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"He Just Wanted Me to Do What Was Best for Me": Latter-Day Saint Clergy's Counsel to Sexual and Gender Minorities and Its Impact

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to understand counsel given to sexual and gender minority individuals by clergy in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJCLDS), the impact of that counsel, and individuals' perceptions of meetings with clergy. Twenty-five current and former members of the CJCLDS who identify as sexual and gender minorities (SGM) participated in 30–60 min semi-structured interviews focused on their interactions with clergy in the CJCLDS. Participants reported receiving various forms of counsel, including encouragement to adhere to church doctrine, counsel focused on self-acceptance, messages that clergy would support congregants' agency and self-determination, counsel focused on increasing faith, and no answers. Participants reported a variety of perceptions of meetings with clergy including wishing clergy were more educated on the experiences of SGMs, hurtful experiences, expectations of mistreatment, recognition that clergy are doing their best, and gratitude for clergy. Interactions with clergy had long-lasting and far-reaching consequences including loss of trust in religious leaders, restriction of church membership, disengagement from faith, engagement with faith, nuanced or lost beliefs, and impacts on mental health. Results suggest that Latter-day Saints clergy working with SGM individuals may be experienced as most effective when they provide safe and supportive spaces for congregants to share their experiences, use approaches that focus on self-determination and agency, seek education/training from CJCLDS-specific LGBTQ+ organizations, and recognize that many SGM congregants approach interactions with clergy with trepidation and fears of mistreatment.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; sexual and gender minority; gay; Latter-day Saints; Mormon; clergy; congregation; pastoral counseling; thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Sexual and gender minority Christians—Christians who experience some degree of same-sex sexual attraction, engage in some degree of same-sex sexual behavior, or endorse a same-sex oriented sexual identity (Lefevor et al. 2022)—face significant stress because of their sexual/gender and religious identities. Relative to heterosexual and cisgender individuals, sexual and gender minorities (SGMs) evidence substantial disparities in their physical health (Hafeez et al. 2017), mental health (Lefevor et al. 2018), and suicidality (McGraw et al. 2020). Recent population estimates suggest that nearly half of SGMs in the United States consider themselves Christian (42%; Pew Research Center 2015). These SGM Christians may face an added layer of stress not faced by their less religious SGM counterparts because of discrimination and prejudice happening in places of worship (Crowell et al. 2015; Lefevor et al. 2021a). This stress may render SGM Christians particularly vulnerable and in need of support.

Like their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts, many SGM Christians come to clergy for support in times of stress (Cadge and Wildeman 2008). SGM Christians

seek support for life concerns directly related to their sexuality/gender (e.g., stress from coming out, discrimination), for theological concerns surrounding sexuality/gender (e.g., making relationship decisions, crises of faith), and for life stressors unrelated to their sexuality/gender (e.g., losing a job, moving; Jacobsen and Wright 2014). Accurate and empathic support must be situated in a thoroughgoing understanding of the unique challenges and experiences of SGM Christians.

Christian clergy, however, are often ill-prepared to provide support and counsel for SGM members that are specific to their life situation and needs (Cadge and Wildeman 2008). For some, this ill-preparation may stem from a lack of meaningful contact with SGM Christians (Smith et al. 2009). For others, it may relate to doctrinal stances on same-sex sexuality and gender expression (Olson and Cadge 2002; Whitehead 2017). Despite feeling ill-prepared, many clergy desire to provide support and counsel to SGM congregants (Neiheisel and Djupe 2008).

Congregations and clergy vary in how they address the needs of SGM Christians (Adler 2012; Moon 2014; Whitehead 2017). Some have historically responded by becoming "open and affirming" congregations. For these congregations and clergy, "open and affirming" typically means that SGMs can be full-fledged members of the congregation and hold all volunteer leadership positions open to other members (Chaves and Anderson 2008). Some congregations adopt formal written statements welcoming SGM individuals. Research on "open and affirming" congregations suggests that SGMs may feel more comfortable authentically engaging in these spaces, which may provide clergy with more opportunities to understand the unique experiences of SGM individuals (Lease et al. 2005).

Other congregations want to support their SGM members but feel that becoming "open and affirming" would be inauthentic at best and theologically compromising at worst (Barnes 2013). These congregations are more likely to be affiliated with more theologically conservative traditions of Christianity (e.g., Southern Baptist, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witness). Clergy and congregants in these congregations often distinguish between experiencing same-sex attraction and engaging in same-sex sexual behavior, and between desires for gender-affirming expression versus pursuing a transition, empathizing with the former and condemning the latter.

Leaders in these congregations often struggle to know how to support their SGM members beyond "loving the sinner" and "hating the sin" (Hoffarth et al. 2018). Many clergy feel deeply for SGM congregants and desire their happiness but also feel unsure of their role in ministering to these individuals (Barnes 2013; Cadge and Wildeman 2008). Clergy in these congregations have very few resources either within the church or within the scientific community, as much of the ecumenical discourse has focused on solidifying stances against same-sex sexuality and gender expression outside of that expected for assigned birth sex, whereas much of the scientific discourse has focused on "open and affirming" congregations.

These difficulties may be particularly pronounced in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJCLDS; "Mormons"). The CJCLDS is a conservative Christian faith that holds strong beliefs about the importance of heterosexual marriage and traditional gender roles (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 2005). Like other conservative Christian faiths, the CJCLDS holds that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained by God and that members should honor this commitment with sexual fidelity within marriage and sexual abstinence outside of marriage. Similarly, the CJCLDS holds that gender is an "essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose" (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 2005). Because of these stances, the CJCLDS sees same-sex sexual relationships and gender transitions to be in opposition to God's plan and places membership restrictions on members who pursue either.

The CJCLDS relies on a lay, unpaid, and all-male clergy, creating a unique environment and atmosphere within the faith. Congregation leaders (i.e., bishops) are called to leadership from within the congregation by area leaders (i.e., stake presidents), who are also called to leadership from within their area by more general church leaders. These leaders are

put in place after a vote of confidence by their congregation (i.e., ward) or area (i.e., stake). There are no formal requirements or training for service within CJCLDS leadership, with the dominant resources for CJCLDS clergy being a church-published handbook and the collective wisdom of those around them.

Clergy in the CJCLDS consequently find themselves in a unique position where they are asked to counsel individuals who used to be fellow congregants. Further, they find themselves in the complicated position of enforcing church stances while showing Christlike compassion for individuals they see as deviating from God's path. The CJCLDS has provided no formal resources to guide clergy on how to balance these competing aims, leaving clergy to navigate as best as they can. In particular, clergy are not aware of the breadth of counsel given to SGM LDS individuals, the impacts of the counsel given by clergy, and how SGMs react to clergy's ministering efforts. Understanding these aspects of SGM experiences with clergy is vital to provide much-needed guidance to help clergy more effectively lead their congregations. Educating clergy in turn may help ameliorate the health disparities experienced by SGM Christians (Lefevor et al. 2018; McGraw et al. 2020).

Very little empirical research has examined the interactions between SGMs and clergy in theologically conservative congregations. Substantial work has noted the potential for increased minority stressors in these congregations (Lefevor et al. 2021a) and that many SGMs raised in theologically conservative congregations ultimately distance themselves from religion (Lefevor et al. 2018). Conceptual work has described best practices in ministering to SGMs (Yarhouse and Sadusky 2020a; Yarhouse and Sadusky 2020b), suggesting that clergy focus on identifying the lenses they use in ministry, acknowledging where pastoral care has fallen short, connecting congregants to other resources, emphasizing multiple pathways for holiness, and creating a ministry climate that is emotionally and spiritually safe.

In our search of the literature, we only found one study that empirically examined the experiences of clergy in the context of ministering to SGMs. This study examined which resources were most helpful for clergy. It found that clergy were generally receptive toward any resources but that the most clearly valued resources were those on suicide and homelessness prevention (Raedel et al. 2020).

The present study addresses this lack of resources—and a more general lack of knowledge about counseling SGMs within theologically conservative congregations—through a thematic analysis of interviews of 25 current and former SGM members of the CJCLDS. Our overarching goals in this project were to understand how clergy in theologically conservative congregations can effectively and authentically support their SGM congregants, and the consequences of their support. Because of the large amount of data generated in these interviews, we have divided the results of the interviews into two manuscripts. In the present manuscript, we investigate the following research questions: (1) what kinds of counsel do clergy give to SGM members of the CJCLDS, (2) what are the impacts of that counsel, and (3) what are SGM members of the CJCLDS's perceptions of meetings with clergy? A second, companion manuscript (still unpublished at the moment of publication of this manuscript) explores the reasons why SGMs speak with clergy about their sexual/gender identities and the kinds of counsel these individuals find most and least helpful.

2. Method

2.1. Research Team

The research team consisted of a diverse group in terms of race/ethnicity (Black, Latinx, White), gender identity (cisgender woman, cisgender man, polygender), sexual orientation (gay, queer, bisexual, heterosexual), religious affiliation (Agnostic, Catholic, Mormon), and professional status (1 graduate student, 1 post-bachelor's student, 2 faculty members). The study was conducted according to the APA Guidelines for working with SGMs and religiously diverse individuals (American Psychological Association 2009). The study was approved by the [WITHHELD] Institutional Review Board.

2.2. Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited from a variety of venues. Some were recruited from researcher-maintained participant lists from previous studies (e.g., Lefevor et al. 2021c). Other participants were recruited using community sampling methods using Facebook groups, including Affirmation, North Star, the BYU USGA group, and Mormons Building Bridges. Recruitment occurred from April to June 2021 and resulted in approximately 500 initial respondents. Individuals who responded to the screener survey were asked to provide information regarding their age, sexual/gender identity, race/ethnicity, and current LDS affiliation. LDS affiliation status includes active (fully participating in church activities), less active (occasional or infrequent participation), inactive (no current participation), excommunicated (involuntarily disfellowshipped), and resigned (voluntarily disfellowshipped).

The research team selected a final sample of 25 individuals for interviews by purposively including individuals with a range of ages, sexual/gender identities, races/ethnicities, and affiliation with the CJCLDS. Because relatively few individuals responded to the initial screener in some categories (e.g., participants older than 55, participants of color, transgender and genderqueer participants), the research team first selected participants from these groups to ensure a diverse sample. Other participants were then selected so that there would ideally be at least 3 participants in any given demographic group (e.g., gay/lesbian, cisgender women) with a relatively balanced proportion of participants who were active and less active in the CJCLDS.

The final sample of participants included participants with a variety of ages (M = 36.12, SD = 12.68, range: 21–67), gender identities (32% cisgender women, 56% cisgender men, 12% transgender and genderqueer), sexual identities (52% gay/lesbian, 32% bisexual/pansexual/queer, 12% heterosexual/same-sex attracted, 4% asexual), racial/ethnic identities (80% White, 8% Latinx, 16% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Asian American, 4% Black; participants could report more than one racial/ethnic identity), and degrees of engagement with the CJCLDS (36% active, 40% less active, 8% inactive, 12% excommunicated, 4% resigned). We did not collect information about participants' state of residence; however, all participants resided in the United States. Anecdotally, however, we note that many participants described challenges unique to living within states that have a large LDS population (e.g., Utah, Idaho, Arizona).

Participants completed an informed consent form detailing the confidential nature of the study prior to interviews. The interview itself was no more than 60 min and was conducted on Zoom due to COVID-19. Participants were given the option to use pseudonyms for anonymity for the reported results. Participants were compensated USD 25 for participation. The interview consisted of eight questions (see Table 1). Participants reported their experiences with LDS religious leaders in varying positions, including bishops (head of a single congregation, known as a ward), stake presidents (heads of groups of 6–12 wards, known as a stake), and mission presidents (heads of LDS missions comprising 100–300 LDS missionaries).

Table 1. Interview questions.

1.	Have you ever talked with a bishop, stake president, or mission president about your sexuality/gender?
	a.　　How was it?
	b.　　What motivated you to talk with a church leader about your sexuality/gender?
2.	What kinds of counsel were you given from your bishop, stake president, or mission president around your sexuality/gender?
3.	How helpful did you find talking with your bishop, stake president, or mission president?
4.	Can you describe a positive experience you had with your bishop, stake president, or mission president regarding your sexuality/gender?
5.	Can you describe a negative experience you had with your bishop, stake president, or mission president regarding your sexuality/gender?
6.	How did your experiences with your bishop, stake president, or mission president affect your views of the church and gospel?
7.	What advice would you share with church leaders who want to support LGBTQ members?
8.	Did we miss anything about talking with a bishop, stake president, or mission president about your sexuality/gender?

2.3. Data Analysis

Two members of the research team coded the data independently (one graduate student and one post-bachelor's researcher). Both coders received training on qualitative analysis from two faculty members who served as auditors. The coders met on a weekly basis to code interviews and reach consensus when their codes were not in agreement. Two external faculty members provided supervision and auditing throughout the analysis process to ensure adherence to qualitative analysis procedures and accurate representation of the data. All four authors participated in the creation of themes.

Thematic coding was employed for the analysis. The analysis was not driven by a particular theoretical model, which provided more flexibility to capture complex and rich detail of the participants' experiences. However, inductive essentialist approaches were used to conceptualize subthemes in order to capture the fullness of participants' experiences with clergy, and the meaning which they attributed to these experiences. The coding scheme for the present analysis was based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) six-step approach: (1) become familiarized with the data, (2) generate initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review themes, (5) define and name themes, and (6) write the report.

3. Results

3.1. Counsel Given by Clergy

Participants reported five main themes of counsel given to them by clergy: restrict same-sex sexuality and/or gender expression, follow faith and church policy, no answers, focus on self-acceptance, and focus on agency. These themes are listed in order from most common counsel to least common counsel (see Table 2).

Table 2. Counsel given: themes, frequencies, and codes.

Themes	Frequency (%)	Codes
Restrict Same-sex Sexuality or Gender Expression	20 (80.0%)	Keep Commandments Avoid Queer People/Situations Avoid Pornography Downplay Sexuality Increase Faith to Change Orientation Conceal Identity Treating Orientation as Addiction Break up With Partner
Follow Faith and Church Policy	20 (80.0%)	Church Answers Shared Church Material Consult Authority Focus on Faith Eternal Perspective
No Answers	15 (60.0%)	No Answers Didn't Counsel on Sexuality/Gender
Focus on Self-acceptance	14 (56.0%)	Explore Same-sex Relationships Self-acceptance Treated Same as Heterosexual Normalize Place for You Talk to Another Queer Person
Focus on Agency	7 (28.0%)	Respect Choices Personalized Counsel You Decide

3.1.1. Restrict Same-Sex Sexuality and Gender Expression

Participants reported that the counsel clergy gave to them most frequently was to remain within the boundaries of church policy and follow the commandments by avoid-

ing same-sex relationships and refraining from pursuing gender transitions. Legrande (24, cisgender man, gay, Pacific Islander, active LDS) described being told: "If you're keeping the commandments and if you're doing what you need to do, that won't be a problem". Similarly, Collin (40, cisgender man, gay, Latinx/Pacific Islander, less active LDS) reported: "He just told me that I really need to pray to be able to be celibate".

Clergy also gave instructions to avoid pornography, minimized the importance of sexual orientation and gender identity, and instructed participants to conceal or change their sexual/gender identity. A few participants reported that clergy minimized their sexual/gender identity by approaching it with dismissiveness and failing to address the participants' fears and concerns. Participants also reported that leaders encouraged them to avoid LGBTQ+ individuals and places. Other participants reported that clergy mistakenly assumed that sexual/gender identity issues were the result of looking at pornography. For example, Tyler (29, cisgender man, gay, White, less active LDS) stated: "My stake president sent me [to] a paid pornography addiction thing . . . It wasn't my issue at all".

3.1.2. Follow Faith and Church Policy

Participants frequently reported receiving two kinds of counsel that are best described as following faith and following church policy. Most frequently, clergy counseled SGM individuals to adhere to church policy. Some participants indicated that clergy who followed this doctrine-focused approach provided generic spiritual advice centered on the premise that enough prayer and devotion can solve many issues, including matters of sexual/gender identity. Sara (34, cisgender woman, SSA, White, active LDS) described an example of this counsel: "He said, 'just read the Book of Mormon and it'll stop'". Similarly, Randall (31, cisgender man, pansexual, White, excommunicated LDS) said: "Jesus will fix you, keep going for it . . . do what you have to do and it'll work out". In other instances, clergy shared materials published by the church on sexual/gender identity or sought advice from their superiors before providing counsel.

Less frequently, participants stated that clergy who provided faith-focused counsel de-emphasized the importance of sexual/gender identity and advised participants to focus on their personal relationship with God, to employ "church answers" of studying scripture and praying, or to keep an eternal perspective. Dave (26, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) reported: "[My bishop said] 'Let's not worry about your sexuality for now. Let's focus on your relationship with God first and foremost . . . Then you should be able to wrestle with this question.'" Similarly, Keaton (25, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) indicated: "I would say the most consistent invitation I was given was just to follow the spirit and to stay close to the Lord". Legrande (24, cisgender man, gay, Pacific Islander, active LDS) shared this experience: "For the majority of my bishops, it's been about the gospel, love, the atonement, myself. It's never been about the policies".

3.1.3. No Answers

Participants also frequently reported that clergy were unsure of how to approach issues of sexual/gender identity. Participants reported that clergy openly admitted to their uncertainty or demonstrated reluctance to provide any counsel. For example, Brenda (31, cisgender woman, pansexual, White, less active LDS) reported: "He was unsure about what to say, so he just [said] maybe it's better if you go to a therapist". In a similar situation, Collin (40, cisgender man, gay, Latinx/Pacific Islander, less active LDS) stated: "He basically told me that he didn't really have any answers . . . he hadn't received any guidance". Kate (35, gender nonbinary, queer, White, less active LDS) also stated: "My bishop tried . . . But I think he felt like he was drowning and didn't know what to do".

Several participants reported that they sought counsel from clergy but received no substantive answers. It is worth noting that the majority of participants did not consider a reiteration of church policy to be substantive or adequate counsel, and often considered it the equivalent of receiving no answers. As a group, participants were well versed in church policy, and several expressed that it was not helpful to receive a repetition of

what they already knew. For example, Randall (31, cisgender man, pansexual, White, excommunicated LDS) stated: "[He sent] me pamphlets that I'd already read and was saying to do the things that I already knew," and Brian (32, transgender man, heterosexual, White, excommunicated LDS) said: "I know what the family proclamation is. I had to memorize it and present it three times".

3.1.4. Focus on Self-Acceptance

Some participants reported receiving counsel that was centered on self-acceptance. In these instances, clergy advised participants to accept their experience of same-sex attraction or desire to transition. Counsel ranged from approaches that focused on validating individuals' lived experiences to encouraging congregants to connect with other SGMs to encouraging individuals to explore same-sex relationships and gender transitions. Randall (31, cisgender man, pansexual, White, excommunicated LDS) shared this counsel he was given from clergy: "Look, you need to acknowledge that you are gay and accept that". Similarly, Kristen (47, cisgender woman, bisexual, White, excommunicated LDS) reported: "He had the attitude of anything that straight couples can do, we should be able to do too". Linnea (29, gender nonbinary, pansexual/queer, White, less active LDS) also stated: "He had said that he would rather I not worry about it . . . and be comfortable just coming to church . . . and not blame myself".

3.1.5. Focus on Agency

Participants reported that some clergy highlighted agency by expressing that participants had the freedom and responsibility to make their own life choices. Clergy often refrained from giving direct advice and instead saw their role as supporting participants in navigating through their own situations. Chelsea (48, cisgender woman, pansexual, White, inactive LDS) illustrated this by saying: "My first bishop, I don't know that he really gave me any specific guidance because he just wanted me to do what was best for me". Participants reported that clergy who focused on agency gave counsel tailored to their situations and encouraged participants to trust their decisions. For example, Legrande (24, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) stated: "He made it about me. He didn't make it about him or about trying to fix me. He made it about me and my choice". Similarly, James W. (24, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) stated: "[He] said, 'look, you know what the teachings are . . . figure [out] what you really want in life.'"

3.2. Perceptions of Meetings with Clergy

Participants described a variety of perceptions of meetings with clergy. We identified six themes: thought clergy were prepared, thought clergy responded with love, thought clergy were hurtful, expected mistreatment, thought clergy did the best they could, and thought clergy were allies. These themes are listed in order from most common to least common (see Table 3).

Table 3. Perceptions of meetings with clergy: themes, frequencies, and codes.

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency %	Codes
Thought Clergy Were Unprepared or Prepared	Unprepared	18 (72.0%)	Inconsistent No Training Don't Understand Same-sex/Gender Issues Willingness to Learn Learned or Improved No Resources or Education Experienced
	Prepared	5 (20.0%)	Prepared

Table 3. *Cont.*

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency %	Codes
Thought Clergy Responded with Love		17 (68.0%)	Supportive Loving and Compassionate Open or Honest Comforting Grateful Encouraging Humility Safe
Thought Clergy Were Hurtful		17 (68.0%)	Not Trying to Understand Uncaring Dismissive No Rapport Punishing Black and White Didn't Have Courage Scared Blamed Overbearing Painful Unwilling to Listen Uncaring Dismissive No Rapport Punishing Black and White Didn't Have Courage Scared Blamed Overbearing Painful Unwilling to Listen
Expected Mistreatment		11 (44.0%)	Expectation of Mistreatment
Thought Clergy Did the Best They Could		10 (40.0%)	Doing the Best They Can Helpful or Want to Help Helpful or Want to Help Only Human Doing Duty
Thought Clergy were Allies		10 (40.0%)	Accepting Inclusive Ally Inclusive Ally

3.2.1. Clergy Preparation

Thought clergy were unprepared. The most common reaction that participants had toward clergy was to note their lack of knowledge or preparation. Participants often observed that counsel varied considerably from one church leader to another, with no recognizable standard for how to work with sexual/gender identity issues. Participants also observed that clergy lacked experience and had no formal training. Colleen (48, cisgender woman, pansexual, White, inactive LDS) shared: "It's not like they have actually studied . . . they're trying to do the best they can with what limited knowledge they have". Similarly, Heather (31, cisgender woman, lesbian, White, less active LDS) reported: "I think a lot of good men are generally speaking in these positions. But a lot of times they don't have any experience with people who are queer".

Several participants also noted that clergy did not appear to have a good understanding of the nature of sexual orientation or gender identity. A few participants took on a teaching role with clergy or approached counsel as a mutual learning experience. For example, Chelsea (48, cisgender woman, pansexual, White, inactive LDS) said: "My other bishop, as nice a person as he was, I ended up being the one teaching him". Many clergy members showed a willingness to learn and improved in knowledge over time. In response to their experiences, many participants stated that they wished clergy were better prepared and pursued either formal training or self-education on sexual/gender identity. Heather (31, cisgender woman, lesbian, White, less active LDS) gave this advice for leaders: "There are [LDS] organizations like North Star and Affirmation [that provide] resources for church leaders. Don't be afraid to seek those out".

Thought clergy were prepared. Some participants reported that clergy were aware of sexual/gender identity issues and were prepared to work with SGM congregants. In the majority of these instances, clergy had family members or close friends who were LGBTQ, and these personal experiences informed their views. Brian (32, transgender man, heterosexual, White, excommunicated LDS) stated, "[A] member on that council has a transgender son". In one instance, Jerry C. (59, cisgender man, gay, Asian American, active LDS) described meeting a mission president and his wife: "To my pleasant surprise, they've been doing their research".

3.2.2. Thought Clergy Responded with Love

Participants commonly expressed that clergy were loving, understanding, and supportive. Willingness to listen was prominent within this theme, and many participants reported that their best experiences with clergy involved receiving compassionate responses and counsel. James B. (48, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) described one such experience: "I felt that my bishops have all been kind and loving and have my best interests at heart". Participants also reported that clergy provided comfort, were open and honest with participants, demonstrated humility by admitting they do not have all of the answers, and created a safe space. For example, Kam (22, cisgender man, gay, White, less active LDS) reported: "He said whatever happens, I'll always be in your corner". Similarly, Chelsea (48, cisgender woman, pansexual, White, inactive LDS) stated: "He wanted this to be a place where people feel comfortable and safe and happy".

3.2.3. Thought Clergy Were Hurtful

Many participants reported hurtful or harmful experiences with clergy. The most frequent negative experience reported by participants was that clergy expressed no interest in understanding the participants' experiences. This included little effort to understand the participants' individual experiences, little effort to understand sexual/gender identity issues in general, dismissiveness, an uncaring attitude, and resistance to correction when participants attempted to explain sexual/gender identity. For example, Sara (34, cisgender woman, SSA, White, active LDS) stated: "[He said], 'just don't act on it and don't come talk to me again.'" Similarly, Tyler (29, cisgender man, gay, White, less active LDS) said: "I just felt [his] unwillingness to even want to understand". It is worth noting that the most common harmful experiences participants reported were related to a lack of knowledge and preparation in clergy.

Some participants reported that their leaders lacked compassion. For example, Collin (40, cisgender man, gay, Latinx/Pacific Islander, less active LDS) shared: "He never had any real sort of compassion or advice or anything for me". Participants also reported discriminatory behavior, which involved being treated differently from heterosexual and cisgender church members. This behavior typically took the form of receiving punishments that were harsher or more punitive compared to other church members in similar circumstances. Colleen (48, cisgender woman, pansexual, White, inactive LDS) illustrated this behavior by saying: "There are people that have had a divorce . . . and they're in [the position of a] bishop, but you won't call a gay man who is completely celibate to be in [the position of a]

bishop?" Less frequently, participants reported that clergy made little effort to establish rapport, acted in an overbearing manner, or created situations which made participants feel fear, blame, and pain. For example, Sara (34, cisgender woman, SSA, White, active LDS) reported this experience when she was 13: "[My bishop] said, 'I'll let you go today because I feel like you're young.' I feel like he just brushed it off like it would just magically go away".

3.2.4. Expected Mistreatment

Participants also frequently expressed that they expected to be mistreated by clergy, although most participants did not report experiencing mistreatment. Many participants noted surprise and relief when their interactions with clergy were positive or neutral. Kuhaupio (56, cisgender man, bisexual, African American/Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander/Asian, active LDS) stated: "I feel for people who have been ridiculed in and outside the church by the leaders . . . but I have not been ridiculed all, they've all been kind to me". Nearly all participants who discussed expectations of mistreatment expressed the belief that their positive experiences with clergy were exceptions that fell outside of the norm. For example, Jerry C. (59, cisgender man, gay, Asian American, active LDS) said: "I live a very privileged life that most people in the queer spectrum have not had at church".

3.2.5. Thought Clergy Did the Best They Could

Many participants recognized goodwill in their church leaders. The most common statement in this theme was that clergy were doing the best that they could. For example, Keaton (25, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) observed that clergy had limited training, direction, and resources, but were nonetheless striving to support their SGM church members: "Some of my bishops, I'm sure they were doing the best they could". Jerry P. (67, cisgender man, gay, White, resigned LDS) expressed a similar sentiment: "I had just come to the conclusion that they're just human. They're just men trying to do their calling".

3.2.6. Thought Clergy Were Allies

Participants perceived clergy as allies when clergy did not try to change participants, or when they did not view sexual/gender identity as problematic. Participants reported that clergy who acted as allies advocated for full involvement in their church congregation, to the extent possible. Jerry C. (59, cisgender man, gay, Asian American, active LDS) shared an experience of clergy who exemplified this: "They have reassured me that there is a place for me and other individuals across the queer spectrum". Less frequently, clergy expressed positive views of sexual/gender identity, full support for same-sex relationships, and full support for free gender expression. For Brenda (31, cisgender woman, pansexual, White, less active LDS), allyship took the form of openness to the exploration of same-sex relationships: "He accepted the idea that I want to date women". For Brian (32, transgender man, heterosexual, White, excommunicated LDS) this meant acceptance of gender exploration and transition: "The first time I met with them, I was wearing a skirt. And I've come to this realization: I feel like I'm not wearing the right clothes. [He said] 'there's not a policy about what clothes you can wear to church. I don't care. Wear whatever. Just don't stop coming'".

3.3. Impact of Counsel

Participants reported that the counsel clergy provided impacted them in various ways. Organized from most to least frequent, there were four main ways clergy counsel had an impact on participants: impact on relationships with the church and church leaders, impact on church involvement, impact on faith, and impact on mental health (see Table 4).

Table 4. Impact of counsel: themes, sub-themes, frequencies, and codes.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency (%)	Codes
Impact on Relationship with Church and Church Leaders	Relationship with Church Leaders and Church Community	16 (64.0%)	Positive Perception of Religious People Negative Perception of Religious People Negative Impact on Romantic Relationships Ostracized Outed
	Church Membership and Status	11 (44.0%)	Question Authority Membership Consequences Lost or Risk of Losing Job Sense of LDS Belonging
Impact on Church Involvement	Disengagement	16 (64.0%)	Withdraw from Church or Church Leader Don't Need Church or Church Leaders Left the Church Decreased Desire to Attend Ward Left Mission Moved Away
	Engagement	7 (28.0%)	Increased Commitment
Impact on Faith	Nuanced Beliefs	15 (60.0%)	Shifting Beliefs—Nuance Separated God and Church
	Losing Faith	8 (32.0%)	Shifting Beliefs—Losing Faith
Impact on Mental Health	Negative	12 (48.0%)	Painful
			Damaging Invalidated Angry or Bitter Concealment Depression Felt Rejected Internalized Negativity Suicidality Trauma Bleak, Hopeless Outlook Confusion
	Positive	7 (28.0%)	Increased Personal Understanding Inclusion/Belonging Reassured Empowered Felt Loved Felt More Worthy Found Voice Relief from Anger Increased Self-trust Understood Sexuality Better

3.3.1. Impact on Relationship with the Church and Church Leaders

Relationship with Church Leaders and Church Community. Changes in relationships with clergy and perceptions of church leadership were commonly reported by participants. Interactions with clergy often colored participants' perspectives of the entire church hierarchy. This change in perception of church leadership involved developing overall positive or negative views of church leadership. For example, Helen (21, cisgender woman, lesbian, White, inactive LDS) expressed a loss of trust in church leadership: "I stopped going to church. A big reason for that was big church leadership, like the first presidency and the quorum of the twelve. I just felt like I couldn't trust them anymore". In contrast, Kristen (47, cisgender woman, bisexual, White, excommunicated LDS) found that interacting with clergy increased her confidence in local church leadership: "I do feel that because of my experience with my bishops and the stake leaders, everyone is trying their best and has our best interests at heart".

Less frequently, participants reported changes in their relationship with their church community. Some participants reported that disclosing their sexual/gender identity had a positive impact on their friends, family, and church congregation, typically by fostering openness and closeness. For example, Linnea (29, gender non-binary, pansexual, White, less active LDS) described how revealing her sexual orientation in front of her congregation encouraged other congregants to be open and seek support from clergy. She described the reaction of her clergy: "You changed the dynamic in the ward and got people to talk about tons of different problems". Participants also reported negative changes in their relationship with their congregation as shown by Jerry P. (67, cisgender man, gay, White, resigned LDS): "Immediately it was like I was a leper . . . they would absolutely turn around and walk away [when they saw me]".

Church Membership and Status. Interactions with clergy resulted in changes in church membership and status for several participants. This included disciplinary councils, loss of privileges to visit temples, inability to hold leadership positions in the congregation, loss of approval for mission, or early return from mission. Less frequently, changes in status included the actual or threatened loss of a job if employed by church leaders or excommunication. Again, there seemed to be no consistent standard for disciplinary measures. Dave (26, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) described clergy barring him from visiting temples: "He's been very adamant about the line where he won't let me renew my temple recommend". Collin (40, cisgender man, gay, Latinx/Pacific Islander, less active LDS) described the loss of a leadership position: "He released me from serving with the youth at the time . . . they decided I was never allowed to work with the youth in the church ever again". Participants described these experiences as harmful and exclusionary.

3.3.2. Impact on Church Involvement

Another impact of clergy counsel was a change in the participants' level of involvement with the church. As a group, participants reported both decreased and increased engagement with the church. Engagement versus disengagement was often tied to the extent to which participants felt a sense of belonging in the church.

Disengagement. The most common change in church involvement was disengagement. Participants reported reduced attendance to congregation activities, reduced interaction with other congregation members, reduced willingness to speak to clergy, periods of absence from church activities, or leaving the church altogether. Sara (34, cisgender woman, SSA, White, active LDS) described withdrawing from clergy: "I didn't want to go to any bishops . . . for any kind of help for the next several years. I felt like he doesn't care". Jerry P. (67, cisgender man, gay, White, resigned LDS) described leaving the church: "As long as my relationship with [God] is solid, I don't need the church. I'm much happier outside of the church than I am in the church".

Disengagement from the church often followed negative experiences with clergy and church leadership, negative experiences with other church members, ostracism, lack of support, and inability to hold the same privileges or positions as heterosexual cisgender church members. Brian (32, transgender man, heterosexual, White, excommunicated LDS) described the frustration of not being able to fully engage in the congregation: "Not allowed to say prayers. Not allowed to share my testimony . . . I can get assignments, but I can't have a calling. And so to try to find a purpose within the church and finding my niche in the ward and connecting with people [is hard], you know?"

Engagement. Less frequently, participants reported increased or maintained engagement with the church, typically following positive experiences with clergy. Participants reported engagement as a result of feeling accepted, clergy expressing kindness and understanding, and feeling connected to God. Dave (26, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) stated: "[Bishops] express love for me . . . that has helped me to feel like I can have a place in the church". Stanley (56, cisgender man, SSA, White, active LDS) stated: "[My bishop] just strengthened my testimony". Participants also engaged with the church after receiving counsel to do things on their own terms. Agency-focused counsel often allowed partici-

pants the flexibility to explore ways to find meaning and remain connected to the church while they processed issues of sexual/gender identity. These experiences also supported the belief that SGM individuals can find a place in the church. James B. (48, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) explained what led to his church engagement: "I think [my bishop's] approach in being understanding and kind about it helped me realize I was ok and that he wasn't going to be all judgmental or discipline me. [He] just helped me feel more comfortable in the ward and re-engage, and just really stay involved in the church".

3.3.3. Impact on Faith

Participants reported that their interactions with clergy changed the way they perceived their faith and the church. This occurred in two ways: the development of nuanced beliefs or a loss of faith.

Nuanced Beliefs. The most common impact of counsel on participants' faith was a recognition that faith is complex and nuanced in nature. Most commonly, participants began to view the church as separate and distinct from God and the gospel. For example, Dave (26, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) stated: "The church thing, obviously it has importance, but it isn't quite as important as my relationship with God and the gospel and Jesus Christ". This nuancing included recognition that the church or people within the church are not perfect; that church policy can change; and that matters of faith can have gray areas and answers are not always forthcoming. Chelsea (48, cisgender woman, pansexual, White, less active LDS) illustrated this shift: "People would always hear that people aren't perfect, but the gospel is. And to me, it was usually the opposite . . . The people in my life . . . they've mostly been supportive. It's the doctrine that [is] saying we don't have a plan or a place for you". Similarly, Keaton (25, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) expressed belief in the impermanence of church policy on issues relating to sexual/gender identity: "I feel like the church is an organization, and how they view these kinds of issues is something that changes and is dynamic".

Losing Faith. Participants also reported a loss of faith. This loss included decreased belief in the teachings of the gospel, a lack of confidence in church leadership, and feeling rejected by the church. Collin (40, cisgender man, gay, Latinx/Pacific Islander, less active LDS) expressed a lack of confidence in church leadership: "I'm definitely questioning a lot the leadership of the church. What's right, what's not? When are they speaking for themselves, when are they speaking for God?" Similarly, Eric (24, cisgender man, asexual, White, less active LDS) stated: "To be entirely honest, [I don't have] the highest belief level in the church anymore". Loss of faith in the church and in the gospel were strongly tied to the negative and harmful experiences with clergy discussed above. Experiences of exclusion and impressions that the church has no place for SGMs also contributed to a loss of faith.

3.3.4. Impact on Mental Health

Interactions with clergy had a direct impact on the mental health of several participants. Participants as a whole reported both positive and negative impacts, although reports of a negative impact on mental health were more common.

Negative Impact. Several participants reported a negative impact on their mental health as a result of interacting with clergy. The most common report was painful and damaging experiences. Legrande (24, cisgender man, gay, Pacific Islander, active LDS) stated: "It felt like . . . an indifferent response. I wish they could have done more to support me". Philippa (30, cisgender woman, bisexual, White, less active LDS) stated: "My conclusion when I was 14 [was] that I will simply never be married . . . that really made things bleak". Other examples include triggering or exacerbating psychological disorders and increasing feelings of guilt and shame.

Negative impacts on mental health also included rejection, invalidation, confusion, trauma, and suicidality. Tyler (29, cisgender man, gay, White, less active LDS) reported: "There were several years where I felt unwanted and hurt by the church . . . I think I

felt pushed out of the church itself pretty strongly". Collin (40, cisgender man, gay, Latinx/Pacific Islander, less active LDS) described the exacerbation of existing mental health issues: "It was more detrimental than anything. I was more depressed after having spoken to him that time".

Positive Impact. Some participants reported a positive impact on their mental health as a result of interacting with clergy. The most common responses were an increased understanding of themselves and an increased sense of belonging in the church. Less common responses included reassurance, empowerment, feelings of worthiness and having a voice, feeling loved, relief from anger, and increased understanding of their sexual/gender identity. For example, Chelsea (48, cisgender woman, pansexual, White, inactive LDS) reported: "It was helpful to be able to speak those words out loud and not feel like the world was going to crash down on me or something". Similarly, James B. (48, cisgender man, gay, White, active LDS) reported receiving reassurance as a result of speaking to clergy: "The bishops that I've spoken to in my current ward have been nothing but loving and kind and supportive. [They] actually helped me feel that things weren't as serious as I may have thought. They . . . helped me feel better about it".

4. Discussion

Interviews with 25 SGM LDS revealed several themes in the approaches clergy take to guide SGM congregants, the impact of their counsel, and the ways SGMs reacted to clergy. We describe these themes in greater detail, providing implications for researchers and clergy.

4.1. Clergy Counsel and LDS Theology

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common counsel participants reported receiving was to restrict same-sex sexuality or gender expression. Participants described receiving a variety of "flavors" of this counsel from clear reiterations of church policy about same-sex sexuality and gender expression to more complex counsel to avoid LGBTQ+ individuals and spaces. The variety of counsel participants received on this topic likely reflects the varying degrees of comfort and knowledge clergy had about SGMs and official church doctrine. Many of the responses in this theme represent clergy re-iterating clearly defined LDS doctrine surrounding refraining from same-sex sexual relationships and gender transitions (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 2022). However, many other responses from clergy were not doctrinally supported—such as encouraging SGM to downplay their sexuality/gender, to try and increase faith to change their sexual/gender identity, or to conceal their identity. These kinds of counsel may be particularly damaging to SGMs because they further stigmatize SGM identities and experiences, and may lead to increased cognitive dissonance (Freeman-Coppadge and Horne 2019). There is consistent evidence that internalized negative messages (i.e., internalized homonegativity/heterosexism) are associated with poor physical and mental health outcomes (Bourn et al. 2018; Lefevor et al. 2021c; Morandini et al. 2015; Sowe et al. 2014; Whicker et al. 2017) and that reducing internalized negative views of SGM identities is associated with positive health effects for SGM individuals (Beckstead and Morrow 2004; Israel et al. 2021; Millar et al. 2016; Skidmore et al. 2022a).

Perhaps more surprisingly, most participants also described receiving counsel focused on self-acceptance. Similar to counsel about restricting same-sex sexuality or gender expression, participants described a variety of "flavors" of this kind of counsel. On the more conservative end, participants described leaders treating them the same as heterosexual/cisgender individuals, validating their experiences, emphasizing that there is a place for them, and helping participants understand that their sexual/gender identity is unlikely to change. These kinds of strategies do not challenge CJCLDS theology regarding SGM individuals and could readily be employed by theologically conservative clergy. On the more progressive end, some participants described their leaders employing strategies that are more challenging to CJCLDS theology, including encouraging and even supporting

LGBTQ+ congregants in exploring same-sex relationships/gender transition. The psychological literature is replete with evidence that acceptance of sexual/gender identities or experiences is a key component in the well-being and health of SGM individuals in secular (Rosenkrantz et al. 2016) and conservative religious settings (Beckstead and Morrow 2004).

Much less commonly, participants described leaders who focused on enhancing their sense of agency and self-determination. Clergy who focused on agency tended to emphasize that they would respect SGM individuals' choices or that the individual should decide what is best for them, while clergy take a supportive role. A potential benefit of approaches focusing on agency is that they can relieve both clergy and SGM congregants of the pressure to tackle difficult theological questions and conflicting expectations. Instead, these approaches allow clergy and SGM individuals to meet in a neutral space where they can share the common goal of fostering acceptance, peace, closeness to God, and comfort in the gospel. In this capacity, clergy are able to provide emotional and spiritual support for SGM individuals without directly condemning or condoning sexual/gender identity. Additionally, this approach allows clergy to place their trust in God and the SGM individual to find a solution, rather than taking on that responsibility themselves. The literature on agency/faith-focused ecclesiastical approaches is limited, but a dissertation revealed that clergy from diverse denominations used similar approaches (Baskett 2018).

4.2. Perceptions of Meetings with Clergy: Positive and Negative Experiences

Participants reported both positive and negative perceptions of meetings with clergy. Sometimes participants described feeling love or allyship from clergy, or saw clergy as doing the best they could. Other times, participants saw clergy as unprepared or dismissive, or expected mistreatment from clergy. Both positive and negative experiences were reported by most participants, suggesting that SGM LDS experiences with clergy are complex and neither entirely positive nor negative.

The key components of participants' positive experiences were receiving clear and explicit messages from their clergy that they were loved and valued and that they belonged, followed by actions that demonstrated and validated those messages. These reactions demonstrate that it was important for participants to feel that their clergy were "on their side," had compassion for them, and prioritized their well-being. Clergy demonstrated this by listening, taking an interest in participants' experiences and perspectives, having an understanding and nonjudgmental attitude, and by directly expressing that they love and value their congregants. Some clergy demonstrated allyship by expressing their belief that the church has a place for SGM congregants and advocating for their full involvement in the church. SGM individuals who experience acceptance from their congregations may develop a greater capacity to accept themselves (Barrow and Kuvalanka 2011).

Further, many participants were understanding of the challenges that clergy face in their positions. These participants recognized that clergy were doing the best they could or wanted to help, even if clergy were ineffective in doing so. This understanding of clergy may be informed by the CJCLDS practice of having a lay clergy. Because clergy did not have special training—and may have been neighbors, friends, or acquaintances—SGM individuals may have been more willing to see the humanity of their clergy. This grace may be particularly encouraging given the immense pressure that many clergy feel in navigating discussions about gender or sexuality (Quinn et al. 2016).

Nearly half of participants described expectations of mistreatment by clergy. Often, participants described a positive interaction with clergy followed by an expression of how uncommonly fortunate they were, which demonstrates the perception that most SGM individuals have negative interactions with clergy. One possible reason for this narrative is that it is common for SGM individuals to experience anxieties and fears over how others will react to their coming out (Pistella et al. 2016). This experience is not unique to SGM individuals in conservative religious settings; however, church policies that appear threatening to SGM individuals may exacerbate anxieties about speaking to clergy. Clergy

who work with SGM individuals should be aware that many individuals will experience some hesitancy to talk with clergy due to this narrative.

Some participants expressed that clergy were experienced and prepared to work with issues of sexual/gender identity. Participants typically noted that knowledgeable clergy had SGM members within their family or among their friends. However, consistent with previous research, the majority of participants expressed that a lack of knowledge, training, and preparation in clergy was the greatest obstacle they encountered when seeking counsel from religious leaders (Baskett 2018; Cadge and Wildeman 2008). One possible reason behind the lack of clergy training participants observed is that church materials focus prominently on church policy, but provide less information on the nature, characteristics, and development of sexual orientation and gender identity. Currently, the CJCLDS has no official position on the causes of sexual orientation or gender identity (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 2022). Resources that cover these topics in depth tend to be secular in nature. Clergy may assume that secular resources run contrary to church policy, and may therefore be reluctant to seek out these resources and use them to better understand SGM church members. Ultimately, this creates a gap in knowledge which leaves clergy unprepared to work with issues of sexual/gender identity. A viable solution to this problem is for clergy to seek information from LDS-specific organizations that specialize in issues of sexual/gender identity, such as North Star (www.northstarlds.org, accessed on 1 January 2022) or Affirmation (www.affirmation.org, accessed on 1 January 2022).

An important implication of this lack of training given to LDS clergy is that the CJCLDS as an institution and the clergy as ministers are inherently left exposed. Institutionally, the lack of training may allow clergy to perpetuate harmful practices such as sexual orientation or gender identity change efforts. Individually, clergy's lack of training may result in inadequate or harmful counsel that may increase the suffering of members, potentially leading to longer-term mental health impacts, including suicide. Either of these impacts of a lack of training may open the church up to lawsuits and ultimately not meet its mission of helping its members come closer to Christ.

4.3. Positive and Negative Impact of Counsel

Interactions with clergy had both positive and negative consequences for SGM LDS with respect to their perceptions of religious leaders, their church membership status, their involvement with the church, their faith, and their mental health. Again, the diversity of impacts highlights the complexity of interactions LDS SGMs had with clergy.

Many participants described positive impacts from talking with clergy about their gender/sexuality. Participants who reported positive impacts typically expressed trust and faith in religious leaders as a result. Continued engagement with the church also resulted from interacting with clergy for several participants. For participants who remained active LDS, many reported that talking with clergy allowed them to engage more fully in church and increase their commitment. These participants described feeling more able to be open and out in their congregations, and several reported forming closer ties to friends, family, and their congregation as a result. Emerging research suggests that SGM individuals in conservative religions who experience social support and religious belongingness may be more likely to continue to engage in these congregations and report mental health benefits such as decreased depression and suicidality (Barrow and Kuvalanka 2011; Skidmore et al. 2022c). Similarly, outness may facilitate continued engagement because it enhances feelings of authenticity. A sense of religious belongingness has also been tied to decreased depression and increased life satisfaction (Skidmore et al. 2022c).

Participants who reported positive impacts often also reported positive mental health impacts, increased self-acceptance, connection to faith, and self-determination. Participants associated benefits to their mental health with receiving compassion, understanding, and acceptance from clergy. Research shows that engaging with congregations that are accepting of sexual/gender identity has a positive impact on the mental health of SGM individuals (Lease et al. 2005).

Despite the fact that the majority of participants reported positive personal experiences with clergy, the majority also reported negative impacts as a result of meeting with clergy. Participants described disengaging from the church, losing faith, and losing a sense of religious community. These impacts highlight how critical interactions with clergy are for many SGM Latter-day Saints. Because official church material encourages SGM LDS to talk with clergy if they experience same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 2022), some may talk with clergy when they have just begun to understand their sexuality or gender. Conversations had at this developmental stage may be particularly impactful (Ali and Lambie 2019). The CJCLDS also sees lay clergy as representatives of God (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 2011). Thus, it is also likely that when SGM individuals have negative experiences with clergy, they may generalize these to God and/or other religious people.

For many, negative experiences with clergy were also related to discernible negative mental health impacts. Research indicates that religious/spiritual struggles—which include interpersonal struggles with religious individuals—have been consistently linked to depression, anxiety, and psychological distress generally (Brewster et al. 2016) and in LDS samples specifically (Lefevor et al. 2021b). Similarly, prejudice and discrimination experienced in religious settings have also clearly been linked with negative spiritual and mental health consequences (Gibbs and Goldbach 2015; Skidmore et al. 2022b; Wood and Conley 2014).

4.4. Limitations

As with any qualitative work, these results cannot be generalized to the larger SGM LDS population. The themes described in this analysis can be used to inform clergy of potential issues that may arise when working with SGM congregants; however, further studies are needed to verify the extent to which these themes are prevalent and relevant to SGM Latter-day Saints. Also, qualitative work cannot provide information on causal pathways or their directionality. Future studies are needed to determine whether the strategies clergy use to approach issues of sexual/gender identity are related to specific outcomes. Additionally, although the research team made efforts to recruit a representative sample, too few racial/ethnic minorities were included in this analysis to draw conclusions related to their experience (indeed, very few participated in the screener survey). SGM LDS who are also racial/ethnic minorities may have experiences that are unique, or that may reflect an interaction with SGM and religious/spiritual identities.

5. Conclusions

The present qualitative analysis involved in-depth interviews of 25 SGM individuals who were affiliated or previously affiliated with the CJCLDS. The purpose of the study was to inform clergy of the experiences of SGM individuals in the CJCLDS and their perceptions of working with clergy. The results revealed that the experiences of SGM congregants with clergy are diverse and nuanced. The participants' reports demonstrated that clergy used a variety of approaches in counseling SGM congregants. Participants reported that many clergy were loving and welcoming, providing ample emotional support and advocating for their inclusion in CJCLDS. Participants also reported that interactions with clergy helped them find belonging, strengthened their sense of personal agency, and helped them remain connected with the church and their faith.

Participants also reported that clergy typically demonstrated a lack of knowledge and preparation regarding sexual/gender identity, and sometimes used approaches that were not concordant with either CJCLDS doctrine or best practices in working with SGM individuals. These practices include encouraging SGM individuals to change or conceal their sexual/gender identity and counseling SGM individuals to avoid contact with other SGM individuals and communities. Overall, participants reported that clergy strove to support SGM individuals, but a lack of training and the exclusion of SGM individuals, such as prohibitions to visit temples, undermined the efforts of clergy to be supportive and

inclusive. Based on the findings, we encourage LDS clergy working with SGM individuals to focus on providing a safe and supportive space, fostering inclusion, using LDS-specific educational resources on sexual/gender identity, encouraging congregants to seek support from other SGM individuals, and using agency-focused approaches.

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