THE RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE GAY MALES ATTENDING A RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis studied the religious and spiritual experiences of undergraduate gay males at a Protestant affiliated higher education institution and how undergraduate gay males made sense of their personal journeys. Data was collected from four participants and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Five themes emerged from this research: (1) Christian identity development, (2) questioning Christian theology, (3) gay male identity development, (4) empowerment, and (5) awakening: a journey towards spirituality. Findings showed that the participants personally constructed their spirituality after reflecting on their life. Being religious and/or spiritual and a gay male appeared to be paradoxical in nature, however, these participants sought to reconcile these perceived paradoxes. Faculty, staff, and peers at Urban Rural University, the study site, impacted the participants’ ideas on religion, spirituality, and gay male identity and in reconciling the three. Three findings emerged from this study. First, the participants faced challenges of being simultaneously religious and gay and reconciling gay identity with religion and spirituality. Second, the participants found support at the undergraduate religiously affiliated institution of higher education that served as the site for this study. Third, participants offered their own definitions for religion, faith, and spirituality. The four participants in this study provided detailed stories that could help other gay males and higher education professional support gay males on their spiritual journeys.

Keywords: religion, faith development, undergraduate, gay male, spirituality, meaning making.
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Ephesians 2:8: For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

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Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

The holistic development of college students is a foundational principle for student affairs professionals. Holistic development includes common themes such as intellectual, social, moral, career, personal, and religious. Yet, student affairs professionals often overlooked the religious, faith, or spiritual development of students. Undergraduate gay males continued to experience stigma for identifying as gay and religious. Gay male undergraduates experienced a negative environment at religiously affiliated institutions of higher education. To document the religious and spiritual experiences of undergraduate gay males, this researcher conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research study. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study sought to understand the religious and spiritual experiences of undergraduate gay males who attended a Protestant affiliated higher education institution in two contexts—(1) religious upbringing and development and (2) gay male identity development. The primary research question is: How do undergraduate gay males attending a Protestant affiliated institution of higher education make sense of and incorporate religion and/or spirituality in their lives?

Statement of the Problem

Since little was known about how undergraduate gay males experience religion and spirituality at a Protestant affiliated higher education institution, this study sought to contribute to the literature on student development in higher education. Additionally, the findings from this research sought to increase our knowledge about gay males' religious history, gay identity development, coming out process within the context of religious upbringing, the impact of a religious undergraduate education on their religious and/or spiritual development, and gay males
search for meaning. This study sought to provide strategies for professionals in the student affairs field regarding the need to increase opportunities for gay male students to develop their spirituality.

Student affairs professionals extensively and historically argued for the holistic development of undergraduate students. In 1937, the American Council on Education (ACE) published *The Student Personnel Point of View* that defined the holistic collegiate student “as a whole- his intellectual capacity and achievement, his emotional make up, his physical condition, his social relationships, his vocational aptitudes and skills, his moral and religious values, his economic resources, [and] his aesthetic appreciations” (ACE, 1937). Today, college campuses are comprised of diverse student populations (race, gender, religion, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation). Based on this diversity, student affairs professional organizations (College Student Educators International [ACPA] and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education [NASPA] and researchers expanded on the idea of a holistic student since 1937 (Astin, A. 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perry, 1960). A student’s holistic development was a balance of intellectual, academic, social, personal, spiritual, and self-exploration equally internal and external to the formal classroom. Although personal and less often discussed, religion, faith, and spirituality played a significant role in the development of the holistic student.

At the same time, Braksnapk, Truatvetter, and Ward (2004) argued that college professionals, even those at religiously affiliated institutions of higher education, do not engage students in their religious or spiritual development and therefore, fail to develop a holistic student. Despite this lack of engagement, recent studies indicated that students are interested in the role of religion, faith, and spirituality in their lives and how college and university campuses develop their religion and spirituality (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 2004;
Harvard University Institute of Politics’, [HUIP], 2008). The Higher Education Research Institute’s (HERI, 2004) extensive survey of 112,000 freshmen at 236 colleges and universities found that 83 percent of students affiliated with a religious denomination and a Harvard University Institute of Politics’ (HUIP, 2008) survey of 1,222 students found only 66 percent of college students affiliated with a religious denomination. While some undergraduates rejected the traditional concepts of religion and faith, researchers Goodman and Mueller (2009) suggest others were increasingly interested in these concepts.

**Significance of the Problem**

Absent from research was the role of religion and spirituality (as defined by individual college students) in holistic student development. Recently, Higher Education Research Institute (2004) *The Spiritual Life of College Students* report indicated that 83 percent of undergraduates believed in the sacredness of life, 80 percent indicated interest in spirituality, and 47 percent indicated the need to seek opportunities to grow spiritually. Bender (2007) warned that large quantitative studies on spirituality were limited by the lack of a common definition and the measurement of spirituality by asking questions about “psychological well-being, experience, and self-identification”, which participants cannot distinguish between various religious practices and meaning of spirituality (p. 1). In this researcher’s conversation and work with undergraduate gay males, there was often confusion regarding the concepts of religion, faith, and spirituality and the role of these concepts in their holistic development. In particular, gay males identified significant struggles with the concepts of religion and faith in the context of their gay male identity.

Studies, mentioned earlier, provided a substantial and extensive amount of quantitative data on undergraduate students’ religious perceptions. Despite the extensive HERI (2004) study,
there were limited qualitative studies on undergraduate, gay males, coming out, religion, and spirituality. Love, Bock, Jannarone, and Richardson (2005) conducted a qualitative study that explored the spiritual experiences of lesbian and gay undergraduates at two Midwestern colleges. An EBSCO search found no other studies existed that examined the religions and spiritual experiences of undergraduate gay males attending a Protestant university and the impact of these experiences on their lives. Society views the concepts of religion, spirituality, faith and gay males as oppositional contexts. Therefore, a lack of research existed. De la Huerta (1999) explained that churches and religiously affiliated institutions of higher education rejected gay males and in return gay males rejected the Christianity and spirituality without exploring their gay identity within the context of Christianity. The participants linked spirituality with Christian doctrine. De la Huerta (1999) identified that “many of us [gay males] have rejected our inherent spiritual natures along with the religious traditions we felt forced to disavow in order to accept our sexual nature” (p. 6). The conflict between the two concepts (religion, faith, and spirituality and gay male identity) presented a problem for gay males on multiple levels including society’s negative view of being gay, religious doctrine condemnation of gay males, and feeling of meaning. Undergraduate gay males perceived religiously affiliated campus environments “to be even less friendly” and they face an “oppressive, non-supportive, homophobic cultures in which they are made to feel invisible and isolated” (Love, 1998, p. 300). Undergraduate years were a critical time when gay males searched for meaning in life and examine their beliefs and values.

As society comes to accept gay males and the sigma lessens (but still ever present), the guidance of student affairs professional(s) was central for undergraduate gay males who struggled with gay identity, coming out, being religious, and making meaning of the gay and religious or spiritual identity. Undergraduate gay males perceived student affairs professionals
as support networks who strived to create an open, affirming, and supportive environment for the holistic growth and development of gay male, but research and practical solutions based on research was lacking to guide student affairs professionals when working undergraduate gay males. If gay males linked spirituality and religion as synonymous terms and religious doctrine hindered a gay male’s exploration for meaning and self-understanding, then why were the religious and spiritual experiences, in the context of gay male identity, not being empowered by professionals at a Protestant affiliated university, which contributes to their holistic development?

**Research Questions and Goals**

This research study sought to address the gap in the literature through a qualitative research project that explored the main question: how do undergraduate gay males attending a Protestant affiliated higher education institution make sense of and incorporate religion and/or spirituality in their lives? The following questions guided this research:

- How does a Christian upbringing impact gay male identity development?
- How do gay males reconcile and make sense of simultaneously being gay and religious?
- How do gay males experience coming out in the context of Christianity?
- Who or what, at their undergraduate institution, influenced how gay males understand religion, faith, or spirituality and their gay identity?

The following definitions guided this study.

- **Undergraduate student** is one enrolled in a higher education institution seeking a bachelor’s degree.
- **Gay male** is biologically (born) male and identified as one who attracted to another male. A gay male in this study
• **Self-identified gay male** is a male open about their sexuality. For this student, the participants were out to their families and did not hide their sexuality from others.

• **Religiously affiliated Protestant institution** is an undergraduate institution historically rooted in the traditions of Christianity and current mission supports Christianity. In this study, the religiously affiliated institution was in the Mid-West and identified throughout this study at Urban Religions University (URU).

• **Religion** is refers to Christianity and defined as a belief in the Christian doctrine.

Researcher conducted previous studies on undergraduate gay and lesbians at Catholic higher education institutions and the notions of homosexuality and Catholic teachings. However, no studies existed that examined the religions and spiritual experiences undergraduate gay males studying attending a Protestant university and the impact of these experiences on their collegiate life.

The practical goal of this research study was to document the religious, gay, and spiritual experiences of undergraduate gay males and to use their documented experiences to enlighten higher education professionals and develop strategies that enabled student affairs professionals to implement strategies that enhance and support opportunities for gay males to engage in their religious, spiritual, and gay male identity development. Results of this study may lead to a larger conversation about the intersection of Christian upbringing, gay male identity development, undergraduate experiences, and the search for meaning or spirituality. The intellectual goal, for this study, was to holistically understand the particular phenomenon of how gay males make sense of and incorporate spirituality in their lives while exploring how gay males reconcile their religious upbringing and gay male identity to create spirituality.
**Organization of this Research Study**

This research study is organized in five chapters: (1) introduction, (2) literature review, (3) research design, (4) report of research findings, and (5) discussion of research findings and implications for educational practice. Chapter one offered the reader an introduction of this study and theoretical frameworks that ground this study. The two theoretical frameworks were cognitive-developmental theory, specifically Kegan (1980; 1982; 1994) meaning making and orders of consciousness and faith development theory (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2011). These two theoretical frameworks served as a lens for the literature review, research methodology, and guided this research. In chapter two, literature review, previous literature and research on the topics: (1) religion, faith, and spirituality and (2) gay male sexual orientation identity development. This researcher analyzed literature on the definitions, doctrines, and models of religion, faith, and spirituality. Second, the literature review focused on sexual orientation identity development. Although, sexual orientation identity development was only one aspect of an undergraduate gay males’ identity, sexual orientation was a strong aspect. Because this research sought to understand and describe the lived religious and spiritual experiences of undergraduate gay males at a Protestant affiliated higher education institution significant attention was provided to the areas of Christian upbringing, spirituality and gay male identity development, especially in the context of a religiously affiliated institution of higher education. Chapter three focused on research design and methodology. The methodology chapter, chapter three, included an explanation of the methodology, interpretive phenomenological analysis (qualitative in nature) research design, which seeks to understand the phenomenon, religion/spirituality in the contexts of gay males religious history, gay identity development, coming out process within the context of religious upbringing, the impact of a religious
undergraduate education on their religious and/or spiritual development, and gay males search for meaning.

**Theoretical Framework**

At private religiously affiliated higher education institutions, there existed an inherent underlying understanding that religion was integral to an undergraduate’s life. Yet, religious traditions, history, teachings, and doctrine towards homosexuality prohibited undergraduate gay males to experience, question, reflect, and make meaning of their experiences of religion/spirituality. For higher education professionals, who work at religiously affiliated institutions of higher education and who support gay males students the holistic development, Christian doctrine caused concern. This study presented higher education professionals with knowledge about how undergraduate gay males experienced religion and gay male identity and made sense of their search for meaning. Developmental theories served as one tool to assist educators in understanding student’s development.

College student development theories provided a framework necessary to engage undergraduates in their development. Rogers (1990) defined college student development as “the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education” (p. 27). In doing so, Rogers (1990) noted that student affairs professionals had a responsibility to the “development of the whole person” (p. 27). Utilized appropriately, college student developmental theory informed educational policy and programming decisions across the educational spectrum to serve the holistic needs of students. For this particular study, the focus was traditionally aged, male undergraduates. Two broad theoretical frameworks grounded this research: constructive development theory, particularly meaning-making (Kegan, 1980; 1982; 1984) and faith
development theory (Fowler, 1981; Park 1986, 2011).

**Constructive developmental theory**

A constructivist approach was broadly understood as a process where individuals created or constructed their realities and how they made meaning (Chessick, 1997; Kegan and Lahey, 1983; Leary, 1994; Rosen, 1996). Constructive-developmental theory was grounded in the stage theory work of Jean Piaget (1963). Piagetian tradition posits that a child’s cognitive growth evolved and changed over time as they encounter various people and environmental situations (Piaget, 1952, 1963). Piaget (1952) focused on childhood development versus adulthood development. Stage theory posits that individuals experienced environments and through these experiences progressed through a regularly established set of stages (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Chickering & Reisser, 1983; Kohlberg, 1981; Perry, 1970). Ponterotto (2005) noted that constructivist researchers concluded that our sense of reality was created from the inner self. However, Ponterotto (2005) had not discounted how external forces might influence an individual’s sense of reality. Kegan’s (1980, 1982, 1994) constructive developmental theory, theorized that internal and external relationships as well as social factors impact adult development.

Concerned with both how an individual makes meaning, interprets, and constructs knowledge (epistemology) and over time how that construction becomes more complex (developmental) was the basis for constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1980, 1982, 1994). According to Kegan (1980), five basic tenets underpinned constructive theories:

1. Human being is *meaning making*. For the human, what *evolving* amounts to is the *evolving of systems meaning*; the business of organisms is to organize. We organize mostly without realizing we are doing it, and mostly with little awareness as to the
exact shape of our own-reality constructing. Our meanings are not so much something we have, as something we are.

2. These meanings systems shape our experiences. Experience, as Aldous Huxley, said, is not about so much what happens to us as what we make of what happens to us. Thus, we do not understand another’s experience simply by knowing the events and the particulars of the other, but only by knowing how these events and particulars are privately composed.

3. These meaning systems to a great extent give rise to our behavior. We do not act as randomly, irrationally, unsystematically, or molecularly as might be thought.

4. Except during periods of transition and evolution from one system to another, to a considerable extent a given system of meaning organizes our thinking, feeling, and acting over a wide range of human functioning.

5. Although everyone makes meaning is richly idiosyncratic and unique ways, there are striking regularities to the underlying structure of meaning-making systems and to the sequence of meaning systems that people grow through (Kegan, 1980, p. 374, italics in original).

Kegan (1980) built on these basic tenets and included: (1) “The deep structure of meaning-making systems involves the developing person’s distinction between self and other and (2) The internal experience of developmental change can be distressing. Because it involves the loss of how I am composed, it can also be accompanied by a loss of composure” (1980, p. 374).

In The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development, Kegan (1982) argued previous stage development models focused merely on cognition. Instead, he posed the
following questions:

Which is to be taken as the master in personality, affect or cognition? or Which should be
the central focus, the individual or the social? or Which should be the primary theater of
investigation, the intrapsychic or the interpersonal? or even Which is to be taken as the
more powerful developmental framework, the psychoanalytic or cognitive-structural?

(vii(ix)

Instead, of focusing on two polarizing “dichotomous choice[s]”, he suggested that researchers
move to a “dialectical context which bring the poles into being in the first place” (Kegan, 1992,
p. ix, italics in original). For Kegan (1980) an inherent relationship existed between the creation
of knowledge and that of self. Meaning making was “a sophisticated understanding of the
relationship between the psychological and the social, between the past and the present, and
between emotion and thought” (1982, p. 15). “There is no feeling, no experience, no thought, no
perception, independent that of meaning-making context” (Kegan, 1982, p. 11). In an ever-
changing world without absolute realities or answers, individuals cannot search for knowledge
through a solely independent cognitive process. Individuals included psychological processes.
Making meaning was a process that was both cognitive and psychological.

In this study, Kegan’s (1980, 1994) constructive-developmental theory broadly framed
this research. Kegan’s (1980, 1994) conceptualized that human beings make meaning of their
experiences (epistemology), of themselves (intrapersonal), and of others (interpersonal) served as
one theoretical framework for this research. Love and Guthrie (1999) argued that Kegan (1980,
1994) was only one of two constructive developmental theorists who focused on cognitive,
affective, and social aspects of experiences to understand a phenomenon and how people made
meaning of that particular phenomenon—the other Sharon Daloz Parks and her faith
development theory focused on undergraduate college students.

**Faith Development Theory**

Parks (2011) concluded that a constructive-development framework of human development was “a complex process that includes changes in biological, cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual, and moral dimensions” (p. 11). She expanded on the traditional ideas of constructive-development framework and asserted that researchers must not rely solely on the order of the stages. Instead, much consideration must also be given to “formative powers of the content: the images and concepts that our structures of mind hold and to the role of imagination in human intelligence” (Parks, 2011, p. 12). Individuals developed along a singular linear path. Yet, there are multiple of contexts that supported individuals to faith development.

Prior to examining Parks (1986, 2000, 2011) faith development theory, one needs to understand the theories which influenced her work. Along with Robert Kegan’s (1980, 1982, 1994) work on meaning making, Parks’ research expanded on the preeminent faith development research of James W. Fowler (1981, 2001). Fowler’s faith development theory influenced and expanded on several developmental theorists: (1) Jean Piaget (1967) constructivist tradition as discussed earlier, (2) Lawrence Kohlberg’s (1958) moral development theory, and (3) Erik Erikson’s (1963, 1993) psychosocial developmental theory (Fowler, 2001). While Piaget and Kohlberg influenced Fowler’s work, Fowler argued that faith development theory was “more comprehensive than the logic of rational certainty characterizing Piaget’s and Kohlberg’s cognitive theories” (Fowler, 1980, p. 150). Faith was universal and also a “way of being, arising out of a way of seeing and keeping” (Fowler, 1986, p. 19)—making meaning. Faith development theory recognized cognition as one aspect and the other was interactions between self and others and how these interactions influence one’s faith development.
**Fowler’s Faith Development Theory**

Fowler (2001) viewed faith and faith development as a triadic process. In the triadic structure, “there is the self, there are the primal and significant others in the self’s relational matrix, and there is the third center of the relational engagement—the ultimate Other” (p. 163). In essence, Fowler (2001) reflected on his 1981 work of faith development as a “theory of the self through time, as constructing meanings and being constructed, in the matrix of relationships and meaning that faith involves” (p. 164). Therefore, Fowler’s (1981, 2001) faith development theory represented a form of constructive-developmental theory.

Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory comprised of six, sequential, and invariant stages of faith: (1) intuitive-projective faith, (2) mythic-literal faith, (3) synthetic-conventional faith, (4) individuative-reflective faith, (5) conjunctive faith, and (6) universalizing faith. Within each of these stages, conflict enabled the person to move from one stage to another. Stage one and two respectively focused on children aged three to ten and stages three and four focused on college aged students. For this study, stages three and four provided the focus. According to Fowler (1981), it was the synthetic-conventional stage (stage three) where many adults found a “permanent place of equilibrium” (p. 179) and viewed their world from this perspective.

During the synthetic-conventional stage, adolescents experienced biological and emotional changes as well as intellectual growth that enabled them to operationalize their experiences (Fowler, 1981). Adolescents form a belief system based in interaction with symbols, writings, and relationships with authority figures including the relationships authority figures have with God. In this stage, faith was conventional because the adolescent was unsure of his or her identity and therefore relied on the “expectations and judgments of significant others” (Fowler, 1981, p. 172). Faith was also synthetic. In the synthetic stage, the adolescent took into
account other’s views of faith without question. In this stage, individuals conformed to the roles set forth by authority figures (Fowler, 1981), which held varying beliefs about religion, faith, and sexual orientation.

In order to transition from stage three to stage four, an adolescent started to critically distance themselves from one’s previous assumptive value system (based on authorities values) and the emergence of an executive ego to “forming a new identity, which he or she expressed and actualize by the choice of personal and group affiliations and the shaping of a lifestyle” (Fowler, 1981, p. 179). A young adult accepted “responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes” (Fowler, 1981, p. 182). Throughout the transition from stage three to four, an individual experienced significant tension manifested as depression or anxiety (Parks, 2011). During stage four, an individual accepted his or her own beliefs, truths, and values while continuing to listen to others.

Parks Faith Development Theory

Inherent in Fowler’s (1981) seminal work was stages focused on faith development from early childhood to adolescents to adulthood. Yet, Parks (1986, 2011) argued that Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory lacked stages specifically devoted to the transition period between adolescents and adulthood. Student affairs researchers and professional recognized this period as the undergraduate years (Parks, 1986, 2011). During this time, undergraduates entered institutions of higher education with specific authority based dualistic ideas as noted in Perry’s (1971) development theory. Student affairs researchers (Astin, A.,1984; Love & Talbot, 1999; Parks, 1986, 2011; Terenizini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Tinto, 1993; Tisdell, 1999) noted that the transition from a structured high school and family life to an unstructured undergraduate experience caused significant stress and tension for students including religious
grounding and faith.

Parks (2011) situated her theory between Fowler (1981) stages three and four. In *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, Parks (2011) shared two concerns regarding faith development of undergraduate aged students—“first, too many emerging adults are not being encouraged to ask big questions that awaken critical thought” (p. xi). Instead, undergraduates were “swept up in religious assumptions that remain unexamined, they may easily become vulnerable to conventional assumptions and miss being invited to their own authentic and worthy dreams” (Parks, 2011, p. xi). During the years of young adulthood (18-32) meaning-making included “(1) becoming critically aware of one’s own composing of reality, (2) self-consciously participating in an ongoing dialogue toward truth, and (3) cultivating a capacity to respond-to act-in committed and satisfying ways” (Parks, 2011, p. 12). She provided this researcher a strong theoretical framework, in conjunction with Kegan (1980), to understand how undergraduate college students understand and make meaning of their religious, faith based experiences. However, Parks (2011) faith based theory does not focus specifically on gay males. Undergraduate gay males attending a private religiously affiliated higher education institution faced both overt and covert signals that shaped their faith experiences.

Similar to Fowler (1981), Parks focused on the concepts of faith and meaning making versus religious beliefs. According to Parks (2011), undergraduate students made meaning through faith.

Faith is often linked exclusively to belief, particularly religious belief. But faith goes far beyond religious belief…Faith is more adequately recognized as *the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience*. Faith
is a broad, generic human phenomenon. To be human is to dwell in an ongoing process of meaning-making, to dwell in the sense one makes out of the whole life—what is perceived as ultimately true and trustworthy about self, world, and cosmos (p. 10).

Parks (2000) believed that the concept of faith “addresses our culture’s current hunger for a shared language about things ‘spiritual’” (p. 7). Parks (2011) advocated for a process in which undergraduate students can make sense of and understand their faith journey for life long meaning. Although her model was stage based, Parks viewed her models as a “dynamic, multidimensional, creative process that is in reality” unlike Fowler’s (1981) theory (Parks, 2011, p. 109). In order to make meaning and sense of faith, she described four levels that comprised faith: self, other, world, and “God” (Parks, 2011). An individual self experienced faith, other included those individuals and interactions outside of self, world was the recognition of others outside of immediate relationships and interactions, and “God” was the center of the individual self (Parks, 2011). Throughout, her discussion of faith development, Parks (2011) placed God in quotations to denote that God was not a supreme being, but an idea that manifested as the focus of an individual’s faith.

Parks (2011) argued that stage-related development theorist such as Fowler, Kohlberg, and Piaget advocate for a direct transition from adolescents to adulthood and development between the two was nothing more than noise or wilderness. Instead of viewing adolescence to adulthood as one stage, as Fowler (1981) concluded in stage three and four, Parks (2011) argued that there was a stage between adolescence and adulthood, which she referred to as young adult. Based on these differences with Fowler (1981), Parks (2011) developed a conceptual model with four-stages: (1) adolescent, (2) emerging adult, (3) tested adult, and (4) mature adult. Individuals in each stage experienced transformations in three interconnected concepts. Parks (2011) labeled
these three interconnected concepts as (1) forms of knowing (cognitive aspects), (2) forms of dependence (affective aspects or emotions), and (3) forms of community (networks or social aspects). First, there were five forms of knowing (cognitive), which was based on the work of Perry (1970): (1) authority-bound and dualistic, (2) unqualified relativism, (3) probing commitment, (4) tested commitment, and (5) convictional commitment (Parks, 2011). Second, there are four forms of dependence (affective): (1) dependent and counter-dependent, (2) fragile inner-dependence, (3) confidence inner-dependence, and (4) inner-dependence. Third, there were five forms of community (networks): (1) conventional, (2) diffuse, (3) mentoring community, (4) self-selected class/group, and (5) open to other. Each of these forms of knowing are described below.

Because most college students reside in either stage one or two, this study focused on these two stages. In stage one, adolescent/conventional faith was an authority-bound, dualistic form of knowing; dependent/counter-dependent form of dependence; and conventional form of community (Parks, 2011). Authority figures (parent, religious leader, boss) controlled the authority-bound knowledge, culturally and social prescribed roles, institutions (churches, higher education, government entities), and customs. Authority figures obtained their authority through “the stories, symbols, and myths that hold the meanings of people and their society” (Parks, 2011, p. 72). Earlier life experiences formed individual’s belief systems. However, if individuals were allowed to avoid critically thinking about their religious or faith experiences, we allow “students to assume that the beliefs with which they were raised are superior truths, it permits them to act on commitments resulting from indoctrination instead of informed reflection” (Raper, 2001, p. 19). In this form of knowing, an individual may have strong and passionate opinions or truths, but when their opinions were challenged an individual, in the
authority bound sense of knowing, will simply not assert their knowing (Parks, 2011).

In stage two, young or emerging adulthood, an individual had probing commitment as a form of knowing; fragile inner-dependence as a form of dependence; and mentoring community as a form of community (Parks, 2011). An individual in this stage recognized that the world was complex; authority figures differed on truth; and there was a need to construct their own sense of inner beliefs or faiths. While in this stage, an individual no longer depended on authority, symbols, or texts, instead the individual begins to form a fragile inner-dependence (Parks, 2011). An inner-dependence stage was viewed fragile not in the sense of “weak, feeble, or puny…it is more like the fragility of a young plant as it emerges from soil: healthy, vital, full of promise, yet vulnerable” (Parks, 2011, p. 107). One recognized consciously that self was part of the greater world and in doing so became more responsible for resolving competing truths. Undergraduate students found themselves in this stage. For gay male students, there may be a fragile inner-dependence about being simultaneously gay and having a religious or faith based belief system.

The previous discussions on cognitive-developmental theory and faith development theory shaped this study. Each of these two overarching models (constructive-developmental theory (meaning making) and faith development theory interrelated and added to the understanding of undergraduate gay males and their spiritual or faith experiences. Kegan’s (1980, 1991, 1994) theory brings together the epistemological, cognitive, affective, intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects to meaning making. Parks (1986, 2011) theory built on the work of Fowler and was a theory focused on undergraduate students. Kegan (1980, 1981, 1994) and Parks (1986, 2011) study participants were not gay males. Yet, their work applied to undergraduate college students. The work of Kegan (1980, 1982, 1994) and Parks (1986, 2011) provided a solid basis for this study.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

To better understand the scope of this study, this literature review focused on six main themes: (1) the history of student affairs, (2) higher education’s role in religious and spiritual exploration, (3) the need for gay males to experience faith/spirituality, (4) gay male identity development, (5) defining religion, spirituality, and faith, and (6) engaging gay males on campus. The literature review informed this research, but does not direct a specific outcome for this study. The participants determined the specific outcomes for this study.

History

Student affairs professionals argued, extensively and historically, for the holistic development of undergraduate students. In 1937, the American Council on Education (ACE) published The Student Personnel Point of View that defined the holistic collegiate student “as a whole- his intellectual capacity and achievement, his emotional make up, his physical condition, his social relationships, his vocational aptitudes and skills, his moral and religious values, his economic resources, [and] his aesthetic appreciations” (ACE, 1937). Today, college campuses are comprised of diverse student populations (race, gender, religion, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation). Based on this diversity, student affairs professional organizations (College Student Educators International [ACPA] and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education [NASPA]) and researchers expanded on the idea of a holistic student since 1937 (Astin, A., 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perry, 1960). A student’s holistic development balanced the intellectual, academic, social, personal, spiritual, and self-exploration equally internally and externally to the formal classroom. Although personal and less often discussed, religion, faith, and spirituality were significant aspects in the development of the holistic student.
Researchers (Dirkx, 1997; Gilley, 2005; Jablonski, 2001; Love, 2001; Love and Talbot, 2009; Rogers & Love, 2007) noted the lack of research and literature on spirituality and spiritual development of college gay males when compared to cognitive, affective, and social theories of non-homosexual student development. Despite this lack of research, recent studies indicated students’ interest in the role of religion, faith, and spirituality in their lives and on college and university campuses increased over the last ten years (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 2004; Harvard University Institute of Politics’, [HUIP], 2008). The Higher Education Research Institute’s (HERI, 2004) extensive survey of 112,000 freshmen at 236 colleges and universities found that 83 percent of students affiliated with a religious denomination and a Harvard University Institute of Politics’ (HUIP, 2008) survey of 1,222 students found only 66 percent of college students affiliated with a religious denomination. Lindholm (2007) noted that college students sought “ways to cultivate their inner self, seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and striving to determine what they think and feel about many issues confronting them” (p. 10). While some undergraduate students rejected the traditional concepts of religion and faith, researchers Goodman & Mueller (2009) suggested others were increasingly interested in these concepts.

There appeared to be a disinterest in developing a culture that provided opportunities for students to search for meaning in their lives. Ward, Truatvetter, and Braskam (2005) argued that college professionals, even those at religiously affiliated institutions of higher education, had not engaged students in their religious, faith, or spiritual development and therefore, failed to develop a holistic student. Parker and Zajonc (2010) encouraged higher education institutions to engage students in discussions on religion and spirituality; noting that the subject was part of the
“human mess” that we must all understand (p. 47). Yet, Bryant and Astin (2008) concluded that spiritual struggles were not uncommon in college students. Bryant and Astin (2008) found that 21% of college students “struggled to understand evil, suffering, and death”, 18% “questioned my religious/spiritual beliefs”, 16% “felt unsettled about spiritual/religious matters” to “a great extent” and 10% felt “disillusioned with my religious upbringing” (p. 12).

Higher education had an imbalanced approach to education (Astin et al, 2011). This approach favored the exterior over the interior in terms of personal development (Astin et al., 2011). Developing and cultivating spirituality was critically important in a time when the current focus of society was on the exterior (materialism, wealth, and oppression of others for “self”) at the expense of the interior (spiritual being) or personal aspect of life. Astin (2003) stated, “…the world’s problems are not going to be solved by math and science and technology; they are human problems, problems of beliefs and values and feelings expressed, for example, by racism or nationalism or religious fundamentalism” or homophobia (p. 14). While higher education tended to, “invest a good deal of our pedagogical effort in developing the student’s cognitive, technical, and job skills, we pay little attention if any attention to the development of 'affective' skills” such as self-understanding, empathy, and care for others (Astin, 2004, p. 38). C.S. Lewis (1974) noted that “without the aid of trained emotions” human are left with only one sense of truth—scientific (p. 24). Glazer (2000) argued that today’s students are engaged in nothing more than seeking economic gains. This was due to the students’ thinking, and to the economic interests of colleges and university. Today, students were indoctrinated not by religion, but “instead into dualism, scientism, and most especially consumerism” (Glazer, 2000, p. 79). Developing and cultivating spirituality was critically important in a time when the current state of society was consumed with violence, lack of civility, and a focus on materialism.
Rogers and Love (2007) went as far to acknowledge that the “student affairs profession had been oddly silent on the spirituality movement in higher education” (p. 704). Furthermore, Rogers and Love (2004) argued that spirituality is a legitimate element of a student’s development and must be understood by professionals who work with students, especially student affairs professionals. Unfortunately, student affairs professionals “failure to engage in discussions of spirituality…may contribute not only to foreclosure on matters of spirituality, but also to a general narrowness of perspective and an inability or unwillingness to think critically, explore value-related issues, and question authorities” (Love and Talbot, 1999, p. 363). Smith (2002) argued that the role of student affairs professionals in aiding students to find spirituality was needed more than ever, especially in an environment where “the university’s inattention to a reality that exceeds nature, and its denial that such a reality exists, shapes student’s mind” (p. 83). The failure of student affairs professionals to understand a student’s spiritual development was even more concerning for gay male students.

Due in part to religious teachings, gay males faced transitional challenges and challenges in formulating their spirituality (D’Augelli, 1994). If spirituality provided the avenue for gay males to construct knowledge and self-understanding and if, religious doctrine hindered this self-understanding, then why was the spiritual journey of these male students not being examined at religiously affiliated institutions of higher education? Higher education institutions cannot create spiritual experiences for students. Chandler et al. (1992) argued for professionals to create programs and services that established the conditions where “spiritual experiences are more likely to occur” (p. 169). Higher education’s responsibility was not to create or impose religion, faith, or spirituality into a student’s life. Instead, higher education could aid students on their exploration and journey toward spirituality.
Identity Development

Identity development occurred throughout one’s life span. However, during an undergraduate college experience an individual’s development rapidly increased. As with any new journey, the transition from high to college, from parent’s home to a semi-independent living situation provided college students the opportunity to examine their independence, prior thinking, and question their ideals on various topics including identity, spirituality, faith, and religion. During their undergraduate college years, college students faced varying challenges that not only engaged, but impacted their cognitive, social, moral, ethical, identity, and spiritual development (Baxter Magolda, 2000; Chickering & Reisser, 1993, Erikson, 1968; Stevens, 2004). People recognized an individual’s identity as complex and dynamic that changed over time based on environmental factors (social, economic, race, education, personal and interpersonal relationship among others etc.). Erikson (1968) asserted that human growth and development was seen as “anything that grows has a ground plan, and…out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole” (p. 92). Sexual orientation identity development shaped gay males sense of self.

At times, these challenges became overwhelming to undergraduate students. Gay males experienced an increased overwhelmed sense of self with the transition to college. Am I really gay? Is it wrong to be gay? Is it a sin? Will peers accept me? What does it mean to come out? Should I come out? Will my family, peers, and teachers accept me for who I am—a gay male?

Oftentimes gay males’ transitioned to undergraduate life with these questions unanswered. Similar to all college students, gay males came to college with varying social, economic, educational, religious, and ethnic experiences that shape their understanding and meaning of life.
(Kegan, 1982, 1984). These individual experiences shaped their thinking about themselves and about others. As gay males transitioned to college, they may kept hidden their sexuality, compartmentalize their sexuality as a coping mechanism (Jackson & Sullivan, 1994), or give up their prescribed heterosexual identity and privileges of that identity while accepting the identity of homosexuality and therefore, the notion on mainstream society: homophobia and heterosexism (Pharr, 1988).

But, who was there to help them answer these questions about being gay? One group was student affairs professionals. Student affairs professionals may be trained to engage gay male students in their search for answers. However, student affairs professionals cannot answer these questions for gay male students. They can only guide them through their personal exploration. Multiple theories (cognitive, identity, social, moral, and among others) guided student affairs professional’s work. Numerous theories existed about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender sexual identity development not only in the greater society, but more importantly in the college environment. Student affairs professionals relied on these various theories to engage gay males on their journey to create understanding and make meaning. Adding to a gay male’s transition to college was their religious upbringing. Being simultaneously gay and religious added an additional complexity to the gay males search for meaning in their lives (Love & Talbot, 1999).

**Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity Development**

Over the last forty years, researchers proposed numerous theories as a means to understand and explain the development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) populations. Each theory explained that the developmental stages or phases an individual undergoes to realize, engage, identify, accept, and integrate their GLB identity with other facets of their lives. Levine and Evans (1991) synthesized GLB identity development models from the 1970s to 1990s and
identified four major components found each model: self-awareness, self-labeling, becoming involved in the GLB community, and integrating one’s GLB identity fully into their lives. In the last ten years, research increased on sexual identity theory specifically to include gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students (Abes & Jones, 2004; Dilley, 2002, 2005; Stevens, 2004; Wall & Evans, 2000). In this literature review, four theories (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Stevens 2004) were examined to offer a broad spectrum of sexual identity theory.

Each of these theories or models offered multiple perspectives on supporting gay males in their transition. Cass model developed in the 1970s provided a stage development theory of gay and lesbian identity development. Two assumptions grounded Cass’ (1970) model: (1) “identity is acquired through a developmental process” similar to the Piagetian tradition and (2) “locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individual and their environments” (external social aspect) (Cass, 1979, p. 219). As individuals moved through the linear stages, the model assumed that males moved from a self-perception as heterosexual to homosexual (Cass, 1979). Cass (1979) linear progression was grounded in the convergence of an individual’s perception of his self-behavior, perceptions of other’s attitudes, and self-identity. The model included six stages of development identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (Cass, 1979).

Cass (1979) argued that individuals had no concept of homosexuality. Instead, an individual must first conceptualize their behavior as homosexual (Cass, 1979, 1984b). Once, an individual conceptualized their behavior as homosexuality, they moved to identity comparison. In this stage, the individual recognized the possibility that they are gay and moved towards
addressing the difference between societies' construct of homosexuality and being homosexual (Cass, 1979, 1984a, 1984b). For comparison, an individual moved towards identity tolerance or admitted to oneself that they were indeed gay and related to others in the GLB community (Cass, 1979). In identity acceptance, an individual increased contact with gay people and lived in either the homosexual or straight world (Cass, 1979). As one became more secure with their inner self and acceptance as gay, the individual moved to identity pride, which included coming out and engaging fully in the GLB community (Cass, 1979, 1984b). Lastly, the individual synthesized their gay identity with other aspects of their lives and eventually, sexual identity became less important than other aspects of their lives (Cass, 1996).

Although one of the first gay development identity theories, Cass’s theory failed to adequately explain the life span of one’s sexual identity development. Researchers noted that the model was formed in the social and cultural ties of the 1970s and had not apply in today’s social, cultural, and political times (Levine & Evans, 1991). Other researchers (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Levine & Evans, 1991) argued that the research cannot apply to lesbians, people of color and ethnic background; this was due in part to Cass’ (1979) study was based on white males. D’Augelli (1994) argued that Cass’s model was too linear and GLB sexual identity development was socially constructed and can be shaped by environmental factors.

To understand gay, lesbians, and bisexual identity development, D’Augelli (1994a; 1994b) introduced a life span model that postulates individuals developed throughout their entire life. D’Augelli’s (1994a) theory of sexual orientation development provided a non-linear, “developmental plasticity” theory (p. 320) that accounts for “the complex factors that influence the development of people in context over historical time” (p. 321). D’Augelli (1994a, 1994b) introduced six-interactive processes for GLB sexual identity development. D’Augelli’s (1994a,
1994b) model avoided using the term stages. His model was a non-linear, life span model (Baltes, 1987). D’Augelli (1994a) framework addressed issues disregarded in Cass’ (1979, 1984, 1996) model of identity development that included the development of a person’s self-concept, relationships with social networks (family, friends, and community), and connection between the two. This model portrayed sexual orientation development as both fluid and fixed based on the particular time in one’s life. The six identity processes were: (1) exiting heterosexual identity, (2) developing a personal GLB identity status, (3) developing a GLB social identity, (4) becoming a GLB offspring, (5) developing GLB intimacy statuses, and (6) entering a GLB community (D’Augelli, 1994a).

In the first status, exiting identity, an individual no longer experienced heterosexual feelings or attractions; instead, an individual identified to self as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (D’Augelli, 1994a). As they exited heterosexual identity, an individual developed personal meaning regarding GLB behaviors and ideals. This occurred through interaction with others (similar to Parks, 2011 mentoring community’s concept). The individual formed a personal identity and moved to status three, developing a social identity (D’Augelli, 1994a). Gay males gained a social identity through engagement with those inside or supporters outside the GLB community (D’Augelli, 1994a). Supporters included members of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning and allies (GLBTQA) student organization, friends, co-workers, and student affairs professionals.

As an individual continued to navigate and develop social identity, they moved towards becoming an offspring (D’Augelli, 1994a). An individual became an offspring by disclosing their new sexual identity to parents and in return, renegotiating the relationship with their parents (D’Augelli, 1994a). Researchers referred to this period as coming out. Becoming an offspring
was a challenge for GLB individuals who have parents that are deeply religious or opposed to GLB identities. Next, the individual moved to intimacy status. Intimacy status was defined by achieving intimate relationships that do not have social or community norms such as in the heterosexual realm (D’Augelli, 1994a). D’Augelli (1994a) noted, “The lack of cultural scripts directly applicable to lesbian/gay/bisexual people leads to ambiguity and uncertainty, but it also forces the emergence of personal, couple-specific, and community norms, which should be more personally adaptive (p. 327). Similar to Kegan’s (1980, 1984, 1994) meaning making theory, individuals in the fifth stage defined their own norms based on lived experiences, understanding, and how they make meaning in and of their relationships. In the last status, the individual engaged in the political, cultural, and social aspects of the GLB community, which an individual may or may not chose to enter (D’Augelli, 1994a).

Throughout these statuses, one must remember that D’Augelli’s (1994a) model accounts for varying environments (social, economic, political, and among others). As a part of his model, D’Augelli (1994a) hypothesized that three factors contributed to an individual’s change in status personal subjectivities and behaviors (individual’s held beliefs and behaviors), interactive intimacies (influence from others), and sociohistorical connections (social, political, and historical context of homosexuality) (p. 319). Taken together these three spheres form to either aide or deter an individual from entering or leaving one status. An individual may also transition from a higher status to a former status (D’Augelli, 1994a).

From his perspective, gay male identity development was not constrained within a certain period or one singular event. Instead feelings changed over one’s life span. Changes in personal, family, peer, legal, and social expectations significantly affected these feelings and to a degree when an individual acts on those feelings (Evans, 2000). When students (gay males)
enter college relationships changed with family members and high school peers, their sense of self, and knowledge was challenged. Throughout this transition to college, students (gay males) formed new knowledge, peer groups, and assumed new roles (Evans, 2000). New knowledge, peer groups, and roles either aided or inhibited the development of gay male student’s ability to progress to full gay male identity. Unlike critiques of Cass’ (1979) progressive stage model Evan and Broido (1999), Love, Boch, Jannarone and Richardson (2005), and Stevens (2004) applied or expanded D’Augelli’s (1994a) model and found the application of his model to be effective in the college environment. One can see a similar non-linear progression in Kegan’s (1980, 1984) theory of meaning making.

Although, D’Augelli (1994a) provided a significant foundation for sexual orientation development, his theory lacked a focus on the college years. Jones and McEwen’s (2000) and Stevens (2004) proposed models based on college students. Jones and McEwen’s (2000) multiple dimensions of identity model provided a fluid model of identity based on an individual’s varying identities. In this model, student’s core identity is developed through their own sense of self while accounting for contextual influences (life experiences) and various social identities (religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, culture, and socio-economic factors) (Jones & McEwen, 2000). In the model, all identities intersected representing “that more than one identity dimension can be engaged by the individual at any one time [and] Identity dimensions then may be experienced simultaneously” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410). Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) reconceptualized the model to include meaning making as the factors that affect the model. “The reconceptualized model, unlike the original model, portrays in two dimensions the interactive nature of relationships among components of the identity construction process: context, meaning making, and identity perceptions” (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007, p. 6). Abes
et al. (2007) reconceptualized theory integrated meaning making based in the foundational work of Robert Kegan (1980, 1994). By adding meaning making to their (Jones & McEwen, 2000) original model expanded the model to include “not only what relationships students perceive among their personal and social identities, but also how they come to perceive them as they do” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 13, italics in original). In this respect, the students made meaning while simultaneously developing a GLB identity.

Although, D’Augelli (1994a) provided a strong foundation to understanding the development of GLB sexual identity, Stevens (2004) concluded that current models do not take into account “religious, cultural, ethnic, or racial dimensions as they relate to the development of a gay identity” (p. 186) at colleges and universities. Stevens (2004) explored gay (male) identity development in the college environment. Stevens (2004) offered a conceptual model of gay identity development that is a dynamic, on-going, and ever changing process where participants often moved back and forth through the degrees. Six integrative categories emerged from the findings: self-acceptance, disclosure to others, individual factors (confidence in self, support networks), environmental influences (relationships, stereotypes), finding empowerment (proud to be gay), and multiple identities exploration (sexual orientation, gender, race and /or religion) (Stevens, 2004, pp. 191-199).

In self-acceptance, an individual expressed feelings or emotions towards another man, but cannot label these feelings or emotions as gay; however, the individuals do understand themselves to be different from heterosexuals (Stevens, 2004). Disclosure to others included “coming out” most likely first to friends and supportive networks and second, to parents (Stevens, 2004, p. 193). Individual factors included the “assessment of personal supports and liabilities” (Stevens, 2004, p. 194). Positive individual factors included self-efficacy and
developing supportive networks while negative factors included rejection, isolation, and “internalized homophobia” (Stevens, 2004, p. 194). College environmental influences included “relationships; locations; signs, symbols, and resources; discrimination; and stereotypes” (Stevens, 2004 p. 196). Gay males found empowerment from their inner self and fluctuated based on the environment which one found them associated with (Stevens, 2004). Eventually, empowerment moved gay males from being and thinking only as a gay male to one that embraced their identity and integrated the one aspect, being gay, into their whole self (Stevens, 2004). Stevens (2004) found that gay men needed to reach empowerment prior to examining their multiple identities. While gay males in the study examined multiple aspects of their identity, which aspects they studied depended on factors such as race and religion (Stevens, 2004). Stevens (2004) gay identity development model within the college environment was imperative to this study as he examined gay male’s identity development in the college environment and how the environment along with multiple identities influenced a gay male’s identity.

**Intersection of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity Development**

Reviewing GLB identity developmental theories was crucial to this study. The above theories provided a historical and current context for this study. These theories were delineated between two distinct paradigms; one was stage model (Cass, 1979) and the other was lifespan models (D’Augelli, 1994a; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Stevens (2004). Bilodeau and Renn, (2005) argued that stage theories help an individual to navigate GLB sexual identity “in progression from less to more complex ways of understanding of self and society” (p. 35). Stages models provided students, readers, and professionals with a straightforward and linear approach to developing a GLB identity. For student affairs professionals these theories maybe best suited to
their day-to-day work. However, it also limited one’s ability to defer from the prescribed stages and the natural progression from one to another. In stage theory, one cannot move to the next stage without completing the previous stage and cannot return to prior stages (D’Augelli, 1994a; Levine & Evans, 1991). The purpose of this study was to examine, describe, and interpret how gay males make sense of and understand religion and spirituality within the context of being gay. A traditional linear model had not allowed for social, economic, racial, cultural, or religious variables to be explored nor does the model allowed the researcher the flexibility to explore how these variables affected a gay males development, especially in the realm of religion, spirituality, and faith.

However, life span models offered nonlinear and flexible processes for an individual to form their GLB identity within varying social, cultural, gender, racial, economic, religious, or spiritual contexts. Bilodeau and Reen (2005) noted that life span models provide great flexibility, but Evans et al. (2010) cautions the use of life span models when working with college students. Inherently, life span theories were meant for an individual’s total life span. However, there was significant value in using life span models with college students. By using life span models, student affairs professionals were better able to understand a student’s development through a historical and current lens; therefore enabling the professional to guide students through their journey.

**Religion, Faith, and Spirituality Identity**

To support this study and understand the potential effects on a gay male’s experience, the terms religion, faith, and spirituality and the historical and current perceptions towards gay males and religion needed examining. Although, religions and religious communities differed in their ideological teachings towards gay males from a strict Biblical interpretation to open and
welcoming, gay males continued to view religious communities in varying ways. Gay males selected to attend religiously affiliated institutions; there was conflict between sexual identity and religious values, beliefs, and culture. Gay males expressed the belief that by repressing their sexual orientation, they gained love and acceptance from people closets to them. McNeill (1988) relates;

> Because I was aware of my sexual feelings, I was tormented by the fear that, at the very heart of my being, there was a fatal flaw that rendered me defective and unlovable. I thought that I could be accepted by my family and Church only if I could hide, deny, and repress the specific form that my ability to love and sexual feelings had taken (p. 6).

However, was McNeill’s statement congruent with other gay males? For some gay males, religious teachings and religious communities created hostile places and brought forth internal conflict (Goodwill, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, and Williams (1994) concluded that religious denominations consider “homosexual behavior immoral, causing gay men to conclude that they must either reject the church or suppress their homosexual inclinations in belief that the two are incompatible” (p. 93). De la Huerta (1999) confirmed Wagner et al. (1994) conclusion that Christianity rejected gay males and in turn reluctant to participate in organized religion and even spirituality.

Gay males in Halkitis et al (2009) study identified religious doctrine as hostile and oppressive and found gay males engaged in a more positive relationship with spiritual practices. De la Huerta (1999) identifies that “many of us [gay males] have rejected our inherent spiritual natures along with the religious traditions we felt forced to disavow in order to accept our sexual nature” (p. 6). Either gay males disavowed their religious lives or as Tan (2005) concluded gay
males who engage in religion, faith, or spirituality experience internalized homophobia. GLBT students perceived religiously affiliated institutions “to be even less friendly places for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people” (Love, 1998, p. 300). Gay students attending religiously affiliated institutions faced “oppressive, non-supportive, homophobic cultures in which they are made to feel invisible and isolated” (Love, 1998, p. 300). Due to religious doctrine and not understanding the differences between religion, spirituality, and faith, a gay male’s spiritual journey became more difficult.

**Defining Religion, Faith, and Spirituality**

In any research, key terms needed defining. Through the exploration of GLB sexual identity literature, we were able to conclude how a gay male develops identity. As with the literature on GLB identity development, a review of the literature on religion, spirituality and faith was necessary. An EBSCO search using the term religion, spirituality, and faith returned 116,643 results. When searching using the terms define religion, 398,610 articles were returned as compared to 76,991 for the terms define spirituality and 381,382 for the terms define faith. From this search one may conclude that there are definitive definitions for the terms religion, spirituality, and faith.

Bender (2007) warned that large quantitative studies on spirituality were limited by the lack of a common definition and the measurement of spirituality by asking questions about “psychological well-being, experience, and self-identification”, which participants cannot distinguish between various religious practices and meaning of spirituality (p. 1). This section explored the varying definitions and provided definitions that guided this research.

Religion was not easily defined nor identified by researchers. In 2000, Hill et al. determined the need to define religion and spirituality. This was necessary due to the “veritable
flood of interest in spirituality...[which] has resulted in disagreements and perhaps even confusion about what is meant by such terms as religion and spirituality” (Hill, et al., p. 52).

Researchers defined religion as a social institution with similar experiences within the community. Steiger and Lipson (1985) viewed religion as a “social institution in which a group of people participate rather than an individual search for meaning” (p. 212). Miller (1999) viewed religion as a social entity focused on a historical set of beliefs grounded in strict Biblical interpretation. Donahue (1985), Mytko and Knight (1999), Hodges (2002), and Seeman (2003) viewed religion as church attendance, adherence to rules, and the amount of time individual spent praying. Hill et al. (2000) noted, “religion historically was a ‘broad-band construct’ that included both individual and institutional elements, it is now seen as a ‘narrow-band construct’ that has much more to do with the institutional alone” (p. 60). Other researchers defined religion as a set of beliefs, teachings, rituals and practices. Religion was “a shared system of beliefs, principles or doctrines related to a belief in and worship of a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe” (Love, 2002, p. 8). Lerner (2007) viewed religion as an organized community with historical teachings, symbols, and doctrine that regulated member’s behaviors.

Most of the research above was based on the need to distinguish religion from spirituality. Notwithstanding, researchers Allport and Ross (1967) and Koenig, Parkerson, and Meador (1997) defined religion through religiosity and religiousness. Allport and Ross (1967) described two types of religiousness, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic believers lived their religion throughout every aspect of their lives and integrated their religious beliefs in to personal structures (Allport & Ross, 1967). Extrinsic believers saw religion as a method to increase their social stand and self-importance in the world (Allport & Ross, 1967). From this perspective the
institution and the individual played an integral role in defining religion. Koenig et al. (1997) described three religiosity dimensions organizational, nonorganizational, and intrinsic. Organizational focused on the amount of times people attend religious services (Koenig et al. 1997). Nonorganizational focused on the amount of time practicing religion through private activities (Koenig et al. 1997). Lastly, intrinsic dimension referred to the extent to which an individual integrates religion into their everyday lives (Koenig et al. 1997). Allport and Ross (1967) and Koening et al. (1997) regard religion as a multidimensional process not exclusively based on religious doctrine and teachings.

**Spirituality**

No definitive definition existed for spirituality. To provide a standard and usable definition for this study, the next literature area of investigation was to define spirituality. The concepts of spirituality, religion, faith, morality, and ethics were frequently confused and used interchangeably to discuss or describe one’s thinking on a higher power or personal journey. Dirkx (1997) and Wink and Dillon (2002) described spirituality as communication with God, union with God, ultimate meaning of life, and belief in a greater force than oneself. Berkel, Armstrong, and Coley (2004) and McGill and McGreal (1988) viewed spirituality as a relationship that transcends oneself and includes a union with God.

Yet, other scholars viewed spirituality as the search for meaning in life (Bown & Willams, 1993; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm 2006; English & Gillen 2000; Frankl, 1959; Howden, 1992; King et al., 1995; Miller 1999; Parks, 2011; Tillich, 1959). “Spirituality is one of the ways people construct knowledge and meaning” (Tisdell, 2003 p. 20). Lindholm (2007) defines spirituality as "potentially a very powerful avenue through which many of us construct meaning and knowledge" (p. 2). His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1996) in *Ethics for the New*
Millennium called for a spiritual evolution and defined the difference between religion and spirituality. Spirituality was concerned with those “qualities of the human spirit—such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance,…and a sense of responsibility, while religion is concerned with dogmatic teachings” (Lama, 1996, p. 22). Love et al. (2005) defined spirituality as “our drive for meaning, authenticity, purpose, wholeness, and self-transcendence” (p. 197). Dantley (2003) defined spirituality as the “…grounding for the values and principles we espouse that inform our personal and professional behavior (p. 274). Critics of the term spirituality denounced the “overuse of the term and have argued that spirituality is permissively invoked to refer to a wide range of idiosyncratic personal experiences that are frequently devoid of obligations” (Wink & Dillon, 2002, p. 80). For this study, there was the need to define or establish a set of ideas that grounds the term spirituality. Elkins et al. (1998) viewed spirituality as a multidimensional concept. To reinforce this idea of spirituality as multidimensional and to provide solid guides, Tisdell (2003) seven assumptions provided a holistic guide for this study not a conclusion singular definition.

Tisdell (2003) provided seven assumptions about the nature of spirituality:

1. Spirituality and religion are not the same, but for many people they are interrelated.
2. Spirituality is about an awareness and honoring of wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things through the mystery of what many I interviewed referred to as the Life-force, God, higher power, higher self, cosmic energy, Buddha nature, or Great Spirit.
3. Spirituality is fundamentally about meaning-making.
4. Spirituality is always present (though often unacknowledged in the learning environment).
5. Spiritual development constituents moving toward greater authenticity or to more
authentic self.

6. Spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes, often made more concrete in art forms such as music, art, image, symbol, and ritual, which are manifested culturally.

7. Spiritual experiences most often happen by surprise. (pp. 28-29).

For Tisdell (2003) spirituality focused on a person’s belief in a higher power, the construction of meaning, the role of symbols, and the need for a communal experience. Parks (2011) argued that faith and spirituality are not solely individual, but instead developed when interacting with others in greater community.

**GLB Sexual Orientation Identity and Spiritual Development**

Students entering colleges sought to understand and make sense of spirituality in aspects of their lives (Lindholm, 2007). Higher Education Research Institute (2004) *The Spiritual Life of College Students* report indicated that 83 percent of students believed in the sacredness of life, 80 percent indicated interest in spirituality, and 47 percent indicated the need to seek opportunities to grow spiritually. However, Bryant and Astin (2008) argued that minority student populations (women, non-Christian religions, ethnic minorities) struggled with spiritual development. Gay males’ experiences were not different from those in Bryant and Astin (2008) study. Levine and Love (2000) noted that GLB students faced a choice “between denying who they are and what they are feeling in order to remain” in the religious community or “risk being label[ed] “intrinsically disordered” losing their relationship with “God and disconnection from the community” (p. 93). Tan (2005) found that gay and lesbian individuals espoused high levels of spiritual wellbeing although they were faced with discriminatory practices. Researchers acknowledged that gay males experience tension between being gay and religious and provided
various models to support gay male’s transition to fully accepting the two dichotomies. Yakushko (2005) developed four approaches to homosexuality: (1) rejecting punitive (sin), (2) rejecting non-punitive (sinful, but embrace GLBT identity), (3) qualified acceptance (hierarchy), (4) full acceptance (acceptable and normative—welcomed) (p. 252). Shallenberger (1996) studied the journey of gay men and lesbians. In his research, Shallenberger concluded that gay males and lesbians transition through three stages questioning, reclaiming, and integrating. During each of these transitions, gay men and lesbians move from a sense of individual loathing and hatred about their religious and spiritual beliefs to one of integrating religion and spirituality into their individual and community lives.

Many higher education professionals and practitioners struggled with religion, faith, and spirituality in relation to GLBT students (Love, et al., 2005). Higher education researchers provided insight into developing a student’s spiritual development. Jablonski (2001) noted that “spiritual development is a form of deeper learning because it touches on students’ encounter with transcendence and ultimate meaning in their lives” (p. 19). The search for meaning continued throughout one’s life span. When paired with Kegan’s (1980, 1982, 1984) meaning making theory and D’Augelli’s (1994a) sexual identity theory there was a significant link between the two—meaning making and understanding throughout the life space. Fowler’s theory of faith development (1981) faith development was a natural progression from one stage to the next. Love and Talbot’s (1999) spiritual development framework viewed spirituality as an interrelated process that through self-reflection, growth, and journey with a spirit one comes to develop their spiritual sense. Similar to the work of D’Augelli (1994a), Love and Talbot (1999) advocated for a process that was non-linear and does not follow specific stages. Borgman (2005) argued that GLBT spiritual development occurred in three religious or faith components stages:
analytic process of conflict resolution (belief system and sexual orientation), characteristics of being (questioning), and experiences impacting conflict resolution and finally integration of multiple identities (religious views, values, education, socio-economic status, gender, and societal factors) to understand and resolve conflict between being gay and Christian.

Love et al. (2005) studied the spiritual experiences of lesbian and gay college students in relationship to identity. Love et al. (2005) development three categories to describe the intersection of sexual and spiritual identity: reconciliation, nonreconciliation, and undeveloped spiritual identity. In reconciliation students “embraced being both gay or lesbian and being religious or spiritually grounded person” (Love et al., 2005, p. 199) with no conflicts between the two. Students did not arrive at this point without significant doubt, conflict, confusion, and pain. However, students arrived at reconciliation through a variety of support or contributors. Contributors included: (1) religious background, (2) “attending church camps”, (3) “having an open, loving environment associated with religion, especially as children”, (4) “having a sexual or intimate relations associated with or instigated by a religious experience”, (5) “the development of reflective self-analysis”, and (6) “the experience of working through challenges, difficulties, and conflicts between religion and sexuality” (Love et al., 2005, p. 204).

Nonreconciliation involved “those who were aware that these two aspects of their identity were not reconciled and those who were not aware” (Love et al., 2005, p. 201). During this stage students who either compartmentalized the two aspects or not recognized them as being of importance in their lives (Love et al., 2005). Students who passively or actively rejected spiritual issues were categorized as undeveloped spiritual identity (Love, et al., 2005). The researchers noted that the term undeveloped does not refer to immature; instead, it refers to the student’s ambiguity with religion and spirituality.
To support gay male’s transformation Parks (2000, 2011) argued that mentoring communities aided individuals in progressing to understand and to make meaning of their faith. Mentoring communities “offers a network of belonging in which young adults feel recognized as who they really are, and who they are becoming. It offers both challenge and support and thus offers good company for both the emerging strength and the distinctive vulnerability of the young adult” (Parks, 2000, p. 95). The church, pride groups, and student affairs professional served as mentoring communities for gay males who trying to reconcile their faith and being gay. Undergraduate college students found themselves in this stage.

Engaging Gay Males on Campus

College provided students the opportunity to engage in self-reflection and “search for meaning in life and examine their spiritual beliefs and values” (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005, p. 31). As the stigma of homosexuality lessens student affairs professional’s guidance is central for college students who struggle with spiritual and gay identity development. The conflict between religious identity and gay male identity caused confusion, forcing one to choose between the two. Student affairs professionals strived to create an open, affirming, and supportive environment for students to develop, cultivate, and grow their individual identities. It was important to understand engagement theories as methods to engage gay males in their search for meaning.

specifically designed to address the needs of GLB students. In return these programs would increase GLB students overall learning and development (Brown, et al., 2004). Dugan, Komives, and Segar (2008) focused on the intersection of leadership and identity as GLBT and found no significant different between GLBT students’ capabilities for leadership as compared to their heterosexual peers. There is the need to shift thinking about gay males and campus engagement from one of participating on campus to how these programs and student affairs professionals can aide students in making meaning of their experiences. Therefore, professional can support gay male students on their spiritual journey or search for meaning in life.

Constructivist theorists asserted that learning involved constructing one’s own knowledge in context and is shaped by interactions with individuals. As examined in the theoretical framework section, Kegan (1980, 1984, 1994) provided the foundation for meaning making. In her seminal work, Parks (2010, 2011) expanded and applied Kegan’s theory to faith development. Baxter Magolda’s (1998, 2001) work in self-authorship provided student affairs professionals an additional tool to support students on their spiritual journey. Using Baxter Magolda’s (2001) cognitive and constructivist theory, theory of self-authorship, student affairs professionals gained insight into gay males’ spiritual development. Baxter Magolda believed that learning involves constructing one’s own knowledge and was shaped by interactions between individuals and their environment (context). Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory of self-authorship presented a framework to answer three major questions: “How do I know?, Who am I?, and How do I want to construct relationships with others?” (p. 15). The first question explored “the epistemological dimension of the self-authorship—the evolution of assumptions about the nature, limits, and certainty of knowledge” (Baxter Magolda, 2000, p. 15). The second question explored an individual’s sense of who they are and what they believe. The final
question explored “how one perceives and constructs one’s relationships with others” (Baxter Magolda, 2000, p. 15). As a gay male transitions to college, he needed to come to terms with these varying questions and consider how this impacts his relationships with others—this included religious or spiritual people. These questions were intertwined and led to an understanding of individual spirituality. All undergraduate students explored these questions, but for gay males, answers to these questions appeared more difficult.

As gay males attempted to answer questions and explored their spirituality, students were bombarded with truth, dogma, and information about religion, faith, and spirituality. They entered an unfamiliar world, one in which there was little guidance on their gay identity and spiritual journey. To aide gay males on their spiritual journey, student affairs professionals had “a responsibility to help young adults make the transition from being shaped by society” to “developing self-authorship” (Baxter Magolda, 2004, p. 17). Baxter Magolda (2001) identified four phases in the movement from external to internal self-authorship: (1) following formulas (authority figures), (2) crossroads (exploring alternatives), (3) becoming the author of one’s life (choosing beliefs and affirming them), and (4) internal foundation (self-determined belief system). Through the development of self-authorship, gay males create their sense of spirituality.

In the first phase, individuals followed religious, faith, and spiritual plans designed by external authorities. Spiritual decisions “revolved around what one was supposed to do” (Magolda, 2001, p. 78). As individuals progressed along their journey and participated in social and intellectual activities, individuals started to explore their own values and beliefs. Through the continued exploration of social and intellectual interactions, the individual developed a strong sense of self and when others changed beliefs, the individual was able to support their
own beliefs. In the last phase, individuals created a “solidified and comprehensive system of beliefs” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 155). A student’s spiritual journey occurred over time and active involvement in meaningful activities afforded students the opportunity to explore and develop their spiritual self.

In the context of gay males’ spiritual development, Baxter Magolda’s theory offered this researcher a framework to stress the need for students and student affairs professionals to collaborate to develop students’ self-authorship of spiritual development. This mutual relationship provided “students an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their experiences and help them develop reflective habits” which leads to an understanding of spiritual self (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 9). A student’s spiritual journey occurred over time and active involvement in meaningful activities afforded students the opportunity to explore and develop their spiritual selves. Baxter Magolda (1999) stressed that “students do not learn…without practice” (p. 9). To support students’ spiritual journey, Baxter Magolda’s theory encouraged student affairs professionals to not only understand students’ needs, but also to create a safe environment for gay males to explore their spiritual journey.

**Conclusion**

Higher education played an integral and powerful role in developing the holistic student. Institutions of higher education were thus a valuable vehicle for providing students the academic, social, spiritual, and support programs necessary to develop their whole self. Yet, one of the most difficult and less discussed aspects of an undergraduate student’s development was religious, spiritual, and gay identity development. For undergraduate gay male students, their religious and gay identity development was rarely explored and remained, relatively unknown to professionals in higher education. With a lack of research and knowledge, professionals in
higher education were unable to support gay male students on their spiritual journey. As such helping gay males develop their religious, faith, or spirituality helped students feel “a fit with peers, feel supported by faculty and by students” (DeWitz et al., 2008, p. 21) and provided higher education professionals with the necessary tools to support gay male students. The world continued to evolve from a society based on a person’s interior (inner understanding) to a person’s exterior (materialism, wealth); therefore, was imperative to ensure that all students, especially gay males had the opportunity to develop their spirituality (interior self); while facing an exterior world that may not accept their search spirituality.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter described the methods used to collect, organize, and analyze the data. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the religious and spiritual experiences of undergraduate gay males at a religiously affiliated Protestant institution of higher education within the context of their gay identity. Based on the intellectual goals, conceptual framework, literature review, and qualitative methodology of this study, one overarching question, how do undergraduate gay males attending a Protestant affiliated higher education institution make sense of and incorporate religion and/or spirituality in their lives? and four sub questions guided this research:

- How does religious upbringing impact gay male identity development?
- How do gay males reconcile and make sense of simultaneously being gay and religious?
- How do gay males experience coming out in the context of Christianity?
- Who or what, at their undergraduate institution, influenced how gay males understand religion, faith, or spirituality and their gay identity?

Through the contextual exploration of Christianity, gay male identity orientation and spirituality, this researcher gained insight into the history of gay males’ experiences and an understanding of their struggles with the two concepts (Christianity and gay male identity). The research question sought to understand the challenges of identifying simultaneously as a gay male and Christian and how those two intersect. Also, this study examined the impact of an undergraduate education on gay male and religious identity development. This study illuminated gay males’ personal narratives and the impact of attendance at a religiously affiliated institution influenced their gay identity and religious/spiritual experiences. Through this research, knowledge was gained concerning the experiences of gay males through their own words.
Taylor and Bogdan (1998) determined that the qualitative researcher’s focus was to understand “people from their own frames of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it” (p. 7). In exploring these questions, the purpose of this study was to share the stories of undergraduate gay males attending a religiously affiliated institution and to provide a new understanding of how gay males described their religious/spiritual and gay identity development experiences at a religious affiliated institution leading student affairs professionals to develop programs and services to support gay males’ gay and religious/spiritual development.

This chapter described the research methodology employed in this study: (1) research questions, (2) description of the sample, (3) design, (4) data collection, (5) data analysis, (6) limitations, and (7) validity. The methodology section provided the rationale for the selected research method based on the theoretical framework and literature review. Collins, Hurst, and Kolander (1992) suggested that spirituality could not be studied by scientific methods; instead, “spirituality rests on the balance of faith and experience, on both revelation and reason. Openness to traditional and nontraditional approaches to investigation and understanding must be considered” (p. 275).

As proposed by Creswell (2009), qualitative research was the appropriate method to explore and to understand the meanings that individuals ascribed to their lives or experiences. Qualitative research was characterized by: (1) a process rather than outcomes, (3) focuses on the meaning that participants make of their experiences and lives, (4) the researcher being the primary instrument to collect and analyze data, (5) data is collected from multiple sources (interviews and observations), (6) using inductive analysis, (7) an emergent design, (8) being interpretative, and (9) creating a holistic account of each participants account. Based on these eight criteria a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study.
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) served as the qualitative method for this study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA’s methodology focused on personal meaning, how participants made sense of particular context or phenomenon, and examined the lived experiences of humans (Smith et al., 2009). IPA emphasized the lived experience and not a philosophical or abstract account of said experience. Phenomenology, hermeneutics (interpretation), particularly the double hermeneutics, and idiography influenced interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was phenomenological in that an individual’s experience was examined in context, time, and place (Smith, et al., 2009). IPA built on the phenomenological work of Husserl (1927) and Heidegger (1927, 1962) (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl’s philosophy concluded that individuals must become reflective on their subjective experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger (1962) viewed phenomenology as process to study people in their world and interpret those experiences to create outcomes—hermeneutics. In hermeneutic inquiry, the researcher’s role was active and aimed to assume an insider perspective (Smith, et al., 2009). The third theoretical underpinning of IPA was idiography. Idiography was concerned at the individual level and providing a detailed examination of the participant’s words in a particular context (Smith, et al., 2009). What makes IPA unique from traditional phenomenology was the double hermeneutic (Smith, et al., 2009). Double hermeneutic was a dual interpretation process where the participant shared their story and tried to make sense of their experiences and in return, “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51).

**Methodology**

**Site**

Urban Religious University (URU), pseudonym, located in the Midwest served as the site
for this study. Approximately 82% of undergraduate students resided in Ohio and 50% of those students resided within one hundred miles. The female to male ratio was 62% to 38%, which offered this researcher a significant male population to pull from. Approximately 20% of students identified with the ELCA faith, 26% had no affiliation and 54% of students identified as Catholic. Although an ELCA affiliated university, the academic curriculum, co-curricular programs, and institutional culture was not rooted deeply in the ELCA doctrine. Instead, CLU’s mission was committed to Lutheran free inquiry, which provided students the opportunity to develop and to make sense of their own faith.

The unique Lutheran history of URU, from one Lutheran synod to the current affiliate of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), demonstrated a commitment to the Lutheran principle of free inquiry. URU’s mission was to transform student lives based on three principles personal growth; prepare independent, critical thinkers for service in a diverse society; and inspire students to reflect based on moral, be spiritual, and engage in society. The selected site was a mid-sized private Evangelical Lutheran Church of America affiliated institution of higher education. The selected site provided access to over 1,800 undergraduate male college students. In addition, URU sponsored a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) student organization with 27 members. Access to the participant population was gained through posters and meeting with the pride organization.

**Sampling: Participants and Selection**

This study used purposeful sampling. Qualitative research focused on purposefully selecting participants that aide the researcher in understanding and addressing the questions posed by the research question (Creswell, 2009). Merriam (1998) argued for a purposeful sampling that includes participants who provides the researcher with much needed data. Maxwell
(2005) identified four goals for purposeful selection: (a) achieve representation through the individuals selected, (b) achieve heterogeneity through specific criteria, and (c) chose participants that have experienced the phenomenon. Smith et al. (2009) recommended researchers using the interpretative phenomenological analysis select a homogenous sample. Smith et al. (2009) noted that the purpose of a purposefully selected homogenous population was not the same as treating each participant as identical, but instead purposeful selection provided the researcher with a consistent population to study.

The sample size depended on three criteria: (a) “the degree of commitment to the case study level of analysis and reporting; (b) the richness of the individual cases; and (c) the organizational constraints one is operating under” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51). Smith et al. (2009) recommended a small sample size that experienced the particular phenomenon-Christian upbringing and identifying as being a gay male. In making recommendations for doctoral students, Smith et al. (2009) argued that the number of interviews is more important than the number of participants and in the end, a higher number of participants does not indicate a better study. Instead, a study is based on analysis, time, reflection, and dialogue with the sample population (Smith et al., 2009). It is the quality of the cases and not the number that ultimately decides the success of a research study.

Four males enrolled at URU participated in the study. Prospective respondents met five inclusionary criteria for this study and experienced the phenomenon being studied—spirituality/faith. First, participants were born biologically male. This criterion ensured the participants experienced and developed solely as a gay male. Understandably readers may believe there was no difference between one born biologically male and one born female and transitioned to a gay male. However, researchers (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994a, 1994 b; Dilley,
2002, 2005; Stevens, 2004) noted that developmental difference existed. Second, participants identified as gay. In this study, identifying as gay was a participant who lives daily as a gay male and does not hide his sexual orientation. As reflected in the literature review on sexual identity, participants who had not accepted their gay sexual identity may not have developed fully, their sexual identity, and therefore, struggled being gay.

Third, participants identified as traditionally college-aged undergraduate students (18-24 years). The theoretical frameworks and the literature review supported the need to study Christian upbringing, gay males, and the intersection of these two concepts. Fourth, participants identified as either a junior or senior. Researchers Astin, A., Astin, H. and Lindholm (2011) found that students in their junior year rated “integrating spirituality in my life” at 50% versus first year students at 42% (p. 31). Student development theory research (Astin, 1984; Baxter-Magolda, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzine, 2005) concluded that a student’s cognitive and affective maturity development increased and a significant amount of first year students struggled with their sexual identity (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Dilley, 2002, 2005; Stevens, 2004). The results of this study revealed an inherent struggle between Christianity and gay sexual identity. The struggle impacted and ultimately created an environment for undergraduate gay males to search for meaning in life.

Fifth, participants identified as Protestant Christian. Love and Talbot (1999) and Love (1999) presented a case study on the impact of a Catholic higher education institution on the development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. This study provided an understanding of the gay males who identify with the Protestant religion. However, participants do not need to believe in the orthodox teachings of the church.

Since the purposed methodology was interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), the
participants must have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). In addition, Creswell (2007) encouraged researchers to limit the diverse individual characteristics. The selected sample mitigated diverse individual characteristics. Inherently, the five inclusionary criteria excluded certain populations (females, heterosexuals, people of other faiths, and graduate students). No significant exclusionary criteria existed for this study. In order to participate in this study, the participant met five criteria: (1) biologically male, (2) identify as gay, (3) traditionally college-aged undergraduate student, (4) junior or senior status, and (5) identify with the Protestant religion. The four participants selected for this study were obtained through posters on campus and contacting the GLBTQ student organization. In addition, one participant noted a faculty member encouraged him to participate. For each recruitment process, I detailed the research study along with the potential risk and rewards to each participant, provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions, and confirm they each met the five criteria. Participants who agree to participate received a $15.00 gift card as a result of participation.

**Data Collection**

Interviewing was the primary technique for collecting data from participants. Maxwell (2005) and Smith et al. (2009) stressed the difference between a research question and an interview question. Research questions focused on what the researcher wants to know (Maxwell, 2005) and interview questions provided the opportunity for participants to tell detailed stories and express their thoughts and feelings (Smith et al., 2009). By seeking to discover the “meaning individuals make of their experiences” interview questions are best suited for this study (Ortiz, 2003, p. 36). Smith et al. (2009) advised researchers to develop six to ten open-ended questions with prompts that generate answers to aid the researcher in understanding the
meaning participants create of a phenomenon. Open-ended questions allowed participants to tell their stories, elaborated on their experiences, and aimed to be descriptive of the meaning created (Seidman, 2006). Researchers were encouraged to avoid leading questions such as what did you really mean? Seidman (2006) argued that “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” is at the heart of interviewing (p. 9).

To best understand these experiences, Seidman (2006) suggested researchers ask participants to: (1) tell about their experiences, (2) reconstruct their experiences not to just remember, (3) keep participants focused, and (4) limit one’s own experiences in the conversation. Interview questions focused on Christian belief system, growing up as a Christian, gay male identity developing, the impact of an undergraduate college on their experiences, and their search for meaning. First, I investigated how participants made meaning and sense of their lives in the context of two historically conflicting context—Christianity and being a gay male. Lastly, I asked participants to tell their stories about these two often conflicting contexts.

In order to produce a high quality interview, Seidman (2006) noted the need to listen. Seidman (2006) suggested three levels to listening—what the participant was sharing, the participant’s voice not what the participant thinks the researcher wants to know, and focus and listen to the participant while remembering the process. By listening carefully, this researcher was able to ask follow-up questions, clarify a participant’s statement, and explore the participant’s story not that of the researcher. Therefore, the researcher employed the interviewing techniques as discussed by Seidman (2006) to ensure accurate and valid data collection.

The data collection occurred over a three month period. An interview time schedule was established for each participant of at least one to one and one half hours. Each participant
participated in one to one and one half hour semi-structure interview with up to two hours for follow-up interviews and member checking. Throughout the interview, the participants described in detail their lived experience of the phenomenon being studied. Interviews took place at a mutually determined URU campus environment where the participant felt comfortable and the researcher received a clear audio recording of the interview. Interview data collected was stored in multiple locations (password protect SD card, a locked file cabinet, and secure cloud system). This researched transcribed each interview. Participants reviewed the transcripts for accuracy.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2009):

The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data. (p. 183)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) served as the underlying method for analyzing participant data. Smith et al., (2009) described analysis in IPA as a complex, non-linear one that encouraged a “reflective engagement with the participant’s account” and “within the repertoire of strategies, there is considerable room for maneuver” (p. 80). IPA was a two-step process; it required that as “participants are trying to make sense of their world, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51). Although Smith et al., (2009) encouraged researchers to take liberty with the approach, they offered several strategies. Strategies included a: (1) “line-by-line analysis”, (2) “the identification of emergent patterns (i.e. themes)”, (3) the “development of a dialogue
between researchers [and] their coded data, (4) illumination of “relationships between themes”, (5) “the organization of all”, (6) “the use of supervision, collaboration, or audit” to test the interpretation, (7) “the development of a full narrative evidenced by detailed commentary”, and (8) “reflection on one’s own perceptions, conceptions, and process” (Smith et al., 2009, 79-80). Throughout the study, the researcher had not placed their beliefs, assumptions, or thoughts to the side. This researcher recognized his preconceived notions, assumptions, and thoughts, which may were not apparent during the research. Instead, this researcher focused on the participant and their story. The researcher continuously engaged in a dynamic or cyclical form of bracketing (Smith, et al., 2009). In IPA, the researcher brought forth the participant’s story and analyzed the data and made sense of the participants story (Smith et al., 2009).

For this researcher followed Smith et al, (2009) suggested steps (pp. 82-102):

Step 1. In the first stage, there is the need to immerse oneself in the data. The data is in the form of participant transcripts and researcher’s observations. To begin this process, researchers are advised to read and re-read the transcripts becoming acutely aware of the participants words and stories.

Step 2. In the second stage, the researcher examines “semantic content and language use of a very exploratory level” (Smith et al. 2009, p. 83). The researcher reads the transcripts line for line with an open mind making exploratory comments. As the researcher moved from line to another line, it was important to “engage in analytic dialogue with each line of the transcript, asking questions of what the word, phrase, sentence means to you, and attempting to check what it means for the participant” (p. 84). Three types of comments were used to analyze the transcripts: (1) descriptive, (2) linguistics, and (3) conceptual (Smith, et. al., 2009). Descriptive comments included key words and thoughts that described what matters to the participant. These
comments were “taking at face value” and took the form of “events, experiences in the participants’ life world” (p. 84). According to Saldaña (2009), descriptive coding provided the reader with what one saw and heard. Descriptive coding provided a clear set of categories for the researcher to determine the secondary coding, in this case theming the data (Saldaña 2009). Linguistic comments focused on the use of language that included laughter, repetition, and tone. Lastly, conceptual comments were interpretative and interrogative in nature. These comments were used to examine the transcript that may lead to further questions.

Step 3. Both Smith et al. (2009) and Saldaña (2009) suggested a process to develop the themes. Theme development was as a process to understand and make sense of the data. By theming the data, the researcher reduced the amount of data and detailed information while keeping the complexity intact. This researcher created a map to connect the themes. This researcher continued to explore the emerging themes and focused on both the interpretative and analysis in IPA. Themes or sentences emerged as phrases that grounds the participant’s statements and identifies the “about and/or what it means” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 139). As themes emerged, this researcher applied the hermeneutic circle “where the part is interpreted in relation to the whole; the whole is interpreted in relation to the part” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 92). These themes were chronological as they appear in the date.

Step 4. In step 4, themes were mapped to see how the researcher viewed the themes, together and how they fit (Smith et al.). By charting or mapping these themes, this researcher was able to draw out significant emerging ideas that related directly to the research questions. Not all themes related to or are considered necessary for the final product. Smith et al. (2009) offered two methods—eyeballing the list or printing the themes, posting them on a wall, and exploring the themes. This researcher chose to use the eyeballing method. The authors also
offered several ways to look for patterns and make connections—abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function (Smith et al., 2009). For this study, this researcher chose to use the abstraction. By using abstraction, this researcher was able to identify “patterns between emergent themes” and develop “super-ordinate” themes, which involved placing similar or like themes under a broader title (Smith et al., 2009, p. 96).

Step 5. This step involved examining the next case using the same steps mentioned above. However, this researcher ensured that the previous case and themes developed from the first case had not influenced or prohibited new themes from emerging.

Step 6. In this step the research’s focused on transitions from studying individual case themes to searching for patterns within various cases. Individual case themes across each case were used to determine greater themes and therefore, reported out in the final project. (Smith et al., 2009).

**Validity and Credibility**

Validity and reliability are concepts grounded in testing or evaluating quantitative research. Eisner (1991) argued that a valid or reliable qualitative study helps us to “understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing” (p. 58). For qualitative researchers it was important to ensure that the research does have a form on validity and credibility. Yardley (2000) provided four dimensions by which to assess qualitative methods: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance. Sensitivity to context is varying ways, sensitivity to literature and participants involved in the study. IPA sensitivity can include focusing on participants who experienced the phenomenon. The researcher must also remember to be sensitive to each individual’s experiences. As Smith et al. (2009) noted that a quality IPA study demonstrated sensitivity to the interviews and “will always
have a considerable number of verbatim extracts from the participants”’ and allowing the participants story to come through (p. 180-181). Lastly, the end product was grounded in the participant’s stories and relevant literature (Yardley, 2000).

The second dimension was commitment and rigor (Yardley, 2000). Commitment and rigor is viewed as significant time with the data and immersion in the data (Yardley, 2000). In IPA rigor is seen throughout the process, specific sample, engaging participants with sensitivity and context, and a detailed analysis of each participant’s story (Yardley, 2000). Smith, et al. (2009) described rigor as a “thoroughness of the study…the quality of the interview and the completeness of the analysis” (p. 181). Thirdly, in transparency, the research is committed to ensuring that others describe every step of the research process in detail and open for examination (Yardley, 2000). Coherence “describes the “fit” between the research question and the philosophical perspective adopted, and the method of investigation and analysis undertaken” (Yardley, 2000, p. 222). Aiming for coherence involved publishing research findings that tell the reader a story (Smith, et al. 2009). Lastly, Yardley (2000) viewed impact and importance as keys to creating validity in IPA researcher. Impact and importance refers to “the decisive criterion by which any piece of research must be judged” (Yardley, 2000, p. 223). Ultimately, impact and importance was not determined by the researcher, but instead by the application of the research and the intended audience (Yardley, 2000). In IPA the researcher creates an argument for using IPA, transcribes interviews into detailed notes, creates a table of themes, is validity (Smith et al., 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) advise qualitative researchers to engage in member checking. By member checking, participants have the opportunity to review the data and provide feedback to ensure that the researchers results correctly interpreted what the participant experienced (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Limitations

Undergraduates from non-Christian religions were not represented in this study. Another limitation for this study was the use of Caucasian gay males. In selecting only Caucasian gay males, this research had not attempted to study lesbians, bisexuals, or transgendered students and students from diverse racial backgrounds. By using IPA, this researcher sought to make sense and interpret what the participant is trying to make meaning of spirituality and being gay. Although there were several limitations to consider, this study provided valuable information to student affairs professional that work and engage gay male students on their spiritual journeys. At the heart of this study was the lived spiritual experiences of gay males. IPA provided the appropriate method to study their experiences. At the heart of IPA is the lived experiences of participants, interpreting those experiences, sharing the stories of individuals who may not have a voice in our society, and providing detailed cases that increased student affairs professionals’ knowledge of the lived experiences of gay males.

Protection of Human Subjects

To protect participants’ identities, as well as the university’s name, each received a pseudonym. Each participant signed an informed consent form detailing the potential risks for participating in the study. Paper interview notes and other documents were stored in a locked file cabinet throughout the study. Digital interview materials (recorded interviews and transcripts) were locked on my personal computer via password and a password protected SD card. A copy of digital files were backed up on a secure website (Amazon Cloud and Google Documents). Participation in this study produced no significant risk to participants. This study documented the spiritual/faith experiences of gay males at a private religious affiliated institution of higher education. Being simultaneously gay and exploring one’s faith/spiritual experiences
may bring forth certain emotions that a gay male may not understand. Yet, participants may benefit by examining being gay and their faith/spiritual experiences on a private religiously affiliated institution of higher education. Participants experienced a sense of empowerment and understanding through the exploration of being connected with a greater presence outside of themselves. In addition, the research results may benefit a greater number of students who identify as gay males and seek to understand and develop their faith/spiritual life. No participants experienced uncomfortable thoughts during the study. For participants who had experienced uncomfortable thoughts, a counselor was available.

In addition to ensuring that participants received any counseling services, I also attended to the issue of confidentiality by providing participants with a participant informed consent form that describes, in detail, the use of and access to their personal data, the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time, and the protocol for protecting their identity throughout the study. No participants withdrew from this study. To ensure participant identities were kept confidential, pseudonyms were applied to each of the participants. Although every step (pseudonyms, securing data, and not releasing information to others) was taken to ensure participants confidentiality, there was a slight risk that a participant can be identified. This method provided participants the opportunity to provide open and candid responses.

Dr. Joseph McNabb, Ph.D. provided oversight to ensure the protection of human subjects, supervises the study. The Northeastern University Institutional Review Board approved this study. URU approved this study as well. The approval of two institutional review boards provided significant oversight of this study.

Conclusion

Higher education played an integral and powerful role in developing the holistic student.
Institutions of higher education were thus a valuable vehicle for providing students the academic, social, spiritual, and support programs necessary to develop their whole self. Yet, one of the most difficult and less discussed aspects of an undergraduate student’s development is spirituality. For undergraduate male students who identify as gay, their spiritual development was rarely explored and remained, relatively unknown to professionals in higher education. With a lack of research and knowledge, professionals in higher education were unable to support gay male students on their spiritual journey. As such helping gay males developed their spirituality helped students feel engaged in campus and provides higher education professionals with the necessary tools to support gay male students. As the world continued to evolve from a society based on a person’s interior (inner understanding) to a person’s exterior (materialism, wealth); it was imperative to ensure that all students, especially gay males have the opportunity to develop their spirituality (search for meaning); while facing an exterior world that may not accept their search spirituality. This research sought to provide gay males and student affairs professionals with the tools to engage and support gay male spiritual development.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study examined the lives of gay males raised in the Christian faith and who attended a Christian affiliated institution of higher education located in the Mid-West. Each student described their experiences and shared their perspectives on being a gay male, being raised Christian, coming out, attending a Christian university, and spirituality. This approach allowed me to examine and understand how gay males make sense and understand their spirituality in the framework of being gay. From an analysis of the transcripts, five superordinate themes emerged: (1) Christian identity development, (2) questioning Christian theology, (3) gay male identity development, (4) empowerment and (5) awakening. The table below contains the five themes are discussed, in turn.

Study Participants

Primary data for this study was collected via four interviews with undergraduate gay males. Four undergraduate gay males (Robert, Sean, Chase, and George) participated in this study. Robert was born in rural Appalachia and raised in the Pentecostal church. He openly identified as a gay male his junior year. Robert identified with the Christian faith, but had reservation about his Christian identity. Sean was raised in large urban city in the upper Mid-West. He was a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Sean identified as an openly gay male in high school. Sean identified early with the Christian faith, but continued to question his Christian faith. Chase was born in the suburbs around a major capital city in the Mid-West and raised in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Chase identified as an openly gay male in high school. Chase grew up being in the Christian faith, but disassociated with any structured religious actions or doctrine. George was born in the suburbs around a major capital city in the Mid-West and raised in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. George
believed in God, but not in structured religious actions or doctrine.

**THEMES**

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<tr>
<th>Figure 4.1 Themes</th>
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<td><strong>Empowerment: Finding Self, Coming Out, and Living as a Gay Male</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Awakening: A Journey Towards Spirituality</strong></td>
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<td>• Exposure: University experience impact on Christian identity and spiritual development</td>
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<td>• Questioning Christian identity within the search for meaning</td>
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**Theme #1: Christian Identity Development**

**Participation**

The four participants were raised in Christian families (one Pentecostal and three Lutheran). Regardless of their individual family dynamics and Christian belief systems, Christianity played an important role in their development. Each participant was baptized and confirmed in their respective churches. Early church memories included attendance at Sunday
school and church, learning about right and wrong from Biblical stories, and interactions with church members. While participation in church fluctuated from one family to another, most participants attended services each Sunday on regular basis. Particularly interesting was the time participants dedicated to worship varied. The dedicated time appeared to be greater with the Pentecostal participant as compared with Protestant participants. Robert, the Pentecostal participant, spent significant time in worship. For Robert time spent in worship related closely to his connection with God and the church community. Robert’s time spent at worship and in church activities illustrated to his parents’ his commitment to God and support of their belief system. Robert found himself deeply intertwined in the church. Robert described his commitment to church:

I’ve for as long as I can remember. I’ve always been in the church um…Sunday’s morning, Sunday’s evening, and then (pause) either Wednesday depending on which pastor. Um then there are always revivals which were weeklong things. That was like every single night of the week whether it was a special evangelist or guest speaker or something at our church.

Church participation reinforced his link with his religion and his parents. Similar to Robert, each participant related time in church as an opportunity to connect with God and their faith. Sean attended the same church as his great grandmother, a first generation immigrant to the United States. He attended Sunday school, sermons, and special events. Chase, similar to Sean, attended Sunday school, sermons, and special events. However, attendance at youth retreats, cooking for the homeless, and repairing homes impacted Chase’s religious beliefs than attendance at traditional services. Chase related participants in those activities were “really beneficial” to his religious life. Participation impacted the participants tie to their religion.
Influencers

Relationships with family, friends, and church community members influenced participants’ Christian identity development. Pastors, Sunday school teachers, and friends impacted participants view on religion. Pastors provided sermons relating God’s word. Sunday school distilled the Biblical teachings into simple lessons for participants. Apart from church members and friends, participants indicated their family influenced Christian identity development at a greater degree. Although four participants broadly identified family as a greater influence, participants specifically reported parents as the number one influencer on their Christian identity development. Parents utilized various approaches to raise and educate their children in Christianity. Biblical stories served as one method to teach Christianity. At an early age, George and Robert remembered parents reading stories from the Bible. Through sharing stories, parents created a strong connection between their children, themselves, and Christianity. Biblical stories provided participants a connection to people, times, and established religious teachings. From these stories, participants learned right from wrong and how to live their lives. George explained:

Well, I guess, I mean my parents lay all the foundation, the groundwork, the general Christian story, the, I mean their like the biggest [inaudible 00:37:13] influencer, you know. So like, like all the Christian stories, all the, the (pause) just the biggest chunk of Christianity that is like from the book is like where I’ve (pause) like I got from them.

Similar to George, Robert, early in the interview, described his parents influence on his religious upbringing, “I’ve grown up my entire life with (pause) with my parents and with my community which formed around religion.”
As George and Robert illustrated their parent’s impact on their Christian identity development, Sean also experienced parental influence. Sean’s parents expected him to attend services, participate in church activities and live as a Christian. A strong connection included a strong family religious lineage. His great-great-grandparents arrived from Germany and planted roots in the state and Lutheran church. Generations continued to attend the same church. His engagement in church activities, baptism and confirmation, and Lutheran religion connected his relationship with his parents. Sean understood his engagement in church contributed to his relationship with his parents. With such a strong connection, Sean continued to attend church and believe in Christianity. As he discussed his religious upbringing in relation to his parents, Sean stated, “I just kinda want to please my parents.” Naturally, a child wanted to please their parents. Through the Biblical stories, sermons, and church activities, participants learned obedience to their parents. Pleasing his parents related to Christian theology. Without the Biblical stories, Christian teachings, and connection to a church community, Sean’s notion of pleasing his parents may have changed. As Sean reflected, it appeared that he chose to attend and participant in church activities based on his parents influence. At an early age participants understood the deep connection with their parents and their religious beliefs. Hence, the ideals, being Christian and pleasing parents, was consistent throughout the participants’ stories. It was the very fact that participants, although questioning their religious beliefs, continued to practice Christianity, in part, to seek approval from their parents. Here, then, was a symbol of parental both influence and one basic tenant of Christian theology—obey thy parents. George and Sean illustrated the strong interaction between parents and child and their impact on a child’s religious development.

**Church Interconnected With Life**
Although, the four participants grew up in a different family, social setting, and community, the participants described Christian theology or religion in a similar nature. The four participants described Christian theology as an institution based on Biblical scripture. Scripture revealed God’s word to people throughout the world. God’s word laid the foundation for a common set of values and direction for God’s followers—Christians. The physical building, the church, brought people together in a community to worship God. Sean described the church as what “brings people together and um (pause) kinda puts them towards a common goal or a common a common worship.” The physical church brought people from various backgrounds together for one common cause to worship God. The church served not only as a physical space to gather, but also a place for fellowship, community, and learning. Through various activities vacation Bible school, volunteering in a food bank, ball games, youth groups, retreats, and suppers, participants became involved in the church. Friendships developed with other children. These activities created a community for the four participants. The church was the first community outside of their families or neighborhood.

A sense of community provided additional opportunities for participants to learn and grow within the safety of the church. Participation in the church community served as positive influence on participants. George and Chase described their involvement in youth groups and camps. The youth group was a “big thing” for George. Youth groups and camps connected them to others their age in the church. The connection to peers provided a sense of community for George and Chase. George viewed the church as “like pretty much my entire life.” Chase described his involvement in the youth group as “really awesome” and connected with other youth who were “figuring out who they were, that, and they were all going through various similar problems as me.” The connection with other youth provided an additional community
for participants to learn, grow, and experience their life with others. Whether participants were involved in youth retreats, choir, bands, serving at food pantries, or attending Sunday services, participants reiterated the importance of community.

Community continued to be an important theme for participants. For Robert, participation in church went beyond attending services, youth group programs, and serving food pantries. The church community played a significant role in Robert’s development. The interconnectedness between Robert’s family and church was stronger than other participants. Robert’s parents served in multiple roles, lay minister, Sunday school teacher, treasurer, and secretary of the church. Robert expressed his relationship with the church: “So, it’s always. Um, our family has always been in not in just the church, but we have and in my opinion carried, my family carried my church when other people couldn’t.” The relationships Robert developed in the church reinforced his ideas about religion. Dedication, sacrifice, and ownership for the church intimately linked with his family’s identity. Robert used the term “carried” to symbolize both the strong, positive connection to the church and the burden that the church placed upon his family. For generations, from his great grandparents to his parents, the church depended on their family to keep the church operating. Without his family’s commitment to carry the church, the church might not exist. While being engaged and carrying the church was a positive for Robert, carrying the church also presented a burden for his family. During his childhood, the church was his life and therefore, he had little interaction with children outside of the church. He described the interconnectedness between the family and church as strong. His use of the term “carried” illustrated both the positive experience with the church and his yearning to be outside of the church. Robert’s experience illustrated the link between family and church community.

Connecting back to the church provided an identity for Robert and supported his Christian faith.
The family and church community served as influences for the participants. Each participant noted the positive influence of their families and the church on their Christian identity development. Similar to parental influence in learning what was wrong and what was right, participants relied on their family to gain understanding of their Christian identity. Without the interconnectedness and influence from family and the church, each participant’s Christian identity would be shaped differently.

**Theme #2: Questioning Christian Theology**

**Christian theology as an institution**

An unexpected finding was that even though family members had strong Christian beliefs and raised their children (participants) with these strong beliefs, each participant questioned Christian theology. Participants described Christian theology as an institution. The institution provided proper guidance and understanding of Biblical text. Without Biblical text and clergy to interpret the text, Christian people are often not able to live the word of God. Participants viewed Christian theology as an institution established by man. Individual men wrote the several years, decades, and centuries after the death of Jesus. Robert described religion as:

an institution that has been created and set-up by man and is sometimes mistaken for what is supposed to be an institution of faith or an institution of um some sorta defined holiness. When in my opinion it’s just something like a list of rules has been built up over time by people.

As with any institution, policies, rules, or regulations ensured the institution’s existence. Similar to other participants, for Chase the institutional structure represented “not just the structure of the building”, but the rules and traditions of Christian theology or what he defined as “structural faith”. In this context, Robert, Sean, Chase, and George presented the Christian
institution in a physical form—the church. The physical church symbolized God’s community on Earth. The church served as a space for worshippers to gather in a common space. Together, worshippers filled the church while being led by a clergy member. Clergy, traditionally men, distributed God’s word through weekly sermons. These weekly sermons contained stories that illustrated rules. Rules directed the everyday lives of Christians. For Robert particular rules were common sense “like don’t kill, don’t lie”. Similar to Robert, George illustrated the ideas of rules and the role of the physical church, “you know you follow all the rules because you don't want to break the rules. Like that's the main reason that you’re in church.” George noted that the church created and enforced the rules. Written Christian theology in conjunction with man’s delivering of the theology created a mechanism to establish rules for Christians. Participants believed the church’s role shifted from one of an uplifting, positive, community to a negative enforcer of certain rules delivered by man.

**Christian socialization**

Although, participants viewed particular rules as common sense, most questioned their upbringing based on strict interpretation of the rules. Participants viewed Christian theology as a set of rules predicated on man’s interpretation of Biblical text and the Old Testament. Biblical text was restrictive, mostly irrelevant, and countered God’s word and love for His people. These rules included “like having certain days as a day of reverence or having certain certain things who [people] can and cannot do” (Robert). After a period of time, the four participants indicated that these rules became engrained in the psyche. Participants, at an early age, rarely questioned the meaning given to the rules. The rules provided a systematic method to control Christian behavior establishing right and wrong.

Throughout their childhood development, Christian theology impacted each participant’s
lives. The rules guided parents to ensure their child learned and lived a Christian life. Christian theology required children to respect others, not steal or cause harm to others, to love God, and obey their parents. Church and Sunday school reiterated these rules through stories and lessons. With multiple people influencing their views, participants viewed rules as absolute truths. Robert grew up with his “parents saying things like to doubt is to be a weak Christian and to question things is sinful.” It appeared that to doubt or to question religious things functioned as a means to suppress any other belief system. Secondly, a Christian never doubts God’s written word, only a weak Christian questioned Christian theology. Questioning Christian theology led to sin and sin led to damnation. There was no questioning Christian theology, to do so one might find themselves, as Sean stated, “going to hell.” The thought of hell impacted the four participants. George related that hell was “something that scared me and made me follow my um, my the rules my, um, parents wanted me to.” While Sean noted that religion was supposed to make him feel good, but instead the church told him that “your wrong and tells you that um you’re going to hell. It’s very disconcerting.” For these participants, hell was real and the concept of hell deterred them from disobeying Christian theology.

For Christian fundamentalists, God’s word was literal and without question. George and Robert questioned the Christian fundamentalist view. George stated, “if we have like all these 100 million rules and different [rules] we would have to sacrifice lambs all the time to make up for all of our sins and all this and that.” Central to George’s account was the significance of literal Christian theology. The relationship between sacrificing lambs and sins expressed George’s questioning of literal Biblical interpretation. Robert questioned the literal interpretation of Biblical text, “I hate religious views where there are rules where there are things like a man can’t lay with a man in the Old Testament right next to you can cut hair or eat
lobster.” The quote illustrated Robert’s struggle to understand Biblical text in today’s world. His quote indicated the dichotomy between living in today’s world and what Christian theological rules to follow. Robert introduced the notion that Christians chose certain scriptures to enforce societal norms. Today, society accepted the notion that one can cut their hair and eat lobster, even in the Pentecostal church where Robert was raised. Yet, a vast majority of Christian churches dictated that a man cannot lay with a man—living as a gay male. Through the use of these two examples, Robert, similar to other participants described Biblical scripture as archaic and must be understood during a particular time period. Using one aspect of scripture to label gay males as sinful and then, the endorsement to eat lobster or cut one’s hair exemplified how Christian people pick and choose what to believe. Reading from these perspectives, participants questioned the true underpinnings of Christian theology. George and Robert not only considered the influence of Christian theological rules on worshippers, but demonstrated that Biblical text is open for interpretation based on individual beliefs.

**Contradictions to God’s Word**

While the four participants expressed concern with the church as an institution, Biblical text, and man’s interpretation of the Bible, another concern for these participants was Christianity as business based on materialism. Participants described how the church and church leaders used tithing and offerings. The church no longer represented a space that valued God’s word. Instead, Christian theology became nothing more than a sanctuary for man to seek refuge as they falsely proselytize to others seeking God’s undivided love. Christian theology became an institution that man used selfishly to rise up in the world. God’s word became that of man and as such was used to harm others. For Sean, the church was not only an institution based on “past precedents” but also an “organization that kinda [was] run on more of the
business side as opposed to the spiritual side.” Sean reflected back on his experience attending church, making offering, and seeing the physical icons within the church. His church included golden crosses, large pulpit, and large stained glass windows. As a business the church collected funds to not only operate, but also purchase icons that represented God. Through actions as business, Sean felt the spiritual side became second to church operation. The idea that a church focused more on operations than cultivating people’s spirituality was expressed by the other participants.

Chase referred to Christian theology as a “structure” “used for many personal, selfish reasons, um that don’t necessarily fulfill the word of God’ and used to treat “people in really horrible ways.” Christians used the church structure to suppress and treat people in horrible ways which conflicted with the God’s true intent to help all people. The church as an institution minimized the role of the church in helping people. To these participants, the church institution hindered their ability to engage in the Christian faith.

While participants viewed the church as an institution and business, they also viewed Christian theology as contradictory to God’s teachings. The church created a façade to suppress views other than those in the Bible. The façade created an environment that contradicted God’s charge for Christians to serve others. Christian theology revealed itself in the form of a physical church. Physical church aspects included oversized cathedrals, churches, massive alters, gold, and jeweled relics. Participants struggled to understand why the church used such physical relics to fulfill God’s word. Church relics established the church’s ultimate authority on absolute truth and power. Funds spent on relics created fewer assets available for projects that fulfilled God’s mission. God’s charge to Christians included providing food, clothing, water, shelter, and medicine to those less fortunate. With funds spent on relics, participants questioned whether the
church accepted and believed in God’s mission. Participants experienced anger and hostility towards the purchase of relics. Why build grand, earthly, churches? Was there a need for gold leaf paintings, large cathedrals, and physical relics to God? All of these relics epitomized the participants’ negative view of the church and their struggle to understand the relics’ connection to fulfilling God’s mission. Robert explained:

seeing that like a lot of times these things [hunger, homelessness] could be fixed if we stopped building big cathedrals and we stop building giant crosses in the middle of campuses (points to the cross on campus) and we stop building giant shiny orthodox symbols with gold leafing on every square inch. Whereas, we could feed children or we could help research for diseases, but instead we are building monuments that are to go to this God that said don’t put your faith in worldly objects.

In this context, Robert found the church’s relationship with God appeared in opposition to God’s charge to Christians. He spoke of scripture that instructed Christians to not build idols and icons to God. As he related earlier, Robert recognized that some Christians practiced opposite to Biblical teachings. Funds spent on relics and idols simply had not served God’s mission. Instead, of spending tithes and offering on relics, churches needed to allocate funds to the poor, children, and research to provide a better life for God’s children. He spoke of scripture that instructed Christians to not build idols and icons to God. Similar to Robert’s views, Chase questioned, “why do we spend millions of dollars on, you know, all these structures to prac-,
practice, um, religion? Um, when the religion is out there. Like, it’s not just confined to the structure of the building.” In this context, Chase found that his relationship with the religion appeared to be outside of the church. The church structure negatively impacted his view of
religion. Church structure confined worshippers. To learn God’s word, people needed to attend church. The church served as the holder of truth. Yet, outside the church people struggled to eat, cloth, and shelter themselves. The church structure merely contained Christians from performing God’s work. Chase communicated a sense of openness with religion versus the containment of religion into a structure.

Reviewing and interpreting the participants’ data, one concluded their ideas on Christianity changed over their development. Throughout their interviews, participant’s ideas about the church reflected their strong notion that the church was no longer a provider for the greater good of the people. At first, the participants learned about the church from their parents with a position message. As participants started to understand the Bible, their belief in the Biblical text as written by man shifted. Participants struggled with two the dichotomies, living and believing God’s word of passion, acceptance, and helping the less fortunate in contrast to man’s building of grand relics to represent God. For participants, the church no longer represented God’s word. Church became an empty building and space with icons that served only man. The church no longer served their spiritual growth. Church, which was traditionally viewed as providing spiritual growth for all of God’s people, became empty, oppressive, and materialistic spaces represented by man’s interpretation of God’s word.

**Theme #3: Gay Male Identity Development**

Another aspect of participants’ development was their gay male identity. Gay male identity formed at an early age. Whether participants fully recognized or openly identified with their gay identity, they experienced feelings for other males. The four participants contained these feelings at an early age. Although, participants experienced gay identity feelings at a young age, they lacked the cognition to identify their feelings as gay. Participants realized and
internally identified their sexual orientation between middle school and high school. Each participant unanimously described feelings of being different than their heterosexual peers. Within their accounts these feelings of different were overall negative. Negative feelings appeared to emerge from the realization that they were different from their heterosexual peers, lack of self-confidence to express their feelings to others including their parents, and internally struggled to figure out what to do with these feelings. For the most part, early interactions with pastors, parents, individuals, and society impeded their gay identity development. All participants related that Christianity impeded their gay identity development. If participants identified as gay, which was sinful, and sinful people were condemned, then participants were not going to explore their gay identity.

**Early Gay Male Identity Development Subjugated by Christian Theology**

At an early age, participants described feelings for their same sex peers. Their emotional reaction to these feelings included curiosity and questioning. The participants experienced a sense of curiosity. The four participants hid these feelings and questioned how to openly express their curiosities to others including their parents. Three of the four participants attempted to place value on these feelings. Yet, their Christian beliefs prohibited them from exploring their gay identity. Participants relied on their Christian faith to shape their exploration. Participants concluded their feelings existed as a test from God. Biblical teachings reinforced their same sex feelings as wrong, sinful, and shameful. The Bible contained absolute truth and if being gay equaled a sin, then sin lead to hell. Under church pressure and Christian theology, what was a young child to think about their feelings towards their same sexed peers? Robert learned about the ramifications for his gay feelings during a church sermon. Robert reflected on his first experience with knowing what his internal feelings were. Sitting under the pew and playing with
toys, Robert remembered the pastor telling a story about being gay.

I especially remember him breaking down what being gay was. And I remember him saying if a man loves another man or if a woman loves another woman and just hearing him talk about how it’s sinful and how you’re automatically going to hell and that just scared me. So, I remember going home … And I just remember balling my eyes out and going into my parent’s room. And just like I was unconsolable (inconsolable) and my mom asked me like oh what’s wrong and I was like I’m going to hell and she was like no you’re not no you’re not and I was—no I am. I am bad and like she was like what do you mean bad. And I was. I couldn’t tell her I couldn’t come to her cause I knew if the preachers said it, it must be true. So, I didn’t want her to know I was so scared of going to hell (long pause). So, having this image of myself burning forever just because there was something that I couldn’t control, cause I always knew that I liked boys but (pause) I’d didn’t understand why it was so bad.

Robert illustrated the internal struggle between his true identity as a gay male with that of a Christian background and parents. The sermon frightened him to the extent that he could not share with his mother. This extract described the ways in which Robert understood the ramifications for being gay. Being gay was bad and therefore, he was bad. As a young child Robert struggled to understand why it was bad to have these feelings. He was not able to control these feelings. Yet, Robert was going to hell for these feels he could not control and this scared him as a young child. The crying signified to his mother that something was wrong. Naturally, his mother responded and attempted to reassure him that he was not going to hell. As she comforted him, Robert’s crying, in one instance, allowed him to establish openly his fear about
being gay and going to hell. In another instance, his crying permitted him, ever so slightly, to connect with his mother and be reassured, although vaguely, that he was not going to hell. Being gay was sinful and as such Robert’s feeling guaranteed hell in the afterlife.

Given the influence of Christian theology and participation in church, Sean’s pastor taught that “you’re going to hell and I think it’s very disconcerting that someone’s foundation is telling them that.” For Sean, the experience suppressed his continued exploration of gay identity until late in high school. Stories of going to hell shattered the participant’s exploration of their gay identity, which was one foundation of their life. All children were taught that sins related to living in hell. Hell was a place where participants knew they would experience pain and suffering—burning in fire for eternity. Participants refused to act on their gay feelings. Being gay assured participants a place in hell. Robert and Sean’s emotional experience summarized that of three participants (Sean, Robert, and Chase). These three participants broke down, cried, and could not explain why they were crying or why they were going to hell. Christian theology taught that gay was sinful and their parents were a part of the same faith. Participants believed that their parents would not love them or condemn them to hell.

Pastors impeded the participants’ gay male identity development as well as parents. Parents had a significant impact on each participant’s gay identity development. At an early age, participants learned from their parents that being a gay was not acceptable. Anyone who identified as gay was a flawed, unnatural, sinful person. Robert explained, “I’ve always been taught like that being gay is wrong, being gay is a sin.” And for the participants’ parents, their children could not be gay. Parents ensured that children learned being gay was wrong. Robert, Sean, and George explained their parents used negative terminology towards gay or perceived gay males. As noted earlier, parents developed this idea about gay males from Christian
theology. Christian theology taught that gay equated to sin. It appeared that being gay, in the
eyes of parents, was negative. For George, his mother “would say like really negative things
towards gay people all throughout my childhood.” Her words established the expected behavior
for George’s life as a heterosexual.

When participants asked their parents about gay people or being gay, their response was
twofold—we love you and you’re not. While participants received a negative response from
parents, the response was in the context of love. It was in this context love and the negative
response that four participants became confused, lost, and withdrawn. If parents thought it was
wrong, then these feelings must be wrong. In the following excerpt, George illustrated the two
dichotomies love and negative reaction to being gay. George reflected on a discussion with his
mom as a child:

I remember literally asking her once as she was leaving the room after like
tucking me in and I was like younger. I was like, “Mom, what if I was gay?”
And she said, “Well, that would be really horrible, but we'd still love you.” So it
was like okay. Like I knew that they would always love me, but it was like I
don’t want my parents thinking that something is horrible, you know. And that's
always like stuck with me. Um, but so it was that negative reaction towards my
parents that just kind of like sealed me up and like, I was like this is how everyone
is going to probably react.

George searched for affirmation, support, and love for being gay. Instead, his mother’s
answer confused and frustrated him. Her response left him questioning not only his feelings, but
also his ability to live openly as a gay male and be loved. The extract above illustrated two
Christian theological underpinnings, simultaneously the responsibility on one hand to love a
child no matter what and to educate children on sinful living. If George was questioning being gay, was he horrible?

For any child, the term horrible related to being wrong, terrible, inferior, and broken. Rather than confirming her undivided love for every aspect of George, she reinforced the identification of gay as horrible. George’s use of the word “sealed” illustrated his perception that being gay was not acceptable and it was better to hide his sexuality inside. Gay identity was unacceptable to the point that any child needed to hide their questions or identity. Family members served as a source of pain for participants coming out. Instead of providing support and helping participants explore this sexuality, parents’ actions caused participants to withdraw, shutdown, turn inward, and explore their sexuality in secrecy.

The four participants attempted to heal themselves of these unnatural feelings. If gay feelings and emotions were a disease, wrong, and sinful, then like most diseases, there was a cure. The cure for participants was turning towards God. The belief in God as a powerful, loving, healing, and all knowing entity created a belief that God healed the sick and forgave the sins. Participants unknowingly created a paradox between the God that condemned them, according to their pastor, parents, and scripture, and to a God that loved them and could heal them of their disease. After all, participants wanted to live normal lives without the burden of these feelings. Although, participants internally identified as gay, they still sought healing from God. Robert illustrated the reaching out to God for healing. Robert wanted to “pray the gay away.” By praying away the gay participants became “normal” (Sean) and could “marry a woman” (Chase). This thinking led participants to focus on healing themselves and thereby, living a heterosexual life.

Hiding Gay Male Identity: Living a Heterosexual Life
Perhaps not surprisingly, given the connectedness of most participants to the church, family and friends, the negative perceptions of gay males, and internalized homophobia, participants tended to live as a heterosexual. Initially, the four participants attempted to explore their gay male identity. Participants discussed how passing and covering as heterosexuals while also setting up personal roadblocks limited their efforts to openly identify as gay. These internal roadblocks prohibited participants from expressing their gay identity. External influences such as parents, family members, friends, pastors, society, and Christian theology mitigated their gay identity exploration. A heterosexual life included a female wife. Given these external influences, participants said they felt confused, uncomfortable, and fearful to openly identify as a gay male.

Given these feelings of oppression, it was not surprising that the four participants attempted to continue to live as a heterosexual. Participants assumed that living as a heterosexual protected them from judgment and helped them to live a more fulfilling life. People assumed that each participant was born heterosexual and therefore, there was little questioning their sexuality. Participants focused on their heterosexual image as a means to live a normal life and not be exposed to ridicule. While living a heterosexual life was a means to a normal life, it seemed to elicit frustration or the sense of being overwhelmed. Participants struggled to hide their gay identity. For participants, the reoccurring internalized struggle between living on the outside as a heterosexual and on the inside as a gay male, created a continuous struggle to understand and feel comfortable with their sexuality. The resulting conflict and dissonance, in terms of identity, was experienced as both difficult and painful. Robert described his difficulties in hiding and balancing two identities. As he recounted his two identities, he referenced using his Christian faith to pray for gay and lesbian people.
I don’t wanna say like I had two different mindsets, but I did like I did have two different mindsets. I had the mindset that I let everyone else know that (pause). I built up like this façade of what I made sure everyone knew. What my opinions, views were those things (long pause) I was like I might not have to tell anyone who I am right now and I might not have to overcome this, this, this, gay part of me. I might have to keep telling people oh yeah I’m straight.

Robert presented two different mindsets, one to the public, heterosexual and an internal one, living as a gay male. He spent significant energy on presenting his opinions on the gay lifestyle. By making his anti-gay views known to others, he attempted to establish a stronger external heterosexual identity. The heterosexual façade served Robert throughout most of his life. The façade allowed Robert to live as a heterosexual while exploring his gay identity internally.

Robert’s use of the term façade summarized each of the participants’ ideas about hiding their gay identity and living as a heterosexual. The façade, at times, caused participants to shy away from talking to gay peers or engaging in gay activities such as a school gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender club, Pride events, or discussing gay topics. Participants felt a strong need to suppress and overcome their gay feelings that might out them to others. Chase experienced a similar struggle with his two identities, “so then I decided to do probably the worst thing I’ve ever done in my life (pause). I decided to um, um, um, overcome my gayness, th-, but, like, try and make myself straight.” Chase’s extract illustrated his struggle to suppress his gay identity. The term overcome implied it was a struggle that must be surmounted to live as a heterosexual. Their gay identity was something to “overcome.” It was interesting to note that both decided not only to hide their gay identity, but also attempt to overcome their gay identity.
Christian theology viewed homosexuality as a sin. Given this negative view, participants continued to question their gay identity. Questioning was grounded in their early development within the church. The participants described feeling different as being central to their understanding of being gay. Participants described feeling different as negative, wrong, and unaccepted. Negative identification appeared to emerge from recognition that being gay and living in the Christian faith was not synonymous. Participants failed to reconcile their gay identity and Christian faith. Internally participants struggled regarding their feelings towards other gay males. If participants recognized their gay identity externally, they surely cemented the negative judgment from others and cemented their afterlife in hell. Two questions arose out of the participants’ stories regarding being born gay. If God created me in his image and I am gay, does that mean God was wrong? Am I defective? Although each participant questioned their gay identity and the link to God, there was considerable attention given to this idea of being born wrong and being a child of God. Sean described his struggle with being born in God’s image, but questioning his gay identity.

If I’m gay does that mean that I’m that wrong? Does that mean that I did something wrong? That I was that I’ve been exposed to something wrong? Or um..am I not really gay? Am I suppose to change that? Is it just kinda like a phase? (pause) Um..and what am I supposed to do about that? And then, things like um (pause) kinda of me getting angry at religion and then not understanding why if God made me then., why um then why he make me like this if it was wrong?

Throughout his statement, Sean’s voice level increased and he appeared to be angry with God. Why would this entity make him and then, tell him that he was wrong for being gay? As
Sean questioned his gay identity, he searched for an answer to being gay. Surely, God had not made him in his image only to condemn him to an eternal life in hell.

As Sean tried to explain his gay identity, his questioning moved to an external force that made him gay. What was he exposed to something wrong? Sean used the term “wrong” to describe why he was possibly gay. As with several aspects of Christian theology, Sean was taught since childhood that being gay was sinful and wrong. Being gay led to a life in hell and only people who commit sins or act in a wrongful manner were in hell. It appeared that Sean equated to being gay and wrong and therefore, in order to be gay Sean had to do something wrong. Choosing the term “exposed”, as it related to an external environmental, explained another possibility as to why he was gay. Being exposed to a chemical or drug caused him to be gay. From this perspective Sean illustrated his struggle with God making him gay and at the same time making him wrong. Opposite to his being exposed to something and therefore, gay, he realized that maybe God made him gay and therefore he was loved. It appeared that Sean continued to struggle with this idea of being gay and God accepting him.

While preachers, parents, and society taught Sean it was wrong to be gay, Robert questioned being created by a God and being gay. He described his conflict with pastors, parents, and individuals in society with the notion of being born in God’s image as: “I am gonna create you in my image but then I am also going to make it where you’re a sin.” This extract described the ways in which being gay and Christian can be understood within a theological context. Given that Robert experienced gay feelings as a child, two Christian tenants conflicted for him—being born in God’s image (gay) and being was a sign. Robert used the terms create, image, and sin were very telling about his thoughts. He used Christian theology to question the true idea that being gay was wrong, sinful, and God would not make such a person. If God
created Robert in his image, then why would God disapprove of him or consider his gay identity a sin? In Robert’s case, God made him and therefore, God made every aspect of him. For the four participants, this notion of being created in God’s image and then, a sin, was linked back to the notion that man wrote and interpreted God’s word. Therefore, God was not passing judgment on the participants. Instead, it was man’s interpretation of Biblical text that created the notion that being gay was sinful.

Attempting to overcome their gay identity, participants suppressed their gay identity and attempted to live as a true heterosexual. Throughout the process of developing a heterosexual life participants, like George “played the role of a straight kid”. Each of the four participants implicated self as creator of their artificial heterosexual life. A lack of support networks and negative influence created the necessary conditions for participants to suppress their gay identity. Participants created an internalized gay male identity to create self-support. However, passing and covering under a heterosexual life negated true authenticity with self and others. Therefore, participants elected to conceal their gay identity, albeit with reluctance, to live as a heterosexual.

**Judging others to protect self and ensure heterosexual life**

Participants employed various methods to live as a heterosexual. These methods included participating in church and sporting activities, connecting with heterosexual males, dating females, and denying their gay identity. For the participants, each of these methods, in their minds, caused little harm to others. Most participants internally identified with gay and lesbian individuals. However, participants refused to openly identify with gay and lesbian individuals. Doing so caused alarm and potentially the breakdown of heterosexual identity. For participants, they decided, either as an individual or through external pressure, to minimize their risk of being outed by disassociating with openly gay peers. This sense of distance became
normalized and in return caused emotional distress for several peers and participants.

In order to hide their gay identity and live a heterosexual life, Robert, Chase, and George expressed their internal homophobia outwardly. In particular, participants in this study indicated that they turned their backs, lashed out, accused other of being gay, and vocally condemned an individual’s gay identity. For three participants (Robert, George, and Chase), the use of verbal language was the mechanism chosen to call others out and protect their gay identity. By using words, participants knew there would be an instant reaction from the individual and those around them. In this sense, the participants created a distraction to hide their identity at the cost of another individual. At times, this cost was so great that the individuals departed school. One participant, Robert, when talking with a female friend who had just come out remembered his reaction, “ahhh you poor thing you’re confused. And at that time I was still the the stereotypical Christian where I was like, where I still love you even though what you are doing is a sin.” In this extract, we see Robert hiding his internal feelings from his friend. Instead of being supportive, Robert condemned her behavior. Robert believed it was wrong for her to be a lesbian, he still loved her. It was through his early Christian development that he learned being gay was a sin, but God still loved everyone.

Even though participants relied on their internal supportive voice, most participants lacked the ability to outwardly express their support. Unlike Robert, George related a different story on his friend’s coming out. George discussed his friends coming out in middle school and his parent’s negative reaction to his friend coming out.

At that point my parents got wind of it [friend being gay] and learned of it and I was really good friends with him. And they basically like were like, “we're taking you out of this church (pause) if you don't stop being friends with him.” And, that
was like really horrible because like my, as I said before, my entire social life was in the church so if I left the church there would be like nothing…As a result of that pressure I like went, I basically like turned my back on him and didn't talk to him and treated him really horribly and basically did (long pause) like literally did what other people, what I would hate other people to do to me.

His parents’ reaction reinforced their prior philosophy that we love you, George, but our son can’t be gay. His parents offered two choices either the church community or his good friend. Either choice appeared to cause discomfort to George. If he chose the church community, which attributed to most of his social life, then, the friendship ended. If he chose the friend, then his church community vanished and therefore, his social community. George decided to given in to his parents’ pressure and that forced him to turn away from his friend. When he used the phase “turned my back on him”, one can see a similar notion in that George turned his back on his own sexuality. Instead of supporting his friend and coming out, he turned his back on both his friend and himself. He realized that his parent’s decision was not only wrong, but hurtful to himself and his friend. The extract above illustrated the simultaneous struggle with being emotionally attached to another individual and on the other hand having that emotionally attachment severed by external pressures.

In order to conceal their gay identity, three of the four participants projected homophobic attitudes toward openly gay and lesbian individuals. Chase reflected on his experience with another peer. During middle school a peer asked him out in the middle of the lunch room. For Chase, the idea that another gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender peer would be interested in him was horrifying. In middle school, Chase was not sure how to react. He was not out and refused to identify as a gay male. Chase recounted his experience.
Leo (name change) was a cross-dresser, and that really freaked me out (pause).

Um, Leo was attracted to me and asked me out in the middle of lunch and I was really embarrassed. And I feel bad about the way I reacted to him (long pause) and I feel really bad for that because I did not let him down easy, um, like, I flew off the handle and called him a fucking drag queen faggot right there in front of everyone and I shouldn’t have done that.

One might conclude that the idea of a “cross-dresser” was more negative than another gay male asking Chase out. Throughout the interview with Chase, the idea of “cross-dressers” or “drag queens” caused a negative reaction as opposed to his reaction with other gay males. The negative visceral reaction to Leo’s proposition suggested that Chase’s Christian background played an influence. Asking Chase out in the cafeteria created a negative environment for both Chase and the other person. One might consider Chase’s reaction as a protective mechanism. The strong use of language, “fucking drag queen faggot” suggested that Chase was truly trying to hide his sexuality and increase the perception that he was a heterosexual. Upon reflection, Chase noted that he felt remorse for his reaction. However, in return, Chase appeared to be intolerant and homophobic to others. There appeared to be an internal struggle. Chase struggled to protect his heterosexual identity, protect himself from other finding out his gay identity and harming him, and remorse for his reaction to Leo. It appeared Chase internally struggled to find the right way to hide his gay identity and project his heterosexual façade.

After their negative experiences Chase, Robert, and George felt bad, a sense of shame, regret, humiliation and remorse for their actions. However, there need to disaffiliate with any perceived gay identity and to live a heterosexual life caused them to negatively react to others as their pastor and parents had to them. As participants continued to reflect on their experiences, all
wanted to contact the person they hurt to apologize and bring closer to their horrible actions. However, the opportunity had not presented itself for the participants. The participants continued to live with their decisions. Surviving as a gay male in a world that thought of them as sinful and an abomination could only be through a heterosexual life. Their negative experiences made it difficult for participants to come out to others, especially parents.

Participants provided the researcher with vital information to understand their gay identity from childhood to their current college experience. In this section, one can see the influence on early Christian teachings on the participants’ gay identity development. The influence of Christian theology caused participants to examine their gay identity with in the negative context of Christian theology. If Christian theology had not referred to gay as being a sin, then participants would have a positive connection with the church. Instead, gay males struggled to understand their natural gay identity and reconcile that identity with their religious beliefs. Identifying as heterosexual helped to protect participants from their internal self, peers, and families. While participants struggled internally to understand and accept their gay identity, the heterosexual life was strengthened through the use of judgment on others. Inherently, the participants sought any methods and outlets to ensure they were not identified as gay.

**Theme #4: Empowerment: Finding Self, Coming Out, and Living as a Gay Male**

Participants coming out experience varied based on their family and friends. At time participants described the experience as negative. Coming out was significantly intertwined with conflict, shame, struggles, internalized homophobia, Christian identity, sense of acceptance, and eventually, liberation, relief, and joy. Within the narratives, participants shared their experience in engaging in self-reflection that led to identification as a gay male. Although, each participant’s story related to their life, one observed numerous similarities. The participants
expressed the belief that by repressing their sexual orientation, they gained love and acceptance from people closets to them.

**Overcoming Negative Stereotypes**

At first participants suppressed their feelings of isolation, identity confusion, and self-hatred. It was not surprising that participants’ coming out process was lengthy over their lifetime. The internal conflict and confusion was quite significant for participants. As participants continued to find their internal identity, they struggled with their perceived notions of a stereotypical gay male. As participants continued on their journey towards gay identity development, they realized the need to come out to their communities. Identifying as a gay male was not always easy or advantageous for participants. The four participants identified the coming out process as slow, exhausting, and most of time lonely. Participants began to drift away from their parents, society, and even their own preconceived stereotypical notions of gay males. However, participants noted the lack of role models as a suppressor to their coming out. George, Robert, and Sean described gay males as “like a flame” (George), “like really flamboyant” (Robert) or feminine (Sean). For Robert, there were few gay role models and those gay males he knew were not what he wanted to become. He “wanted to stay in the closet was because I had (pause) very few influences of a gay man that wasn’t the stereotypical flamboyant queen. That wasn’t really like ah hairless, spray tanned muscular, frosted tip bleach tooth twink.” Robert’s description of a gay male illustrated the perceptions of the participants. The discussion about gay role models brought forth a sense of discrimination in the gay community. The participants viewed flamboyant and feminine gay males as negative role models. The use of phrases such as “spray tanned muscular, frosted tip bleach tooth twink” provided a glimpse at how he saw gay males. By viewing gay males in this manner, Robert confirmed to his internal
self that being openly gay was nothing more than a stereotype.

**Internal Acknowledgement**

The perception that gay males possessed feminine or flamboyant qualities turned Robert and Sean away from interacting with the gay males at their high schools or in the community. This removal of self from their peers protected their heterosexual identity. However, as participants started to explore their gay identity, they yearned to connect with similar gay males. Their perceptions created another internal struggle with their connection with others. Before participants openly identified as a gay male to others, participants needed to overcome these stereotypical perceptions of gay males and identify as a gay male to themselves. With internal acknowledgment as a gay male, participants disclosed their gay identity to others. Robert described how he felt coming out to himself:

That was the point where I was like okay I am done lying to myself! I’m done hiding this part of me! That is part of me that is part of me! It’s not just a fad It’s not just it’s not just a phase. It’s who I am (long pause). So, it was that was the point where I was done lying (deep breathe).

Unlike his other attributes, Robert hid his gay identity from himself and others. It was interesting to note how he described his outer persona as a fade and a lie. The internal struggle to accept himself and lie was constant for Robert throughout much of his life. He suppressed his gay identity for so long that he himself started to understand that he was no longer able to hide. When he decided to be “done” with hiding, he implicated himself as creator of his inner self versus allowing society to shape his internal sense of self. Clearly, Robert was “done hiding” his gay identity. It was a great awakening for Robert.

The act of coming out to oneself provided greater relief and awakening then coming out
to others. For Sean, he described his internal coming out as: “I’m always a big fan of being open with who you are. And it took me a long time to get there with myself. But when I did it was an awakening experience.” Sean describes a sense of being truthful and open with himself. He showed how being open with one’s self helped to start the conversation about how to be authentic and come out. Chase described his coming out with a simple statement, “I was like, I can’t do this, and that was the moment that I knew, like, I have to come out of the closet.” Through this internal self-disclosure, participants took the first step to identify themselves as a gay male and move towards a life as a gay male. The next step for participants and often the most difficult was sharing their new found identity with others.

After coming out to themselves, participants started on a journey to live as a gay male. Living openly as a gay male was not simultaneous with living and accepting their identity externally. Internal recognition provided participants with courage and higher self-esteem to tackle the next roadblock—being accepted by others. While participants continued to hide their gay identity from their parents, they chose to explore and make connections with gay male peers. When assessing whether to come out to close friends, participants often took a measured approach. Would friends accept and affirm their gay identity or would they walk away from their friend?

**Negative Reactions When Coming Out to Peers: Isolation and Loss**

As participants developed their gay identity in the open, they decided to share with others. Coming out to another person, in this case, peers, they acknowledged their gay identity openly. Individuals came out to close friends and peers prior to their parents. Coming out to close friends and peers caused less mental discomfort. Although close friends and most peers acknowledged their friends coming out, other peers acknowledged, but had not affirmed their
gay identity. The lack of affirmation manifested in both verbal and physical mistreatment towards participants. Verbal mistreatment included the use of the terms, faggot, fag, homo, and queer. Chase and Sean described verbal mistreatment in their stories. For them, these words provided little affirmation for them to come out. The words were just that, words, but participants experienced mixed emotions and at times, questioned whether they made the right decision to share their sexuality. Some participants withdrew inward, became angry, or went home in tears. Chase experienced varying emotions: “And like, you know, like people on the bus would always tease me (long pause). Fine. Screw you, I’m like, sometimes I would go home in tears.” Out of several examples, Chase continued to relate back to the bus experience and coming home in tears and not able to tell his parents why he was in tears. The bus served as a symbol to contain him while others teased him. Since this story is related to Chase coming out, the bus symbolized his struggle to come out to himself let alone to others. When he came out to others the response was overwhelming negative. These negative reactions caused Chase to experience negative emotional pain. We can see his pain described through the words “screw you.” Sitting in the bus, he had no option to escape. Instead, he attempted to defend himself through words. His release of the pain only came once home and able to openly cry.

Another participant, Sean experienced a similar environment when coming out in high school. However, his experience was not as vivid and detailed as Chase’s experience. Instead, Sean experienced “a lot of hostile a lot of other…guys in my school.” The hostile environment for Sean focused on straight males who felt Sean was trying to “seduce them” or to “have sex with everyone.” The idea that a gay male wanted to have sex with straight men signified to Sean the absurdity in such a notion. Why would a gay male want a straight man? In this environment, Sean experienced few verbal insults. Instead, the teasing was in the form of a stereotypical view
of gay males—all gay males wanted sex from a straight guy. Although, Sean’s experience differed from Chase, there were negative reactions for both of the participants when coming out.

**Positive Response from Peers**

Participants sought to decipher which friends and social networks supported their coming out. The majority of participants reported that their social networks (friends) knew prior to their parents. Through established social networks, participants found connections with their peers throughout high school. Participants learned to live openly with their gay identity through supportive heterosexual friends, university faculty and staff, and openly gay peers. Participants found supportive networks generated a supportive environment for participants to process their internal coming out, while seeking an approach to externally coming out and live openly as a gay male. Three of the four participants (Robert, Chase, and George) came out to individual friends while Sean came out to a group of close friends.

Chase found support in the arts, music, and theatre. Although, Chase noted the stereotypical view of males in art, music, and theatre as gay, he had not participated in these programs to hide out or seeking other gay males. Instead, art, music and theatre provided an escape and affirmation for Chase. In theatre practice, Chase received affirmation about being gay. Chase told a lead member (name deleted) “Hey, I might be gay,” and “he’s like, you know that’s OK!” The lead member went onto to say “like, it’s OK, you, know, like, you’re allowed to like me”. “But if you need to talk to me, I’m here.” Chase reflected on this message, “I was like thankful about that [telling him it was okay]. And so, like, that somehow gave me the confidence to tell every single, like, one of my classmates in a week...”. It’s interesting for Chase to choose the word “allowed” to reflect on this experience. The use of the term “allowed” appeared to reaffirm Chase’s link to Christian theology and the role of his parents in regulating
his gay identity. As his sense of identity broke from his traditional view on his gay identity, he realized that permission to be a gay male was not necessary. Instead, a fellow gay male provided the support for him to come out and affirm his internal thinking. Thus, Chase acknowledged his loss of a sinful, shunned, and wrong self. A strong, open, and empowered gay male came forward.

Similar to Chase, George came out to a close friend prior to his parents and others. The difference between Chase and George was the time period as to which it occurred. Chase came out in high school while George in college. George decided to come out to his roommate. One night after socializing at the bar, George and his roommate returned to their room. Prior to telling his roommate George felt nervous, but with the assistance of alcohol George came out to his roommate. When George came out to this roommate, his roommate came out as bisexual. George noted, “I was like. Well that's ridiculous because I’m gay.” He described his first coming out “like a dam breaking or like a whole different perspective.” Similar to water rushing after a dam breaking, George’s first coming out provided the affirmation for him to come out to others. The simple act of impulsivity provided the confidence to come out to others and live life as a gay male. Unlike Chase and George, Sean came out to a group of friends. “I kinda of came out to some of my friends (pause) Um but not really really not a lot of them just a few on them at first” (Sean). His coming out to friends led to him coming out to other friends and then, eventually not hiding his gay male identity. Sean’s friend supported him throughout high school even in times of hostility. It was through their friends’ affirmation that participants started to live as gay males.

**Difficulty in Coming Out to Parents**

Most participants said their parents formulated an idea or knew of their gay identity prior
to telling them. Unlike the apparent acceptance of their friends, participants became concerned about coming out to their family, especially parents. The act of coming out was made difficult knowing their parent’s believed in Christian theology, previously established behavioral standards (gay equaled sinful and wrong), and the fear of being rejected, disowned, and alone in a world that may not accept them. In some way, these fears were supported by their parent’s beliefs and actions towards gay males in their communities. Regardless of whether coming out directly or indirectly to parents, participants reported their parents’ view on gay identity varies and changed overtime.

Participants frequently reported their parent’s reactions as puzzled, shock, distress, and refusal to discuss the issue. While neutral reactions included the search for more meaning to understanding their child’s new gay identity. For some participants, the experience was positive and affirming. While other participants received it’s not right, but I love you acceptance.

Robert described his coming at process.

I was expecting you are no longer my son. I don’t love you like that type of thing, but I was received with the I will always love you, BUT. In so the BUT is what I want to take care of and the other statement that my mother made that night was um (pause). She asked me if I was going to tell my dad. And I said, I don’t know yet and she goes well you probably shouldn’t because it’s probably the worst thing that could happen and I remember (long pause) not even blinking and saying I could have killed myself that probably would have been worse and having her sit there silent and not knowing how to react to that (long pause).

As Robert approached the conversation, he pre-established a negative reaction from his mother. He expected her to disown him. In part, his thought process comes from his previous
experience with the Pentecostal church. It was interesting to note that implicit in his account of coming out to his mother was fear and rejection. Instead, his mother found a way to acknowledge that she loved him, but had reservations about accepting his gay male identity. His mother’s reaction relieved him. Instead of following her religious teachings, she turned away from those and her responsibility of a mother and her love for her son overcame the Pentecostal teachings. However, when she asked about telling his father, she created a difficult situation for Robert. Robert wanted to share his life with his family. His mother’s question about telling his father appeared to be a hint to Robert about how his father might feel. Was she trying to protect him from his father? For her, Robert’s coming out to his father was the “worst thing.” His father served as a lay minister, church treasurer, and as related earlier in Robert’s interview, his father partially “carried the church.” With his father’s dedication to the church, it appeared that his mother attempted to alleviate any alienation that Robert might experience. From another perspective, Robert’s mother might be sharing her disappointment with Robert’s coming out. However, Robert viewed her statement in the literal sense. To tell his father about being gay was not the “worst thing” for Robert. Instead, Robert viewed the “worst thing” as ending his life—completing suicide. Robert’s thought of suicide provide a glimpse into his struggles between living as a gay male and living as a Christian. For Robert, it was far worse to kill himself than living as a gay male. Robert illustrated the internal struggle related to being gay, hiding his sexuality, and coming out to a supportive community.

Sean supported Robert’s “I love you, but experience.” When Sean came out to his mom, in the middle of a restaurant, he noted she cried. Sean described his mother’s acceptance as “it wasn’t she wasn’t exactly excited about it, um (pause), but she’s very supportive about everything like everything to do with homosexuality now”. Although, his mother, in that
moment, struggled to find the right words, she supported him throughout his coming out process. In some way, the act of telling parents about their gay identity created the catalyst to live a new life. Although, Robert chose a traditional path to tell his mother, other participants did not have the opportunity to tell their parents or chose a different path. For George, he struggled to tell his parents. He heard throughout his life that being gay was wrong. His parents tried to “sway” him and “they thought, oh if we can just like really pressure him then he'll just be straight.” The pressure continued to influence George throughout his development. He noted the idea of being straight. For his parents, if George was gay, then there was the possibility that with pressure, he would become straight. Instead of telling his parents in person, George chose to use social media. The idea of telling his parents face to face horrified him. George was part of a student organization working on a campaign to support gay, lesbian, and bisexual peers. The campaign included members using the term it gets better. George participated in the video and placed the video on his website. The use of social media provided the mechanism for him to come out without facing his parents. His parent’s response was negative and positive. His mother was “more upset that I came out over YouTube instead of to her.” In replying to his parents, George noted that he was “kind of going back through life and discussed why I always felt like I couldn’t talk to them.” From this interaction with his parents, one can see the impact of his parents’ decision on the lack of coming out to them first. Instead, of having their child trust them with coming out, George chose an electronic means to deliver the message. In some way, the act of coming out to their parents was understood as both a liberating and defiant act. Liberating in that he was now free from his heterosexual identity. He was defiant in that he had not told the people who believed they were the closest to him. This action constituted and solidified his gay identity. Although, nothing changed physically between participants and their parents,
disclosure of their identity allowed for an internal awakening.

**Sense of Comfort with Self**

The idea that identifying as gay was wrong, sinful, or a choice was overcome as participants started to become secure in their gay identity. All four participants noted that their gay male identity was only one aspect of their whole being. By coming out and acknowledging their gay identity, participants stopped living a secret, double life. In fact, participants felt awakened, relieved, and liberated from hiding their gay identity. Through this coming out process each participant found their inner self and connected with others. Participants came to see themselves as a whole person. Gay male identity no longer shaped their life. Instead, they left an oppressive community and came to find a new community that accepted them. Sean captured a sense of participants’ transition from hiding and being defined by their gay identity to becoming empowered to live as a gay male.

We’re all born with certain unchangeable things about ourselves um, that I didn’t choose to be gay. I am willing. I am kinda wiling to live my life the way I am and not really pay much attention to (pause) kinda of what can’t change. It’s just like part of me and I’m fine with that.

Sean felt a consistency and authenticity in being born gay. Unlike his feelings as a child, he realized that being born gay was natural. It was not a choice for him. Why would someone want to experience the pressure from parents, friends, society, and internal self for a choice? Sean decided to no longer accept the notion that he was sinful, abnormal, or impure. Instead, he was empowered to live a new life.

George realized that his sexual identity was only aspect of his being. After reading an essay on God and being gay, George concluded that God loved him and showed his love through
the death of his son, Jesus. God sent Jesus to die for people’s sins and therefore, if being gay was a sin, which George did not believe, then God loved him for all of his attributes. George reflected on his experience of becoming whole, “God is okay with being gay. Just the understanding of what Jesus’ sacrifice really was because I think a lot of people are like He [Jesus] died for us, like that's so sad and that's so, like meaningful to my life.” George found the God’s sacrifice of Jesus to set him free from the notion that he was not a whole person. Jesus provided the freedom for him to live his life openly as a gay male. He turned his focus from being gay and letting everyone know about his sexuality to his sexuality only as a part of his being. As Robert discussed his gay identity, he noted that “It’s [gay identity] just another part of me.”

In this theme one can see the participants’ evolving thoughts on gay male identity in concert with their Christian identity. Throughout their lives participants experienced negative influences and reactions to their gay male identity. As they moved past their publicly coming out, participants no longer viewed their gay identity as a large part of their lives. Participants openly revealed their gay identity to friends and family members. Yet, when asked about openly identifying to others, participants expressed they felt it not necessary to disclose their identity to others. Through a process of self-reflection, guidance from others, and acceptance by peers and family, participants developed a true sense of self and authentic relationship with others while identifying openly as a gay male. Participants believed their gay identity was only one aspect of their life not separate from their race, gender, or physical appearance. They lived comfortably with their identities. Being a gay male was no longer shameful, sinful, or an aspect to hide.

**Theme #5: Awakening: A Journey Towards Spirituality**

As participants started to live comfortably with their gay male identity, they shifted to
examining their belief system. Participants questioned whether living in the Christian faith conflicted with their gay male identity and how they viewed the church. As participants entered college, there was a sense of independence from parental figures and a new freedom to explore their sexuality and Christian faith. The university offered academic courses, co-curricular activities, and study abroad programs that challenged their previously held notions of Christianity. The opportunity to explore their faith under a new lens challenged the participants’ ideas about religion, faith, and spirituality.

Exposure: University Experiences Impact Gay, Christian, and Spiritual identity

Although, the church provided positive experiences for participants, participant struggled with Christian theology and participation in church activities. Religious communities differed in their ideological teachings towards gay males from a strict Biblical interpretation to open and welcoming gay males in the community. While gay males chose to attend a religiously affiliated institution, there were significant conflicts between gay male identity and Christian theology, beliefs, and culture. For these participants, the choice of a Christian University was based on curriculum, proximity to home, and financial aid packages not the religious affiliation.

Attending the University created a sense of distance from parental guidelines and autonomy for the participants. The distance from parents created a new dynamic for participants. Participants no longer had parents supervising their daily activities. Instead, each individual was responsible for almost every aspect of their lives (e.g. waking up, making breakfast, getting to class, making a schedule, washing clothes and being a self-advocate). The new found autonomy created an environment where participants tested their Christian beliefs.

One of the first notable subthemes was the lack of attendance at church. Instead, participants controlled their attendance at church. Robert noted that he no longer had “a
parental unit saying HEY, YOU have to go to services it’s Sunday.” For George, compulsory church attendance and engagement in the church declined “probably like a 90% decrease in going to church since I came to college.” Robert and George noted that their new found autonomy, from parental influence, provided the freedom and direction to pull away for attending church or church related activities.

Exposure to various programs, services, academic classes, international travel, and diverse peers impacted the participants views on their Christianity and gay male identity. University experiences provided participants the opportunity to engage in experiences that were not offered in their home towns or high school. In multiple courses, participants studied differing views on world religions. The University required participants to complete one class in religious studies. Each participant completed the course within their first two years. The course created an environment where participants learned about religious history, traditions, customs, and analyzed religion within a historical and social perspective. The historical and social perspectives enabled participants to view Biblical text and translation in a different light. Robert’s experience in the religious course allowed him to explore the Bible and view Biblical “translation from a different point. So, um my mind was being opened to new things that like I had never studied before and I was actually discouraged from of studying when I was a child.” Being discouraged from studying different religions and perspectives reinforced parental and Christian influence over Robert. However, at the University, Robert engaged in diverse religious studies without parental influence. Through this course and related materials, Robert started to open his mind and explore the various connections between religious traditions, varying translations, and within a historical and social context regarding his gay male identity. It appeared that Robert’s experience was not possible without his attendance at the University.
Similar to Robert, the University impacted Chase’s view of religion, in particular Christianity. Under the direction of a professor, Chase noted:

“[I] studied, uh, religion… I found it to be one of the most eye-opening, um courses that I’ve taken here at University. Um, you know, we studied Islam and we studied Judaism and, um Buddhism and all these other major religions. And I started to realize a common theme between all of them, and that’s supposed to be doing good for others and not good necessarily for yourself.”

Not only did the course expose Chase to varying religious, but his realization that religions were similar provided motivation for him to examine his Christianity. Each religion was founded to do good and help others. Although, the course opened his eyes to various religions, the course and interactions with peers and professor were not enough to overcome his childhood development in relation to religion. Similar to his childhood experience, Christian theology taught conflicting messages—love thy neighbor, help them, and being gay was wrong and sinful.

Chase realized that the true intent of Christianity was to do good for others and not himself. Yet, in his childhood, church leaders built large icon to God, condemned him as a gay male, and provided little for the poor. The exposure to the religious course impacted Chase’s thinking.

Exposure through an on-campus course was significant for two (Robert and Chase) of the four participants. Just as the on-campus academic course was significant for those two participants, study abroad courses impacted another participant. Being immersed in another culture provided Sean with a different lens to view Christian theology and religion. When Sean studied abroad in Australia, he concluded that Christianity was not for him. However, he had not decided on whether or not God loved and accepted him. He continued to struggle with this
aspect of his belief system. In Australia, Sean attended cultural events and academic courses. In addition, he attended the Anglican Church with friends. Sean described the Anglican Church as “open and accepting of gay males.” The notion that a Christian church accepted gay males was difficult for Sean to understand. Was the Anglican Church turning away from Christian theology? Was the Church wrong in its teachings? Was the Church right in its teachings? The exposure to an Anglican church created an internal struggle for Sean. Sean described his struggle with attending the Angelica Church and being accepted:

I also went through well maybe (deep breath and sigh). Maybe it’s not what it seems. Maybe that maybe it. God is accepting. Maybe religion is accepting of me um (pause). I kinda felt that way a little bit when um when I studied abroad in a different country and went to church there.

Doubt and confusion guided Sean’s understanding of God and Christianity. Had man’s strict interpretation of the Bible pushed Sean away from God? The experience in Australia created a rich environment for Sean to question his beliefs about God and Christianity in relationship to his gay identity. Sean explored the idea that God accepted and loved him for all that he was. The Anglican Church offered a different view from his childhood experience. One can see a second struggle in the comparison between the Angelica Church in Australia versus the church in the United States. Was Christianity in the United States different from that of Australia? Was each individual sect within Christianity different? All of these questions related to Sean’s experiences as a child, in high school and college, and now, in a foreign country. When he returned to the United States, Sean realized “nothing really changed though (long pause). I didn’t really feel comfortable going to a church here [United States].” The uncomfortable feels reaffirmed his opposition to religion. To return home from another country and realize that
religion in your home country rejected you as a gay male disrupted his path to exploring God’s acceptance and love. Yet, based on his experience in Australia, Sean was willing to continue his search. Reflecting back, Sean noted that “maybe I haven’t found the right church or yet, maybe I haven’t found the right (pause) religion or faith yet.” His experiences and exposure to customs, traditions, and a different form of Christianity provided strength for Sean to continue on his spiritual path.

**Questioning Christian Identity**

Christian theology, socialization, and the contradictions of Christian theology started to weigh on the participants belief in God. The connection to God dissipated as participants completed academic course work, interacted with diverse peers, lived as a gay male and questioned why God allowed wars, poverty, and starvation in the world. For three participants, living as a gay male, also, impacted their connection with God. If Christian theology saw them as an abomination then Christianity lacked any relevance in their lives. Questioning their Christian faith took numerous forms. Three participants, perhaps not surprisingly, with their negative experiences with Christian theology, turned away from Christianity and waivered in their belief in God. Robert, Sean, and Chase continued to wavier between I believe in God and I do not believe in God. At times, the wavering came in the form of believing in God, but not institutionalized Christianity. However, their earlier belief that identifying as gay male and believing in God was wrong, sinful, and abomination decreased over time. To connect with their gay identity, the three participants, Robert, Sean, and Chase, felt the need to question and distance themselves from God. It appeared this moving back and forth was related to their early church experience, identifying as an openly gay male, viewing religion as an institution, and certain experiences in their lives. Sean turned away from God based on Christian theology that
related to his gay identity. Sean first identified as agnostic and later acknowledged that institutionalized Christian theology was not his belief system, but belief in God could be. However, he continued to challenge his belief in God. Sean related “so, there um for a while I considered myself agnostic and I don’t even know if I ah don’t consider myself agnostic.” Sean’s gay identity provided the opportunity for him to question his belief in God. His belief system was established on his new found gay male identity. His questioning of his belief in God came with the understanding and influence of Christian theology. If God and the church believed him to be an abomination, then he had no reason to return to the God and the church.

I just just don’t feel comfortable in believing in something (pause)
worshipping something that tells me that I am wrong when they (long pause). Um like when that um when that God or whatever made me and if they made me then why did they make me wrong.

The extract above hinted at the broader issue for Sean—believing in a God that made him, but made him gay. Being a gay male was not acceptable to God. However, if God made Sean, then was Sean truly an abomination or sin to God? Throughout his interview, Sean struggled with the two notions: 1) God made him, man created an institutionalized Christian theology, and therefore, God continued to love and accept him and 2) God made him, but condemned him for being gay and therefore, God no longer loved or accepted him. If Sean removed Christian theological teachings from his life, then he might be able to reconnect with the God that made him. However, having developed in a Christian church, Sean denied the existence that God could love and accept him. These two dichotomies continued to weave in and out Sean’s story.

For Roberts, questioning their Christian identity took on a more personal note and not
related to their gay identity. Robert’s relationship with his grandmother affected his religious views the most since attending college. During his junior year, his grandmother passed away. Robert’s grandmother served as strength for him. He reflected that his grandmother knew, although he never told her about his sexuality and never condemned or judged him. She continued to support him throughout out his life. His grandmother served the church and others through delivering food to those less fortunate, creating a food pantry and never missing a church service no matter how she physically felt. His grandmother was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis at the age of 21 and not expected to live past her 30s. However, she lived until the age of 62. Robert described his grandmother’s life as one that was fulfilling and painful. After her death, Robert questioned why God put her through so much pain and why she continued to serve God. Robert reflected on his grandmother’s death:

Seeing how much she was in pain. How much she suffered and then, for her to while she is suffering to look up and say um she’s praising a God who is unfair. Who’s unjust and for her to have so much faith and passion that just kinda made me angry. Because I just want to look at the same God and be like you fucking suck. What is wrong with you. Um, that defiantly that was (long pause) a breaking point. I lost a lot of ah respect for, for. If there is a God. If he. If he or she does exist. They fucking suck. For people to serve so selflessly and then yet get little. I don’t want to say she didn’t get a rewards because if there is an afterlife, I’m sure she’s getting a reward and I like to think she is getting her reward, but for her to serve so selfless you know for so many years and then for her to suffer that way is just completely unfair.

Her death significantly impacted Robert’s view on God. During his grandmother’s death,
He questioned the notion of God. His grandmother was faithful until her death, even praying to God at her last moments. He questioned why she continued to believe in a God that caused her such pain. Her belief in God was not enough for Robert, who was overcome with grief and anger, to continue his belief in God. At a time, when he needed God, the most, Robert sought others for comfort. In this experience, Robert lost more than his grandmother; he lost his faith in God. To connect with this God after seeing his grandmother’s good works, but then his grandmother’s suffering enraged Robert. In his grief and anger, he acknowledged that, if there was a God, his grandmother was rewarded in the afterlife. However, Robert was not able to reconcile this afterlife reward with the suffering of his grandmother on Earth. One can see the anger and hurt in Robert. His use of the phase “fucking sucks” showed distain and rejection of God. At time, when he needed God the most, he was not able to connect and rely on a God who was unjust. Later in the interview Robert stated that this experience, “ kinda make me shut down to any kind of divine power.” His dedication to the church since early childhood and his family’s deep connection to the church could not overcome his grandmother’s suffering in death. It appeared that studying religion in college, his new gay male identity, and lastly his grandmother’s death influenced his decision to turn away from God. Her suffering and death cemented Robert’s disbelief in God.

Not all participants waivered in their Christian faith or link to God. George continued to have a strong belief in God. At first, he believed because of his rearing in the Christian church. However, since attending college and exploring Christianity from varying perspectives, George’s belief in God became stronger. He saw God as loving and accepting. George remained strong in his faith and committed to God, but not the institutionalized church.

And so I feel like from that point [childhood] until the point that I’m at now
[adulthood], um, I feel like I’m at more of a trying to see things more holistically instead of just by the rule. So I’m trying to like delve deeper into what God actually wants and the nature of God rather than…[the church].

For George, his connection with God was through his individual interaction and search for a deeper relationship with God not that of the church. The church structure and strict Christian teachings regarding gay identity conflicted with his own relationship with God. Through this relationship with God, George overlooked the institutional structures of the church to remain connected with God. All participants dismissed the need for Christian rituals in their lives (e.g. attending Sunday school, church services, or church community events). While participants questioned their connection with God, they consistently noted turning away from institutionalized Christianity leaving behind traditions and rituals. The continued questioning and search for meaning provided the participants an opportunity to define their sense of self and belief system. Participants described their search for meaning and belief system without institutionalized religion as spirituality.

Feeling Lost

Participants discussed their gay identity and conflict with Christian theology as one motivator to search for meaning in their lives. Traditional Christian theology no longer served as a foundation in most participants’ lives. The four participants raised concern about being lost and searching for a new set of beliefs to guide their lives. To connect with nothing, the participants felt a void. There was no specific guidance in this developmental part of their lives. College presented participants with new challenges. Not only had college impacted their thinking on gay identity and Christian theology, it was a time in which students faced decisions about interacting with family, peers, and society. Would parents accept their child as they
searched for new meaning and turning to a new belief system? Would church relationships diminish? What would guide their new found freedom from a perceived oppressive belief system, traditional Christian theology? Was there a place in the church for them? Was God still walking with them?

As participants continued to discuss their stories, participants realized they were not lost or without guidance. Instead, their search for meaning continued to evolve and grow. Robert talked about his journey up to this point and his diminished Christian identity. His diminished Christian identity had not affected his spirituality. It was important to recognize that Robert continued to engage in self-reflection about whether he believed in God or not. Robert reflected on his journey: “It’s kinda opened me up more to a divine power because when it comes to my spirituality my spirituality has never gone away.” For Robert, it was a divine power that guided him on his difficult journey. Yet, through his difficult journey, Robert never lost his spirituality. Unlike, Robert, George continued to believe in God and had not questioned God’s love for him. He reflected that God never left him and guided him throughout his life: “I firmly believe and I like feel that there's a path that I’ve been on and God has been guiding me.” For George, God had not left him to wander alone through his journey. God helped him along his difficult journey. It was this realization that solidified George’s belief in God. Although their journey differed, they each recognized that they were not lost. No matter how difficult it was for these participants, they continued on their search for meaning.

**Search to Define Spirituality**

The four participants identified their new belief system, whether they identified with Christianity, God, or another entity, as spirituality. For each participant, defining and thinking about spirituality was rooted in the past and present. Their thinking was linked to their Christian
Participants acknowledged the difficulty in defining spirituality. As such participants determined spirituality was not defined by a concise, systematic use of words. Nor was spirituality measured by using scientific measurements. Unlike science based experiments, where one used their physical senses to determine whether or not something was true, participants concluded that spirituality revealed itself as a set of personal beliefs and values with or without a divine entity. Scientific inquiry neither proved or disproved the existence of this entity. Participants noted that one cannot define spirituality. Instead, participants described the meaning of spirituality. George described spirituality as:

I think spirituality is one’s ability to, eh, one's ability to believe in something bigger than themselves. Spirituality, but it, spirituality, is like something that's kind of hard to define in general because I don't think it just includes religion or it just includes a belief in God.

The difficulty in defining spirituality comes from the inherent notion that spirituality was a broad concept. Life experiences, education, and one’s internal belief system comprised spirituality. Although, the internal belief system was shaped by external factors, there was no method to prove one’s spirituality. Sean noted “you can’t necessarily explain why you believe something (pause). You just you just do and um, it’s like an internal belief that you don’t have to justify to anyone else really. It is something you hold to be true.” The use of the terms truth and
justify illustrated the notion that truth cannot be explained by scientific methods and an individual was not required to justify their belief systems through external methods. Unlike his experience with Christianity truth, spiritual truth was internal. Truth and in this case, spirituality, was justified by the individual and their internal truth.

Unlike Christianity, spirituality offered no specific set of rules, entities, or guidelines. Instead, spirituality revealed itself in numerous forms. Robert described spirituality, “like within everything there’s spirituality in art. There’s spirituality in nature. So, like there is a lot of just like a spirit realm that surrounds us in the world.” For Robert, spirituality manifested itself in both a physical form (art and nature) and a non-physical form that surrounded him on a daily basis. If spirituality was “within everything”, then as a gay male, Robert was a spiritual person. Unlike, Christian theology, spirituality was not limited to a person who believed in a certain set of rule. Robert’s story illustrated the notion that spirituality was not limited to one thing or confined to a certain space. Chase described spirituality as “the expression of that, um, the sharing of that gift of, you know, being able to have that kind of spiritual high…Um, I, I often think true happiness is also spirituality because there’s just something about that connection.” Chase equated happiness to spirituality. In his discussion on spirituality, Chase reiterated that spirituality related to doing “good works” without being “restricted by the institutionalized church.” For all participants, spirituality was found in numerous forms and served as a guidance to finding their meaning in life.

Cultivating Spirituality

Participants experienced spirituality as a search for meaning. The search for meaning included the development and cultivation of their belief system. The search for meaning was a continuous internal and external process that manifested itself in the form of spirituality.
Spirituality involved self-reflection, internal searching, questioning, exploration, and interaction with a wider community. The search for a new spiritual self-started with the internal as opposed to the external and communal approach from their childhood. Christian identity development occurred within a community focused on teaching, learning, and living a set of prescribed rules. Few instances appeared in which the church provided guidance for each participant. Now, participants turned inward and relied on their internal self to seek a new spiritual self. Sean described his search for spirituality as a concept that is “more within one’s self in my opinion. It’s more (long pause) (clears throat). It’s more internal something that you can’t really control as much.” For Sean, his search for spirituality was from the inside out and wasn’t necessarily controlled by him. Instead, spirituality was a concept that came naturally to Sean from the inside. Unlike Christianity, spirituality was not controlled by one person or set of rules. Spirituality was an internal awakening.

Similar to their experiences with Christianity participants found the need to cultivate and engage in their spirituality. Spirituality was a developmental and evolving process. Similar to developing their Christian and gay male identities, participants expressed the need to develop their spirituality. For example, George noted “spirituality is the development of one’s faith or like the seeking of develop. (pause) Trying to develop whatever your faith.” The outcome of relating spirituality to a developmental process was an approach for participants to make sense of their spirituality in increments. As participants continued to engage in their spirituality, they strived to cultivate and foster their new found spiritual selves. Participants reexamined and engaged on a consistent basis with their spirituality. There was a general sense that living as a spiritual being was a positive experience for participants. The connection with self and others led participants to focus greater attention on their spirituality. Indeed, there appeared to be a
self-awareness that participants needed to focus and refocus on their spirituality. Chase provided this perspective: “There’s days where I find myself praying and, um, you know, like, be like, oh, my gosh, I really haven’t been feeding my spiritual life, um, in the way that I should because I focus on all of these other things.” Feeding one’s spiritual life was difficult in today’s society. The constant flow of information and instant access to individuals through technology mitigated the opportunity to feed one’s spiritual life. In an every growing hectic world, participants found it difficult, at times, to connect with their spiritual selves. Robert believed that technology hampered his ability and the ability to engage with his spiritual self. Robert stated: “technology which [is] disconnecting us from people. When you truly like let yourself connect with nature you can defiantly feel a presence with different things. Um, you can defiantly feel a spiritual connect with people.” In order to develop, cultivate, and maintain spiritual self, participants noted the need for relationships with others. Participants in this study recognized the need to engage in a community.

Finding a community that supported their gay identity and shared their spiritual sense was pivotal. Participants noted the strong connection between their spirituality and others. The connection with others created an opportunity to openly express their gay identity and spirituality. Many of these spiritual connections occurred while interacting with peers, friends, and even strangers. Robert talked about his connection with others; “you can defiantly feel a spiritual connect with people… I believe a spirit people’s spirit and their spirituality helps connect that. And I believe that the reason you connect well with certain people is due to your spirit.” Chase commented, “spirituality comes into play, because you’re, like, you can’t help but feel that way, um, and you want to share it with people, and it’s, it’s a gift.” Connecting with other was important for participants. Developing a spiritual self was a continuous process. The
process evolved as participants continued to self-reflect and engage with others. Spirituality was a lifelong journey that needed to be practiced, cultivated, and fed.

**Living a Spiritual Life**

Living a spiritual life for participants was central to their search for meaning. It was the search for meaning upon which participants sought to live a spiritual life. For participants, spirituality manifested outside of traditional Christian theology. Robert, Chase, and Sean continued to question the role of God in their lives and their spirituality manifested in a continued journey to seek meaning and answers to their questions. The three participants agreed that their spirituality was not related to Christian theology or the institutionalized church.

George continued to believe in God and attended certain religious sermons. However, George acknowledged that he no longer believed in strict Christian theology, the institutionalized church, and others interpretation of the Bible. Instead, he connected with God on an internal level. The internal and direct connection with God formed the basis for George’s spirituality and faith. The connection between George and God continued to grow with great strength. George sought truth from his connection with God. Throughout his story telling, regarding his new found spirituality, George emphasized his connection continued to grow stronger with God. George stated:

> I feel that spirituality and faith is a part of everyday life. I think that it's just something that kind of flows…I think spirituality and faith has become more important to me than religion. This is in terms of God. Like I don’t find myself getting as much truth from religion as I do from, and this sounds weird, but like from God Himself as an entity. Like, and like, I mean I’ll still like read the Bible if I have to, but like I don't necessarily want someone like always telling me how
to interpret spirituality and faith

George continued to resist reading the Bible on a compulsory level. He no longer needed the Bible to guide his life. His ongoing connection with God moved George closer to understanding truth. Truth emanated from God not other’s interpretation of the Bible.

Not all participants transitioned their thinking about Christianity to spirituality. Sean, Robert, and Chase sought to live a spiritual life through various means. For Chase, spirituality was found in his daily interaction with people, waking up in the morning, and music. The spirituality he felt encompassed everything around him. He was not focused on just one aspect or one entity. Instead, something as simple as waking up in the morning and hearing a bird connected with him. Chase commented:

Um, like, I love waking up in the morning during the spring and a bird is there just chirping outside my window, like, that, to me, is just, like, so tranquil and I, I have this, like, I have a spiritual high at that moment. Um, you know, like, I feel like the world’s at peace and, like, it makes me want to be a better person. It makes me want to strive to continue to improve other people’s live.

For Chase, he experienced spirituality through the simplest of things. Similar to Chase, Robert lived his spiritual life through connection with people and with connection with the environment. Robert commented “let yourself connect with nature and you can defiantly feel a presence with different things. Um. You can defiantly feel a spiritual connect with people.”

Sean’s spirituality came in the form of connection with others and with internal beliefs. Sean stated, “I accept more of a faith in myself and others…Believing in something and feeling something that is more supernatural something that you can’t explain all the times. Something that um (long pause) affects you and you don’t really know why.”
As participants shared their stories about their new found spirituality, they found it difficult at times to truly define spirituality. Their difficulty remained not a sign of weakness or lack of focus. Instead, as participants related earlier in their interviews, spirituality exhibited itself as personal in nature. Their new found spirituality continued to evolve with no final end point. Participants understood their search for meaning and spirituality as an endless search that needed negotiation throughout their life. For some participants, Sean and Robert, the continued questioning of whether their connection with God would return. Yet, they prepared to continue on this ambiguous journey to find their true search for meaning. Seeing, hearing, and connecting with the world around them created a spiritual sense for these three participants.

**Conclusion**

The participants’ stories brought to light their experiences with Christianity, gay identity, and spirituality. Their experiences rooted in the Christian faith shaped their past and over time their belief system evolved. Participants’ viewed religion, faith, and spirituality as an evolving system throughout the interviews and may continue to do so throughout their lives. The relatively small homogeneous and sample size included homogeneous, white, Christian, undergraduate gay males. Further research is needed to fully understand the implications of Christian and gay male identity development in relationships to diverse gay males search for spirituality. Throughout the interview participants shared their stories. As they shared their stories in the moment, participants reflected on their journey from childhood to the current day. The reflection brought forth many past experiences, negative and positive emotions, and a written history of their stories, their journeys. They were shaped by their past and not held captive to those experiences. At the close of their interviews, participants embraced the idea that their spirituality manifested in numerous forms—nature, music, art, God, humanity. This
manifested spirituality was fluid. Because they recognized this fluidity, participants realized that their journey never ended. Their journey continued as a process. Throughout their lives, participants would continue to engage, to think, to learn, to explore, to question, to listen to their inner voice, and to commune with others. In the final analysis, it was their truth, their journey, their spirituality.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the lived experiences of undergraduate gay males raised in the Christian faith and who attended a Christian affiliated institution of higher education located in the Mid-West. The purpose of this study was to understand how undergraduate gay males attending a private Christian University experienced and made sense of their religious upbringing, gay identity and spiritual experiences within the context of Christian development. Based on the practical and intellectual goals, conceptual framework, and the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis qualitative methodology, this research sought to answer the main question: how do undergraduate gay males attending a Protestant affiliated higher education institution make sense of and incorporate religion and/or spirituality in their lives? Six additional questions were formulated as a foundation for this research:

- How does a Christian upbringing impact gay male identity development?
- How do gay males reconcile and make sense of simultaneously being gay and religious?
- How do gay males experience coming out in the context of Christianity?
- Who or what, at their undergraduate institution, influenced how gay males understand religion, faith, or spirituality and their gay identity?

This study explored the lives of gay males raised in the Christian faith and who attended a Christian affiliated institution of higher education Urban Religious University (URU). URU located in the Midwest University States and was the chosen site for this study based on its Christian founding. Each student described their experiences and shared their perspectives on being a gay male, being raised Christian, coming out, attending a Christian university, and spirituality. This approach allowed me to examine and understand how gay males make sense
and understand their spirituality in the framework of being gay. The results of this research emerged from their stories. By studying gay males in a Christian religious campus environment, one was able to understand more about their development over a period of time from childhood to current date.

The following chapter provided the reader with an answer to two questions, “So, what does this research information mean? and “how can we use this research in practice?” This study was conducted to draw conclusions that will provide higher education and student affairs professionals with information on how to support gay males on their search for meaning, which they labeled spirituality. In addition, this chapter will discuss this study: (1) conclusions, (2) implications for practice, (3) practitioner and the scholarly significance, and (4) limitations and recommendations for future research.

Conclusions and Discussion

This research arose out of curiosity to understand the lived religious and spiritual experiences of undergraduate gay males in the context of being raised Christian and being gay. This section offers conclusions and discussions based on the literature review, theoretical frameworks, and qualitative data offered in chapter four. Three conclusions were drawn from an analysis of the data: (1) the challenges of being simultaneously religious and gay and reconciling gay identity with religion and spirituality finding empowerment to reconcile religious upbringing and gay identity to search for meaning in life; (2) finding support at an undergraduate religiously affiliated institution; and (3) defining religion, faith, and spirituality: the search for meaning. Each conclusion will be discussed throughout the chapter.
The Challenges of Being Simultaneously Religious and Gay and Reconciling Gay Male Identity with Religion and Spirituality

Throughout this study participants sought to understand and reconcile their religious upbringing and their gay identity. The ability to reconcile these two oppositional concepts proved difficult at an early age. Participants were curious about these new and unrecognized feelings. Yet, participants kept these feelings internally and attempted to reconcile their without external support networks. Internally participants struggled to understand these new feels against their Christian beliefs. Biblical teachings taught that same sex feelings were wrong, sinful, and shameful. Participants learned that Biblical teachings contained absolute truth and if their Christian beliefs revealed that same sex feelings were sinful, and then these feels lead to an eternal damnation. Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, and Williams (1994) noted that religious doctrine supported the idea that males could not love another male. The love between to males was concluded to be deviant and rejected by Christianity (Wagner, et al. (1994). Gay males learned to turn away from these feels and purge them from their psyche for the sake of their religion.

As gay males explored their sexuality within their Christian belief, their struggles continued. In their adolescents, the four participants sought to embrace their Christian identity while suppressing their gay thoughts and feelings. This suppression was inherent in their need to satisfy their parents, families, and God. For if they were gay, then God would not love them and send them to eternal damnation. When their religious beliefs excluded their gay male identity, a disconnect occurred between their traditional religious beliefs, their gay identity, and ability to reconcile the two contexts both internally and within a community. Silencing their religious beliefs rendered them without a belief system. Silencing their gay identity rendered them
without a supportive, social network and sexual identity. Choosing their religious beliefs or openly embracing their gay identities further marginalized and isolated the participants. If they choose their religious beliefs, then they abandoned their gay identities. If they choose their gay identity, then they abandoned their religious beliefs and potentially their friends and families. This journey created internal and external turmoil. Internal struggles existed between their Christian identity and gay identity.

As the church rejected the four participants, three of the four participants rejected their Christianity identity without exploring their gay identity within the context of Christianity. Participants in this study ran into some of the issues described in a study by De la Huerta (1999). De la Huerta (1999) explained that churches rejected gay males and in return gay males rejected the church. For gay male participants, religion was linked with the doctrine of Christianity. De la Huerta (1999) identified that “many of us [gay males] have rejected our inherent spiritual natures along with the religious traditions we felt forced to disavow in order to accept our sexual nature” (p. 6). As participants started into late adolescents (college year), they began to challenge their conceived notions about Christianity and started to focus on their gay identities. Participants rejected their Christianity to grow in their gay identity.

The rejection of strict Christian doctrine and their Christianity to foster their gay identity created isolation for undergraduate gay males. This rejection and confusion between the two contexts demonstrated that undergraduate gay males needed to manage isolation internally and externally in their new community. The four participants left their home communities, which at least provided some support, to engage in a new university created a sense of isolation for participants. Isolation for undergraduate gay males deeply limited their engagement, involvement, and persistence in examining their Christian and gay identities, reconciling these
two identities, engaging openly in the university community, and exploring their search for meaning. Although two of the four participants (Sean and Chase) lived openly as a gay male in high school and found significant support from their family members and high school peers, all four of the participants hid their gay identity from their new peers, faculty, and staff in their first undergraduate year. The four participants chose not to engage with the pride (gay, lesbian, and bisexual) student organization for fear of their gay identity being exposed to others and those within the religious university community; although, Urban Religious University stated in their admissions criteria that they did not discriminate against applicants based on sexual orientation. The participants created a self-imposed isolation to protect their identities and therefore, limited their participation in the Urban Religious University community. As the four participants began to identify as gay, the participants acquired freedom and empowerment from some of their internal isolation from peers who support their gay identity.

The four participants openly revealed their gay identity to friends, family members, and greater communities; they stared to understand that their gay identities was only one aspect of their whole self. Yet, when asked about openly identifying to others, participants expressed they felt it not necessary to disclose their identity to others. The participants as Walton (2006) noted were able to integrate their two identities spirituality and gay identity “in spite of anti-gay or anti-Christian biases expressed by significant generalized others” (p. 15). Through a process of self-reflection, guidance from others, and acceptance by peers and family, participants developed a true sense of self and authentic relationship with others while identifying openly as a gay male. Participants believed their gay identity was only one aspect of their life not separate from their race, gender, or physical appearance. They lived comfortably with their identities. Being a gay male was no longer shameful, sinful, or an aspect to hide.
Notwithstanding the prevalence of negative damnation of Christian doctrine, participants have gained an increase in their sense of self and spirituality. Hostility towards gay males, expressed by many Christians, had not prevented these participants from experiencing their sexuality, identifying themselves as gay males, celebrating their identities, and reconciling their gay identity with their Christian upbringing.

**Finding Support at an Undergraduate Religiously Affiliated Institution**

Influencers were identified throughout this study. The four participants identified people, places, and objects as influencers. Each of these influencers was identified as having a significant impact on the participants’ experiencing religious, spirituality, and gay identity development. The four undergraduate gay males transitioning from high school to college continued to have questions about their religion and gay identity. Was there a God? Was God condemning gay males? Was there another deity? Was it okay to be gay and religious or even spiritual? Was one to abandon their religion for their gay identity and vice versa? These questions remained unanswered for the four participants. Participants’ individual experiences shaped their thinking about themselves, about others, and these unanswered questions. Two of the four participants (Sean and Chase) identified as gay in high school and the other two (Robert and George) identified as gay internally, but not to others. In this study, the four participants concealed their gay identity in their first year of college. As they entered college each participant chose to hide their gay identity and again, turned inward to negotiate and reconcile their religious upbringing and gay identifies.

As the participants turned inward, they continued to question their religious beliefs. The four participants noted this internal focus increased their isolation from others. As the four participants hid their gay identity and moved inward, there was the need for supporters and
support services. But, who was there to help participants answer questions about religion, being gay, and finding their search for meaning? The four participants’ exposure to religious courses, diverse faculty and staff, diverse peers, and co-curricular programs created an environment for them to gradually express their dissonance with Christianity and share their gay identity with others. A surprising conclusion, in this study, was the impact of religious courses and religious faculty on participants’ beliefs regarding Christianity and gay male identity. Each participant was required to complete a religion course. The four participants chose to engage in world religious courses. The faculty in these courses used a variety of methods to understand and explore world religions. The courses exposed participants to religions, including Christianity, to historical, political, and social texts written during each of the religious foundations time periods. Beyond this academic exposure, religious faculty played an integral role in helping gay males to coming out and regain a sense of religious or spiritual self.

Faculty served as unlikely mentors to each participant. Three of the four participants attended the same course with the same faculty member. The faculty member, Dr. Robert Smith (pseudonym), provided a positive environment for the three participants to explore their Christian beliefs and gay identity within historical, social, and political context. The participants noted Dr. Smith encouraged their gay identity development. The fourth participant, Robert, had another faculty member. The faculty member, Dr. Barbara Johnson (pseudonym) encouraged her class to read the Bible as a historical document written in a certain time period and by man. Throughout his course Robert questioned Biblical text in this historical framework and began to believe that Christian doctrine was not an absolute truth.

To support gay male’s transformation Parks (2000, 2011) argued that mentoring communities served as the most powerful to aide individuals in progressing to understand and to
make meaning of their faith. Mentoring communities “offers a network of belonging in which young adults feel recognized as who they really are, and who they are becoming. It offers both challenge and support and thus offers good company for both the emerging strength and the distinctive vulnerability of the young adult” (Parks, 2000, p. 95). Participants in the study noted the impact of faculty on their ability to come out, reassess their religious values, and search for spirituality. Although participants struggled with their religious upbringing and gay identity, participants found unlikely supporters in their religious faculty. Participants recognized that their current experiences in college, social relationships with diverse peers, engagement in the community, and reflection on their gay identity shaped their spiritual journey. These experiences linked to Christian upbringing, self-reflection, and external influences guided participants on their journey towards spirituality.

**Defining Religion, Faith, and Spirituality: The Search for Meaning**

The third conclusion of this study was to define the terms religion, faith, and spirituality. At the beginning of this study, the four participants used these terms interchangeably. Yet, as the four participants continued to reflect on their religious upbringing and their new search for meaning, they started to develop definitions for the terms religion, faith, and spirituality. Participants labeled religion as Christianity. Central to Christianity was the significance of Biblical text, the physical church, symbols, a community of believers guided by a pastor, and a belief in one God. Biblical text, Bible, contained the Christian doctrine that believers followed. The Bible provided rules regulations, and polices. In addition, to Christina doctrine, all four participants viewed Christianity as an institution. Christianity manifested itself as a physical institution. This physical institution had rules, policies, and regulations for members. Within the institution, there was a community of believers who followed a prescribed set of rules. These
rules provided believers with social constructs and therefore, created a social institution. The social institution took the form of a physical church. The church served as the physical social institution where believers congregated to worship God. Worship was community engaged versus an individual search more meaning with God. Previous research by Donahue (1985), Lerner (2007), Mytko and Knight (1999), Hodges (2002), Seeman (2003), and Steiger and Lipson (1985) supported the participants notion of religion. Religion was as a “social institution in which a group of people participate rather than an individual search for meaning” (Steiger and Lipson, (1985), p. 212). Religious social constructs regulated Christian’s behaviors. For these four participants religion was defined as a strict adherence to the historical, social, and institutional set of beliefs in a singular figure—God.

The four participants acknowledged the difficulty in defining spirituality. Instead, the participants used descriptors. At first the four participants described what spirituality was not. Spirituality was not defined by a concise, systematic use of words. Nor was spirituality measured by using scientific measurements. Unlike science based experiments, where one used their physical senses to determine whether or not something was true, participants concluded that spirituality revealed itself as a set of personal beliefs and values with or without a divine entity. Scientific inquiry neither proved nor disproved the existence of this entity. Participants noted that one cannot define spirituality. Instead, participants described the meaning of spirituality. The difficulty in defining spirituality comes from the inherent notion that spirituality was a broad concept and focused on an individual search for meaning. Life experiences, education, and one’s internal belief system comprised spirituality. Tisdell (2002) and Lindholm (2007) found that spirituality was a search for meaning constructed by the individual. Similar to the participants notion of spirituality, Tisdell (2003) described spirituality as “one of the ways people construct
knowledge and meaning” (p. 20) and Lindholm (2007) noted the “powerful avenue” that spirituality was for individuals to “construct meaning and knowledge” (p. 2). Spirituality was described as seeking something within one’s self, something that cannot be seen, heard, or defined.

Spirituality was a continuous search for meaning that needed cultivation. Participants noted the importance of interacting with others on an intentional basis. The participants’ experiences deviated from Tisddell’s (2003) seven assumptions about the nature of spirituality found in the literature review. Tisdell (2003) noted that spirituality was constructed through an “unconscious and symbolic process” (p. 29). Yet, the participants in this study noted their intentional search for meaning and a spiritual self. Unlike religion spirituality took numerous forms, God independent of institutionalized religion, community with others, nature, music, arts, and living a respectful life and loving others. Spirituality shifted from a religious identity based on strict Christian doctrine and spirituality manifested in numerous forms—nature, music, art, God, humanity. Parks (2011) noted this was a shift from authority based to stage two probing commitment. The world was no longer based on an authority figure (pastor, family, parents). Instead, authority figures differed on their religious and spiritual views and therefore, individuals needed to find their own truth, their own belief systems (Parks, 2011). Spirituality was an individual and community process manifested as a search for meaning, a journey. Spirituality became fluid. Because they recognized this fluidity, participants realized that their spirituality was a never ending search for meaning. Each participant identified their new belief system, whether they identified with Christianity, God, or another entity, as spirituality. Unlike Christianity, spirituality offered no specific set of rules, entities, or guidelines. In spite of Christian religious doctrine, these gay male participants “adopted various strategies that
facilitated a harmonious blending of their (seemingly incompatible) identities” (p. 15). For all participants, spirituality was found in numerous forms and served as guidance to finding their meaning in life.

As participants shared their stories about their new found spirituality, they found it difficult at times to truly define their spirituality. Their difficulty was not a sign of weakness or lack of focus. Instead, as participants related earlier in their interviews, spirituality was personal. Their new found spirituality was ever evolving and no final end point. Participants understood their search for meaning and spirituality was endless. For some participants, Sean and Robert, the continued questioning of whether their connection with God would return. All four participants were prepared to continue on this ambiguous journey to find their true meaning. Seeing, hearing, and connecting with the world around them created a spiritual sense for these four participants.

**Implications for Practice**

Despite the exploratory nature of this qualitative study, the undergraduate gay male voices represented in this study supported several important implications/recommendations for examining the role of religious upbringing within the context of gay male identity, religiously affiliated institutions impact on undergraduate gay males religious and spiritual experiences, higher education and student affairs professionals role in supporting gay males as they explore their spirituality, and creating and implementing programs and services that encourages gay males to develop a spiritual identity in concert with their gay identity. The implications/recommendations here are provided for religious affiliated institutions who at least in their anti-discrimination and/or admissions statements accept people of various sexual orientations. This researcher is not asking religiously affiliated institutions of higher education,
who truly hold a strict adherence to Christian doctrine to support gay males. It would be foolish to believe that such a suggestion is possible. Student affairs professionals who support the development of a holistic student may find this information useful. The results of this study present four implications for undergraduate gay male spirituality exploration.

The first implication is for family members, specifically parents, to consider the impact of their beliefs on gay male identity development. When parents instill strict Christian values and beliefs into their children and then, speak negative about gay and lesbian people, they abruptly suppress their child’s gay male identity development. In order for gay males to create a positive gay identity and continue to consider Christianity as their spiritual guide, parents could be advised to listen to their children and create an environment that supports their children. If parents cannot create an environment of support, then parents are encouraged to allow their children to explore their religious beliefs and gay identity with other adults and peers. All four participants experienced repression and negativity towards the idea of gay sexuality and therefore, suppressed their gay identities. As they continued to grow in their sexuality, three of the four participants turned away and rejected their Christian values.

By the time, the four participants notified their parents of their gay identity, three of the four participants rejected their Christianity. If parents found supportive ways to engage their sons in sexual identity exploration within the Christian faith, there was the opportunity for gay males to integrate and reconcile these historical paradoxical concepts. Since two (Robert and George) of the four participants waited until college to identify as gay to their parents and families, student affairs professionals and higher education institutions can create a support network for parent and family members. The support networks could provide education, mentoring, and assistance to parents of gay males. Through the matching mentoring program, parents of openly identified
gay males could be linked to those parents of those males who recently identified as gay. In addition, the parents could be provided with training and materials on how to support their gay sons through their search for self and meaning.

The second recommendation of this study is that religiously affiliated higher education institutions, open to accepting and supporting gay males, be proactive in their efforts to help undergraduate gay males explore their sexuality and spirituality. Unlike heterosexual undergraduate males, undergraduate gay males do not arrive on campus prepared to engage in a conversation about their religious beliefs and gay identity. They may feel family, peer, faculty, and staff pressure to commit either to their religion or their gay identity—abandoning one for the other. This study shows that two of the four undergraduate gay males started URU not previously identifying openly as a gay male. All four males started URU not openly identifying as a gay male; although two of the other participants openly identified as gay in high school. Those raised in a strict Christian doctrine came to college suppressing their gay identity and questioning their Christian identity. It is incumbent for religiously affiliated higher education institutions to establish admissions and transition mechanisms to encourage gay males to attend their institutions. For example, institutions might include information on their website regarding student organizations, counselors, and the institutions statement on sexual orientation. In addition, supportive testimonials from current students, faculty, and staff would add a sense of community for the undergraduate gay males.

The third recommendation is for higher education institutions to provide mentoring opportunities for undergraduate gay males. As the four participants in this study state, Urban Religious University was mostly accepting of their gay identity. However, the participants felt the need to hide their gay identities during this first year. Offering a confidential or open
mentoring program would create a transition program to support undergraduate gay males in their first year. Mentoring programs that are more inclusive, accepting both those undergraduates exploring their gay sexuality and those publicly open about their sexuality, would afford gay males a support system outside of faculty and staff. Such a program would involve a faculty and staff member to link first year undergraduates with their peers. Such mentoring experiences could result in a stronger transition and more authentic self for undergraduate gay males, especially those who do not publicly identify as gay. To support gay male’s transformation Parks (2000, 2011) argued that mentoring communities are the most powerful to aide individuals in progressing to understand and to make meaning of their faith. Mentoring communities “offers a network of belonging in which young adults feel recognized as who they really are, and who they are becoming. It offers both challenge and support and thus offers good company for both the emerging strength and the distinctive vulnerability of the young adult’ (Parks, 2000, p. 95). Peers in the mentoring program are trained to support undergraduate gay males in their transition from high school. The peer to peer mentoring program could grow to include faculty, staff, and community supporters to link undergraduate gay males to additional support networks. These mentoring communities and support networks can help support and shape each gay males journey from authoritative to one of self meaning. Baxter-Magolda (2004) noted that undergraduate gay males are ripe, with support from mentoring communities, to develop their own sense of self, meaning, and become authors of their lives—what Baxter-Magolda refers to as self-authorship. The church, pride groups, and student affairs professional can serve as mentoring communities for gay males who are trying to reconcile their faith and being gay while finding their self-authorship.

The fourth recommendation of this study is that religiously affiliated institutions of
higher education and higher education institutions, overall, create an opening, inviting, and supportive environment for undergraduate gay males to explore, question, and investigate their Christian and gay identities without the threat of rejection, discrimination, or damnation.

Undergraduate gay males in this study demonstrated resilience and the ability to explore their spirituality in the context of their gay identity. Their histories and experiences have created the capacity for them to make decision regarding their search for meaning. Gay students attending religiously affiliated institutions faced “oppressive, non-supportive, homophobic cultures in which they are made to feel invisible and isolated” (Love, 1998, p. 300). This study showed that undergraduate gay males struggled to openly acknowledging their sexual identity while embracing their Christian identity.

The four participants identified several practices to aid in their transition from high school to college and the exploration of their Christian beliefs in the context of being gay. These practices included being open-minded, teaching courses that allowed participants to engage with the Biblical text and explore Christianity in historical, social, and political context, and responding to students search for meaning outside of Christian faith. It was incumbent for higher education institutions to create clearly defined open and positive environment for gay males. Religious higher education institutions, open to gay male’s entering their communities for example Urban Religious University, are not always prepared, equipped, or fully open to assist undergraduate gay males with their new formed identities much less a conversation between Christianity and gay male identity. Gay males may arrive on campus not wanting to express their identities. Higher education faculty and student affairs professionals serve to influence the religious and spiritual experiences of gay males. Parks (2000) identified these professionals as meaning makers. Meaning makers help students to engaging in conversations about faith, which
Parks (2000, 2011) defined not as a single entity, but an internal set of beliefs.

Student affairs professionals could find opportunities to explicitly state and reinforce that spirituality is a significant aspect of a gay male’s development. There is the need to provide formally structured programs for gay males to explore and develop their sexual identity and religious or spiritual identity. It was clear from this research that the four participants did not fit into a linear stage model. Instead, the four participants experienced a non-linear stage development similar to Stevens (2004) and Jones and McEwen (2000) participants. For example, the four participants in this study, cycled between hiding their gay male identity and being open; believing in God, questioning God, and attempting to determine their reconnection to God. Just as gay males should be able to openly identify as gay, there is the need for gay males to engage, examine, and explore their holistic self. Spirituality is as important as gay identity development. Love and Talbot (199, 2002) and Smith (2002) both argued that the role of student affairs professionals was to aide all students in examining their spirituality, developing a sense of self, and assist students on their way to making meaning. Student affairs professionals can study and understand the religious and sexual orientation development of gay males. Professionals could provide structured training programs for faculty, staff, and students to discuss and explore issues of religion and gay male identity in various contexts. These learning programs could include information on gay male identity development, the historical stigma of being Christian and gay, and how to be supportive of gay males. In essence, these learning programs provide an opportunity for university community members to gain knowledge and insight to what Christian, religious, or spiritual gay males face.

Required religious courses provided gay males the opportunity to examine Christian doctrine in a historical context. URU and similar universities could encourage opportunities for gay
males to engage in self-reflection. Capeheart-Meningall (2005) noted that college was time a
time to “search for meaning in life and examine their spiritual beliefs and values”. As the stigma
of homosexuality lessens student affairs professional’s guidance is central for college students
who struggle with spiritual and gay identity development. The conflict between religious
identity and gay male identity can cause confusion, forcing one to choose between the two.
Student affairs professionals strive to create an open, affirming, and supportive environment for
students to develop, cultivate, and grow their individual identities.

For the four participants in this study, the formal academic courses provided avenues to
rethink their Christian religious belief system with their gay identity. The four participants noted
that academic courses allowed them explore their current Christian beliefs, in regards to their gay
identities, and provides participants with the knowledge to seek spirituality outside of formalized
religion. The opportunity to question Biblical text and homosexuality in historical, social, and
political context created the motivation for participants to explore and question these contexts
which led to their spiritual selves. Spiritual exploration and development cannot occur within
the academic classroom alone. Co-curricular experience has a significant impact on student’s
education (Astin, 1984, 1994). Student affairs professionals could examine ways of developing
and implementing a diversity center the included sexual orientation and spirituality within its
missions and co-curricular programs that support gay males to explore their religious and sexual
identity beliefs. The center can lead discussion on Christianity, sexual orientation, world
religions, and spirituality. These co-curricular programs could enable gay males to openly
question or reaffirm their early Christian belief system and reconcile their gay and religious
identities earlier in their college development. Rather than viewing Christianity and gay male
identity as paradoxical concepts and therefore ignoring and suggesting that gay males abandon
their Christian religious beliefs, ways of supporting for the exploration between the two could be encouraged. Jones and McEwen’s (2000) study concluded that through self exploration and support from external mentors, gay males were able to hold two identities. In this study, those two identities are religious/spiritual and gay. The center creates a community within the university that is supportive of gay males. In addition, this religious exploration can be a powerful tool for undergraduate gay males to engage in their own process of spirituality.

**Practitioner and Scholarly Significance**

The balance between scholar and practitioner was a process with mixed emotions. The primary goals of this research were to: (1) explore the impact of Christian religious development on gay males identity and spiritual experiences, (2) understand gay male identity development within their religious development, (3) explore the impact of undergraduate experiences on gay males religious, faith, and spiritual development, (4) study an underrepresented group to ensure their stories were told to serve and support gay males through their search for meaning—spirituality, and (5) contribute to the body of qualitative research that explores the experiences of gay males and their search for meaning. Being a scholar enabled one to understand and gain a broad knowledge of previous research while exploring a personal interest of scholarly work. Through the scholarly lens, one was able to understand the historical and current contexts of how undergraduate gay males make sense of their religious and spiritual experiences. The question focused on a complex and multilayered contexts. The idea that a gay male was religious and/or spiritual and gay seemed paradoxical. Yet, participants provided significant insight into their religious upbringing, gay male identity development, the impact of their undergraduate experience, and continued search for meaning. The literature review and theoretical frameworks provided a scholarly starting point to understand meaning making, gay male identity
development, and religious and faith development. However, the scholarly research had not included a qualitative study that sought to understand undergraduate gay males experience with religion, the impact of religion on their gay identity development, impact of an undergraduate education on their religious and spiritual sense, and their deeper understanding of these experiences.

Scholarly research cannot be viewed outside of practice. In higher education, especially the student affairs profession, there is the need to understand the student’s experience through a developmental (scholarly) and practical lens. For this research, there was an inherent value in the learning from the participants and seeing how their experiences were brought to life through everyday interactions, social programs, activities, and academic experiences. Having listened, absorbed, and lived with their stories, this researcher gained a valuable and eye opening experience. For this research, the practical implications outweighed the development of a new theoretical concept. Instead, being a practitioner allowed this researcher to implement the scholarly work into every day practice. Without the ability to use the research, the scholarly significance became void for this researcher. Allen and Cherry (2000) argued that, “In the end, we are meaning makers. We structure reality of college life through our programs, activities, and social-norming approaches” (p. 85). As a practitioner, this researcher believes in and supports undergraduate gay males in their pursuit to find their spirituality and make meaning in their lives. Parks (2000) described individuals who support student through their faith and spiritual experiences as meaning makers. As a practitioner, this researcher seeks to serve as a meaning maker for undergraduate gay males. These results will be used to propose educational sessions at regional and national conferences. The results will help to develop and implement programs that support undergraduate gay male’s ability to reconcile their religious upbringing and their
gay male identity while searching for meaning.

Through their exploration, undergraduate gay males will be able to develop and live by their own spirituality. This researcher spent a significant amount of time answering the questions “So, what does this research mean? and “how can it be used to support undergraduate gay males in their search for meaning”? Finally, this researcher plans to build on this research study by conducting additional research related to undergraduate gay males, religion, and spirituality. One future study will focus on religious gay males who experienced nurturing and supportive environments (parents, families, and church) that accepted their gay identities and continued to support their religious development with God. In addition, this researcher wants to explore this study at a public higher education institution. As a result of this research, this researcher offered implications to support undergraduate gay males on their search for meaning.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study’s findings shared the experiences of gay males, illustrated their struggles to reconcile their religious upbringing that condemned them to a life of damnation and their gay male identity, find their place in this world, and continue their search for meaning. Participants indicated their search for meaning, which they labeled spirituality, would continue after this study ended. Moreover, findings extend gay male identity development and spiritual development research by understanding undergraduate gay male experiences with Christian doctrine, construction of gay identity, and the impact of higher education on their search for meaning. There were several recommendations for future research that could further support undergraduate gay males on their search for meaning—spirituality. Discussed below are potential areas for future research.

First, three of the four participants continued to believe in God on some level. This was a
one of the most surprising findings. Inherent in the search was the idea that being Christian and gay were paradoxical concepts. Instead, this study surmises that gay males can continue to believe in a God that once condemned them. A study designed to explore the interaction between graduate gay males and their religious beliefs would be a significant addition to the research literature. Findings would allow researchers and practitioners to understand if maturing gay males continue to believe in some form of God, become strongly involved in their Christian religious beliefs, or move away from their Christian beliefs.

Second, this study points out, on a smaller scale, the complexity of being a gay male, being raised Christian, and searching for meaning in life—spirituality. The four participants described their search for meaning and their new belief system as spirituality. The search for spirituality was a continuous process for each participant. Two of the four participants (Sean and Robert) continued to struggle with the idea of a single religion and noted their continued need to understand spirituality within a new concept that may or may not include Christianity and God. George continued to believe in God and Christianity in a new context. George no longer believed in the printed Biblical doctrine. Instead, George found a connection with God on an individual and spiritual level. Unlike the other three participants, Chase concluded that God and Christianity were not relevant to his spirituality. Chase found his spirituality in connection with others, music, and the arts. The four participants created their spiritual self through a complex and dynamic process. There is the need for student affairs professionals to understand the complexity of gay male spiritual development. Future research is needed to determine a non-linear developmental model for the spiritual development of gay males. A developmental model can serve as guidance for higher education and student affairs professionals.

Third, this study was conducted at a medium sized, private Evangelical Lutheran Church
of America (ELCA) undergraduate institution in the Midwest. Conducting this study at another ELCA church with a similar population size may produce additional information and/or support this study’s findings regarding undergraduate gay male’s religious upbringing, gay identity development, undergraduate experiences, and search for spirituality.

Fourth, this study used a small homogeneous (Caucasian, openly gay males, junior class status, Christian) sample size. A larger, diverse population sample may provide results that are generalizable to a larger population. Researchers are encouraged to diversify this study with students for varying racial and religious backgrounds. A study comprising a diverse racial sample may provide insight into how racially diverse gay males experience and make sense of their spiritual journeys. Furthermore, a larger study involving multiple religions may provide additional information on how religiously diverse undergraduate gay males experience religion, gay identity development, and spirituality. Additionally racial and religious diversity will help student affairs understand how historical stigma with Christianity and gay male identity intersect with racial identity.

Fifth, a longitudinal study that collected multiple interviews with additional participants over the course of a year may provide additional information on gay male’s identity development, religious upbringing, spiritual experiences, and the impact of an undergraduate religious institution on their experiences.

**Conclusion**

In this study, the participants’ stories brought to light their experiences with Christianity, gay identity, spirituality, a search for meaning, and the ability to overcome their negative experience to love not only themselves, but those around them. Their adolescent experiences were rooted in the Christian faith and over time evolved.
Participants’ views on religion, faith, and spirituality continued to evolve throughout this and would do so throughout their lives. The complexity of their experiences and the intersection of Christianity and gay identity development created a dynamic situation.

Gay males struggled to balance their religious upbringing with their gay sexual identity and whether or not they could reconcile these two concepts. As they shared their stories in the moment, participants reflected on these two preconceived paradoxical concepts. Their past and current experiences shaped their search for meaning. This study attempted to provide additional knowledge regarding the experiences of Christian gay males. They were shaped by their past and not held captive to those experiences. Throughout their lives, participants would continue to engage, to think, to learn, to explore, to question, to listen to their inner voice, and to commune with others. By telling their personal stories and reflecting back, this study was able to identity several recommendations to support gay males in finding this spirituality. It is my hope that by sharing these participants’ stories and this study’s findings that others will maximize their efforts to support gay males through their sexual identity development and support their efforts to find spirituality.
References


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Appendix A: Interview schedule and questions

1. Introductions and greetings (rapport)
2. Set-up materials
   a. Journal for taking interviewer/field notes (Saldaña, 2009, for more information on field notes)
   b. Digital recording system
3. Provide participant with microphone
4. Turn on digital recorder
5. Introduction to the study and review participant consent form
6. Start Interview with the following questions:
   a. Faith, Religion, and Spirituality:
      • How would you describe religion, faith, and spirituality? (Descriptive)
      • Could you give me a brief history of your upbringing in relation to religion, faith, or spirituality?
      • Talk with me about what place religion, faith, or spirituality has in your life? (Narrative)
      • Thinking back on your college experience, talk with me about how your notion of religion, faith, and spirituality may have changed.
      • What does the terms ‘religion’, ‘faith’, and ‘spirituality’ mean to you?

   b. Gay Sexual Identity:
      • Talk to me about growing up and being gay. (Descriptive)
      • What does the term ‘gay male’ mean to you? How do you define it?
      • Talk with me about what place identifying as a gay male has in your life? (Descriptive)

   c. Faith, Religion, and Spirituality and Sexual Identity
      • Talk with me about how identifying as being gay and your faith, religious, or spiritual beliefs play in your life? (Narrative)

   d. Resources, facilities, and support
      • Please share with me your experience with faith, religion, or spirituality during your college years?
      • Can you tell me what, who, or whom has influenced your views on religion, faith, and spirituality?

   e. Follow-up questions as necessary (Smith et. al, 2009)

7. Thank participant for their time, review next steps, and provide $15.00 gift card.
Appendix B: Participant Consent

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY
You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study being conducted by Melvin D. Adams, III, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctor degree in Education at Northeastern University. This study is conducted under the supervision of Dr. Joseph McNabb, Ph.D. of Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. If you have questions about this research study you may contact Melvin D. Adams, III at [redacted] or Dr. Joseph McNabb at [redacted]. If you have questions or experience problems during this study, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. The telephone number is 614-373-4588 or email at irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish. Nan C. Regina at Northeastern University, will contact [redacted] and submit your claim. This is to ensure that your questions or concerns are directed to each institution.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this qualitative study is to document the spiritual experiences of gay male students and to use their documented experiences to develop strategies that may enable student affairs professionals to implement these strategies to enhance and support opportunities for gay male students to engage in spiritual development. By conducting this study, the principal investigator hopes to understand more about gay males and their spiritual experiences. The study is not intended to exam sexual orientation development including sexual activity, coming out process, or other events not linked to religion, faith, or spirituality.

Procedures
As a participant in this study, you will be asked to review the informed consent form at least three days prior to the interview and decide whether or not you would like to participate in the study. You are asked to participate in one and possibly a second in-person interview from 30 minutes to 90 minutes in length. The interview will consist of open-ended questions about faith, spirituality, and religion, sexual orientation identity, and experiences with the previous two subjects. The research topic does not include sexual experiences. The first interview is between 60 and 90 minutes. The second interview is for follow-up with the participant to ask additional questions or gather clarification from the participant. The third interview is for member checking or to share with the participant the analysis to determine if the researcher has described in detail the participant’s story and information. The interview will be digitally recorded and secured via password on a personal computer, Google Drive backup, and Crash Plan backup. Each of these methods are password secured and cannot be accessed by anyone except the researcher. There is one file that lists both your name and pseudonym. The file is saved on the researcher’s password protected computer and Google Drive and Crash Plan backup, which are all protected via password. The file is used to ensure that the researcher can reconnect with the participant in the second and third interview. Using a cross-cut paper shredder, the file (with participant’s first name and pseudonym name) is destroyed after the third interview. The three interviews and the recordings, which does not contain your name, are the only identifier for the remainder of this study. You will have the opportunity to decide where the interview is conducted and following the interview, I will send an interview summary via e-mail, asking you to review, verify, and
comment upon the preliminary draft of the results. Total expected participate time is two and one half to three hours over a one-month period. The interview will consist of semi structured open-ended questions about faith, spirituality, and religion, sexual orientation identity, and experiences with the previous two subjects. The research does not focus on sexual experiences with other men.

**Potential Risks and Discomforts**

Due to the personal nature of both faith/spirituality and sexual orientation identity, there is the potential for emotional distress or other uncomfortable feelings. During the interview, please stop the researcher if you feel uncomfortable or do not wish to continue in the study. As a participant in this study, I will provide you with information about the Center for Counseling and Health Services on-campus and campus ministries. If you need assistance in receiving these services, the researcher will work with each area to ensure that you are granted services.

**Potential Benefits**

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant. The research results may or may not benefit a greater number of students who identify as gay males and seek to understand and develop their faith/spiritual life. Additionally, the findings from this study may or may not create knowledge about the phenomena of faith/spirituality in gay male undergraduate students and provide student affairs professionals with a greater understanding of the phenomena to create programs, facilities, and services that enable gay male students to develop on their faith/spiritual journeys. The participant shall receive a $15.00 gift card upon completion of the member-checking step. The gift card can be from any establishment in [insert location].

**Confidentiality**

All information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential except for review by the researcher and researcher’s committee. No identifiable information is released to the committee. All information except for information about self-harm or harm to others is covered under confidentiality. Confidentiality of all documents is ensured through the use of password protect computer, locked file cabinet, and password protected back up on Google Drive and Crash Plan. There is one file that lists both your name and pseudonym. The file is saved on the researcher’s password protected computer and Google Drive and Crash Plan backup, which are all protected via password. The file is used to ensure that the researcher can reconnect with the participant in interview two and three. Using a cross-cut paper shredder, the paper file (with participant’s first name and pseudonym name) is destroyed and the digital files are deleted after the third interview. All interview transcripts will contain a pseudonym to ensure that your identity is not connected with it. Any names and identifiable information is blacked out in the transcripts. Data is reviewed by this researcher and the doctoral committee. This is to ensure that the data methods and data collected are accurate. Printed transcripts collected from the interviews will be kept in a locked file cabinet, when not in use, digitized (keep under password protection), and printed transcripts are destroyed after the research is completed. Digitized copies of the transcripts are destroyed after seven years and stored on Google Drive cloud via password protection. Informed consent forms are digitized and protected via a password for seven years. Paper copies are destroyed once digitized via cross shredder. The data is reported using pseudonyms.
Participant Right to Withdraw
You are participating in this study voluntarily and may withdraw from the study at any
time. There are no repercussions or negative consequences for withdrawing from the research
study.

Contact Information of the Researchers
If you have questions about this research study you may contact Melvin D. Adams, III at [redacted] or Dr. Joseph McNabb at [redacted]. If you have questions or experience problems during this study, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. The telephone number is 614-373-4588 or email at irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish. Nan C. Regina at Northeastern University, will contact [redacted] or [redacted] and submit your claim. This is to ensure that your questions or concerns are
directed to each institution.

Rights of Participant
If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and ask for Nan C. Regina, Director,
Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston,
MA 02115. The telephone number is 614-373-4588 or email at irb@neu.edu. You may also
contact the Capital University Institutional Review Board (IRB), [redacted]. Each human subjects protector will notify and report to each
other any concerns. You are given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as
a research participant with a member of the IRB. The Northeastern University and [redacted] IRBs reviewed and approved this study.

Participant Understanding
I understand the procedures described above and all of my questions and concerns have
been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that there is not direct benefit for me to
participate in the study. The $15.00 gift card is to thank me for my time. I agree to participate in
this study voluntarily and I have been given a copy of this form.

X ___________________________ ___________________________ ___
Participant’s signature Printed Name Date
Appendix C: Institutional Review Board Approval

Notiﬁcation of IRB Action

Date: November 28, 2012
IRB#: 12-10-12

Principal Investigator(s): Joseph McNabb

Department: College of Professional Studies

Address: 62 Hamilton
Northeastern University

Title of Project: The Spiritual Experiences of Gay Males at a Protestant High Education Institution: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Participating Sites: Capital University—approval received

Informed Consent: One (1) signed consent (Capital University version)

DHSIS Review Category: Expedited #5, #7

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

Approval Expiration Date: NOVEMBER 17, 2013

Investigator’s Responsibilities:

1. Informed consent forms bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of any unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the beneﬁt-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and forms are subject to audit at any time.
4. Any modiﬁcations to the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal must be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not extend to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Calvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA 2. 0630