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**Citation:** Connell, A. and Yates, J. ORCID: 0000-0001-9235-564X (2020). 'Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free': An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Career Experiences of Gay Clergy in the Church of England. *Sexuality and Culture*, doi: 10.1007/s12119-020-09779-5

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# 'Then You Will Know the Truth, and the Truth Will Set You Free': An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Career Experiences of Gay Clergy in the Church of England

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Accepted: 16 September 2020  
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## Abstract

The career choices of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) employees are increasingly under the spotlight in academic research, but the experiences of LGB employees called to devote their careers to faith organisations remain largely unexplored in the literature. The Church of England does not fully condone same-sex relationships and this may pose a challenge for LGB people working for the Church, as they look for a way to reconcile their sexuality with their faith and their employer's beliefs. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of six gay clergymen in the Church of England, using data gathered through semi-structured interviews and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Three master themes were identified: tensions between sexuality, calling, and career; coping strategies; and the institutionalisation of homophobia in the Church. The findings are discussed with reference to Work as Calling Theory and we offer practical recommendations.

**Keywords** Church of England · Work as calling · IPA · Gay clergy

## Introduction

The Church of England (hereafter, the Church), plays an integral role in many people's lives, from cradle to grave, and as England's established church is deeply integrated within the fabric of society. The Church can be conceptualised in different ways: the Church as represented by its primary agents (i.e. Bishops), the Church as a culturally normative community of clergy or the Church as a wider community of believers. In this article, unless otherwise specified, we refer to 'the Church' as the institution itself, an organisation with an espoused set of policies. The Church is

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served by approximately 7700 ordained clergy employed as paid priests in parishes across the country (The Church of England 2017), many of whom feel that they have been ‘called’ to the priesthood (Pio and McGhee 2019). Approximately 2.0% of the British population identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Office for National Statistics 2019) and given that LGB people are often drawn to altruistic careers (Ng et al. 2012), one might imagine that there are a number of gay men within the priesthood. The Church, however, offers a particularly challenging context for the employment of LGB people. In the UK, employees with protected characteristics—including both sexual orientation and religious belief—are protected from workplace discrimination by the provisions in the Equality Act 2010 (Clucas 2012). There are, however, several exemptions to the legislation which permit lawful discrimination even when made on the basis of a protected characteristic (Clucas 2012). Religious organisations, for example, are granted exemptions permitting them to discriminate on the basis of sexuality and religious identity (Clucas 2012), which the Church exercises through two specific requirements placed on gay clergy. First, the Church does not allow clergy to marry a partner of the same sex (The Church of England 2014) and second, it dictates that clergy in same-sex relationships must remain celibate (The Church of England 1991).

Gay clergy thus find themselves in a position in which their sexual identity is not condoned by their employer and their life choices are consequently restricted. It seems likely that this conflict may have an impact on their career experiences and their working lives, yet our understanding of their experiences is currently limited.

The challenges and barriers that the LGB community face in employment have been well documented in academic literature (Gacilo et al. 2017; Martinez et al. 2017; Ozeren 2014) and the antecedents of the career choices of LGB people have been explored in both theoretical papers and through empirical research (Kaplan 2014; Ng et al. 2012; Schneider and Dimitto 2010; Tilcsik et al. 2015). There has also been some research which explores the way that Christians reconcile their faith and their sexuality. There is, however, scant literature exploring the experiences of LGB people who feel that they are called to positions of leadership in religions that adopt a heteronormative outlook such as the Church (Clucas 2012; Nixon 2008; Smith 2019). This study aims to address this gap in the literature, exploring the experiences of gay clergy working for the Church, and how they reconcile their sexual identity, their faith and their employment.

## Theoretical Background

This study focuses primarily on issues of calling and vocation, and the relationships between faith, sexuality, and career. One theory which has clear relevance to this study is Work as Calling Theory (Duffy et al. 2018).

The concept of a ‘calling’, with its religious origins has been explored in the literature over recent years with several competing definitions emerging (Dik and Duffy 2009; Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas 2011; Kaminsky and Behrend 2015). Perhaps the most rounded definition of calling is Duffy and Dik’s (2009), which posits that calling must involve the experience of an externally-driven career motivation,

behaviours that contribute to society, and must be rooted in purpose or meaning, all of which can be ascribed to a career in the priesthood. This definition is used as the foundation of Work as Calling Theory (WCT) (Duffy et al. 2018), which seeks to explain the antecedents and consequences of calling.

As WCT is an emergent theory, there is as yet limited empirical research testing its propositions, although an initial study identified that the majority of its propositions are fully supported (Duffy et al. 2019). Importantly, the perception of a calling has been found to directly predict living a calling through person-environment (P-E) fit, potentially important when considering a career in an institution such as the Church (Duffy et al. 2019). This study brings the focus of calling research back to its religious origins, exploring its potential applicability to faith workers.

The literature offers us some valuable insights into the experiences of employees' sexuality in the workplace, including research which explores disclosure of sexuality, bullying, and discrimination. Choosing to disclose homosexuality within the workplace can be challenging for people (Griffith and Hebl 2002), with potential adverse consequences for individuals and their partners (Corrigan and Matthews 2003; Williamson et al. 2017). Evidence from a recent meta-analysis has identified significant relationships between disclosure, and relational and organisational factors such as social support, and perceived organisational discrimination (Wax et al. 2018). There remain, however, competing theories as to the antecedents and consequences of workplace disclosure, and there is a need for future research to develop our understanding of the relationships between variables and how they may apply to different groups and in settings such as the Church (Follmer et al. 2019).

Despite some encouraging counter-evidence that some LGB workers increasingly feel able to disclose their sexuality within the workplace (Williams et al. 2009), the evidence on homophobia within employment suggests that even in labour markets with high levels of protection, such as the UK, discrimination against LGB workers still exists (Ozeren 2014). This discrimination can be experienced formally, through its institutionalisation in organisations' policies and procedures and informally, where it affects LGB workers' experiences through the behaviours of employees and their interactions with colleagues (Gacilo et al. 2017; Martinez, Hebl, et al. 2017; Martinez et al. 2017). There are, however, several identified factors that can positively reduce discrimination in the workplace and help LGB employees feel comfortable disclosing their sexuality, including the provision of social support from colleagues and supervisors (Marrs and Staton 2016), and the development of LGB friendly policies and procedures (Lloren and Parini 2017; Ragins and Cornwell 2001). Measures such as these can help develop perceptions of a supportive organisation, helping employees to feel comfortable with disclosure (Griffith and Hebl 2002).

Turning to the literature which explores the specific experiences of Christians combining their faith with sexuality, we find several studies highlight a link with well-being. Attendees of the Christian denomination, the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which adopts a liberal attitude towards homosexuality, explained that they could successfully integrate their faith with their sexuality and were aided in doing so by MCC itself (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000). A quantitative study of the impact of religious affirmation (support) for LGB people of faith found that

affirmation was positively related to psychological well-being through the mediators spirituality and internalised homophobia (Lease et al. 2005). Finally, a study of gay Christians in non-affirming churches in the USA found non-affirmation associated with higher levels of internalised homophobia, with a consequent impact on psychological well-being (Barnes and Meyer 2012). These studies collectively suggest that psychological well-being can be affected by the relationship between faith and sexuality. However, the presence of mediators suggests that these relationships are complex and further research could usefully explore this in more depth.

A number of studies have explored the strategies that gay people of faith adopt with regard to reconciling their faith and sexuality. Thumma (1991) found gay Christians manage to distance themselves from the Church whilst maintaining their closeness to God, through reassessing the messages, and concluding that the Church is wrong to condemn homosexuality. In another study, Christians in rural America were found to adopt one of two strategies: seeking a local affirmative Church, or focusing on their personal relationship with an affirming God (Woodell et al. 2015). Walton (2006) found that participants accepted their identity as a gay Christian through strategies including recognising their sexuality as God's will rather than a lifestyle choice, critically interpreting the Bible, and accepting that there could be inconsistencies between their sexual and religious identities. A further study based within the MCC found that participants' strategies included emphasising their faith identity, adopting heteronormative behaviours, and redefining sexuality as a blessing (McQueeney 2009). Finally, in an anthropological study, it was found that gay Christians can develop a 'queer Christian identity' (O'Brien 2004, p. 182) that embraces the challenge of transforming churches to embrace all and where individuals' sexuality is seen as God-given and something to be celebrated.

One area that has received less attention in the literature is the experiences of gay leaders within the Church. As we saw above, gay Christians can find different ways to reconcile their faith and sexuality, often by focusing on their relationship with God, and distancing themselves from the institution of the Church, or indeed choosing to worship within a different denomination (McQueeney 2009). But for clergy, it is not possible to sidestep the issues of the institution of the Church so easily; the institution is the medium through which they can live their calling, and too much of a distance could compromise their clerical identity.

In a rare study exploring this tension, Keenan (2016) argues that gay clergy develop a role-based distinction between vocation and profession. The vocational aspects of their jobs are those which come from God and the professional are those which are requested by the Church. This gives them an 'interpretative space' within which they can resolve the tension between the call to the priesthood, and the lack of acceptance of their sexual identity within their institution. In this way they link the tension to the earthly realm, which is fallible, rather than the heavenly realm, which is not. The clergy in Keenan's study reported that the aspects of their work which were most important and most enjoyable were the vocational, rather than the professional part of their roles—bringing God's message, leading worship and pastoral duties, rather than administration. But the two parts of the role were not wholly separate—the clergy see that they have to fulfil the professional duties in order to gain access to the platform through which they can live their calling.

From the review above, it is clear then that whilst sexuality, faith, and career theory are well researched, there is a gap in understanding the experiences of gay religious leaders. This study aims to start to address this gap, exploring the lived experiences of gay clergy who work or have worked within the Church of England.

## Method

This study was underpinned by an interpretivist philosophical position and associated relativistic ontological belief that there are multiple perspectives on the world which cannot be distilled to a single, universal truth (Willig 2013). The researchers hold a phenomenological belief that it is critical to understand the individual perspectives and worldviews of participants that derive from their unique lived experiences, and which cannot be elucidated in large-scale quantitative research (Coyle 2016). A qualitative design was also chosen for several practical reasons, including the challenge of identifying and accessing the relatively small total population of target participants, the nature of the research question, and the limited volume of research on this population within psychology, which means that a qualitative study can be useful in identifying phenomena that can be researched further in the future (Willig 2013).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was thought to be well suited to the exploration of complex personal experiences such as those researched in this study (Smith and Osborn 2008). IPA has three primary characteristics. First, as a phenomenological approach it is concerned with providing a deep and detailed insider's perspective and understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences. Second, as an idiographic method, it is concerned with the analysis of individual cases and not generalisable result. Third, it is a double hermeneutic approach, whereby the researcher's own worldview is a critical component of the analysis as they make sense of the participant making sense of their experiences (Smith 1996, 2011; Smith and Osborn 2008).

## Participants

All participants were men ordained to the priesthood in the Anglican communion who are currently, or were previously, employed by the Church of England as parish priests. The research focuses exclusively on male priests for three reasons. First, the experiences of gay women in the Church can be assumed to differ from men as they may face discrimination on the basis of their gender as well as sexuality. Second, clergy within the Church are still predominantly male and the focus of the debate on sexuality in the Church is focused on male homosexuality rather than female homosexuality (Nixon 2008; The Church of England 2017). Finally, in keeping with the IPA approach, it was thought that a more homogenous group of participants would allow for a more in depth analysis of the phenomenon (Smith and Osborn 2008). Additional inclusion criteria included Christianity and homosexuality, which were necessarily applied to restrict participants to the target population. The participants all identified as white or white

British homosexual men aged between 44 and 65 years old. Minimal demographic information was collected from the participants in order to ensure anonymity, considered to be vital, given the sensitive nature of the topic.

## Procedure

Once ethical approval was granted, participants were recruited from a confidential group of self-identified LGB clergy, which was indirectly accessed through personal contacts of the first author circulating a call for participants. Expressions of interest were received from ten group members. All volunteers were sent a participant information sheet and participant consent form. Ten volunteers returned consent forms, two did not respond to further contact from the researcher, and the current role of two of the volunteers would have increased the heterogeneity of the group and therefore were not included as participants. The study therefore comprised six participants, slightly more than the recommended minimum numbers required to ensure validity in an IPA (Smith and Osborn 2008). Given the sensitive nature of the topic and this history and the Church's position on sexuality (Yip and Keenan 2004), every effort was made to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, with all identifying information removed and their pseudonyms used on all documents.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants, chosen as the method most suitable to being able to collect the breadth and depth of data required to complete an IPA (Smith and Eatough 2015). Interviews were completed throughout June and July 2019, primarily in participants' vicarages or rectories, and in one case a meeting room within a diocesan office. All locations provided participants with appropriate levels of privacy, important considering the sensitivity of the topics, and to ensure an empathic setting to help participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences (Smith and Osborn 2008). The interviews were based on an interview schedule of ten questions that covered participants' lived experience of calling, openness and disclosure, career development, bullying and harassment, personal relationships, and their recommendations for the Church regarding its position on sexuality and the priesthood. In accordance with Smith and Osborn's (2008) guidance for empathic questioning in IPA interviews, the researcher used open questions throughout, with minimal probes used when appropriate to further explore participants' experiences, including *'How open have you felt able to be about your sexuality during your career?'* and *'What have been your experiences of developing personal romantic relationships while in the priesthood, knowing the constraints that the Church sets on homosexual male relationships for priests?'*. Interviews lasted between 62 and 91 min and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## Analysis

Following transcription, the researcher followed the steps outlined by Smith and Osborn (2008). First, as IPA is idiographic, the process started with a line-by-line analysis of one participant's transcript, interpreting his statements and sentiments,

developing an initial framework of themes. Second, themes were iteratively clustered together. Third, themes were tabulated. Fourth, the process was repeated with all other transcripts with collective themes identified and prioritised. Finally, convergent themes from across participants were tabulated and analysed.

As qualitative research necessarily involves a level of interpretation of others' experiences it is important for the researcher to acknowledge their role in the research process and the implications of their personal perspective and internal biases (Coyle 2016; Willig 2013). To that end, the first author, who conducted the interviews and the primary analysis, kept a reflective log and noted moments where personal thoughts arose throughout data collection and analysis. This was especially important given the double hermeneutic characteristic of IPA, the researcher's existing views on the inclusion of LGB people within the Church and society, and his close familial relationship with a gay priest. The initial codes and themes identified by the first author were then shared with the second author to ensure that the analysis made sense and was grounded in the data.

## Findings

This study sought to explore the experiences of six gay clergymen working for the Church and three themes were identified: tensions between sexuality, calling and career, coping mechanisms, and the institutionalisation of homophobia in the Church. Several subthemes were identified within each theme, displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1** Identified themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
1. Tensions Between Sexuality, Calling, and Career	Reconciling faith and sexuality (6)*
	Hiding sexuality through fear (3)
	Inauthenticity (6)
2. Coping mechanisms	Sources of support (6)
	Separating the Church and God (4)
	Leaving the Church (3)
3. The Institutionalisation of Homophobia in the Church	Policy as a barrier to inclusion (6)
	Treatment of gay clergy by colleagues (6)
	The concentration of power and authority with Bishops (5)
	Complicity and collusion with an unjust system (3)

\*Numbers in brackets indicate the number of participants whose narratives included each subtheme



## Tensions Between Sexuality, Calling, and Career

The participants in this study were all called to be parish priests; called, in Philip's words, to serve God in '*a particular place*' and with '*a particular people*'. The notion of a 'career', with its hints of free will and conscious choice, and its assumptions of the value of development and promotion (CED 2020), did not resonate with any of them. James prefixed his discussion about his career saying '*if we even want to use that word*' and Philip echoed these sentiments showing that the term 'career development' was not particularly meaningful to him, wondering '*if there is such a thing?*'. The participants had no interest in seeking promotion to more senior positions, as Mark explained: '*I didn't have any ambition, career-wise[...]* all I ever wanted to do was get ordained and work in a parish' and Ed said that he had '*never regarded myself as being material for a pointy hat*'. More relevant that the notion of career was the fact that they had been called by God to the priesthood. All participants discussed in detail the positive and negative emotions and feelings—from joy to fear—that they experienced as they realised that they were called to the priesthood. Importantly, many participants revealed the apprehension that they felt about whether they would be able to integrate their sexuality with their calling and the potential consequences for themselves, partners, parishes, and careers. Three subthemes were identified in this theme: reconciling faith and sexuality, hiding sexuality through fear, and inauthenticity.

### Reconciling Faith and Sexuality

It was noticeable how several participants wrestled with reconciling their faith with their sexuality both before and during their career. Mark, for example, describes his feelings as a teenager coming to terms with both being gay and called to the priesthood:

it felt like this was a bit of me that was actually not gonna be loved by God (which is, of course, gross heresy), but at the gut level that is what I felt... the sex thing was a huge, kind of, question mark. If I was trying to, sort of, cope with the vocational bit over here, um, sexual thing was lurking over here as a big, sort of cloud.

Mark's description here might suggest that his feelings at the time came from an instinctive position that Christianity and homosexuality were incompatible, a position he reveals is not one that he presently subscribes to, but which appears to have resulted in feelings of doubt about his future in the Church. Mark's comment about coping with his vocation, as distinct from sexuality, suggests that calling in and of itself can also weigh heavily regardless of sexuality.

Matthew describes his feelings of rejection by several faith groups that he worked for prior to joining the priesthood as a direct result of his sexuality, culminating in him wanting God to change his sexuality:

the drive between sexuality and spirituality weren't reconciled at the time.... I thought, 'God's more powerful than this, I will change, I will... if I pray enough, if I fast enough, God will change my sexuality and I will be healed'.

Matthew's reflection here suggests that he once held the view that his sexuality was incompatible with a life of faith but at a more extreme position than Mark, whereby his sexuality was akin to an affliction that needed curing.

### **Hiding Sexuality Through Fear**

Matthew's feelings above form part of a wider anxiety about being openly gay within the Church shared particularly by Ed and Philip, who have both at times felt the need to hide or sublimate their sexuality as part of their identity. Philip describes how at the time of seeking selection to the priesthood his sexuality was not:

something I was fully confessing to myself, let alone anybody else, and in a sense therefore it was kind of like a compartmentalised part of me. And it was me, it wasn't fully me in that sense.

Philip demonstrates here that he recognises that sexuality is very much a part of his identity but his previous sublimation of it meant that he was not living as his full self. His reference to sexuality in the form of a confession to himself might suggest a previously experienced inner sense of shame or guilt about his sexuality as a Christian.

### **Inauthenticity**

The official Church policy is that gay clergy cannot marry, and their relationships must be celibate. In practice, however, the participants reported quite a different message from the bishops, illustrated by the advice Mark was given by a bishop, that his gay sexual relationships would not be a problem '*as long as you're discrete*'. The participants struggled to accept the disingenuous approach of the Church (as represented by its bishops), and its unofficial but widespread policy of turning a blind eye to homosexual behaviour, described by Ed as a '*don't ask, don't tell*' policy, and they found the position that they themselves were put in, to deny or hide this part of themselves, unconscionable. They described this culture of secrecy as being at odds with their calling, which Simon explained should offer '*a place where we can fit and completely be ourselves*', and highlighted the contrast with their experiences of Church policies which made them feel profoundly uncomfortable—illustrated powerfully through Philip's description of himself, in the eyes of the Church as '*the person who shouldn't exist: I'm a priest and I'm gay*'.

For these participants, authenticity, openness and honesty are all at the very heart of their relationship with God, and central to their understanding of what it means to be a priest, both in terms both of faith and vocation. Simon talked about the '*fundamental truthfulness*' that the scriptures advocate, and described theology as part of a '*liberating movement*' committed to '*changing the world and social justice*'.

Yet, as Matthew explained, the Christian values of tolerance and acceptance are not institutionally applied to the Church's clergy: *'the Church doesn't care for the carers, it doesn't minister to the ministers'*. Philip felt that as a priest he needed to be *'open and honest and accessible and quite exposed'* and found that his congregation were quite hurt when he came out to them as *'they thought that we had that relationship, and I was keeping this big secret'*. The participants found themselves preaching about authenticity, encouraging and empowering others to be the person God wants them to be, and trying to develop open and honest relationships with their parishioners, and yet alongside this, they were expected to deceive or mislead their parishioners through denying part of their identity. Simon felt the Church's hypocrisy was exemplified when he was told that *'we don't mind how many nights of the week he [his partner] stays with you but he must have a separate postal address'*.

## Coping Strategies

The second theme identified participants' strategies for coping with the tension described in the first theme. Three subthemes capture sources of support, a distinction between Church and God, and ultimately, leaving the Church.

### Sources of Support

One source of support, common to all participants, is a confidential support group for gay clergy, described by Ed as leading to several positive outcomes:

lasting friendships there to this day which are really important to me, um. And, able to share one's feelings about being gay and in the Church, being gay and being a single parent, being a single parent and being a priest, 'cos other people were in similar positions too. So, yeah. Solidarity. Confidentiality. Um, the opportunity to learn and to worship together.

Ed's statement here highlights several aspects of the importance of groups and social networks. First, he notes the role that groups play, as a community of equals, in facilitating the development of friendships. Second, the potential for the groups to act as a cathartic support mechanism through being able to openly share stories with others in similar positions. Third, the striking shared language of solidarity—also used by Philip—to suggest the reciprocal nature of the support they receive. Finally, the power of worship in bringing people within the community together, as Philip also describes, *'being in solidarity with each other and with Christ around the table, that was hugely powerful, hugely powerful, and accepting, and affirming'*.

Four participants emphasised that the trust and affirmation that they had received from their local church community had been an important support mechanism. James, for example, described how in his parish he receives, *'very proactive acceptance from wardens and colleagues and everything else'* and that *'people had much more of a problem when I changed the wine from red to white'*, concluding *'all the*

*sort of people we are told have a problem with, um, same-sex matters and it's just not true'.*

Similarly, Simon, was told by the Bishop that he could not live with his partner because *'the parish wouldn't cope'*, whereas he was told by his parish *'we're so glad you've got somebody'*. Indeed, as James and Matthew described, their congregations have a 'so what' attitude towards their sexuality and for James, they instead place their focus on the meaningful impact that his ministry can have on the local community, *'are you a decent priest? Are you going to say mass, you know, reliably and decently? And you preach? Are you going to visit us in hospital? That's what they're interested in and, uh, I think they're right'*.

Although not a universal experience, these examples suggest a disconnect between bishops' perceptions of congregations adopting a conservative outlook on human sexuality and the reality that congregations place their focus much more on the practical elements of a priest's ministry rather than their personal life.

### **Emphasising a Distinction Between the Church and God**

We described above how the participants all found a way to reconcile their sexuality with their faith, but for all participants, it was more of a challenge to find acceptance within the institution of the Church. One approach adopted by four of the participants was to emphasise a clear distinction between the Church and God. This seemed to help them to cope with the homophobia they encountered, reasoning that whilst the Church may not accept them fully, God always will. It was the Church they saw causing difficulties, as it pandered to the conservative sensibilities of certain factions of the Anglican Communion, refused to re-examine the scripture, or failed to address or challenge prejudice. The participants used strong language to explain the Church's position, describing it in terms of *'hatred'* (Mark), *'cruelty'* (Ed) and *'wickedness'* (Simon), contrasting starkly with their descriptions of God's love for them; Simon, for example, several times linked the word 'gay' with the phrases *'God Accepts You'* and *'God Adores You'*.

Yet whilst making this distinction between Church and God seemed to help the participants to understand the paradox of being fully accepted and truly loved by God, and yet not having the same status as their heterosexual colleagues within the Church, the participants were not able to marginalise the Church altogether. They saw it as a necessary evil, understanding that they needed the Church to allow them to fulfil their vocations. Mark and Matthew both described a *'love-hate'* relationship with the Church, Mark joking: *'I love to hate it!...but I firmly believe that I've got a God-given vocation'*: his relationship with God is unequivocal, but his relationship with the Church is ambivalent—he says *'we're stuck with it, for all its flaws'*.

### **Leaving the Church**

Three of the participants, reached a point where they could no longer find a way to work within the Church, and felt that their only recourse was to leave. Ed, Simon, and Mark all shared their experiences of leaving their employment in the Church

as a consequence of reactions in the Church to their sexuality. Simon recalls his frustration at a Kafkaesque situation whereby he was refused permission to move his partner into his home, stating, ‘*I got a letter from the vicar in which he said it was the bishop’s decision, and then I got a letter from the bishop saying it was the vicar’s decision*’. The refusal of the vicar and the bishop to take ownership of the situation here could suggest an unwillingness to take accountability for a decision that derived directly from Simon’s openness about his sexuality. Simon’s consequent decision to leave the Church to resume his career in education meant losing his community, networks, and home, and would likely have been a serious decision to take at the time. However, it is notable that all three participants who left the Church returned to their ministry, suggesting that their sense of calling is powerful enough to mitigate their experiences of leaving and the Church’s response to their sexuality, through emphasising the vocational aspects of their ministry over the professional.

## **The Institutionalisation of Homophobia in the Church**

The final theme identified concerns reflections on the Church itself and its position of what is arguably institutionalised homophobia. Four related subthemes have been identified: policy as a barrier to inclusion, treatment of gay clergy by colleagues, the concentration of power and authority with Bishops, and complicity and collusion with an unjust system.

### **Policy as a Barrier to Inclusion**

It is unsurprising that participants had strong views on the Church’s policy set out in *Issues in Human Sexuality (Issues)* and the Church’s exemptions to equalities legislation. The participants reported feeling that the continued application of *Issues* and the exemptions are a barrier to their full inclusion in the Church and to the inclusion of other LGB people as both laity and clergy. Simon describes how he feels as a consequence of Church’s position:

that’s where the rage remains for me... and the damage that does to people... and the toxicity of it, um, you know it’s just so embarrassing that the Church is in this place. You know, the Church is getting an exemption from equality legislation has to be, you know, a condemnation of us all really.

The strength of feeling displayed by Simon and shared by most other participants, reveals the powerful emotional impact of the Church retaining its current policy positions in terms of the impact that Simon believes it has on psychological well-being but also the Church’s place in society. Simon’s reflection that the Church’s position reflects as condemnation on everyone in the institution suggests perhaps a sense of regret about the liberal wing of the Church’s failure to win the arguments in favour of equality in the period since *Issues* was implemented and how a seemingly unjust reality is institutionally embedded.

## Treatment of Gay Clergy by Colleagues

Although participants largely initially stated that they had not been on the receiving end of bullying or harassment within the Church, all were aware of others who had. Mark describes an encounter with colleagues on an away day:

there were a group of, sort of, the leading evangelical lights in the diocese who were... talking about who the next bishop might be ... And unfortunately, I walked by at the point at which someone was saying, 'well as long as it's someone who's going to get rid of all the gays, we'll be alright'.

This statement reveals a profoundly homophobic attitude on the part of some clergy towards their gay colleagues that led to Mark fearing a '*gay witch-hunt*' and, following the appointment of a conservative bishop, an environment that '*feels less safe and less comfortable than it did before*'. Mark presents an unsettling experience that demonstrates how openly some feel able to share homophobic views within the Church, regardless of the potential to cause harm to colleagues through creating a fearful environment.

## The Concentration of Power and Authority with Bishops

Participants' lived experiences of working for the Church also seem to depend on the power and authority that bishops have over their diocese and their ability to influence people's appointments, promotions, and disciplinary and grievance processes. Ed, having decided to leave the Church of England for the Church in Wales reflects on how allegations of bullying could be addressed by a bishop:

a bishop who is unsympathetic, unsupportive, a bishop who is... takes a very different theological view on whether it's right for gay people to be clergy, um, you know, and believes that it's a lifestyle choice and something you can change, I don't think it would [take action]... there have been cases where it's been dismissed out of hand.

Ed contrasts this with his situation in Wales where, '*all five bishops and the one who's just retired are all supportive of LGB clergy... I know that I don't have to fear who I am, and I don't have to worry about who I am*'. Similarly, James describes how the formal rebuke he received from his bishop after marrying his same-sex partner contrasted with the revocation, in another diocese, of a colleague's Permission to Officiate when he did the same. These examples highlight the level of autonomy that bishops have to exercise authority within their own diocese and their ability to determine the culture with regard to inclusion of gay clergy as well as to take decisions in respect of their employment.

## Complicity and Collusion with an Unjust System

Although it is clear that participants enjoy their pastoral roles as priests, some reflect on their feelings of how they balance the fulfilment they get from priestly ministry with their membership of an institution that they largely view as unjust. Simon gives a potent description of how this feels:

how much by staying on the inside am I colluding with this system which is so unjust, and um, I think I have to ask myself that question every day, um, and if it becomes too toxic or if I feel the collusion is too high then I will have to leave.

These remarks powerfully encapsulate an almost tragic dilemma that faces several of the participants and the choice that they face in either living out their calling and, in doing so, remaining a member of an institution that restricts their ability to live out their lives fully and freely, or not. Indeed, as Simon concludes, this is his 'existential question'.

The identified themes and subthemes will be analysed in detail with reference to existing theory and research below.

## Discussion

The present study explores the lived experiences of gay clergy who work for the Church of England. Three master themes were identified: the tensions participants' faced between their sexuality, their calling, and their career within the Church, the coping strategies that participants relied on, and the institutionalisation of homophobia in the Church. We now move to a discussion of the themes, in the context of relevant theory and research, and propose implications for research and practice.

The first theme identified broadly supports research that highlights the conflict that some religious LGB people face regarding their faith and sexuality (O'Brien 2004). In contrast to the positive integration of identity participants demonstrated in studies that took place within the LGB-affirming Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) (McQueeney 2009; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000), participants in the present study had varied experiences of the relationship between their faith and sexuality within the Church of England, with some offering stories of rejection by the Church and related groups directly because of their sexuality. This suggests that experiences of the relationship between faith and sexuality may vary depending on the level of affirmation received from the Church, with greater affirmation perhaps associated with a more positive experience of reconciling faith and sexuality. Although this is unsurprising given previous studies that demonstrate a positive association between affirmation and psychological well-being (Lease et al. 2005), this study contributes to further understanding by identifying the importance of affirmation within the specific context of a non-affirming employer. Furthermore, this study identifies that affirmation can be received from non-employer sources, including the local Church community, and that this might offset the perceived lack of affirmation from the Church itself.

Additional support for existing literature can be found in several participants' experiences of internalised homophobia when faced with non-affirming experiences within the Church (Barnes and Meyer 2012; Lease et al. 2005). In the present study, this manifested itself primarily in terms of experiences of fear and the drive to sublimate sexuality under other aspects of identity. However, despite previous empirical research finding no main effect for a relationship between non-affirming religious settings and mental ill health for LGB people (Barnes and Meyer 2012), one participant identified a link between their experience of a lack of affirmation from the Church and their mental health. This suggests that there may be a relationship between affirmation and mental ill health which could be explored in future research.

In addition to the tensions they experienced as gay Christians, the participants faced a number of challenges specific to their role as clergymen within the Church. The participants had all experienced some level of discrimination with their careers in the Church, sometimes overt, such as when they were rejected from jobs because of their sexuality, and sometimes in the form of more subtle discrimination, in the hints that perhaps their application to a particular parish might not be welcomed. The participants were clearly distressed at the discrimination that they received, but the negative impact of this seemed to be mitigated by the vocational nature of their career choices. The idea of 'career development' seemed quite alien to the participants, and none of them appeared to have an interest in promotion for its own sake. They relied on God to tell them what He had in mind for them and as it happened, none of these participants had felt God wanted him to be a Bishop. The fact that the homophobia within the Church barred them from promotion therefore held less practical significance and for these participants, the explicit discrimination, upsetting as it was, did not seem to hurt nearly as much as the social injustice of feeling that they were not fully accepted for who they were.

The participants reported a widespread 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, in which the Church was prepared to turn a blind eye to homosexual behaviour in their priests, on the condition that no-one found out. The participants felt that this was antithetical to God's teachings, preventing them from fulfilling their own vocation, and they found the hypocrisy and secrecy to be profoundly painful. To all participants, God's teachings speak of the importance of accepting people for who they are, being authentic and open, striving for social justice and, in the words of Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury as quoted by Mark, 'radical inclusivity'. Yet the Church, for various reasons, did not seem to apply these principles to its own ministers. The participants acknowledged that many senior individuals in the church were genuinely liberal and inclusive but found themselves in a position of having to prioritise elements within the Anglican communion whom they felt would not tolerate a more open attitude towards homosexuality. Thus they found that the Church, as an institution and as represented by its bishops, was not able to accept them for who they were in the way that God did, and they found this both hypocritical and hurtful.

On top of this, the participants found that the Church's attitude prevented them from fulfilling their vocation. They were not allowed to be fully open about themselves, and this was problematic both because they felt they could not do their jobs as well (as they were prevented from developing open and authentic relationships



with their parishioners), and because they felt forced to be hypocritical themselves (preaching about God's acceptance and then denying their own sexuality). This inevitably led to a difficult relationship with the Church: it was the Church that provided the platform for the priests to fulfil their vocation, but it was also the Church that prevented them from doing it properly. Previous literature has identified that making a distinction between God and the Church, and focusing on God whilst marginalising the Church, has been a mechanism through which gay Christians have managed to resolve the tension between their sexuality with their faith (Thumma 1991; Walton 2006; Woodell et al. 2015). For these clergymen, however, the Church was the means through which they could fulfil their vocation, and thus could not be marginalised.

Another coping strategy adopted by gay Christians who have encountered a lack of acceptance from the Church, is to migrate to a more inclusive denomination in their vicinity (Woodell et al. 2015). The participants from this study, in contrast, more often chose to stay within the Church and seek out others of similar faith and sexuality by joining a group that combined the two, rather than leaving the Church and joining a liberal denomination such as MCC (McQueeney 2009). To some degree, this choice seemed to be a product of the specific nature of their calling, as one participant found when faced with that choice, he felt called to serve all of God's community rather than, as he saw it, restrict himself into LGB-specific ministry.

These coping strategies were not available to these priests. Their vocation meant that they needed the Church to fulfil God's calling and meant that they were not at liberty to look elsewhere to find a more tolerant or accepting place of work. Instead they needed to find a way to accept a 'love-hate' relationship with the Church, as Mark explained '*you just kind of find a way to live with the tension*'. They valued what the Church brought to them and appreciated the opportunity to devote their lives to serving their parishioners, and fulfilling God's plan for them, and tried to find a way to endure the inevitable ills that came with it, finding strength through the support they could find. But for some of the participants, the hurt caused by this lack of acceptance became intolerable.

Notably, three participants shared how they left their employment with the Church—despite living their calling as a priest—as a direct result of their sexuality, and the spiritual, emotional, and psychological impact this had on them. Those who left all chose to work in public service, which echoes previous findings that LGB people are drawn to altruistic motivation in employment (Ng et al. 2012). Furthermore, it could be suggested that in doing so they were living a temporarily unanswered calling and crafting their career by choosing public service (Berg et al. 2010). As all eventually returned to the Church, it suggests that there is a possible gap in the theoretical model in Work as Calling Theory (WCT) whereby it does not account for the long-term pull of calling, even after it has stopped being lived (Duffy et al. 2018, 2019). This contributes to our understanding of calling within this context and is a worthwhile avenue for future research.

The last theme identified concerns the interpretation of participants' comments on the nature of power and authority within the Church and how policy, treatment of other gay colleagues, and action by bishops and the Church can be viewed as collectively institutionalising homophobia. As Ozeren (2014) notes, LGB employees in

the workplace experience a range of discriminatory behaviours at both an individual and organisational level, which can lead to adverse consequences for both individuals and organisations. This study contributes to understanding of workplace sexual orientation discrimination by demonstrating that gay clergy experience both formal and informal discrimination at work (Croteau 1996), with potentially widespread consequences. The continuation of the Church's stance on celibacy for gay priests (The Church of England 1991), and exemptions to the Equality Act 2010 (Clucas 2012), which participants opposed, are examples of the Church acting in a formally discriminatory way in practice, if not in law. Furthermore, participants' recollections of the negative treatment of LGB colleagues in the Church by conservative clergy, suggest that the Church's formally discriminatory position consequently leads to a de facto permission for some priests to informally discriminate against colleagues on the basis of their sexuality. Finally, participants' views on Church hierarchy and bishops' power suggest that those who hold a conservative position on human sexuality may not take seriously concerns raised about the bullying or harassment of gay clergy. Furthermore, gay clergy with conservative bishops may feel uncomfortable disclosing their sexuality (Griffith and Hebl 2002) for fear of the stigma and lack of support they may receive from their bishop (Corrigan and Matthews 2003; Follmer et al. 2019).

Recognising the discrimination that occurs against gay clergy in the Church, several participants expressed their discomfort at devoting their life to the institution. In a secular organisation, such thoughts could be considered to represent a breakdown in the psychological contract (Herriot et al. 1997; Robinson 1996). However, within the context of faith leadership, the psychological contract between the employee and the organisation, is perhaps a secondary consideration to what could be considered to be a 'spiritual contract', between the employee and God. It could therefore be suggested that the 'stickiness' of calling that participants experience as priests within the Church lasts, despite any sense of discomfort with their employment, as a result of the spiritual contract manifest in their employment (Duffy et al. Duffy et al. 2018, 2019). This is not to conclude, however, that this is easy for participants. Indeed, in order to overcome their discomfort with the Church's positions, participants appear to adopt several behaviours such as emphasising their calling to be a parish priest and their personal connection to God and their community (Duffy et al. 2018; Woodell et al. 2015). Alternatively, a minority of participants described how they channel their focus into activism for social justice within the Church and seek to make change from within.

## Implications for Practice

The study's results suggest several implications for how the Church can help support its gay employees. This research demonstrates the strength of feeling held by gay clergy with regard to the current policies which deny gay clergy the right to marry or conduct a sexual relationship (Clucas 2012; Smith 2019). Most participants displayed a level of anger and frustration with the Church and its leaders yet were resigned to the belief that the status quo will be maintained for the foreseeable

future. The primary implication for the Church is that there is a potentially substantial group of clergy who are experiencing low levels of perceived organisational support with potential ramifications for their well-being and commitment to the organisation (Kurtessis et al. 2017). Participants love their work for the Church but wish for it to take greater action to support them through providing them with affirmation, recognising that their sexuality and relationships are as valid as their heterosexual colleagues, and permitting them the opportunity to exercise their full legal rights. These wishes, effectively to change policy and provide managerial support, are congruent with research that shows that such actions make a positive difference to LGB employees in secular organisations (Lloren and Parini 2017; Marrs and Staton 2016) and should therefore be actively considered by the Church.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings from this study need to be interpreted in the light of several limitations. First, as with any qualitative study, the issue of researcher bias must be acknowledged. The first author's lifelong exposure to the Church and personal connection to many gay clergy has had a role in shaping his pre-existing views on the Church's position on human sexuality and these experiences will inevitably have shaped the research process. The participants were self-selecting, and this carries with it a likelihood that the participants had unusually strong views about the topic, perhaps as the result of their own negative experiences. A further quantitative study would allow exploration of the generalisability of these findings. Further studies exploring the experiences of other groups such as gay women or non-white gay clergy in the Church, or to gay men in other denominations or faiths, could be of great interest particularly so for those who identify as part of multiple minority groups, where intersectionality is an important consideration (Cole 2009).

## Conclusion

This study provides what we believe to be the first academic research which explores the lived experiences of gay clergy within the Church and contributes to the literature and the understanding of faith and sexuality within people's careers. In doing so, it has provided an opportunity for some gay clergy within the Church to express their experiences of working for a non-affirming organisation, and it reinforces the findings of previous research on sexuality, faith, and career within a unique setting. In addition, the study provides greater understanding of the strategies used to reconcile faith and sexuality within the priesthood and thus opens up a potential new avenue for the Work as a Calling Theory research. Finally, the study provides qualitative evidence as to how working within an environment of formal and informal discrimination can affect perceptions of wellbeing and organisational support, and the actions that gay clergy feel should be taken to improve their lived experience.

**Funding** None.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** All the authors declares that they have conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Human and Animal Rights** This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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