

THE LGBT+ DIVIDE IDENTITY, SHAME, AND EQUALITY BEFORE GOD AND THE CHURCH

*Curtis VanderWaal, David Sedlacek,
Nancy Carbonell, Shannon Trecartin,
and Steve Yeagley*

ABSTRACT

Navigating one's sexual and/or gender identity can be a difficult and complex process for Christian LGBT+ youth, leaving many of them at high risk for poor mental health outcomes and self-harming thoughts and behaviors. Seventh-day Adventist families and congregations are just beginning to grapple with how they should respond to their LGBT+ children. This survey of 310 Seventh-day Adventist adult Millennials explored perceived levels of their families' acceptance or rejection of their sexual orientation or gender identity during their teen years. Other variables included recent levels of self-esteem, social support, depression, substance abuse, high-risk sexual activity, and suicidal thinking or attempts. Findings showed generally low levels of family acceptance and support, as well as elevated rates of depression and at-risk thoughts and behaviors. A high proportion of respondents have retained strong spiritual commitment and moderate church involvement. We conclude with recommendations for parents, family, church members, and friends who have LGBT+ loved ones.

INTRODUCTION

Based on the findings of eleven recent national and international studies, researchers estimate that approximately 9 million people, or about 3.8% of the U.S. popula-

tion, self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT+) (Gates 2011). More recently, a large 2014 Pew Research Center report found that 4.7% self-identified as LGB (Smith 2015). The experience of LGBT+ persons in the general population of the United States has been described and studied for several decades. Among other things, these studies have examined the experience of LGBT+ youth when they come out to their families. Facing many of the developmental challenges common in adolescence, they now find themselves also dealing with a stigmatized identity. Many young people dread sharing their sexual orientation or gender identity with their families for fear of rejection, discrimination, and bullying. They have heard the gay jokes and have experienced the hostile tone of conversations directed at LGBT+ individuals. Often, the last thing many would choose to be is LGBT+, and yet they find themselves attracted to persons of the same sex or feel that their body does not correspond with their assigned gender. For many, their greatest fear is that they will be rejected by their family if they come out to them. The strain on family relationships and parent-child conflicts that follow such an event are often overwhelming and traumatic. Studies (Russell and Fish 2016; Thornton, Green, and Benn 2019; Pickles 2019) demonstrate that LGBT+ youth who are not supported by their families experience poorer outcomes later in life including depression, suicide attempts, substance abuse, and poor self-esteem. These harmful health consequences tend to be even worse for ethnic minority LGBT+ populations who face the intersecting stressors of racism plus their sexual minority status.

Christian youth who identify as LGBT+ can face even greater challenges. A Pew Research Center report (Smith 2015) found that almost half (48%) of those who self-identified as LGBT+ also considered themselves to be Christian. While many of these individuals have been raised to love God and do so to the best of their ability, they may have heard sermons condemning gay persons as sinners. In their reading of Scripture, they may have read the texts that call homosexuals an abomination. They may have heard church members conflate homosexuality with pedophilia and mental illness. They often have no one to talk to about this and are left to figure it out alone. In their efforts to *not* be gay they may have prayed that God would make them straight. They may have dated opposite sex acquaintances and even married heterosexual partners. They may have attended change ministries and gone to counseling to try to alter their orientation. Yet

they almost always find themselves unchanged. Many feel shamed and rejected by their community of faith. Some are angry with God for not changing them. Others reject God. Still others find ways to reconcile both their faith and their orientation.

Seventh-day Adventist LGBT+ youth are no exception. If anything, our youth and young adults have even greater difficulty navigating these issues because of the very high behavioral standards of our church. LGBT+ issues have prompted recent discussions in the Seventh-day Adventist church, including the 2015 Summit on Sexuality held in Cape Town, South Africa.

The idea for our research emerged through multiple conversations with LGBT+ students across several venues: The Teen Homelessness Taskforce at Andrews University, AULL4One (the informal support group for Andrews LGBT+ students), classroom settings, and personal conversations. Although LGBT+ family research has been conducted using national samples, the researchers were not able to find any studies that were specific to any church denomination. Many well-meaning church members talk *about* LGBT+ individuals, but few actually talk directly *to* LGBT+ individuals to better understand their experiences and perspectives. For all of these reasons, we believed that the time was right to study the experience of Adventist LGBT+ youth related to coming out to their families.

TARGET POPULATION

The target population for the survey was adults who identified as LGBT+, were between the ages of 18 and 35, and who were raised in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Survey participants did not need to be current members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. We chose this age range to stay broadly within the Millennial Generation and also to create time boundaries for more recent memory of family relationships. We believe this data will be helpful even though this symposium addresses Gen Z—an age cohort whose members haven't all yet reached puberty and the sexual identity challenges concomitant with that.

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT

Following a review of the literature, researchers developed an initial list of questions related to family acceptance and rejection, with a primary focus on teenage years. Some of the questions were adapted from a study conducted by Caitlin Ryan and colleagues (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez 2009; Ryan and Rees 2012) at the

Family Acceptance Project, although their study did not specifically target church-affiliated LGBT+ individuals. Other family acceptance questions were developed based on general themes developed by the researchers. Primary themes included Coming Out to Parents; Family Rejection; Parents' Responses/Consequences; and Impact of Religion. These questions were also reviewed and edited for sensitive language, question clarity, and comprehensiveness (face validity) by selected key Adventist LGBT+ individuals and family members, as well as by selected LGBT+ researchers and allies.

Researchers also identified possible outcomes that might result from family rejection. Outcome variables were selected from a variety of standardized scales previously demonstrated to have strong reliability and validity. They included the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, the Patient Health Questionnaire Depression Screen, selected substance abuse questions from the national Monitoring the Future survey, high-risk sexual behavior and suicidal thoughts/behaviors questions from the Family Acceptance Project Study, questions about religious background and involvement; and various demographic questions. We also included two qualitative questions asking participants to compare their current lives with their teen years, as well as to describe or clarify responses that were not adequately captured in the survey.

DATA COLLECTION

Following Institutional Review Board approval through Andrews University, we used purposive snowball sampling to generate responses within current and former Adventist LGBT+ networks. Anonymous data was collected from July–October, 2016 using SurveyMonkey. A SurveyMonkey link was sent to the following Adventist LGBT+ networks: 1) Intercollegiate Adventist GSA Coalition (IAGC) (iagcadventist.com); 2) SDA Kinship International (sdakinship.org); and, 3) various Adventist LGBT+-friendly support networks. We requested that these groups send out the invitation to complete the survey through various forms of social media (personal blogs, Facebook, email, website announcements, etc.), while at the same time asking those distribution groups and individuals to forward the SurveyMonkey link to other Adventist LGBT+ friends or related networks. Subjects self-screened by reading the email or social media introduction and then proceeding to the link to complete the survey.

While it is impossible to know how many current or former Seventh-day Adventists self-identify as LGBT+, if we were to extrapolate from national statistics (between 3.8% - 4.7% of the U.S. population), it is possible that in the North American Division population of 1.25 million members (Seventh-day Adventist Church 2018), approximately 47,000-59,000 members could self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

SAMPLE

A total of 505 individuals began the survey, with 332 individuals completing substantial portions of the survey and 314 individuals completing the entire survey. Table 1 shows gender at virtually equal responses for Male (45.8%) and Female (44.1%) respondents, with an additional nine individuals (2.9%) identifying as Transgender, three individuals (1.0%) selecting Intersex, and 30 persons (9.8%) selecting Other, which included self-selected categories of “gender-queer,” “agender,” “gender fluid,” “non-binary,” and several other similar variations.

Table 1: Gender

GENDER	% (N)
Male (M)	45.8% (142)
Female (F)	44.2% (136)
Transgender (F→M)	2.6% (8)
Transgender (M→F)	.3 (1)
Intersex	1.0% (3)
Other	9.7% (30)

As Table 2 shows, while over half (55.7%) the respondents identified their ethnic background as White/Euro-American, the remainder were a diverse mixture of backgrounds, with 12.7% Hispanic/Latino, 9.4% Black/African American, 9.1% Multi-racial, 8.8% Asian or Pacific Island, and 4.2% Other. Almost one-fourth (23.9%) of respondents were not born in the U.S., but almost half of this sub-group (46.2) had lived in the U.S. for more than 10 years.

Table 2: Ethnicity

ETHNICITY	% (N)
Hispanic/Latino	12.6% (40)
Black/African-American	9.4% (29)
White/Euro-American	55.7% (172)
Asian or Pacific Island	9.1% (28)
Multi-Racial	9.1% (28)
Other	4.2% (13)

Table 3 tabulates the sexual orientation of those surveyed. When asked about sexual orientation, over one-third (37.9%) identified as Gay, over one-fourth (28.8%) selected Bisexual, one-fifth (20.3%) selected Lesbian, with the remaining 13.1% selecting Other, which included “Pansexual,” “Queer,” “Asexual,” and several other orientation categories.

Table 3: Sexual Orientation

SEXUAL ORIENTATION	% (N)
Gay	32.2% (116)
Lesbian	20.4% (63)
Bisexual	28.5% (88)
Other	12.9% (40)

Table 4 shows that almost one-fifth (18.7%) of respondents were college-aged (18-22 years), almost half (44.6%) were early young adult (23-29 years), and one-third (33.8%) were 30-35 years old.

Table 4: Age

AGE	% (N)
18-22 years of age	18.6% (57)
23-29 years of age	44.6% (137)
30-35 years of age	33.9% (104)
Other	2.9% (10)

FINDINGS

Beyond the demographic information from participants, their responses to the additional questions will be reported here. Some of these will also be presented in tables, while others will simply have the data in paragraph format.

Religious Background and Involvement

Virtually all respondents (97.4%) grew up as Seventh-day Adventists. Respondents said that religion was an important feature their homes, with more than three-fourths (76.8%) describing their family as Very Religious or Spiritual and less than one-fourth (22.8%) saying their home was Somewhat Religious or Spiritual. Currently, only 41.6% identify as Seventh-day Adventist, with almost a third (32.8%) claiming no religious affiliation and another fourth (23.4%) selecting Other (including common responses such as Christian, atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, “Badventist,” and an eclectic variety of religious denominations. Despite having grown up in strongly religious families, only a third (32.1%) of respondents Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they considered themselves to be *religious*. However, three-fourths (73.4%) Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they considered themselves to be *spiritual*.

As evidence for this claim, almost a third (30.8%) said they pray daily, with another one-fourth (23.4%) praying at least weekly. In addition, one-fourth study the Bible or other sacred text (24.0%) or read religious books or journals (23.4%) at least weekly. Finally, almost a third (29.6%) participate in religious services on a weekly basis.

Independent Variables:

Family Acceptance and Rejection

Independent variables for this study include coming out to parents/caregivers, family rejection, parent responses/consequences, and the impact of religion.

COMING OUT TO PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

Respondents were asked how old they were when they first came out as LGBT+ to a parent or caregiver. A third (33.1%) came out during their teen years, with most coming out between ages 16–19 years. The largest group (40.2%) came out between ages 20–29 years, presumably after leaving home, with an additional 6.3% coming out when they were 30 years or older. One-fifth (20.5%) have

never come out to their parents. Table 5 reports some of the thoughts and feelings of those who did come out to their parents. We have combined the Strongly Agree and Agree into one column. We did the same by combining the Disagree and Strongly Disagree in another column as shown below.

FAMILY REJECTION

Table 6 shows generally high levels of family rejection. Respondents believed that most of their parents (81.9%) struggled to accept their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, with two-thirds (65.8%) saying that one or both of their parents responded as if their orientation or identity were as poor reflection on them. Rejection was often manifested in humiliating ways within some families, with 42.1% of respondents saying they were ridiculed by their family for the way they dressed or fixed their hair to express their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In addition, over a third (37.5%) said their family used demeaning language about their orientation or identity, with 20.6% saying their family called them names such

Table 5: Coming Out to Parents/Caregivers

THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS REPORTED	AGREE & STRONGLY AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE & STRONGLY DISAGREE
I felt comfortable coming out to my parents.	11.0%	3.8%	85.2%
I was scared to come out because I knew my family would think I was sinful and/or disgusting.	80.5%	9.6%	9.9%
I knew of my parents prejudice against LGBT+ persons, so it was hard for me to come out to them.	75.8%	7.7%	16.4%
I knew that I would be rejected if I revealed my sexual orientation and/or gender identity to my family.	47.9%	25.9%	26.2%
I was afraid that my parents would disown me if I came out to them as LGBT+.	57.2%	11.0%	31.8%
My family listened attentively as I shared my sexual orientation and/or gender identity journey with them.	41.4%	7.4%	51.2%
My parents were disappointed when I came out to them.	69.5%	16.1%	14.4%
Immediately or very soon after coming out, my parents communicated that they loved me no matter what.	25.9%	7.0%	67.1%
I was forbidden to tell anyone else of my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	42.8%	11.4%	45.9%
When I came out to my parents, I was kicked out of my house.	8.9%	2.1%	89.0%

as “fag” or “sissy.” Almost a third (29.0%) said their parents’ financial support was dependent on them complying with their parents’ wishes about their sexuality or gender.

Finally, almost a third (28.4%) said their family blamed them for any anti-LGBT+ mistreatment they received.

Table 6: Family Rejection

THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS REPORTED	AGREE & STRONGLY AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE & STRONGLY DISAGREE
My parents struggled to accept my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	81.9%	10.1%	8.1%
One or more of my parents responded as if my sexual orientation and/or gender identity was a poor reflection on them.	65.8%	12.8%	21.4%
I was ridiculed by my family for the way I dressed or fixed my hair to express my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	42.1%	10.8%	47.1%
My family used demeaning language about my sexual orientation and/or gender identity after I came out to them.	37.5%	8.8%	53.8%
I was called names such as “fag” or “sissy” by my family.	20.6%	7.5%	71.9%
My parents’ financial support was dependent on my complying with their wishes about my sexuality and/or gender.	29.0%	15.6%	55.4%
My family blamed for my any anti-LGBT+ mistreatment I received.	28.4%	16.2%	55.4%

Table 7: Parent Responses/Consequences

RESPONSES AND CONSEQUENCES	AGREE & STRONGLY AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE & STRONGLY DISAGREE
I was not permitted to associate with any LGBT+ friends.	27.7%	13.3%	59.1%
My parents took me to counseling to try to change my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	26.0%	5.0%	69.0%
My parents took me to counseling to help me understand and accept my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	11.8%	2.8%	85.4%
My parents searched for organizations that would help them understand, support, and accept my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	16.5%	18.9%	64.4%
My parents were open to exploring ways of supporting me as an LGBT+ person.	27.8%	11.4%	60.8%
My parents would defend me if anyone else demeaned or attacked my sexual orientation or gender identity.	26.7%	34.1%	39.2%

PARENT RESPONSES/CONSEQUENCES

Table 7 describes the kinds of responses or consequences that parents or caregivers gave to their LGBT+ children. About one-fourth (27.7%) of respondents were not permitted to associate with any LGBT+ friends. In addition, one-fourth (26.0%) of parents/caregivers took their LGBT+ child to counseling to try to change their orientation or identity. On the other hand, a minority of parents tried to help their child better understand their orientation and/or identity, with over one-fourth (27.8%) of parents expressing their openness to exploring ways to support their LGBT+ child. Further, 11.8% of parents took their child to counseling to help them understand and accept their identity and/or orientation. Similarly, 16.5% of parents searched for organizations that would help them understand, support and accept their child's orientation and/or identity. Finally, around one-fourth of respondents felt that their parents would defend them if anyone else demeaned or attacked their orientation or identity.

IMPACT OF RELIGION

Religion played an extremely important role in how respondents and their families interpreted and responded to issues of orientation and identity. Table 8 shows that religious beliefs triggered feelings of guilt and shame in three-fourths (75.2%) of respondents. Most parents were heavily influenced by their religious beliefs, with 82.4% of respondents saying that religious beliefs led to difficulty in parents accepting their orientation and/or identity.

Almost two-thirds (60.4%) of parents prayed that God would change their child's orientation and/or identity, and well over half (57.0%) of parents used Scripture to try to talk their child out of their orientation and/or identity.

One-fourth of parents (25.0%) took their child to a pastor for prayer and counseling to change their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In contrast, about a third (37.0%) of parents drew upon their religious beliefs to help them understand and support their child's sexual and/or gender journey. Because only one-third of respondents came out to their parents while they were in their teen years, it is likely that these percentages underestimate the behaviors of parents trying to change their children's beliefs.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

The dependent variables in this study focused primarily on the social support provided to the LGBT+ people surveyed. This included support from friends, from family, and from religious people and caregivers.

Social Support

Respondents were asked questions about current levels of social support using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (PSSS). Tables 9-11 show selected social support questions, organized by the categories of Friends, Family, and Caregiver/Clergy/Church. Researchers combined Very Strongly Agree and Strongly Agree responses into the same category in order to better highlight similar results. On either side of the neutral option

Table 8: Impact of Religion

PARENTS AND RELIGION	AGREE & STRONGLY AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE & STRONGLY DISAGREE
When I came out, my religious beliefs triggered feelings of guilt and shame.	75.2%	3.4%	21.4%
Given my parents' religious beliefs, they had difficulty accepting my sexual orientation and/or gender identity	82.4%	7.5%	10.2%
My parents prayed that God would change my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	60.4%	27.1%	12.5%
My parents used Scripture to try to talk me out of my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	57.0%	6.4%	36.7%
My parents drew upon their religious beliefs to help them understand and support my sexual and/or gender journey.	37.0%	18.5%	44.5%
My parents took me to a pastor for prayer and counseling to change my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	25.0%	4.8%	70.2%

a mid-range option was added—mildly agree and mildly disagree. Findings show strong differences between the three categories. Social support from friends (Table 9) was generally strong, with respondents saying they have a special person or friend who: A) Cares about my feelings (69%); B) Is around when I am in need (68%); C) I can talk about my problems (65%); and D) I can count on when things go wrong (62%).

In contrast, family members were considered to be much less available and helpful. Table 10 shows that social support from family was moderate to low, with between 21%

and 42% believing their family was available for support. Respondents Very Strongly Agreed or Strongly Agreed that: A) My family really tries to help me (42%); B) My family is willing to help me make decisions (34%); C) I get the emotional help and support I need from family (24%); and D) I can talk about my problems with my family (21%).

Finally, caregivers, clergy, and religious congregations (Table 11) were generally not considered to be good sources of social support for respondents. Respondents Very Strongly Agreed or Strongly Agreed that: A) I have a

Table 9: Social Support from Friends

FRIENDS SUPPORT	AGREE & STR. AGREE	MILDLY AGREE	NEUTRAL	MILDLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE & STR. DISAGREE
There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	70.0%	14.7%	6.4%	4.8%	4.2%
There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.	69.2%	15.4%	6.7%	5.4%	3.2%
There is a special person who is around when I am in need.	68.1%	15.3%	4.8%	6.1%	5.8%
My friends really try to help me.	66.7%	23.6%	5.4%	1.6%	1.6%
I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me.	65.8%	16.3%	7.0%	5.4%	5.4%
I can talk about my problems to my friends.	64.9%	24.3%	5.1%	3.2%	2.5%
I can count on my friends when things go wrong.	61.7%	24.9%	9.3%	1.9%	2.2%

Table 10: Social Support from Family

FAMILY SUPPORT	AGREE & STR. AGREE	MILDLY AGREE	NEUTRAL	MILDLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE & STR. DISAGREE
My family really tries to help me	34.2%	27.5%	18.5%	8.3%	10.6%
My family is willing to help me make decisions.	34.2%	27.5%	18.5%	8.9%	10.9%
I get the emotional help and support I need from my family.	24.7%	27.6%	8.3%	14.4%	25.0%
I can talk about my problems with my family.	20.5%	27.5%	11.5%	12.5%	27.6%

professional caregiver who is an important support (21%); B) I have a clergy person who is an important source of support (12%); and C) My religious congregation is an important source of support (9%).

In light of the low scores, especially from family members, religious people, and care givers, one good correction would be to inform and assist people whose loved ones are LGBT+. The NAD Commission on Human Sexuality has adapted a resource, in conjunction with Bill Henson of “Lead Them Home.” A specifically “Adventist” edition of Henson’s booklet *Guiding Families of LGBT+ Loved Ones* became available in 2018 free of charge from AdventSource and can be ordered online. This can be used by individuals and groups to improve understanding and social support for LGBT+ loved ones.

HIGH-RISK BEHAVIORS

While Seventh-day Adventists have a strong tradition of abstinence from using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, we asked questions about drug and alcohol use to better understand possible risk behaviors. While we are providing numerical data for high-risk behaviors, no tables are provided for the remaining sections. Almost one-fourth (22.3%) said they used alcohol weekly, with another 17.7% saying they used alcohol between three or more times per week. In addition, 10.0% of respondents used tobacco three or more times per week. Almost 10% of respondents used marijuana weekly or more often. Finally, 14% of respondents said they had passed out or lost consciousness as a result of using drugs or alcohol within the past five years.

We asked two questions relating to risky sexual behaviors (no table provided). Almost one-fourth (22%) had had unprotected anal or vaginal sex with a casual partner or a steady partner who was non-monogamous within the past

six months. Of that group, 4% (12 respondents) had had sex with someone who was HIV positive. We did not ask the HIV status of the respondent.

DEPRESSION AND SUICIDALITY

We asked a series of questions relating to nine standard clinical criteria for depression that occurred over half or more of the days in the two weeks prior to the survey (no table provided). Thirty percent of respondents reported low energy and 29% said they had sleep difficulties. In addition, respondents reported appetite problems (21%), feeling bad or like a failure (19%) and trouble concentrating (19%). Sixteen percent reported anhedonia (the inability to feel pleasure), 14% said they felt down or hopeless, 10% reported moving or speaking slowly, and 5% said they had suicidal thoughts.

We also asked three questions relating to suicidality. Almost one-third (31.7%) of respondents said they had thoughts of suicide or thoughts of ending their life during the past six months. Almost one-third (29.0%) had made a suicide attempt at some point in their life. Of this group, almost a third (29.5%) said that their suicidal thoughts or attempt(s) were related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. These numbers are much higher than the general population (Carroll 2018).

DISCUSSION

There are several limitations that merit a brief mention. The first limitation is that many of the family acceptance variables are measures of the *perceptions* of the participants in this study. While perceptions are important and often shape a person’s reality, it may also be true that parents may not have intended, or even perceived that they had rejected or stigmatized their child. Well-meaning parents, attempting to love their child, may have shared with them their understanding of God’s Word and the

Table 11: Social Support from Religious People and Caregivers

FAMILY SUPPORT	AGREE & STR. AGREE	MILDLY AGREE	NEUTRAL	MILDLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE & STR. DISAGREE
I have a professional caregiver (therapist, healthcare provider, etc.) who is an important source of support for me.	20.8%	13.1%	19.9%	9.9%	36.2%
I have a clergy person who is an important source of support to me.	11.9%	10.6%	11.5%	8.0%	58.0%
My religious congregation is an important source of support to me.	9.3%	10.3%	14.7%	9.0%	56.7%

child may have perceived parental rejection as a result. The difficulties of researching perceptions and their impact on reality can be very challenging. Despite one's best efforts, love can be perceived as rejection. Second, the findings of this study are limited by the memories of the respondents. Memories can be unreliable, but accurate or not, can shape perception and subsequent behavior. Finally, we did not ask questions about the extent of family trauma, including sexual abuse, violence, substance abuse or neglect. Family dysfunction can emerge in all family types, not just those with LGBT+ children, leading to mental health challenges and at-risk behaviors on the part of children in response to those traumas.

With those limitations in mind, this preliminary analysis of the data indicates that many LGBT+ individuals have experienced a great deal of suffering, shame, and rejection from family members and churches as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Although we continue to analyze the comments made by 277 of the respondents in this survey, we have selected a few key quotes to represent some of these challenges. One respondent stated, "After I came out, I was much happier in general but far more isolated from my church community support network. This was particularly devastating as the SDA church was an integral part of all primary and secondary school systems in the area." A common response from many is represented in what one respondent stated when she said: "[Coming out] has definitely changed the family dynamics [which has since] disappeared and there is no longer trust and/or 'real' love in the house. Everything is now dependent on me being, in their words, 'normal.'" Another shared, "[After coming out], my grandmother sent me a letter full of Bible verses. My grandmother does not speak to me now. I am dead to her."

When LGBT+ youth come out to their parents, the conversations that need to occur between them are often difficult, filled with varying feelings of shock, fear, grief, and confusion. Sadly, too many of our LGBT+ youth experience shame and rejection rather than empathy and connection on the very difficult journey that they are on. "My dad lost it," one participant stated. "He said horrible things to me, like he would have preferred I was a drug addict. He said he would pay for me to go to any doctor to cure me. He said I had ruined his life and he would never be able to show up in church again." In the midst of the rejection, it is also possible to see that hurting and confused family members don't know where to turn for help as they try to sort out how best to help their LGBT+ child.

We recognize the courage and strength it takes for a Seventh-day Adventist LGBT+ individual to come out to family and friends, and we particularly wish to thank those who took the time and emotional energy to participate in our research. As can be seen from this study, coming out often results in conflict, emotional pain, and the isolation of LGBT+ individuals. Many will also wrestle with their own, their family's, and their church's understanding of Scripture surrounding LGBT+ issues. They may come to think of themselves as deeply flawed and unworthy of connection with God and others, not for anything they may have done but simply because of who they are. At such times it is important to remember that God still loves and supports them, even as parents and church members wrestle with the meaning of texts about homosexuality. Such confusion can sometimes make it difficult to understand and come to terms with their orientation and/or identity. That said, it is also important to remember that there are a small but substantial group of families who *have* provided support and love to their LGBT+ children, thereby making the difficult journey of coming out less painful and challenging than it might have otherwise been.

In response to our findings, we believe it is important for parents, family members, church members, and friends of LGBT+ youth to understand: (1) that they are not alone; (2) that it takes great strength and courage for an LGBT+ loved one to come out; (3) that their reaction to a loved one's coming out has a direct impact on that young person's wellbeing; (4) that their support and care for their loved one is vitally important, even if they are confused by or uncomfortable with their loved one's orientation or identity; (5) that significant others (parents, families, friends, church members, youth pastors) need to seek understanding and knowledge of LGBT+ issues; (6) that affirming their love for an LGBT+ family member or friend is their first business, not trying to change their sexual orientation or gender identity; and, (7) that it is important for them to communicate to LGBT+ youth that both they and God love them unconditionally, even as they seek to come to terms with that young person's orientation or identity in the context of their religious beliefs.

It is our hope that this research will contribute to the growing awareness of Seventh-day Adventist church members and the larger community of the challenges faced by Adventist LGBT+ youth as they first come to terms with their same-sex attraction and identity. Understanding how LGBT+ children perceive the responses of

parents, friends and church members can help all these groups to develop more caring and helpful responses to the LGBT+ persons they know. In addition, information from this study could aid General Conference, North American Division, and Union and Conference leaders in family ministry positions as they begin to develop resources for LGBT+ persons, their families, and the congregations in which they worship. Such resources would help family members, friends, church members and pastors to be more supportive as we walk this journey with our LGBT+ youth and fellow churchgoers.

The Seventh-day Adventist church would do well to proactively address the needs of its LGBT+ members and their families. Many of our churches are not prepared to welcome with graciousness either one of their own or a member of the community who is same-sex attracted or transgender. Leaving families and young people to figure out and deal with this major life event alone without the faith community's support and love is counterproductive for all. Beginning steps might include learning to listen without judgment, addressing our own fears about sexuality, exploring resources that can help LGBT+ persons and their families, providing the same generous, unconditional welcome that Jesus did with the outcasts of his day, and providing spaces for honest, humble conversations about this difficult issue.

CONCLUSION

If we wish to keep Seventh-day Adventist LGBT+ youth and adults in our congregations, we must create safe, loving spaces for LGBT+ individuals to attend and flourish. We must refuse to use shame and relational disconnection as tools to induce guilt or change or as a form of punishment. This only creates lasting harm. Rather than hearing condemnation, they should be welcomed and included as equals before God and other church members. While everyone in the church may not agree on the interpretation of Biblical texts, all can agree with Jesus that the greatest commandment is to love. While there may be much discussion about how that love is demonstrated, it must start with conversations that make room for greater levels of understanding and compassion. It is only in these sometimes difficult spaces of conversation that long-term change will happen. As we are trying to manifest this love in meaningful ways, we must remind ourselves that we are all beneficiaries of God's continuing grace. This grace can allow us to offer tangible love and support to LGBT+

children and their families, thereby creating safe spaces where all can be embraced as God's beloved children.

Curtis VanderWaal, PhD, MSW, is chair and professor of Social Work at Andrews University and director of the Center for Community Impact Research at the Institute for Prevention of Addictions. A majority of his research is focused on addiction treatment, prevention, faith-based ministries, and LGBT+ issues. He and his wife, Rebecca, a high school English teacher, are longtime Michigan residents.

*David Sedlacek, PhD, LMSW, CFLE, is professor of Family Ministry and Discipleship at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University and director of the MA in Youth and Young Adult Ministries program. He has worked as a clinician, researcher, teacher, pastor, and administrator. Together with his wife, Beverly, he has written a book entitled *Cleansing the Sanctuary of the Heart: Tools for Emotional Healing*.*

Nancy Carbonell, PhD, is professor of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology and coordinator for Clinical Mental Health program at Andrews University. She has specialized in the areas of ethics and multicultural competencies for mental health workers, and group interventions. She and her husband have two married sons.

Shannon Trecartin, PhD, is an assistant professor of Social Work at Andrews University. Her research is focused on the social and built environment as contributors to wellbeing among vulnerable populations. She and her husband, Terry, enjoy traveling and anything related to the outdoors. Shannon co-facilitates a care group with David Sedlacek for students who are LGBT+ on the campus of Andrews University.

Steve Yeagley, DMin, is assistant vice president for Campus and Student Life at Andrews University and adjunct professor of Youth and Young Adult Ministry at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Steve enjoys traveling with his wife, Manuela, a practical theologian and assistant research professor.

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