cultural understanding, it is important to avoid delegitimizing the world or self of the other.

The dangers of outright delegitimization and interpersonal violence are rather obvious. Instead of promoting productive contact, discussions break down and groups turn inward, isolating themselves from interpersonal violence. Productive debate is stifled and the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ widens. Yet, it must be recognized that more subtle forms of delegitimization can be equally damaging to intergroup relations. Good (1994) wrote eloquently about how external attributions of ‘mystification’ – or ‘coercion,’ ‘oppression,’ or ‘brainwashing’ – undercut the dignity and agency of the victimized other. He noted, “Interpreting the culture of the other as ‘mystification’ or ‘false consciousness’ raises difficulties ... it risks making actors to be dupes – of a hegemonic system” (p. 61). Such claims pretend access to a privileged, acultural view and frustrate the search for mutual recognition and fruitful dialogue by positioning the other as ignorant and inferior. Moreover, by refusing to recognize the legitimacy and distinctness of ex-gay and ascetic men’s sexual identities or worldviews and constructing such persons as ‘confused’, ‘ignorant’, or ‘oppressed’ without reference to their own experience, commentators and analysts engage in a form of colonization that effectively defuses the very real challenge such persons represent to dominant (secular, liberal) understandings of self, morality, and sexuality (see Ganzevoort et al., 2011).

Although some conservative Christians argue that gay men have been ‘deceived’ into believing their lifestyle is healthy by gay advocates, these disempowering terms are most often levelled against ex-gay and ascetic men in public discourse and scientific research (see, for example, Griffith, 2005; Halkitis et al., 2009; O’Brien, 2004; Sanchez, 2007; Valera & Taylor, 2011; Weiss et al., 2010). This process is evident in Johns and Hanna’s (2011) declaration that same-sex attracted Mormons must be liberated from “invalid beliefs” and “flawed, demeaning messages” (p. 215) and that such individuals must not be “blamed for forming these negative beliefs, but... helped to see that those beliefs were forced upon him or her, and the problem lies with agreeing with them” (Johns & Hanna, 2011, p. 215). Such attributions of mystification deny ascetic and ex-gay men control over their own life projects and powerfully delegitimize their understandings of self and reality. They suggest that these men are passive beings, unable to resist the repressive force of the church and incapable of making thoughtful decisions.

Yet, the current investigation does not support such attributions of passivity. Descriptions of the neophyte stage suggest a deeply engaged and critical process of interpretation, reflection, and evaluation wherein participants carefully considered the possibilities proffered by different redressive institutions and rejected those that failed to evidence adequate ‘fit.’ In their attempts to mediate crisis, ex-gay men, ascetics, and survivors alike actively, strategically, and creatively appropriated various cultural forms and put local symbolic resources to work in service of their own aspirations and moral priorities. The processes of reading, commitment, and enactment that underlie the shift from crisis to redress reflect the will of the individual to take control over their lives and selves. It is inaccurate to portray any of the men in the current study as passive recipients of cultural templates or mere pawns of political systems. As Good (1994) noted, just because authority and power differentials are present does not mean that all interactions can be reduced to instances of ‘exploitation’ or ignore the complex and numerous forms by which actors resist the rhetorical force of expert discourse and social pressure. Whereas analysts are quick to point out that LGB Christians are “not passive agents at the mercy of social labeling” and that they can “constantly invent and reinvent narratives and accounts that help shape their self-identity and relationships with the social world” (Yip, 1999, p. 60), the current analysis clearly indicates that such productive creativity is not the sole purview of gay survivors.

Common references to these individuals as ‘oppressed,’ ‘coerced,’ ‘mystified,’ ‘deceived,’ or ‘brainwashed’ are therefore in direct contradiction with their own experiences of empowerment, truth, and initiative throughout the redressive process. As Theo noted, “I’ve had plenty of conversations with people who, um, think that, you know, ex-gay ministries basically are like brain-washing ... [but] that’s certainly not my experience.” Rodney similarly affirmed: “People go... ‘you just got brainwashed’ ... but no, I listened to what they had to say and then I applied it... they *allowed* me to choose that or not... at any given point I could have left.” Such delegitimizing assumptions force ex-gay and ascetic men to defend themselves against attributions of mystification, denial, and brainwashing. This is not to suggest that instances of coercion or deception are not a part of ex-gay ministry experiences – such images were common in the narratives of survivors. Rather, this reflection is meant to draw critical attention to the idea that all men who live without homoerotic gratification are passive victims of a repressive regime. The very frequency with which various conservative Christian strategies were abandoned and deemed unfeasible attests to the active and engaged nature of the redressive process. In many

cases, the rhetorical project failed upon encountering a reflective subject who chose to pursue an alternative course of action. As Csordas (2002) noted, the persuasive nature of therapeutic discourse and the need to convince actors of their appropriateness and effectiveness implies the will of the subject. Redress is not an unreflective act of passive conformity. Rather, it is “a conversation, a dance, a search for significance” (Good, 1994, p. 60) in which participants actively engage various resources and navigate the preferences, aspirations, and constraints that define all human life. Attributing all instances of ex-gay and ascetic life to acts of compulsory obedience is a violent act that denies participants’ agency, subjectivity, and reflexivity. It is illogical and morally distasteful. As Shweder (2003) reported, “Liberationists are no more agentic than fundamentalists” (p. 24).

Yet, just because humans cannot evaluate these different sexualities by referencing some objective truth or unproblematically position one as mystification and the other as empowerment does not mean that they cannot engage in any sort of critical analysis. One can attend to how networks of force relationships promote and sustain particular ways of thinking, feeling, and being and limit others. One can also critically evaluate the institutions and discourses associated with different sexualities and attend to the potential dangers of particular redressive strategies. Lastly, humans can criticise the veiling of particular aspects of reality by specific institutional discourse and lament the contradictions between practices and discourses often observed in institutions and communities that profess to support and embrace those struggling with a sexual-moral crisis. The *critical* of critical relativism balances an appreciation for difference with attention to the capacity for suffering and violence in social interactions. Critical reflection is not grounded exclusively in abstract universal principles that ignore the alterity of each person, but also, through a dialectic loop, in an experiential ethics of everyday life (Ricoeur, 1990/1992).

The current analysis revealed several harmful practices grounded in redressive institutions. Critical relativism does not preclude one from critiquing the promotion of unreasonable expectations for sexual change, noting the dangers of pathological discourses, or the harm done by insinuations or outright attributions of personal failure in the context of ex-gay ministry settings. These practices undoubtedly risk harming individuals who are in a precarious and vulnerable state of crisis. I can also condemn any instances of forced participation in redressive institutions and decry the use of false information to coerce individuals into any particular ways of being. Shying away from associating secular science with absolute truth, I can

confidently affirm that the reporting of unfounded claims about gay life by ex-gay leaders is an immoral practice that precludes participants from making informed decisions.⁷⁹ I can state with confidence that the acts of cultural insensitivity and discrimination experienced by some Christian men in secular mental health settings was an egregious affront to their personal dignity.

The forms of suffering that result from various socio-political processes can also be described in the context of a critical-relativist analysis. The current analysis suggests that the experience of sexual-moral crisis and the suffering it entails are intimately tied to the lack of positive gay role models in participants' early developmental environments, the universal devaluation of gay life in their local worlds, the persistent force of heterosexism in North American life, and the institutionalization of homonegativity in the church. A sexual-moral crisis is socio-political phenomenon born of the delegitimization and vilification of gay life. The pervasive homonegativity and heterosexuality embedded in both secular and Christian society sustains this difficult experience across generations, producing a legacy of suffering. It also places some men at risk of persisting in unfruitful and destructive reorientation efforts throughout their lives or developing relationships and families that subsequently suffer from the weight of this struggle.

The dogged promotion of particular modes of redress at the expense of individual wellbeing and the unwillingness of leaders and clinicians to explore the potential value of alternative forms can also be critiqued from this perspective. Even when it was clear that some men in ex-gay ministry programs were spiralling into deep despair, they were encouraged to persist in their efforts. Conversely, some secular therapists encouraged individuals to pursue gay relationships before they had worked through their internalized homonegativity, leading to heartbreaking experiences of moral panic. Such rigid and dogged promotion of particular ways of being and the seeming refusal to refer participants across cultural lines (conservative Christian resources versus secular clinicians/affirming advisors) is political in nature – it reflects the polemics of the contemporary social landscape as it relates to issues of sexuality. On many occasions, it was clear that client wellbeing was sacrificed in service of maintaining political boundaries and promoting particular social agendas. Although participants entered the neophyte stage seeking fruitful help and guidance, their interests were often undercut by socio-political skirmishes and the refusal to divert from rigid ideological lines.

It is also of note that the three ways of world-making described by ascetics, gay survivors, and ex-gay individuals invariably reinforce homonegativity, heterosexism, and a binary vision of human sexuality (even as they problematize these concepts and attitudes). In the case of ex-gay and ascetic men, the continued association of homosexuality with pathology and sin is relatively obvious. As Wolkomir (2006) noted, these sexual forms reflect a modernization of Christian homonegativity and heterosexism through the democratization of sin and discourses of pathology. Here, old normalizing forces are simply embedded in new images and ideas. As Paul noted, “It’s convenient for them [conservative churches] to have the ex-gay movement, because it gives them an out for having to say, ‘We condemn you for being gay’ instead they say, ‘Oh, we have this compassionate response to you.’” Yet, subtle forms of heterosexism were also evident in gay survivor narratives, where the men work hard to simultaneously construct themselves as similar to their ‘straight’ peers and distinguish themselves from those ‘other’ gay men who spend their lives partying and engaging in promiscuous sex. Throughout, they worked to minimize the significance of their desires and establish their fundamental similitude with their heterosexual peers by expressing a firm preference for intimate, long-term, monogamous relationships; grounding their identities in projects, traits, and social roles unrelated to their sexuality; and consistently highlighting the banality and ordinariness of their lives. The message was clear: *there is nothing (strange) to see here*. As critical scholars have noted, this ‘homonormative’ approach to gay life seeks to replicate aspects of the mainstream, neoliberal, heterosexual lifestyle (Halperin, 2012; Tilsen & Nylund, 2010).

By constructing themselves as unambiguously ‘gay’ or ‘straight’, participants in all three groups also reinforced the traditional homosexual/heterosexual binary. As various analysts have noted (see, for example, Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Moon, 2014; Stuart, 2003), such reified sexual identities are part of a “matrix of dominance and exclusion” (Stuart, 2003, p. 108) that forecloses fluidity, facilitates the subordination of alternative sexualities, and demands conformity to one side of the categorical divide or the other. In this sense, participants reinforce the very sexual categories that are responsible for their inferior position within conservative Christian communities. Heterosexual norms and binary approaches to sexual orientation thus exert a powerful influence over the lives of ex-gay men, ascetics, and gay survivors alike. All three groups expressed an implicit desire for equivalence with the deeply entrenched, idealized heterosexual form, which is constructed in opposition to its homosexual counterpart. While this

desire to conform to various idealized images is not necessarily problematic, it runs the risk of delegitimizing and breeding hostility toward peripheral sexualities that depart from heterosexual or homosexual norms (including those who identify as ‘asexual’, ‘bisexual’, or ‘queer’).

As the forgoing discussion affirms, critical relativism does not condemn unreflectively embracing all practices, attitudes, and discourses simply because they are ‘cultural.’ It allows the potential for harm and suffering to emerge from various ideas and encounters and identify the system of force relations that shape human sexuality. This critical, contextualized approach also allows the identification of instances where a false sense of danger might be used to reinforce dominant discourses or promote particular forms. One must ask to what extent the current moral panic over ex-gay and ascetic men is reflective of legitimate human rights concerns or an unreflective reassertion of the dominant secular moral order. It is important to separate the existence of these various sexualities from their imposition or institutionalization. Wherever a particular sexual form is promoted as the only right, good, and true way of living with homoerotic desires, the potential for harm exists. Similarly, where institutions or advocacy groups are established to convince people to embrace a particular way of world-making, there is a danger that they will place their own sociopolitical agendas above their concerns for the welfare of individuals. Although particular leaders, advocates, or institutions might be worthy of reproach, this does not legitimize social violence against those who embrace alternative sexual forms and seek to live in peace with others. There is nothing inherent in this diversity that need infringe on the rights of others – violence does not flow necessarily from differences of opinion.

Perhaps most importantly, this perspective reveals the danger of orthodoxy in both its secular and religious forms. It warns to be wary of the tyranny of similitude and the problem of moral imperialism (Shweder, 2003) – to be careful to not recreate oppression in attempts to ‘emancipate’ the other. The same dangers associated with the imposition of a conservative religious worldview are embedded in secular assimilation projects. We must be willing to recognize the desire to maintain one’s cultural identity and resist assimilation into the individualistic, multinational, and pseudo-acultural world of the liberal, cosmopolitan elite is a real and legitimate aspiration that cannot be unreflectively attributed to false consciousness, subjugation, or tradition-laden routine (Shweder, 2003). Wherever there is a push towards cultural homogenization, one needs to ask why this is occurring and what forms of suffering it might inflict on those who prefer alternative ways of world-making. On what grounds is the

world of the other denied or delegitimized? It is only by combining an appreciation for plurality, difference, and the cultural nature of all human life with an eye to human politics and the potential for harm that people can appreciate the complexity of sexual ethics in contemporary North American society. The goal is not necessarily to agree or to come to inhabit one world. Plurality is – and always has been – a feature of all societies. Moreover, honest and respectful dialogue has been shown to increase mutual respect and de-escalate instances of interpersonal conflict and violence even where it solidifies disagreement (Fowler, Gamble, Hogan, Kogut, McComish, & Thorp, 2001; Moon, 2014). Rather, the goal is to improve understanding of the varieties of contemporary sexual experience within Canada and the United States and better appreciate what is at stake in different sexual forms so that people can reduce harms, improve intergroup relationships, and enhance the capacity for informed ethical decision-making. Below, I explore the implications of the current analysis for contemporary sexual ethics and discuss practical and targeted strategies for improving the lives of same-sex attracted Christian men.

So What? Implications for Contemporary Sexual Ethics and Clinical Practice

Critical relativism maintains that one cannot engage in meaningful cultural critique or make informed political decisions until the individual has achieved a “nonethnocentric conception of the [local] moral domain and some knowledge of local ethnographic realities” (Shweder, 2003, p. 5). It requires a careful reflection on the reasons for intervening in the others’ way of life and to consider what impact this might have on individuals and the larger cultural system. Confident that I have gained some level of insight into a sexual-moral crisis and the lives of ascetics, ex-gay men, and gay survivors, I offer several suggestions regarding how citizens and experts might respond to sexual diversity and support same-sex attracted Christian men in a complex, plural society. I begin by reflecting on a series of proposed actions and policies before moving on to elucidate my own vision of productive, sensitive, and accessible support.⁸⁰

Prohibition, censorship, and the restriction of care options. In light of the harms described by some past clients, critics have called for bans on ex-gay ministry programming. Flentje et al. (2013) noted that discussions of prohibition are increasingly common amongst opponents, particularly since the first youth ban was enacted in California (see Eckholm, 2012). Calls for censorship of ex-gay and ascetic voices – such as the TLC case described above – are closely connected to this desire for prohibition. In these situations, ascetic and ex-gay men are asked to step back into the closet, silently passing as heterosexuals rather than explicating their

unique sexual forms. As Foucault (1976/1990) stated, “[Repression acts as] a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of non-existence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know” (p. 4). Censorship is thus more than an act of dehumanization and delegitimization – it is a form of social erasure. Simultaneously, critics and mental health experts have argued with increasing insistence that affirmative therapy conducted by trained clinicians is the best way of supporting individuals experiencing a sexual-moral crisis. Unsatisfied with the notion of a ‘null’ or ‘neutral’ therapeutic environment, Tozer and McClanahan (1999) argued for “therapy that celebrates and advocates the authenticity and integrity of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons and their relationships” (p. 734). These authors argue that clients who are marginalized within society need therapists to be active allies and advocates to counteract the homophobic tendencies of the broader culture. Others promote forms of intervention intended to help clients recognize that their distress is related to the internalization of religious beliefs, social stigma, and prejudice against homosexuality while encouraging them to think more positively about their identity as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person (Karten & Wade, 2010; Morrow & Beckstead, 2004). Together, prohibition, censorship, and expert opinion work to promote the cultural assimilation of Christian sexual minorities into secular norms. These forces intend to narrow the field of choice available to same-sex attracted Christian men in an attempt to protect them from potential harm and help them avoid an unsatisfying way of life. Despite issuing from noble intentions, one must ask whether this narrowing of options would be of benefit to those experiencing a sexual-moral crisis or whether there might be unintended negative outcomes associated with this process.

Putting aside the legal issues related to prohibition and censorship, I contend that several unintended issues and problematic outcomes could arise from such processes. First, it is likely that legal prohibitions or acts of censorship would not put an end to these practices, but rather drive reorientation efforts underground in much the same way as female genital mutilation (see Shweder, 2003). This would enhance the possibility of client harm by eschewing the capacity for critical surveillance. As Super and Jacobson (2011) note, secrecy and opacity permit religious abuse to thrive, unchecked by voices of dissent. It would also result in the loss of productive dialogue whereby those with different experiences or cultural perspectives are able to move and influence one another through dynamic exchange. Although contemporary North American

society might be home to multiple modernities, these cultural systems do not exist in isolation from one another. They are mutually influential and exert a force on one another through sharing, debate, and social pressure (D'Andrade, 1984, Foucault, 1976/1990; Taylor, 2004). Evidence suggests that such dialogues have had an important influence on the ex-gay ministry movement, altering their dialogues and spurring changes aimed at harm-reduction. For example, both Gerber (2011) and participants in the current investigation noted that the ex-gay ministry movement has subtly altered its message of 'change' in recent years – diluting expectations about the possibility of radical reorientation partially in response to reports of the profound distress and disappoint wrought by unmet expectations. More recently, Exodus International– the face of the ex-gay movement from 1976 to 2011 – disbanded in the face of ongoing reports of harm, as a host of past leaders and therapists have apologized to previous clients (Bailey, 2013; Rhodan, 2014). Exodus International leaders are currently working to explore how they might continue to support same-sex attracted Christian men in a more productive manner. These developments suggest the fruitfulness of open communication and the benefits of sustaining an open dialogue across the cultural divide. By forcing these practices underground, one precludes productive communication and loses capacity to shape these practices by fostering mutual understanding and the recognition of harms and suffering. That is, the context of *negotiation* is lost, whereby cultural groups express their discontentment with one another and work toward conflict resolution or – at the very least – reflexivity and the potential reduction of harms (see Kleinman, 1995; Ricoeur, 1990/1992).

Any attempt to prohibit particular programs or narrow service options also risks leaving some same-sex attracted Christians without any support. The idea that these men would embrace secular psychology or affirming Christianity in the absence of ex-gay ministry programs and other conservative Christian supports remains to be seen. In the context of the current analysis, affirming resources were poorly attended – particularly early in the crisis period. As inhabitants of a conservative Christian modernity, these men looked to the religious community for help and tended not to consider secular or affirming supports. As Brad explained:

People say, 'Well, why didn't you just go to a PFLAG [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays group] or a, or a GSA [Gay-Straight Alliance group] or something like that?' Well those didn't exist in my world! I grew up in a conservative, Evangelical

boarding school. . . . And even if there had been a club, my religious experience was so close-minded that I would never have accessed it.

Theo (an ex-gay man) similarly stated that he had never had any interest in attending programs outside the Christian community: “The only resource that made any sense was among believers.” Ganzevoort et al. (2011) noted that the idea of an ongoing, cosmic battle between good and evil is commonplace in many conservative Christian congregations and communities and often leaves the faithful with a marked scepticism toward secular or liberal supports. Other investigators have similarly observed that the faithful fear secular mental health professionals will undermine their faith and beliefs (Johns & Hanna, 2011). Participants in the current study affirmed that concerns about spiritual destruction or pollution played an important role in deciding where to seek support. Jordan (ascetic) noted: “What an affirming congregation has done, they have ignored God . . . they have ignored scripture . . . [they] are heretical and preaching deception.” Seth similarly affirmed, “I don’t think they’re right.” In the minds of many ex-gay and ascetic participants, affirming and secular resources were ‘depraved,’ ‘deceptive,’ and ‘blasphemous’ spaces where sin was normalized and ungodliness was celebrated. As Josiah (survivor) explained:

The way they [conservative Christians] live . . . [would] be completely shattered by accepting what this secular and potentially demonic piece of information is trying to tell them . . . so therapists that are affirmative need to be *really careful* about understanding the deep fear that happens for people that are being asked to change their mind on such a fundamental aspect of what they believe.

Christian peers and leaders reinforced this preferential bias, tending to refer the men to resources inside the conservative Christian community. In the absence of ex-gay ministry programs or conservative Christian supports, it is likely that many of these individuals would have been left to cope with their struggle on their own, hedged into silence and inactivity by a lack of acceptable options for support.⁸¹

Moreover, the current data also suggest that conservative Christian resources played a positive role in the redressive process of participants across all three groups (ascetic, ex-gay, and survivor). As was evident throughout Parts 2 and 3 of the thesis, ex-gay ministry services and conservative Christian supports often provided participants with highly satisfying ways of thinking, feeling, and being, rescuing them from a world of pain and suffering. Moreover, where

these conservative Christian resources failed to provide a satisfying way of resolving crisis, alternative options emerged for gay survivors. Generally, it was only after participants had come to terms with the immutability of their desires and began to critically reflect on the homonegativity of the church that affirming resources and secular supports were taken seriously as potential healing resources. It is difficult to say how attempting to bypass these intermediary steps between secret suffering and an openly gay life would impact the redressive process. The idea of bypassing sexual reorientation or repression efforts might fail to recognize the important role played by these intermediary resources in the gradual transformation from fear, self-loathing, and stigma to acceptance and empowerment. While it is reasonable to imagine that some men would find their way to affirming resources and gay identities without these intermediary steps, it is just as likely that the leap would prove too radical for some Christians. As Brad explained:

Ex-gay ministries – it was like – it’s like I had to cross a chasm and there was no way I could ever jump the whole thing and they were like a pillar in the middle that I could jump to, which would give me enough strength to jump to the next place, which would get me to the next place, where I could finally get across. And as much as that could never be a place where I stayed my whole life, I am so thankful it was there at that time because, you know, I came so close to killing myself on multiple occasions, out of loneliness and fear and desperation.

Without the critical reflection and sense of permission engendered by failed and often harmful reorientation and repression efforts, it is likely that at least some men would remain devoid of support, unwilling to imagine any way forward. The search for the truth of the self in external figures is often a “process of narrowing in by opposites” (Fernandez, 1974). In this sense, engagement with many different signs, discourses, and images throughout the exploratory neophyte stage might prove indispensable for some men in the search for self.

What is missing from discussions of prohibition, censorship, and the restriction of care options is an appreciation of the social forces and cultural realities that preclude some men from embracing an affirming position and render ex-gay and ascetic options highly appealing. Here, ‘utopian virtues’ distort “the practical realities amongst which most people on earth live ... [a] particular world of pain and possibility” (Kleinman, 1995, pp. 48-49). As Theo explained, “Ex-gay ministries ... exist because people of faith, um, are – they believe *fully* that what they are

doing is sinful and they don't want to continue doing it." For some same-sex attracted Christian men, the dominant way of living with same-sex attraction in secular North American society (as a proud, openly-gay man) will never be an option. As Theo (an ex-gay man) noted, "The person who is a Christian – if you really are faithful in what the Bible says, then you're confronted with this idea of 'Well this may be who I am, but it's not who I was *intended* to be.'" Jed (an ex-gay man) similarly noted, "[Homosexuality] was not the design for my life or the plan or the path that I was going to go." Charles (an ex-gay man) simply stated, "For us, living a life of SSA [same-sex attraction] just wasn't an option." The idea of embracing one's desires or adopting a gay identity is as unthinkable as the notion of life-long repression is for gay survivors. Morality and truth cannot be mandated or legislated. These men live in different cultural worlds and they require different selves, social identities, communities, spiritualities, and sexualities.

To refuse those who cannot socially or morally embrace gay life access to services or fruitful models that could help restore a sense of hope to their lives risks condemning them to perpetual crisis. It risks abandoning them in the 'pit of despair' (Crites, 1986) and sentencing them to a protracted phase of confusion, chaos, hopelessness, and self-loathing where suicidal ideations and attempts are not uncommon. Tozer and McClanahan (1999) stated that an absence of services is preferable to reorientation programs, noting that "no action (barring risk of client self-harm, of course) is better than the wrong action" (p. 739). I respectfully disagree. Without ex-gay ministry programs and conservative Christian services, it is easy to imagine that many of the current participants – including some gay survivors – might have wasted more of their lives in a state of fear, secrecy, and suffering or even taken their own lives. As Brad noted:

Those ministries being there and giving me a safe place to talk about what was going on in my life *saved* my life. The amount of psychic pain that I was in at the time – the self-loathing and self-hatred and feeling like I had to keep this a secret and couldn't talk to anyone about it was *so destructive* in my life. And the thing that pulled me back... [was having] a safe space where I could even acknowledge to myself that I was attracted to guys and be okay with that. They gave me a group of people who were like me to have said 'We love you' – they gave me people who said, you know, 'You belong here.'

Although ex-gay and ascetic men continue to live with many struggles, the availability of alternative forms outside the typical heterosexual / homosexual binary enabled these men to find peace and satisfaction in the face of chaos and despair. For this reason, I see value in multiplicity

and contend that censorship, prohibition, and the restriction of care is dangerous to those whose moral and social commitments preclude embracing the secular norm of gay life. As a number of cultural analysts affirm, the potential for ‘counterproductive activism’ is great when policy recommendations proceed in a top-down manner without an appreciation for the ‘inside perspective’ or an opportunity for reciprocal, participatory engagement across cultural divide (Ingstad, 2007; Kleinman, 1995; Shweder, 2003).

Diversity, dialogue, and client-centered care. The tension between conservative Christianity and secular modernity – in regard to sexuality and a number of other issues – is likely to persist into the foreseeable future. Religion thrives alongside secular liberalism and the spontaneous convergence of these cultural worlds is highly improbable (Shweder, 2003; Taylor, 1999). As such, the promotion of a single option for men experiencing a sexual-moral crisis is untenable as it would leave some men with no solution at all. Rather than trying to restrict the number of legitimate sexual forms available to Christian men who experience same-sex attraction, society should encourage an ethic of productive dialogue, pragmatic diversity, and creative adaptation. Same-sex attracted Christian men suffer when they are unable to imagine satisfying possibilities for their lives and are empowered by the prospect of living well with their desires. The likelihood of successful coping is therefore enhanced when various ways of living well are made available to those in crisis. What is needed is not a restriction of options, but a proliferation of forms. As Paul (survivor) stated:

Our sexuality is very complex... [and] a gay identity may not make sense for a lot of people who have gay desires... [We should be] letting people be themselves and, instead of coming out gay or straight, just figure out who you are and let there be room in the world for there to be all kinds of different, complex people.”

This means that some men will inevitably encounter options they deem ill-suited to their moral proclivities and personal aspirations. However, simply knowing that there are Christian men living happy, healthy, and joyful lives under various circumstances can offer life-sustaining hope to those in crisis, drawing them out of ‘the closet’ and into a realm of experimentation where they can develop their own ethical aim and work toward the good life in a safe and supportive environment.

This vision entails a commitment to productive dialogue and respect for sexual diversity across the support network. In contrast to imposing or mandating change from the outside, I

promote a pragmatic model of cultural transformation as outlined by Habermas (1968/1973), whereby the world of those involved in proposed or desired changes is taken into consideration and dialogue is maintained between advocates of change and local actors. Kleinman (1995) advocated a similar approach of productive dialogue, noting that meaningful change can only proceed when oppositional groups have done the work needed to understand “the meanings and relationships in distinct local worlds ... [and] elicit the perspectives of [all] participants” (p. 54). Although this vision of productive contact and consultation is somewhat utopic and perhaps not fully attainable, any movement toward this ideal will improve the likelihood of bringing about lasting and meaningful change without alienating or delegitimizing the other. Here, change emerges through a dynamic process of reciprocal adjustment. The solution to a problem (ethical violations, personal suffering, reports of harm, etc.) passes back-and-forth between interested parties, bringing oppositional groups into a progressive determination of the nature of the problem on the basis of proposed solutions. Here, oppositional groups enter into a dynamic spiral of clarification that fosters mutual recognition and a series of reciprocal adjustments that promote change without dehumanizing or denying the experiences of one another. Where this proves difficult, Kleinman (1995) noted that the ethicist might help facilitate communication and foster mutual understanding in an attempt to negotiate conflict and protect all participants from the “dehumanizing imposition of hegemonic principles” (p. 55).

While the mode of productive communication described by Habermas (1968/1973) entails a frank discussion and debate about the potential benefits, harms, challenges, and losses associated with different sexual forms – including ascetic and ex-gay sexualities – and the communication of realistic expectations to potential clients and their families, it also requires an obligation on all sides to refrain from providing unsubstantiated, partial, or knowingly false information about particular ways of thinking, feeling, and being. It also requires all parties to avoid unreflectively delegitimizing the world of the other or attempting to prevent those in crisis from accessing alternative constructions of reality or lived opportunities. It would require leaders and clinicians to be willing to recognize when their own preferred forms might not be a good ‘fit’ for clients and be willing to explore other options or refer to other sources of support in such moments, as opposed to simply abandoning individuals in the depth of their chaos. It is my contention that much of the suffering experienced by participants in the neophyte stage was a direct consequence of active attempts to delegitimize and invalidate other possibilities, placing

immense pressure on individuals to adopt a particular way of thinking, feeling, and being despite a seeming lack of ‘fit.’ By retaining the experimentation, creativity, and multiplicity of the neophyte stage while tempering social pressure and the delegitimization of alternatives, the anxiety and despair associated with this phase of life could be reduced.

In essence, I am advocating for a vision of client-centered care to replace the current, ideology-driven service networks. Here, service provision would be oriented toward helping individuals navigate a multiplicity of options for their lives and discover a way of living well with their desires. Rather than attempting to convince clients to adopt their own vision of the world, clinicians and leaders would be willing to accompany individuals in an exploration of various possibilities. This would require that they take the notion of ‘multiple worlds’ seriously while also maintaining an eye to the influence of socio-political forces that could leave some individuals with the sense that their options are highly restricted. In this sense, leaders and clinicians must themselves become critical relativists in their efforts to help others navigate sexual-moral conflict and the challenges of contemporary cultural life in plural societies. They must develop a contextualized understanding of the client and be willing to acknowledge their world as valid and equal while also recognizing the potential for oppression and the need to empower those who are victims of relationships of dominance (i.e., *without* unreflectively reading all situations as an example of exploitation or resistance).

The American Psychological Association Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients (2000) affirmed this ethic by noting, “The role of psychologists, regardless of therapeutic orientation, is not to impose their beliefs on clients but to examine thoughtfully the clients’ experiences and motives” (p. 1443). The report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009) similarly noted:

The appropriate application of affirmative therapeutic interventions for those who seek SOCE [sexual orientation change efforts] involves therapist acceptance, support, and understanding of clients and the facilitation of clients’ active coping, social support, and identity exploration and development, without imposing a specific sexual orientation identity outcome (p. v).

Yet, the reports of participants in the current investigation suggest that the ideal of an unbiased exploration of possibilities grounded in “affirmative multiculturally competent treatment”

(Flentje, Heck, & Cochran, 2014) frequently fails to be realized in clinical practice (see Chapter 8). The present analysis suggests that there is strong socio-political resistance to the idea of promoting diverse sexualities as equally legitimate possibilities across the current service network. The tendency to pressure clients to adopt particular views and delegitimize alternatives is evident in both secular and conservative Christian spaces. Yet, I contend that those living with sexual-moral crisis should not bear the brunt of ideological polemics. If we really want to serve these men, we must consider new ways of helping them define and pursue the good life.

A vision of client-centred care grounded in a critical relativist orientation would begin with the pursuit of deep understanding. As scholars have noted, cultural *competence* requires more than just a capacity for empathy or an ‘open mind;’ it necessitates a deep understanding of the world of the client and the unique set of restraints, possibilities, obligations, and aspirations that define their lives that can only be attained through active engagement as opposed to censorship, distance, and silence (Berry, 2003; Kleinman, 1995; Shweder, 2003). As Josiah(survivor) explained, such dialogues foster understanding and mutual recognition and are, in themselves, a moral act: “People *need* to hear stories and they *need* to feel understood... [so] these stories need to get told, without necessarily having [an] outreaching agenda... [or trying] to find core agreement on things.” Ascetics, survivors, and ex-gay men all attested that conservative Christian supports have much to learn about human sexuality and the contours of contemporary gay life. Similarly, secular psychology cannot purport to offer culturally effective care to Christian men without developing a deep understanding of their religious worldview. For example, recognizing the cultural distance that separates conservative Christians and their secular North American counterparts, Seth (ascetic) qualified his narrative by stating: “If you’re not from a religious upbringing and you’re gay affirming, this might all just sound like silly.”

Developing a rich understanding of this phenomenon and the different options available to those in crisis would require communication or consultation across the cultural divide. It would mean that conservative Christians and secular liberal would have to be willing to learn from one another and destabilize their own understandings in much the same way participants have done through their own experiences of crisis. This does not mean that clinicians or leaders are obliged to support or advocate for particular sexualities. Rather, the vision of productive contact outlined here simply requires that actors be willing to position their own preferences

responsibly, reflect on their own assumptions about reality, and consider supporting their clients in exploring alternative forms of redress without rebuke, hostility, threat, or humiliation.

Such culturally competent, client-driven services could take many forms. It could be that secular psychologists and conservative Christian supports both undergo further training in religious and sexual studies, respectively, to better appreciate the psychological, emotional, corporeal, spiritual, and social nature of a sexual-moral crisis. Conservative Christian, secular, and affirming supports could also form service partnerships, working together to help individuals navigate the psychological, emotional, spiritual, and social contours of crisis. The key is that a multiplicity of voices be present to expose those in crisis to a wealth of options. Here, I recognize the value of Mikhail Bakhtin's (1970) ideal of 'heteroglossia,' "in which the interpretation of texts, practices and the world requires the contribution of a multiplicity of languages, perspectives and ideologies that 'mutually animate' one another" (as cited in Good, 1994, p. 62). However, given the highly polemic nature of the current service system, garnering support for cross-cultural consultation or referral could be a problem. It could be that fostering hope through a multiplicity of options is best accomplished where expert authority – in its secular or religious forms – is absent or minimized. Perhaps, as Gold and Stewart (2011) argue, peer-lead support or discussion groups could provide fruitful spaces where individuals could be introduced to different redressive approaches and engage in processes of self-discovery and reflection could proceed without the restrictive influence of an over-arching ideology. Whatever form these supports might take, it is essential that they provide a safe space for self-reflection, that they find ways of destigmatizing same-sex attraction and restoring hope to those in crisis, and that they permit individuals to explore various possibilities for their lives without threat of abandonment or pressure to conform to any one 'right' way of living.

While it is likely that many individuals on both sides of the heterosexual/affirming, conservative Christian divide might be opposed to such moral and ideological 'heteroglossia', "strategies of interference" (Kleinman, 1999) could prove useful in the meantime, providing access to multiple sexual models through channels that are not controlled by particular political or ideological institutions. Here, a plurality of creative forms, options, and solutions could be made available to the public in the form of abstract discussions, personal profiles, or artistic renderings. By enhancing the visibility of various redressive options outside of official religious or secular mental health channels and subjecting these possibilities to sustained critical

reflection, the capacity for creative adaption is increased and the restrictive power of secular or religious gatekeepers is undercut.

The suggestions proposed herein represent a creative engagement in an open exploration of potential solutions. In the face of this newly emerging cultural conundrum, the search for alternative approaches and best practices must proceed in a flexible, exploratory manner. Bridging secular psychology and conservative Christianity will not be easy. The question of how mental health professionals might possibly support and affirm individuals who promote various forms of homonegativity has no simple answer. As Kleinman (1995) confessed, even the most disciplined and prolific moral philosophers lose their way “in the thicket of multiculturalism” and the complexities of cross-cultural care (p. 57). Yet, even in its most flexible form, the vision of productive contact, pragmatic multiplicity, and inter-cultural sensitivity promoted here is sure to garner political pushback. The criticism Brad’s work has drawn from both secular and conservative Christian institutions for failing to clearly align with either conservative Christian or secular liberal interests (see Chapter 14) foretells the resistance, such an endeavour, will likely engender. Where there is cultural contact over a topic as meaning-laden as sexuality, there are bound to be sparks. However, I agree with Shweder (2003) that social contestation and dynamic debate is much more productive than silence and far preferential to “the horrific alternative of a centralized medical [or religious or psychological] hegemony in which individuals and even local communities lose the capacity to define the limits of a moral way of life” (p. 132). To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past – where hegemonic norms were used to justify violence against those who deviated from dominant sex and gender norms – and help all individuals experiencing same-sex desires to create satisfying lives, a diverse approach that recognizes different (and sometimes conflicting) modes of empowerment must be encouraged. By repositioning diversity as a creative opportunity and recognizing multiple sexual forms – or, at least, a broader diversity of forms – as equally ‘right,’ ‘good,’ and ‘true’ within specific cultural universes, multiple paths to the good life can be created, thereby increasing the chance that all same-sex attracted Christian men will find a way of living well with their desires.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current analysis has developed rich insights into the extraordinary world of a sexual-moral crisis and the taken-for-granted realm of contemporary North American culture. This experience-centered analysis reveals the extent to which a sexual-moral crisis ripples out from

the individual, impacting families and communities and revealing the frontiers of intra-societal fracture. Yet, this account – like all others – is limited and partial. With such a small sample, I cannot generalize about casual or predictive patterns. This is not, after all, the point of interpretive analysis. The current interpretation speaks only to the men in this particular study – it is reflective of their unique lives and the contexts in which they live. This is not to say that the current interpretation is not relevant to other contexts or individuals. Some of the patterns, meanings, and experiences described here could very well resonate with other groups or individuals. Yet, it must be acknowledged the current sample reflects the meanings and experiences generated by a particular group of men, all of who were North American, Caucasian, adult, and male and identified as largely overcoming a sexual-moral crisis and reaching a state of balance in their lives. As a group, they were also eager to share their stories and to reach out to others, not only in the context of the current research, but also as advocates, leaders, or critics in the larger social sphere. Their stories were thus grounded in a particular socio-political context and informed by their individual features and past experiences. These men represent a group of relatively well adjusted, highly educated, and vocal individuals – many of whom were engaged in leadership positions. The stories of those who are in different circumstances, caught in the midst of the search for redress, or less practiced in telling their stories might look very different.

The exploratory, generative nature of the current analysis inspires many new questions. I end the global conclusion of the thesis by suggesting only a few fruitful directions for future research. First, it is imperative that researchers develop a greater understanding of pre-intervention profiles and lasting harms and benefits associated with different redressive strategies. Clinicians and quantitative researchers could contribute greatly to the current understanding of sexual-moral crisis and inform ethical decision-making by bringing objective scales to bear on the mental, emotional, and social health of clients both before and after various interventions. Second, more research is needed to explore how the family struggles and experiences of sexual victimization and/or social exclusion so common throughout childhood narratives (see Chapter 1) might have impacted participants' experiences of a sexual-moral crisis. Third, it is imperative that researchers begin exploring a sexual-moral crisis in the context of other populations. Studies of females, older individuals, youth, and those from diverse ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds are sorely lacking across the literature. Such investigations would not only provide valuable information in their own right, but would also allow for

intriguing comparisons with existing analyses of protestant male Caucasians living in North America. Fourth, there is a need for more detailed research into particular phases of sexual-moral conflict. Future investigations should seek to enhance our understanding of the crisis period and how early experiences influence subsequent decision-making. Researchers must also develop a better understanding of the neophyte phase and the various types of formal and informal resources and supports that characterize this period. Fifth, more research is needed to explore how various aspects of a sexual-moral crisis influence family and community life. Situated, ethnographic investigations could be of particular value. Sixth, given the increasingly political nature of ex-gay and ascetic identities, there is a need for research into how sexual plurality is presented by the media and constructed by the general public in contemporary North American society. Lastly, there is a need for additional research into the political, economic, and social forces at play in these experiences, and how various resources and practices relate to local politics and support particular interests.

On my own, I intend to further explore the sociopolitical challenges and clinical possibilities associated with sexual-moral crisis. There has been a surprising lack of research into best practices with Christian men experiencing homoeroticism. A brief review of the literature revealed only a handful of texts specific to this subject. These studies focus on accommodating same-sex attracted Christian to existing secular and Christian services and provide tips to enhance client-sensitive care (see Bowland, Foster & Vosler, 2013; Haldeman, 2004; Heermann, Wiggins & Rutter, 2007; Yarhouse & Burkett, 2002). These works generally assume that individual pastoral or secular counselling is the best setting for intervention and largely avoid attending to the profound ethical paradoxes and political conflicts that are likely to ensue in such encounters. A host of questions remain. How do clients, religious counsellors, and clinical psychologists envision best practices for conservative Christian men caught in the midst of sexual-moral crisis? What interesting experiments are currently taking place outside of the secular/Christian binary? What resistance or discomfort might be generated by the meeting of different sexual and moral imaginaries in therapeutic spaces? What opportunities for cross-cultural learning can clinicians and leaders imagine? In terms of secular psychologists in particular, little is known about how such professionals experience attempts to offer culturally-sensitive care for same-sex attracted, conservative Christian men and what challenges they face in this area of practice. What might it mean for them to support someone who maintains a

pathological or sin orientation toward homoeroticism? Are they comfortable refusing to help those who pursue particular lives, projects, or selves in contradiction with their own? Do they feel they possess the necessary knowledge and skills to adequately treat the faithful and offer culturally competent care? How much do they know about the struggles of gay, ascetic, and ex-gay men? How do they propose to overcome the profound contradiction between their desire to support LGB rights and promote a positive vision of sexual diversity and the mandate to provide culturally-competent, client-driven care to those with unmistakably homonegative attitudes? While the idea of referring same-sex attracted Christians to other services is often suggested in response to this quandary (see, for example, Anderton et al., 2011), to whom might secular counsellors confidently and ethically refer such clients?

Even less is known about how Christian leaders construct secular psychology and relate to dominant sexual discourses. What opportunities exist for these two supports to come together in support of Christians in crisis? What challenges does such a union face? Although I contend that prohibition, censorship, and forced cultural and sexual homogenization are unlikely to benefit those in the depth of despair, sorting out how best to move forward is not an easy endeavour. Yet, I am confident that mutual consultation and the bridge-building this process facilitates holds great promise for improving understanding across the cultural divide and improving the services offered to Christian individuals in crisis.

⁷² As Cianciotto and Cahill (2006) noted, the debate surrounding conversion therapy and ex-gay ministry services intensified in 2006, when a 16 year old boy name Zachary Stark accused an adolescent ex-gay program of abusive practices, leading to a highly publicized investigation by the state of Tennessee. Although no evidence of child abuse was ultimately found, this event remains lodged in the public mind.

⁷³ A similar explanation was advanced by Creek (2013) in her analysis of same-sex attracted celibate Christians.

⁷⁴ That is, a world where the fantastic, marvelous, and supernatural are taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life and where the existence of Gods, angels, demons, witches, relics, sacred places, and the like is assumed.

⁷⁵ What Taylor (2004) referred to as the 'social imaginary' - the collection of shared understandings and normal expectations that underlie human social life.

⁷⁶ Stefan Zweig's (1927/1991) portrait of the sad, repressed, and lonely life of a thinly-veiled gay man in 1927 provides a powerful illustration of how the gay civil rights movement opened up a wealth of new possibilities for same sex attracted men, not only in global society but also for those embedded in fundamentalist Christian denominations. Where the professor in Zweig's work remained stagnated in secret suffering and inner fracture throughout his life, the current participants were able to move past the crisis period by appropriating modern symbolic forms previously unavailable in North American society. This novel reinforces the extent to which the various modes of experimentation, self-discovery, and creative revisionism described by participants throughout the current work were inconceivable in the earlier part of the 20th century.

⁷⁷ Halperin (2012) and a handful of other critical analysts surveyed in his analysis represent notable exceptions.

⁷⁸ As Douglas (1966) explained, the function of taboos is to assure the transformation of arbitrary rules or prohibitions into moral absolutes. This functional analysis of taboos affirmed that they underpin social structure everywhere, transforming the arbitrary into 'right' and 'wrong.'

⁷⁹ Although, as Shweder (2003) noted, attempts to correct certain ‘erroneous beliefs’ is unlikely to deter participants from seeking these services, since the primary motivations have little to do with discreet facts and more to do with the global structure of the moral imaginary.

⁸⁰ It is important to note that the following discussion refers to adults, and that a consideration of the unique challenges and opportunities for youth is beyond the scope of this work.

⁸¹ The lack of appropriate and accessible services available to Christian men in the throes of crisis is itself attested to by the fact that many who have lived through this crisis feel compelled to help others avoid common pitfalls and find sensitive supports. In this service desert, many who have emerged from crisis feel compelled to offer whatever support they can to peers.

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Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Birth year	Ethnicity	Residence	Marital status
Adam	55	1956	Caucasian	Tennessee	Divorced (female), single
Brad	35	1976	Caucasian	Ontario	Married (female)
Charles	29	1982	Caucasian	District of Columbia	Married (female)
Jed	49	1962	Caucasian	Ohio	Married (female)
Jordan	37	1974	Caucasian	California	Married (female)
Josiah	30	1981	Caucasian	Ontario	Divorced (male), single
Mason	65	1946	Caucasian	Arizona	Divorced (female), widowed (male), single
Matt	44	1967	Caucasian	British Columbia	Committed (male)
Mitch	52	1959	Caucasian	California	Single
Ned	36	1975	Caucasian	Oregon	Committed (male)
Paul	46	1965	Caucasian	Pennsylvania	Divorced (female), engaged (male)
Rodney	47	1964	Caucasian	California	Single
Seth	33	1978	Caucasian	Michigan	Married (female)
Theo	56	1955	Caucasian	Oklahoma	Married (female)
Todd	59	1952	Caucasian	California	Married (female)
Walter	56	1955	Caucasian	Washington	Single

Table 1 Continued

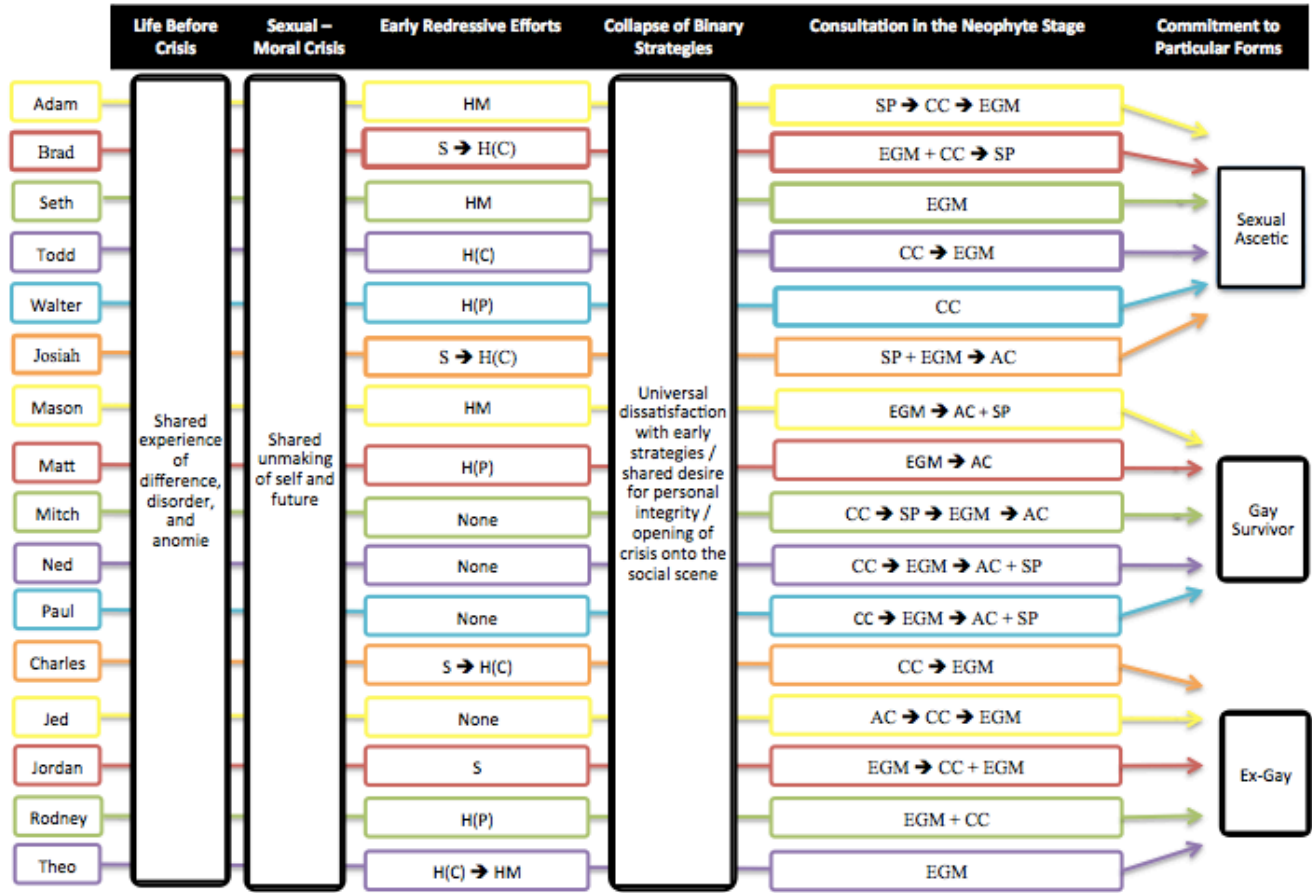
Pseudonym	Children	Education	Religious Identity	Previous Religious Affiliation(s)
Adam	0	B.A.	Seventh Day Adventist	N/A
Brad	0	M.A.	Anabaptist Protestant	Fundamentalist Baptist
Charles	2	M.A.	Non-denominational Evangelical	Charismatic Christian
Jed	1	M.Ed.	Christian	Roman Catholic
Jordan	0	M.Div.	Christian	N/A
Josiah	0	M.Div.	Anglican	Christian and Missionary Alliance, Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, Vineyard Movement
Mason	3	B.A.	Spiritual	LDS (Mormon)
Matt	0	M.Sc.	Atheist	Catholic, Assemblies of God
Mitch	0	M.A.	Liberal Christian	Roman Catholic
Ned	0	Some college	Liberal Christian	Conservative Christian
Paul	0	B.A.	Religious Society of Friends (Quaker)	Roman Catholic, Evangelical
Rodney	0	M.Div.	Baptist / Non-denominational	Evangelical Christian
Seth	3	B.A.	Conservative Protestant	N/A
Theo	5	B.A.	Southern Baptist	N/A
Todd	3	Some college	Seventh Day Adventist	N/A
Walter	0	Some college	Seventh Day Adventist	N/A

Table 1 Continued

Pseudonym	Number of ex-gay ministry interventions	Age at last ex-gay ministry intervention	Year of last ex-gay ministry intervention
Adam	2	41	1997
Brad	3	27	2003
Charles	1	25	2007
Jed	1	23	1985
Jordan	3	29	2003
Josiah	1	21	2002
Mason	1	54	1999
Matt	1	21	1988
Mitch	2	47	2006
Ned	1	22	1997
Paul	4	33	1998
Rodney	1	38	2002
Seth	3	31	2009
Theo	2	52	2007
Todd	2	56	2008
Walter	0	N/A	N/A

Figure 1

Overview of Movements, Encounters, and Strategies in Participant Narratives



Key:

‘→’ Indicates a distinct shift between redressive strategies or patterns of consultation, ‘+’ indicates a period of overlap between strategies or consultation modes

Early Redressive Strategies: ‘S’ = supplication, ‘H(C)’ = clandestine homosexuality, ‘H(P)’ = public homosexuality, ‘HM’ = heterosexual marriage

Neophyte Resources: CC = Conservative Christian resources; EGM = ex-gay ministry programs; AC = affirming Christian supports; SP = secular psychology services

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Letter



Invitation to Participate

Jan Gelech, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. Candidate

Culture and Human Development, University of Saskatchewan, Canada

Email: jan.gelech@usask.ca Phone: 1-415-412-5283

Hello,

My name is Jan Gelech and I am exploring ex-gay ministry experiences as part of my Ph.D. dissertation. I would like to respectfully invite you to participate in this project by sharing your story and thoughts with me.

This project is person-centered and seeks to create a rich and nuanced account of how individuals understand their experiences with ex-gay ministries. The goal of this research is to come to a better understanding of what might motivate someone to engage with these programs, what kinds of experiences individuals have within these environments, the kinds of changes and transformations individuals feel they have undergone as a result, and clients' thoughts, opinions and feelings on related topics. **I am not promoting any political agenda** – I seek only to better understand the lives people attempt to create for themselves according to their own moral compasses.

Study participation involves a confidential interview session lasting about 1.5 hours. In this session, I ask participants to tell me a bit about their lives and then ask them some questions pertinent to their ex-gay ministry experiences. **All information is kept confidential, with identifying names, places, occupations, organizations, and other details removed or altered in the interview transcript.** Interviews are conducted either in person or over the phone depending on where the participant is located and their own personal preference.

This study has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board (10-342) and adheres to all ethical principles. If you have any questions or concerns, this board can be reached at 1-306-966-2084. If you would be willing to participate in this research study, or would like more information, please contact me via phone or email at any time (see above).

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope this request finds you happy and healthy!

Jan Gelech

Appendix B: Demographics Questionnaire (Key informants)



Exploring Ex-Gay Ministry Experiences

Researcher: Jan Gelech
Program: Culture & Human Development

Advisor: Dr. M. Desjardins
Department: Psychology

Name: _____

Sex (M/F): _____

Date of Birth: _____

Place of Birth: _____

Current Place of Residence (City / Neighbourhood): _____

Other Places of Residence / Years Lived in Location: _____

Age: _____

Level of Education: High School ___ BA ___ MA ___ PhD ___ Other ___

Occupation: _____

Religious Affiliation: _____

Years Affiliated with this Religion: _____

Name of Ex-Gay Ministry Program(s) / Survivor Organizations You are Involved With:

Years Involved with Ex-Gay Ministry Program(s): _____

Location of Ex-Gay Ministry Program(s): _____

Brief Description of Your Involvement with Ex-Gay Ministry Program(s):

Appendix C: Institutional Interview Guide (key informants - ex-gay organizations)

Note: Italics indicate possible prompts to be used by the interviewer in the event that particular subjects were not covered in either the life history interview or participant responses to the general question posed.

Life

- Can you tell me about your life and how you came to be involved with helping men with unwanted SSA?
- Your motivations as a leader?

Program

- Motivations
 - What do you think motivates clients who come to you?
 - Any non-religious clients?
- Stakes
 - What are you trying to accomplish through your program? Why?
 - What are you trying to avoid? Why?
 - What are the core principles that guide your program?
- Level of intervention
 - What exactly are you trying to change?
 - *Desires?*
 - *Understandings?*
 - *Behaviour?*
 - *Identity?*
- Tell me about the program.
 - Who is the program for?
 - *Who does it attract?*
 - *Is it applicable to all same-sex attracted persons or just some?*
 - Can you walk me through a typical program session?
 - What kinds of activities or practices are involved?
 - *What happens when someone first enters?*
 - *What happens when they leave?*
 - *Rituals?*
 - What kinds of objects are used?
 - What rules or in play?
 - What is the emotional experience of clients engaged with the program?
 - *How do clients emotionally respond to the program?*
 - *What negative emotions are involved?*
 - *Positive emotions?*

- Duration of contact with clients?
- Group dynamics (if applicable!):
 - What is the mood of the group like?
 - What are the relationships between group members like?
 - Were there any hierarchies?
 - Who is in charge?
 - Is there an authority figure?
 - What role models are present?
 - Are there any sub-groups or internal divisions within the group?
- Interaction
 - What is your relationship to clients like?
 - Disagreements? Conflicts? Disruptions?
 - Do people ever resist program rules, goals, or discourses?
 - *How so?*
 - *How is this managed?*
 - Withdrawals?
 - *Why?*
 - *How is this managed?*
- Body
 - How did this program address the body / behaviour?
 - *About behaviour or more psychological?*
 - *Is the body altered in any way?*
- Space
 - What is the physical space of interaction like?
 - What is the group space like?
 - How are people arranged? Why?
 - Does the community extend beyond this physical space / meeting in any way?
- Discourses
 - What teachings are part of your program?
 - What does your program teach about sexuality?
 - What do you teach about sexual orientation?
 - What do you teach about same-sex attractions or desires?
 - What is it?
 - Causes?
 - How can they be changed?
 - What do you teach about sexuality and religion?
 - *What does Christianity say about SSA / homosexuality?*

- *Why does sex matter to the church?*
 - *What do biblical teachings say about same-sex attraction?*
 - *What is the status of religious texts?*
 - *Historical? Absolute?*
 - *Why should same-sex attraction something to be resisted?*
 - *How does God relate to same-sex attracted individuals? Punishment? Forgiveness?*
 - *What happens to those who engage in homosexual acts in the afterlife?*
 - *Are desires / attractions sins? Behaviours?*
- **Outcomes**
 - How do you understand program success?
 - *What is required to 'succeed'?*
 - *Degrees of success?*
 - *How is this assessed?*
 - *Who is responsible for this success?*
 - *How does it come about?*
 - What happens to people after they leave?
 - *Continue to struggle?*
 - *Cured?*
 - What causes different program outcomes?
 - *What kinds of people are successful in the program? Why?*
 - *What kinds of people are unsuccessful in the program? Why?*
 - *What kinds of people leave to assume a gay self-identity? Why?*
 - How does the program influence clients' everyday lives?
 - *How does it impact their spousal relationships?*
 - *Their relationships with other men?*
 - *Their faith?*
 - *Their goals?*
 - *Their emotional functioning?*
 - Are some individuals harmed by the program? Can it accentuate distress or pose other dangers?
 - *If so:*
 - *Who is harmed and why?*
 - *How are these dangers managed?*
 - What happens if people experience sexual falls?
- **Morality**
 - What does it mean to live a good life?

- *What are the most important things in life?*
 - *Has your notion of what is most important changed over the years?*
- How does one attain the good life?
 - *What must be accomplished?*
 - *What must be avoided?*
 - *How?*
- What do we owe to others?
- What do we owe god?

Rights

- What are the rights of your clients?
- What rights do you have as a leader in the ex-gay movement?
- What rights do your opponents have?

Politics

- Politics
 - What do you think of affirming congregations?
 - What do you think about the gay community?
 - What do you think about the current state of sexuality in America?
 - What do you think about the way the church deals with SSA / homosexuality?
 - What do you think about the ex-gay movement?
 - What do you think about those who oppose ex-gay ministry practices / researchers that purport to show that these practices are harmful or ineffective?
 - What do you think about gay affirmative therapies?
 - How do you think the general public sees the ex-gay movement?
 - What do you think of people who say that ex-gays are lying to themselves / fakes?

History

- How did your organization come about?
- How has it changed over the years?
 - *Goals?*
 - *Program?*
 - *Practices?*
 - *Size?*
- How do you see the future of the ex-gay movement?
 - *In general?*
 - *Your organization in particular?*
 - *What are your hopes for the future of same-sex attraction?*

Appendix D: Institutional Interview Guide (key informants - ex-gay survivor organizations)

Note: Italics indicate possible prompts to be used by the interviewer in the event that particular subjects were not covered in either the life history interview or participant responses to the general question posed.

Life

- Can you tell me about your life and how you came to be involved with helping ex-ex-gay men / ex-gay survivors?

Program

- Motivations
 - Why do people come to you?
 - What are they looking for?
- Stakes
 - What are you trying to accomplish through your program? Why?
 - What are you trying to avoid? Why?
 - What are the core principles that guide your program?
 - Duration of contact with clients?
- Discourses
 - What is your position / discourses on sexuality?
 - What do you teach about SSA?
 - What do you teach about sexuality and religion?
- How does the program influence clients' everyday lives?
 - *How does it impact their spousal relationships?*
 - *Their relationships with other men?*
 - *Their faith?*
 - *Their goals?*
 - *Their emotional functioning?*
- Morality
 - What does it mean to live a good life?
 - *What are the most important things in life?*
 - *Has your notion of what is most important changed over the years?*
 - How does one attain the good life?
 - *What must be accomplished?*
 - *What must be avoided?*
 - *How?*
 - What do we owe to others? What do others owe to us?

- What do we owe god?

Rights

- What are the rights of your clients / those you serve?
- What rights do you have as a leader in the ex-gay survivor movement?
- What rights do your opponents have?

Politics

- Politics
 - What do you think of affirming congregations?
 - What do you think about the gay community?
 - What do you think about the current state of sexuality in America?
 - What do you think about the ex-gay movement?
 - What do you think about those who oppose ex-gay ministry practices / researchers that purport to show that these practices are harmful or ineffective?
 - What do you think about gay affirmative therapies?
 - How do you think the general public sees the ex-gay movement?
 - What do you think of people who say that ex-gays are lying to themselves / fakes?

History / Future

- How has it changed over the years?
 - *Goals?*
 - *Program?*
 - *Practices?*
 - *Size?*
- How do you see the future of the ex-ex-gay movement?
 - *In general?*
 - *Your organization in particular?*
 - *What are your hopes for the future of same-sex attraction?*
- Ideally, what would you like to see happen with the ex-gay ministry movement?

Appendix E: Demographics Questionnaire (participants)



UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

Exploring Ex-Gay Ministry
Experiences

Researcher: Jan Gelech
Program: Culture & Human Development

Advisor: Dr. M. Desjardins
Department: Psychology

Name: _____

Age: _____

Place of Birth: _____

Current Place of Residence (City): _____

Other Places of Residence / Years Lived in Location: _____

Family Status: Single _____ Married _____ Divorced _____

Children (number & age): _____

Level of Education: High School _____ BA _____ MA _____ PhD _____

Other _____

Occupation: _____

Religious Affiliation: _____

Years Affiliated with this Religion: _____

Name of Ex-Gay Ministry Program(s) Attended: _____

Date of Ex-Gay Ministry Program Participation(s): _____

Location of Ex-Gay Ministry Program(s): _____

Brief Description of Ex-Gay Ministry Participation / Program(s) Attended: _____

Appendix F: Life History Interview Guide (participants recruited through ex-gay organizations)

Can you please tell me about your life, starting as far back as you can remember and leading up to your hopes and dreams for the future in a way that helps me understand how you feel about your life today as someone who once sought to alter their same-sex attraction?

- What was your childhood like?
- What were your teen years like?
- At what point did same-sex attraction become an issue in your life?
- What was life like prior to your engagement with ex-gay ministries?
 - Dating?
 - Relationships with family, friends, church, community?
 - Emotional life?
 - Spiritual life?
 - Institutional contact / conflict resolution strategies?
- What was life like during your engagement with ex-gay ministries?
 - Dating?
 - Relationships with family, friends, church, community?
 - Emotional life?
 - Spiritual life?
 - Institutional contact / conflict resolution strategies?
- What was life like following your engagement with ex-gay ministries?
 - Dating?
 - Relationships with family, friends, church, community?
 - Emotional life?
 - Spiritual life?
 - Institutional contact / conflict resolution strategies?
- Marriage?
 - What drew you to her?
 - What did you look for in a potential partner?
 - How did she respond to your past?
 - What has your struggle meant for her life?
- At what point did important others learn of your SSA? How did they react?
 - *Church community? Family members? Friends?*
- What is life like for you now?
 - What is your current involvement with the ex-gay movement? If any.
- What are your hopes for the future?

Appendix G: Life History Interview Guide (participants recruited through ex-gay survivor organizations)

Can you please tell me about your life, starting as far back as you can remember and leading up to your hopes and dreams for the future in a way that helps me understand how you feel about your life today as someone who once sought to alter their same-sex attraction?

- What was your childhood like?
- What were your teen years like?
- At what point did same-sex attraction become an issue in your life?
- What was life like prior to your engagement with ex-gay ministries?
 - Dating?
 - Relationships with family, friends, church, community?
 - Emotional life?
 - Spiritual life?
 - Institutional contact / conflict resolution strategies?
- What was life like during your engagement with ex-gay ministries?
 - Dating?
 - Relationships with family, friends, church, community?
 - Emotional life?
 - Spiritual life?
 - Institutional contact / conflict resolution strategies?
- What was life like following your engagement with ex-gay ministries?
 - Dating?
 - Relationships with family, friends, church, community?
 - Emotional life?
 - Spiritual life?
 - Institutional contact / conflict resolution strategies?
- Marriage?
 - What drew you to her?
 - What did you look for in a potential partner?
 - How did she respond to your past?
 - What has your struggle meant for her life?
- At what point did important others learn of your SSA? How did they react?
 - *Church community? Family members? Friends?*
- What is life like for you now?
 - What is your current involvement with the ex-gay movement? If any.
- What are your hopes for the future?

Appendix H: Semi-Structured Interview Guide (participants recruited through ex-gay organizations)

Note: Italics indicate possible prompts to be used by the interviewer in the event that particular subjects were not covered in either the life history interview or participant responses to the general question posed.

Part 1: Details on the Life Story

In this first part of the interview, I would like to come back on your life story to explore in greater detail some key issues to help me better understand your experiences.

- Ex-Gay Ministry Experience
 - What motivated you to attend an ex-gay ministry program / seek to change your SSA?
 - *Event?*
 - *Person?*
 - *Why was homosexuality problematic in your life?*
 - *Who was involved in the decision?*
 - *What other options did you consider?*
 - *What were you hoping to accomplish?*
 - *What were you hoping to avoid?*
 - *What did others think of your decision to participate?*
 - *Friends, family, community, spouse?*
 - Tell me about the ex-gay ministry program(s) you attended. What was the program group like? How would you explain it to an outsider?
 - *What is a typical program session like?*
 - *Rules?*
 - *Practices / activities?*
 - *Teachings?*
 - *Sexuality?*
 - *Homosexuality?*
 - *What is it? What causes it? How fix it?*
 - *Are any things talked about other than sex?*
 - *Are other viewpoints discussed – pro-gay, affirmative therapy, welcoming congregations?*
 - *Anything you did not agree with / did not accept / chose to alter or ignore for your own situation?*
 - *What was it like to be a member of this group / community?*
 - *Did problems ever erupt within the community?*
 - *Disagreements? Conflicts? Disruptions? Resistance? Sex?*
 - *Did people ever leave the group? Why ?*

- What was your emotional experience of the program?
 - *What parts of the program were associated with positive emotions?*
 - *Negative?*
 - *Did you ever feel harmed in any way?*
- What happens if someone has a sexual ‘fall’?
- Do you have any involvement with the ex-gay movement now?
- What role did others play in your conversion efforts?
 - Role of wife?
 - Her thoughts, emotions, coping strategies throughout?
 - Friends?
 - Community members / faith leaders?
 - Family members?
- Program Outcomes
 - What does success in the program mean?
 - *Are there different outcomes?*
 - How do you feel the program went for yourself?
 - *Did you succeed in fulfilling your original expectations?*
 - *What were the best aspects of your experience?*
 - *What were the worst?*
 - *Would you change anything?*
 - *What is required for success? Who is responsible for success?*
 - How do you feel the program went for other group members?
 - *Who was successful in the program? Why? What does this mean?*
 - *Who was unsuccessful in the program? Why? What does this mean?*

Part 2: Changes in the Lifeworld Following Program Participation

In this part of the interview process, I will ask you about how certain aspects of how you think, feel, behave, and interact in the world have been altered by your ex-gay ministry experiences.

- How did your experience with the ex-gay ministries and your struggle with SSA alter your life?
- How did participation in the program / SSA struggle impact your relationships?
 - *Marriage?*
 - *Family*
 - *Parental / sibling relationships?*
 - *Children (current or anticipated)?*
 - *Friends?*
- How did the program impact your own sexuality?

- *Has your sexual orientation changed?*
 - *How so?*
- *Current status of your sexuality?*
 - *Do you continue to struggle at all?*
 - *Will there ever be an end to your struggle?*
 - *How do you manage temptations?*
- *The way you think about sex?*
- How is your daily life different compared to daily life before your participation in ex-gay ministries?
- How did participation in the ex-gay ministry program change who you are as a person?
 - *How has it altered the way you feel about yourself?*
 - *Your sense of masculinity?*
 - *How has it altered the way others see / act towards you?*

Part 3: Experiences of Conflict Resolution

- How did you work through sexual-religious conflict?
- What of institutions / services / resources / ideas played a role in your attempts to mediate this conflict?
 - What were the benefits of these resources?
 - What were the harms?
- Who was helpful in this process?
- What challenges did you face?
- What advice would you give other same-sex attracted Christian men?

Part 4: The Current Lifeworld

In this part of the interview process, I will ask you for additional details on your current life and the thoughts, feelings, values, and behavioural tendencies that characterise your current existence.

- Everyday Life
 - What is your marriage like?
 - *How do your same-sex attractions impact your marriage?*
 - *Is your marriage different in any way because of your previous SSA?*
 - *Is your relationship better than the typical marriage in any way?*
 - *What is your wife's experience of being married to an ex-gay man like?*
- Self and Identity
 - Who are you at this point in time?
 - *How would you define yourself?*
 - *What are the most important/ defining aspects of who you are?*
- Sexuality

- What has been the significance of your same-sex attractions in your life?
 - *What has it meant for your life?*
 - *Your relationships?*
 - *Your faith?*
 - *Your goals and dreams?*
 - *How would your life have been different without same-sex attraction?*
 - *What negative things have come from your same-sex attractions?*
 - *Have any positive things that have come from your same-sex attraction?*
- How do you currently understand sexuality?
 - *What is it? Where does it come from? Role of body, mind, emotions?*
- How does being a Christian impact the way you think about sexuality?
- What does it mean to be an ex-gay?
- Is your sexuality core / central to identity or peripheral?
- **Morality**
 - What does it mean to live a good life?
 - *What are the most important things in life?*
 - *Has your notion of what is most important changed over the years?*
 - How does one attain the good life?
 - *What must be accomplished?*
 - *What must be avoided?*
 - *How?*
 - What do we owe to others?
- **Marginality and Difference**
 - In what ways are you different from / the same as other men?
 - In what ways are you different from / the same as other men who have been through ex-gay ministries?
- **Politics**
 - What do you think of affirming congregations?
 - What do you think about the gay community?
 - What do you think about the current state of sexuality in America?
 - What do you think about the ex-gay movement?
 - What do you think about the way the church handles SSA / homosexuality?
 - What do you think about those who oppose ex-gay ministry practices / researchers that purport to show that these practices are harmful or ineffective?
 - What do you think about gay affirmative therapies?
 - How do you think the general public sees ex-gays?
 - What do you think of people who say that ex-gays are lying to themselves / fakes?

- Religion
 - What role has Christianity played in your life?
 - *Role /importance in your life?*
 - Is same-sex attraction a sin?
 - Are SS thoughts and desires sins? Are SS behaviours?
 - Why does sex matter to the church? How does God relate to SSA individuals?

Part 4: Open Reflection

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your life, your experiences with same-sex attraction, or your participation with ex-gay ministry programs?
- Is there anything I did not ask about that you feel is important about your life, your experiences with same-sex attraction, or your participation with ex-gay ministry programs or any other institutions or services?

Appendix I: Semi-Structured Interview Guide (clients recruited through ex-gay survivor organizations)

Note: Italics indicate possible prompts to be used by the interviewer in the event that particular subjects were not covered in either the life history interview or participant responses to the general question posed.

Part 1: Details on the Life Story

In this first part of the interview, I would like to come back on your life story to explore in greater detail some key issues to help me better understand your experiences.

- Ex-Gay Ministry Experience
 - What motivated you to attend an ex-gay ministry program / seek to change your SSA?
 - *Event?*
 - *Person?*
 - *Why was homosexuality problematic in your life at the time?*
 - *Who was involved in the decision?*
 - *What other options did you consider?*
 - *What were you hoping to accomplish?*
 - *What were you hoping to avoid?*
 - *What did others think of your decision to participate?*
 - *Friends, family, community, spouse?*
 - Tell me about the ex-gay ministry program(s) you attended. What was the program group like?
How would you explain it to an outsider?
 - *What is a typical program session like?*
 - *Rules?*
 - *Practices / activities?*
 - *Teachings?*
 - *Sexuality?*
 - *Homosexuality?*
 - *What is it? What causes it? How fix it?*
 - *Are any things talked about other than sex?*
 - *Are other viewpoints discussed – pro-gay, affirmative therapy, welcoming congregations?*
 - *Anything you did not agree with / did not accept / chose to alter or ignore for your own situation?*
 - *What was it like to be a member of this group / community?*
 - *Did problems ever erupt within the community?*
 - *Disagreements? Conflicts? Disruptions? Resistance? Sex?*

- *Did people ever leave the group? Why ?*
 - What was your emotional experience of the program?
 - *What parts of the program were associated with positive emotions?*
 - *Negative?*
 - *Did you ever feel harmed in any way?*
 - What happens if someone has a sexual ‘fall’?
 - Do you have any involvement with the ex-ex-gay movement?
- What role did others play in your conversion efforts?
 - Role of wife?
 - Her thoughts, emotions, coping strategies throughout?
 - Friends?
 - Community members / faith leaders?
 - Family members?
- Program Outcomes
 - What does success in the program mean?
 - *Are there different outcomes?*
 - How do you feel the program went for yourself?
 - *Did you succeed in fulfilling your original expectations?*
 - *What were the best aspects of your experience?*
 - *What were the worst?*
 - *Would you change anything?*
 - *What is required for success / who responsible?*
 - Do they help anyone?
 - How do you feel the program went for other group members?
 - *Who was successful in the program? Why? What does this mean?*
 - *Who was unsuccessful in the program? Why? What does this mean?*

Part 2: Changes in the Lifeworld Following Program Participation

In this part of the interview process, I will ask you about how certain aspects of how you think, feel, behave, and interact in the world have been altered by your ex-gay ministry experiences.

- How did your experience with the ex-gay ministries and your struggle with SSA alter your life?
- How did participation in the program / SSA struggle impact your relationships?
 - *Marriage?*
 - *Family*
 - *Parental / sibling relationships?*
 - *Children (current or anticipated)?*

- *Friends?*
- How did the program impact your own sexuality?
 - *Has your sexual orientation changed?*
 - *How so?*
 - *Current status of your sexuality?*
 - *The way you think about sex?*
- How is your daily life different compared to daily life before your participation in ex-gay ministries?
- How did participation in the ex-gay ministry program change who you are as a person?
 - *How has it altered the way you feel about yourself?*
 - *Your sense of masculinity?*
 - *How has it altered the way others see / act towards you?*

Part 3: Experiences of Conflict Resolution

- How did you work through sexual-religious conflict?
- What of institutions / services / resources / ideas played a role in your attempts to mediate this conflict?
 - What were the benefits of these resources?
 - What were the harms?
- Who was helpful in this process?
- What challenges did you face?
- What advice would you give other same-sex attracted Christian men?

Part 4: The Current Lifeworld

In this part of the interview process, I will ask you for additional details on your current life and the thoughts, feelings, values, and behavioural tendencies that characterise your current existence.

- Everyday Life
 - What is your marriage like?
 - *How do your same-sex attractions impact your marriage?*
 - *Is your marriage different in any way because of your previous SSA?*
 - *Is your relationship better than the typical marriage in any way?*
 - *What is your wife's experience of being married to an ex-gay man like?*
- Self and Identity
 - Who are you at this point in time?
 - *How would you define yourself?*
 - *What are the most important/ defining aspects of who you are?*
- Sexuality
 - What has been the significance of your same-sex attractions / homosexuality in your life?
 - *What has it meant for your life?*

- *Your relationships?*
 - *Your faith?*
 - *Your goals and dreams?*
 - *How would your life have been different without same-sex attraction?*
 - *What negative things have come from your same-sex attractions?*
 - *What positive things that have come from your same-sex attraction?*
- How do you currently understand sexuality?
 - *What is it? Where does it come from? Role of body, mind, emotions?*
- How does being a Christian impact the way you think about sexuality?
- What does it mean to be an ex-ex-gay?
- Is your sexuality core / central to identity or peripheral?
- What was the process of coming out of the ex-gay movement / embracing your SSA like?
 - Getting involved in gay community?
 - Relearning?
 - Overcoming harms?
- Morality
 - What does it mean to live a good life?
 - *What are the most important things in life?*
 - *Has your notion of what is most important changed over the years?*
 - How does one attain the good life?
 - *What must be accomplished?*
 - *What must be avoided?*
 - *How?*
 - What do we owe to others? What do others owe us?
- Marginality and Difference
 - In what ways are you different from / the same as other men?
 - In what ways are you different from / the same as other men who have been through ex-gay ministries?
 - Those who are now 'ex-gay'?
 - Other gay men?
- Politics
 - What do you think of affirming congregations?
 - What do you think about / is your experience of the gay community?
 - How does this compare to how ex-gay ministries portray it?
 - What do you think about the current state of sexuality in America?
 - What do you think about the ex-gay movement?
 - What do you think about the way the church handles SSA / homosexuality?

- What do you think about those who oppose ex-gay ministry practices / researchers that purport to show that these practices are harmful or ineffective?
- What do you think about gay affirmative therapies?
- How do you think the general public sees the ex-gay movement?
- What do you think of people who say that ex-gays are lying to themselves / fakes?
- Religion
 - What role has Christianity / faith played in your life?
 - *Role /importance in your life?*
 - Is same-sex attraction a sin?
 - Are SS thoughts and desires sins? Are SS behaviours?
 - Why does sex matter to the church? How does God relate to SSA individuals?
 - How do you see homosexuality from your current faith perspective?

Part 4: Open Reflection

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your life, your experiences with same-sex attraction, or your participation with ex-gay ministry programs?
- Is there anything I did not ask about that you feel is important about your life, your experiences with same-sex attraction, or your participation with ex-gay ministry programs or any other institutions or services?

Appendix J: Consent Form



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Exploring Ex-Gay Ministry Experiences

Researcher: Jan Gelech
Program: Culture & Human Development

Advisor: Dr. M. Desjardins
Department: Psychology

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled *Exploring Ex-Gay Ministry Experiences*. Please note that participation in this study is completely optional and that no negative consequences of any kind will accrue to those who choose not to participate. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask any questions you might have about the study.

Student Researcher: Jan Gelech, Department of Psychology, University of Saskatchewan, Canada, 415-412-5283, jan.gelech@usask.ca.

Supervisor: Michel Desjardins, Department of Psychology, University of Saskatchewan, Canada, 1-306-966-6650, michel.desjardins@usask.ca.

Study Outline:

Study Purpose and Objectives: This study retrospectively explores how individuals construct and negotiate interpretations of their experiences with ex-gay ministries. The goal of the study is to come to a more detailed understanding of ex-gay ministry experiences and their impact on clients' lives. This study is also intended to further the research training of the graduate student.

Study Procedure: Participants are required to complete both a life-history and semi-structured interview pertaining to their experiences with ex-gay ministries and other aspects of their lives relevant to the research topic. Participants are required to partake in two or more interview sessions (a second semi-structured interview meeting will be scheduled if more time is needed), each lasting approximately 90 minutes. All interviews will be tape recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. The participant may ask for the recording device to be turned off at any time.

Transcript Release: Participants will be asked to sign a transcript release form which allows the researcher to use the information from the interviews as part of presentations, papers, and the thesis. This release form also enables the participant to check that the transcript data is accurate. After you interview, and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of you interview, and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit

Reporting of Results and Data Use: Data will be reported in summarized form with direct quotations used throughout. The data collected in this study will be used in the student-researcher's Ph.D. thesis paper. Additionally, the data will be widely disseminated through a variety of means, including potential conference presentations, book chapters, and publications in academic journals.

Potential Study Benefits: Participation in this research project may contribute to the better understanding of ex-gay ministry experiences and their impact on individual lives. These benefits are not guaranteed.

Potential Study Risks: Possible psychological discomfort is the only risk associated with this study. It is possible that participants could become emotional during the disclosure of personal information and recall of significant life experiences. However, these risks are minimal and not believed to be any greater than those encountered in daily life. All possible steps will be taken to avoid any type of psychological discomfort throughout the study. This involves reminding the individual that they are free to withdraw at any time, for any reason, and without penalty of any kind. It will be made clear that the researcher will not be upset in the event of withdrawal from the study. Additionally, participants will be reminded that they may refuse to answer any particular questions throughout the interview process that make them uncomfortable. Although the researcher does not foresee any major psychological risks associated with this research, anyone who experiences any emotional distress is encouraged to contact **HELPLINK** toll-free at: 211 or (800) 273-6222. This organization provides free, confidential information & referral service for Bay Area health and wellness resources.

Data Storage: The Principal Investigator will be responsible for all data storage. During fieldwork, all data and consent forms will be stored securely by the researcher in a locked safe at the researcher's residence. This includes electronic data (files will be kept on a data key), tape recordings, and all hand-written field notes. Data will be stored separate from consent forms and demographic questionnaires. Additionally, copies of all electronic data will be saved on the University of Saskatchewan Cabinet system, a web-based file manager. Following fieldwork, all data will be kept in a locked cabinet at the University of Saskatchewan. The data will be stored for a minimum of five years after completion of the study. When the data is no longer required, it will then be appropriately destroyed.

Confidentiality: Steps will be taken to safeguard the confidentiality of all responses. Data will be safely stored and the contribution made by each participant will not be shared with others outside of the research team. Data will be stored separate from consent forms and demographic questionnaires. Only the student-researcher and the supervisor will have access to the data. Although direct quotations from the interview will be reported, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information (such as organizational affiliations and positions) will be removed from all data and research reports.

Right to Withdraw: Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. There is no guarantee that you will personally benefit from your involvement. The information

that is shared will be held in strict confidence and discussed only with the research team. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason without penalty of any sort and any data that you have contributed will be destroyed at your request. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until the data has been analyzed and the findings have been pooled. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the research project, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researchers at the numbers provided if you have other questions. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on (February 2, 2011). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, please feel free to call the Research Ethics Office collect at 1-306-966-2084 or contact the office via email at ethics.office@usask.ca .

Debriefing: At the end of the study, participants will be given a debriefing form that better explains the nature of the study and provides information about local counselling resources in case the interview process has induced any negative emotional states. The participants will also be given a chance to ask any remaining questions at this time.

Dissemination of Results to Participants: An electronic version of the research results will be sent to all participants upon study completion. A paper copy of results will be mailed to participants upon request.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understand the description of the research study provided above. I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I agree to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw my consent to participate at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

(Name of Participant)

(Date)

(Signature of Participant)

(Signature of Researcher)

Appendix K: Debriefing Form



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Exploring Ex-Gay Ministry Experiences

Researcher: Jan Gelech
Program: Culture & Human Development

Advisor: Dr. M. Desjardins
Department: Psychology

The goal of the study was to come to a more detailed understanding of how individuals construct and negotiate interpretations of their ex-gay ministry experiences and their impact on clients' lives. Current literature in the area of conversion therapy has focused largely on outcome investigations and ethical debates (see, for example, Spitzer, 2003; Shidlo, Schroeder, & Drescher, 2001). This field of investigation is largely political and often largely removed from rich experiences of program participants. Though some researchers have recently focused more closely on personal experiences (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Erzen, 2006), many questions remain unexplored. The current study was designed to investigate personal ex-gay ministry experiences, privileging individual voices and attending to the nuances and details of particular cases. The researcher seeks to better understand such experiences by placing them within the larger context of unique lives, revealing similarities and differences in the meaning and significance of ex-gay ministry experiences given certain life circumstances.

Your involvement in this project was greatly appreciated! An electronic copy of the completed study will be made available to participants via email. Paper copies will be mailed to participants upon request.

I encourage you to contact me if you have any further questions or comments about your participation in this study. Although I do not foresee any major psychological risks associated with this research, anyone who experiences any emotional distress is encouraged to contact **HELPLINK** toll-free at: 211 or (800) 273-6222. This organization provides free, confidential information & referral service for Bay Area health and wellness resources.

Thank you for your participation!

Jan Gelech (Jan.gelech@usask.ca, 1-415-412-5283)

- Beckstead, A. L. & Morrow, S. L. (2004). Mormon clients' experiences of conversion therapy: The need for a new treatment approach. *The Counseling Psychologist, 32*, 651-690.
- Erzen, T. (2006). *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian conversions in the ex-gay movement*. London: University of California Press, Ltd.
- Shidlo, A., Schroeder, M. & Drescher, J. (2001). *Sexual conversion therapy: Ethical, clinical and research perspectives*. New York: Haworth Press, Inc.
- Spitzer, R. L. (2003). Can some gay men and lesbians change their sexual orientation?: 200 participants reporting a change from homosexual to heterosexual orientation. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 32*(5), 403-417.

Appendix L: Transcript Release Form



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SASKATCHEWAN

Exploring Ex-Gay Ministry Experiences

Researcher: Jan Gelech
Program: Culture & Human Development

Advisor: Dr. M. Desjardins
Department: Psychology

Participants are given the option to 1) review their interview transcripts and be given the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate prior to transcript release or 2) release the transcript to the researcher without review. The decision to review or to decline to review transcripts will be recorded here in writing. Authorization of the release of transcripts is also recorded here in writing.

Option 1) Transcript Review

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Jan Gelech. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Jan Gelech to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

OR

Option 2) No Transcript Review

I, _____, have declined to review the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Jan Gelech to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher