

**Diabolical Dialogue:
An Investigation into Obstacles and Opportunities
in the LGBTQIA+ Discourse within
Baptist Churches in South Australia**

by

Julie Gardiner

Bachelor of Ministry, Tabor College

Master of Ministry, Tabor College

College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences

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Abstract

This research project originated in a personal dilemma. As a heterosexual, cisgender Baptist pastor in South Australia, I felt ill-equipped to facilitate the LGBTQIA+ discourse in my church and community. The advice from fellow Baptists was homogenous, lacking depth for meaningful dialoguing perspectives fundamental to people's identity and faith. Therefore, this study explores the hindrances and opportunities for the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. This grounded research, based on semi-structured interviews and narratives, includes experiences from Baptists and non-Baptists, including LGBTQIA+ individuals, familiar with the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.

The study found that the prevailing silence towards the LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Baptist community obstructs dialogue. This lack of dialogue is harming LGBTQIA+ individuals and their families. The research uses concepts from dialogue theorists Buber, Gadamer, Bakhtin, Bohm, Said, and Volf and from Theory U and *Dadirri*—the Aboriginal method of deep listening. It shows that shifting from a subject- or ethics- based discourse to a person-centred approach can change dialogue from talking *about* to talking *to* another person. However, dialoguing over differences leads to clashes in perspectives and forces a choice: towards *absence* or *presence* in the dialogue, which entails an uncomfortable sense of liminality. The influence of Scriptural interpretations and the power modes operating in the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches contributed to the discussions being described as monologues rather than dialogue. The research also considers occasions when participants fostered an empathic open LGBTQIA+ discourse. The opportunities and hindrances located through this research inform the recommendations for LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university
2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed

Julie Gardiner

25 May 2024

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I want to express my sincere thanks to my church. You provided a safe space where I found the freedom to express thoughts that I might not have fully expressed elsewhere, and for that, I am deeply grateful. As a diverse congregation with varied theological perspectives, our strength lies in shared practices rather than uniform beliefs. This speaks volumes about our commitment to love and our choice to prioritise diversity over conformity. Your dedication to active listening and willingness to embark on the dialogue journey, even when uncomfortable, has been a source of inspiration. Thank you for fostering an inclusive community.

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Julie Gardiner

Adelaide, May 2024

Note on Style and Editing

This thesis generally follows the *Chicago Manual of Style* 17th edn but uses Australian and UK preferences (e.g. single quote marks). Long URLs are given in full in the bibliography but have been shortened in footnotes. The thesis has been edited in accordance with the revised 2019 Guidelines developed collaboratively between the Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd) and the Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR). The Guidelines reflect the Australian standards for editing practice published by IPEd.

Table of Abbreviations

ABM	Australian Baptist Ministries
ACC	Assembly of Confessing Congregations
BC	Baptist Care
BCSANT	Baptist Churches South Australia & Northern Territory
BC (NSW & ACT)	Baptist Churches of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory
BCSA	Baptist Churches of South Australia
BCWA	Baptist Churches Western Australia
BUNT	Baptist Union of the Northern Territory
BUV	Baptist Union of Victoria
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
ESV	English Standard Version (Bible)
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), intersex, and asexual (or allies)
QB	Baptist Union of Queensland (Queensland Baptists or QB)
Data coding	Q = LGBTQIA+ person; NQ = heterosexual and cisgender person; B =Baptist; NB = non-Baptist; P = accredited Baptist pastor; L = ministry leader within their local church; BC = Baptist Care

Introduction

Our sense of identity—understanding our uniqueness, which differentiates us from others, and our sameness, through which we can perceive similarities with others—enables us to make sense of the world and allows us to find our place in a complex society.¹ Identity, whether referring to an individual or a group, informs our ‘social identification’ and determines the boundaries between *us* and *them*.² When identities have been constructed with differing worldviews and values, there is inevitably a cultural clash, and the discourse often leads to acrimony and division. In dialogue, differences in perspectives are compounded when the perspectives taken are from deeply held values, particularly in matters of faith. This insight is supported by Andrew Marin’s research on the ‘cultural wars’ between the LGBTQIA+ community and conservative Christians.³

This research is titled *Diabolical Dialogue* for a reason. Most people will have seen discordance in the LGBTQIA+ discourse, whether personally experienced or merely by observing the public domain. This ministry practice research study aims to understand and describe the context for the LGBTQIA+ discourse conducted in Baptist Churches of South Australia (BCSA) and its affiliated churches. Understanding the context equips participants and facilitators with relevant information, enabling them to engage in a more informed and

¹ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *What Is Anthropology?* 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 159; Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008).

² Eriksen, 156–57. Nick Hopkins, ‘Identity, Practice and Dialogue,’ *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 18, no. 4 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.954>.

³ Andrew Marin, *Us Versus Us: The Untold Story of Religion and the LGBT Community* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016). Andrew Marin, ‘Winner Take All?—A Political and Religious Assessment of the Culture War Between the LGBT Community and Conservatives,’ *Political Theology* 12, no. 4 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v12i4.501>.

constructive dialogue. It helps to avoid making assumptions or relying on incomplete information. Exploring the context helps identify shared experiences and values, creating common ground for participants. This shared understanding forms a foundation for finding areas of agreement and building on commonalities.

The question that guides this research is:

How is the current LGBTQIA+ discourse being conducted within Baptist Churches of South Australia (BCSA) member churches and what opportunities and hindrances are there to further dialogue?

The research was driven by necessity as I am a Baptist pastor—accredited by BCSA—and the members of my Baptist church express a mixture of theological approaches and biblical hermeneutics when engaging in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Additionally, several LGBTQIA+ persons attend or volunteer in the church’s community projects. My engagement with the LGBTQIA+ discourse was fraught, and I experienced all the known obstacles to facilitating a dialogue over differences in perspectives, including assumptions and the propensity of people to speak *for* me and not *to* me.

I sought advice from BCSA and other Baptist leaders on bridging the gaps in the conversations between the different perspectives manifesting in my church and the community. I received the same general answer about being ‘welcoming’ to LGBTQIA+ persons but ‘non-affirming’ of their lifestyle or LGBTQIA+ theological perspectives.⁴ I felt this approach lacked practical application, primarily because I sought dialogue tools to

⁴ Welcoming-not-affirming is a philosophical and theological stance that upholds heterocentrism and cisgender as the normative expression of human sexuality. Participation in the church community is predicated on adherence to strict behaviour guidelines. LGBTQIA+ persons are expected to adhere to non-affirming theology and those acting on their orientations will be excluded from aspects of the church’s ministry, including ordination. James Nelson, *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. James F. Childress and John Macquarrie, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1990), 271–74. ‘LGBTQ Policy Definitions’ (Crowdsourced database), updated 2018–2022, <https://www.churchclarity.org/score-definitions>; Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

facilitate conversations over difference, and most of the advice seemed preoccupied with orthodoxy. I also wanted to hear from contexts beyond Baptist churches. This is how and why this project began.

There is no data or prior research on the LGBTQIA+ discourse conducted in BCSA and its member churches. Consequently, I only had assumptions about what topics people were engaging with. My aim in the research is to allow the questions to arise from the context rather than deciding the issues and then trying to apply answers to them.

Therefore, this qualitative research takes the form of a grounded theory study on the LGBTQIA+ discourse conducted in BCSA and its member churches. Participation was open to anyone connected with the LGBTQIA+ discourse in South Australian Baptist churches. This included senior leadership within BCSA, the pastors and leaders from BCSA-affiliated churches, members/attendees of BCSA member churches, LGBTQIA+ persons and groups connected to Baptist churches, persons with experiences of discussing LGBTQIA+ issues with Baptists, and participants from Baptist Care (SA), which is an Affiliated Ministry of BCSA. The aim was to discover effective strategies for facilitating conversations between people who disagree over their perspectives. These perspectives often emerge from deeply held sacred values and may form part of a person's identity and spiritual beliefs. The objectives were to map the current conversation in order to understand mistakes that may negatively affect the conversation and to build on the strategies that can foster positive dialogue over differences.

This dissertation first explains who is engaged with the study. Chapter 2 introduces me as the researcher and acknowledges my known biases. It describes the Baptist tradition through its history and church governance structure, then focuses on the Australian state Baptist associations, which together form *Australian Baptist Ministries*. It provides a brief overview of the public LGBTQIA+ discourse of each Australian state body, including the South Australian Baptists. It also explains the rationale for including participants from Baptist Care (SA).

Chapter 3 presents the distinctive concepts introduced by critical dialogue theorists, including Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Mikhail Bakhtin, Edward Said, David Bohm, Jurgen Habermas, and theologian Miroslav Volf. It outlines the commonalities in dialogue theories, including agreeing on a definition, creating a safe, brave space, recognising the inherent risks in engaging in dialogue, and maintaining a commitment to continued conversation.⁵ The chapter also explores the liminal responses to discourse by engaging with Theory U.⁶ It defines 'listening' by examining the practices of 'Dadirri', an Aboriginal method of deep listening and person-centred connection. *Dadirri* involves communal listening, turning listening into a collective process where the community decides on a response based on what they have heard.⁷

Chapter 4 investigates influences on dialogue, in particular assumptions and biases; the effects of monocultures; fear and moral panic; wielding of power in discourse; the significance of theological perspectives on the Scriptures; the effects of hidden identities and stigma; and the transgressing of sacred values.⁸ These influences have specific relevance to the research findings. Chapter 5 outlines the research design, including the research

⁵ Michael L. Kent and Maureen Taylor, 'Toward a Dialogic Theory of Public Relations,' *Public Relations Review* 28, no. 1 (2002), [https://doi.org/10.1016/S036-111\(02\)00108-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S036-111(02)00108-X).

⁶ Claus Otto Scharmer, *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications* (California: Berrett-Koehler, 2018).

⁷ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., 'Dadirri: An Indigenous Place-based Research Methodology,' *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 18, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801221085353>; Roianne West et al., 'Through a Critical Lens: Indigenous Research and the Dadirri Method,' *Qualitative Health Research* 22, no. 11 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732312457596>.

⁸ Nelson, 'Homosexuality,' 271–74. Dawne Moon, 'Beyond the Dichotomy: Six Religious Views of Homosexuality,' *Journal of Homosexuality* 61, no. 9 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2014.926762>. Nigel G. Wright, 'Inclusive Representation: Towards a Doctrine of Christian Ministry,' *Baptist Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2001), <https://doi.org/10.1179/bqu.2001.39.4.002>; Jeffrey A. Paul, 'The Varieties of Religious Responses to Homosexuality: A Content and Tonal Analysis of Articles in Pastoral Psychology from 1950 to 2015 Regarding Sexual Minorities,' *Pastoral Psychology* 66, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-016-0717-1>.

philosophy—critical realism—and the methodology—grounded theory. It also introduces the participants and covers the ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

Chapter 6 is the first of the discussion chapters. I have chosen to integrate results from the data and discussion for ease of reading. It examines the data and reports on the culture of silence surrounding the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. It considers the influence of silence through a triple lens that draws on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Edward Said, and David Bohm's theories on the power implications operating in dialogue. It also explores the equality and mutuality that *Dadirri* brings to dialogue.

Chapter 7 explores the theme of 'us and them' and the different impacts that subject-based or person-centred conversation has on discourse. It engages with the theories propounded by dialogue theorist Martin Buber and theologian Miroslav Volf. Chapter 8 then examines the consequences of initiating dialogue from different 'opinion-places' or viewpoints. It explores the collision of perspectives through Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory on the fusing of horizons. Later in the chapter, the conflict that occurs when dialoguing over difference is explained through Theory U, which explores the way people 'presence' or 'absence' themselves from dialoguing their differences.

Chapter 9 discusses the ways in which theology and biblical hermeneutics influence the LGBTQIA+ discourse. It examines the participants' expectations of the discourse and their approach to dialoguing with those of a different theological stance. It reveals the dominance of the non-affirming biblical hermeneutic on the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. It also investigates Baptist attitudes towards the posture of 'welcome but non-affirming' which highlighted some Baptists' dissatisfaction with a stance that excluded LGBTQIA+ persons from the church. This chapter employs a dialogical pedagogy drawing on David Bohm's examination of tradition as an influence on discourse and Miroslav Volf's framework of a theology of embrace as a framework for discourse. Chapter 10, the last of the discussion chapters, engages with findings from Baptist Care (SA) participants. Baptist Care (SA) has a close relationship with individual Baptists and Baptist churches as the

'hands and feet' of the Baptist social justice and community projects. The participants from Baptist Care (SA) offer a unique perspective to research on the Baptist LGBTQIA+ discourse as they engage in the conversations at an individual and institutional level. The Baptist Care (SA) participants are also conducting the LGBTQIA+ discourse with Baptists outside the local church context.

Chapter 11, the final chapter, discusses the theory that emerges from the research on the way Baptists belonging to BCSA and its member churches conduct an LGBTQIA+ discourse. It engages in a form of dialogical pedagogy that melds the literature from the dialogue theorists and Theory U with the practices of *Dadirri*. It discusses the consequences of the current discourse and suggests recommendations to facilitate dialogue when differences in perspective are essential to one's identity and faith in Christ.

Who Is Doing the Talking: Introducing the Researcher and the Baptists

This chapter explains the Baptist tradition and the influence of both its history and the Baptist distinctives that are the foundational markers for most Baptists. It also explores the influence of the biblical Scriptures and evangelicalism on BCSA and its member churches. The chapter then defines ‘Australian Baptists’ and explains the rationale for limiting the scope of the research to Baptists who are members of BCSA. It discusses the influence of the congregational governmental structure on Australian Baptist Ministries (ABM) and the Australian state-based associations before it examines the relationship between Baptist Churches of South Australia (BCSA) and its member churches. Later in the chapter there is an outline of the Australian state-based Baptist associations’ public statement on LGBTQIA+ related issues.

This chapter also provides an overview of Baptist Care South Australia, which is an Affiliated Ministry of BCSA, exploring its connection with BCSA and its member churches.¹ It reviews the rationale for including Baptist Care participants who joined the study through the ‘snowball’ sampling method, in which existing participants refer new individuals to join the research.² The chapter then proposes that the unique relationship between these organisations positions Baptist Care participants as discerning dialogue partners, offering insights into the LGBTQIA+ discourse within BCSA member churches applicable at both individual and institutional levels.

¹ Baptist Churches of South Australia, *Constitution*, 2021.

² See Chapter 5: Methodology.

Introducing the Researcher

As well as being the researcher, I bring my voice to this study. Therefore, I will explain why I undertook this research project and what my voice will add. I also recognise that I bring conscious and unconscious biases to this study.³ Acknowledging my standpoint increases transparency and adds another layer of accountability to the research.⁴

My career has been primarily in church ministry, and I am an accredited Baptist pastor with BCSA. I am a feminist theologian with a Master of Ministry Degree from Tabor College, Adelaide. I identify as a woman, and I am in a heterosexual marriage. My husband, Daniel, and I have adult sons who are also in heterosexual relationships. My family and I emigrated to South Australia from the UK in 2010. Daniel is also a Baptist pastor, and we job share; however, I am not the pastor's wife. It is difficult to explain 'pastor's wife' unless you have experience in that space; however, I am one of the Senior Pastors in my home church. The church hired me in 2013 partly to reconnect with its local community, which has a strong queer contingent and its own annual pride march. Consequently, LGBTQIA+ individuals began connecting with the church through LGBTQIA+ church attendees, church members with LGBTQIA+ family, LGBTQIA+ advocates, and LGBTQIA+ volunteers. As a local church, we have begun to work on community projects alongside Pride of the South.⁵

³ Rita M Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 15. See Coakley on cultural biases. Coakley states: 'Since it is easy to swim in the tide of prevailing cultural obsessions, it is often, by the same token, surprisingly difficult to identify the hidden current which are pulling those [sexuality] debates in opposing directions.' Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015), 2.

⁴ Ronald J. Chenail, 'Interviewing the Investigator: Strategies for Addressing Instrumentation and Researcher Bias Concerns in Qualitative Research,' *Qualitative Report* 16, no. 1 (2011).

⁵ Pride of the South is a volunteer-based social, support and networking group for the LGBTQIA+ communities of Adelaide's outer Southern suburbs and beyond: Pride of the South, <https://prideofthesouthblog.wordpress.com/>.

However, before our engagement, the congregation had not discussed their theology or praxis on including LGBTQIA+ individuals in the church. I found myself facilitating a conversation between church members—the majority of whom held a non-affirming biblical hermeneutic and praxis that carried the expectation that LGBTQIA+ persons would be expected to agree to—and LGBTQIA+ individuals, not all of whom came from a non-affirming perspective. I wanted to facilitate a discussion between opposing views and not be forced to take sides or decide whose perspective should be included in, or excluded from, the dialogue.

Therefore, this research has particular importance to my own work. I am confronted with the pressing need for a workable framework for dialoguing over differences in perspective. Engaged individuals from all sides of the sexuality and gender orientation debate highly value their own perspectives. For many, this debate is not based on a desire to be ‘right’; instead, it is based on a belief that they must live their identity convictions with integrity. The need, then, for wisdom when navigating the intersection between people in their places of difference directly applies to my own context. My objective is to garner insights from the participants’ experiences, dialogue theorists, and literature and research and bring them into service as tools of facilitation for constructive conversation about firmly held differences that are often intrinsically intertwined with an individual’s sacred values.

Focusing the Research

This research is limited to exploring the experiences and perspectives of the LGBTQIA+ discourse within a Baptist context and concentrating on South Australia.⁶ When

⁶ Beagan and Hattie note that there is ‘scarce’ research on LGBTQIA+ persons experiences in faith traditions outside of Christianity; Brenda L. Beagan and Brenda Hattie. ‘Religion, Spirituality, and LGBTQ Identity Integration,’ *Journal of LGBTQ Issues in Counseling* 9, no. 2 (2015), 92–117; 93; Kathleen M. Sands, ‘Homosexuality, Religion, and the Law,’ in *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 3–18; Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and Sarah-Jane

undertaking a study project, it is at first difficult to navigate the parameters for the research. However, the decision to focus on a Baptist perspective is driven by my personal context. I am a Baptist and a Baptist pastor, I have LGBTQIA+ persons connected with my church, and I am dealing with differing expectations of the way LGBTQIA+ Christians should practice their faith. When I first explored ways to facilitate an LGBTQIA+ discourse in my local Baptist church, I found meagre and inadequate resources from an Australian Baptist perspective. That is why I decided to pursue this area of research.

When I was considering my focused research question, I explored ways in which other denominations navigated the LGBTQIA+ discourse. For example, I examined the Uniting Church Australia's LGBTQIA+ discourse. However, there were significant differences between the two denominations. While the Uniting Church had voted to allow LGBTQIA+ marriages, Baptist in South Australia did not even have a forum for LGBTQIA+ discourse, and what discussions were had were definitely held within a perspective that did not affirm LGBTQIA+ orientations.⁷ As Hannah-Jones's thesis shows, the Uniting Church's LGBTQIA+ discourse stayed in a public and passionate debate because of the influence of multiple factors including that church's conciliar structure, its emphasis on multiculturalism, its covenant with Aboriginal members of the church, its focus on the importance of the individual—and, crucially, the number of LGBTQIA+ persons within the Uniting Church who 'came out' and shared their experiences and advocated for their perspective. As

Page, *Religious and Sexual Identities: A Multi-Faith Exploration of Young Adults* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); A. Tomkins et al., 'Controversies in Faith and Health Care,' *The Lancet* 386(10005) (2015): 1776–80; Juswantori Ichwan, 'The Influence of Religion on the Development of Heterosexism in Indonesia,' *Religion e Incidencia Publica* 2 (2014); Ibrahim Abraham, "'Out to Get Us": Queer Muslims and the Clash of Sexual Civilisations in Australia,' *Contemporary Islam* 3 (2009).

⁷ Avril Margaret Hannah-Jones, 'Divided We Stand: The Sexuality Debate in the Uniting Church in Australia 1977–2000 (2003), Abstract.

Hannah-Jones stated: ‘Without people publicly willing to identify as homosexual, the Uniting Church would never have debated sexuality to the extent that it did.’⁸

The Uniting Church had undertaken extensive preparatory work in the LGBTQIA+ discourse compared with what I had experienced in the discourse among South Australian Baptists. Equally, LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates are hidden in South Australian Baptist churches, and it is difficult to dialogue with the hidden. Consequently, figuring out how to begin implementing the Uniting Church’s recommendations for facilitating the LGBTQIA+ discourse in my South Australian Baptist context proved to be a challenge.

There were also problems with the Anglican and Church of England’s handling of the LGBTQIA+ discourse. For example, researcher Michael Keenan suggests that the Anglican Church suffers from the same problem as Baptists in perpetuating a culture that keeps LGBTQIA+ individuals hidden or silenced. Keenan argues that the Anglicans shape and limit LGBTQIA+ narratives to present homosexuality in a form that is acceptable to Anglicans.⁹ Additionally, Simpkins and O’Donovan, critiquing the arguments during the LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Church of England, suggest that the LGBTQIA+ discourse is based solely in the conservative views of the church.¹⁰ Yet, the Anglican LGBTQIA+ discourse does illustrate the potential institutional problems that LGBTQIA+ discussion creates: a constant fear of splits in the denomination has been reported in the Anglican

⁸ Hannah-Jones.

⁹ Michael Keenan, ‘Conditional Love? Assimilation and the Construction of “Acceptable Homosexuality” in Anglicanism,’ in *Contemporary Issues in The Worldwide Anglican Communion: Powers and Piety*, ed. Abby Day (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁰ Matthew Simpkins and Oliver O’Donovan, ‘The Church of England’s Exclusion of Same-sex Couples from Marriage: Some problems with Oliver O’Donovan’s Influence and Arguments,’ *Theology (Norwich)* 119, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X15623702>.

denomination here in Australia and in the Church of England.¹¹ I sought to understand ways to facilitate the LGBTQIA+ discourse *between* differing perspectives and *with* people of different views. The Anglican LGBTQIA+ discourse seems to bear similarities with the Baptists LGBTQIA+ discourse, particularly with the silencing of LGBTQIA+ perspectives.

Church governance structures influence the LGBTQIA+ discourse as denominations that operate on an episcopal or hierarchical mode may make some decisions but are not self-governing, when compared with congregational churches like Baptists. Equally Baptists are unlike movements such as the Quakers, which are nongovernmental and have no formal clergy and operate under ‘Consensual Decision Making’ characterised by equality.¹² The LGBTQIA+ discourse is significantly influenced by the Baptist tradition and its distinctives because of their importance to many within the local churches. I acknowledge my biases here; they hold personal importance to me. Therefore, I looked for help in facilitating LGBTQIA+ discourse from other Baptists.

However, this also proved difficult because the differences in the context were such that the structure they used did not exist for us. For example, the Baptists in the United Kingdom have forums for LGBTQIA+ discourse that facilitate spaces for the dialogue

¹¹ Susannah Cornwall, ‘Incompleteness, Imperial Legacies, and Anglican Fudge: How Concerns About Gender and Sexuality Affect How Anglicans Do Theology,’ *Anglican Theological Review* (2023); Jordan Baker, ‘Fundamentally Awry’: Bishops Block Move to Reject Same-Sex Marriage,’ *Sydney Morning Herald* 11/5/2022; Harriet Sherwood, ‘Church of England in Turmoil As Synod Rejects Report on Same-Sex Relationships,’ *The Guardian* 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/>; Harriet Sherwood, ‘Church of England Votes in Favour of Blessings for Same-Sex Unions,’ *The Guardian* 10/2/2023; Catherine Pepinster, ‘Evangelicals Fear LGBT Blessings Proposal Would Split the Church of England,’ *Christianity Today* 6/2/2023.

¹² Kärkkäinen; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1080–94; Chad Owen Brand and Norman R. Stanton, eds, *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004); Elizabeth Molina-Markham, ‘Finding the “Sense of the Meeting”: Decision Making Through Silence Among Quakers,’ *Journal of Communication* 78, no. 2 (2014); C. Wess Daniels and Rhiannon Grant, eds, *The Quaker World* (London: Routledge, 2023).

between the differing theological perspectives towards the Scriptures concerning LGBTQIA+ orientations.¹³

Having the dialogue partners does not appear to have changed the trajectory of the UK Baptist movement, which does not allow its pastors to conduct same-sex marriages and faces the same issues of facilitating a contentious discourse that threatens to split the movement.¹⁴ However, there are spaces for an LGBTQIA+ discourse in the UK that accommodates differences in perspectives, which mark it as different from Baptists in South Australia. The biggest obstacle to adopting learnings from the LGBTQIA+ discourse held in the UK, and America, with its loud and vocal Southern Baptist Convention, is that they are

¹³ For example, in 2016 a website called *Something to Declare* was initiated to foster dialogue; 'The Courage to Be Baptist,' *Baptists Times UK*, 6/12/2016, www.baptisttimes.co.uk; There is also UK-based Affirm ('Baptists Together for LGBT Inclusion'), which is a potential dialogue partner: Affirm, 'History of the Affirming Baptist Network,' <https://www.affirm.org.uk>. Until 2023 and the beginning of the Open Baptist Movement, Australia did not have an official affirming Baptist organisation as a possible dialogue partner. *Open Baptists* ('A New Baptist Network'), <https://openbaptists.org/>.

¹⁴ Baptist Union of Great Britain, 'Listening to the National Discernment. Responding to the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013,' www.baptist.org.uk/x; Mark Woods, 'British Baptists and Gay Marriage: Will It Split the Denomination?,' *Christianity Today* 2015, 24 April 2015, <https://www.christiantoday.com/>. Recently, the UK Baptist Union has begun to discuss whether a pastor in a same-sex marriage can be ordained as a Baptist Pastor: Pam Davies, 'Care, Caution and Challenge as the Baptist Union Reflects on Same-Sex Marriage,' *Open Table*, 20 May 2022, <https://opentable.lgbt/>.

not Australian.¹⁵ Culture, along with ecclesiological foundations, profoundly influences the way denominations approach the LGBTQIA+ discourse.¹⁶

Mapping the overarching discourse across the denominations is further complicated by the predominant focus on homosexuality and same-sex marriages, which reduces the dialogue to a limited subset that LGBTQIA+ individuals argue ‘minimises and disparages

¹⁵ To see how culture and geography influence Australian theology see Banks; in one example Banks argues that the outback for Australians is a ‘source for national self-understanding’; Robert J. Banks, *God the Worker: Journeys Into the Mind, Heart, and Imagination of God* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 185; D. Hannah, ‘Experience of Place in Australian Identity and Theology,’ *Pacifica* 17(3) (2004); Marelle Edith Harisun, ‘Power, Polity, and Politics: An Ethnographic Analysis of Theological and Ecclesiological Understandings and the Praxis of Power in the Uniting Church in Australia’, Thesis (Ph.D.)—Flinders University, School of Theology, 2007); Christian Scharen, *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 113–15; Mark Jennings, ‘The Israel Folau Case, Heterodoxy and “Orthodox Sexual Desire”,’ *Journal For The Academic Study of Religion* 36, no. 1 (2023); Anna Halafoff et al., ‘Complex, Critical and Caring: Young People’s Diverse Religious, Spiritual and Non-Religious Worldviews in Australia and Canada,’ *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 11, no. 166 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11040166>; Elaine Lindsay, ‘Spiritual Subversions, Australian Feminist Studies,’ *Australian Feminist Studies* 14 no. 30 (1999).

¹⁶ Todd Nicholas Fuist, Laurie Cooper Stoll, and Fred Kniss, ‘Beyond the Liberal-Conservative Divide: Assessing the Relationship Between Religious Denominations and Their Associated LGBT Organizations,’ *Qualitative Sociology* 35, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-011-9211-3>; Joel Hollier, Shane Clifton, and Jennifer Smith-Merry, ‘Mechanisms of Religious Trauma Amongst Queer People in Australia’s Evangelical Churches,’ *Clinical Social Work Journal* 50 (2022) 275–85; Elizabeth J. Hubertz, ‘Loving the Sinner: Evangelical Colleges and Their LGB Students,’ *Quinnipiac Law Review* 35 (2016); Hannah-Jones; Keenan; Jordan Baker, ‘‘It’s a Sin’: How Sex and Women Split the Anglican Church,’ *Sydney Morning Herald* 18 August 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/>; Lutheran Church of Australia, ‘Human Sexuality: Three Key Issues,’ *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions*, 2014, <https://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr/>; Robyn J. Whitaker, ‘After a Long Struggle, the Uniting Church Becomes the First to Offer Same-Sex Marriage,’ *The Conversation*, 17 September 2018, <https://theconversation.com/>; Mark Jennings, ‘Impossible Subjects: LGBTIQ Experiences in Australian Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches,’ *Religions* 9, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9020053>; S Clifton, ‘Australian Theology,’ in *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource For The Worldwide Church*, ed. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Karkkainen (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

their emerging identities'.¹⁷ Generally, denominations tend to focus separately on the topics of same-sex attraction and gender diversity. The divergent approaches generate an abundance of information that, in turn, posed challenges to conducting a comprehensive investigation into how these denominations conduct the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

Addressing the broad spectrum of Christian LGBTQIA+ discourse is challenging due to its complexity and diverse influences. Therefore, to answer the questions that my context and experiences raised, and to maintain research quality and clarity, this study focuses specifically on the Australian Baptist tradition. This targeted approach allows for a more thorough examination of the specific context, contributing to a richer understanding of the topic within this framework. It also allows me, as the researcher, to respond to the specific nuances raised by Australian Baptists in South Australia.

History of the Baptists

In 2009, Baptists commemorated their 400th anniversary, marking the beginning of a tradition embedded in religious freedom. The early Baptist movement was founded in the United Kingdom on the convictions of its leaders, John Smyth (formerly an Anglican Minister) and Thomas Helwys. They were 'non-conformists' advocating for the separation of Church and State, and Baptists were therefore persecuted for operating outside the state church, the Church of England.¹⁸ Consequently, they fled to Holland to plant their first Baptist church in 1609, returning to London three years later.

¹⁷ Joel Hollier, *Religious Trauma, Queer Identities: Mapping the Complexities of Being LGBTQIA+ in Evangelical Churches* (Cham: Macmillan Palgrave, 2023), 278.

¹⁸ 'Non-conformist has been applied to those people or churches which refused to conform to the doctrines or authority of the Established Church in England, particularly in the seventeenth century. It was applied to Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers and others': Philip J. Hughes and Darren Cronshaw, *Baptists in Australia: A Church with a Heritage and a Future*, ed. Darren Cronshaw (Nunawading Victoria: Christian Research Association, 2013), 104; Michael H. Montgomery, '12 Non-

Smyth and Helwys maintained that believers should have the freedom to practise their faith according to their own consciences, including the ‘believer’s baptism’ for adults who—unlike infants—are able to make a conscientious decision about their faith. It was a belief shared by Roger Williams, who founded the Baptist movement in America thirty years after Smyth and Helwys planted their first church. Baptists were influential in writing the American Constitution, especially the First Amendment, which protects religious freedom.

However, the Baptists’ relationship with slavery was more problematic. The *Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, commissioned by Southern Baptists, concluded that the history of Baptists was ‘intertwined’ with slavery and ‘the commitment to white supremacy’.¹⁹ Baptists were unemphatic about denouncing the injustices tied to slavery. Many influential Baptists throughout the centuries owned slaves, and when English Baptists urged their American brethren to support emancipation following the *Slavery Abolition Act 1833*,²⁰ the predominantly white American Baptists, primarily in the South, declined. They cited a desire to maintain national unity within the denomination as the reason for rejecting abolition efforts and argued that the autonomy of the local church prevented them from addressing the issue.²¹ Centuries later, Martin Luther King Jr. continued to criticise the perpetuation of the status quo, referring to ‘[those who prefer] a negative peace, which is the absence of tension to a positive peace, which is the presence of justice.’²²

Conformist Ecclesiologies,’ in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, ed. G. Mannion and L. S. Mudge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁹ Kevin Jones, *Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018 (<https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/>), 5.

²⁰ (3 & 4 Will. 4. c. 73), passed by the British Parliament.

²¹ T. S. Kidd and B. Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 125.

²² Martin Luther King, ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail: April 16, 1963,’ in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000), 526.

The question whether Baptists prefer preservation of the institution over supporting victims and upholding social justice continues to be debated, as can be seen in the Baptist response to historical and present cases of abuse.²³ Again, there are differences between countries in the way Baptists respond to the issues of sexual abuse. For example, the US Southern Baptists, who commissioned the report into their responses to the allegations of sexual abuse, have been accused of ‘stonewalling’ in tackling the issues of abuse.²⁴ The same arguments used in 1833, which prevented tackling the injustices of slavery, were again used to justify not addressing sexual abuse: protect the institution above the individual and stress the autonomy of the local church in relying upon it to address the problems within its own

²³ Melissa L. Davey, ‘Royal Commission Has Led to More Than 100 Child Abuse Prosecutions, Says Head,’ *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/>) 16/5/2017; ‘The Independent Inquiry Into Child Sexual Abuse,’ Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2021, <https://www.baptist.org.uk/>; Edward Helmore, ‘US Southern Baptist Churches Facing ‘Apocalypse’ Over Sexual Abuse Scandal,’ *The Guardian* 12 June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/>).

²⁴ Guidepost Solutions, *Report of the Independent Investigation: The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee’s Response to Sexual Abuse Allegations and An Audit of the Procedures and Actions of the Credentials Committee*, 2022 (<https://static1.squarespace.com/>); Susan M. Shaw, *Southern Baptist Women on Church, Home, and Society* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 199–201; David Clohessy and Christa Brown, ‘Progress on Sexual Abuse in the SBC? Not So Fast,’ *Baptist News Global*, 24 June 2022, <https://baptistnews.com/>. There have been allegations that the focus on precluding women from ministry and expelling churches for employing women pastors is diverting attention from the sexual abuse claims. Susan Shaw said: ‘The possibility of women’s leadership is such a threat, it has to be eradicated. So rather than dealing decisively with its clergy abuse scandal, the SBC’s annual meeting last month chose to spend its time pummeling women pastors and once again delaying necessary abuse reforms’: Susan Shaw, ‘Southern Baptists Consider Women’s Leadership a ‘Threat,’ *Ms. More Than A Magazine, A Movement*, 7 June 2023; Kate Shellnutt, ‘Southern Baptists Committed to Abuse Reform. What Happened?’, *Christianity Today*, 14 June 2023, (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/>). However, it is also argued that focusing on women is an attempt to stop the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in the SBC; See Andrew Gardner, ‘Southern Baptists Uphold Expulsion of churches with Women Pastors–But the Debate’s Not Just About Gender,’ *The Conversation*, 29 June 2023, <https://theconversation.com/>.

community.²⁵ However, in Australia, the response to the Royal Commission Into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse means that the needs of the individual are prioritised over the institutions.²⁶ BCSA and its member churches signed up for the redress scheme, which takes responsibility for historical abuse and offers support, including but not limited to financial support, to the victims of abuse. The BCSA Assembly vote in 2018 was unanimously in favour of joining the redress scheme.²⁷ This is not to suggest that abuse has always been dealt with correctly by Baptists.²⁸ However, it does indicate a willingness to address, and try to prevent repeating, the mistakes of the past.²⁹

Despite their complex history, Baptists have a heritage firmly established in social justice, as demonstrated by the number of prominent Baptist advocates, who include Martin

²⁵ 'EC [Executive Committee] Trustees were singularly focused on avoiding liability for the SBC [Southern Baptist Convention] to the exclusion of other considerations. In service of this goal, survivors and others who reported abuse were ignored, disbelieved, or met with the constant refrain that the SBC could take no action due to its polity regarding church autonomy – even if it meant that convicted molesters continued in ministry with no notice or warning to their current church or congregation': Guidepost Solutions LLC, 'Report of the Independent Investigation ... An Audit of the Procedures and Actions of the Credentials Committee' (Report, 15 May 2022), 3.

²⁶ *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* (Final Report, Volume 16, Religious Institutions, 15 December 2017, <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/>, 841; K. Wright, S. Swain, and K. McPhillips, 'The Australian Royal Commission Into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse,' *Child Abuse & Neglect* 74 (2017).

²⁷ *National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse Act 2018* (Cth); 'Child Protection National Redress Scheme,' <https://sabaptist.asn.au/redress/>, 2018.

²⁸ *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, 492.

²⁹ For actions to prevent child sexual abuse see *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, (Final Report, Part D, Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Religious Institutions,' 2017), 841, <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/system/>.

Luther King, Mary McLeod Bethune, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Nannie Burroughs, and Helen Barret Montgomery.³⁰

The first Australian Baptist church began in Tasmania in 1835, and the first South Australian Baptist church was started in Flinders Street, Adelaide, by Silas Mead in 1861. Baptists had been worshipping in South Australia since 1838; however, they were fractured by theological disputes. The formation of the Baptist Union of South Australia in 1863 facilitated cooperation and unity among the autonomous churches.³¹ The Baptist church in Australia has its own complicated history with racism, evidenced in its relationship with First Nations peoples.³² Churches have been complicit in massacres and the assimilation of Aboriginal and First Nations peoples. Simultaneously, Baptists have advocated for the rights of these communities — support that spans the period from early colonial times in

³⁰ Sienna Corkill, 'Faithful Advocacy,' *Baptist World Aid*, 6 June 2023; Corkill, Sienna <https://baptistworldaid.org.au/>; Darren Cronshaw, "'Lord Let Me Care": Glimpsing Back to Baptist Approaches to Social Justice' (commissioned as staff resource for strategic direction, Baptist Union of Victoria, 2016), www.buv.com.au/Baptist-identity; Kate Hanch, 'Martin Luther King Jr.'s White Moderates and Moderate Baptists: Moderateness as Betrayal of the Gospel,' *Review & Expositor* 116, no. 2 (2019); photograph, Woodard's Studio, Chicago, 'Mary McLeod Bethune, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Nannie Burroughs, and Others At Baptist Women's Gathering, Chicago,' (New York Library, 1930), <https://www.nypl.org/>; Thomas McCluskey and Elaine M. Smith, *Mary McLeod Bethune: Building a Better World, Essays and Selected Documents* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On lynchings* (New York: Dover Publications, 2014); Traki L. Taylor, "'Womanhood Glorified": Nannie Helen Burroughs and the National Training School for Women and Girls, Inc, 1909–1961,' *Journal of African American History* 87, no. 4 (2002); Helen Barret Montgomery was theologically conservative, which creates debate amongst scholars regarding her feminist advocacy. Nevertheless, she advocated for women's education and women's emancipation. See Kendal P. Mobley, *Helen Barrett Montgomery: The Global Mission of Domestic Feminism* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009).

³¹ Richard Moore, 'Four Hundred Years: The History of the Baptist Church,' (2009), <https://www.baptist.org.au/>; Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003); David Hilliard, "'Baptist Church', SA History Hub, History Trust of South Australia,' (2001).

³² Rev. Graham Paulson, 'Baptists and Indigenous Australians' (International Conference On Baptist Studies, Whitley College, Victoria, 17 July 2009, <https://www.buv.com.au/>).

the days of Baptist minister John Saunders (1806-1859) to the present.³³ Current advocacy for First Nations peoples continues through Baptist initiatives such as Australians Together and A Just Cause.³⁴

Rev. Graham Paulson was Australia's first ordained Indigenous Baptist pastor (1968).³⁵ In a paper presented at an international conference on Baptist Studies, he said: 'We [Baptists] need to turn redemptive analogies into redemptive practicalities.'³⁶ This approach was echoed in the report to the American Southern Baptists on slavery and racism. The recommendations in the report extend beyond a formal apology to include a commitment not to hide the experiences of those impacted by slavery and deep racism.³⁷ There is a stated intention to engage in ongoing dialogue to address injustices of marginalisation and power imbalances, which suggests the relevance of dialogue theory (rather than, say, advocacy). Research on Australian churches, including Baptists, concluded that to engage with the Indigenous community, especially the next generation, it is crucial for churches to provide

³³ Meredith Lake, *The Bible in Australia: A Cultural History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2018); Lyndall Ryan, 'New Evidence Reveals Aboriginal Massacres Committed on Extensive Scale,' *Newsroom*, University of Newcastle (Australia), 16 March 2022, <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/newsroom/>; Ross Langmead and Meewon Yang, 'Multicultural Congregations: A Victorian Baptist Perspective,' in *Crossing Borders: Shaping Faith, Ministry and Identity in Multicultural Australia*, ed. Helen Richmond and Myong Duk Yang (Sydney: Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Ministry, The National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 2006); J. W. Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope* (New South Wales: Albatross Books, 1990). For Baptist advocates see Rev. John Sanders, 'Claim of the Aborigines,' (<https://www.jmm.org.au/articles/20835.htm>: John Mark Ministries, 1838), 95–98.

³⁴ Melissa Lipsett, 'Faithful Advocacy', *Baptist World Aid*, 6 September 2023, <https://baptistworldaid.org.au/>; A Just Cause ('Baptist Churches Speaking Up for Justice'), <https://ajustcause.org.au/>; Cronshaw, 'Lord Let Me Care.'

³⁵ Baptist Union of Victoria, 'Rev Graham Paulson-First Ordained Indigenous Baptist Pastor in Australia,' 2012, <https://www.buv.com.au/news/>.

³⁶ Paulson, Rev. Graham, 'Baptists and Indigenous Australians.' International Conference on Baptist Studies, Whitley College, Victoria, 17 July 2009, <https://www.buv.com.au/>, 13.

³⁷ Jones, 2.

more opportunities for Indigenous leaders to speak.³⁸ These arguments, from diverse perspectives, converge on a common theme that prioritises the need to be in dialogue *with* those who have life experiences, rather than advocacy being *about* the issues.

Baptist Distinctives

The principles of the early Baptist movement laid the foundation for the Baptist distinctives—the core beliefs and practices that set Baptists apart from other Christian denominations. While there are variations in the theological perspectives and emphases among Baptists today, the following distinctives are commonly associated with the Baptist tradition: believer’s baptism; religious freedom and freedom of conscience; autonomy of the local church; the primacy of Scripture; church membership being exclusive to those who have professed their faith and whose lives are evidence of that faith (that is, a person belongs to the church because of a personal conviction and not through living in a Christian society); individual competence, known in Baptist circles as ‘the priesthood of all the believers’, where individual members have the ability and responsibility to interpret the Bible and exercise their faith through the church’s ministries; the separation of church and state; and a commitment to evangelism and mission. There are also two ordinances: adult baptism and the Lord’s supper (Holy Communion).³⁹

Adult baptism is more than an outward sign of an inward faith confession. Baptists believe it is the division between salvation and sin. Hughes and Cronshaw argue that baptism substantiates a ‘strong distinction’ between ‘those who are saved and those who

³⁸ Mark McCrindle and Shannon Wherrett, *The Future of the Church in Australia*, (Norwest: McCrindle Research, 2020), 47.

³⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation: A Guide to Baptist Belief and Practice* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985); Ian Birch, ‘Baptists and Biblical Interpretation: Reading the Bible with Christ,’ in *The ‘Plainly Revealed’ Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*, ed. Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Georgia: Mercer University Press: 2011); Stephen Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, ‘Ecclesiological Traditions,’ in *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 65–66.

are not. They [Baptists] believe that salvation requires a specific commitment to the faith.’⁴⁰ The strength of the personal conviction of faith is in the value of religious freedom and the right of a person to act by their conviction and not coercion. However, the weakness of the ‘saved/unsaved’ dichotomy is that it quickly becomes ‘othered’, leading to the exclusion of those deemed to be sinners.

This has implications for the conversation regarding the inclusion and expression of LGBTQIA+ persons’ faith in a local Baptist church. If the prevailing interpretation of biblical Scripture within a local church classifies actions related to LGBTQIA+ orientations as sinful, this interpretation could potentially result in the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons from participation in the church’s LGBTQIA+ discourse. This exclusion could stem from a misalignment with the doctrinal beliefs of the church, which may be perceived as a barrier for LGBTQIA+ individuals to engage in meaningful conversations or be fully included within the church community.

The autonomy of the local church is a key distinctive in the Baptist tradition. The principle emphasises the self-governing nature of individual churches, signifying their independence from external ecclesiastical authority or hierarchy. Affiliations with a larger Baptist Association (e.g, at a national or state level) are voluntary and do not entail centralised control over the local church. It is the responsibility of the individual members of the local church to corporately decide (usually through voting) its theology and praxis. Senior leaders and pastors are selected by their local church and are subject to the collective will of the church members.

As the church is a collection of equals, the members collectively govern the church. This is a congregational form of governance. However, as Stanley Grenz noted in *The Baptist Congregation*, not all Baptist churches adhere to a congregational governance model. Some

⁴⁰ Philip J. Hughes and Darren Cronshaw, *Baptists in Australia: A Church With a Heritage and a Future* (Nunawading Victoria: Christian Research Association, 2013), 39–41.

are akin to ‘semi-Presbyterianism’, where the leader dominates, or ‘democratic-congregationalism’, where the majority rule.⁴¹ Democratic-congregationalism has possible consequences for LGBTQIA+ individuals engaged in the conversation now happening within Baptist congregations, as they are often in the minority and unable to gather enough votes to have influence. They would need advocates for their inclusion in the LGBTQIA+ discourse to change the power imbalances created by majority rule.

Scripture

Baptists believe in the primacy of Scripture, which asserts the absolute authority of the Bible to inform faith and praxis and is the lens through which truth is tested.⁴² However, Baptists vary in their interpretation of the Scriptures.⁴³ For example, some Baptists interpret the Scriptures concerning LGBTQIA+ orientations as affirming an LGBTQIA+ person’s acting in accordance with their sexual and gender identity. Other Baptists interpret the Scriptures as not affirming LGBTQIA+ orientations and are therefore commonly labelled as ‘welcoming but non-affirming’. It implies that while LGBTQIA+ persons are welcome to come to church, the church community’s doctrines prevent full affirmation or support of LGBTQIA+ identities or relationships. This approach often involves nuanced exclusion for LGBTQIA+ persons in the life and ministry of the church, such as being unable to marry in the church and restrictions in membership, leadership roles, ordination, and certain

⁴¹ Stanley Grenz is a Baptist theologian and ethicist. Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation*, 53–57.

⁴² ‘Baptist Churches of South Australia Constitution,’ 27; Stephen R. Holmes, ‘Baptists and the Bible,’ *Baptist Quarterly (London)* 43, no. 7 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1179/bqu.2010.43.7.003>. Hughes and Cronshaw, 34.

⁴³ Nelson, ‘Homosexuality,’ 271–74.

volunteer positions.⁴⁴ Consequently, interpretations significantly shape discussions about LGBTQIA+ individuals living faithfully according to the Scriptures.

Many Baptists hold to the traditional teachings of the church, found in the Created Order of Genesis Chapter 2, which interprets the Genesis Scriptures through the lens of ‘essentialism’: that is, gender is fixed at birth and heterosexuality is God’s will for humanity.⁴⁵ The question of when the church began to emphasise certain teachings on Genesis and the Creation Myths is a complicated matter beyond the scope of this research.⁴⁶ However, the evidence indicates that essentialism and the public discourse on natural law took centre stage during the Reformation. It was strategically employed as a polemic against ‘popish corruption.’⁴⁷ Protestant theologians actively advocated for marriage, family, and a strict prohibition on non-marital sex. As a result, sexual ethics became a foundation principle of the Protestant Movement.⁴⁸ The impact of the Reformation resulted in the

⁴⁴ Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality*; Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015); Church Clarity.

⁴⁵ J. Piper and W. Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006); B. D. Ellis, *the Philosophy of Nature: A Guide to the New Essentialism* (Chesham, England: Acumen, 2002); Constance R. Sullivan-Blum, ‘“The Natural Order of Creation”: Naturalizing Discourses in the Christian Same-Sex Marriage Debate,’ *Anthropologica* 48, no. 2 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.2307/25605311>; Terry S. Stein, ‘Social Constructionism and Essentialism: Theoretical and Clinical Considerations Relevant to Psychotherapy,’ *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy* 2, no. 4 (1998): 33, https://doi.org/10.1300/J236v02n04_04.

⁴⁶ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015); Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Petersen, eds, *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (Boston: Brill, 2012). For a different perspective on the Creation Myths, from a Jewish tradition, see Greenberg, the first openly gay Orthodox-ordained Jewish Rabbi: Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

⁴⁷ Faramerz Dabhoiwala, ‘Lust and Liberty,’ *Past & Present* 207, no. 1 (2010): 142.

⁴⁸ D. MacCulloch, ‘Reformation Time and Sexual Revolution,’ *New England Review* (1990-) 24, no 4 (2003). To understand the difference the Reformation made to the LGBTQIA+ discourse, see its impact on the difference between Orthodox and Protestant traditions. As Arentzen et al. said: ‘In theological

teachings on Genesis 2 and the rest of the Creation Myths drawing on a particular set of doctrines within the broader scope of the Bible. This marks a notable difference in the traditional teachings of Genesis between Protestant and Eastern Orthodox scholars. For example, Arentzen and Purpura argue:

In theological trajectory the Orthodox Church differs radically from the Protestant denominations that emerged from the Reformation. Whereas, the latter are leaning on the foundations of a single biblical corpus, Orthodox theologizing cannot rely on one voice or one library of texts but needs to engage the whole complex heritage of the Church.⁴⁹

However, essentialism is the most common ontological stance in Western Protestantism, and it reinforces the conviction in heterosexual relationships and the concept that the fundamental purpose of human sexuality is procreation.⁵⁰ It also maintains that biology assigns gender based on observable physical characteristics typically categorised as male or female at birth. However, gender is not only physical, as it can include assigning roles that the genders may or may not perform. Gender roles are debated within the Baptist movement as there are Baptists who hold a complementarian view—that is, they believe in male headship, patriarchy, and a prohibition on women in leadership—as well as egalitarians, who maintain there is no distinction in roles due to gender, as people are made in the image of God. Consequently, egalitarians do not assign roles or a power hierarchy

trajectory the Orthodox Church differs radically from the Protestant denominations that emerged from the Reformation. Whereas, the latter are leaning on the foundations of a single biblical corpus, Orthodox theologizing cannot rely on one voice or one library of texts but needs to engage the whole complex heritage of the Church': Thomas Arentzen, Ashley M. Purpura, and Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Orthodox Tradition and Human Sexuality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 9; Bryce Rich, 'Tradition or Traditions? the Case of Sex and Gender,' in *For I Am Wonderfully Made: Texts on Eastern Orthodoxy and LGBT Inclusion*, ed. Misha Cherniak, Olga Gerassimenko, and Michael Brinkschröder (Esuberanza Publishing).

⁴⁹ Walton; Protestant theologians promoted, marriage, family, and strict prohibition on non-marital sex; See, Dabhoiwala, 142; MacCulloch..

⁵⁰ Bob Pease, *Undoing Privilege: Unearned Advantage in a Divided World* (London: Zed Books, 2021), 129–33; Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

according to gender.⁵¹ There are both complementarian and egalitarian Baptist churches in South Australia.

Essentialists fundamentally differ from social constructivists, who view human development, including gender identity and sexual orientation as socially situated, and knowledge as constructed through interaction with others.⁵² Therefore, gender identity and sexual orientation are neither binary nor biologically predisposed. Social constructivism recognises that gender and sexual identity are more complex and personal aspects of a person's identity that may not always align with the sex assigned at birth.

Traditional church teachings on sexual and gender orientations assert that acting upon LGBTQIA+ identities is inconsistent with Scripture. This perspective significantly influences discussions about inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals within Baptist churches. For example, in research conducted by Flood and Hamilton mapping homophobia in Australia, Baptists were identified as 'the least tolerant' denomination regarding homosexuality (based on 2005 data from the Australia Institute).⁵³ To date, no further research has been conducted to track changes in Baptist attitudes. However, that study does suggest that Scripture has in the recent past, and may still, influence attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ individuals. The perceived

⁵¹ James R. Beck, *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); John G. Stackhouse, *Partners in Christ: A Conservative Case for Egalitarianism* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015); Tara K. Soughers, 'Made in the Image and Likeness of God,' in *Beyond a Binary God: A Theology for Trans* Allies* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018).

⁵² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999); Daniel R. Patterson, *Reforming a Theology of Gender: Constructive Reflections on Judith Butler and Queer Theory* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2022); Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, 'Doing Gender,' *Gender & Society* 1, no. 2 (1987), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002>; Gary L. Anderson and Janelle Scott, 'Toward an Intersectional Understanding of Process Causality and Social Context,' *Qualitative Inquiry* 18, no. 8 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800412452857>.

⁵³ Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton, *Mapping Homophobia in Australia* (Canberra: Australia Institute, 2005), <http://www.tai.org.au/node/1213>; The mapping of homophobia in Australia used data that Roy Morgan Research had compiled from self-completion interviews from 24,718 respondents aged 14 and over.

intolerance revealed by the research may be attributed to the Scriptural perspective held by Baptist churches, where membership often requires agreement with the local church's interpretation.⁵⁴ Consequently, individuals within Baptist churches who identify as LGBTQIA+ are typically expected to adhere to the church's traditional sexual ethic, which may be incongruent with their own sexual or gender identity.⁵⁵

However, Flood and Hamilton's research highlights the complexity of the issue, as it also showed (this time within the Catholic faith community) a marked difference between the denomination's position on LGBTQIA+ orientations and 'the everyday beliefs and values of those people who share its faith'.⁵⁶ A similar finding was seen in research on major Protestant denominations in America. Clergy admitted avoiding advocacy for LGBTQIA+ affirming theology, fearing their congregations would not agree with their stance. Yet this was not always the case; the clergy had misjudged the level of support for LGBTQIA+ persons among the rank-and-file members.⁵⁷ These findings underline the need for research into the lived experiences of the individual members of the Baptist faith community to see whether the Baptist church's official position reflects its members' attitudes.

Evangelicalism

Research indicates that a person's Christian beliefs are influenced by their core values, which are shaped and solidified through active involvement in religious traditions and

⁵⁴ Jacob Porter, 'Church Governance and Authority,' Master of Divinity thesis, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Harvard School of Theology (2005), 14–17.

⁵⁵ Hughes and Cronshaw, 39; Julie Juola Exline, 'Beliefs About God and Forgiveness in a Baptist Church Sample,' *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 27, no. 2 (2008).

⁵⁶ Flood and Hamilton, 15.

⁵⁷ Paul A. Djupe, Laura R. Olson, and Christopher P. Gilbert, 'Whether to Adopt Statements on Homosexuality in Two Denominations: A Research Note,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 4 (2006): 611, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2006.00331.x>.

institutions.⁵⁸ The reinforcement of these beliefs often occurs within faith communities, through teachings from family, church, and spiritual leaders, as well as through a person's interpretation of the Scriptures.⁵⁹ These values subsequently impact attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ individuals. One of the influential teachings on the Baptists worldwide has been the 'evangelical movement', and many Baptists define themselves as 'evangelical'.⁶⁰ For example, the Baptist Ministries of Australia website states: 'We are an Evangelical church'.⁶¹

'Evangelical Christians' participate in a diverse range of denominations and theological perspectives, from conservatism to liberalism. This diversity may mean they oppose each other on various topics.⁶² Therefore, it becomes essential to clarify the term 'evangelical.' When Australian evangelicals, including Baptists, employ the term

⁵⁸ Here, beliefs are defined as how knowledge is gathered and how it is expressed. Gena Minnix, 'Reconciling LGBT Affirmation with Christian Beliefs Among Mental Health Professionals: A Grounded Theory,' ed. Julie Anne Strentzsch, Dana Comstock-Benzick, and Steven Farmer (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015). There is a difference between being spiritual and being religious (i.e., belonging to a religious denomination). A person may be spiritual and have little or no affiliation with a religious organisation. Ralph W. Hood, *the Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, ed. Peter C. Hill and Bernard Spilka, 4th ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2009); Michele M. Schlehofer, Allen M. Omoto, and Janice R. Adelman, 'How Do Religion and Spirituality Differ? Lay Definitions among Older Adults,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.146-906.2008.00418.x>.

⁵⁹ Mandi Nicole Barringer, Davida Gay, and John Lynxwiler, 'Gender, Religiosity, Spirituality, and Attitudes Toward Homosexuality,' *Sociological Spectrum* 33, no. 3 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2013.732903>; Hood; Amy M. Burdette, Christopher G. Ellison, and Terrence D. Hill, 'Conservative Protestantism and Tolerance Toward Homosexuals: An Examination of Potential Mechanisms,' *Sociological Inquiry* 75, no. 2 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.147-82X.2005.00118.x>.

⁶⁰ Hughes and Cronshaw, 36.

⁶¹ 'About Us,' 2020, <https://www.baptist.org.au/about-us/>.

⁶² Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007); Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 2nd ed. (London: Triangle, 2014); Harriet A. Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

‘evangelical’ as a descriptor, they typically intend to convey specific characteristics including: a commitment to the Protestant doctrine of salvation through faith in Jesus, a shared belief in the mission of every believer to spread Christianity, and a recognition of the primary authority of Scripture above all else.⁶³

However, Cooper’s research suggests that conservatives within the evangelical movement claim to represent evangelical orthodoxy and consequently guard against the dangers of transgressing the established social order.⁶⁴ Conservative evangelicals’ desire to protect their faith against worldly influences presents a significant challenge to open dialogue and understanding between differing viewpoints within the faith community. This is particularly true when LGBTQIA+ individuals, in their study of Scripture, arrive at interpretations that differ from the conservative perspective. This research explores whether, and how, the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches may be shaped by the need to safeguard the orthodoxy of the church, given the absence of existing research on this subject.

Summary of the Baptist Distinctives

Baptists’ congregational mode of governance and their distinctives are designed to enable Baptists to maintain their ‘non-conformist’ heritage.⁶⁵ In *Discovering Our Baptist Heritage*,

⁶³ Kailla Edger, ‘Evangelicalism, Sexual Morality, and Sexual Addiction: Opposing Views and Continued Conflicts,’ *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-010-9338-7>; Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 41.

⁶⁴ Travis Cooper is a researcher specialising in religious studies and anthropology. Travis Warren Cooper, ‘Emerging, Emergent, Emergence: Boundary Maintenance, Definition Construction, and Legitimation Strategies in the Establishment of a Post-Evangelical Subculture,’ *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56 no. 2m 398–417; for an example of an author defending orthodoxy, see Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1984), 135.

⁶⁵ Hughes and Cronshaw, 104; Leonard..

Edwin Gaustad describes Baptists as ‘reforming prophets rather than conforming priests’.⁶⁶ Baptists are called to a collective faith journey, characterised by what Marelle Harisun describes, in relation to the Uniting Church, as a ‘synergetic pilgrimage.’ This implies collaboration and shared spiritual responsibility rather than ‘power-over’ dynamics involving the exertion of authority over others.⁶⁷ In essence, the tenets of the Baptist church emphasise the expectation for Baptists to embody a cooperative and inclusive approach to faith, where power is shared rather than exercised over others.⁶⁸

Australian Baptists

The following section explains the congregational governance structure within the Australian Baptist Movement (ABM) and explores the way congregationalism shapes the interaction among the national body, the Australian state associations, and the local churches. It then provides an overview of the approaches adopted by the state associations on issues relevant to LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Public statements from national or state Baptist associations on matters of faith, including LGBTQIA+ statements, are infrequent, owing to the autonomy of each church. Such conversations mainly occur within individual congregations and are rarely accessible to the public unless recorded in Assembly minutes or reported by news agencies. For example, in 2018, the yearly conference for leaders of Baptist churches in South Australia

⁶⁶ Gaustad said: ‘Baptists indeed stand for individualism above institutionalism, for the reforming prophet more than the conforming priest, for a pietism that is private and personal before it can properly become public and social’; Edwin S. Gaustad, ‘Toward a Baptist Identity in the Twenty-First Century,’ *The American Baptist Historical Society* (2008): 88; Walter B. Shurden, ‘The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto.’ Centre For Baptist Studies, 1998, <http://www.centerforbaptiststudies.org/shurden/Baptist%20Manifesto.htm>.

⁶⁷ Marelle Edith Harisun, *Power, Theology and Ecclesiology in Practice: An Analysis of the Power Struggle Over Sexuality in the Uniting Church in Australia* (Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP Lambert, 2010), 59–60.

⁶⁸ Holmes, 130–39.

and the Northern Territory focused on LGBTQIA+ issues to allow senior leaders an opportunity for discussions. In 2019, the then BCSA President hosted an informal round table conversation on LGBTQIA+ theological perspectives and pastoral issues with a handful of pastors and congregational members from BCSA churches. I have firsthand knowledge of these discussions as I attended both meetings. However, there are no public records available for reference and no documented proposals for furthering the discourse.

The inherently internal nature of this discourse poses a challenge for external observers aiming to thoroughly map the discourse on the inclusion or exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals within Australian Baptist churches. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that each Australian state Baptist Association does reference policies regarding LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly concerning topics such as same-sex marriage, on their respective websites. Consequently, this chapter incorporates a condensed summary of LGBTQIA+ related statements from each Australian state Baptist Association along with relevant news articles. This summary offers an overview of their respective stances and approaches regarding the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals within Baptist communities.

Congregational Governance

ABM comprises the Baptist Association (Union) from each of the Australian states: The Baptist Union of Queensland (Queensland Baptists or QB); The Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV); Baptist Union of Tasmania (Tasmanian Baptists); Baptist Churches Western Australia (BCWA); The Baptist Union of New South Wales and ACT (Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT); The Baptist Union of the Northern Territory (BUNT); and Baptist Churches of South Australia (BCSA).⁶⁹ At the time of writing, BCSA (approximately seventy churches) and

⁶⁹ Australian Baptist Ministries, nd, accessed 23 December 2023, <https://www.baptist.org.au/about-us/>.

BUNT (approximately thirteen churches) are merging to share the administrative burden and offer more support to local churches.⁷⁰

ABM defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman; therefore, no Baptist celebrant—including BCSA’s authorised marriage celebrants—may conduct a same-sex marriage.⁷¹ Thus, Baptist churches in Australia differ from the Uniting Church in Australia, which agreed in July 2018 to permit ministers to choose whether to conduct or refuse same-sex marriage.⁷² However, the consequence of the decision for the Uniting Church in Australia has been a schism, with the non-affirming churches forming their own wing—The Assembly of Confessing Congregations (ACC). This aligns with research conducted by Djupe et al., who concluded that institutions tend to be wary of public debates and issuing formal statements on contentious policies, as they are divisive. Even internal discussions may lead to ‘serious ramifications’ and ‘uncertain outcomes.’⁷³ The ACC has subsequently closed.⁷⁴ However, other denominations, including Baptists, observing the Uniting Church’s handling of the discourse on same-sex marriages, may have concerns about

⁷⁰ The new name after the merger will be Baptist Churches of South Australia and Northern Territories (BCSANT). However, at the time of this research the two associations had not amalgamated and therefore this study only focuses on Baptist churches associated with BCSA. <https://sabaptist.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/AnnualReport2022.pdf>, 13. The new association was voted in at the BCSA Assembly on 18 November 2023.

⁷¹ Baptist Union of Victoria, ‘Marriage Rites of the Baptist Union of Australia,’ Australian Baptist Ministries, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.buv.com.au/documents/item/117> (no longer available); ‘What the passage of the amendments to the Marriage act means for Baptist Churches,’ Australian Baptist Ministries, accessed April 15, 2019 <https://www.baptist.org.au/>.

⁷² Deidre Palmer, ‘UCA Statement on Same Gender Marriage,’ 2018, <https://pilgrim.org.au/blog/wp-content/uploads/15th-Assembly-same-gender-marriages-statement.pdf>.

⁷³ Djupe, Olson, and Gilbert, 613.

⁷⁴ John Sandman, ‘Taking ‘Uniting’ Off the Signboard,’ 2018, *Eternity Today* (<https://www.eternitynews.com.au/australia/taking-uniting-off-the-signboard/>); Hannah-Jones; Ben Nielsen, ‘Uniting Church Threatens to Split over Liberal Same-Sex Marriage Stance,’ 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/>.

potentially experiencing a similar trajectory toward schism and a loss of churches from the denomination.

The beginning of a split in the Australian Baptist churches may have already begun, as in 2022 a new Baptist movement emerged called Open Baptists. It serves as a network for the theologically affirming Baptist churches in Australia. However, Open Baptists extends beyond issues related to marriage and sexuality to emphasise the importance of upholding historic Baptist distinctives, which Open Baptists defines as ‘including the importance of associating with others, the autonomy of the local church to make decisions, freedom of conscience of individual members and churches, and discernment and decision-making in the church meeting where every voice can be heard’.⁷⁵ These Baptist distinctives were initiated and reiterated to ensure that all voices are equitably heard in the church’s discourse. It is too early to know the importance of the Open Baptist Movement or its impact on the national Australian Baptist movement of churches. However, the Open Baptist Movement does figure in the LGBTQIA+ discourse occurring in the Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT. This will be addressed later in this section when examining the individual state-based Baptist associations.

Within ABM, the state-based associations in Australia comprise autonomous Baptist churches that have chosen to affiliate with their own state or territory organisation. Each member church maintains its independence and self-governance but collaborates with the relevant Association for various purposes. The associations serve as regional bodies that provide support and resources—and when requested act in an advisory role for churches facing challenges—to the affiliated Baptist churches in their respective states. Additionally, although not an exhaustive list, they assist in the accreditation of leaders, professional development training, child-safe policies, insurance, marriage licences and some financial services. This congregational model of church governance is a distinct feature of Baptist

⁷⁵ *Open Baptists*, <https://openbaptists.org/>.

tradition, setting Baptists apart from denominations that adhere to hierarchical or representative models.

Baptist churches value their autonomy and the distinctive that allows the local church to decide its doctrinal positions.⁷⁶ This means that any theological–ethical approach—described by Nelson as ranging from non-affirming or affirming interpretations of the Scriptures relating to LGBTQIA+ issues—could be present in one or more of the Baptist churches.⁷⁷ The theological–ethical positions are described in detail later; however, it is important to note here that a church fitting Moon’s descriptor of a homonegative ‘God hates fags’ position cannot be affiliated with ABM or BCSA.⁷⁸ In theory, a local church can vote to theologically affirm LGBTQIA+ orientations and an LGBTQIA+ person’s rights to hold leadership positions and to marry and remain in the Baptist affiliation. However, to date, there are no known affirming churches in BCSA, and therefore, it is possible that non-affirming churches within the movement could vote against the inclusion of an affirming church if they viewed affirming theology as heterodoxy.

This is evidenced by the ongoing discourse in one Association, Baptist Churches (NSW & ACT). It has been a tumultuous period for the Association, which was the subject of public attention due to its indirect association with the ABC’s newspaper reports on the dismissal of Karen Pack from Morling College (the Baptist Theological College of New South Wales)

⁷⁶ Hughes and Cronshaw, 34–44.

⁷⁷ Nelson, ‘Homosexuality,’ 271–74.

⁷⁸ Moon; Westboro Baptist in America is one of the churches that holds this extreme position and it has been denounced by Baptist Ministries of Australia; ‘Baptists Denounce Latest Westboro Stunt,’ *Christianity Today Australia* 2009, 19 February 2009, archived at <https://archive.md/qerZ2#selection-299.07.26>. To understand the impact of this position on people’s lives see Richard Fidler and Sarah Kanowski, ‘Conversations: Leaving the Westboro Baptist Church,’ (2020), radio. <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/conversations/megan-phelps-roper/11864974>.

because of her same-sex marriage.⁷⁹ However, it is the internal politics over the Constitution's definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman that has occupied much of the focus of the Association.

The Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT state their position as 'welcoming but not affirming', which means LGBTQIA+ persons may attend a Baptist church but the church's doctrine prevents full affirmation of LGBTQIA+ identities or relationships. Accordingly, it advocates celibacy for all sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage.⁸⁰ It also passed a motion in 2019 mandating that all affiliated churches and ministers must adhere to the Association's marriage position statement—which, as defined in its constitution, characterises 'sexual relations with a same-sex partner' as 'unethical'. Consequently, if a local church endorses a theological stance supporting LGBTQIA+ orientations by including same-sex marriages, it may face removal from Baptist Association membership.⁸¹ Essentially, the vote made the non-affirming theological perspective of LGBTQIA+ identity a core belief for Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT, which differs from the stance of associations in other Australian states.

The vote has implications. First, the decision made by the Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT appears to transgress the Baptist distinctive on the autonomy of a local church to decide its 'doctrines, worship, objects, and values'. This issue was addressed by a

⁷⁹ Michael Vincent and Laura Kewley, 'Karen Pack Was Praised As an 'Excellent' Educator, But She Says She Was Sacked By Her Employer Morling College for Being Gay—But the College Disputes This,' *ABC News* April 9, 2021.

⁸⁰ Baptist Churches NSW & ACT, 'Public Issues Paper Pastoral and Missional Response to Same-Sex Oriented Persons,' 2015. In 2019, BC (NSW & ACT) created an online portal to allow discussion on same sex marriages: 'Affiliation, Baptist Values, and Same Sex Marriage Discussion Online Portal,' BC (NSW & ACT), 2019, <https://nswactbaptists.org.au/portal/>. See also the crowdsourced database and evaluation site for Christian churches' policies on websites: Church Clarity, www.churchclarity.org/.

⁸¹ Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT, *Constitution*, (2021), <https://nswactbaptists.org.au/>; John Sandeman, 'NSW-ACT Baptist to Uphold Traditional Views on Sexuality,' *Eternity* (Bible Society Australia) 2021.

subsequent resolution, which affirmed the autonomy of individual local churches to determine their beliefs. However, the Association also clarified its position by restating the position that it establishes the criteria for affiliating with Baptist churches.⁸² It is an uncomfortable distinction for some Baptists; as the distinctive of the Baptist traditions means that no institution or association has greater authority than that of the local church.⁸³ This motion carries significant implications for the affirming churches in the Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT. The central issue throughout the debate concerned Hamilton Baptist Church, which has unequivocally expressed LGBTQIA+ affirmation, and whether it would be compelled to leave the Association.⁸⁴

However, the risk that affirming Baptist churches in Victoria and the other states might find themselves facing a similar trajectory of being voted out of their Baptist associations has been mitigated by the formation of the Open Baptists.⁸⁵ Now, rather than forcing an LGBTQIA+ discourse within the established Baptist associations at state and national levels, theologically affirming Baptist churches in Australia may simply avoid the conversation by changing networks. Equally, as a relatively new movement, there is currently no existing data to know what, if any, dialogue is taking place between the Open Baptists and the

⁸² 'Association Position Statements: Approved At the 2022 Ordinary Assembly,' 2022, <https://nswactbaptists.org.au/project/position-statements/>.

⁸³ Open Baptists, *Dreaming of New Beginnings*, Opening Address, Rev Carolyn Francis, 27 October 2023. Accessed 29 November 2023, <https://openbaptists.org/resources/>; 'Our Submission to a NSW and ACT Baptist Association Taskforce on Baptist Values and Same Sex Marriage,' Canberra Baptist Church, 2022; Mark Wingfield, 'Australian Baptist Association Requires Agreement on Its statement on Marriage for All Affiliated Churches and Ministers,' *Baptist News*, 14 November 2022, (<https://baptistnews.com/>); Michael Frost, 'Breaking Up the Family in the Pursuit of Uniformity,' *Mike Frost. Net*, 2022; 'NSW, ACT Baptists in Vote to Prevent Celebrations of Love Between LGBTQIA+ People,' *Pearls and Irritations: John Menadue's Public Policy Journal*, 2022.

⁸⁴ *Hamilton Baptist Church (NSW)*. <https://www.hamiltonbaptist.com.au/>; Erin Martine Sessions, 'Have Baptists Just Sold Their Soul Over Same-Sex Marriage?,' *ABC News* 2022.

⁸⁵ *Open Baptists*, <https://openbaptists.org/>.

established Baptist Association or assess the impact this will have on the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. However, initial indications are that there is some cause for concern about the potential consequences of limiting diverse voices in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within the established Baptist movement through the removal of dialogue partners with different perspectives.

BCWA issues 'A Suggested Template for BCWA' with 'Key Questions Surrounding Human Sexuality.'⁸⁶ The template advocates a 'Welcoming not Affirming' stance on same-sex relationships and outlines the exclusion of 'practising homosexuals' from BCWA local churches—that is, being excluded from membership with voting privileges and serving in ministry positions. The statements on nonbinary and gender-diverse orientations are inconsistent as they are occasionally mentioned and sometimes omitted in the exclusion policies. However, the word 'etc.' may lead us to presume the statement applies to LGBTQIA+ gender and sexual orientations. Due to the autonomy given to the local churches, BCWA's 'Welcoming not Affirming' position is 'a suggested template'. In 2021, a member church of BCWA (Albany Church) made headlines by hosting an event that the LGBTQIA+ community described as 'gay conversion therapy'—a charge vehemently refuted by the church.⁸⁷ This controversy highlights the challenge of a 'welcoming-non-affirming' approach to LGBTQIA+'s inclusion in Baptist churches. While the church believes it is extending a welcome to LGBTQIA+ persons, from the LGBTQIA+ perspective, it appears to be a clearly qualified acceptance. Moreover, these tensions bring to light the broader cultural challenges that influence church practices concerning LGBTQIA+

⁸⁶ 'A Suggested Template for BCWA. Key Questions Surrounding Human Sexuality,' 2015, <https://www.baptistwa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Key-Questions-surrounding-Human-Sexuality.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Peter Barr, Dominique Bayens, and Tom Edwards, 'Albany Baptist Church Pushes Ahead with 'Gay Conversion Therapy' Event Despite Backlash from LGBT Community,' *ABC News* May 24, 2021; David Pestipino, "'Gay Conversion Therapy Roadshow' Hits WA Churches with "Reformed" Gay Man At the Helm,' *WA Today* June 4, 2021.

individuals. This controversy has shifted the focus from internal church policies and has propelled the debate into the public arena.

A search of the Tasmanian Baptist's website revealed no statement on sexual or gender orientations or same-sex marriage.⁸⁸ Similarly, their constitution lacks a specific definition for marriage, unlike Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT. Nevertheless, Baptist pastors are restricted from officiating marriages for LGBTQIA+ individuals due to the directive from Baptist Ministries Australia, asserting that marriage is exclusively between one man and one woman. The Tasmanian Baptist's constitution emphasises the autonomy of the local church and the freedom of conscience for all the believers. Consequently, the responsibility for deciding policies resides with individual local churches rather than the Tasmanian Baptists. Therefore, the lack of policies for LGBTQIA+ individuals in Baptist churches is to be expected, as it aligns with the decentralised approach where each local church assumes this responsibility. However, it is difficult for LGBTQIA+ people to assess the suitability of a church, as search engines reveal nothing about inclusion/exclusion policies on LGBTQIA+ same-sex relationships and marriage or gender identity.

A wider search of the internet, though, immediately uncovers 'A Submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission's Consultation on Protection from Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual Orientation and Sex and/or Gender Identity by the Tasmanian Baptists.'⁸⁹ This is a response to the 2010 Australian Human Rights Commission's public consultation process questioning the need for specific sexual and/or gender discrimination laws. It is a strongly worded document which, as described by the responding report by the

⁸⁸ 'A Submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission's Consultation on Protection from Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual Orientation and Sex and/or Gender Identity,' updated November 2010, amended February 2011, 2010, <https://bit.ly/3RrqqKV>.

⁸⁹ Tasmanian Baptists.

Human Rights Commission, ‘strongly opposes changes to the law’.⁹⁰ The document was submitted before the plebiscite on amending Australia’s *Marriage Act 1961* (Cth) to legalise same-sex marriages, and it contains references that ‘express opposition’ to changes in marriage laws.⁹¹ Thus, if LGBTQIA+ persons research the stance of Tasmanian Baptists towards LGBTQIA+ orientations, the letter to the Australian Human Rights Commission is the primary document available to them.

By far the most comprehensive attempt to address sexuality was undertaken by BUV. Its web-based resources include articles from ‘Traditional Christians Views’ and ‘Alternative Christian Views’ and suggestions for further reading.⁹² However, its position on same-sex marriage aligns with ABM, as it defines marriage as between ‘a man and woman to the exclusion of all other’.⁹³ A search for information on BUV’s perspective on transgender or nonbinary orientations did not locate any relevant material on the website. BUV does not provide a list of their LGBTQIA+ affirming Baptist churches in the Union—something that Church Clarity advocates as essential for LGBTQIA+ persons looking for full inclusion in a church and not the qualified acceptance of non-affirming churches.⁹⁴ However, websites such as *The Brave Network* include some BUV churches in their list of LGBTQIA+ affirming

⁹⁰ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Addressing Sexual Orientation and Sex and/or Gender Identity Discrimination Consultation Report*, 20 (http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/lgbti/lgbticonsult/report/; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011).

⁹¹ Commission, Short, 39.

⁹² ‘Sexuality,’ *Resources: Justice and Advocacy*, <https://www.buv.com.au/resources/justice-and-advocacy/sexuality/>, 2022.

⁹³ ‘Minutes of a Meeting of the Assembly of the Baptist Union of Victoria,’ 2015.

⁹⁴ Church Clarity is a website, www.churchclarity.org/, that advocates for churches to clearly state on their websites any and all exclusion policies applicable to LGBTQIA+ persons.

churches.⁹⁵ Equally, BUV churches such as *Sanctuary* and *South Yarra Community Baptist Church* are easily recognisable from their websites as LGBTQIA+ affirming congregations.

BUNT provides a statement outlining ‘five normative principles’ (monogamy; commitment in marriage between a man and a woman; equality in marriage; fidelity; and cisgender identity). While BUNT acknowledges the local church’s autonomy, it ‘strongly recommends that churches do not appoint people engaged in these practices as leaders within their churches nor as delegates to QB Assembly.’⁹⁶ It is speculative to suggest reasons behind the statement and to decide whether it is an attempt to keep the peace between non-affirming/affirming churches or a warning of consequences to affirming churches. However, it is an important statement for this project because of BUNT’s merger with BCSA and the implications of their posture on BCSA’s policies towards LGBTQIA+ inclusion/exclusion.

BCSA describes itself as ‘a voluntary association of Baptist churches in South Australia that agree to work together in God’s mission in accordance with its objects and values’.⁹⁷ Local Baptist churches choose to be members of BCSA; therefore, as previously stated, not all churches in South Australia that call themselves ‘Baptist’ are members of BCSA.⁹⁸ BCSA carries the legal responsibility and authority for establishing and maintaining the accreditation of pastors/leaders within the local churches. However, a local church may appoint a senior leader not accredited by BCSA, and the church remains a member of the Association. To be employed or volunteer within BCSA, a person must be ‘a member in

⁹⁵ ‘Equal, Affirmed, Included,’ The Brave Network (Melbourne), <https://thebravenetwork.org/>.

⁹⁶ ‘QB’ is the acronym for ‘Queensland Baptists’. Baptist Union of Queensland, ‘Queensland Baptists Position Statement on Sexuality and Marriage,’ (QB, 2018), <https://qb.org.au>. BUNT delegates attend the Queensland Baptist Assembly.

⁹⁷ Baptist Churches of South Australia, ‘Constitution,’ (BCSA, 14 May 2021 2021), 4, Constitution, 4. <https://sabaptist.asn.au/>.

⁹⁸ BCSA is a growing movement of about 70 churches. *Baptist Churches of South Australia*. www.sabaptist.asn.au.

good standing of a BCSA church'.⁹⁹ The BCSA participants who contributed to this study were a mixture of employees and volunteers, with responsibilities ranging from board and leadership positions to administration and volunteering, from the various advisory committees.

BCSA address sexuality issues through its statement on 'marriage and marriage celebrants', affirming that marriage is between one man and one woman. It outlines why it holds these values and defines 'disobedient and damaging' sexual relationships as 'polygamy, prostitution, and same-sex activity'.¹⁰⁰ In 2012, the BCSA Board adopted the sexuality and accreditation statement that BCSA will accredit no person involved in a same-sex relationship.¹⁰¹

This review of the Australian state associations' websites has shown a varied approach to public statements on LGBTQIA+ faith. Victoria's site was the most easy to navigate and contained the most comprehensive material. However, on the other states' websites, including BCSA, it was difficult to find information specifically on LGBTQIA+ related issues. For example, apart from intermittent references to 'transgender' on the Western Australian web page, there was no information for nonbinary persons. In addition, there are no links to LGBTQIA+ affirming Baptist churches, and one wonders how LGBTQIA+ Christians could find a Baptist church suitable for them when there is so little information available.

⁹⁹ '[17] AFFILIATED MINISTRY ORGANISATIONS. [17.1] An Affiliated Ministry Organisation of the Association is a body set up by the Association to perform some special function on behalf of the Association. [17.2] The recognised Affiliate Ministry Organisations are: [17.2.1] Baptist Care (SA) Inc; [17.2.2] Such other organisations as the Association may establish from time to time'; 'Baptist Churches of South Australia Constitution,' 11.

¹⁰⁰ 'Marriage and Marriage Celebrants,' Baptist Churches of Australia, accessed April 15, 2019, <http://sabaptist.asn.au/marriage/>.

¹⁰¹ 'Statement on Sexuality and Accreditation,' Baptist Churches of South Australia, 2012, <http://sabaptist.asn.au/>.

Dialogue Partners: A Case for Baptist Care

This research was open to any participant who had experience of the current LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in BCSA-affiliated churches. Therefore, participants from outside of a Baptist church context engaged in the research, including staff from Baptist Care South Australia. Baptist Care's role and function are distinctly different from that of a church, and therefore, comparing Baptist Care to BCSA or a local church is not an equivalent comparison. For example, Baptist Care is subject to specific legislative and mandated requirements of the contracts regarding their clients and employment law that differ from those of BCSA and its member churches. While these differences distinguish it from BCSA and its member churches, discounting Baptist Care participants on these criteria neglects the unique relationship between Baptist Care and BCSA-affiliated churches. This connection provides Baptist Care participants with a distinctive perspective on the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches in two ways. First, there is its institutional discourse, as one Baptist ministry to another Baptist organisation. Second, through its relationship with many individual Baptists who are employed or volunteer in Baptist Care. The following briefly explores the connection of Baptist Care to BCSA and its churches by examining Baptist Care's origins and its involvement in both the institutional and individual LGBTQIA+ discourse.

Baptist Care (SA) is a member of Baptist Care Australia, which is the national advocacy and research body for the organisation.¹⁰² It is a connection built on relationship; Baptist Care Australia has no constitutional authority to dictate the decisions or the operations of Baptist Care (SA) or the other members.¹⁰³ The governing structure of Baptist Care is influenced by the Baptist tradition of local autonomy, allowing local Baptists to determine

¹⁰² Baptist Care Australia, 'About Us,' <https://www.baptistcareaustralia.org.au/about-us/>; Baptist Care Australia, 'Constitution,' updated (adopted 7 June 2017), Objectives: 3–3.1.5.

¹⁰³ Baptist Care Australia, 'Constitution,' Powers: 4.1.

their practices. In this case, the state body holds the control rather than the national body. Baptist Care (SA) was founded to provide support to the disadvantaged within the state, extending the help beyond the capacity of a single local Baptist church.¹⁰⁴ It is a specialised agency designed to offer broader and more comprehensive aid to those in need, drawing on a wider range of resources and expertise and collaborating with multiple agencies and not for profit organisations, including Baptist churches. Baptist Care in South Australia has approximately 1,000 staff, including those from different faiths and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.¹⁰⁵ There are also volunteers working for the organisation. As Baptist Care originates from BCSA churches, it holds significance for both churches and individual Baptists. Both contribute substantial time and financial support to Baptist Care.

The connection between the organisations of Baptist Care SA and BCSA is established through Baptist Care SA functioning as an Affiliated Ministry of BCSA.¹⁰⁶ Baptist Care is linked to BCSA through its governing document, which explicitly states that the values of Baptist Care align with those of BCSA. As a result, Baptist Care cannot deviate significantly from BCSA's values.¹⁰⁷ It reports to BCSA and its board, and the CEO position is approved

¹⁰⁴ Baptist Care's Vision Statement is: 'Serving to transform lives'. Baptist Care (SA), 'Constitution of Baptist Care (SA) Incorporated,' Governing Documents, Australian Charities and Not-For-Profit Commission, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Thi Thu Le Pham et al., 'Definitions of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD): A Literature Review of Epidemiological Research in Australia,' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18020737>.

¹⁰⁶ The Constitution of BCSA states that it is an 'association established by Baptist Churches to act as an agency of Baptist Churches of South Australia Incorporated as contemplated in the Constitution and By-Laws of Baptist Churches of South Australia Incorporated': BCSA *Constitution*, adopted 14 May 2021, <https://sabaptist.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/BCSAConstitution-14-May-2021.pdf> Australia, 6.1.

¹⁰⁷ Baptist Care South Australia, *Constitution*, Foundations: 3.1.

by the BCSA Assembly board.¹⁰⁸ Baptist Care holds the equivalent rights to a local church within BCSA. It has two representatives (the chair of the Board and the CEO) who can vote at the BCSA Assembly. This inclusion ensures that Baptist Care is included in the decision-making processes that impact the whole movement.¹⁰⁹ The constitution for Baptist Care SA specifies that the senior management are from a Christian faith tradition.¹¹⁰ As a result, all the participants in this study from Baptist Care belonged to various Christian denominations, providing them with both the understanding and experience on how faith and doctrine shapes the LGBTQIA+ discourse. This specific positioning enables a comparative analysis of the LGBTQIA+ discourse between BCSA and another Baptist institution that share the same values, enriching the understanding of LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches.

Additionally, the involvement of Baptist Care participants in LGBTQIA+ discourse introduces a unique dynamic to the conversation. Unlike conventional discussions within the local church, these participants engage with individual Baptists working or volunteering with the organisation, extending the conversation beyond the typical church setting. This shift not only broadens the spectrum of perspectives but also alters the power dynamics. By observing the LGBTQIA+ discourse outside the local church's power base, there is an opportunity for a more nuanced exploration of how Baptists navigate and contribute to the discussions. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between faith, doctrine, and the LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Baptist community, as it considers diverse experiences beyond the confines of traditional church structures.

¹⁰⁸ Baptist Care South Australia, *Constitution*, Foundational Values 3.1.1 and Membership 6.1.

¹⁰⁹ Baptist Churches of South Australia, *Assemblies*, 2022, <https://sabaptist.asn.au/assemblies/>.

¹¹⁰ This criterion only applies to senior management and does not apply to all staffing levels; Baptist Care South Australia, *Constitution*, 'Values of The Association [3.1] Foundational Values [3.1.1] The Foundational Values of the Association are the Values of its Member, as prescribed in its Member's Constitution': Baptist Care South Australia, *Constitution*, 3.1–3.1.1.

The distinct relationship and specific interaction between Baptist Care and BCSA positions participants from Baptist Care as exceptional dialogue partners for the study of LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Baptist context. Participants from Baptist Care bring a depth of experience due to their interaction with diverse individuals and their exposure to various situations within the framework of BCSA and its churches. These insights hold value at both individual and institutional levels, revealing personal experiences and shedding light on organisational practices.

Summary

An overview of the public discourse from the national and state Baptist associations on issues relevant to LGBTQIA+ persons show how the internal politics of Baptist Churches of NSW and ACT and the removal of affirming churches from the Association has weakened the Baptist distinctive on being a movement of churches of diverse perspectives. This, along with the recommendation of BUNT that no church include in leadership LGBTQIA+ persons who affirm their identities, and the issues of templates outlining the beliefs on sexual and gender orientation that Baptists are encouraged to adopt, could suggest the beginning of a shift away from the Baptist distinctive that individual autonomous churches should discern their theology and praxis and still be called Baptist.

Therefore, in addressing the question posed by this chapter regarding who is doing the talking, it is evident that Baptists who hold a non-affirming stance on LGBTQIA+ orientations play a predominant role in both participating in and controlling the discourse. This raises questions for the research concerning the possible restricted scope of the LGBTQIA+ discussions within the Baptist community. However, it also raises questions on whether the individual Baptists in their conversations are following the public stance of the Baptist organisations or whether they are taking a different approach in their LGBTQIA+ conversations and engaging with people with diverse views and experiences on the issue.

The Baptist history of nonconformity and the value placed on their distinctives serve as powerful allies in an LGBTQIA+ discourse that prioritises dialogue between differing perspectives. The distinctives related to the autonomy of the local church, the freedom of conscience for all the believers and the equality and value given to voices from all the perspectives on the issues lay the groundwork for operating in an inclusive mode of power in dialogue. However, if this distinctive is being sidelined it raises the question how a dialogue over difference can even happen. This has implications for this research, raising a further question as to what extent the current dialogue on LGBTQIA+ faith is influenced by the Baptist traditional values and distinctives.

Influencers in Dialogue Theory

Dialogue theory proposes that discourse can reward, discipline, and include or exclude individuals and groups.¹ Its component theories emanate from the work of four influential social commentators on discourse: Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Jurgen Habermas.² Edward Said, David Bohm and Miroslav Volf also contribute to this work in communications studies. Each offers a unique insight into the way dialogue should be conducted and serves as a valuable lens through which to examine the ongoing discourse on LGBTQ inclusion in Baptist churches.

This chapter provides a brief introduction to each of these individual dialogue theorists. It then discusses the similar core values shared in the dialogue-related concepts which these theorists consider influential in any discourse.³ These values are: (1) agreeing on a definition of dialogue; (2) creating a safe, brave space; (3) listening; (4) understanding that dialogue comes at a risk; and (5) making a commitment to keep talking.

However, 'listening' is laden with meaning, values, and expectations and has implications for power, identity, and social relations.⁴ To augment and enrich the concept

¹ Teun A. Van Dijk, 'Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis,' *Discourse & Society* 4, no. 2 (1993): 254–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006>; Elizabeth Keating, 'Power and Pragmatics,' *Language and Linguistics Compass* 3, no. 4 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.174-18X.2009.00148.x>.

² Rob Anderson, Leslie Baxter, and Kenneth Cissna, 'Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies,' (London: Sage, 2004); Rob Anderson and Kenneth Cissna, 'Fresh Perspectives in Dialogue Theory,' *Communication Theory* 18, no. 1 (2008).

³ Rob Anderson, Kenneth N. Cissna, and Ronald C. Arnett, 'The Reach of Dialogue: Confirmation, Voice, and Community,' (Digital Commons @ University of South Florida, 1994), 10.

⁴ Tanja Dreher and Poppy de Souza, 'Locating Listening,' in *Ethical Responsiveness and the Politics of Difference*, ed. Tanja Dreher and Anshuman A. Mondal (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Grace

of listening, it has been coupled here with the Australian Aboriginal concept, *Dadirri*.⁵ This is a practice of deep listening that involves being attentive to nature, inner self and others, and results in the community understanding the impact of the discourse on all involved. The strength of *Dadirri* is its ability to deepen awareness of others, which results in community discourse that is based on relationship and reciprocity.

As discussed later in this chapter, *Dadirri* has previously been used in research and has been contrasted with Habermas's theory.⁶ My own reason for choosing to include it alongside the four more usual dialogue theories is that I was concerned about the predominantly male representation of dialogue theorists situated within a Western academic context, albeit that they came from diverse national backgrounds. *Dadirri* brings a feminist, non-western perspective and has its roots in an Australian context. I also sought a dialogue theory that was relevant to Baptist theology. *Dadirri* fits that criterion as it is a spiritual practice that has much in common with the Hebrew biblical concept of *Selah*, which is believed to derive from the Hebrew word 'pause' or 'ponder'. *Selah* is a cue for the reader to contemplate the meaning of the words and their connection to their own life or

Ji-Sun Kim and Graham Hill, *Healing Our Broken Humanity: Practices for Revitalizing the Church and Renewing the World* (Illinois: IVP, 2018), 77–90.

- ⁵ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., 'Dadirri: An Indigenous Place-based Research Methodology,' *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 18, no. 1 (2022): 94–103, 95; Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2000); Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, 'Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness. A Reflection by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann,' Miriam-Rose Foundation, 2002.
- ⁶ Lisa Urquhart et al., 'A Dialogical Approach to Understand Perspectives of an Aboriginal Wellbeing Program: An Extension of Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action,' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920957495>.

relationship with God.⁷ *Dadirri* discourse also calls for what are in effect *Selah* moments in dialogue through its emphasis on listening, relistening, and silent critical reflection.

Dadirri also applies to the discourse within BCSA and its member churches resulting from the Voice Referendum of 2023.⁸ The Voice sought to amend the Australian Constitution to recognise First Nation peoples by establishing an independent and permanent advisory body to the Australian Government and Parliament on issues that affect the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. BCSA Board and some of its member churches voted to act as advocates for The Voice. The question of how to include First Nations peoples' voices is also being examined because of the merger of BCSA with BUNT and the number of BUNT Aboriginal churches that the amalgamated Association will now serve. *Dadirri* would be applicable, and possibly even welcomed, into the current framework for discourse on the inclusion of First Nation faith by Baptists. Therefore, it could potentially be more readily acceptable as a framework for discussions by member churches when conversing about the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in Baptist churches. *Dadirri* encourages the community to participate in respectful and attentive dialogue that creates a shared awareness of the impact of the dialogue experience for everyone involved.

Missing from the core values identified by the dialogue theorists is the practice of liminality as outlined by Theory U. Otto Scharmer developed Theory U from a collaborative project initially introduced in *Prescence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, which presented a new theory of change and learning.⁹ Theory U addresses complex problems by

⁷ William Smith, Francis Nathan Peloubet, and Mary Abby Thaxter Peloubet, *Smith's Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1967), 941; Ashley E. Lyon, *Reassessing Selah* (College & Clayton Press, 2021).

⁸ Australian Government, 'Referendum on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice,' (14 October 2023). <https://voice.gov.au/>.

⁹ Peter Senge, Claus Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (Cambridge, MA: Society for Organizational Learning (SoL)), 2004.

employing a process of awareness-based systematic thinking that moves beyond symptom analysis. It delves into the three fundamental causes of the issues: the inner self (source); thought processes (process); and actions taken (results).¹⁰ Theory U unfolds as a journey as individuals or groups encounter challenges to their beliefs. The process follows a U-shaped trajectory, with two distinct responses within the liminal journey. Individuals progress through stages of awareness, empathy, and action in response to these challenges. Conversely, they might regress through stages of ignorance, hate, and fear when encountering similar hurdles.¹¹

While Scharmer makes it explicit, liminality—the space between ‘letting go’ of what is known and ‘letting come’ new ways of thinking—is also implied in the work of the dialogue theorists. Gadamer, in particular, wrestles with the concept of liminality through his theory of ‘the fusion of horizons’.¹² In my research, throughout the interviews, participants described their experiences of the liminal space. It was part of the process of talking about differences in deeply held convictions. Therefore, this study incorporates liminality and Theory U as part of the necessary framework for facilitating the dialogue over the practice of LGBTQIA+ faith in Baptist churches. This chapter concludes by examining the influence of Theory U and the concepts of liminality.

Dialogue Theorists

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was an Austrian-born Jewish philosopher and scholar of Hasidic Judaism. His theory bases genuine dialogue in personhood—from ‘one open-hearted person to the other open-hearted person’—and, therefore, based on peer meetings, where

¹⁰ Scharmer, 18–19.

¹¹ Scharmer, 34.

¹² David Vessey, ‘Gadamer and the Fusion of Horizons,’ *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17, no. 4 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550903164459>.

each person is valued and never objectified.¹³ Buber advocates 'I–Thou' above 'I–It' relationships as the basis of all dialogue. I–It is a subject–object relationship when 'one relates to the other only indirectly and nonmutually'.¹⁴ I–Thou prioritises equality and partnership, making person-to-person dialogue more important than goals.¹⁵

Part of the 'I–Thou' relationship is an appreciation of others' viewpoint rather than imposing one's views on others, and this can only be realised when there is a genuine motivation to understand another's perspective. Buber said: 'I do not have the right to want to change another if I am not open to being changed by him as far as it is legitimate.'¹⁶

The motivation to understand others is often stolen by hubris, lack of energy, and cognitive overload.¹⁷ Buber identified three types of dialogue: genuine, technical (the

¹³ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, ed. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 9. Kenneth N. Cissna, *Moments of Meeting Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Dialogue*, ed. Rob Anderson (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 54. Rogers', and The Potential For Public Dialogue; Buber's definition of personhood differs significantly from others in this field; Scott summarises their classifications as 'memory, reason, and autonomy'. For Buber, there are four criteria for personhood: I. Uniqueness. II. Wholeness. III. Goodness. IV. A drive to relationship; Sarah Scott, 'An Unending Sphere of Relation: Martin Buber's Conception of Personhood,' *Forum Philosophicum (Kraków, Poland)* 19, no. 1 (2015): 6, <https://doi.org/10.35765/forphil.2014.1901.01>; Maurice Friedman, 'Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogue of Voices and the Word That Is Spoken,' *Religion & Literature*, 33 no. 3 (2001), 25–36, https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-48690-3_3.

¹⁴ Friedman, 25.

¹⁵ Buber, 208; Judith M. Brown, 'Wherefore Art 'Thou' in the Dialogical Approach: The Relevance of Buber's Ideas to Family Therapy and Research,' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 36, no. 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1002/anzf.1100>; Louise Morley and Frances Crawford, 'What Does It Mean to "Start Where the Person Is At"? Reflections on Personhood in Social Work,' *Qualitative Social Work: QSW: Research and Practice* (2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250221108638>.

¹⁶ Cissna, *Moments of Meeting Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Dialogue*, 42.

¹⁷ Hunter Gehlbach, Maureen E. Brinkworth, and Ming-Te Wang, 'The Social Perspective Taking Process: What Motivates Individuals to Take Another's Perspective?,' *Teachers College Record* 114, no. 1 (2012).

practical need for objective understanding) and monologue disguised as dialogue.¹⁸ Monologues would be classified as an I–It dialogue.¹⁹

Critics of Buber argue that his theories are binary: *I–Thou* versus *I–It* or *interhuman* (Buber’s word for ‘individual’) versus *social group* dialogues. Indeed, he does ‘draw radical distinctions between two relational forms.’²⁰ However, Buber would see *I–Thou/I–It* dialogue not as disjunctively oppositional (*versus*) but as ‘a continuous oscillation’ between the two.²¹

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), the German philosopher, played a critical role in the development of twentieth-century hermeneutics. His philosophical hermeneutics of dialogue has four key concepts: prejudice, tradition, authority, and horizons. Gadamer posits that all understanding begins with our ‘prejudices’ and biases, and that these are necessary for interpreting the world. He argues that not all prejudices are negative.²² However, he insists on self-examination to detect biases, and openness to their being changed through dialogue with others. Gadamer believes that meaning and knowledge can only be found in ‘interaction’ and not the ‘private internal’, and he argues: ‘[genuine

¹⁸ Martin Buber and Olga Marx, *Tales of the Hasidim*, Ian Reid Collection, (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 19.

¹⁹ Cissna, *Moments of Meeting Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Dialogue*, 52.

²⁰ Jonas Aspelin, ‘What Really Matters Is “Between”’: Understanding the Focal Point of Education from an Inter-Human Perspective,’ *Education Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2010): 133, <https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v1i2.21937>.

²¹ W. J. Morgan and Alexandre Guilherme, ‘I and Thou: The Educational Lessons of Martin Buber’s Dialogue with the Conflicts of His Times,’ *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44, no. 9 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00681.x>.

²² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 271; Jean Grondin, ‘The Hermeneutical Circle’ (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 12.

dialogue] requires [that] one does not try to argue the other down but really considers the weight of the other's opinion.'²³

Tradition, for Gadamer, is awareness of the situatedness of knowledge, and he argues that one cannot escape the influences of tradition; although it is possible not to endorse it. Gadamer 'rehabilitates authority' too, claiming it is not necessarily linked to power or coercive control when it is based on the community's practices.²⁴ However, Gadamer understands that authority cannot override autonomy, as autonomy is present in genuine dialogue.²⁵ The concepts of prejudice, tradition, and authority are linked, and Gadamer insists all are inescapable. Habermas and Ricoeur critique Gadamer's theories on the basis that he fails to insist on a critical response to the power implications of prejudice, tradition, and authority.²⁶

Gadamer's premise for resolving disagreement is argued in his 'fusing of horizons'.²⁷ Each person sees the horizon from their perspective (Gadamer's word is 'standpoint'), which is influenced by their context.²⁸ Standpoints limit our visions; horizons are not limited. To see beyond our horizon is to move our position to look from another's perspective—to a greater context—and see their horizon and thereby discover new

²³ Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna, 'Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies,' 142; Gadamer, 367–68.

²⁴ Gadamer uses 'teachers, superiors, and experts' as positive examples of authority. Gadamer, 249; 'Rehabilitates' is Ricoeur's word for Gadamer's approach to authority see Paul Ricoeur, 'Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,' in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 305–6.

²⁵ Gadamer, 279–80.

²⁶ Robert Piercey, 'Ricoeur's Account of Tradition and the Gadamer: Habermas Debate,' *Human Studies* 27, no. 3 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:HUMA.0000042126.34909.1f>.

²⁷ Gadamer, 313.

²⁸ Gadamer states: 'The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular standpoint.' Gadamer, 302.

meaning. This creates a new fused horizon based on a mutual agreement between the two perspectives. However, the critics respond that if there is no understanding or agreement on the unfamiliar perspective, then they remain two separate horizons, and no fusion occurs.²⁹

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) was a Russian philosopher known for his work on literary criticism, ethics, and linguistics. His theory emphasises that societal and cultural contexts always influence dialogue and therefore reside outside individual boundaries.³⁰ Martin Buber’s influence on Bakhtin is seen in Bakhtin’s theory—dialogics—as Bakhtin argues that explanations or monologues require one person whereas ‘understanding and comprehension entails two consciousnesses’.³¹ Bakhtin uses the term ‘heteroglossia’ to emphasise the social aspect of communication, in contrast with ‘monologism’, which is characterised by a single, authoritative voice or perspective with no room for diverse voices or dialogic interaction.³²

Bakhtin analyses the ‘language of professional’ and the way social groups communicate with their shared language.³³ That is relevant to this study because the church—Baptists included—shares vocabulary and syntax that differ from others outside the community. Consequently, those lacking the specialised language and understanding of meanings are sidelined and silenced in the conversation. This creates hierarchical patterns

²⁹ E. D. Hirsch is theorist of education and literary critic. Vessey, 526–30.

³⁰ Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Michael Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 271–93; Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna, ‘Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies,’ 227.

³¹ Friedman, 33.

³² Carolyn M. Shields, *Bakhtin Primer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 48; Caryl Emerson and M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics: Mikhail Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Emerson and Bakhtin, 292–93. Also see 6–7.

³³ Bakhtin and Holquist, 289.

of thinking and power inequalities. Bakhtin introduced the concept of ‘carnival’ to break the ‘all-powerful’ hierarchical barriers. Carnival is an event where rules, inhibitions, and codes of behaviour are suspended; it thereby subverts forms of hierarchy in society and becomes a catalyst for new ways of thinking.³⁴

Jurgen Habermas (1929–) is a social theorist whose theory of ‘communicative action’ is based on ‘ideal speech’—an ethics-rule-based discourse—aiming for a cooperative search for the truth, which he calls the ‘force of the better argument.’³⁵ Habermas argues that moral reasoning, ethical reflection, and logical augmentation lead to rational discourse.³⁶ His theory has two central tenets: (1) the difference between communicative action and other (possibly harmful) actions; and (2) the influence of ‘systems’ that ‘colonise our lifeworld’—i.e, our personal and social worlds. Habermas opposes any ‘force’ (rhetoric, use of authority or persuasion) featuring in dialogue, arguing for equality in the power bases.³⁷ He advocates for the ‘forceless force of a better argument.’³⁸

However, his critics evaluate Habermas’s theories as idealistic, arguing that dialogue is rarely motivated purely by rationality.³⁹ For example, if you distrust someone, it is

³⁴ Shields, 97–102.

³⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 25.

³⁶ William Outhwaite, *Habermas: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994).

³⁷ Victor Ferry, ‘What Is Habermas’s “Better Argument” Good for?’, *Argumentation and Advocacy* 49, no. 2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2012.11821788>; Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna, ‘Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies,’ 6.

³⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 108.

³⁹ For the strengths of Habermas’s theory see Michele Dillon, ‘The Authority of the Holy Revisited: Habermas, Religion, and Emancipatory Possibilities,’ *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (1999), <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00081>; Ilan Kapoor, ‘The Devil’s in the theory: A Critical Assessment of Robert Chambers’ Work on Participatory Development,’ *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2002): 109–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590220108199>; Minh Q. Huynh and HK Klein, ‘The Critical Social Theory of Jürgen Habermas and Its Implications for IS Research,’ (Social Theory and Philosophy for

unlikely that you will agree with them even when their argument is rational. Nevertheless, Habermas's work has its strengths. It has been influential in advocating the position that meaning and understanding are only found in the plurality of voices, and that dialogue must be conducted with equality, inclusivity, and sincerity.⁴⁰

Edward Said (1935–2003), drawing on his experiences as a Palestinian in exile combined with his academic expertise in literature and philosophy, had a profound impact with his influential work *Orientalism*. This work focused on the intricate connections between culture, power dynamics, and colonialism, elevating this field to become a crucial subject in academic discourse. Said argues that the retelling and restructuring of the stories of the other by the powerful has an impact on the way other is known, and subjugates that 'other' to those with power.⁴¹ He contends that representations of 'others' by those who have the power create a set of stereotypes of 'other' and justifies the action of those who hold the power. Said's work focuses on the Western perception of Arabs and the way the Palestinian story is retold from a Western stance.⁴²

Said polarises opinions. For example, Bernard Lewis, a British specialist in Oriental studies, described his work as academically flawed, prejudiced, biased, and obsessive.⁴³ Said reciprocated, calling Lewis a 'politically motivated zealot, masquerading as an

Information Systems, 2004), 32; William Rehg, *Cogent Science in Context the Science Wars, Argumentation Theory, and Habermas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 24.

⁴⁰ Veronica Vasterling, 'What Is the Aim of Discussion? a Provisional Answer with the Help of Habermas and Arendt,' *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 18, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022216629124>.

⁴¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

⁴² Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

⁴³ A. L. Macfie, *Orientalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 249.

impartial scholar'.⁴⁴ The exchange could be considered an example of diabolical dialogue, which creates conflict, confusion, and chaos rather than seeking common ground or resolution. In this dissertation, Said's theory on Western Imperialism and colonialism is used to examine the power structures operating behind the dialogue.

David Bohm (1917–1992), a quantum physicist, developed a process, 'Bohmian Dialogue', directed at interrupting habitual conversational patterns by suspending judgements and welcoming differences. His aim for dialogue is not to reach a consensus or agreement but rather, through reflective listening, to understand and explore the issue deeply.⁴⁵ The criticism of Bohm's process lies in its application; groups based on Bohmian Dialogue failed to continue because listening and openness left no framework to move into reconciliation.⁴⁶ However, for Bohm the commitment to unjudgmental listening is an opportunity to discover truth by confronting our 'deep' assumptions and changing our personal responses to differences.⁴⁷

Bohm's vision for the process comes from the experience of being silenced. He feared that dialogue on his quantum mechanics article would be treated 'with a conspiracy of silence' by the 'bigshots' in the physics community.⁴⁸ This proved to be the case; leading physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer suggested that 'if we cannot disprove Bohm, then we must

⁴⁴ Macfie suggested that their differences were the result of their belief in was research philosophies. Edward Said draws from postmodern philosophy, and his critics take a traditional realist approach to history. Macfie, 351.

⁴⁵ David Bohm and Lee Nichol, *On Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1996); Bela Banathy and Patrick M. Jenlink, *Dialogue As a Means of Collective Communication* (New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2005), 174–87.

⁴⁶ Banathy and Jenlink, 163; Sebastian Slotte and Raimo P. Hämmäläinen, 'Decision Structuring Dialogue,' *EURO Journal On Decision Processes* 3, no. 1 (2015): 6, DOI 10.1007/s40070-014-0028-7.

⁴⁷ David Bohm, Donald Factor, and Peter Garrett, 'Dialogue: A Proposal,' 1991, David-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html#3; Bohm and Nichol, 17–19.

⁴⁸ Bohm, Factor, and Garrett, 17–19.

agree to ignore him.’⁴⁹ Bohmian Dialogue addresses the power imbalances through constantly listening and relistening to opinions that differ from ours.

Miroslav Volf (1956–) is a Croatian Protestant theologian and the Founding Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.⁵⁰ Volf’s experience as ‘a minority of a minority’ (he was a Pentecostal in communist Croatia) informs his insights into navigating the complexities of dialoguing over differences.⁵¹ His contribution to the dialogue theories is largely through his theological approach to ‘exclusion and/or embrace’, which is born from his personal experiences of exclusion, violence, and reconciliation.⁵² He examines the dynamics of power, identity, and forgiveness, advocating for an inclusive vision of embrace that acknowledges the humanity of the other and challenges exclusionary practices.⁵³

Volf generates debate—as the reception of his book *A Public Faith* demonstrates. Where Volf advocates for political and religious pluralism in the public sphere, John Stackhouse—a Christian apologetics scholar—disagrees, arguing that Christians must fight against ‘all that believes wrong and acts against right’.⁵⁴ The exchanges between these theologians

⁴⁹ F. D. Peat, *Infinite Potential: The Life and Times of David Bohm*. (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 133–35.

⁵⁰ ‘Yale Center for Faith and Culture at Yale Divinity School,’ <https://faith.yale.edu/>.

⁵¹ Rupert Shortt, *God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 214; Miroslav Volf, *Miroslav Volf on Christian Witness in Turbulent Places*, podcast audio, Cultivated2020.

⁵² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁵³ Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, The Stob Lectures; 2002 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011); Miroslav Volf, ‘Faith, Pluralism, and Public Engagement,’ *Political Theology* 14, no. 6 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1179/1462317X13Z.00000000053>.

⁵⁴ John G. Stackhouse, ‘A Public Faith—But for Everyone and Every Public?,’ *Political Theology: The Journal of Christian Socialism* 14, no. 6 (2013): 743, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1462317X13Z.00000000046>. Stackhouse is a Canadian scholar and author in Christian apologetics, ethics, epistemology, and evangelical history. Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*; Volf, ‘Faith, Pluralism, and Public Engagement.’

demonstrate that disagreements do not have to be avoided; rather, they model ways to engage publicly over differences.

Commonalities Between the Dialogue Theorists

The dialogue theorists view five general principles as essential if there is to be a genuine dialogue. These are: (1) agreeing on a definition; (2) creating a safe, brave space; (3) listening; (4) understanding that dialogue comes at a risk; (5) making a commitment to keep talking. However, since this study defines 'listening' using the concepts found in *Dadirri*, this section also includes an overview of the principles inherent in that approach.

A Definition of Dialogue

The multiple definitions of dialogue in the literature suggest that its meaning shifts with each discourse-community and discipline.⁵⁵ In *Resolving Public Conflict*, Dukes concludes:

The field of conflict resolution, whose study so clearly reveals the cost of distorted communication, does not itself have a shared language.⁵⁶

The lack of an agreed definition leaves dialogue vulnerable to being understood as meaning 'persuasion'⁵⁷ or even 'destructive debate.'⁵⁸ To avoid that, this research defines dialogue as two-way, symmetrical communication, in which each participant is committed

⁵⁵ Petra Theunissen and Wan Noordoni, 'Revisiting the Concept "Dialogue" in Public Relations,' *Public Relations Review* 38 (2011): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.09.006>; Also see Tonn Mari Boor, 'Taking Conversation, Dialogue, and Therapy Public,' *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 3 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.2005.0072>. Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna, 'Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies,' 21.

⁵⁶ Franklin Dukes, *Resolving Public Conflict: Transforming Community and Governance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 186.

⁵⁷ Theunissen and Noordoni, 6.

⁵⁸ Richard Chasin et al., 'From Diatribe to Dialogue on Divisive Public Issues: Approaches Drawn from Family Therapy,' *Mediation Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1996): 323, <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.3900130408>.

to understanding what the other is saying and forming a 'common consciousness' through working together to create common ground.⁵⁹

Defining 'dialogue' in this way implicitly acknowledges the importance of language and the meaning behind the words people use.⁶⁰ It lays the ground rules *for* the conversation and manages the expectations *from* the conversation.⁶¹ Agreeing that dialogue is a 'radical availability to otherness' places relationship above the need to prove the argument on any given perspective.⁶² Further, defining 'dialogue' from a relational stance forms a platform for the second value: creating a safe space.

Creating a Safe Space

Safe spaces are intended to cultivate an environment that allows participants to share honestly on sensitive or controversial issues.⁶³ However, spaces cannot be 'universally safe', and some in the dialogue are automatically safer than others through the inequalities of race, gender, sexuality, immigration status etc, ingrained in our cultures and psyche.⁶⁴ Thus,

⁵⁹ Bohm and Nichol, 3',36; Kelly E. Maxwell, Biren A. Nagda, and Monita C. Thompson, *Facilitating Intergroup Dialogues Bridging Differences, Catalyzing Change* (Sterling: Stylus Publishing, 2011), 2.

⁶⁰ Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein*, ed. Peter Winch (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 40–47.

⁶¹ Ximena Zúñiga, 'Bridging Differences through Dialogue,' *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience* 7, no. 6 (2003): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/108648220300700603>.

⁶² Cissna, *Moments of Meeting Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Dialogue*, 7.

⁶³ The Roestone Collective, 'Safe Space: Towards a Reconceptualization,' *Antipode* 46, no. 5 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12089>; Barbara Mae Gayle, Derek Cortez, and Raymond Preiss, 'Safe Spaces, Difficult Dialogues, and Critical Thinking,' *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 7, no. 2 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2013.070205>; Karin K. Flensner and Marie Von der Lippe, 'Being Safe from What and Safe for Whom? A Critical Discussion of the Conceptual Metaphor of "Safe Space",' *Intercultural Education* 30, no. 3 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2019.1540102>.

⁶⁴ Lise Paulsen Galal and Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen, *Organised Cultural Encounters* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2020), 200; Tracey Lamont, 'Safe Spaces Or Brave Spaces? Re-Envisioning Practical Theology and Transformative Learning Theory,' *Religious Education* 115, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2019.1682452>.

'safe spaces' does not equate to 'comfortable spaces', as past experiences may 'introduce messiness and unpredictability'. Yet, it is the risks associated with being unpredictable that are often catalysts for change.⁶⁵ To create the right expectations for participants in 'safe spaces', research by Arao et al. led them to suggest a rebranding to 'brave space.' This conveys the probability of participants needing courage, as safety cannot be guaranteed even when everyone engages with the best intentions.⁶⁶

Some researchers (e.g, Hill Collins and Maxwell et al.) believe it is possible to overcome the barriers to safe spaces by 'acknowledging differences in power and privilege' and understanding that individuals have their boundaries for feeling safe.⁶⁷ Articulating the necessary ground rules is necessary to create platforms that 'distinguish destructive debate from dialogue'.⁶⁸ Volf argues that a safe space must contain frameworks for inclusion.⁶⁹ He states:

the will to give ourselves to others and 'welcome' them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity.⁷⁰

Volf's prerequisite of suspending judgement of others changes the nature of dialogue from what Bohm and Nichol describe as 'analyzing ... to win the game' to one where the

⁶⁵ Galal and Hvenegård-Lassen, 189; Helen F. Wilson, 'On the Paradox of 'Organised' Encounter,' *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 38, no. 6 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2017.1386631>.

⁶⁶ B. Arao and K. Clemens, 'From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces,' in *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, ed. Lisa M. Landreman (Herndon: Stylus, 2013).

⁶⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, 'Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender As Categories of Analysis and Connection,' in *Social Class and Stratification: Classic Statements and Theoretical Debates*, ed. Rhonda F. Levine (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 227–30; Maxwell, Nagda, and Thompson, 30. Catalyzing Change

⁶⁸ Chasin et al., 325–26.

⁶⁹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 36.

⁷⁰ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 21.

motivation is to listen.⁷¹ Therefore, the research will investigate whether the current discourse on the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ members in Baptist churches has created inclusive spaces, and also assess the impact that the existence or absence of safe spaces has had on the conversation thus far.

Defining Listening

'Listening' is not easily defined because people have varying agendas when they listen. Purdy and Borisoff names five types of listening—discriminative, comprehensive, critical (evaluative), therapeutic (empathetic) and appreciative.⁷² Listening is passive or active; either 'transactional', to convey information, or 'interactional'.⁷³ Therefore, the definition must reflect the reasons for listening and how the listener interprets what was heard.

When listening is connected to dialoguing differences, it can be associated with negotiation, persuasion, and compromise. For example, Bohm and Nichol's research defines listening as a commonality through understanding, resulting in 'negotiation'.⁷⁴ Negotiation has been described as synonymous with compromise and loss.⁷⁵ However, Stephen Covey

⁷¹ Bohm and Nichol, 6.

⁷² Michael Purdy and Deborah Borisoff, *Listening in Everyday Life: A Personal and Professional Approach*, 2nd ed. (New York: University Press of America, 1997), 11–13 and 333. Tyagi has increased the list to nineteen. Babita. Tyagi, 'Listening: An Important Skill and Its Various Aspects,' *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* (2013).

⁷³ Gillian Brown and George Yule, *Teaching the Spoken Language: An Approach Based on the Analysis of Conversational English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); John Stewart and Karen Zediker, 'Dialogue As Tensional, Ethical Practice,' *Southern Communication Journal* 65, no. 2–3 (2000): 235, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940009373169>.

⁷⁴ Bohm and Nichol, 18 and 26; Roger Fisher (who specialised in negotiation and conflict theory) uses the term 'persuasion' rather than 'negotiation' but his conclusions are the same: any resolution has to journey through 'theory' to a workable solution 'in the real world'. William Ury, 'the Five Ps of Persuasion: Roger Fisher's Approach to Influence,' *Negotiation Journal* 29, no. 2 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12012>.

⁷⁵ Mary Peterson, 'Constructive Conflict: Conflict Resolution Starts with Asking the Right Questions Even Before There Is a Conflict,' *Association Management* 54, no. 8 (2002).

disagrees, arguing that negotiating ‘transcends’ conflict through ‘creativity’ and its commitment to look for a ‘3rd alternative which no one has thought of yet.’⁷⁶ Covey, Bohm and Nichol argue that the aim of listening is to reach a negotiated resolution. This differs from Keenan’s definition, in which listening means learning from others. Keenan argues that in the LGBTQ/faith conversation, the church is guilty of listening to a *problem* rather than listening with an agenda to learn from LGBTQ persons.⁷⁷ This resonates with Buber’s insistence on dialoguing with people, not problems.⁷⁸ The different ways in which these scholars categorise reasons for listening—that is, the differences between Bohm and Nichol, Covey, and Keenan—highlights the importance of knowing the assumptions carried into the conversation. One comes expecting to negotiate, and one to learn from ‘other’. The variations in agendas for listening mean that any definition should include understanding the speaker’s agenda and the expected results for the listener.

Researcher Michael Purdy argued that in Western cultures, ‘Listeners were recognised but only as they were important to the purposes of the speaker.’⁷⁹ Although Western societies do have instances of community listening, as in support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which prioritise active listening for healing, and religious practices like those of the Quakers, who employ silence for collective decision-making, the prevailing emphasis on individualism often results in a lack of active listening.⁸⁰ Jon Roar Bjørkvold offers an

⁷⁶ Stephen R Covey, *The 3rd Alternative: Solving Life’s Most Difficult Problems* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 12 and 51.

⁷⁷ Keenan, 109.

⁷⁸ Buber, 208.

⁷⁹ Purdy and Borisoff, 1.

⁸⁰ Maria G. Swora, ‘Narrating Community: The Creation of Social Structure in Alcoholics Anonymous Through the Performance of Autobiography,’ *Narrative Inquiry* 11, no. 2 (2001); Elizabeth Molina-Markham, ‘Finding the “Sense of the Meeting”: Decision Making Through Silence Among Quakers,’ *Journal of Communication* 78, no. 2 (2014): 155-74; Sally R. Munt, ‘Quakers: Post-Christian Selfhoods within the Liberal Sphere,’ in *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places*, ed. Andrew Kam-Tuck

interesting perspective on Western culture in his research on *Sikia*, a Swahili practice he translates as ‘integrated sensing’. *Sikia*, within the African tradition, aligns with deep listening but involves a more comprehensive sensory awareness, encompassing a holistic perception of the environment. Bjørkvold contrasts *Sikia* with ‘Western specialization,’ a tendency in Western cultures to fragment and isolate facets of experience and knowledge, potentially overlooking their interconnectedness. While Bjørkvold primarily explores the broader implications of ‘Western specialization’, his research does correlate with active listening. It highlights Western cultural tendencies that may affect people’s listening habits, causing them to miss sensory connections (i.e. what is seen and felt) and thus promoting fragmented attention and encouraging specialised listening for specific information or cues. These patterns, if addressed, could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding.⁸¹

This predisposition to prioritise listeners based on their relevance to the speaker’s objectives necessitates an alternative listening methodology in the conversation surrounding the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in Baptist churches to counteract cultural norms.⁸²

Listening as Defined by Dadirri

Dadirri—the Aboriginal method of deep listening—differs from the tendency to ‘cognitively prepare a response’ because it aims to ‘understand the speech and feelings’ of the other

Yip, Kath Browne, and Sally R. Munt (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 51–80; Richard Eckersley argues individualism is ‘the defining characteristics of Western nations’ which is often contrasted with the collectivism of Eastern nations. Richard Eckersley, *Well & Good: Morality, Meaning and Happiness* (Text Publishing, 2005), 45.

⁸¹ Jon Roar Bjørkvold, *The Muse Within: Creativity and Communication, Song and Play from Childhood through Maturity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); Laura Brearley, ‘Deep Listening and Leadership: An Indigenous Model of Leadership and Community Development in Australia,’ in *Restorying Indigenous Leadership: Wise Practices in Community Development*, ed. Cora Voyageur, Laura Brearley, and Brian Calliou (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2014), 103.

⁸² Purdy and Borisoff, 82.

person.⁸³ *Dadirri* is from the language of the *Ngan'gikurungkurr* people of the Daly River, although it is seen in many Indigenous cultures.⁸⁴ It was first introduced by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann—an *Nauiyu* Elder and principal cultural authority on *Dadirri*—and developed as a method by *Jiman/Bundjalung* woman Judy Atkinson, who specialises in intergenerational and relational trauma, and healing or recovery for Indigenous peoples.⁸⁵ Through *Dadirri*, knowledge and understanding are obtained via a cyclical process of deep listening, reflecting, learning, and then relistening at a deeper level.⁸⁶ *Dadirri* is a spiritual experience; therefore, the reflection is comparable to contemplation and silent meditation.⁸⁷ Silent contemplation is another example of a countercultural approach, since the response of silence is rarely seen in contemporary discussions. Gemma Corradi Fiumara argues in her book *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening* that 'the Western ... system of knowledge tends to ignore the listening processes.'⁸⁸

However, *Dadirri* argues that silence is not something to be 'threatened' by as it facilitates the process of deep listening.⁸⁹ *Dadirri* is not a process to be rushed; it is analogously linked to a slow-moving river. Ungunmerr-Baumann describes it as:

⁸³ Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., '*Dadirri: An Indigenous Place-based Research Methodology*'; West et al.

⁸⁴ Atkinson, *Trauma Trails*, 15; Ungunmerr-Baumann, '*Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening*.'

⁸⁵ 'We Al-li—Culturally Informed Trauma Integrated Healing Approach.'

<https://www.wealli.com.au/our-staff/judy-atkinson/>; Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., '*Dadirri: An Indigenous Place-based Research Methodology*'.

⁸⁶ Atkinson, *Trauma Trails*, 19.

⁸⁷ Lynore K. Geia, Barbara Hayes, and Kim Usher, 'Yarning/Aboriginal Storytelling: Towards An Understanding of An Indigenous Perspective and Its Implications for Research Practice,' *Contemporary Nurse: A Journal for the Australian Nursing Profession* 46, no. 1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.5172/conu.2013.46.1.13>.

⁸⁸ Gemma Corradi Fiumara, 'Towards a Fuller Understanding of *Logos*,' in *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1.

⁸⁹ Marshall Leaver, 'Exploring the *Dadirri* Way of Learning in Society and Culture,' *Culture Scope* 79 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.3316/ielapa.572530603274597>.

Be still, wait, do not rush things. Let life happen by itself. Work with it, trust in the spirituality and wisdom that is around you.⁹⁰

Dadirri calls for patience when listening and learning from another person's story. Again, it is countercultural to sit with differences and not immediately address them, and the importance of deliberately 'relistening' as part of the process reinforces the value of listening over speaking.⁹¹ Ungunmerr-Baumann argues that in *Dadirri*, there is 'no need for words as the act of learning is all about listening and not asking questions.'⁹²

The encouragement to engage in deep listening with contemplation and patience does not mean that *Dadirri* dismisses the uncomfortableness experienced in the process. Ungunmerr-Baumann describes the *Dadirri* journey as a 'crosswind', and the listener can 'adjust or crash' during the process. However, in turbulence, one becomes aware of the 'preconceived ideas' and 'filters' that influence, and it is the 'shaky space' that 'shifts ways of thinking and listening.'⁹³

There are similarities between *Dadirri* and Habermas' theories on communicative action. Both share an emphasis on: (1) a reciprocal relationship, power-sharing, and the inclusion of all voices; (2) community reflection on the meaning that reaches a common understanding; and (3) the importance of being connected to the environment. Habermas identified the connection to the environment as the influence of 'lifeworlds' and 'systems', and *Dadirri* aims to connect with creation and ancestral stories.⁹⁴

However, the outworking of these theories has sometimes produced different results. For example, when Habermas proposed a framework for religious dialogue in public

⁹⁰ Leaver, 'Exploring the Dadirri Way,' 22,

⁹¹ Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., '*Dadirri*: An Indigenous Place-based Research Methodology,' 96.

⁹² Ungunmerr-Baumann, '*Dadirri*: Inner Deep Listening,' 1.

⁹³ Ungunmerr-Baumann, '*Dadirri*: Inner Deep Listening,' 9–11.

⁹⁴ West et al., 1586–88.

spheres, he was accused of ‘adopting a highly attenuated understanding of learning from religion’ because his definition of listening had an agenda of agreeing with one perspective rather than the aim of understanding the other.⁹⁵ Habermas was accused of not listening, as deep listening transcends mere acknowledgment of differences in perspectives; it demands a conscious effort to validate each side’s insights. Habermas’s theories have also been accused of lacking a practical application. Thus, research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, using Habermas’s methodology, concluded that while his theory ‘provided a process of equitable dialogue ... the challenge of defying traditional epistemological assumptions remains.’⁹⁶

Dadirri differs in that it aims to ‘learn from listening’ and then to ‘purposefully plan to act, with actions informed by learning wisdom and the informed responsibility that comes with knowledge.’⁹⁷ Research on Indigenous experiences of paediatric hospitalisation found that *Dadirri* both enabled participants to share and reflect on experiences and—equally—equipped them to explore suggestions for change.⁹⁸ The plan to act may sound similar to negotiation; however, the difference lies in the emphasis on *responsibility* for action because of the knowledge acquired. There is a responsibility to act because of a growing empathy to value what others bring to the community and to initiate change where they are devalued. This responsibility challenges the entire community to address power imbalances. There is a responsibility for others and not just to self in *Dadirri*.

⁹⁵ Areshidze, 272; Darren R. Walhof, ‘Habermas, Same-sex Marriage and the Problem of Religion in Public Life,’ *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 39, no. 3 (2013): 227, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453712473077>; Melissa Yates, ‘Rawls and Habermas on Religion in the Public Sphere,’ *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, no. 7 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453707081685>.

⁹⁶ Urquhart et al., 4.

⁹⁷ Atkinson, *Trauma Trails*, 16.

⁹⁸ Laura Tanner, Kendall Agius, and Philip Darbyshire, ‘“Sometime They Run Away, That’s How Scared They Feel”: The Paediatric Hospitalisation Experiences of Indigenous Families from Remote Areas of Australia,’ *Contemporary Nurse* 18, no. 1–2 (2005), 3–17, <https://doi.org/10.5172/conu.18.1-2.3>.

Dadirri addresses the problem of listening with a personal agenda. It starts with the expectation that dialogue is about deep listening rather than speaking. It expects the listening to be done in a community where all voices are treated equally, and all people matter. *Dadirri* is a spiritual journey suited to people of faith because it reminds all that this dialogue is happening in a sacred space over sacred issues and is a contemplation of the Spirit within each of us. It values relistening over speaking and expects us to act with the knowledge gained by deep listening and by exploring ways of implementing any suggested changes.

Dialogue Comes with Risk

Engaging in dialogue over differences carries risks because it moves people out of their comfort zones, into a place of vulnerability. Volf described such risks as the ‘drama of embrace.’ It is a place of uncertainty, where arms are outstretched in the hope of the embrace being both received and reciprocated. In essence, dialogue with others carries the risk of rejection. Volf further argues that reconciliatory dialogue is a continuing process where ‘the identity of the self is both preserved and transformed’, while the distinctiveness of others is acknowledged and, to some extent, integrated into the constantly evolving self-identity.⁹⁹ In other words, listening to another’s perspective challenges one’s worldviews and exposes biases.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, dialoguing with others is the catalyst for liminality, which is an uncomfortable journey that many would rather avoid.¹⁰¹

There is an additional risk that the conversation might take unanticipated and unplanned directions. This is of particular concern to those holding power, because it risks

⁹⁹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 140–45, at 140.

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna, ‘Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies,’ 29; Harold H. Saunders, *Sustained Dialogue in Conflicts: Transformation and Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 26.

¹⁰¹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 19.

altering their preferred outcomes for the discourse. Ken and Taylor's essay on dialogue in public relations between organisations and individuals or advocacy groups describes the risk as integral to the ethical conversation. They advocate that 'all involved are communicating in the *present* about issues, rather than *after* decisions have been made' (their emphasis). However, they observe the threat that disclosures from those with the minority voices could be used to 'exploit or manipulate' those with differing perspectives to fit the agenda of those holding control over the power bases for the discourse. Therefore, they argue for discourse not to be driven by 'action or policies'—a 'monologic discourse system'—but rather to emphasise communication as a tool for negotiating relationships (i.e. dialogic discourse practices).¹⁰² They conclude that to keep discourse based in dialogic relationships requires a commitment to keep talking.

A Commitment to Keep Talking

Various factors can impede well-intentioned conversations. Among these are 'divergent views' on definitions of justice and resolution, and the emotions induced by conflict—especially a fear of being negatively affected by the outcomes.¹⁰³ Therefore, discussing differences in perspectives should not be seen merely as a way to solve the immediately apparent or agreed-upon problem. Instead, it requires a commitment to continuous dialogue, addressing each new issue as it arises during the conversation.

A commitment to keep talking is essential for revealing what Habermas terms 'systematic distorted communication'.¹⁰⁴ This concept highlights situations where participants may strategically behave, or manipulate, despite outwardly appearing to seek

¹⁰² Kent and Taylor, 23–26.

¹⁰³ Rudolf Schuessler, 'Justice in Negotiations and Conflict Resolution,' in *Alternative Approaches in Conflict Resolution*, ed. Martin Leiner and Christine Schliesser (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 26; David A. Buchanan and Andrzej Huczynski, *Organizational Behaviour*, 9th ed. (Harlow: Pearson, 2017), 702.

¹⁰⁴ Jürgen Habermas, 'On Systematically Distorted Communication,' *Inquiry* 13, no. 1–4 (1970), 205–18.

mutual understanding.¹⁰⁵ Systematic distorted communication is not necessarily a conscious choice; it is often the place of ‘mistakes’, and the space before there has been a ‘reassessment’ of personal biases or fears that are driving the individual’s conversation. However, systematic distorted communication is likely to disrupt or create barriers to dialogue over differences.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, undertaking a commitment to ongoing dialogue entails talking about and learning from the ‘mistakes’ within conversations, embracing and encouraging them as valuable ‘teachable moments’. This commitment to keep talking signifies a prioritisation of continuing dialogic relationships within the discourse.¹⁰⁷

Before embarking on the discourse over differences in perspective, it is essential for participants in the conversation to explore and agree on the five principles listed at the beginning on this section. Collectively, they create a general framework for encouraging authentic dialogue. The principles imply that individuals undergo a liminal journey as they prepare for discussions on differing perspectives. However, the influence of liminality is not explicitly addressed. This oversight hinders a comprehensive understanding of the impact of liminality on the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches. Therefore, this study engages with the influences of liminality through the concepts found in Theory U.

Liminality and Theory U

Liminality and Theory U explain the way liminal space affects individuals’ decision-making processes, particularly when a different viewpoint challenges their existing beliefs about themselves and others. These are introduced next.

¹⁰⁵ Alan G. Gross, ‘Habermas, Systematically Distorted Communication, and the Public Sphere,’ *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2006): 311, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940500511603>; Outhwaite.

¹⁰⁶ Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna, ‘Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies,’ 189.

¹⁰⁷ Kent and Taylor, 25 and 29.

Liminality is characterised as a 'betwixt and between' state of double-mindedness when a catalyst challenges a pre-existing way of thinking, leading to a process of questioning and ultimately adopting or assimilating a new way of thinking.¹⁰⁸ It was first associated with Turner's anthropological studies of the ritual passages undertaken throughout life (e.g. childhood to adulthood, marriage, or separation through death).¹⁰⁹ Entering a liminal space can free individuals from social and cultural norms, allowing them to critically examine existing boundaries and structures.¹¹⁰ However, the liminal journey of challenging existing mindsets is often described as 'destabilising', 'disorienting', and 'painful' and as impacting one's mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.¹¹¹ This is not a space most people willingly walk into, and people typically want to move away from it quickly. Entering or allowing liminality is not intended to convert someone's perspective to agree with another's. Rather, it is the ambiguous, uncomfortable space of questioning and re-examining preconceived views and assumptions. However, challenging the status quo is essential in providing a platform in dialogue for diverse perspectives to be heard.

Frost and Hirsch emphasise that liminal learning is not only 'a personal process of discovery' but is also conducted in community.¹¹² Frost draws on Turner's word

¹⁰⁸ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Jersey: Transaction, 2011), 95; Timothy L. Carson et al., *Crossing Thresholds: A Practical Theology of Liminality* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2021).

¹⁰⁹ Barbara Czarniawska and Carmelo Mazza, 'Consulting As a Liminal Space,' *Human Relations* 56, no. 3 (2003): 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726703056003612>.

¹¹⁰ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1982), 27. Hans-Peter Muller, Barbara L. Marshall, and Austin Harrington, *Encyclopedia of Social Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 322; Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull, eds, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 6: Psychological Types* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971).

¹¹¹ Sheryl Fullerton, 'What Else Is There?', *Oneing* 8, no. 1 (2020), 77–80.

¹¹² Frost and Hirsch, 93.

'communitas' because it 'denotes an intense feeling of social togetherness and belonging' which only happens through a shared experience of transitioning in liminal space.¹¹³ Turner pictures liminality birthing communitas; he says: 'Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority.'¹¹⁴ Communitas emphasises the bond established through the mutual experience of liminality.

However, sharing the experience of being betwixt and between is a vulnerable place to be. It reveals our uncertainties and our sense of how little we know and therefore revealing our journey through liminality risks inviting judgments from others. Frost and Hirsch put it this way: 'Liminality remember involves adventure, risk, journey, engagement, and courage.' All these words point to a personal cost and it is understandable why many avoid sharing the experience with others. However, if anxieties are overcome and trust built, sharing the experience forges greater relationships. As Frost and Hirsch say:

When liminality happens (it can be deliberately cultivated) it fundamentally restructures the nature of pre-existing relationship, friendships emerge from mere associations and comradeship evolves from pre-existing friendships.¹¹⁵

Journeying in liminality with others has the potential to overcome barriers by forging new communities based in relationship. It places difference as a value and an accepted part of being in communitas and not as a reason for exclusion. As Frost and Hirsch conclude, 'liminality creates the condition where people learn to have each other's backs.'¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 110.

¹¹⁴ Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 128.

¹¹⁵ Frost and Hirsch, 54.

¹¹⁶ Frost and Hirsch, 94.

Franciscan friar Father Richard Rohr incorporated the concept of liminality into theology, characterising it as the ‘prophetic position’ situated on the spiritual periphery. Therefore, liminality is not defined by ‘an outsider throwing rocks or a comfortable insider who defends the status quo, but one who lives precariously with two perspectives held tightly together.’¹¹⁷ The liminal journey figures in the biblical narratives as exile, journey, or pilgrimage, which expresses barrenness, travail, and loneliness.¹¹⁸ These are familiar biblical themes to many within the Baptist church and, therefore, could provide a gateway for explaining liminality and encouraging engagement in the discomfort of wrestling with the unfamiliar and the resulting change.

Rundel’s research asserts that many churches—he cites Evangelicals in particular—do not acknowledge or educate about biblical instances of liminal places, leaving many incapable of accepting and navigating liminality. He suggests that the doctrine of ‘faith in God’ leads some to believe that they should not grapple with uncertainties. When the season of questioning inevitably arises, they are left confused and feeling guilt-ridden for experiencing liminality.¹¹⁹ Additionally, the questions raised in liminality could be perceived as doublemindedness, which carries a negative connotation because the Scriptures state: ‘a double-minded man is unstable in all their ways’ (James 1:8). However, Donald Beggs argues that doublemindedness is a ‘virtue’—and not James’s ‘agent of evil’—because it enables individuals to ‘deliberate and act well.’¹²⁰ It is journeying through doublemindedness and contradictions that challenges established mindsets. Andrew Marin

¹¹⁷ Richard Rohr, ‘On the Edge of the Inside: The Prophetic Position,’ *Tikkun* 22 no 5 (2007): 1.

¹¹⁸ Michelle Trebilcock, ‘Living with Jesus in Liminality: An Invitation to “Be Dead” with the Dead God,’ *Crucible Theology and Ministry*, no. 4:1 (2012), 1–21, <https://doi.org/www.crucible.org.au>; ‘Oneing. Liminal Space,’ Center for Action and Contemplation, 2023, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/liminal-space/>; Thomas J. Rundel, ‘Liminal Spaces: A Narrative Spirituality of the Bible’ (George Fox, 2015), 1–210, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/109>.

¹¹⁹ Rundel, 161–63.

¹²⁰ Donald Beggs, ‘The Moral Virtue of Doublemindedness,’ *Philosophy* 88, no. 345 (2013): 430.

agrees. In his assessment of the cultural war between LGBTQIA+ and conservative Christians, Marin believes that ‘a lack of commitment to intentionally live in a place of constructive tension with each other’ prevents communication between the sides.¹²¹ An understanding and commitment to a liminal journey may hold the key to facilitating the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.

Otto Scharmer developed Theory U to explain the two typical responses within the liminal journey. As a process of awareness-based systematic thinking, Theory U goes beyond symptom analysis for complex problems to delve into the three fundamental causes: the inner self (*source*); thought processes (*process*); and actions taken (*results*).¹²² The journey (Figure 1) follows a U-shaped process. When confronted with challenges to individual or collective beliefs, individuals and groups progress through stages of awareness, empathy, and action—or, conversely, through stages of ignorance, hate, and fear.¹²³

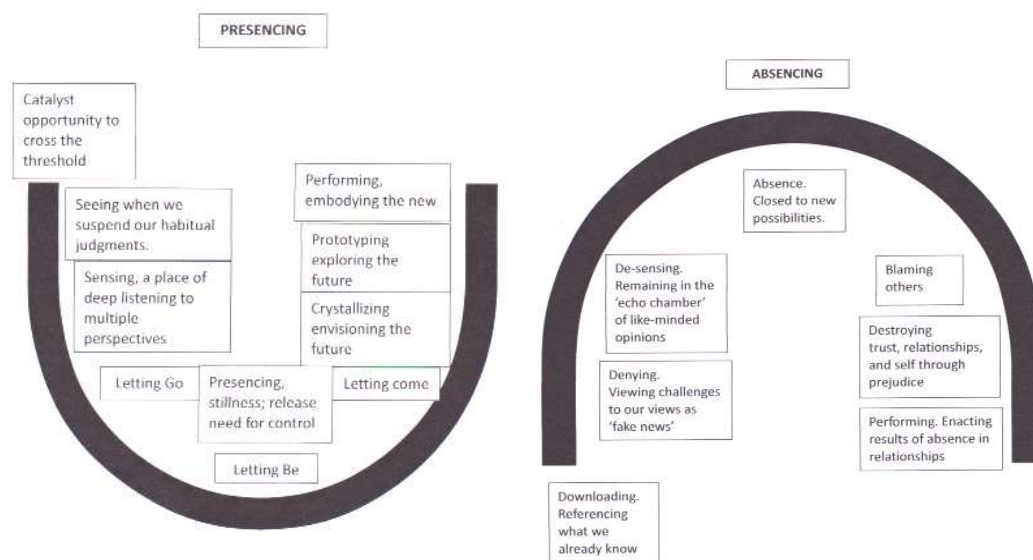


Figure 1: The two responses to liminality outlined in the theory of U

121 Marin, ‘Winner Take All?’, 507.

122 Scharmer, 18–19.

123 Scharmer, 34.

The Theory U journey begins with a challenge to a person's established norms that becomes the catalyst to cross the threshold from the known into the unknown. At this moment, there is a choice of either 'Presencing' or 'Absencing' from the discourse that is challenging established modes of thinking.

In 'Presencing' the journey progresses down the left side of the U through the 'suspending' of habitual judgments and 'sensing' alternative perspectives. No decisions are made; it is about 'letting go' of familiar thought patterns and allowing the challenge of an unfamiliar perspective. At the bottom of the U journey is 'Presencing' which Scharmer describes as: 'let[ting] go of the old and connect[ing] ... with the future potential.'¹²⁴ What is important to recognise at this stage is that there is no agenda for what the future may hold. This is not a space where opinions are necessarily radically altered from previous ways of thinking. Rather, it is place of possibility with uncertain outcomes. Carson et al., drawing on Scharmer's work, refer to the second stage of the liminal journey as 'Letting Be', which is often accompanied by feelings of 'Desolation'.¹²⁵ During this stage, individuals may experience a sense of loss of control and agency as they are uncertain whether to continue holding onto previously held beliefs or to adopt new ways of thinking.¹²⁶ Carson et al. propose that the liminal journey represents a Christian worldview, where the base of the 'U' has become the 'pinnacle' because relinquishing power and autonomy mirrors the biblical command to die to self and live for Christ.¹²⁷

Emerging from the 'Letting Be' stage is 'Letting Come', which involves 'Crystallizing' and envisioning the future from a new perspective. This is followed by 'Prototyping' and 'Performing', which entail the enactment and embodiment of the newly discovered

¹²⁴ Scharmer, 98.

¹²⁵ Carson et al., 58.

¹²⁶ Fullerton.

¹²⁷ Carson et al., 113. Trebilcock. See Luke 9:23; Galatians 2:20 and 5:24–25.

thinking. Whereas the 'Letting Be' period is often deeply personal, the 'Letting Come' journey of transformation is worked out through relationships with the broader community.¹²⁸ Frost and Hirsch argue that inviting others to participate in the process is crucial for gaining 'new insights on old themes'.¹²⁹

Theory U argues that a challenge to a person's established norms does not always lead to discovery and transformation, and the journey through the 'U' cycle may be inverted to become a destructive experience. The challenge to thinking is still there; however, the response is 'Downloading' from pre-existing knowledge. Three inner voices block the lefthand path of the U—'Voice of judgment' against another perspective; 'Voice of cynicism' that refuses to act in a vulnerable manner towards others; and 'Voice of fear'. 'Downloading' moves to 'Denying' (which views challenges to their perspectives as 'fake news') and 'De-sensing' (or the 'echo chamber' of like-minded opinions that reinforce existing beliefs, thereby closing them to different perspectives). The base of the U becomes a place of 'Absence', which is closed to new possibilities. Scharmer describes this as a closed will due to fear, a closed heart due to hate and a closed mind due to ignorance. Rising from the U is a process of 'Blaming Others' and 'Destroying' trust, relationships, and self through prejudice. 'Performing' is the final stage when the outworking of the inverted U is enforced in relationships with others.¹³⁰

Theory U argues that the outcome of a liminal journey is influenced by whether an individual approaches it with an open or closed mind. Closed-mindedness results in prejudice, ignorance, anger, hate, and fear. Conversely, an open mind leads to curiosity, compassion, and courage.

¹²⁸ Carson et al., 62.

¹²⁹ Frost and Hirsch, 54 and 93. Frost and Hirsch conclude: 'Liminality creates the condition where people learn to have each other's backs' p 94.

¹³⁰ Scharmer, 33–36.

Theory U links openness to one's ability to listen, categorising four types of listening: downloading, factual (i.e, noticing what is different and new), empathic, and generative, which allows for something new. Listening is not confined to the feedback loop of like-minded opinions. Rather it is about 'attending' and intentionally engaging with and learning from differing perspectives.¹³¹ In this way, it shares similar values to *Dadirri's* emphasis on deep listening.

Theory U recognises the desire to escape the discomfort of liminality. The inclination is understandable; however, it is impossible, as the process cannot be rushed.¹³² The gradual pace of the liminal journey is an important thing to observe, because there is frequently an expectation of rapidly reaching a consensus in discussions over differences. In the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches, there will be challenges which prompt a shift in thinking and initiate the process of liminality. However, pushing to speed up the journey risks aborting the act of transformation. BCSA and its member churches have a history of creating space for the slow journeys of liminality, as evidenced by their decades-long dialogue about accepting women in leadership positions. However, there is a significant difference between the discussions on these issues. The conversation regarding women's rights to ministry has been necessitated by the presence of women in leadership, including the Director of Ministries for BCSA. However, the dialogue about LGBTQIA+ rights differs, due to the absence of LGBTQIA+ persons and their perspective from the discourse, which prevents the necessary challenge to established ways of thinking required by Theory U.

The liminal journey has potential to instigate meaningful change in a person's life. If embraced, the liminal space can lead to the emergence of novel ways of thinking and acting and has the power to transform individuals and communities. However, liminality is uncomfortable, especially for those who feel that questioning their biblical understanding

¹³¹ Scharmer, 42-43.

¹³² Trebilcock, 10.

is akin to a lack of faith in God. Thus, using biblical themes such as journey, exile, or pilgrimage can offer a commonality of language to encourage the exploration of the unfamiliar and serve as a solution to this problem.

Summary

This chapter introduced the work of the individual dialogue theorists, the core values for hosting dialogue, and the principles of *Dadirri* and Theory U, which together are seen here as essential in creating authentic dialogue and promoting equitable participation. The literature reveals that facilitating a conversation over differences needs agreement on the values common to all significant dialogue theorists. Dialogue requires a standard definition—agreed upon by all involved in the exchange—to create a safe/brave space where people will be empowered to share their thoughts. Dialogue also needs to value the process of deep listening, as seen in the practices of *Dadirri*—above destructive debate—because the dialogue is always looking to maintain future relationships. Dialogue is not to be undertaken lightly, as there are always associated risks; therefore, it must be entered with a commitment to keep talking despite inevitable conflicts.

Chapter 4 now builds upon the examination of dialogue theory to consider broader influences on dialoguing over differences in perspectives. It investigates the factors that may impact the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.

Influences on LGBTQIA+ Dialogue

Dialogue is influenced by our worldview and shaped by the underlying constructs and assumptions that are not always acknowledged.¹ For example, feminist activist Riki Wilchins² shows how the habitual nature of aligning conversations with gender norms results in ‘third genders always sounding fanciful, nonsensical, or just ridiculous’. Dialogue theory reveals ways in which the discourse can reward, discipline, and include/exclude individuals and groups.³ Recognising the influences in discussions about differences is crucial for understanding the power imbalances in the discourse and uncovering the conscious and unconscious biases in the conversation.

In that vein, this chapter examines the predominant influences on individual and organisational behaviour that impact the conversations over differing perspectives. It explores key influences on the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches, including assumptions, monoculture, moral panics and scapegoating, power, theological perspectives, stigma, and sacred values.

Assumptions

Assumptions are seen in the everyday use of ‘loaded terms’; the words and phrases which carry a subtext that elicits an emotive response from the hearer.⁴ Loaded terms ‘shift’ their

¹ Stephen C. Levinson, ‘Interactional Biases in Human Thinking,’ in *Social Intelligence and Interaction*, ed. E. Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 221.

² Riki Anne Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2004), 73.

³ Van Dijk, 254–55; Keating.

⁴ Dwight Bolinger, *Language, the Loaded Weapon: The Use and Abuse of Language Today* (London: Longman, 1980), 88.

meaning with 'the location and nature of the speaker.'⁵ However, speakers and listeners often assume a shared understanding of the subtext rather than explicitly discussing its changing meaning during their dialogue. Similarly, everyday communication includes implicit propositions and assumes that the listener shares the same contextual assumptions as the speaker.⁶

Additionally, there is the speaker's assumption of truthfulness and the expectation that the listener accepts what is said as truth. Sentences are often structured to elicit agreement with the speaker's perspective; for example: 'You like him, don't you?'⁷ Truthfulness is also complicated by a statement's literal and intended meaning, which may have been implied but not actually said, and that can lead to misunderstandings and disagreements. For example, it is not unusual in disagreements to hear 'but what you actually said was ... '⁸ Habitually structuring conversations to align with the speaker's viewpoint, whether consciously or unconsciously, is relevant to the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in BCSA member churches. This practice shows that the perspectives held by the majority of Baptists will shape the framework and boundaries for the conversation. In many Baptist churches, the prevailing perspective does not affirm either LGBTQIA+ persons

⁵ Marjorie B. Garber, *Loaded Words* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 2; Brian T. Connor, '9/11 – a New Pearl Harbor? Analogies, Narratives, and Meanings of 9/11 in Civil Society,' *Cultural Sociology* 6, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975511427809>. Narratives', and Meanings of 9/11 in Civil Society; Aletta G. Dorst and Anna Kaal, 'Metaphor in Discourse. Beyond the Boundaries of MIP,' in *Metaphor in Use: Context, Culture, and Communication*, ed. Fiona Macarthur et al. (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2012).

⁶ Bolinger, 77. Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, 'Truthfulness and Relevance,' *Mind* 111, no. 443 (2002): 604–5, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/111.443.583>; Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture As Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 35; Garber, 2 and 7; The book *Eat, Shoots & Leaves* has excellent examples of this despite its focus on textual grammar: Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (London: Profile, 2005).

⁷ Bolinger, 77.

⁸ Wilson and Sperber, 583 and 600.

acting on their orientations or LGBTQIA+ relationships, for doctrinal reasons. Consequently, Baptists with a non-affirming theological perspective tend to assume the responsibilities of the speaker, dictating the meaning and expecting agreement based on their assumptions.

Assumptions are also made when those with the power presume to speak on behalf of those in the minority. Critical discourse analysis has demonstrated the power of the collective to structure language to create a positive language for the speaker, as opposed to negative statements about others.⁹ Edward Said highlighted the link between culture, power, and colonialism, emphasising the adverse outcomes when those in power speak on behalf of others. Said argues that those in power can control the way the stories of others are told and thus shape perceptions about the other. As he put it, 'to have power is to be able to know the world in your own terms.'¹⁰ LGBTQIA+ activist Sally Rugg echoes Said's argument. She used the case of the Australian Government's responses to the legalisation of same-sex marriage during the Australian plebiscite to show how those in power retell stories to portray themselves positively.¹¹ The church, regardless of denomination, is accused of the same offence of manipulating and reconstructing LGBTQIA+ narratives for its own

⁹ Michael G. W. Bamberg and Molly Andrews, *Considering Counter Narratives. Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense* (Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 2004); Jackie Abell, Elizabeth H. Stokoe, and Michael Billig, 'Narrative and the Discursive (Re)Construction of Events,' in *Lines of Narrative: Psychosocial Perspectives*, ed. Molly Andrews et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000); Van Dijk; Bolinger.

¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 81. Said's work centred on the Western portrayal of Arabs, in particular the Palestinian narrative.

¹¹ The 2017 plebiscite—The Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey—determined the public support for legalising same-sex marriage: Brenton Holmes, 'A Quick Guide to Plebiscites in Australia,' (2011), <https://www.aph.gov.au/>; Nick Evershed, 'Full Results of Australia's Vote for Same-Sex Marriage, Electorate by Electorate,' *The Guardian* (15 November 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/>; Sally Rugg, *How Powerful We Are: Behind the Scenes with One of Australia's Leading Activists* (Hachette Australia, 2019), 4.

agenda.¹² For example, narrating the assumption that LGBTQIA+ persons are in pain because of their orientations and attend church seeking comfort rather than expecting equality.¹³ In religious discourse, there are also references to everyone belonging to a broken, fallen, and sinful world. This explicitly characterises LGBTQIA+ sexual and gender orientations as broken, and excludes the possibility that LGBTQIA+ individuals may not perceive their orientations as either broken or sinful. Anshuman Mondal, an academic who specialises in free speech, argues that freedom of expression too often prioritises the speaker without considering the impact on the listener. The imbalance creates a power dynamic, given that those with the dominant voices are often the primary speakers and may avoid any obligation to listen.¹⁴ This limits the speaker's ability and willingness to hear and respond to marginalised voices, ultimately leading to closures and exclusions in the discourse.

The consequence of those in power retelling the other's story is that the perspective often needs to be dismantled before any dialogue over differences is initiated. This is relevant to this research, given the power of the collective to structure language to create positive self-representation and negative portrayal of others. In the LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Baptist context, verifying assumed familiarity with the other's account, particularly when the 'other' is in the minority, is essential in order to confirm its origin and guard against distortions that may arise from conflicting motives.

¹² Keenan, 96; Dawne Moon, 'Emotion Language and Social Power: Homosexuality and Narratives of Pain in Church,' *Qualitative Sociology* 28, no. 4 (2005): 340–43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-005-8362-5>; Also see Schneider and Roncolato on how black sexuality is reconstructed by white culture to maintain the power differential. It also examines how Queer Theory deconstructs and reconstructs orthodox doctrines. Laurel C. Schneider and Carolyn Roncolato, 'Queer Theologies,' *Religion Compass* 6, no. 1 (2012): 9–10, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2011.00315.x>.

¹³ Moon, 'Emotion Language and Social Power: Homosexuality and Narratives of Pain in Church,' 343.

¹⁴ Tanja Dreher and Anshuman A. Mondal, eds, *Ethical Responsiveness and the Politics of Difference* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 54.

Monocultures and Monologues

Communicating over differences is further complicated by the tendency to live in monocultural groups that affirm beliefs and disregard different perspectives.¹⁵ Brené Brown, a clinical social worker and academic, argues that the ‘echo chamber’ of like-minded opinions results in a ‘monoloop’ leading to negative stereotyping:

The sorting we do to ourselves and to one another is, at best, unintentional and reflexive. At worst, it is stereotyping that dehumanizes. The paradox is that we all love the readymade filing system, so handy when we want to quickly characterize people, but we resent it when we’re the ones getting filed away.¹⁶

Dialogue theorist Martin Buber argues that much of what is called ‘dialogue’ is, in fact, a monologue.¹⁷ According to Buber, genuine dialogue only happens through empathising and engaging with the other’s unique perspectives and social/cultural norms.¹⁸ Therefore, assumptions held within monocultures only change by building relationships with the ‘other’ and listening to their perspective.¹⁹ The echo chamber raises the question of how much of the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches is a monologue and whether all perspectives can speak by their own authority into the debate.

¹⁵ Social commentator Bill Bishop described this as ‘the big sort’ or the ‘giant feedback loop.’ Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness* (London: Vermillion, 2017), 34; Also see Marin, *Us Versus Us: The Untold Story of Religion and the LGBT Community*, 152.

¹⁶ Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*, 8–9.

¹⁷ Buber, 23 and 38; Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 171.

¹⁸ Susan Visvanathan, ‘On Dealing with Difference: Rethinking the Work of Edward Said, Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt with Reference to Kashmir and Kashmiriyat,’ *Cultural Dynamics* 29, no. 4 (2017), 275–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374017741021>.

¹⁹ Richard Rohr, ‘The Second Conversion: Solidarity,’ 26 May 2020, <https://cac.org/the-second-conversion-2020-05-26/>. Theory U describes this as a ‘spark’ that moves us away from ‘downloading’ what we already know: Scharmer, 24. See also Gadamer’s ‘Fusing of Horizons’ in Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

Fear, Moral Panic, and Scapegoats

Despite its potential, engaging in dialogue over differences in perspectives, including in the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches, is more likely to raise anxiety than the thought of possibilities.²⁰ The fears are numerous and may include: the fear of change; fear of losing biblical heterodoxy; fear of offending through using incorrect language; fear of losing relationship; fear of sharing private experiences (of self or a loved one); and fear of not knowing how to have the conversation.²¹ These fears are compounded by the reliance on rhetoric either to protect a sacred value or to hide their lack of personal reasoning or knowledge on the subject.²²

Brené Brown's observations on the fear of being 'labelled' with 'unwanted identities' helps to explain people's fear about the LGBTQIA+ discourse.²³ For example, non-affirming Christians may fear being labelled as fundamentalist or homophobic, while LGBTQIA+ advocate, Sally Rugg, spoke of the 'horrible things written about me on Facebook'.²⁴

²⁰ Marin, *Us Versus Us*, 153.

²¹ These fears were revealed in the data from the participants' interviews.

²² Rhetoric is either negotiable because it is grounded in 'reasoned consequences' or 'sacred rhetoric that rejects consequentialism in favour of protecting values; Morgan Marietta, 'The Absolutist Advantage: Sacred Rhetoric in Contemporary Presidential Debate,' *Political Communication* 26, no. 4 (2009): 388, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600903296986>; Gary Adler, 'An Opening in the Congregational Closet? Boundary-Bridging Culture and Membership Privileges for Gays and Lesbians in Christian Religious Congregations,' *Social Problems* 59, no. 2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2012.59.2.177>; Samuel J. Abrams and Morris P. Fiorina, "'The Big Sort' That Wasn't: A Skeptical Reexamination,' *APSC* 45, no. 2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096512000017>; Biren A. Nagda, 'Breaking Barriers, Crossing Borders, Building Bridges: Communication Processes in Intergroup Dialogues,' *Journal of Social Issues* 62, no. 3 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2006.00473.x>.

²³ Brené Brown, 'Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame,' *Families in Society* 87, no. 1 (2006): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.3483>.

²⁴ Gregory M. Herek, 'Beyond "Homophobia": Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century,' *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 1, no. 2 (2004): 13,

Authentic conversations about differences entail vulnerability, which may elicit fear and a desire for self-preservation in the dialogue.²⁵ This potentially explains the defensive postures and adversarial rhetoric observed in the public debate between conservative Christians and the LGBTQIA+ community.²⁶ There is a fear of inevitable conflict.²⁷ Amanda Sinclair, a researcher and consultant in leadership, stated: ‘Working critically with diversity needs to be uncomfortable, needs to be confronting’. However, despite her professional role, she admitted instances where she too had ‘opted for comfort’ rather than engage in dialoguing over the differences in perspectives on a topic.²⁸ It is plausible that opting for the comfort of the majority perspective in a local church is also the preferred path in the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.²⁹

The fear of change is linked to the fear of unravelling the societal structures that provide individuals with a sense of security and belonging. It gives rise to the phenomenon known as ‘moral panic’, a concept first applied in its modern sense by sociologist Stanley

<https://doi.org/10.1525/srsp.2004.1.2.6>; Keith Mascord, *Faith Without Fear* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 164; Rugg.

²⁵ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 33; Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 69.

²⁶ Ahmed, 69; Marin, ‘Winner Take All?’; Wendy Cadge and Christopher Wildeman, ‘Facilitators and Advocates: How Mainline Protestant Clergy Respond to Homosexuality,’ *Sociological Perspectives* 51, no. 3 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2008.51.3.587>.

²⁷ Harold R. Fray, *Conflict and Change in the Church* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1969). Conflict is defined as ‘a process of social interaction involving a struggle over claims to resources, power, and status, beliefs, and other preferences and desires’; Herb Bisno, *Managing Conflict* (California: Sage, 1988), 13.

²⁸ Amanda Sinclair, ‘Women Within Diversity: Risks and Possibilities,’ *Women in Management Review* 15, no. 5/6 (2000), <https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420010372850>.

²⁹ Cadge and Wildeman.

Cohen. He coined the term 'Folk Devils' to describe the situation where, as a result of moral panic, specific groups are demonised and held responsible for social problems.³⁰

Moral panic shares similarities with the 'slippery slope syndrome', in which the metaphor of the 'slippery slope' anchors the belief that altering the established order may lead to normalising previously taboo behaviours for individuals and society.³¹ For example, moral panic over the Safe Schools program (aimed at raising awareness and understanding of gender and sexual diversity) resulted in fears of 'queering children', loss of parental control, and the program's depiction as a 'sexual predator', which led to the loss of

³⁰ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London: Routledge, 2022).

³¹ Gilbert Herdt, *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight Over Sexual Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Ahmed, 61; Eugene Volokh, 'the Mechanisms of the Slippery Slope,' *Harvard Law Review* 116, no. 4 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1342743>; Jason C. Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism*, vol. 90 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 82; Mark J. Brandt and Christine Reyna, 'the Role of Prejudice and the Need for Closure in Religious Fundamentalism,' *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36, no. 5 (2010): 715, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167210366306>; Travis Warren Cooper, 'Emerging, Emergent, Emergence: Boundary Maintenance, Definition Construction, and Legitimation Strategies in the Establishment of a Post-Evangelical Subculture,' *Journal For The Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 2 (2017): 398, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12329>.

government funding.³² This panic also extended to the same-sex marriage debate and fears of traditional family values eroding.³³

Due to the fear of the slippery slope and the perceived violation of values and beliefs, some churches have adopted a paternalistic gatekeeper mentality, which reinforces boundaries against LGBTQIA+ individuals in faith communities.³⁴ Consequently, it legitimises excluding LGBTQIA+ persons from the church.³⁵ Australian research found that fear leads conservative/evangelical Christians to form a prejudiced ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality that may be unconscious or quickly justified.³⁶

³² The Safe Schools Program was a nationally funded initiative to create more inclusive environments for LGBTQIA+ children at school and prevent bullying and discrimination. The Safe School Coalition Australian, accessed 7th July, 2020, <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/who-we-are>; The Government was accused of giving way to conservative Christian groups and ‘white, cisgender, heterosexual male politicians’: Lucy Nicholas, ‘Safe Schools Review Findings: Experts Respond,’ *The Conversation* (2016); Also see the experiences of the Victorian branch of the Salvation Army who withdrew their support of the program after backlash from their members: R. Urban, ‘The Salvation Army in Retreat on Safe Schools Program,’ *The Australian* 15th December, 2016; Clifford J. Rosky, ‘Fear of the Queer Child,’ *Buffalo Law Review* 61, no. 3 (2013).

³³ Herdt; B Loudon, ‘FactCheck: Will Safe Schools Be “Mandatory” If Same Sex Marriage Is Legalised?’ (2017), <https://doi.org/https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/sexuality/agenda/article/2017/10/03/factcheck-will-safe-schools-be-mandatory-if-same-sex-marriage-legalised>; Jay Daniel Thompson, ‘Predatory Schools and Student Non-lives: A Discourse Analysis of the Safe Schools Coalition Australia Controversy,’ *Sex Education* 19, no. 1 (2019): 41–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1475284>.

³⁴ Cooper 239–72; Jeremy N. Thomas and Daniel V. A. Olson, ‘Evangelical Elites’ Changing Responses to Homosexuality 196–2009,’ *Sociology of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srs031>, 348; Mascord, 74–84; Harisun, ‘Power, Polity, and Politics,’ (PhD Thesis).

³⁵ Brandt and Reyna, 712–22; Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage, 2015), 66; Maureen Miner Bridges, ‘Psychological Contributions to Understanding Prejudice and the Evangelical Mind,’ *Christian Scholar’s Review* 47, no. 4 (2018).

³⁶ Bridges, 366.

Concerns about the slippery slope to unorthodoxy are also associated with the fear of questioning traditionally held doctrinal teachings.³⁷ In *The Battle for God*, Armstrong suggests that the need for definite doctrines and the segregation of the 'other' emerge from the fear of annihilation and the belief that the other's values will 'wipe out' their own core values and even their religion.³⁸ The Baptist tradition and distinctives of freedom of conscience and the autonomy of the local church to decide its doctrine and praxis means that orthodoxy within the Australian Baptists encompasses a diverse spectrum of beliefs. This accommodates a coexistence of divergent views on doctrines and practices that remain within the bounds of orthodoxy.³⁹ An example of this diversity is seen in the contrasting doctrines of salvation endorsed by Calvinism, which emphasises predestination, and Arminianism, which emphasises humanity's free will.⁴⁰ This coexistence on a spectrum of beliefs is possible due to acknowledgment of the influence of situational context, tradition, reason, and personal experience on the process of hermeneutics, and some Baptists have recognised that these factors play a significant role in shaping people's theological perspectives.⁴¹

³⁷ Harris, 180–85; C. R. Bovell, *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 196.

³⁸ Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 368.

³⁹ Holmes; Hughes and Cronshaw; Brian D. McLaren, 'Generous Refund,' in *A Generous Orthodoxy: By Celebrating Strengths of Many Traditions in The Church (and Beyond)*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 31–46.

⁴⁰ Carl Gordon Olson, *Getting the Gospel Right-A Balanced View of Salvation Truth* (Michigan: Global Gospel, 2005).

⁴¹ Green argues: 'We easily assume that these words are our words, available to ask in our cultural context, and easily forget that every reading of every NT [New Testament] text today is an exercise in intercultural communication and understanding. Too easily, then, we constrict NT texts to serve our own interests finding them justifications for our sometimes comfortable practises in the world'; Joel B. Green, *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 6; Also see Powell's 'polyvalence' argument—'the capacity or perhaps the inevitability for the text to

Thus orthodoxy, while maintaining certain core tenets in the Baptists statement of faith, allows room for differences in interpretation and theological emphasis because it acknowledges that believers may approach their faith from diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences.⁴² This recognition, based in Baptist traditions and distinctives, offers a dynamic framework for theological discourse within Baptist communities, where theological discussions and variations in belief can coexist while remaining firmly grounded in the broader framework of orthodoxy.

However, there is another theological concept related to orthodoxy known as ‘biblical inerrancy’. This is the belief that the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—is infallible and free from error, not only in matters of faith but also in history and science.⁴³ The issue of biblical inerrancy is a matter of extensive debate and contrasting views for the worldwide church, across the denominations.⁴⁴ Numerous studies have linked belief in biblical inerrancy with moral absolutism, which excludes any sexual identity outside of

mean different things to different people.’ Mark Allen Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 3; Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 1999), 197; Ruth Perrin, *The Bible Reading of Young Evangelicals: An Explanation of the Ordinary Hermeneutics and Faith of Generation Y* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2016), 86–87; Birch, 153.

⁴² Each Australian Baptist State Association has its own statement of faith, available on the ABM website.

⁴³ The benchmark for a definition of biblical inerrancy is found in Evangelical Theological Society, *The Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy* (ETS 1978). An evangelical statement on biblical inerrancy is seen in the Lausanne Covenant; John Stott, ‘Lausanne Covenant with Study Guide,’ (The Lausanne Movement, 2009), 27–31; Donald A. Carson and John D. eds. Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992).

⁴⁴ R. Jr Mohler et al., *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013); Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, ‘Defending Inerrancy: A Response to Methodological Unorthodoxy,’ *Journal of The International Society of Christian Apologetics* (2012).

heteronormativity and 'simplifies complex realities'.⁴⁵ Therefore, LGBTQIA+ theology is viewed as unorthodox, belonging to liberal and progressive theology rather than traditional/conservative perspectives.⁴⁶ In *Hearing Voices, Demonic and Divine: Scientific and Theological Perspectives*, Christopher Cook argues that adopting a literal interpretation of Scripture can result in the speaker elevating their perspective to that of God, fundamentally altering theological discussions into arguing with the divine.⁴⁷ Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer correctly recognised the dilemma regarding the authority of Scripture: whether

⁴⁵ John Shortt, 'Fundamentalism and Evangelicals—And Education,' *International Journal of Christianity & Education* 3, no. 2 (1999), <https://doi.org/10.1177/205699719900300208>; Mascord, 77; Paul W. Williamson et al., 'The Intratextual Fundamentalism Scale: Cross-Cultural Application, Validity Evidence, and Relationship with Religious Orientation and the Big 5 Factor Markers,' *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 13, no. 7–8 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670802643047>, 723; Hamdi Muluk and Nathanael G. Sumaktoyo, 'Intratextual Fundamentalism and the Desire for Simple Cognitive Structure: The Moderating Effect of the Ability to Achieve Cognitive Structure,' *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 32, no. 2 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1163/157361210X500919>; Burdette, Ellison, and Hill, 182; Hood; Ken Keathley, 'God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 1 (2010), 169.

⁴⁶ John P. Hoffmann and John P. Bartkowski, 'Gender, Religious Tradition, and Biblical Literalism,' *Social Forces* 86, no. 3 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.0.0013>; Burdette, Ellison, and Hill, 93 and 183; Constance R. Sullivan-Blum, "'It's Adam and Eve, Not Adam and Steve.'" What's At Stake in the Construction of Contemporary American Christian Homophobia,' in *Homophobias: Lust and Loathing Across Time and Space*, ed. David A. B. Murray (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Brantley W. Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 18–19; For examples of orthodoxy excluding LGBTQIA+ voices see Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017). For the argument for including all voices in theology see Kenton. L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 287; Keathley. For an example of situatedness influences on theological perspectives see Gill Valentine and Louise Waite, 'Negotiating Difference through Everyday Encounters: The Case of Sexual Orientation and Religion and Belief,' *Antipode* 44, no. 2 (2012), 474–92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2010.00866.x>.

⁴⁷ Chris Cook, *Hearing Voices, Demonic and Divine: Scientific and Theological Perspectives* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2019). Chris Cook's work focuses on spirituality, theology, and health.

it lies with the text itself or is subject to individual interpretation, it still raises the question about who ultimately holds power to decide.⁴⁸

Power

The power relationship between institutions such as BCSA or a Baptist church and individuals is one of the influences in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Institutions act as the foundation of social order by establishing norms that 'structure political, economic and social interaction'.⁴⁹ As a result, individuals are influenced by the practices and structures of these organisations, which are often accepted and 'taken for granted'.⁵⁰ Traditionally, institutions are known for being unchanging and laden with power implications.⁵¹ Institutions exert power by controlling systems and allocating resources that perpetuate their values while privileging certain groups and excluding others.⁵²

However, institutions do not function in a vacuum, and they are influenced by societal factors.⁵³ Consequently, individual Baptist church members can influence the church's

⁴⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940–1945*, ed. Mark S. Brocker, 1st English language ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). Also see Sparks.

⁴⁹ Maria Ziegler, *Institutions, Inequality and Development* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012).

⁵⁰ Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen, *Beyond Continuity Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9; Christopher P. Scheitle, Stephen M. Merino, and Andrew Moore, 'On the Varying Meaning of "Open and Affirming"', *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, no. 10 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2010.517064>.

⁵¹ James Mahoney, *Explaining Institutional Change Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, ed. James Mahoney and Kathleen Ann Thelen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–37.

⁵² Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power,' *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 786, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>.

⁵³ Royston Greenwood et al., *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, vol. 32 (London: Sage, 2011); Julie Battilana, 'Agency and Institutions: The Enabling Role of Individuals' Social Position,' *Organization* 13, no. 5 (2006): 653–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508406067008>.

discourse for or against the status quo.⁵⁴ Individuals who value tradition, security, and conformity may resist institutional changes, relying on their local church to maintain predictable behaviour patterns.⁵⁵ However, individuals can also exploit any ‘embedded structures’ as ‘platforms’ from which to call for people to reflect and act differently.⁵⁶ Change agents are not necessarily charismatic. Instead, they may be united in their advocacy and have access to the power bases and resources needed to create change within the institution.⁵⁷ If that is recognised, advocacy becomes crucial for LGBTQIA+ persons in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within BCSA member churches, as LGBTQIA+ persons remain a minority and require supporters to initiate conversation leading to meaningful change.

⁵⁴ Salvador Minuchin and H. Charles Fishman, *Family Therapy Techniques* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981); Minuchin states: ‘the individual, the nuclear family, the extended family, and the community—is both a whole and apart ... each whole contains the part, and each part also contains the “program” that the whole imposes. Part and the whole contain each other in a continuing, current, and ongoing process of communication and interrelationship.’ Minuchin and Fishman, 13; Michael Lounsbury, ‘Institutional Rationality and Practice Variation: New directions in the Institutional Analysis of Practice,’ *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 33, no. 4 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aos.2007.04.001>.

⁵⁵ T. Devos, D. Spini, and S. Schwartz, ‘Conflicts Among Human Values and Trust in Institutions,’ *British Journal Social Psychology* 41 (2002): 482. The study noted a positive link between religious affiliation, values based in conservation, and a trust of institutions, 492; Streeck and Thelen, 9.

⁵⁶ Mahoney describes the process of changing an institution as ‘layering’, where ‘new rules are attached to existing ones, thereby changing the ways in which the original rules structure behaviour’. James Mahoney and Kathleen Ann Thelan, *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 16; Devos, Spini, and Schwartz, 492; M. Voronov and R. Vince, ‘Integrating Emotions Into the Analysis of Institutional Work,’ *Academy of Management Review* 37, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2010.0247>.

⁵⁷ ‘Groups seeking change often mobilize collectively outside established institutions to assert new logics and disrupt taken-for-granted arrangements. Yet institutionalists have recognized movements also arise within institutions...using established networks and resources to diffuse alternative practices and drawing effectively on existing institutional elements and models to craft new systems’; Greenwood et al., 32, 288; P. J. DiMaggio, ‘Interest and Agency in Institutional Theory,’ in *Institutional Patterns and Organizations*, ed. L. Zucker (Massachusetts: Ballinger, 1988).

Harisun's research on the implications of power in the relational dynamics between the Uniting Church in Australia and LGBTQIA+ persons identified four broad categories of power operating in churches:

1. 'Power-over' that manifests itself in the forms of a 'warrior model', based on strength and competition; a 'parental model', initiated through role, rank, or relationship; and a 'bureaucratic model' that is an impersonal and anonymous power, seen in roles and functions.
2. 'Power-with' individuals and the institution.
3. 'Power-within'. This power of influence operates through charisma, ability, and relationship; it may inspire or oppress.
4. 'Power-between' that seeks mutuality. It gives people authority irrespective of the power bases. Power bases are the structure of relationships, persons, or agencies that may confer power.⁵⁸

The Baptist distinctive in the freedom of conscience for all believers should result in a 'power-between' praxis in local churches. Harisun describes 'power-between' praxis as 'interactive' and 'synergistic', that is, 'energy-in-community, where the totality of power is more than the sum of the individual parts (or members)'.⁵⁹ Feminist theologian, Schüssler Fiorenza, calls 'power-between' the church community 'the Ekklesia: the full decision-making assembly of free citizens', contrasting it against 'patria potestas' and the patriarchal power of the father over the church.⁶⁰ This raises the question whether Baptist churches operate in a 'parental' mode of power—i.e, 'control over'— rather than functioning as a

⁵⁸ Harisun, 'Power, Polity, and Politics' (PhD Thesis), 59–60.

⁵⁹ Harisun, 'Power, Polity, and Politics' (PhD thesis), 60.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of Naming: A Concillium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 56–58; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals a Critical Feminist Ekklesia-Logy of Liberation*. (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 245–47.

community of equals due in part to the influences of Scriptural orthodoxy and fear of the slippery slope syndrome.⁶¹

Diverse Theological Perspectives

In Baptist communities, discussions about LGBTQIA+ issues frequently cite the centuries of historical teachings from the global church across various denominations. The discussions, grounded in the church's traditions, mainly follow the 'natural law' of heteronormative and binary cisgender norms. While Plato and Aristotle were early proponents of natural law, the thirteenth-century theories of Thomas Aquinas have been most influential in shaping the church's understanding of its principles. Today, natural law theory offers the most common intellectual defence for the differential treatment of LGBTQIA+ individuals,⁶² and religion significantly shapes attitudes toward homosexuality and gender diversity, as traditional Christian views deem acting on LGBTQIA+ orientations to be sinful.⁶³

Baptist theologian Stephen Holmes best articulates the Baptist understanding of tradition as both a 'historical and supra-historical' entity. It involves faith and practices passed down through generations and adapted to address new contexts while also

⁶¹ Harisun 'Power, Polity, and Politics' (PhD thesis), 45.

⁶² B. D. F. Gallaher, 'Tangling with Orthodox Tradition in the Modern West: Natural Law, Homosexuality, and Living Tradition,' *The Wheel* (2018); Katie Grimes, 'Butler Interprets Aquinas: How to Speak Thomistically About Sex,' *Journal of Religious Ethics* 42, no. 2 (2014); John Goyette, Mark S. Latkovic, and Richard S. (Eds.) Myers, *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Natural Law Tradition: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004); Brent Pickett, 'Homosexuality', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford.edu. 2002. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/homosexuality/>.

⁶³ Beagan and Hattie; V. L. Bullough, *Homosexuality: A History (from Ancient Greece to Gay Liberation)* (London: Routledge, 2019), 17; Robert. A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Text and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010).

preserving the core truths of the gospel.⁶⁴ However, Holmes adds a caveat: careful analysis is essential when considering traditions in the church, as some uncritically followed traditions may promote beliefs and practices that are in their essence non-Christian and could potentially cater to ‘contemporary idolatries’ rather than fulfilling the desire for authentic expressions of Baptist faith.⁶⁵

LGBTQIA+ studies including the work of feminist queer theorists Gayle Rubin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and historian and sexologist Vern Bullough also assert that societal factors play a substantial role in shaping the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities and orientations. This adds to the argument that an LGBTQIA+ discourse based on tradition often overlooks the ongoing interpretation of tradition within the context of contemporary cultural understanding.⁶⁶ For example, LGBTQIA+ studies have uncovered historical contexts which demonstrate that LGBTQIA+ orientations and variant sexual activities were more openly tolerated and accepted than has generally been understood.⁶⁷ David Hillard’s work on the Australian Anglican churches aligns with this perspective. He argues that before the 1960s, the Anglican Church provided ‘niches’ for same-sex attracted individuals,

⁶⁴ Stephen R Holmes, ‘Tradition and Renewal in Baptist Life,’ *The Whitley Lecture 2003* (2003): 4; Stephen Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

⁶⁵ Holmes, *Tradition and Renewal*, 8.

⁶⁶ Gayle Rubin also applied societal factors to understanding LGBTQIA+ issues to her own work. She said: ‘Texts are produced in particular historical, social, and cultural circumstances, and are part of discursive conglomerates that shift over time. As texts are read in new contexts, the conversations and issues that formed them are often forgotten or unknown’: Gayle S. Rubin, ‘Blood Under the Bridge: Reflections on “Thinking Sex”,’ *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 1 (2011): 17; Gayle S. Rubin, *Deviations* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993); Bullough, 32; Also see John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage, 2013).

⁶⁷ See Pickett’s Dictionary for examples: Brent Pickett, *Historical Dictionary of Homosexuality* (Washington: Rowan And Littlefield, 2022), 1–289.

but changes in culture have largely dissolved these spaces.⁶⁸ This is coherent with Michel Foucault's assertion that a significant shift in Western perceptions of sexuality occurred in the nineteenth century with the introduction of the term 'homosexuality'. While naming 'homosexuality' allowed for a nuanced understanding of sexuality, it also contributed to a hetero/homosexual binarism that allowed society to label behaviour as deviant or normative.⁶⁹ If we examine these contexts, evidence emerges that the church's traditional stance may not accurately reflect the historical reality. This challenges the belief in Baptist LGBTQIA+ discourse that tradition is an unchanging timeless construct.

Additionally, questioning the discourse about tradition and uncovering the hidden LGBTQIA+ persons in history disrupts the prevailing narrative. It challenges the idea within the LGBTQIA+ discourse that LGBTQIA+ identities are new or experimental, and stem from a postmodern shift to a society characterised by relativity. Australian academic and gay rights advocate Dennis Altman asserts that this challenge has empowered LGBTQIA+ persons:

I define queer history as being ultimately about the desire to know there are other people out there like us ... There is clearly interest in queer history ... perhaps because unlike communities defined by ethnicity or religion, we do not grow up learning at home, and we must search it out, often hiding it from our biological families.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ David Hilliard, 'Some Found a Niche: Same-Sex Attracted People in Australian Anglicanism,' in *New Approaches in History and Theology to Same-Sex Love and Desire*, ed. Mark D. Chapman and Dominic Janes (New York: Springer International, 2018).

⁶⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990). Also see E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (California: University of California Press, 1990); H.G Cocks, 'Religion and Spirituality,' in *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. M. Houlbrook and H Cocks (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Amy Richlin, 'Sexuality and History,' in *The Sage Handbook of Historical Theory*, ed. Nancy Partner and Sarah Foot (New York: Sage, 2013). Also see Benjamin Law's interview with Australian photographer William Yang in Benjamin Law, *Growing Up Queer in Australia* (Victoria, Australia: Black Inc, 2019), 108.

⁷⁰ Dennis Altman, *Unrequited Love: Diary of an Accidental Activist* (Clayton, Vic: Monash University Publishing, 2019), 198–99.

LGBTQIA+ studies shape the LGBTQIA+ discourse by recovering hidden perspectives, combating historical erasure, and enriching the apologetics, thus changing the way LGBTQIA+ persons and advocates engage in the conversation. It empowers LGBTQIA+ individuals in the discourse by allowing them to see their predecessors who navigated similar challenges.⁷¹

LGBTQIA+ studies extend to queer theology, which owes its origins to queer theory. Queer theology seeks to reveal the presence of LGBTQIA+ in faith and Scriptures and disrupt all assertions of prevailing sexual and gender normalcy taught by the Church.⁷² It deconstructs and reconstructs texts to uncover an LGBTQIA+ understanding of the Scriptures.⁷³ However, Christianity and queer theory are perceived as fundamentally incompatible by many who hold a traditional biblical view on sexual ethics, and this perceived incompatibility hinders productive dialogue or communication between the two perspectives.⁷⁴ The epistemological differences between the traditional teachings of the

⁷¹ For the importance of carving out spaces for queer persons see Corrinne Sullivan and Madi Day, 'Queer (y) ing Indigenous Australian Higher Education Student Spaces,' *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 50, no. 1 (2021).

⁷² Elizabeth Stuart argues that queer theology is determined to 'destabilize the notion of what constitutes Christianity and a Christian by refusing to accept on trust that a white, straight, male Christianity is the sole Christian truth'; Elizabeth Stuart, *Religion Is a Queer Thing: A Guide to the Christian Faith for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People* (London: Cassell, 1997); Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2011); Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011); Patrick S. Cheng, 'Contributions from Queer Theory,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Schneider and Roncolato.

⁷³ Jay Michaelson, *God vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 103; Louis William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Michaelson; Jarel Robinson-Brown, *Black, Gay, British, Christian, Queer: The Church and the Famine of Grace* (London: SCM Press, 2021).

⁷⁴ Norman. W Jones, 'Post-Secular Queer: Christianity, Queer Theory, and the Unsolvable Mysteries of Sexual Desire,' in *Intersections in Christianity and Critical Theory*, ed. Cassandra Falke (New York:

church and queer theology create barriers to meaningful discussion and understanding in contemporary debates on LGBTQIA+ faith and praxis. Hollier's research uncovered an additional obstacle to dialogue between different perspectives: the scarcity of queer theologians in Australia.⁷⁵

While there are significant differences between the traditional teachings of the church and Queer theory, it is simplistic to view them as entirely incompatible. For example, queer theorists and Baptists who hold to the church's traditional LGBTQIA+ teachings may both be actively engaged in addressing social justice concerns, demonstrating an intersectionality based in a broader commitment to equality and justice. Additionally, both belief systems are subject to a range of interpretations and positions, and it may be possible for Baptists and queer theologians to engage in respectful conversations that acknowledge their differences while seeking common ground.

However, more often queer theology is treated with scepticism by the majority of Baptists—who hold to the church's traditional teachings on LGBTQIA+ orientations—as queer theology is seen as deconstructing orthodoxy⁷⁶ and replacing the authority of the Scriptures with the subjective and unreliable hermeneutic of personal experience.⁷⁷

Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 75; Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 50; Hollier, 4–5.

⁷⁵ Hollier suggests: 'The self-consciously controversial nature of queer theology has resulted in the discipline playing a more marginal role in the majority of LGBTQIA+ Christian's lives, especially in an Australian context where queer theologians are few'; Joel Hollier, 'The Lay of the Land,' in *Religious Trauma, Queer Identities: Mapping The Complexities of Being LGBTQIA+ in Evangelical Churches* (Cham: Springer International, 2023), 40; Altman suggests Australians seek knowledge from America rather than relying on their own perspectives. He said: 'Rather as old monarchists refer to the mother country, many Australian today drawn on America culture to define ourselves, even as we protest our national uniqueness; Altman, ix.

⁷⁶ Hollier, *Religious Trauma, Queer Identities*, 25–27.

⁷⁷ On the influence of experience in hermeneutics see, Mary M. Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method: A Survey of Contemporary Theologians and Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017);

However, Patrick Cheng, in his book *Radical Love: Introduction to Queer Theology*, argues that queer theology is not simply a matter of ‘advocacy’ or ‘determining the right answers’ suitable for a changing world. Cheng demonstrates that, as in other theologies, queer theologians are employing the four pillars of: Scripture, tradition, reason, and human experiences to develop queer theology.⁷⁸ The findings from Hollier et al. support the view that LGBTQIA+ individuals can be deeply committed to the Scriptures and their faith:

Contrary to the popular notion that LGBTQIA+ communities are uninterested in religion, it is noteworthy how passionately many participants held on to their faith, fighting for it, studying it and reworking it in a manner that could coexist with their experiences.⁷⁹

Nonetheless, a significant portion of the existing literature dealing with theological debates within the church has focused on accentuating theological disparities among various perspectives rather than seeking common ground. The main consequence of this is the resulting lack of literature that can offer practical guidance for those working with LGBTQIA+ individuals within faith contexts.⁸⁰ The continual emphasis on theological differences has perpetuated a cycle of refining and contrasting positions, particularly as seen in the dichotomous approach of a ‘non-affirming or affirming’ perspective on the theological debate.⁸¹ This is evidenced by the form of the current public LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches described in Chapter 2, which often settles into non-affirming views on LGBTQIA+

Uche Anizor, *How to Read Theology: Engaging Doctrine Critically and Charitably* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 145–72; Anthony C. Thiselton, *Approaching the Study of Theology: An Introduction to Key Thinkers, Concepts, Methods & Debates* (Illinois: IVP, 2018).

⁷⁸ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 11–22; Patrick Cheng, ‘Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People Today: Four Christological Models,’ ed. James H. Cone (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2010).

⁷⁹ Hollier, *Religious Trauma, Queer Identities*, 103.

⁸⁰ Hollier, *Religious Trauma, Queer Identities*, 5–6.

⁸¹ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

orientations, predominantly with a focus on sexuality and marriage, while other aspects of LGBTQIA+ identities receive limited, if any, attention.⁸²

The Baptist ecclesiological distinctive of congregational church governance means that each church has its own hermeneutical lenses that influence church practice.⁸³ This means Baptists’ approach to Scriptural interpretation is nuanced. Consequently, a dichotomous approach to LGBTQIA+ faith inevitably fails to represent the possible spectrum of stances from non-affirming to affirming theological positions.

In light of the need for more nuanced perspectives on LGBTQIA+ issues, researcher Dawne Moon proposes a six-part typology that uses colloquial phrases to reveal the unspoken theologies of individuals in their daily lives.⁸⁴ Moon’s framework is a highly simplified guide; however, it does highlight the complexity of peoples’ approaches to the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

Homonegative		Moderate		Homopositive	
God hates fags	Love the sinner, Hate the sin	We don’t talk about that	They can’t help it	God’s good gift	Godly calling

Figure 2: Moon’s dialogic framework

⁸² The public LGBTQIA+ discourse is discussed in Chapter 2: Who Is Doing the Talking; R. Grant and M. Nash, ‘Homonormativity or Queer Disidentification? Rural Australian Bisexual Women’s Identity Politics,’ *Sexualities* 23 (4) (2020), 592–608.

⁸³ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 100–106 Also see 64.

⁸⁴ Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Moon recommends using the categories ‘to sort out the nuances in religious views on homosexuality’ rather than to ‘pigeonhole’ people as individuals can hold contradictory views and change their minds; Moon, ‘Beyond the Dichotomy: Six Religious Views of Homosexuality.’

Moon's typology builds on the four-part typology proposed by sexual ethicist James Nelson: rejecting-punitive; rejecting-nonpunitive; qualified acceptance; and full acceptance.⁸⁵ These are discussed in more detail below.

The 'rejecting-punitive' stance reflects the fundamental belief that LGBTQIA+ sexual and gender identities transgress Scriptural teachings. Hence, they are regarded as immoral, idolatrous, and sinful, and LGBTQIA+ persons are, when seen from this perspective, likely to be excluded from the church community.

The 'rejecting-nonpunitive' position is a philosophical and theological stance that upholds heterocentrism and cisgender as the normative expression of human sexuality and gender orientations.⁸⁶ However, a distinction is made between LGBTQIA+ orientations and acts and therefore, in the case of sexuality, the church seeks to encourage LGBTQIA+ persons to embrace celibacy.⁸⁷ Participation in the church community is predicated on adherence to a narrow set of behavioural guidelines.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Nelson, 'Homosexuality,' 271–74; James B. Nelson, 'Homosexuality and the Church,' 2021 (1977), <https://doi.org/https://www.religion-online.org/article/homosexuality-and-the-church/>.

⁸⁶ Scott G. Veenvliet, 'Intrinsic Religious Orientation and Religious Teaching: Differential Judgments Toward Same-Gender Sexual Behavior and Gay Men and Lesbians,' *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 18, no. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508610701719348>; Robert. Nugent, 'Homophobia and the Roman Catholic Clergy,' in *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies that Work*, ed. James Thomas. Sears and Walter L. Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 360.

⁸⁷ Joe Dallas and Nancy Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide to Understanding Homosexuality: A Biblical and Compassionate Response to Same-Sex Attraction* (Oregon: Harvest House, 2010); Sam Allberry, 'Is God Anti Gay? and Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible and Same-Sex Attraction,' (Surrey: Good Book Company, 2013); Stanton L. Jones and Mark. A. Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religious Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Grove, Illinois: Ivy Academic, 2007).

⁸⁸ For example, Rev Robert Nugent was censored by the Holy See for straying too far from the boundary of a celibate, and his work with the LGBTQIA+ community was closed. However, Nicholas Chamberlain (the first Church of England Bishop to publicly state that he is in a gay relationship)

The position of ‘qualified acceptance’ asserts that though same-sex relationships, marriages, and gender-affirming surgery are contrary to God’s intention, they are permitted, since humankind resides in an imperfect, sinful world.⁸⁹

Nelson’s final category is the ‘full acceptance’ position—known as the ‘affirming position’—where LGBTQIA+ theology, identity and relationships are afforded equal standing with heterosexuality.⁹⁰ Nelson’s typology relies on broad definitions and lacks detail, particularly in the affirming position. William Stacey Johnson’s book, *A Time to Embrace*, adds the following categories to the affirming position: Legitimation; Celebration; Liberation; and Consecration.⁹¹ In his typology, *legitimation’s* position argues for justice for LGBTQIA+ persons; it critiques the church’s non-affirming position as treating LGBTQIA+ persons as ‘second-class citizens’.⁹² *Celebration’s* position calls for same-sex relationships to be celebrated based on God as Creator, who created all things ‘good’, including LGBTQIA+ orientations.⁹³ *Liberation’s* position critiques theological concepts through the lens of a

retains his leadership position because he and his partner are celibate. Paul Vittelto, ‘Rev. Robert Nugent, Priest Who Counseled Gay Catholics, Dies At 76,’ *New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/10/us/rev-robert-nugent-priest-who-counseled-gay-catholics-dies-at-76.html>) 2014; Harriet Sherwood, ‘Bishop of Grantham First C of E Bishop to Declare He Is in a Gay Relationship,’ *The Guardian* 2016, 2 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/02/nicholas-chamberlain-bishop-of-grantham-c-of-e-gay-relationship>.

⁸⁹ James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2013); Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010).

⁹⁰ Nelson, ‘Homosexuality,’ 272; James Thomas Sears and Walter L. Williams, *Overcoming Heterosexual and Homophobia: Strategies That Work*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁹¹ William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006).

⁹² Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 73.

⁹³ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 80.

person's lived experience.⁹⁴ Finally, *consecration's* position advocates for same-sex relationships to be blessed by the church through the covenantal act of the marriage rite.⁹⁵

The various typologies fail to recognise the differences between lesbian/gay theologies and queer theologies or the value that the difference between these approaches adds to the conversation.⁹⁶ The difference in the approaches stems from their methodologies.⁹⁷ Lesbian/gay theology arose from 'liberation' theology and 'the right to define their own experience'. Queer theology employs deconstructionist methods of queer theory, which asserts that both meaning and truth are socially constructed; therefore, there is no fixed meaning in the Scriptures or in Jesus' identity/sexuality.⁹⁸

BCSA member churches typically describe their theological stance towards LGBTQIA+ individuals as 'welcoming but not affirming', a concept first introduced by Evangelical

⁹⁴ Liberation theology was a Latin American movement started by Gustavo Gutier. It takes its theological perspectives from those who live on the margins of society: Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 86–87.

⁹⁵ The consecration approach is more than a celebration because it situates the LGBTQIA+ person's life 'within the community of faith.' Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 102.

⁹⁶ Mary Elise Lowe, 'Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Theologies: Origins, Contributions, and Challenges,' *Dialogue* 48, no. 1 (2009): 58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2009.00430.x>; Gerard Loughlin, 'What Is Queer? Theology after Identity,' *Theology & Sexuality* 14, no. 2 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1355835807087376>.

⁹⁷ Lowe, 49–50.

⁹⁸ Cheng, 'Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People Today: Four Christological Models'; David Tabb Stewart, 'LGBT/Queer Hermeneutics and the Hebrew Bible,' *Currents in Biblical Research* 15, no. 3 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993X16683331>; Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2003). <https://transreads.org/>; Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Queer theology advocates 'queer hospitality', which aims to break every boundary that excludes, thereby opening oneself to include all without restriction, which may include sexuality; thus, all sexual acts communal, anonymous, and polyamorous are permissible when the 'action is welcoming and hospitable'; John Blevins, 'Hospitality Is a Queer Thing,' *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 19, no. 2 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1179/jpt.2009.19.2.006>; Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*.

Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz in 1998.⁹⁹ This stance stipulates that while people with LGBTQIA+ orientations are welcome in the church, the church maintains a non-affirming position towards individuals who adopt LGBTQIA+ lifestyles, and will therefore adopt policies that exclude LGBTQIA+ persons from ordination, from some ministry positions, and from being married by a BCSA celebrant.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, ‘welcoming-non-affirming’ seems to equate with ‘tolerance’ rather than ‘welcome.’¹⁰¹ The welcoming but not affirming position assumes that celibacy is appropriate for LGBTQIA+ faith.¹⁰² However, this stance raises concerns about the inconsistencies within the church.¹⁰³ Some are sceptical about the practicality of lifelong celibacy, especially since it is deemed impossible for heterosexuals;

⁹⁹ Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* 153–58.

¹⁰⁰ Church Clarity advocates for transparency on LGBTQIA+ policies in churches and on their websites; it states: Non-Affirming policies in churches place restrictions on individuals based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (e.g. people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer). Therefore, a church may welcome LGBTQIA+ people, but it will not ordain, hire, or marry LGBTQIA+ people, and LGBTQIA+ may experience restrictions from membership, leadership, and some volunteer roles; Sprinkle; Bernard Schlager and David Kundtz, *Ministry Among God’s Queer Folk: LGBTQ Pastoral Care* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2019).

¹⁰¹ Wendy VanderWal-Gritter, *Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2014); Veenvliet 53–65; Paul, 92; Eric M. Rodriguez, ‘At the Intersection of Church and Gay: A Review of the Psychological Research on Gay and Lesbian Christians,’ *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918360903445806>.

¹⁰² Farrah Tomazin, ‘Gay, Celibate and Christian: US Evangelical in Melbourne for Same-Sex Talks,’ *The Age* 2016; Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016); Ed Shaw, *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015); Allberry, ‘Is God Anti Gay? and Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible and Same-Sex Attraction.’

¹⁰³ Beagan and Hattie; Steve Chalke and Ed Shaw, “Is Church Silence Failing Gay Christians?,” interview by Justin Brierley (Saturday Show, *Unbelievable*, 2015, no longer accessible) <https://www.premierchristianradio.com/>; Darren Jay Freeman-Coppadge, ‘Harmony, Dissonance, Or Harm? the Psychological and Spiritual Promises and Perils of Gay Christian Celibacy’ ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018); Ilan H. Meyer, ‘Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence,’ *Psychological Bulletin* 129, no. 5 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1037/003-909.129.5.674>.

that is, if heterosexuals are encouraged to marry rather than be tempted by sexual immorality, then why is celibacy demanded of same-sex attracted Christians?¹⁰⁴

Being welcoming but non-affirming is at times described as ‘loving the sinner but hating the sin.’¹⁰⁵ However, research into LGBTQIA+ experiences and responses to that position are not favourable:

LGBT people, however, are often conflicted over the widespread mixed message of love the sinner, hate the sin, feeling valued and loved as individuals while simultaneously feeling devalued and hated due to their sexual orientation.¹⁰⁶

Thus, a welcoming but not affirming stance has implications: it relegates LGBTQIA+ persons to the status of second-class Christians, both through its exclusion policies and by associating LGBTQIA+ identity and relationships with being ‘broken’ and inferior to God’s heteronormative plan. A charge of ‘sacramental shaming’ is also levied at some churches because ‘non-affirming’ Christians require constant acknowledgment of shame from LGBTQIA+ persons as proof that they love God and belong in the community.¹⁰⁷ The resultant nonconformity to group norms and values can cause LGBTQIA+ persons and congregational members with LGBTQIA+ family members to hide sexual and gender identities. The absence of these LGBTQIA+ voices in Baptist church’s conversations is a factor in the closed ‘monolooop’ experienced in some of the Baptist’s LGBTQIA+ discourse.

Examination of the influence of Scripture on the LGBTQIA+ discourse is complex, as at times it has little do with textual interpretation and is addressing broader issues. This is

¹⁰⁴ Tomazin; Coakley. Also see Brownson; Sarah Coakley, ‘Taming Desire: Celibacy, Sexuality and the Church,’ (2011), <https://doi.org/http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/05/20/3222443.htm>.

¹⁰⁵ Veenvliet.

¹⁰⁶ Paul, 92; Rodriguez.

¹⁰⁷ Theresa W. Tobin and Dawne Moon, ‘The Politics of Shame in the Motivation to Virtue: Lessons from the Shame, Pride, and Humility Experiences of LGBT Conservative Christians and Their Allies,’ *Journal of Moral Education* 48, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2018.1534088>.

seen in Brittain's ethnographic research on Episcopal bishops' responses to the same-sex relationships debate, which reveals that Scriptural disputes often represented larger issues. Brittain contends that the LGBTQIA+ discourse functions as a means of distinguishing 'liberals' from 'conservatives,' and therefore, the LGBTQIA+ discourse he examined was a debate on where the power to interpret the Scriptures resided.¹⁰⁸

Influence of 'Hidden Identity' and Stigma

Erving Goffman's work on stigma sheds light on the dynamics of social exclusion and discrimination faced by marginalised groups within religious communities. Stigma is the term used to describe the negative labelling, discrimination and prejudice that individuals encounter when their characteristics or identities are seen as departing from societal norms or expectations—for example, physical disabilities, mental illness, criminal convictions and LGBTQIA+ identities.¹⁰⁹ Building on Goffman's work, Bos et al. identified four interrelated contexts for stigma; public stigma; self-stigma; stigma by association; and structural stigma, whereby institutions legitimise stigma. Stigma affects the individual in three distinct ways: anticipated stigma, which fears a future event; enacted stigma, which refers to the experience; and internalised stigma, which reduces self-worth.¹¹⁰ Individuals may describe their experiences of stigmatisation without explicitly using the term, as it often outworks as

¹⁰⁸ Christopher Craig Brittain, 'Ethnography As Ecclesial Attentiveness and Critical Reflexivity: Fieldwork and the Dispute Over Homosexuality in the Episcopal Church,' in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Christian Scharen (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans: 2012), 91–95.

¹⁰⁹ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986); Jon Garland, Basia Spalek, and Neil Chakraborti, 'Hearing Lost Voices: Issues in Researching 'Hidden' Minority Ethnic Communities,' *British Journal of Criminology* 46, no. 3 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azi078>.

¹¹⁰ Arjan E. R. Bos et al., 'Stigma: Advances in Theory and Research,' *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 35, no. 1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2012.746147>; Rodriguez.

informal social sanctions (i.e, gossip, criticism, ostracism). Thus, implicit stigma can be a pervasive influence on the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

Hollier et al. investigated the repercussions of stigmatising LGBTQIA+ persons in Australian evangelical churches that labelled the LGBTQIA+ identities as ‘sinful.’ The research found that LGBTQIA+ persons faced both subtle and explicit discrimination, and these authors concluded that LGBTQIA+ individuals experienced ‘mischaracterisation’ and were viewed as ‘a moral threat’; consequently, they experienced ‘erasure, social distancing, and suffered psychological trauma.’¹¹¹ This research is particularly relevant for Baptist churches, as it highlights the pain and suffering experienced by LGBTQIA+ persons who are part of the church community. Given that such issues are prevalent in Australian evangelical churches, it is likely that similar challenges exist in Baptist churches. The study by Hollier et al. draws attention to the necessity for a heightened focus on the influence of stigma within LGBTQIA+ discourse, and its detrimental effects on LGBTQIA+ personhood. Stigma’s pervasive presence and its adverse consequences demand a concerted effort to address and effectively combat its influence.

Disclosing a stigmatised label requires courage, as it is an act of authenticity that risks social judgment. Some LGBTQIA+ individuals may choose to hide their identity due to the stress it entails, opting for self-protection by presenting as a member of the non-stigmatised group to avoid prejudice. This process of ‘coming out’ and sharing their internal identity with others, while managing the responses they receive, can pose significant challenges.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Hollier, Clifton, and Smith-Merry, 275–85.

¹¹² A. Goldberg, *The Sage Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies*, vols 1–3 (California: Sage, 2016); Melissa Campbell, Olya Zaporozhets, and Mark A. Yarhouse, ‘Changes in Parent–Child Relationships and Religious Views in Parents of LGB Youth Postdisclosure,’ *The Family Journal* 25, no. 4 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480717741650>.

However, hiding one's identity and internalising stigma also have adverse health effects.¹¹³ Additionally, LGBTQIA+ persons have to wrestle with reconciling their spiritual and LGBTQIA+ identities, which may lead to their selection of one identity over the other, rather than achieving integration.¹¹⁴ This is a tension heterosexual Baptists do not have to face, which points to a significant aspect of the way LGBTQIA+ individuals may approach the discourse in Baptist churches.

Transgressing Sacred Values

The LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches occurs within the complex realm of sacred values. Sacred values are deeply ingrained in our core social identity, encompassing a broad range of issues such as the welfare of children, justice, ethnicity, sexual and gender identity, and religion. Therefore, they are not a commodity to be traded, nor something to be negotiated as part of a settlement.¹¹⁵ Scriptural interpretations can be sacred values, which can change a preferred interpretation into a divine absolute, making it non-negotiable in the discussion.¹¹⁶ Keith Mascord argues that denominations have turned their 'disputed matters

¹¹³ Anna-Kaisa Newheiser and Manuela Barreto, 'Hidden Costs of Hiding Stigma: Ironic Interpersonal Consequences of Concealing a Stigmatized Identity in Social Interactions,' *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 52, no. C (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2014.01.002>; Alissa Sherry et al., 'Competing Selves: Negotiating the Intersection of Spiritual and Sexual Identities,' *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 41, no. 2 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017471>; Stephenie R. Chaudoir, Valerie A. Earnshaw, and Stephanie Andel, "'Discredited" Versus "Discreditable": Understanding How Shared and Unique Stigma Mechanisms Affect Psychological and Physical Health Disparities,' *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 35, no. 1 (2013): 78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2012.746612>.

¹¹⁴ Sherry et al.

¹¹⁵ Martin Hanselmann and Carmen Tanner, 'Taboos and Conflicts in Decision Making: Sacred Values, Decision Difficulty, and Emotions,' *Judgment and Decision Making* 3, no. 1 (2008); Philip E. Tetlock, 'Thinking the Unthinkable: Sacred Values and Taboo Cognitions,' *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 7, no. 7 (2003): 320, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S136-613\(03\)0013](https://doi.org/10.1016/S136-613(03)0013); Hanselmann and Tanner.

¹¹⁶ Sacred values can change interpretations from 'I say' to the imperative 'God says' with little deliberation as to whether this is in fact the case; See Tetlock, 320–21.

into articles of faith.¹¹⁷ The need to protect sacred values helps explain the defensiveness which often accompanies people's explanation of their theology.

Transgressing sacred values leads to discomfort, fear, and moral outrage—with occasional pragmatic responses—which can create obstacles to the discussion.¹¹⁸ Reframing sacred values is challenging because it may be perceived as an attack on one's identity. Therefore, in the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptists churches, it is crucial to consider one's own and others' sacred values, as they could impede the conversation by creating barriers and deadlocks.¹¹⁹

As Wilson and Sperber observe in their study of verbal communication, 'Failures in communication are common enough: what is remarkable and calls for explanation is that communication works at all.'¹²⁰ Since a vast amount of communication is based on cultural and Scriptural assumptions and the influence of monocultures and power imbalances, along with sacred values, fears, hidden identities and stigma, it is easy to see why they would conclude this. Understanding these factors affecting dialogue does not eliminate miscommunication. Rather, it creates a path of grace in conversations. It allows engagement

¹¹⁷ Mascord, 71; Keith Mascord also wrote an article on *Homosexuality, The Old Testament and Today* for the Baptist Churches of Victoria's website. <https://www.buv.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Homosexuality-the-OT-and-Today.-Keith-Mascord.pdf>.

¹¹⁸ Tetlock, 321; Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, 'Reframing Sacred Values,' *Negotiation Journal* 24, no. 3 (2008): 223, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.157-979.2008.00182.x>.

¹¹⁹ Covey; Atran and Axelrod, 242; N. Argo and J. Ginges, 'Beyond Impasse: Addressing Sacred Values in International Political Negotiations,' in *Handbook of International Negotiation Interpersonal, Intercultural, and Diplomatic Perspectives*, ed. Mauro Galluccio (Cham: Springer International, 2014), 15.

¹²⁰ Wilson and Sperber, 606.

in difficult discussions with a shared recognition that there may be discrepancies between what is said and what was intended.¹²¹

In conclusion, the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches is shaped by a complex interplay of various factors. Assumptions, monoculture, moral panics, scapegoating, power dynamics, theological perspectives, stigma, and sacred values all contribute to the discourse. These influences, whether conscious or unconscious biases, significantly impact the nature and tone of dialogues. Therefore, recognising and understanding these key influences is essential for creating a safe space and for facilitating more inclusive and informed conversations on LGBTQIA+ issues within the Baptist context.

¹²¹ Covey suggests: ‘while we tend to judge others by our intent, we tend to judge others by their behaviour’; Stephen R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 78.

Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design; its philosophy, methodology, and methods, including the use of *The Phases of Thematic Analysis* by Braun and Clarke for data analysis.¹ It then introduces the participants and discusses the criteria for their selection. The chapter concludes by addressing ethical considerations and the study's limitations.

Research Design

The question that guides this research is:

How is the current LGBTQIA+ discourse being conducted within Baptist Churches of South Australia (BCSA) member churches and what opportunities and hindrances are there to further dialogue?

The aim is to discover effective strategies for facilitating conversations between people who disagree over their perspectives. The perspectives are often deeply held sacred values and may form part of their identity and spiritual beliefs. The objectives are twofold: (1) to map the current conversation; (2) to understand the mistakes which negatively affect the conversation and build on strategies which foster positive dialogue over differences.

The research design has three sections: (1) research philosophy; (2) methodology; and (3) methods. As I understand and use these terms, the *research philosophy* is the worldview that provides the ontological and epistemological framework for the research.² This study has critical realism as its research paradigm. *Methodology* is the framework—the rationale and principles—that structures critical inquiry into the research. The methodology used in

¹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,' *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006).

² Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19.

the research is grounded theory. *Methods* are the techniques adopted to collate the data; in this research, the methods included interviews, questionnaires, and narrative inquiry.³

Research Philosophy

Egon Guba (a founder of Naturalistic Inquiry) defined research philosophy as ‘a basic set of beliefs that guides action’.⁴ Social research uses many different philosophies.⁵ However, by Guba’s definition, critical realism best suits the ontological and epistemological assumptions guiding this study. Critical realism is concerned with critiquing social, political, ethnic, and gender structures and empowering groups and individuals to overcome the inequalities resulting from those structures.⁶

Roy Bhaskar, the founder of critical realism, argues that these inequalities are present and influential whether acknowledged or not. His philosophical framework for critical realism seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of reality, particularly in the context of social sciences. It incorporates two key concepts: transcendental realism and critical naturalism.⁷ Transcendental realism asserts the existence of an objective reality that exists independently of our subjective perceptions or experiences. It challenges both idealism and relativism, and advocates for research that reveals the underlying structures and causal power of an external reality, which may not always be directly accessible through our experiences. Transcendental realism is combined with critical naturalism and the

³ Melanie Birks and Jane Mills, *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 4.

⁴ Egon G. Guba, *The Paradigm Dialog* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1990), 17.

⁵ J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, ‘Philosophical Assumptions and Interpretive Frameworks,’ in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, ed. J. W. Creswell (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013).

⁶ Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, ‘Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,’ in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994), 113.

⁷ Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978); Marget Archer et al., *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998).

concept of ontological pluralism—a perspective that challenges a monistic view of reality and asserts the coexistence of multiple, irreducible ontological levels. This differs from transcendental realism, which tends to focus on a more unified ontological framework. Critical naturalism provides a framework for understanding and exploring the diversity and complexity of the world.

Bhaskar argues for an ‘emergent objectivity’, suggesting that while complete objectivity may be unattainable, researchers can strive for a more objective understanding of reality by being aware of their subjectivity.⁸ His framework for critical realism encourages researchers to engage with the world in a way that acknowledges the existence of an independent reality while also remaining critical and self-aware when it comes to their own biases and perspectives as they pursue knowledge.⁹

Critical realism is insightful in research as it assumes a link between the *real* (i.e, the causal mechanisms that produced the event), the *actual* (i.e, empirically observed events), and the *experience*.¹⁰ Bhaskar argues that the causal connection between the real and the experience may not be directly visible; however, critical realism uses the participants’

⁸ Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 51.

⁹ R. Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (Thetford, UK: The Thetford Press, 1986); Carolyn Oliver, ‘Critical Realist Grounded Theory: A New Approach for Social Work Research,’ *The British Journal of Social Work* 42, no. 2 (2012): <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr064>; John Michael Roberts, ‘Critical Realism, Dialectics, and Qualitative Research Methods,’ *Journal For The Theory of Social Behaviour* 44, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12056>.

¹⁰ Markos Zachariadis, Susan Scott, and Michael Barrett, ‘Methodological Implications of Critical Realism for Mixed-Methods Research,’ *MIS Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2013): 857, <https://doi.org/10.25300/MISQ/2013/37.3.09>; Bhaskar’s link between the real and the empirical has similarities to Habermas’ theory linking empirical-analytic, cultural-hermeneutics, and social criticism; See D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2020), 6; Bhaskar; Sarah Bunt, ‘Critical Realism and Grounded Theory: Analysing the Adoption Outcomes for Disabled Children Using the Retroduction Framework,’ *Qualitative Social Work: QSW: Research and Practice* 17, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325016664572>.

experiences to identify the possible causes of the event. He also argues that the potential to be wrong should not dissuade the researcher from seeking the causal mechanism, as critical realism is based on growing and changing knowledge.¹¹ Bhaskar's approach guided this study. The causal link was implicit rather than explicit in the research findings, since participants would share their experiences but rarely share the cause behind the event. However, it was possible to reflect upon the 'real'—the social structures with causal powers—and include those reflections in the research, even though the reasons were not directly visible in the data collated. Critical realism allowed me to move beyond simply describing the experience to focus on the processes operating behind it.

Critical realism has a dual focus on structures and agency. It argues that knowledge and meaning accumulate and change through dialogue with others, particularly when others have a different worldview.¹² Critical realism is well suited to my research question and the objective of facilitating discussions about differences by including the varying perspectives of the participants rather than by excluding 'others'. The ethical philosophy of critical realism directs the study to maintain an 'interactive' relationship between the researcher and the participant, thus levelling the power bases. Guba and Lincoln conclude that research with a philosophy of critical realism aims to be 'dialectical in nature to transform ignorance and misapprehension ... into more informed consciousness'.¹³ This happens by seeing ways in which how the structures might be changed and examining the actions required to effect change.

¹¹ Bhaskar; Zachariadis, Scott, and Barrett, 857; Garry Potter and José López, *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* (London: Continuum, 2005), 19–20; Potter and Lopez equally argue that it is possible to 'judge between competing theories on the basics of their intrinsic merit as explanations of reality. We do so both scientifically and in everyday life'; Potter and López, 9.

¹² Berth Danermark, Mats Ekström, and Jan Karlsson, *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed, Routledge Studies in Critical Realism, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

¹³ Guba and Lincoln, 110.

Guba and Lincoln's argument of a practical application from critical realism, and the possibility of a 'more informed consciousness' among researchers and practitioners involved in the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches, confirm it as the most appropriate philosophy for my research. Critical realism aims to provide a comprehensive framework to prevent the research from straying from its values.¹⁴ Critical realism is best combined with a complementary methodology such as grounded theory (the choice I have made here).

Research Methodology

Grounded theory was chosen for this study for two reasons. First, grounded theory explores complex social phenomena and 'is most appropriately employed in studies where little is known about a phenomenon of interest.'¹⁵ To date, there is no research on the dialogue and relational dynamics between Baptists in South Australia and LGBTQIA+ persons, and I contend that this is an area where a theory needs to be developed. Second, grounded theory facilitates the concurrent development of a new theory alongside data collection and analysis. I contemplated that during the research process I might discover categories that were previously unknown or not deemed significant and thus omitted from my initial literature review. Grounded theory enables continuous collection, analysis, and refinement of the emerging theory, integrating data and the evolving literature discourse.

Glaser and Strauss introduced grounded theory in 1967,¹⁶ in response to the dominant deductive research methods of the era. It relies on inductive reasoning as 'a research strategy

¹⁴ Oliver; Potter and López, 5.

¹⁵ Birks and Mills, 113, Morley and Crawford.

¹⁶ B. Glaser and A. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research, Observations*, (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

whose purpose is to generate theory from data'.¹⁷ It is summarised as 'a systematic, inductive, and comparative approach for the purpose of constructing theory.'¹⁸ The process involves the researcher initially coding and analysing the data, then, during the intermediate phase, finding the relationship between the categories, before producing analytical insights that account for the relationship to form a theory.¹⁹

Grounded theory has evolved in different directions since its introduction by Glaser and Strauss, most notably by Corbin and Strauss and by Kathy Charmaz and Antony Bryant.²⁰ The differences are primarily in their research philosophies. Charmaz and Bryant developed a constructivist model, and Strauss and Corbin operated from a relativist ontological position founded on pragmatism.²¹ Glaser's grounded theory is the least explicit about its research philosophies, which means it is accessible to combine with my philosophical framework of critical realism.²² Grounded theory focuses on the data generated by participants to develop theories, and critical realism focuses on the underlying structures that influence the participants' experiences. Together they produce a holistic, rounded approach most suited to the research question concerning the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.

¹⁷ Keith Punch, *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*, 2nd ed., (London: Sage, 2005), 155; Glaser and Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory*; John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007), 22.

¹⁸ Glaser and Strauss, 1; Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), 1; Juliet M. Corbin and Anselm L. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3rd ed, Qualitative Research, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008).

¹⁹ Punch, 157; Birks and Mills, 114–16.

²⁰ Corbin and Strauss, viii; Bryant and Charmaz.

²¹ Birks and Mills, 108–10.

²² Birks and Mills, 5; Lynne Taylor, 'Redeeming Authenticity: Empirical Study on the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians,' Flinders University, School of Humanities and Creative Arts, 2017), 40–41.

One area of difference between Glaser's classical grounded theory and constructivist and relativist theories is in the prior reviewing of literature. Glaser emphasises that the researcher abstains from literature reviews and comes to the research as a blank slate. Later theorists have recognised that this is impossible; as Corbin and Strauss argue, researchers are guided by their prior knowledge, literature, and personal experience. These scholars suggest that the best way to bracket (isolate or set apart) personal knowledge is to include the researcher's ideas and responses in the data as analytical memos.²³ These contrast with the participants' data and thus highlight the researcher's bias and allow more reliable data to emerge. I found both analytical memos and journaling helpful as a continual reminder of my biases. I also found my supervisors were excellent dialogue partners in the research, as they added a further level of accountability in highlighting my biases.

Methodologist Joseph Maxwell argues that the literature review is a conceptual framework that focuses on the areas particularly relevant to the study and is therefore useful prior to the data collection. He advises seeing the literature review as 'useful' but not 'infallible', which mirrors Glaser's aspiration to see the data generating new ideas and theories. Therefore, I took Maxwell's advice and reviewed the literature before embarking on the research to inform what Maxwell calls 'the story' of what is going on and why.²⁴ However, I was also influenced by Glaser, and I returned to review literature when the data suggested new or more nuanced themes. Grounded theory's systematic approach to data collection, coding, and analysis allows for the discovery of new concepts to emerge from the data. It also emphasises the continual refinement of concepts through an interactive process between data collection and literature analysis. In this study, I found the most valuable aspect of grounded theory to be its encouragement of the researcher to continuously

²³ Corbin and Strauss; Lea Tufford and Peter Newman, 'Bracketing in Qualitative Research,' *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice* 11, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010368316>.

²⁴ Joseph A Maxwell, 'Designing a Qualitative Study,' in *The Sage Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods*, ed. Leonard Bickman and Debra J. Rog, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 222.

investigate empirical data alongside the existing body of knowledge previously found in the literature throughout the research process. This integration helped me to build a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research topic.

Grounded theory's dialectical approach allows the themes identified in the data to be informed by concepts drawn from dialogue theorists.²⁵ It also recognises the complexities of participants' experiences. This was particularly notable in my research, in light of the participants' stories about the way discussing differences in perspectives led them on a liminal journey that often evoked an uncomfortable, visceral tension within them. The dialogue theorists do not focus on liminality, nor on the responses to the physical feelings it provoked, although that was often implied. Grounded theory's multifaceted approach to research accommodates these newer concepts, which match the research participants' experiences. In this example, the empirical data integrates successfully with the existing knowledge on liminality available in the literature, most notably Claus Otto Scharmer's Theory U.²⁶

The dialectical approach of grounded theory between data results and the literature also identified gaps in the existing approaches. For example, although the dialogue theorists emphasised the value of attentive listening during discussions on contrasting perspectives, it is worth noting that all were male and influenced to varying extents by Western academic perspectives. It is reasonable to assume that these influences shaped their contextual understanding of active listening. Grounded theory enabled the study to move beyond the male 'western' context and engage with the Aboriginal deep listening practice of *Dadirri*, which is taught by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, a female Aboriginal elder.²⁷ *Dadirri* presented an alternative perspective on listening, challenging the common practice of

²⁵ Maxwell, 222–25.

²⁶ Scharmer.

²⁷ Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., '*Dadirri: An Indigenous Place-based Research Methodology*'; West et al.

listening primarily to formulate responses and advocating for a more contemplative mode of listening that prioritises understanding.

In conclusion, the dialectical approach employed in grounded theory fosters a reciprocal relationship between data and theory. This dynamic interaction, which I personally found to be intellectually enriching, greatly contributed to the research process, and produced nuanced and contextually grounded findings.

Data Collection

Participants

The participants were chosen for this study because they met Creswell's criterion of giving insight into the situation.²⁸ Three groups were identified to participate in this research: (1) Senior leadership within both BCSA and BCSA-affiliated churches; (2) Members/attendees of BCSA member churches; (3) LGBTQIA+ persons and groups connected to Baptist churches.

A fourth group of participants, consisting of leaders from within Baptist Care (SA), became part of the study through the snowball sampling method. Further details of the snowball method are provided later in this chapter. However, it is important to examine how Baptist Care (SA) meets the criteria for participation in this study. Due to Baptist Care (SA)'s unique connection, as an Affiliated Ministry of BCSA, Baptist Care (SA) holds equivalent rights to affiliated churches, and has two representatives (the Chair of the Board and the CEO) who are delegates to the BCSA Assembly. These representatives have the authority to vote in the decision-making processes of BSCA.²⁹ Therefore, at an institutional level, they are already dialogue partners with BCSA and Baptist churches. However, the

²⁸ John Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2014).

²⁹ Baptist Churches of South Australia, 'Constitution'; Australia.

Baptist Care (SA) participants also serve as dialogue partners on an individual level. The connections between Baptist Care (SA), BCSA, and its churches are evidenced by the number of individual Baptists who work and volunteer for Baptist Care (SA). Consequently, the Baptist Care (SA) participants in this research are actively engaged in the LGBTQIA+ discourse at a personal level with many Baptists.

The inclusion of Baptist Care (SA) participants is important due to the distinctive perspective they bring to the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Unlike individuals within the church context, Baptist Care (SA) participants offer a unique vantage point, observing and understanding that the discourse surrounding LGBTQIA+ issues extends beyond the confines of a local church. As dialogue partners, their experiences within the broader community provide valuable insights into the way these conversations impact individuals and groups alike.

Although the study was available to anyone engaged in the LGBTQIA+ discourse with BCSA and its member churches, there was a notable lack of participation from the ethnic Baptist churches in the Association. These churches represent Baptists belonging to Indigenous Aboriginal, mainland China, Vietnam, and Chin people groups. The ethical guidelines for this research precluded reinviting churches to participate in the study. This was to ensure there was no coercion, and it empowered participants to choose whether or not to participate in the research, but it did limit the breadth of the data.

Additionally, given Grant and Nash's research on homonormativity, it is important to note that participants were primarily from urban locations.³⁰ Grant and Nash concluded that the LGBTQIA+ discourse is conducted differently in rural locations. Thus, the study could not examine the way rural and urban locations influence the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches, due to the absence of participants from rural Baptist churches.

³⁰ Grant and Nash. Also see M'ck McKeague, *You Can Take the Queer out of the Country*, in Benjamin Law, 92–93.

Identifying Participants

To help identify the context for each participant, I introduced a code tailored to the way each participant primarily chose to identify themselves. The code is present and used throughout the discussion chapters. The code elements are: LGBTQIA+ identity (Q); Heterosexual and cisgender identity (NQ); Baptist (B); Accredited Baptist Pastor (P); Non-accredited leader in a Baptist church (L); Baptist Care (BC).

To avoid assumptions, heterosexual, cisgender, LGBTQIA+ sexual and gender orientations were included only if participants disclosed them. However, it is reasonable to conclude that the majority of the participants were hetero/cisgender, give the statistics for LGBTQIA+ persons in Australia, and a culture that rarely discloses hetero/cisgender identities.³¹ In this study, pseudonyms are used for all participants except those who specifically asked to keep their actual names.

Snowball Sampling

This research used purposive sampling to engage participants for the study. However, participants also came through snowball sampling—where participants recommend others from their social group for the study—although snowball sampling was unplanned and occurred organically among the participants.³² In qualitative studies, researchers commonly use snowball sampling for its valuable potential to extend research beyond the ‘hegemonic

³¹ Pronouns may appear on some signatures. Brian D. Earp, ‘On Sharing Pronouns,’ *The Philosopher* 109, no. 1 (2021); Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak, ‘He/She/They/Ze,’ *Ergo Journal of Philosophy* (2018).

³² Purposive sampling techniques is defined as ‘selecting units (e.g. individuals, groups of individuals, institution) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study’s questions.’ Charles Teddlie and Fen Yu, ‘Mixed Methods Sampling: A Typology with Examples,’ *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1, no. 1 (2007): 77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689806292430>.

centres' and include participants who might be concealed, marginalised, or affiliated with subgroups unknown to the researcher.³³

As previously stated, this research included participants from Baptist Care (SA) through the snowball sampling method. They were referred to the study by a current participant who recognised the value of their perspectives after hearing about their experiences of the LGBTQIA+ discourse. All the Baptist Care (SA) participants are actively involved in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Baptist community, interacting with individual Baptists, and with BCSA and its member churches. Their distinctive experiences of engaging in the Baptist LGBTQIA+ discourse beyond the confines of a local church are presented in a dedicated discussion chapter.

Research Methods

The study adopted a mixed-method approach to collating data, with participants choosing between a semi-structured interview with the researcher or narrating their experience.³⁴ The aim was to give the participants control over how the interview would be conducted and allow them to choose the method that they felt provided a safe environment for them to speak. However, the majority of Baptist participants opted for an interview that was question-based, and LGBTQIA+ participants preferred narrative inquiry. Each method brings its own dynamics to the research.

³³ Chaim Noy, 'Sampling Knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research,' *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11, no. 4 (2008): 341, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701401305>.

³⁴ Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (London: Sage, 2007); Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. D. Jean Clandinin, *the Relational Ethics of Narrative Inquiry*, ed. Vera Caine and Sean Lessard (London: Routledge, 2018). See Appendices 1 and 2 for the questions.

Interviews with the researcher used identical open-ended questions.³⁵ Using identical questions aided in correlating the answers during the data analysis but still allowed the participants freedom in answering the question.³⁶ Creswell advocates a flexible approach when interviewing, as participants only sometimes answer the question they have been asked and suggests the researcher be prepared to follow up with a rephrased question to facilitate the interview.³⁷ There are weaknesses, however, in interviews. The researcher generates the questions that frame the direction the discourse will take, and there is a risk that the questions will be too general or too specific. There can also be a power differential, with participants feeling pressured to respond to the ‘professionals’ conducting the research with the ‘right’ answer. This could have been especially true for participants from my home church; therefore, a third-party researcher was employed to interview these participants to address the potential power imbalances.

Equally, my role as a BCSA pastor—versed in Baptist church culture—would make it impossible for me not to be an influence in the conversation. To limit my voice, the interviews happened without interrogation from my perspective. I therefore only asked questions to clarify that I had heard the participant correctly. In the interests of transparency, I confess that this was not easy, as it is customary to join in a conversation. However, during the data analysis, I checked my responses to see whether, and how, I had influenced the conversation, and found that my interactions largely helped maintain the conversation rather than directing it. Seidman proposes the aim of interviewing as being ‘not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses ...’ but argues instead that ‘[at] the

³⁵ C. McNamara, ‘General Guidelines for Conducting Interviews,’ (<https://napequity.org/wp-content/uploads/10j-General-Guidelines-for-Conducting-Interviews.pdf>: National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity, 2009). <http://managementhelp.org/evaluatn/intrview.htm>.

³⁶ Daniel W. Turner III, ‘Qualitative Interview Design: A Practical Guide for Novice Investigators,’ *Qualitative Report* 15, no. 3 (2010): 756.

³⁷ Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*.

root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.³⁸ Indeed, that was my experience with the interview process. Occasionally, participants simply answered the question. However, more commonly, the questions allowed them to share the lived experiences that had influenced their answers.

Narrative interviews bypassed the problem of asking direct questions, as storytelling is not subject to the researcher's thought processes or framework for structuring the questions.³⁹ Storytelling allows the participant's experience to emerge in an undirected way.⁴⁰ Narrative interview techniques generally require that direction from the researcher be kept to the minimum; the researcher is limited to asking the participant to tell a story that is meaningful to them. During the main narration, the researcher can speak once the interviewee signals that they have finished their story. The researcher may then ask: 'Is there anything else you want to tell me?' and ask questions clarifying events. 'Why' questions or cross-examinations about contradictions in the story are not permitted.⁴¹ As with interview questions, narrative interviews allow the researcher to collate common themes. However, they also generate new insights as narratives reveal questions the researcher failed to consider asking in a question-based interview. The researcher cannot know what will be said; it is an unanticipated narrative. Thus, narrative inquiry keeps the researcher's influence to a minimum. This addresses power imbalances, researcher biases, and implicit influences

³⁸ Irving Seidman, *Interviewing As Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 4th ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013), 9; Sandra Jovchelovitch and Martin W. Bauer, 'Narrative Interviews,' in *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound*, ed. Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell (London: Sage, 2000); Richard Winter, 'Finding a Voice— Thinking with Others: A Conception of Action Research,' *Educational Action Research* 6, no. 1 (1998), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650799800200052>.

³⁹ Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 62–66.

⁴⁰ Clandinin.

⁴¹ Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 62–66; Bamberg and Andrews.

on the study.⁴² The Baptist Care (SA) participants all used the narrative approach to the study.

Hood et al. suggest that qualitative inquiry's advantage is its suitability for studying social, religious, and spiritual processes because qualitative methodologies 'unpack' the 'meaning' behind the data results. They argue that '[T]his is particularly relevant to understanding religion as a system of meaning.'⁴³ Additionally, Pranee Liamputtong argues that qualitative inquiry methods such as interviews and narratives give access to people who are often silenced and marginalised because it prioritises the posture of 'explain to me'.⁴⁴ This allows the researcher 'to be sensitive to issues such as gender difference, race, economic status and individual differences', providing a comprehensive understanding of the situation from the context where the phenomenon originates.⁴⁵ It is argued that cooperative inquiry can 'contribute to a framework for emancipatory practice, which can facilitate empowerment through mutual learning'.⁴⁶ The key rationales for choosing critical realism, grounded theory, thematic analysis (which I will discuss in Analysing the Data), and the tools of interviews and narrative inquiry, are the opportunities they provide to study the influence of context on the dialogue. Additionally, they aim to empower the voices of all the participants and not just the stakeholders.

⁴² Marcia Marx, 'Invisibility, Interviewing and Power: A Researcher's Dilemma,' *Resources for Feminist Research* 28, no. ¾ (2001).

⁴³ Hood et al., 31.

⁴⁴ Pranee Liamputtong is a medical anthropologist; Pranee Liamputtong, *Researching the Vulnerable a Guide to Sensitive Research Methods* (London: Sage, 2007), 7.

⁴⁵ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*, 40; Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research. a Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 57; D. G. Hays and A. A. Singh, *Qualitative Inquiry in Clinical and Educational Settings* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2012).

⁴⁶ A. Moggridge and P. Reason, 'Human Inquiry: Steps towards Emancipatory Practice,' *Systemic Practice and Action Research* 9, no. 2 (1996): 163–64.

Data Saturation

Data saturation occurs in qualitative research when no new insights or information are obtained from additional data collection. It indicates that a comprehensive understanding of the research topic has been reached and is used as a criterion to stop data collection.⁴⁷ Strauss and Corbin argue that there is a point where any 'new' data is 'counter-productive' because it does not add to the overall story.⁴⁸ The decision to stop collecting data is dependent on assessing the data in light of the research question. On that criterion, the saturation point was reached early in the research process.⁴⁹ However, the study departed from this approach to data saturation because of its priority to allow access for any who wanted a voice in the conversation. Participants continued to be interviewed throughout the data analysis, and their contributions—whether additional or a fresh perspective—were added to the existing data.

I extended the interviews beyond data saturation for several compelling reasons. Confirming and reinforcing the findings was a key motive. In addition, I sought to accommodate the potential of the snowball sampling method and the emergence of distinct subgroups. I hoped—and perhaps even anticipated—that extra time might allow for Aboriginal and First Nations People to contribute to the study. While the anticipated participation did not materialise, an unforeseen subgroup within Baptist Care (SA)

⁴⁷ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'To Saturate or Not to Saturate? Questioning Data Saturation As a Useful Concept for Thematic Analysis and Sample-Size Rationales,' *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 13, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846>; Mark Mason, 'Sample Size and Saturation in PhD Studies Using Qualitative Interviews,' *Forum, Qualitative Social Research* 11, no. 3 (2010). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-11.3.1428>.

⁴⁸ Corbin and Strauss, 136; Monique M. Hennink, Bonnie N. Kaiser, and Vincent C. Marconi, 'Code Saturation Versus Meaning Saturation: How Many Interviews Are Enough?,' *Qualitative Health Research* 27, no. 4 (2017): 594, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316665344>.

⁴⁹ Patricia I. Fusch and Lawrence R. Ness, 'Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research,' *Qualitative Report* 20, no. 9 (2015): 1409; Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, 'How Many Interviews Are Enough?,' *Field Methods* 18, no. 1 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>.

emerged. I, as researcher, had not initially considered inviting them to participate as I had not understood the extent of the involvement of Baptist Care (SA) in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Baptist community. However, the pivotal driver for the choice to continue interviewing past what was arguably data saturation lay in the evidence indicating a pervasive culture of silence concerning the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. I determined that the study would not inadvertently align with this culture and that every individual should have access and agency throughout the research process.

Analysing the Data

Grounded theory has its limitations, including the subjective nature of qualitative research and the openness of the research.⁵⁰ Chapman explained the issue of grounded theory for new researchers, like myself:

Many of the approaches to analysis in grounded theory can present new researchers with challenges due to their relative openness; they provide little of the apparent security of more deductive approaches such as the framework approach. The iterative movement between data and the development of themes can appear confusing, and issues can arise about how best to move between inductive and deductive stages in the analytical process.⁵¹

As I am a new researcher, I also used Thematic Analysis, developed by Braun and Clark, to address the issue of 'relative openness' during the data analysis. Thematic Analysis provides a framework for analysing the data. Therefore, along with grounded theory's process for observing the relationship between the categories to generate a theory, this study followed *The Phases of Thematic Analysis* by Braun and Clarke, which is a tool for analysing

⁵⁰ A. L. Chapman, M. Hadfield, and C. J. Chapman. 'Qualitative Research in Healthcare: An Introduction to Grounded Theory using Thematic Analysis,' *Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* 45, no. 3 (2015): 203–4.

⁵¹ Chapman et al., 'Qualitative Research in Healthcare,' 204.

qualitative data through ‘identifying and reporting patterns (themes)’.⁵² Although Braun and Clarke present the phases as a linear process, Maxwell argues that it is essential to remember that the research design is ‘interactive’ and that the phases are ‘affected by each other.’⁵³

The mapped codes used for the Data Results are set out in Appendix 3. Table 1 (below) summarises the data analysis process adopted here.

Table 1: The data analysis process⁵⁴

Phase	Description of the process
Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code
Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis
Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme
Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

Braun and Clarke argue that thematic analysis allows philosophical assumptions of ontology (reality), epistemology (knowledge), axiology (values), and rhetoric (participant’s voice) to come into view, shedding light on their influences on the conversation.⁵⁵ The strength of such thematic analysis is its rigorous process for engaging and organising the

⁵² Braun and Clarke, ‘Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,’ 79.

⁵³ Maxwell, 215–16.

⁵⁴ Table 1 after Braun and Clarke.

⁵⁵ Braun and Clarke, ‘Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,’ 87.

data, and the analysis developed can be ‘robust and defensible’ and ‘insightful’.⁵⁶ Arguably, its weakness is that it may not produce a ‘theoretical model’—although Braun and Clark disagree, arguing that it may be used as either a methodology or a tool.⁵⁷ Terry et al. discuss the strengths and weaknesses of thematic analysis, suggesting that strength lies in its lack of theory, as this allows it to be ‘independent of any predetermined particular theoretical framework.’⁵⁸ However, this lack of a theoretical model is the reason I chose to use grounded theory alongside thematic analysis. I saw the combination—the accessibility of thematic analysis alongside the framework of grounded theory—as enabling robust and well-rounded data analysis.

Thematic analysis is linked to critical realism as it aims to reflect ‘the reality’ of the situation and ‘the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings.’⁵⁹ It is also linked to grounded theory as both are exploratory rather than confirmatory, aiming to support their claims with data.⁶⁰ Together, they aim for equality in the dialogue and give voice to those often marginalised.⁶¹

⁵⁶ G. Terry et al., ‘Thematic Analysis,’ in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, ed. Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton-Rogers (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2017), 34; Braun and Clarke, ‘Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,’ 97; Hays and Singh.

⁵⁷ Greg Guest, Kathleen M. MacQueen, and Emily E. Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012); Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, ‘Conceptual and Design Thinking for Thematic Analysis,’ *Qualitative Psychology* 9, no. 1 (2021): 6–8 and 19, <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>.

⁵⁸ Terry et al.

⁵⁹ Steve Vincent and Joe O’Mahoney, ‘Critical Realism and Qualitative Research: An Introductory Overview,’ in *SAGE: Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Cathrine Cassell, Gina Grandy, and Ann L. Cunliffe (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2018); Braun and Clarke, ‘Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,’ 81.

⁶⁰ Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, 7–8.

⁶¹ Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, 13.

Ethical Considerations

This research received ethics approval from Flinders University Human Resource Ethics Committee. The Ethics Committee's recommendations included employing a third-party researcher (with no current/past, personal/professional, relationship/affiliation with any potential participants) to conduct the interviews and narrative interviews with participants from the Baptist church where I work. In addition, the third-party researcher undertook de-identification before submitting the participants' transcripts.

The Ethics Committee also recommended that to ensure that no participant felt obligated or pressured to be involved in the research—because of relationship or my position as an accredited Baptist pastor—that member churches of BCSA receive an email from the State Executive Minister of BCSA inviting the church members and the senior leaders to participate in the research. My contact details were available, and they were left to contact me or not. Senior leaders or congregational members within my church were given contact details for the third-party researcher. LGBTQIA+ community groups were sent a letter of invitation explaining the study, eligibility criteria, and my contact details.

All the data was de-identified. However, as this research was undertaken with a small pool of people, some of whom may be known to each other, anonymity could not be guaranteed.

To be truly inclusive of all the voices involved, the research needed to recognise the influence of power relationships between researcher and participant.⁶² The power imbalance occurs for two reasons: (1) the participant assumes the researcher is the 'professional' with the ultimate 'authority'; and (2) the researcher holds power over all

⁶² Harisun, *Power, Theology and Ecclesiology in Practice: An Analysis of the Power Struggle Over Sexuality in the Uniting Church in Australia*. See Karnieli-Miller et.al excellent table for further details on the range of power relationships between researcher's and participants; Orit Karnieli-Miller, Roni Strier, and Liat Pessach, 'Power Relations in Qualitative Research,' *Qualitative Health Research* 19, no. 2 (2009): 281, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732308329306>.

stages of the research.⁶³ Therefore, there must be a deliberate intent to redress hierarchical power structures—to bring an equalitarian approach (i.e, collaborative) rather than a hierarchical power relationship (i.e, researcher and participant) to the study.⁶⁴ To answer the question of the researcher’s power over all the stages of research, participants were invited to view the data analysis. This ensured the authenticity of their voice and the validity of my conclusions.⁶⁵ Karnieli-Miller et al. acknowledge the struggles of keeping the balance between participants as partners in the research stages with the study’s methodological integrity. However, they conclude the benefits outweigh any possible risks, arguing that through ‘promoting self-examination in the various stages of research, we can decrease the violation of participants’ rights and increase our accountability and true obligation to them, to self, and to the community’.⁶⁶

As Buddhist and feminist academic Rita Gross argues, all researchers are biased.⁶⁷ To overcome these biases and deliberately approach the research with curiosity, I employed four well-known techniques: (1) openly acknowledging the situatedness of the researcher; (2) holding myself accountable to my supervisors, with whom I transparently engaged and who faithfully kept me accountable for my biases; (3) bracketing (setting aside experiences, assumptions, biases, and preconceived ideas about the phenomenon under investigation) through analytical memos and journaling my thoughts and assumptions;⁶⁸ (4) incorporating the checks and balances provided by the participants, who who were sent a copy of their

⁶³ Marx.

⁶⁴ Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach, 281.

⁶⁵ Victor Jupp, *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods* (London: Sage, 2006), 234.

⁶⁶ Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach, 287.

⁶⁷ Gross, 15; Gross tackles the charge levied at feminist researcher and writers of ‘the mistaken perception of bias’ through ‘fostering the illusion that they [conventional, androcentric scholars] are without any specific agenda’.

⁶⁸ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*.

transcript and the discussion chapters, allowing them to check the authenticity of how I used their quotes. This process ratified my collation and the results of the data. These techniques enabled me to establish credibility, transferability, and confirmability, which are the hallmarks of trustworthiness in qualitative research.⁶⁹

Limitations of the Study

While this research was accessible to all who were engaging in the LGBTQIA+ discourse with BCSA, its member churches and its affiliated ministry, it did not attract participation from Baptists belonging to Indigenous Aboriginal, mainland China, Vietnam, and Chin people groups churches within BCSA. Given that these multicultural churches hold a significant place within South Australian Baptists, it is necessary to conduct further research specific to these contexts.

Further, this study predominantly involved participants from urban settings. More research is needed to investigate the influence of rural and urban environments on LGBTQIA+ discourse within South Australian Baptist churches.⁷⁰

This study focused on difficulties specific to the LGBTQIA+ discourse within BSCA member churches. However, LGBTQIA+ issues are not the only potentially divisive dialogue Baptists may face when sacred values are confronted. For example, the referendum to establish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice within the Constitution did not pass. Like the plebiscite on marriage equality in 2017, the referendum exposed deep divisions in the discourse. In 2023, BSCA merged with BUNT to form Baptist Churches SA & NT (BCSANT) and with it the inclusion of additional Aboriginal churches in the Association. This means there is a new need for frameworks that promote constructive

⁶⁹ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (California: Sage, 1985).

⁶⁹ Jeanne J. LeVasseur, 'The Problem of Bracketing in Phenomenology,' *Qualitative Health Research* 13, no. 3 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732302250337>.

⁷⁰ Grant and Nash, 592–608.

discourse in this season of grief and pain for many Aboriginal and First Nations peoples. Ongoing research is necessary to explore ways in which the recommendations emerging from this study could be adapted in the dialogue with the Baptist Aboriginal churches and how the research might apply to other discussions about differences in perspective characterised by deeply held values that are influenced by faith and identity.

Finally, additional research is suggested by the merger between BUNT and BCSA. BUNT has publicly stated that churches should not send LGBTQIA+ delegates to the Baptist Assembly if they live according to their sexual and gender orientation.⁷¹ BCSA has not issued a similar statement. The merged institution serves as a dialogue space where obstacles and challenges to LGBTQIA+ discourse will require negotiation as the new entity takes shape.

⁷¹ Baptist Union of Queensland, 'Queensland Baptists Position Statement on Sexuality and Marriage'.

CHAPTER 6:

Discussing the Influence of Silence

This is such a real topic for culture as well, and if we just keep ignoring it ... they are asking questions, and we are not answering them. —Nathaniel

≈

I told my church prayer group that my kids had same-sex partners. No one commented on it ... My friends? Nothing was ever said. Amanda (a close friend from my Baptist church) was the first person to ask me about my kids ... I burst into tears because I had kept everything to myself for so long. I hadn't spoken to anyone. —Mary

The following chapters explore critical themes derived from the participants' interviews and narratives about the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. Each chapter focuses on one theme from the research findings. This chapter focuses on the theme of 'silence', which is the preferred stance taken by many towards the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches. Chapters 7–9 cover the themes of personhood, dialoguing about clashing perspectives, and the influence of the biblical Scriptures. Chapter 10, the final discussion chapter, contains the findings from the participants connected to Baptist Care (SA), an affiliated ministry of BSCA, which has a unique relationship with BCSA and its affiliated churches. Drawing on observations made by participants, Chapter 10 offers a comparative examination of the way these two Baptist organisations—Baptist Care and BCSA and its member churches—conduct the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

Each discussion chapter draws upon relevant dialogue theories previously discussed along with concepts from *Dadirri* and Theory U that apply to that theme. My purpose in these chapters is to foster a dialectical pedagogy between the research data, the dialogue theorists, and the concepts of *Dadirri*, Theory U, and liminality.

As previously described, the participants are identified using the following code: **Q**=LGBTQIA+ person; **NQ** = heterosexual and cisgender person; **B**=Baptist; **NB** = non-

Baptist; **P**=accredited Baptist pastor; **L**=ministry leader within their local church; **BC**= Baptist Care.¹

This chapter discusses the study findings of a culture of silence evident in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches. It also explores the following sub-themes: a culture akin to ‘Don’t ask; Don’t tell’; the problems of stereotyping and labelling; and the fears that drive a response of silence to discourse. It also explores the implications of silence for an LGBTQIA+ person’s safety and mental health.

In this chapter, the impact of silence on the LGBTQIA+ discourse is examined through the concepts found in Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue, which argues that truth is not found in silence or assumptions; it is found through dialogue with others.² The chapter also examines the influence of silence on the LGBTQIA+ discourse through the theories of Edward Said—who addresses power imbalances—and David Bohm, who emphasises listening without judgment.³ The priority Bohm gives to listening correlates with *Dadirri*’s methodology for deep listening and contemplation of the stories of others,⁴ and *Dadirri* aims to generate awareness of how the discourse directly impacts people. For that reason, the chapter applies *Dadirri*’s practice of deep listening to the current LGBTQIA+ conversation within Baptist churches.

‘Don’t Ask; Don’t Tell’

An overriding theme of ‘silence’ towards an LGBTQIA+ discourse was identified in the data. Silence can serve as a conversational tool, yet the way it is utilised—especially by those in

¹ Chapter 5: Methodology.

² Bakhtin and Holquist; Shields.

³ Bohm and Nichol.

⁴ Ungunmerr-Baumann, ‘*Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness*’; Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., ‘*Dadirri: An Indigenous Place-based Research [Methodology](#)*’.

the majority with the power to control both access to, and the direction of, the conversation—determines whether silence is employed positively or negatively. For example, silence in the positive sense is explained through the Aboriginal practice of *Dadirri* and ‘deep listening’. It argues for a period of silence to follow disclosures made by others to allow contemplation on what was heard.⁵ Kate (BC) explained how Aboriginal communities use speaking, listening, and silence in conjunction to address the issues that the community is facing. She said: ‘[The Aboriginal community] want to talk about what has been covered up over many years and told incorrectly or not told well in a Christian context.’ *Dadirri* resonates with Edward Said’s assertion that power within discourse resides with those who tell the story; therefore, the stories should be recounted by their rightful owners.

However, silence can have an adverse effect on dialogue when it silences the voices of others by refusing them either permission or safe places to speak. The adverse effect of silence appears in the participants’ stories and was compared to the US military phrase, ‘Don’t ask; Don’t tell’, which stated that LGBTQIA+ persons could serve in the Armed Forces if they kept their sexual identity hidden.⁶ Sophie (B) said:

There’s almost a ‘Don’t ask; Don’t answer’ type of thing. It’s like, is it okay to welcome someone who’s in a monogamous relationship with someone of the same sex? Is that okay? But someone who’s exploring their sexual proclivities is not OK? Where do you draw the line? As soon as you start to go, ‘This is the line’ of someone being in the church, I think we’re on really dangerous ground because God’s line may be completely different to what we think it is.

Samuel (Q) specifically quoted ‘Don’t ask; Don’t tell’ as a descriptor for his experience of the attitude of Baptist churches towards the LGBTQIA+ discourse. He added the

⁵ Atkinson, 16.

⁶ Brandon A. Davis, *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Background and Issues on Gays in the Military* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2010); Nathaniel Frank, ‘The President’s Pleasant Surprise: How LGBT Advocates Ended Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,’ *Journal of Homosexuality* 60, no. 2–3 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2013.744666>.

following evaluation of the impact of a discourse influenced by that stance: 'The practical problem with "Don't ask; Don't tell" is how do you ask the hidden?' Samuel's observations conveyed the disempowerment that occurs when the discourse speaks 'for' and not 'to' the people it is concerned about. Samuel's narrative was reminiscent of Edward Said's theory, which examines the power structures operating behind the dialogue. Said reflects on living as an exiled Palestinian and the consequences of feeling silenced. He speaks of the need to reveal things that 'have so far been either hidden or not discussed at all' and says it is only made possible by including in the discourse those with lived experience of the issues.⁷

Many participants expressed similar experiences of being 'hidden' and of LGBTQIA+ issues not being openly discussed. For example, Mary and Louise told people from their respective Baptist churches that their children were LGBTQIA+ oriented and 'there were no comments on it'. Louise wanted conversations with her church's pastors and leaders but observed that 'we've not had official talks with anyone.' She also included examples of the wall of silence from friends within the church:

When my child went to hospital [due to mental health issues] that night, a friend dropped a meal off but nothing was really broached about the situation. They wanted to bless us, I suppose, and [were] feeling for us. But nothing is ever really like asking, 'What's going on? Are you ok?' Do you know what I mean? I suppose I wish that a bit, that people might be interested. But it is a lot for people to contend with, and on the other hand, I understand if they don't, I'm not bitter about it really.

Paul (B), Louise's husband, agreed with her conclusion, saying: 'there have been times when I wished people would ask us, "How are you doing?"' Louise suggested the silence stemmed from people's inability to deal with another person's painful issues. Knowing how to support a friend when their child is navigating sexuality and gender identity, particularly when it affects mental health, is challenging. Many fear saying the wrong thing and feel ill-

⁷ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2013), 566. Also see Schneider and Roncolato on how black sexuality is reconstructed to maintain power differentials.

equipped to help. Despite this, maintaining silence does not provide a solution, and the pain of loneliness is evident in Louise's interview. She said: 'not talking to us hurt a little bit because you don't feel supported as a family. And you expect it a little bit from a Christian environment.'

Len (B) suggested that on occasions, the basis for the Baptist silence was 'not the US military's stance' but rather a choice to be inclusive and collaborative. Len explained:

So, it's not a 'Don't ask; Don't tell' thing. It is a knowing we are here at the table of Jesus, celebrating our rightful place in Christ. That's different from, let's be naive and make out it's not happening. So, it's an act of grace rather than a statement of grace. It's living grace.

Len's observation highlighted the difference in experiences. For Len, his attitude was one of wanting to extend grace to LGBTQIA+ persons, and he believed silence on LGBTQIA+ issues created an inclusive space for collaboration relating to Jesus. However, throughout the narratives from LGBTQIA+ participants and their advocates, silence was viewed as excluding them. For example, Samuel said:

There is a whole lot of hoo-ha going on and warring going on, on both sides of the argument, and it just seems that the very people who are probably best placed to offer insight into these issues aren't being solicited for their opinion or their view on these matters.

Edward Said speaks of the way silence reinforces the powerful influence of 'unexamined assumptions' on dialogue. In his example, Said is explicitly speaking of the 'biases' of 'Princeton, Harvard, and Chicago' academics masquerading as the unexamined assumptions of 'objectivity' and 'scientific impartiality', whereas in Len's example, bias is not driving the conversation.⁸ However, Said argues (and he makes this case in all his books) that it is only possible to get to the truth of a situation when you allow a person to tell their own story. Prioritising the right of a person to respond in their voice uncovers unexamined

⁸ Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, 25.

assumptions. Len's desire for grace-filled inclusion has an insightful aspect; however, it was lost because of the silence when it is viewed from an LGBTQIA+ perspective.

Practical Implications in Local Baptist Churches

The research findings highlighted the practical implications for pastors as they navigate the 'Don't ask; Don't tell' culture of the current LGBTQIA+ discourse. Some pastors mentioned that LGBTQIA+ persons had disclosed their orientation to them, but the wider church remained unaware. The reason for the disclosure staying with pastors and leaders was unclear, although sometimes confidentiality issues were mentioned. Pastors are often seen as confidants and counsellors within their congregations. When LGBTQIA+ persons disclose their LGBTQIA+ orientation, pastors and leaders may prioritise maintaining the trust and confidentiality of these individuals.

Samuel (Q) used words like 'pragmatism' and 'good reasons' to explain why his pastor did not allow the information about Samuel's sexual orientation to go beyond him. However, Samuel reported that his pastor said to him: 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if you were able to say to the church this is who I am ... and for it to just be known and not cared about?' Pragmatism offers an insightful diagnosis of the current LGBTQIA+ discourse by explaining how the social structures that influence the LGBTQIA+ discourse are constructed.⁹ However, it falls short by overlooking power dynamics, thereby weakening its overall argument.¹⁰ A pragmatic approach that perpetuates the 'Don't ask; Don't tell' culture may, even inadvertently, sustain a discourse characterised by silence and

⁹ Fabrizio Macagno and Sarah Bigi, 'Analyzing the Pragmatic Structure of Dialogues,' *Discourse Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017); Emma Brush, 'Inconvenient Truths: Pluralism, Pragmatism, and the Need for Civil Disagreement,' *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 10, no. 2 (2020).

¹⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, 'Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue,' *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 444; Macagno and Bigi, 153; Norbert Wiley, 'Pragmatism and the Dialogical Self,' *International Journal For Dialogical Science* 1, no. 1 (2006): 15–18.

concealment. Brandon (Q; B) supported this argument, contending that the ‘Don’t ask; Don’t tell’ culture in Baptist churches resulted in ‘pushing LGBTQ into secrecy’.

Primarily, it was pastors and LGBTQIA+ persons who noted that church members either lacked awareness or deliberately ignored the LGBTQIA+ orientation of individuals in their church. Lyn (P) observed: ‘It’s interesting, in my youth group, there were three people who were gay ... and no one talked about it; no one talked about it!’ The repeated phrase, ‘I don’t know any LGBTQ’, evidenced in the data, also suggested that the broader church community were frequently ignorant of LGBTQIA+ individuals within their congregations. Samuel (Q) highlighted the problem of the hidden LGBTQIA+ in local churches:

You probably wouldn’t know the number of gay people who are sitting in any given Baptist church on any given Sunday. And many people wouldn’t understand that. And would those people—who feel out of place already because they are the unnamed people who get talked about but never talked to in relation to the issues—would they even be willing to engage in conversations of that nature, and how would you find them?

The hidden presence of LGBTQIA+ individuals in a typical Baptist church is a reality that often goes unnoticed. The challenge therefore to the current LGBTQIA+ discourse lies in finding effective ways to identify and engage LGBTQIA+ persons in the discourse. However, it should be considered whether LGBTQIA+ individuals, who are marginalised, would be willing to engage in such conversations. David (former P) shared his perspective on the reasons LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates choose to remain hidden in Baptist churches:

There were no gay people wanting to come to our church, and that could be a chicken or egg. It could be that they didn’t come to our church because they knew we were a conservative Baptist church that doesn’t welcome them, or it could be just by chance, or as it turned out later, looking back, there were gay people in the church who only told me afterwards and at least four parents of gay people who were too afraid to tell me before I shared my [affirming of LGBTQ] views. None of whom are still there, including the gay person.

Maintaining the ‘Don’t ask; Don’t tell’ culture in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse, even on pragmatic grounds, compels LGBTQIA+ into secrecy. This can hinder the church’s

capacity to openly engage and address the real experiences and challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ persons.

Pastors' and leaders' hesitation to address 'Don't ask; Don't tell' derived from uncertainties about church members' engagement in the discussion and whether the dialogue would provide a safe space for LGBTQIA+ individuals. There was an example in the interviews of different responses from congregational members when they heard about their pastor's interaction with LGBTQIA+ persons. Two participants spoke of the same situation of gay men attending a church service. For one participant, the case in question was a positive example of the church's engagement with LGBTQIA+ persons because the couple came despite it being a non-affirming church, and the church did not compromise on its non-affirming beliefs. For the other, it was a negative example because the pastor explained to the gay couple that it was a church that held a non-affirming position, and the gay couple did not return.

An example of the dilemma pastors and leaders of Baptist churches face was seen in Andrew's interview. Andrew (L) recounted a conversation with a gay man in his church regarding the potential 'benefit' of disclosing his same-sex orientation to the broader congregation. The decision was complicated by the individual's reluctance to disclose this information to close family members. However, Andrew focused on the possible responses from the church members and spoke of previous experiences where he felt uncomfortable with the conversation:

It's not a deriding, how do I explain. It is almost conveying perhaps a not acceptable way of being, can't think of a better word than that. Conveying that general sense of, 'well, we steer clear of that sort of thing'.

Andrew reiterated that pastors and leaders find themselves in an 'uncomfortable' space between the church members and LGBTQIA+ persons, illustrating the challenging position that pastors and leaders occupy when navigating the complex interplay between their church communities and LGBTQIA+ persons. This situation vividly illustrates the

substantial weight and responsibility that the LGBTQIA+ discourse places upon the pastors and leaders of Baptist churches. Personally, I resonate with this observation, having experienced a similar burden. It was this sense of responsibility that motivated my research on this topic.

However, the withholding of LGBTQIA+ disclosures by pastors may be part of a depoliticisation strategy. Cadge and Wildeman’s research describes the way clergy adopt strategies to ‘neutralize or depoliticize’ conflict between their church and LGBTQIA+ persons before responding as facilitators or advocates on LGBTQIA+ issues.¹¹ This issue was discussed by Thomas (P) when he imagined advocating for LGBTQIA+ persons to hold ministry positions in his church:

In my current context, I don’t think I could, it would probably cost me my leadership to have that battle. And I’m trying to pick my battles at the moment anyway!

Edward Said argues that it is a ‘scandal’ when a person is silenced due to what they represent because of ‘differences in language, race, identity, history, and tradition’, when they become invisible or forced to ‘transform’ and assimilate to an acceptable identity. However, it is the scandal that undermines the institution.¹² Said argued that invisibility and silence can be—and has a proven history of being—‘shattered’ by the marginalised, which ‘leaves a new space to be filled by peoples who can speak for themselves.’¹³ Said’s concept serves as a severe criticism warranting consideration. It prompts the question whether the majority of Baptists would agree with Said and regard the silence of LGBTQIA+ individuals and their advocates in the current discourse as scandalous, and whether they are offended by the prioritisation of the church over the needs of LGBTQIA+ members.

¹¹ Wendy Cadge is a sociologist of religion; Christopher Wildeman is a sociologist and public policy scholar: Cadge and Wildeman, 587–603.

¹² Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, 521.

¹³ Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 524.

Cadge and Wildeman's study also raised the question whether pastors fear that telling their church would be seen as giving tacit approval to LGBTQIA+ orientations by those who hold a non-affirming theological position. David spoke about this issue in interview. He resigned as a Baptist church pastor after campaigning for the 'Yes' vote in the Australian plebiscite on same-sex marriage. He spoke at length about how, shortly after that, he resigned from working with BCSA when discussions ceased on increasing his hours as regional oversight for pastors of the rural churches. David said that it was reported to him:

that the Board had voted unanimously to prevent me having that pastoral services job because I quote this: 'unfortunately, I'd stepped outside the bounds of orthodoxy' ... I couldn't understand the inconsistency of allowing me to keep 0.2 but not allowing me the 0.4 ... so practically and on principle, I couldn't keep that 0.2 role. I remember being quite gutted by that but also ... the Board at that time; so many of them were friends or people who I had worked closely with ... people who knew me inside and out.

Seth (B; BC) made comments that are coherent with Cadge and Wildeman's findings. Seth had experienced Baptist leaders acting inclusively towards LGBTQIA+ individuals and then finding ways of placating the members of Baptist churches by keeping them in the dark or by supporting another contentious issue (e.g, anti-abortion). He said: 'You are placating that group by saying: "Look at what I'm doing. Don't worry about that [LGBTQIA+ person], that's over there."' However, Jacob (B) suggested that fear of the unknown consequences may be a contributing factor to adopting the stance of 'Don't ask; Don't tell':

[There is] the tension between saying nothing because they [pastors] are scared to say something, and then when they do say something, they often find a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't.' ... If you do say something and articulate a viewpoint, they are often called out. That's a felt tension for a lot of pastors in this space.

The data showed that the responsibility for navigating the implications of 'Don't ask; Don't tell' fell on pastors, leaders, and LGBTQIA+ persons alike. It was a complex space for everyone to journey through. This complexity places a significant burden on pastors and leaders who struggle managing the church's expectations and the needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals within the congregation. The result of this struggle is that LGBTQIA+ persons

are often left with little choice but to hide their orientations. Considering these challenges, a compelling argument can be made for promoting an LGBTQIA+ discourse that is hosted within the context of the five principles of genuine dialogue. These were discussed previously in Chapter 3 and are: (1) agreeing on a definition; (2) creating a safe, brave space; (3) Listening; (4) understanding that dialogue comes at a risk; (5) making a commitment to keep talking. Genuine dialogues provide a forum for individuals to participate in candid conversations regarding the difficulties and potential solutions. By doing so, the LGBTQIA+ discourse offers an alternative to the isolation and pressure of dealing with these complex issues alone.

Implications in BCSA

Pastors and Baptist workers moved their discussions on a culture of silence within Baptist churches to the subject of BCSA and the movement's silence in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. However, it is a complicated story to retell. One pastor mentioned feeling they received no help from BCSA. Another referenced the 'helpful' conversations happening across the movement that they felt were a 'balanced approach', and yet another said that although they were aware BCSA had a position, 'they had not read it'. The Baptist distinctive on the local church's autonomy also figured in the discussion as some Baptists felt that the LGBTQIA+ discourse was a matter for the local church and, therefore, would not expect or look to BCSA for direction. BCSA staff mentioned papers and conversations between individuals within BCSA; however, there was little reference to any discourse between churches and BCSA. Fynn (B) said:

I have no idea what the Baptist Church's current stance is. I do know that there are a few that are intensely wrestling with, 'What do we do with this?' And I don't, to be honest with you, I don't think there's a clear answer yet. We'll see.

These differing expectations and experiences of engaging with BCSA in the LGBTQIA+ discourse meant that even though some categorically believed they met a wall of silence, it was impossible to conclude whether this was the case.

Participants mentioned the lack of information on the BCSA website on gender and sexuality issues, as shown in Chapter 2.¹⁴ Patrick (B) said: 'If I go to their website, there isn't any information about their position if they have one.' Lauren (B) described the website as 'impenetrable', and said that although she once found a statement on same-sex marriage, she could not find it again. She sounded exasperated: 'If I'm dialoguing with the organisation, their website is rubbish because I can't find what they tell me is there ... It really should be idiot-proof.' Most participants who mentioned consulting the website said their involvement in the research spurred their interest in knowing BCSA's stance on LGBTQIA+ issues. Before that, they had not sought guidance from BCSA on the matter. This suggests a mutual silence, as BCSA was accused of not addressing the topic, yet no one mentioned actively seeking their perspective either.

Several participants used the example of the Baptist Pastor's Conference in 2018, when BCSA focused on LGBTQIA+ related issues. Jacob (B) was probably the most forthcoming on the topic, and he covered the main points that others related about the event:

My experience of a missed opportunity was the 2018 Baptist Pastor Conference, and the feedback as well from other pastors was that we really didn't get anywhere, despite the fact that was the topic. It felt as if the powers that be said, 'Oh, we've done that, done, and dusted. Case closed and wrapped in a bow.' And to me, we ... weren't given an opportunity to dialogue anywhere, despite the fact that the Baptists were very excited that they had got somewhere and were very proud that this was even being discussed ... Ten years ago, we wouldn't have had the conversation, so maybe we should celebrate that. But the discussion was largely one-dimensional.

Samuel (Q) also observed that Baptist churches included LGBTQIA+ individuals in the conversation, but only when they had the same non-affirming perspective. He specifically mentioned the pastors' conference:

¹⁴ Church Clarity. Crowdsourced database and evaluation site for Christian churches' policies on websites, 2018–2022, accessed 16 February 2023, www.churchclarity.org/.

I noted that no time was set aside at all ... which was an important forum for that issue at that particular time while the plebiscite was going on for [saying]: 'Hey, let's get gay people here; hey, are there gay people here in the Baptist church who we could actually listen to.' But no effort was even made ... I did make myself available to discuss my experience; I'll take questions and explore things together, and I'll be open and willing to do that. [No one] never gave me a call, and there was no one at the pastors' conference with any direct experience as a GLBT (*sic*) person who made a presentation or who was represented at all in the discussion.

Many participants felt that the Pastors Conference, while intended to be a platform for communication, ultimately served to illustrate the cultural silence within the movement of Baptist churches. The findings identify a primary concern: the format for the LGBTQIA+ discourse at the pastor's conference resembled a monologue rather than a dialogue, representing a missed opportunity.

Implications for LGBTQIA+

LGBTQIA+ participants spoke of choosing to remain silent about their sexual orientation when seeking to join a Baptist church. Kate (Q) was one such person:

I don't really know what perception this church has on gay people because I haven't honestly expressed my sexuality to a lot of people ... I've only told two or three people.

A Baptist pastoral worker (Chaza) used the term 'hidden identity' to describe the journey of a same-sex attracted lady who considered joining the church:

She wanted to come along and do Christianity Explored but she is just terrified that if she reveals that she is same-sex attracted that she is going to be rejected and it's almost like she is looking for love and acceptance for who she genuinely is, which she believes is as a same-sex attracted woman. That's her hidden identity.

LGBTQIA+ Baptists and those seeking to join Baptist churches spoke about remaining silent about their sexual and gender identity for several reasons, including fear of enacted or felt stigma; to avoid judgemental attitudes; and a wish 'to not freak people out'.¹⁵ For

¹⁵ 'Enacted stigma' i.e, negative treatment of a person with a stigma; 'felt stigma', i.e, the experience of anticipation of stigmatisation; Bos et al., 3.

example, Ian (P) disclosed that his church struggled to welcome LGBTQIA+ persons when they openly expressed their sexual and gender orientations:

There have been occasions when people who would identify in that space and have presented themselves in a way physically, that is, how do I describe this, almost stereotypical of that space and therefore drew attention to themselves in turning up in a church context. Those were a little bit more difficult to navigate because the church, being a mix of diverse people, there were people who tended to react to that. Engaging with the person themselves was no issue at all, although perhaps not unexpectedly, they didn't hang around for the long term.

Samuel (Q) shared candidly how he felt when, after journeying from silence to self-disclosing his sexual orientation, he was met with what he described as 'prejudice'. Other participants also used the term 'prejudice' to describe their understanding of his situation. Samuel said:

It was at that point that I walked out of the meeting into my office, and I locked my door, and I spent time having a little bit of tearing up, and I made the decision there and then, I just can't do this anymore.

Identifying the fears felt by LGBTQIA+ participants explained why some opt for hiddenness rather than face the reactions of others in the Baptist church. However, Samuel went beyond identifying the issues to reveal the private place behind the 'locked door' where the feelings of vulnerability are expressed and the painful rejection is endured. It is a picture of isolation that Samuel was not alone in expressing. Kate (Q) disclosed the internalising tension stigma creates, explaining how growing up in a family that attended a church (not Baptist), she kept quiet because she feared judgment: 'But I was a lot younger then, and I was too afraid to come out, which is harder. It's really hard to hide who you are and not be yourself.' She also shared the dilemma of disclosure: 'What do you do? You can't be yourself because you get judged; pretend to be somebody else, and you're got for lying. It's weird.'

The process of revealing LGBTQIA+ orientations to family, friends, and the wider community is deeply personal, so it is important to respect personal decisions about when, how, and to whom they disclose. Many LGBTQIA+ persons fear negative reactions from their families, friends, and wider communities and may worry about being rejected or ostracised by loved ones.¹⁶ Baptist churches provide pastoral care for all its members, including LGBTQIA+ persons. Therefore, it is incumbent on them to maintain their duty of care and provide support and understanding, creating an environment where LGBTQIA+ persons feel more comfortable and safer in sharing their true selves. To make this assertion raises significant questions about the ‘Don’t ask; Don’t tell’ culture and the way it obstructs the creation of safe spaces within Baptist churches for LGBTQIA+ persons.¹⁷ Reluctance to openly discuss LGBTQIA+ issues builds an additional barrier compounding the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ in their process of disclosure.

Some LGBTQIA+ participants mentioned hiding their identity for fear of reprisals—such as job loss, status, or ministry opportunities—for themselves and those who employed or supervised them. For example, Kate (Q) said: ‘There’s a reason I don’t come to a Sunday service. I am afraid. I don’t want it to reflect on my supervisor, and “Oh no, you’ve let a lesbian volunteer!”’ LGBTQIA+ advocates and those with LGBTQIA+ family members also highlighted the fear of potential repercussions on employment, ministry opportunities, and financial income as influential factors for adopting silence.¹⁸ Paul (B) candidly explained:

Selfishly, what does that [having a queer child] mean for ministry? How does that affect us? We are in a position where we receive funding from families and individuals and churches, who come mostly from a conservative theological framework. We’ve been quite open to our network about what [our child] does, what he’s studying, so in one sense, it may not come as

¹⁶ Corrinne T. Sullivan et al., ‘This Is Our Place, But We’re the Outsiders,’ *Australian Geographer* 54, no. 3 (2023): 347–64.

¹⁷ See Chapter 3 on the importance of safe spaces; Flensner and Von der Lippe; Gayle, Cortez, and Preiss.

¹⁸ Djupe, Olson, and Gilbert.

much of a surprise. But what will be the fallout if and when he speaks out his story more publicly or we are put on the spot?

Participants expressed that the results of the silence meant they felt alone because they were without a community to process their thoughts and feelings. For example, Mary (B) spoke of being unable to talk to her family, friends, or church community about her LGBTQIA+ children. She regularly referred to her thoughts returning to a place of 'denial' that her children were same-sex attracted: 'I was in denial, and I didn't want to acknowledge that fact ... and so it was all "fixable" as far as I was concerned and they could find someone else' (i.e, a heterosexual partner). She shared her processing of the situation, which she said led her to very dark conclusions, including being under God's judgment: 'I actually thought I was being punished.' However, after finding the strength to confide in her Christian friends, including those from her Baptist church, she noted that they promptly offered support and presented a notably inclusive outlook on her and her LGBTQIA+ family's position with God and in the church.

Breaking the Silence

Some participants shared their experiences of breaking the silence over LGBTQIA+ issues, which was not easy for any of them. Paul (B) spoke of someone talking to him 'on the sly', and although he did not elaborate, it suggested people lack the necessary tools for starting a conversation about LGBTQIA+ orientations. Louise (B) longed to talk about her LGBTQIA+ child: 'I don't think people have asked me anything that I wished they hadn't because no one has ever really asked me (laughs).' However, Samuel (Q) recounted that when a Baptist engaged him in a conversation to address Samuel's silence about his sexual orientation, it had a detrimental effect on him: 'I left the discussion ... fuming and dazed'. This was partly due to different expectations about the subject matter for the conversation. Samuel expected to talk about how BCSA 'could take steps to develop and foster a keener sense of understanding about these issues.' Instead, he was asked about his sexual orientation. He described how he felt 'ambushed' because of what he described as 'deeply

probing questions about my own personal life'; questions which he admits he did not answer to his Baptist friend's satisfaction. There is a significant difference between the participants as those, like Louise, were voluntarily disclosing, while Samuel's disclosure was requested of him.

Insights from David Bohm and *Dadirri* Theories

Bohmian theory (David Bohm's dialogue theory) argues that trust takes time to develop. To engage in 'true dialogue' — which has 'participatory consciousness' where all are partaking in the group — 'may take time' because 'as people start to know each other, they begin to trust each other.'¹⁹ Paul (B) insisted that his child needed to be given space and time to discover what Paul describes as an outward and inward expression. He explained: 'the outward expression being someone who doesn't fit a stereotype; inward experience is whether they are experiencing same-sex attraction'. Paul's testimony showed sadness and frustration at the lack of space and time given to LGBTQIA+ individuals as they journey to understand their sexual and gender identity.

The beginning of this chapter referenced Len's statement that, from his perspective, 'silence' was a 'grace', and Samuel's negative experience of having someone enter the silence on his sexual orientation does shed light on Len's meaning. The problem seems to be in knowing how to break the silence. The lack of discourse with the LGBTQIA+ community results in a dearth of shared experiences, particularly from LGBTQIA+ persons, regarding disclosing sexual orientation in Baptist churches. As a result, there is a missed opportunity to engage in discussions that could evaluate both positive and negative experiences, and subsequently apply these insights to inform future LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches.

¹⁹ Bohm and Nichol, 26.

The Aboriginal practice of *Dadirri* and 'deep listening' recognises that the silence is broken by relistening to the person with the story. A period of silence follows to allow contemplation on what was heard, and only then would the final stages of *Dadirri* be initiated, where the community 'purposely plan to act'.²⁰ Looking through the lens of *Dadirri* at Louise and Samuel's experiences, there was not enough deep listening and relistening in either situation. Equally, neither Louise nor Samuel shared experiences of the Baptist community corporately determining how to respond in similar situations in the future, which is the aim of *Dadirri*.

Problem of Assumptions and Labels

One of the spaces where silence operated was in unexamined assumptions. Assumptions were identified previously in Chapter 4 as barriers to dialogue. For example, Lyn (P) acknowledged that assumptions and unconscious biases influence her dialogue with a same-sex attracted leader in her team:

I think when you are a married person to someone of the opposite sex and you live what people see as a white middle-classed life, you are boxed. You are not a part of the LGBT community; you are not. You are part of this community. And to a degree, they are right.

However, this was a place of tension for Lyn. She admitted her biases and accepted how people saw her, and yet she argued she wanted the right to be more than 'the box' assigned to her. Other Baptist participants spoke of how they had also been 'boxed' by the assumptions of friends and family members. For example, knowledge of Liz's (B) faith stopped her co-worker from revealing her same-sex attraction. Liz repeatedly said: 'I'm actually getting upset telling you about this story because it actually just broke my heart', and her following explanation is characteristic of many who were in a comparable situation. Liz explained:

²⁰ Atkinson.

I'm upset ... because the perception is so warped, and it's come from somewhere and I know we [the church] have to take responsibility for that but it still makes me so sad because that would never change how I love her or talk with her or our friendship.

The sense of sorrow and concern for the damage done to the relationship was constant in these stories.

However, there was also a sense of injustice that stemmed from the silencing effect of assumptions, which prevented individuals from voicing their own perspective. Phrases like, 'being spoken for and not to'; 'they assumed I am against them but they haven't experienced it'; 'he told me what I thought'; and 'it's frustrating when people decide what you think' were typical responses to the assumptions ascribed to them. James (P) explained how church members speak for him: 'Liberals consider me a fundamentalist, and fundamentalists consider me a liberal!' In another example, two participants candidly shared how they were 'assumed to be gay' because they were single. Both participants discovered this assumption because someone asked them about their sexual orientation. Individuals were not the only recipients of assumptions; churches were also labelled. One participant explained how Christians in her district had labelled her church 'the gay church' because the church had welcomed a transitioning teenager into the fellowship. Participants were not indignant about their assigned 'labels'—James remarked that he 'did not care!' Rather, they expressed—often through the shrugging of shoulders—frustration, incredulity, or occasionally humour, and acceptance or resignation to the assumptions made. Most of the participants attempted to explain the possible reasons for people's assumptions.

However, it was noticeable how few of the participants went back to the person to ask, 'Where did that assumption come from?' Instead, they answered the question with their own assumptions. This illustrates how assumptions stop the mutual dialogue as they

replace the voice of 'other' and their right to respond.²¹ There is a correlation in this set of findings with Bakhtin's argument that truth is not found in personal reflection 'but between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.'²²

Insights from Bakhtin's Theory: Language Is Never Neutral

For some participants, silence emerged as their preferred course of action because of their unease when conversing about an individual's sexual and gender identity. For example, Chaza (L) continuously used words such as 'if' when she spoke about approaching someone for the first time about their LGBTQIA+ orientation. 'If' suggested this is not a conversation people want to have with each other, and participants spoke of the fear of overstepping boundaries. They were unsure at what point in the relationship they would have the right to ask these questions of another person. This reluctance to cross boundaries included family members and friends.

It was notable how many participants prefaced their statements with phrases such as 'I don't know how to say this'; 'I'm unsure of the right language to use'; 'What is the correct term?'; 'I can imagine an LGBT friend of mine hearing me say that and being super offended'. Participants struggled to explain their perspective if they felt it could cause offence and would state: 'I'm not saying that ... ' to explain their position. Fear of offence at times stopped participants from sharing their perspectives. Occasionally, participants asked for parts of their narratives to be omitted from the transcript because they feared their intentions would be misjudged. Non-LGBTQIA+ church attendees were more prone to struggles and fears around language than their LGBTQIA+ counterparts. Abigail (P) summarised it when she said:

²¹ Said, *Orientalism*.

²² Friedman, 32.

I think what the church struggles with is language, and how to articulate ... We haven't necessarily known how to explain ourselves ... We haven't always taken on the contextualisation of language and that language isn't only what you say; it is what is heard. And so we know what we mean but we need to take into account that what we mean might be perfectly great but if it is heard in an unhelpful way, then we need to find a better way of saying it.

Abigail's comment illustrates dialogue theorist Bakhtin's conclusion that language is never 'neutral'. Instead, language has the potential to be misunderstood and cause hurt and offence, particularly when the cultural, social, and historic meanings 'embedded' in it are ignored. Bakhtin further argued that even those with 'an excellent command of language feel quite helpless in certain spheres' explaining what they mean.²³ Engaging in discussions about the relational dynamics between Baptists and LGBTQIA+ individuals proved challenging, fostering a heightened state of vulnerability.²⁴ For example, Kieran (B) said: 'I feel conflicted most of the time when discussing this sort of stuff.' As far as possible, the interviews were conducted in a safe environment, where the participants told their stories from their perspectives, and as a researcher, I was conscientious in not interrogated them. It is difficult to imagine how people manage group discussions or interact with those holding contrasting opinions where ideas, challenges, and emotions flow freely.

Listening to the participants' struggle with language explained some of the painful situations individuals and churches had experienced when the subject of sexual and gender orientation was suddenly demanding a response from them. Perhaps it is to be expected given it is not a societal norm to talk about our personal sex lives. It would be considered unusual to discuss sexuality and ask personal questions about it, whether for heterosexual or LGBTQIA+ persons. For example, Kate explained her problems with disclosing her same-sex attraction, saying: 'I'm openly gay but I don't go out there saying, "Hey, I'm Kate and

²³ Shields, 59.

²⁴ Cissna, *Moments of Meeting Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Dialogue*, 259.

I'm gay; I've arrived!" Participants lacked experience in discussing sexuality, and as a result, they struggled to handle the subject when it arose. Therefore, it is unsurprising that many were averse to talking about LGBTQIA+ sexuality and gender orientations.²⁵

The lack of training in engaging with diverse perspectives raised whether remaining silent could be a lesser evil than making negative remarks. Emily (Q) specifically contrasted a negative verbal encounter with a Christian over her same-sex marriage and acknowledged that she preferred it to the wall of silence:

That was the worst response, the most blunt. But I respect the fact that she did that rather than doing it from behind my back. The opinion of 70% of my Christian friends I once knew is the same as hers but they just haven't had the balls to tell me, have just let our lives and our relationship disintegrate with time. Which I think is fairly normal in some ways.

Emily's observation raises the question whether discourse should be proactive and whether avoidance tactics increases the risk of conversations becoming reactive. There are situations that merit silence and taking time to reflect. However, cognitive sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel's research on 'the conspiracy of silence' examines the nature of secrets, fear, and embarrassments on dialogue. He concludes the potential benefits of breaking what he terms the 'conspiracy of silence' far outweigh the problems associated with maintaining that silence.²⁶ Therefore, in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches, there is a case for purposeful moments of reflective silence, provided they contribute to, rather than impede, the ongoing proactive engagement in constructive dialogue.

There was an experience common to all the participants when they broke their silence and shared their perspective in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Whether LGBTQIA+ oriented or

²⁵ Emily Moyer-Gusé, Adrienne H. Chung, and Parul Jain, 'Identification with Characters and Discussion of Taboo Topics After Exposure to An Entertainment Narrative About Sexual Health,' *Journal of Communication* 61, no. 3 (2011): 154.

²⁶ Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 79–88.

heterosexual/cisgender, church or non-church participants, leadership, or church attendees, all had experiences of feeling judged by the ‘opposing’ perspective. Emily (Q) gave a wry example when speaking about a Baptist friend’s perspective on Emily’s same-sex marriage:

She would be one of the people who would be thinking bad things about me. I probably don’t come into her mind at all, really. But if I did come into her mind, the thoughts would not be positive.

No group seemed to escape the experience, and powerful adjectives such as ‘persecution’ and ‘prejudice’ appeared in these stories. One Baptist youth worker spoke of ‘buying into the culture that’s saying if you are not supporting us [LGBTQIA+], then you are persecuting us. But at the same time, the church is being persecuted because we can’t have our identity, and they [LGBTQIA+] are welcome to have their identity now.’ All the participants wrestled with the judgements that left them feeling ‘othered’. They implied experiences of exclusion, discrimination, or a lack of belonging. There was a sense of being perceived as separate or distinct from the dominant or privileged group. LGBTQIA+ individuals felt it in their conversations with the predominant culture within the Baptist movement. Baptists implied they felt judged by the changing culture within the wider societal context for believing and maintaining the traditional heterosexual and cisgender norms of the church. It reiterates the importance that breaking the silence towards the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches needs to begin by creating ‘safe spaces’ for participants. It also requires setting clear expectations for the LGBTQIA+ discourse and acknowledging that participants may need courage, as safety cannot be guaranteed even with the best intentions.²⁷

Implications of Silence on LGBTQIA+ Safety

Participants wanted to break the silence because of concerns about and experiences with safety issues for LGBTQIA+ persons in the wider community. For example, Kimberly (B)

²⁷ Arao and Clemens, 135–50.

recounted the stories from the gay men she supported as a pastoral worker in a university: ‘the young guys were beaten up. They had scars and blood, it was awful.’ This was Kate’s experience:

It is hard being gay. I’ve walked down the street and had glass bottles thrown at me, I’ve had bins, eggs, shit ... it’s hard being gay ... And I find men are the ones who are the least accepting and get physical about it and throw stuff and spitting at us. I honestly think, though, that it would be a lot harder to be a gay man than a gay woman, so my hats off to all those gay men and the ones in trans.

There needs to be an awareness of the profound safety implications for LGBTQIA+ individuals in disclosing their sexual and gender orientations if the reasons for their silence are ever to be understood. There was never a mention of violence towards LGBTQIA+ persons happening in Baptist churches. However, it is important to raise the physical safety issues that LGBTQIA+ face and not solely focus on mental health issues.

The link between a culture of silence and self-injury, and suicide was prevalent in the narratives of LGBTQIA+ and their advocates. For example, Emily (Q) shared how her internalising of her same-sex attraction led to self-harming: ‘I was cutting and going to lead a [Baptist] youth group, and that was just not right (laughs).’ Annie (Q) summed up what many participants (both hetero/cisgender and LGBTQIA+) fear is the future for the younger generation:

I feel for the children who are going to come through feeling what I felt and possibly succeeding at suicide, whereas I didn’t succeed. For me, it is a pastoral issue but it’s more than that, and it’s more than an issue of justice. It’s an issue of safety for queer youth.

Participants spoke of internalising stigma; the pressure of being unable to talk about their experiences; their inability to live by the identity markers set by the prevailing church culture; and the sense of what Annie described as ‘wrongness.’ This is where the person feels the other is judging their perspective—that is, wrong sexual or gender orientation; wrong theological perspective; wrong, as in being a sin issue or being in rebellion against God’s plan; and what has been categorised as ‘wrong evaluation methods’ in this research.

For example, Emily's theological justification for her same-sex relationship was deemed to have flawed evaluation methods. She was accused of 'losing her way' and displaying biased methodology. After Emily had publicly shared her thought processes about her same-sex relationship, she received this written response from a Christian with a non-affirming perspective:

I know you know this isn't the will of God. I know you know this is a sin but somewhere inside, you are relying on, hoping God is more love than wrath so that he will let you keep doing this. It is a scary thing to be in the hands of an angry God, and God is angry with the wicked every day.

The exchange highlighted presumption ('I know you know'), the dismissal of Emily's conclusion ('this isn't the will of God'), and the rejection of Emily's evaluation methods for her relationship with God and others. The final sentences possibly do more to reveal theophobia in the one writing to Emily, although it is essential to acknowledge it as a form of coercive control.²⁸

The constant message of eternal judgment and condemnation is considered a form of coercive control because it uses the threat of eternal condemnation to manipulate and control Emily's behaviour. In this case, Emily will face eternal condemnation for being in a lesbian marriage. This view espoused a form of emotional and psychological manipulation, designed to make her conform to the beliefs or expectations of the person writing to her. Coercive control involves a pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling another person, and it often includes tactics intended to create fear or exert power and influence over another person.²⁹

²⁸ Esther Taylor, 'Religion and Coercive Control,' (2021), <https://doi.org/https://www.onewomanproject.org/religion/religion-and-coercive-control>.

²⁹ Australian Government, 'Coercive Control,' <https://www.ag.gov.au/families-and-marriage/families/family-violence/coercive-control>, 2023; Australian Baptist Ministries produced a video on coercive control that is based on intimate partner abuse. However, the principles still apply

The constant message of judgment and condemnation can be highly distressing and emotionally harmful. Sophie said: 'if they [LGBTQIA+] find themselves in church that should be the safest place for them not the place where they suffer the most harm.'

While each individual instance of this message may seem minor, the repetition of such messages or other microaggressions can have a cumulative and significant impact on the victim, leading to feelings of fear, shame, and guilt. These feelings can, over time, result in the victim conforming to the demands of the person using coercive control, even against their own beliefs or desires.³⁰

Annie (Q) expressed experiencing deep self-hatred due to Christians consistently labelling her self-evaluation of her queer identity as 'sinful' and 'wrong.' She described knowing she was queer but struggling with that conclusion because 'the churches are giving a powerful message of, "you can't be".' She said: 'I was bought up to believe queerness was wrong ... and I was unable ... to question whether I was gay or trans; it wasn't an option.' This sense of coming to a wrong conclusion and being unable to have the conversation led to what Annie describes as 'a deep self-hatred' that seriously damaged her mental health.

Applying *Dadirri's* Practice of Awareness

There is a practice in *Dadirri* that Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann explained as moments of 'just being aware':

In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn – not by asking

to other relationships; Australian Baptist Ministries, *Coercive Control, Safer Spaces Toolkit* (The Safer Spaces Toolkit: <https://saferspacestoolkit.com.au/videos/>, 2018). Also see EJ Hurbertz's research on the effects of LGBTQIA+ policies towards LGBTQIA+ students. Hurbertz states that Evangelical colleges enforce codes against LGBTQIA+ behaviour, in particular homosexuality, to uphold their faith and religious identity. Despite these codes, they have sexual minority students, and the campus environment remains 'overwhelmingly negative to them', even if they comply with the codes: Hubertz, 216.

³⁰ Shane Sharp, 'Resisting Religious Coercive Control,' *Violence Against Women* 20, no. 12 (2014).

questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting. Our people have passed on this way of listening for over 40,000 years ... It is just being aware.³¹

Dadirri's awareness calls for *Selah* moments to pause in silence and consider what was just heard, and Annie's disclosure of her deep-seated pain was one of those moments.³²

Yet neither Annie nor I stopped the conversation here. In Western cultures, pausing in the conversation and meditating on what we heard is rare; Western culture expects us to respond and continue the conversation.³³ This fundamentally differs from the practice of *Dadirri* and Ungunmerr-Baumann's argument for 'being aware'. What does 'being aware' mean when a person confesses that they live with 'deep self-hatred' because of the judgement and exclusion of others? In Louise's example, she shared the loneliness that she experienced when no one spoke to her about her hospitalised son. Her story suggested that people *knew* the situation and yet were not *aware* of it, not in the *Dadirri* sense of the word. From a *Dadirri* perspective, awareness means being present with someone. It means empathy and a responsibility to ensure the person knows they are being heard. It is a commitment to carrying the burden and journeying with that person.

Proponents of *Dadirri* argue that awareness comes from listening and relistening to the stories of others. Annie said:

I desperately need the thing [the silence over LGBTQIA+ issues in the church and the power imbalances towards LGBTQIA+ persons by the majority stakeholders in the Baptist church] critiqued. I feel that there is a sin in the church that is putting this burden, an unnecessary burden on young people.

³¹ Ungunmerr-Baumann, '*Dadirri*—Inner Deep Listening.

³² *Selah* is an Old Testament Hebrew word often interpreted as a pause or a moment for reflection, inviting the listener to meditate on the preceding words or to give emphasis to the message being conveyed.

³³ Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., '*Dadirri*: An Indigenous Place-based Research Methodology'; Purdy and Borisoff.

The experience of having time and space to repeatedly ‘relisten’ to the participants’ interviews resulted in me ‘being aware’ of sadness that my own ingrained culture could not simply sit comfortably in a place of silent grief with Annie. However, it is not the only ‘awareness’ I have gained. There is the awareness that in my role as a Baptist pastor I have often agreed with the culture of silence that is seemingly preferred by many in the church and ignored or even silenced people’s painful stories, particularly from LGBTQIA+ and their advocates.

The practice of *Dadirri* deep listening also cultivated an awareness of a new desire to experience ‘deep listening’ in a community and not alone. Bohm believes society is based on a shared ‘coherent’ meaning; without it, ‘we do not make much of a society.’³⁴ ‘Don’t ask; Don’t tell’ is the antithesis of coherent meaning. Applying Bohmian Dialogue theory to the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches would mean deliberately seeking to understand the perspective—Bohm would use the term ‘meaning’—of the opposite side. ‘Exposing the meaning’ would allow for the possibility of working together towards ‘coherence’—Bohm’s word that describes a shared meaning which binds and holds a group together.³⁵ Bohm advocates:

We don’t have to begin by accepting or rejecting them. The important thing is that we will never come to truth unless the overall meaning is coherent ... If we can work this through, we will then have a coherent meaning in the group and hence the beginning of a new kind of culture.³⁶

The concept of *Dadirri* ‘awareness’ embodies a sense of being fully present; fully conscious. It implies an ongoing, present-tense awareness. It should stay with you. When

³⁴ David Bohm, Ray McCoy, and J. Krishnamurti, ‘Tradition and Truth,’ in *The Limits of Thought: Discussions* (London: Routledge, 2002), 28.

³⁵ William van den Heuvel, ‘Dialogue and Coherence,’ (1996), http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_and_coherence.html.

³⁶ Bohm, McCoy, and Krishnamurti, 28.

individuals, such as Annie, share their experiences of ‘deep self-hatred’ resulting from being labelled as ‘sinful’ and ‘wrong’ by Christian communities, it should serve as a powerful *Selah* moment for Baptists. It is the place for repentance, which for people of faith is more than an apology, it is the changing of attitudes and actions.³⁷ Changing the LGBTQIA+ discourse from silence to one that prioritises deep listening is vital if Baptists are to understand the detrimental impact the conversation is having on LGBTQIA+ persons.

Furthermore, the awareness gained from the practice of *Dadirri* should motivate Baptists to actively engage in an LGBTQIA+ discourse that prioritises an ongoing, empathetic awareness of how the existing discourse affects all parties involved. In essence, changing a culture of silence for one of dialogue is an invitation to embrace a culture of continuous awareness, compassion, and open dialogue, thereby contributing to a more supportive community for everyone.

Summary

The research reveals a pervasive culture of silence surrounding the LGBTQIA+ discourse in the Baptist community. The motivations for embracing this silence varied, with some mistakenly believing that the ‘Don’t ask; Don’t tell’ approach minimises challenges in engaging with the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Fear emerges as a common and underlying factor, encompassing concerns about unforeseen consequences, the potential loss of relationships or status, and the fear of causing offence. A significant aspect of this culture of silence among many non-queer Baptist church participants was their fear of language and how to break the silence over LGBTQIA+ issues without jeopardising relationships.

The silence prevailing within Baptist churches has demonstrably adverse consequences for LGBTQIA+ individuals, their advocates, and those with LGBTQIA+ family members. Many of them remained concealed, unable to openly share their experiences,

³⁷ Kim and Hill, 56–75.

resulting in internalised stigma, mental health challenges, loneliness, and social isolation. However, the study shows that avoiding the discourse, particularly dialoguing directly with LGBTQIA+ persons, hinders the ability to discover comprehensive solutions to the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ people within Baptist churches. Consequently, breaking the silence and engaging in constructive dialogue is vital to building more supportive and safe practices for the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches.

The findings indicate growing recognition among Baptists regarding the need to dismantle the prevailing culture of silence surrounding the LGBTQIA+ discourses. However, a significant number of participants expressed uncertainty about how to initiate this change. An initial recommendation based on the findings is to challenge the 'Don't ask; Don't tell' approach by offering opportunities and a framework that empowers individuals to initiate essential conversations. However, to end the silence in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches would need a deliberate policy of creating a continuing conversation. As non-queer Baptists are in the majority and hold the power in Baptist churches, it becomes their responsibility to acknowledge the significant disadvantage caused by power imbalances for voices from an LGBTQIA+ perspective. Therefore, significant changes to the way the current LGBTQIA+ dialogue is conducted, at both a local church and state level, would necessitate those in the majority laying down the power that in effect creates a monologue and not a dialogue over differing perspectives.

Baptist pastors were among those who expressed a pressing need for a new framework within the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Their aim was to establish a safe space for engaging in open conversations. The constraints of confidentiality and employment-related fears have hindered direct dialogue with their churches and attempts at wider transforming the discourse into what many perceive as a monologue that repeats the same perspectives. Pastors wanted authentic dialogue, characterised by a reciprocal exchange of ideas, thoughts, and perspectives. Their focus lies in creating a safe space where diverse viewpoints can be shared, explored, and potentially integrated, fostering a deeper

understanding of differing perspectives within the Baptist community. Nevertheless, it is important to consider that even if a safe space were to be created, the fear of judgment and stigmatisation, and the looming possibility of ostracism may still pose significant deterrents, dissuading many from actively participating in the LGBTQIA+ dialogue.

However, as Edward Said demonstrated, invisibility and silence can be disrupted, often through the resilience of marginalised voices.³⁸ The findings reveal that some within the Baptist context have initiated conversations, or expressed a desire for new connections, with those holding differing perspectives. This potentially signals the initiation of a process of breaking the existing silence. If indeed it marks the beginning of a change, then committing to the practices found in *Dadirri* offers a thoughtful approach to the LGBTQIA+ discourse moving forward. Without a framework like *Dadirri* for the whole Baptist community to engage in, there is a risk that different groups may embark on separate conversation pathways, interacting with those who share their perspective and thereby inadvertently creating echo chambers. This siloing effect can potentially magnify the differences between the groups. As they continue down separate paths of dialogue, the divide between them will inevitably widen over time.

For these reasons, I see the integration of *Dadirri* practices within the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches as not only valuable but also essential. *Dadirri* emphasises the principle that addressing and overcoming the pain resulting from injustice necessitates creation of a space for active listening, re-evaluating the stories of others, and contemplating how inequality affects the entire community. It stresses that only through a comprehensive understanding of diverse perspectives can these issues be effectively tackled. In line with *Dadirri*, the approach to addressing problems should involve collective understanding, where different voices are welcomed and heard.

³⁸ Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 524.

The findings show that some participants have already started to engage in deep listening to perspectives different from their own. Further, participants expressed a genuine desire to engage in meaningful conversations and deeply listen to the stories of those whose life experiences diverge from their own. By embracing *Dadirri* practices, Baptist churches could create an environment that not only fosters understanding but also allows for effective and empathetic discussions within the LGBTQIA+ discourse, promoting an LGBTQIA+ dialogue rather than a discussion with like-minded perspectives.

It could be argued that some of the practices of *Dadirri*, although still at a fledgling stage of growth, are already happening on an individual level. However, *Dadirri* is a method which calls for the whole community to engage in the process. This is possibly the biggest challenge for the Baptists in SA: how to talk as a community about, and with, LGBTQIA+ persons experiences of their faith. At this point in LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches, the findings suggests that the dialogue is one-sided, with a non-affirming perspective holding all the power over who is allowed to speak. Therefore, the onus is on the majority who hold the power to make room for those excluded. The challenge of *Dadirri* is to create space and time for all the different perspectives to be heard and relistened to—the emphasis is on listening not talking—to corporately discern how to act against the pain felt by many LGBTQIA+ persons and Baptists with LGBTQIA+ family and friends in Baptist circles.

Discussing the Influence of Personhood

What sort of community are we Baptists? Do we accept people? —Lyn

≈

When we start talking openly with each other and listening and hearing and sharing, we sometimes find that we're not so different in what we actually think after we've gone through the process. And I can say that, you know, like I have a friend that I've been talking to who's of a different view biblically. —Edward

This chapter examines the influence of person-centred, as opposed to subject-centred, dialogue on the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. It employs dialogue theorist Martin Buber's concept of I and Thou versus I and It as the lens to disseminate and understand the participants' experiences.¹ The chapter also engages with theologian Miroslav Volf's theory of embrace, which advocates for inclusive acceptance and reconciliation of the other, recognising their worth and creating space for dialogue, empathy, and understanding to foster peace and coexistence.² Volf's theory suggests ways for navigating the conversation over difference. These are examined in light of the participants' experiences.

Martin Buber's dialogue theory examines how dialogue can either value or diminish personhood. Brandon (Q, B) captured how a conversation impacts personhood:

If we don't ask any questions ... I'm detracting from you as a person because I don't want to know anything about you. When I talk to you (at this point, he nods at me), I ask about your husband and your kids. If I'm in a same-sex relationship, you're not allowing me to tell you about my husband, my kids.

¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 1958); Morley and Crawford. Morgan and Guilherme.

² Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

Buber defines 'personhood' by four criteria: uniqueness, wholeness, goodness, and a drive to a relationship. These characteristics of personhood are lost when conversations are constantly on a subject matter; such discussions are what Buber describes as an 'I and It' (*I-It*) dialogue. '*I-It*' is where the other's 'personal life is levelled down', and they are no longer seen as a whole person but as a category — 'i.e. people are gendered, raced, ethnicized, aged, abled, sexuality-ed, trans-sexuality-ed, liberal, progressive, conservative, and/or intersectionalized ... [which] leaves the whole person out of the discussion.'³ Buber concludes: '*I-It* assumes a position before things but does not confront them in the current of reciprocity.'⁴ Buber addresses the problems associated with a discourse based on '*I-It*' by advocating for 'I and Thou' (*I-Thou*) dialogue — which is always person to person — to take precedence. Buber recognises that dialogue does include '*I and It*', where it is necessary to discuss a topic. However, he advocates that *I-It* is not the sole focus of the conversation.

The data themes presented in this chapter are a case in point. The subjects were important to the participants and covered questions they believed needed to be considered. Participants wanted to talk about 'it'; for example, they wanted to discuss the language of us and them, sin, and discipleship. However, Buber advocates for *I-Thou* not to be subjugated or lost to *I-It*. He argues that genuine dialogue must 'recognise persons as persons ... recognise their uniqueness', their personhood.⁵ Zoe (B) spoke of excluding LGBTQIA+ persons from church 'without thinking' about what the church had taught and how that had changed because she was now 'seeing' LGBTQIA+ as individuals. She attributed this to her pastors, who had 'put huge energy into both one-on-one conversation and challenging us from the pulpit' on the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons from the church:

³ Donald S. Blumenfeld-Jones, 'Freedom to All Human,' in *Reimagining Curriculum Studies: A Mosaic of Inclusion*, ed. Donald S. Blumenfeld-Jones (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 114.

⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 70.

⁵ Scott, 9.

‘They picked up the challenge ... so I think that’s when God was taking me on a journey into that time of “seeing” [LGBTQIA+ persons].’

Discussing the Topic of ‘Us and Them’

The topic of ‘us’ and ‘them’ raised by the participants revealed awareness of the propensity for LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches to switch to an ‘I-It’ dialogue that lost sight of the person. ‘Us and them’ was predominately used to explain the difference between opinions and experiences rather than drawing demarcation lines between those who theologically hold a ‘non-affirming’ position towards LGBTQIA+ persons who act on their orientations and those who theological ‘affirm’ LGBTQIA+ orientations as having equal authority with heterosexuality and cisgender. Occasionally, participants expressed frustration at how their language created segregation and division. For example, while sharing a theological reflection, Fynn (B) caught himself using ‘us and them’. He responded in a similar vein to other participants:

When the Bible says, ‘His grace is sufficient for us,’ it actually means it. And it’s not just about us; it’s about them. And see, even that language annoys me. ‘Us and them.’ His grace is sufficient for humankind, and that’s the reality, and while there is a distinction, a difference, a separation, an exclusion, we’ve missed the boat.

Kimberly (B) agreed, fearing those who ‘draw lines in the sand’ of ‘them and us’ had failed to ‘understand the pastoral dimension.’ Her conclusions resonated with I-Thou because she believed that ‘them and us’ had resulted in talking about an issue and not talking from person to person.

Derogatory Descriptors of LGBTQIA+ Persons

However, there were occasions when a minority of participants described derogatory language of LGBTQIA+ persons being used to differentiate ‘us’ and ‘them’; terms such as

'repugnant to God,' 'abomination,' 'dirty', and 'disgusting'.⁶ Brandon (B,Q) shared his experience of hearing his affirming theological perspective described as 'filth':

I was just explaining to this Baptist pastor, I was halfway through my sandwich, and he exploded: 'I am sick and tired of you. I don't have time to waste with people like you. One day you will stand before God and give account for this filth that you believe. Woe on you.' I was stunned; I couldn't even eat. I was just devastated. I said: 'I understand that is your decision.' He said: 'This isn't my decision; it's your decision.'

This was an example of employing the concept of divine retribution—'Woe to you'—as a means for exerting coercive influence.⁷ Brandon explained how, both during and after the conversation, he felt emotionally abused. He likened the experience to the time he had witnessed perpetrators of domestic violence justifying their behaviour by holding the victim responsible for their actions. Brandon described his conversation with the pastor as a similar experience. He noted that somehow he had been blamed and made responsible for the pastor's anger when being told, 'This is your decision'. This allowed the pastor to justify their anger without confronting their own biases.

This was not the only story of a Baptist pastor taking a confrontational approach in the conversation. Iris (B) spoke of a trainee pastor approaching the conversation in what she described as an 'aggravated' manner:

There was a man in our congregation who was going to be a minister, and I was talking to him one day, and he just got quite aggravated and said that he believed that if gay people would just confess their sins and stopped doing what they were doing, then perhaps they

⁶ Cody J. Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide, and the Souls of Queer Folk* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020), 117–119.

⁷ Jesus used the phrase 'woe to you'. However, in Luke 6:17–26, it was in the context of the Beatitudes, which is Jesus' sermon on a life that is dedicated to and pleasing to God, free from hypocrisy, full of love and grace, full of wisdom and discernment. In Matthew 23:1–37, Jesus used 'woe to you' to judge the religious leaders for their hypocrisy. In neither case does Jesus use 'woe to you' to address those who were labelled 'sinners': Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide*, 55.

could be accepted. But they were great sinners, and they had to repent before anything could happen.

What is unclear from this story is whether the trainee pastor knew beforehand that he was speaking to a mother with a lesbian daughter. However, Iris did have the courage to reply:

I said, 'Well, I've got a gay daughter and a niece and a granddaughter. I've had quite a bit to do with gay people in the past, and they're all very loving people.' And I just didn't believe it because I believe that gay people were born like it. And it's nothing that they made a choice to go that way. That's just how they are.

This same mother also had conversations with 'a lot of my Baptist friends' who had been 'very vocal' on the issue of same-sex marriage. She said: 'They thought it was all very disgusting.' During the interview, this mother never shared how those words impacted her and her daughter's sense of value or belonging in her church. However, Louise (B) described feeling unsafe in her local church:

Being in a church environment, we do feel we have had to work through a lot of this with God and haven't felt we have been able to talk to anybody, really. I was in a space Sunday morning where someone said something to me, non-related, but it triggered me, and I was sitting in church feeling, I don't feel safe here, I don't feel like there is anyone I can go to here and talk to them about what I'm going through.

In contrast, another mother (Mary) with LGBTQIA+ children shared a positive experience involving her Baptist friend, Amanda (who identifies as heterosexual and cisgender). Amanda responded with acceptance and affirmation towards both Mary and her children. These examples show widely differing responses when discussing LGBTQIA+ persons, and it seemed to be a lottery of whether a conversation with a Baptist would be safe or unsafe for LGBTQIA+ individuals and their advocates. Amanda's response modelled an I-Thou approach to the conversation when she valued the mother and her children. Her support to the mother followed Buber's challenge to 'experience the other side.' For Buber, Amanda's conversation is the I-Thou moment because it is not limited to empathy; rather, Amanda modelled acceptance of their sense of identity. Buber argues that to become

completely present to another's reality, this is a life of dialogue.⁸ Noah argued that Baptists cannot tell LGBTQIA+ persons what to do or believe. He said: 'you can't do that because [LGBTQIA+ identities] are part of their lives, their framework, that they have built over years ... it is part of who they are now.'

Power of Language

Language has power, and the power of language created images of 'us and them' in the data results.⁹ For example, LGBTQIA+ participants used expressions from: 'gay and Christian cannot coexist' to 'Satan's kids' to describe what they had heard or believed people had said about them.¹⁰ Philippa (B) shared a vivid picture when she confessed how growing up in a conservative Christian culture, she 'almost thought they [LGBTQIA+] had horns on their head.' This comment illustrated the power of language to demonise a section of the community. The findings align with dialogue theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts on language. Bakhtin concludes that 'each generation, at each social level, has its own language ... its own vocabulary, its particular accentual system'. In Philippa's experience, the language of her social group resulted in demeaning and marginalising LGBTQIA+ persons.

Shields builds upon Bakhtin's work to argue that language can be used in ways that 'prevents others from entering into relations with us.' This creates an echo chamber.¹¹ Bakhtin calls it 'monologism', which he argues 'denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibility'.¹² Monologism refers to the

⁸ Blumenfeld-Jones, 112–15.

⁹ The Book of Proverbs argues: 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue.' Proverbs 18:21 ESV.

¹⁰ The participants referred to Baptists, Christians, and the Church interchangeably, and therefore (at times) they were attributing the words of others (not Baptist) to describe what they believed to be the Baptist position.

¹¹ Caroline Shields' research focuses on inclusion, equity, and social justice in education; Shields, 49–50.

¹² Emerson and Bakhtin, 337.

dominance of a single, authoritative voice or perspective in a text, conversation, or discourse. It is characterised by a lack of genuine interaction, diversity of voices, or open-mindedness in communication. Bakhtin believes that genuine dialogues involve the interplay of various voices, each with its own viewpoints and experiences. Dialogism is seen as more open, dynamic, and reflective of the diversity of human experiences and social contexts.¹³ In the findings, monologism created the echo chamber that legitimised the language used to describe LGBTQIA+ persons. However, this language did not remain confined to the social group from which it originated. It was known to LGBTQIA+ persons outside of the group.

Philippa's story exemplifies the echo chamber's powerful influence on perceptions, language, and, ultimately, the relational dynamics in a conversation. As Philippa continued her narrative, she shared her experience of her monologism being broken by meeting LGBTQIA+ persons and engaging with perspectives outside the echo chamber she lived in. Bakhtin contrasts monologism with 'dialogism', which emphasises the presence of multiple voices, perspectives, and interactions in a discourse. Monologism is the antithesis of dialogue. It perpetuates power imbalances by excluding the voices that do not adhere to the dominant norms of the group and contributes to the polarisation of differing perspectives. It also prevents growth. Another example of monologism and the dominance of a single view in a text and language was seen in Len's argument that some Baptists use the Bible 'as a rule book' to reinforce their view. Len (B) described it as a lacking intellectual integrity:

I think [the Bible] it is meant to inform us for the day in which we live, and too often it's used as a proof text in ways that were never culturally appropriate for its own time. There is something intellectually bankrupt about that kind of behaviour.

¹³ John Shotter, 'Bakhtin and Billig: Monological Versus Dialogical Practices,' *The American Behavioral Scientist* 36, no. 1 (1992): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764292036001003>; Ali Jamali Nesari, 'Dialogism Dialogism Versus Monologism: A Bakhtinian Approach to Teaching,' *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences* 205 (2015).

Ashton (B) spoke of his grief over the language directed at LGBTQIA+ persons:

There's this absolute pain when I see people being broken, and I literally mean the word broken by the church. Not restored. Not dealt with dignity. Marginalised and also minimised, literally having their humanity taken from them. Particularly because I work a lot with teenagers, just going to someone who tells you who they are, or who they believe they are, and then someone turns around to them, saying: 'It's just a phase.'

Ashton believed platitudes and simplistic answers minimise a person's issue, value, and identity. Yvette (B) agreed:

If [LGBTQIA+ orientations] is really who they are, it's not going to change, genetically. There's so much in science that we don't know yet. And it breaks my heart when I see a child screaming to be different to what they are but they're actually trying to be themselves.

'Offensive' and 'offended' apply to this section of narratives. As the researcher, I felt the participants' pain when I heard the stories and the language used. As a Baptist, there was a sense of shame in belonging to a group of people who could behave in such a manner.

Discussing Sin: An I-It Moment

Discussing a theological understanding of 'sin' was another example of an I-It moment in the conversation. Participants wanted to analyse the nature of sin and discuss obedience/disobedience to the Scriptures as part of the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. However, the conversation was not limited to ethics; instead, it was a question of faith and relationship with Jesus. For many Baptist participants, sin was not simply violating a moral code; it is better characterised as the betrayal of a covenantal relationship with God. This is also the case for those influenced by evangelicalism, which defines 'sin' in the following way:

Sin is an offence not so much against the law as against love. In legalistic religion, sin is a violation of a moral taboo. In evangelical religion, sin is wounding God's very heart. For evangelicals, the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.¹⁴

Nathan (B) expounded on the understanding of 'sin' as the manifestation of a broken relationship with God:

Jesus died for our sins, for all of our sins ... It doesn't mean that we can just go ahead willy-nilly and go and knock some old lady over the head and grab her handbag, we're free. Doesn't mean that at all. It also says in the Bible, when Jesus spoke to the prostitute, you know when she said she wanted to stop, he said: 'Go and sin no more, your sins are forgiven.' My perspective on that is, go and sin no more.

Oliver (B) demonstrated the thought processes and the practical application of an evangelical definition of sin:

Well, because the Bible teaches against it [acting on LGBTQIA+ orientations] really ... God, particularly, and Paul himself sort of preaches against that. And if they're obedient to God's word, how can they do things differently? That's a major problem I think a lot of us have [is] the understanding of it, how they can justify it.

Oliver also explained how the evangelical definition of sin influenced his perspective on LGBTQIA+ persons in leadership. He clearly articulated what other participants had said:

I find it difficult that they can lead if they're being disobedient to God's word. You're trying to teach others to follow God's word. How can you do that if you're not doing it yourself?

¹⁴ Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 1475. This latest edition of the *Evangelical Dictionary* includes a diversity of authors from 'female, ethnic minority, and/or Majority World perspectives' in order to present what it describes as 'evangelical trends'. Therefore, this dictionary was chosen because of its aim to represent the 'fullness' of evangelical expression; Lionel Young, 'Review of *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*,' *Theological Librarianship* 14, no. 2 (2021).

Some participants attributed the condemnation of LGBTQIA+ same-sex relationships as 'sinful' to the influence of hyperbolic portrayals of LGBTQIA+ sexuality.¹⁵ For example, Thomas (P) shared his experience of addressing the concerns of a family in the church when they realised that a gay man had joined:

I think it was the funny assumption that because this guy was gay, he was going to hit on this woman's son. And I think there's that assumption that a gay guy is going to hit on me.

Brandon (B, Q) said:

It's the caricature we all know, gay men are dirty and hang out in toilets and have thousands of partners and are oversexed. And because I've heard one story of that, so that fits my caricature of that.

Brandon argued that stereotyping allows some Baptists to 'justify their prejudices' against LGBTQIA+ persons. Lyn (P) agreed with this assessment from her own experience. She explained how two of her gay friends were promiscuous; therefore, she believed the same of all the gay community. However, she identified the problem as a 'battle with myself' and not with LGBTQIA+ individuals. She insisted that she needed to wrestle over how she prejudged all LGBTQIA+ persons because of the actions of a couple of people.

In both examples, the actions and choices of a couple of people were used to form assumptions about a whole group. This is known as individual-to-group generalisation. It leads to stereotyping and influences attitudes and biases towards social groups.¹⁶ Open dialogue with people from diverse backgrounds plays a crucial role in disrupting the tendency to generalise based on isolated incidents. When people from different

¹⁵ Gregory M. Herek, 'The Social Psychology of Sexual Prejudice,' in *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*, ed. Todd D. Nelson (New York: Psychology Press, 2016), 364–66.

¹⁶ Kylie McIntyre, Stefania Paolini, and Miles Hewstone, 'Changing People's Views of Outgroups Through Individual-to-Group Generalisation: Meta-Analytic Reviews and Theoretical Considerations,' *European Review of Social Psychology* 27, no. 1 (2016); Kate Ranganath and Brian A. Nosek, 'Implicit Attitude Generalization Occurs Immediately; Explicit Attitude Generalization Takes Time,' *Psychological Science* 19, no. 3 (2008).

backgrounds engage in genuine conversations, they are more likely to see each other as individuals rather than representatives of a stereotyped group. Additionally, open dialogue provides an avenue for the dissemination of accurate information to challenge biased narratives. However, the limited direct dialogue with LGBTQIA+ individuals, as illustrated in the previous chapter, presents a significant obstacle to effectively challenging the prevailing biases.

Brandon (Q, B) told of a Baptist pastor conveying his disgust at the ‘gay men who went into town on Friday nights just to have sex’ and demanded that Brandon explain the behaviour. Brandon answered: ‘So do heterosexual guys’, to which the pastor responded: ‘that’s different; they have a natural instinct’. Participants were not always as candid as Brandon and Lyn on the sexual stigma assigned to LGBTQIA+ persons.¹⁷ However, Brandon and Lyn’s narratives raised questions about the influence of unspoken prejudices on dialogue and how to uncover the ‘unspoken’ behind an argument. Contact theory answers these questions. It suggests that prejudices and biases are reduced when there is contact between majority and minority groups, and there is ‘even greater reduction ... when the contact is sanctioned by institutions.’¹⁸ Psychologist and academic Gregory Herek has conducted extensive research on prejudice towards sexual minorities. He argues that initiating conversation directly with those of different perspectives establishes empathy, which precipitates the inclusion of safe spaces that promote equality and breaks the influence of unspoken prejudice.¹⁹

Change is also possible when the majority see sexual stigma as incompatible with the group’s values as well as their own.²⁰ For example, participants shared stories of calling

¹⁷ Herek, ‘The Social Psychology of Sexual Prejudice,’ 357.

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¹⁹ Herek, ‘The Social Psychology of Sexual Prejudice,’ 370–71.

²⁰ Herek, ‘The Social Psychology of Sexual Prejudice,’ 374.

people to account for their language. John (B) gently rebuked an older woman (also Baptist) after she had said: ‘Oh, but you know they’re such dirty people.’ He challenged her through his theological reflection on Jesus’ time on earth: ‘Well, back in Jesus’ time, who were the dirty people? Weren’t they the tax-gatherers and people of that society? And what did he do?’ What is notable about John’s narrative is that his challenge did change the woman’s attitude. John said:

And she could see that. And I think I’m not presuming too much from her—I mean, she’s older than me—but I think I’m not presuming too much in saying I believe she took that on board.

Jacob (B) recalled ‘being called out’ by someone for his ‘failure ... for using the word “gay” as a derogatory term’. He confessed that until he was called to account, he had not thought of the ‘impact’, ‘hurt’ and ‘offence’ the term caused those who were same-sex attracted.

In another example, Richard (B) drew on his past experience to contrast more recent dialogue: he remembered that at ‘church, school, or football club’, the language surrounding LGBTQIA+ persons was ‘either negative or part of a bad joke.’ He spoke of the three rules in the Christian motorcycle club: ‘No poofers allowed. No poofers allowed. No poofers allowed.’ He concluded it was a ‘mentality ... people just laughed, no one would frown upon that sort of talk back then’ and shared his ‘embarrassment at the way we spoke then.’²¹ Richard crafted his whole narrative around language and the way past cultural shifts inspired him to hope for further change in today’s culture. Richard confessed that he did not always welcome the conversations initiated by his Baptist church—he described them as ‘confronting’ and ‘difficult’—however, he credits the discussion for ‘bringing clarity ...

²¹ McCann et al. state that humour in men becomes one technique to negotiate gender hierarchies and therefore ‘poofers’ indicates where a man fits in the acceptable or devalued category for heterosexual masculinity; Pol Dominic McCann, David Plummer, and Victor Minichiello, ‘Being the Butt of the Joke: Homophobic Humour, Male Identity, and Its Connection to Emotional and Physical Violence for Men,’ *Health Sociology Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 15, <https://doi.org/10.5172/hesr.2010.19.4.505>.

And, I suppose, mostly, more of a peace knowing I don't have to have all the answers at this time. And just to feel comfortable being uncomfortable.'

Richard's narrative ends in a very different position from the starting place of 'No poofers allowed', and he attributes the change in part to the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in his Baptist church. He said:

particularly being at the church when there's that freedom to have discussions and people [can] express what they're thinking and what they're not sure about, and so we can work through things together.

Sarah (B) is in the same church as Richard and engaged in similar conversations. She came to a comparable, positive conclusion on the LGBTQIA+ discourse, despite it being an uncomfortable experience:

There's something amazing about having pushed through that barrier of fear and discomfort and panic of: 'this is a topic, how do we talk about it, let's resist it, let's just react.' But to actually push through that threshold and just be in a space now of real freedom. We're in a space of freedom and just, like, genuinely love these people. Love to give them a big hug; I didn't do it today because of the coronavirus. But, you know.

Sophie attributed her church engaging in the LGBTQIA+ discourse as the primary reason for the church's welcoming stance towards LGBTQIA+ persons. She recognised that there were still people ('the old ducks') in her church that might say 'the wrong thing', however, she believed 'there were enough people that even if they do not [personally] affirm LGBTQIA+ persons, we would [as a church] accept people.'

In general, the participants' discussion of 'sin' demonstrates that a topic-based LGBTQIA+ discourse can facilitate the creation of distinctions between groups, resulting in an 'us' and 'them' mentality. These distinctions became ugly in some examples because of their bias and prejudice. However, there was also evidence of engagement in the LGBTQIA+ discourse confronting those prejudices and bringing a positive change in the language assigned to LGBTQIA+ persons. Engaging in LGBTQIA+ discourse in a Baptist

church also challenged the ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality that, in effect, excluded LGBTQIA+ persons from the discourse.

Avoiding the Word ‘Sin’

When discussing ‘sin’, most participants focused on sexual relations, not gender incongruity. However, there was an unwillingness to identify same-sex relationships as a sin, and some participants employed tactics to minimise or avoid the word altogether. To minimise the emphasis on ‘sin’, careful attention was paid to articulating the difference between same-sex attraction (which was not a sin) and a sexual relationship (deemed a sin), irrespective of whether the same-sex couple were in a monogamous relationship and/or married. Additionally, some (predominantly non-affirming Baptists) made statements about LGBTQIA+ ‘sin’ and then included comparisons with the ‘sin’ they believed they and other Baptists operated in; for example, the need to address the lack of love or the judgemental attitudes. Many participants feared judgment for their non-affirming position. It was a recurring theme seen throughout the interviews. Nyla (B) summarised the church’s predicament:

You know you get these big preachers, like Osteen and that, and they go, ‘Oh, you know, we love everyone.’ Well, that’s nice but you didn’t actually answer the question. And why? The church has always made quite definitive statements about things. And I think when they balked from these things, it’s like, ‘Oh, well, we don’t want to be on the wrong side of the community, and we don’t want to be seen as being judgmental.’²²

To avoid the word ‘sin’, there was a notable attributing of LGBTQIA+ sexual and gender orientations as the consequences of a ‘broken world’ or, more frequently, a ‘fallen world’. This concept is based on Creation Myths and the story of Adam and Eve, where their disobedience in the Garden of Eden led to the belief that all humans inherit a universal and inherent sinful nature—i.e, the doctrine of original sin—requiring salvation through

²² Joel Osteen is an American lay preacher, televangelist, and author based in Houston, Texas.

faith in Jesus.²³ This is not the only interpretation of Genesis. The Eastern Church emphasises the doctrine of original goodness, which is based on the belief that humans are created in the image of God. This perspective highlights the inherent goodness of human nature at the moment of Creation. However, the doctrine of original sin is an influential prevailing belief in Catholicism and Western Protestantism.²⁴ Kieran (B) explained: 'I think the nature of our world is that it is fallen and broken, and sin has taken hold.'

Rather than assigning the individual as a 'sinner', LGBTQIA+ orientations were frequently labelled 'broken' or 'fallen', and if LGBTQIA+ persons acted on their sexual orientation, they were compared to 'an adulterer,' 'a murderer,' 'a thief,' and most frequently, 'an alcoholic.' Thomas (P) said:

I don't see that a person deciding to live a particular lifestyle sexually is any different from a person deciding to be an alcoholic, who admits I am an alcoholic and I need to give my life over to God.

The comparison statements were frequently intended to equalise the moral landscape by emphasising that LGBTQIA+ individuals were perceived as 'no different from other sinners', thereby conveying the absence of a hierarchy in sin. For example, Derek (B) said:

It's all sin, and there's no difference ... a person who tells lies about people and gossip, it's all the same. And LGBTQIA+ whatever's are no different. And we accept them as people.²⁵

However, the comparisons could also be considered a judgment on LGBTQIA+ personhood.²⁶ Notably, although people admitted that they sinned, few labelled themselves

²³ Genesis 3.

²⁴ James Boyce, *Born Bad: Original Sin and the Making of the Western Mind* (London: SPCK, 2016); Gary A Anderson, *the Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination*. (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

²⁵ Derek's word 'whatever's' most likely refers to the acronym 'LGBTQIA+'. This observation is based on the number of participants who struggled or were anxious about the wrong letter placement. For example, Ashton (whose quote follows Derek's) missed the 'T' in his quote.

²⁶ Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide*, 119.

as akin to ‘a murderer’ or spoke of what it must feel like to be labelled in such a way. Ashton (B) noted the disconnect:

The reason that we shine spotlights on other people’s sin is so we can hide the darkness it creates ... And I often feel that way within the church. I’ve had it before where ... I mean, it’s a bit ironic about me, but the Bible talks about gluttony, treating your body with respect. And I’ve had diagnosed obese people complaining to me about LGBTQ+ (*sic*). I’m like, we can have this conversation, but how? How does that work?

No data was available to suggest the reasons behind the disconnect that Ashton noted between ‘my/our’ and ‘their’ sin. It is possible—as argued by researcher Brené Brown—that this is a ‘reflexive’ and ‘quick way to sort people’, and therefore, the offence is unintentional. However, Brown argues that stereotyping ‘dehumanizes’ and observes that ‘we resent it’ when the same happens to us. Brandon (B, Q) vented his frustration with the phrase ‘we are all sinners’, branding it as ‘absolutely crap’:

There’s this idea that we recognise that we are all sinners ... But that’s not been my experience or the experience of gay Christians I’ve spoken to, in that their sexuality goes to the top of the pile. The fact that I’m cheating on my tax return or that I get angry or use alcohol inappropriately that’s a minimal issue, [but] by jingo, we’d better deal with the sexuality. And we say we treat all sin the same but it’s actually not true. It’s absolutely crap.

Nathaniel (who has an LGBTQIA+ family member) spoke about the Baptist position of ‘broken’, critiquing it as judgmental:

In my experience of the Baptist church, it’s very much, well, if you are homosexual, then you are broken, and you need to be fixed, and that approach doesn’t encourage journeying alongside them. But it’s just like, what you are doing is wrong, and you need to stop and change. It often doesn’t come from a posture of love ... It’s never a conversation of, ‘I don’t know’. There’s never a journeying alongside; there is more of a critique. Like, you are already a lost cause.

The findings reveal a deliberate linguistic strategy—particularly employed by heterosexual/cisgender Baptists—of rephrasing ‘sin’ to ‘broken’ to mitigate the negative connotations associated with ‘sin.’ Yet, this approach raises questions of whether to avoid the label ‘sinner’; one word has merely been replaced with another equally negative label.

A further tactic involves the immediate juxtaposition of LGBTQIA+ 'sin' with other transgressions, notably alcohol addiction. This rhetorical approach aims to convey a non-judgmental stance by positioning the 'sin' associated with LGBTQIA+ identities as no worse than other transgressions.

However, substituting a word fails to examine the impact on LGBTQIA+ persons of labelling LGBTQIA+ orientations as 'sin' or 'broken'. In the discussion, there is no room given for agency, hindering LGBTQIA+ persons from articulating their own perspectives on their orientation. The label 'broken' carries the same imposed label as 'sin' and is assumed to be universally accepted. There is also a lack of awareness regarding the impact on the mental well-being of LGBTQIA+ persons when confronted with continuous messages declaring 'brokenness'. It could be argued that such narratives not only lack hope but also endorse a narrative of fatalism.

Spiritual Convictions

Coupled with the assumptions that LGBTQIA+ persons would agree with seeing themselves as 'broken' and 'fallen' was the added expectation that LGBTQIA+ persons would, therefore, experience the conviction by the Holy Spirit to change. Patrick (B) explained:

For those who are practising the lifestyle, it seems to me that if they're a part of church life; then at some point in time, they need to come to an understanding, through the work of the Holy Spirit, of what God desires for them in terms of relationships and sexuality. As with all Christians, there should be a heart attitude of desiring to please God on his terms. Granted, it can take years for people to work through issues like these.

Patrick voiced the expectation—explicitly and implicitly implied by other participants who held a non-affirming theological perspective—that 'at some point' LGBTQIA+ persons would be convicted by the Holy Spirit to conform to a non-affirming position. However, participants did not discuss the potential outcomes if LGBTQIA+ individuals were not convicted of any 'sin' in their sexual or gender identities, nor did they address how a non-

affirming church would respond if LGBTQIA+ persons, through their relationship with the Holy Spirit, were convicted to embrace an affirming position. Would they then no longer be welcomed in the church? It raised the question whether LGBTQIA+ conviction is considered genuine only if it aligns with a non-affirming perspective.

Sarah (B) argued that the issue of the conviction of the Holy Spirit lay in the 'trajectory' a person was journeying on; were they heading towards a deeper relationship with Jesus or away from what they believed was Jesus' expectations for their lives? Sarah articulated what others thought: that personal relationship with God was paramount and, therefore, the question of sexual or gender orientation was the wrong question. Sarah suggested a heterosexual Christian who 'slept around' and was 'unfaithful' in relationships would be a more significant discipleship issue in her church than someone in a monogamous same-sex relationship. It was an interesting perspective, because while Sarah's theological position is non-affirming, she clearly articulated a conclusion that other participants hinted at—gay/lesbian/bi sexualities were not always viewed as the biggest or most pressing issue needing to be addressed by the church.

For some participants, navigating the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches took a person-centred approach rather than a non-affirming/affirming dichotomous doctrinal one. Participants believed it was best for LGBTQIA+ persons to work out their faith in God. Grace (B) said:

It's up, then, to that person and God to figure out lifestyle changes that the individual needs to make, not to be told, 'You can't do that because it's not okay, we don't like it.' But rather that God says, you know, to the person in their relationship, they need to, to fix this area or whatever.

Nathaniel (B) maintained that conversations with LGBTQIA+ persons must start from recognising their personhood: 'Identity is meant to be in knowing you are a child of God ... instead of saying, what you are doing is wrong.' He argued that individuals must maintain authority and control over 'God speaking into their lives.'

James (P) discussed this person-centred approach to the LGBTQIA+ discourse at length. He said: 'Identity is very much a pastoral discipleship question rather than a theology question. It is about learning, not about drawing hard lines and saying what's in and what's out.' James then gave examples of the types of questions he used when pastoring gay men who were journeying their same-sex attraction:

How do you make sense of being a same-sex attracted Christian? What does that mean for your life, and how do you follow Jesus and be a whole human being with that reality?

James then included a story of a gay man who struggled with James's advice to accept his identity:

For this person, that wasn't a helpful question. He was much more interested in saying, 'How do I get rid of this?' rather than 'How do I live with this?' Ultimately that became something which he left our community over, to try and seek somewhere that was a bit more hard-line and a bit more black-and-white.

James questioned why some LGBTQIA+ Christians would seek conversion therapy. He speculated it was due to shame issues, social identity, and the need to assimilate the group norms.

There was a shared consensus among these participants that the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches should acknowledge the personhood of LGBTQIA+ individuals. This perspective was not rooted in individualism; rather, it advocated for personal autonomy, which is a distinctive of the Baptist tradition. The argument was that individuals should retain authority and control over how they interpret or understand God speaking into their lives.

Discussing Discipleship

Discussing a theological understanding of 'discipleship' was another I-It moment in the conversation. The subject of 'discipleship' was introduced by Baptist pastors and

particularly the participants from the BCSA staff.²⁷ 'Discipleship' was linked to the 'Lordship of Jesus' and addressed the belief that identity—whether sexual or gender—is subject to Jesus. James (P) coherently explains this concept:

One of the things I am passionate about is discipleship. The idea of knowing how to reclaim our given identity and to allow that identity to flow into every aspect of our life and practice so that we become mature and fruitful and more like Jesus. One of the things I am convinced of is that every single person regardless of their sexuality, whether they be heterosexual, homosexual, or something else, needs to learn how their identity as a follower of Jesus, as part of his kingdom, shapes their practice and their desires and the motivations that there are and what they do. It is a huge issue.

The choice to refer to 'discipleship' in these staff interviews and the similarities in the participants' answers suggested this had formed part of the conversation within the ranks of BCSA. The similarities included: the foundational belief that identity was subject to God, not the individual; believing that being a Christian is one's core/primary identity; and asking whether belonging to the LGBTQIA+ and church communities was possible. For example, Abigail asked whether belonging to both communities is a place of tension that is too difficult to navigate:

Being a follower of Jesus is at the heart of who we are and that becomes our core identity. If there is another group that is saying: 'No, this is your core identity'. How do you do both? You can't have two communities saying: 'This needs to be your primary identity'. So, I think that is really hard; it can be hard to be members of both communities. So, I don't think you can't be, I just think it's a challenging road to try and walk.

The final point of agreement on discipleship among BCSA participants was an acknowledgment the hypocrisy of singling out sexuality when there were few other conversations about discipleship in the church. Others, like Joseph, gave examples of where Baptist churches regularly ignored discipleship issues:

²⁷ BCSA: Baptist Churches of South Australia.

My question would be back around the identity and to say if your first loyalty is not to Christ and you are not holding your sexuality and everything else at his feet, then I've got concerns. Having said that, none of us have got that perfectly, submitting our whole lives to Jesus' feet. So, I would have concerns about someone becoming a member of the church who is too busy being a workaholic ... We have churches on the verge of saying we don't challenge you on Western consumerism, we bless it. That is equally heretical.

There were no real answers as to why discipleship should be fundamental to the dialogue with LGBTQIA+ believers when it is not applied with the same intensity to other areas of a church member's life. Some participants labelled discipleship conversations—in one case, over parenting issues—as in the 'too-difficult' category.

However, other questions about the meaning of 'discipleship' were not explored in the interviews. For example, is the purpose of discipleship to help individuals recognise the flaws in their beliefs and subsequently modify their perspective to align with one's own?

Discipleship: An LGBTQIA+ Perspective

Most of the participants who associated identity with discipleship were heterosexual/cisgender. However, there was one LGBTQIA+ participant—Tessa—who shared her experience of discipleship and identity:

It was all really confusing. Right through my teen years, it was really hard. Really difficult because, on one hand, there was this normality to being same-sex attracted but then someone was telling me it was wrong. And the people who were telling me that it was wrong were the church.

To set the context for discipleship, she explained how—when journeying her personal realisation of same-sex attraction—her church encouraged her to work in the church to find her identity in her faith: 'So, they had me doing all the things ... My whole sense of self was wound up in that'. However, it resulted in her building her identity on performance and roles. For Tessa, theological reflection on 'God as Creator' became her framework for exploring what her created identity as a same-sex attracted woman of faith should look like for her. She confesses she almost 'disregarded Christianity'; however, she read

*Homosexuality and Christian Faith*²⁸ and joined a Baptist church that gave her permission to ask the questions. She says:

And then I started thinking about it and it gave me the sense of relief that I can start to pull off layers of protection that I'd built up and layers of falsehoods about myself that I'd layered on top of myself ... This book had partly given me permission to think in a different way about same-sex attractedness and the Christian faith. So, that was really important. And I think [pastors names given] are an extension of that for me ... They've helped me in that and given me, I guess, a church that I felt safer in, which is nice.

For Tessa, engaging in dialogue with those outside the non-affirming theological position of her church played a pivotal role in her faith journey; without it, she would have lost her faith.²⁹ This highlights the necessity of evaluating the effectiveness of current discipleship approaches, particularly concerning LGBTQIA+ Christians who may be experiencing a crisis of faith. Tessa's narrative also highlights the significance of her Baptist pastors granting her the freedom to incorporate diverse voices and perspectives into their ongoing discussions. A fundamental issue arises when heterosexual/cisgender persons disciple LGBTQIA+ persons and offer guidance on the challenges they face, as their experiences differ.³⁰ This, however, does not imply that heterosexual cisgender pastors cannot genuinely care for their LGBTQIA+ congregants. Instead, it emphasises the need for a renewed sense of humility that acknowledges the value of seeking advice from those with lived experiences and expanding the circle of dialogue partners in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Engaging in the echo chamber of like-minded opinions poses a significant obstacle to effective problem-solving. Echo chambers tend to impede collaboration and limit the diversity of perspectives that are essential for addressing complex issues.

²⁸ Walter Wink, *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

²⁹ Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide*, 79–85.

³⁰ Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide*, 125.

Navigating Dialogue: Meeting Community and Individual Needs

When discussing subjects touching on LGBTQIA+ inclusion in Baptist churches, Richard and Fynn both highlighted the need for an extended period of dialogue. They were not the only participants to suggest this—one participant (Kieran) thought it could take fifty years to eventualise.³¹ They partly believed this because the Church’s history proved that change takes decades. For example, in 1978, Marita Munro was the first Baptist woman ordained in Australia. Yet, over four decades later, Baptists in Australia still do not corporately agree on whether women should hold leadership positions in the churches.³² Proposing a particular span of time in which to resolve an issue is complex. Building the frameworks for inclusive dialogue needs time to address the influences of the echo chamber of like-mindedness and the deeply embedded sacred values unique to each person. However, for those in the minority who experience neither a voice in the discussion nor the power to implement change, there is a valid argument that enough time has already been given/taken by those in the majority. Theologian Miroslav Volf describes this as a gap ‘between our desires and their satisfaction’. He argues that the act of giving and forgiving is the way to build a bridge in ‘the yawning gap between deep self-centredness and true generosity.’³³

However, Volf’s identification of ‘the yawning gap’ raises more fundamental questions: Do people recognise their self-centredness when it is outworked in the relational dynamics between Baptists and LGBTQIA+ persons who stand at opposite ends of the theological spectrum? Who needs to be generous here? How would people act differently if

³¹ The participants were referring to groups rather than focusing on individuals.

³² Darren John Cronshaw, ‘A History of Women’s Ordination in the Baptist Union of Victoria,’ (Master’s thesis, Melbourne College of Divinity, 1998). Available at John Mark Ministries, added 5 January 2003, <https://www.jmm.org.au/articles/9020.htm>.

³³ M Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 20 and 107.

the priority was generosity in building a bridge between our desires and their satisfaction? Equally, what is an appropriate response to bridge building, as asking people to relinquish their anger (even for the sake of forwarding the conversation) is harmful to the person and is a form of injustice?³⁴ Volf argues against the silencing of ‘victims’ of injustice:

If the victims remember rightly, the memory of inhumanities past will shield both of them and all of us against future inhumanities; if the perpetrator remembers rightly, the memory of their wrongdoing will help restore their guilty past and transform it into soil on which a more hopeful future can grow.³⁵

Buber similarly argues that authentic dialogue is only possible when there is awareness of our treatment of those we disagree with.³⁶ Perhaps looking at our treatment of others and contemplating Volf’s observations on deep self-centredness and true generosity is where the dialogue needs to begin.

Community’s Responsibility in Dialogue

Answering whether Baptists need more time or whether LGBTQIA+ individuals and their advocates have been more than patient is a complicated question of freedom and liberty; is it the individual or the community who has rights in this space? Volf and Buber agree on the answer. Buber believes freedom is found ‘from within connections, not despite them; they are found in dialectical partnership between individuality and communion with others.’³⁷ Volf argues:

³⁴ Amia Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger,’ *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12130>; Alfred Archer and Georgie Mills, ‘Anger, Affective Injustice and Emotion Regulation,’ *Philosophical Topics* (2020).

³⁵ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 116; Volf, *The End of Memory*.

³⁶ Blumenfeld-Jones, 115.

³⁷ Blumenfeld-Jones, 97.

Surrendering the particularity of persons in order to preserve their communal aspect, however, is a poor exchange if surrendering the particularity of a person also means surrendering personhood. Spiritual cloning does not produce persons.³⁸

It is the action of the community creating a space for the individual to engage in mutual dialogue that builds bridges between differences.

Baptist participants raised this perspective by discussing the ‘posture’ adopted by some within the Baptist movement towards the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Participants spoke of the ‘wrong posture’, which matched Buber’s argument for awareness of our treatment of those we disagree with. For example, Ian said:

As a pastor ... I think there are times when the church has bumped up against my desire to treat a person in a certain way. And I’ve seen the church bringing down shutters on people.

Ken (P) referred to the plebiscite on same-sex marriage to explain the ‘wrong’ posture:

The biggest tension for me has been with the way that we—we being, I take myself as being part of the church and the church leadership—is where I have seen our posture towards same-sex couples has been completely wrong. So, things like the plebiscite, and things like the unwelcoming and disapproval that people feel or have been made to feel because of their sexual orientation when they have no knowledge of God, no knowledge of sin, and yet we are judging them with rules that they have no understanding of. So, I get really frustrated with the church whenever I see its posture towards the LGBT community being wrong in that regard.

Those in the majority within a community bear the responsibility for creating spaces for those on the margins, as the marginalised lack the power to achieve equality in dialogue. Therefore, the current LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches requires a consideration of the ‘posture’ adopted by the Baptist community towards its LGBTQIA+ members, their families, friends, and advocates. This evaluation can potentially promote awareness of how we treat those we disagree with.

³⁸ Miroslav. Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church As the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 182.

Adopting Embrace over Exclusion

There was evidence from some of the Baptist participants that they in effect adopted Volf's argument for a posture of embrace over exclusion. They expressed emotions ranging from 'disquiet' to 'revulsion' when sharing their stories of how individuals and churches had excluded LGBTQIA+ persons. For example, Philippa (B) said: 'there's been a big conflict for me in the way that we've [the Baptist church] treated them ... It's actually a disgrace, to be quite honest, in my opinion.' Participants did not necessarily elaborate on what they did with that disquiet/anger. However, it did not appear to be a catalyst for action, and no one shared examples of any advocacy for LGBTQIA+ persons who were experiencing exclusion. Lauren (B), who identified herself as holding a welcoming but non-affirming posture, expressed regret for not advocating for an LGBTQIA+ man during a conflict in her church that resulted in his leaving the church. She clearly articulated that she would 'speak up' if a similar issue arose.

Others spoke of witnessing LGBTQIA+ exclusion and seeing that it had become an internal catalyst for examining their attitudes and praxis. For example, Sarah (B) told of hearing about the exclusion of a lesbian sibling by her Christian family (not Baptist). Hearing the story (shared by the mother, who was caught in the middle of the family dynamics), Sarah was convinced of her complicity in the issue, even though she had no relationship or influence with the family. She said:

I am so sorry, God, that I've been complicit for years of turning your church into a place that is no longer welcoming to people, that could make someone, someone that has more humanity than many of us put together and more courage, that they would not be welcomed.

Sarah attributed her complicity to 'a lack of thinking' about the impact of exclusion on LGBTQIA+ persons as due to '[her] not educating [her] self ... [she] hadn't chosen the intention ... [hadn't] entered the space of confusion [over differences in theological

perspectives].’ She described hearing about the LGBTQIA+ person’s exclusion as a ‘really significant thing because I knew which camp I didn’t want to be in.’

There was a story from a Baptist participant (Grace) who described feeling excluded by representatives of the lesbian community at a community event. Grace prefaced her story with: ‘But the way they presented themselves, and they knew that I was representing this church, that’s why I was there’ before stating that ‘I would have preferred to have left ... you know, inside I was cringing and, you know, wishing everything to be over because I wanted to get out of there.’ She found the way the lesbian representatives presented themselves ‘extremely intimidating’ (a phrase she repeated twice). She explained:

They were physically large ladies. They were physically loud in their speech. I don’t know if that was intentional on their part or not. It was not a pleasant experience from that point of view, and given that it was, you know, a meeting of interested parties of varying interested groups, not just the church and the lesbian community people groups, I found it to be, yeah, a pretty poor representation of their community from the way these people behaved.

For Grace, the event implied exclusion, as no one directly confronted her. However, she responded viscerally to the situation: ‘It was most uncomfortable and unpleasant, and to the point I said to [her pastor, name given], I do not want to do this again.’

Lyn (P) shared her painful experience of exclusion when she was accused of homophobia publicly on Facebook; a charge she refuted and, in her interview, she suggested she could call defence witnesses. She explained it happened when asked what the Bible said about homosexuality, and she presented a welcoming-non-affirming position. What was heard and consequently reported was that she condemned LGBTQIA+ to hell. Lyn said: ‘I would never condemn anyone to hell; I’m actually not God, I don’t have the power to condemn anyone to hell.’ Lyn’s story illustrates how destructive the conversation can be at times. Lyn shared her heart to pursue an honest, inclusive conversation and experienced a horrific dialogue. It highlights the cost of engaging in dialogue over deeply held ideologies.

Words such as ‘personal cost’, ‘uncomfortable’, ‘panic’, and ‘fear’ were used by participants to describe the price for dialogues. The frequency of such negative words suggests the current frameworks for LGBTQIA+ dialogue do not create a ‘safe space’, and adopting the term ‘brave space’ may better communicate what participants will need in this conversation—courage.

Journeying as a Community

Participants addressed the complexities of creating safe spaces in a community. Fynn (B) said:

One of the journeys of [church name given] is to, wherever we’re going, to go with everybody; to take everybody with us. And there are, there’s a number of people from a whole range of different streams that go there, and so, they’ve come from different backgrounds and different situations in relation to how they view the LGBT, how they interact, if at all, with them, what comes through with their demeanour. So, it’s going to take us longer than if it was just 20 people, because we’ve got 100 people to take there. But we wanna hope that we are actually on that journey so that we can actually have confidence that any LGBT, anyone in their community, can come in safety.

Fynn’s comment highlights the influence of hidden assumptions. Often, the church can be seen as a monoculture by its members as much as by outside observers. However, the interviews suggest that the reality is far more complicated. The individuals in Baptist churches bring a myriad of opinions to the conversation without necessarily understanding the scope of the differences within their fellowship. Even if the church agrees that it holds a welcoming but not affirming posture, its members may not agree on what that looks like.

Luke (P) described this as: ‘the complexity of the church context—when we live where those tensions meet.’ Lauren (B) describes the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches as: ‘fraught in many ways. It’s fraught because we are dealing with individuals, and then we are dealing with organisations, and then we are dealing with processes.’ Fraught is an interesting word to choose as it speaks of a situation or course of action, filled with or likely

to result in something undesirable. It expresses the depth of apprehension over having difficult conversations within churches, let alone attempting the conversation with anyone outside the membership. If there are to be LGBTQIA+ discussions in Baptist churches, the consequence will likely be felt first in the local church. The church could find the dialogue uncomfortable, leading into uncharted territory where the differences within their community are revealed.

Avoidance Is No Solution

Whatever stance we adopt, the need to converse and disagree with one another is unavoidable in dialogue. Joseph (P) said: 'So, conversations do need to be had. And people are going to have to wrestle with that'. However, there are genuine fears over the outcome, and it is a burden for those in leadership as they may bear the brunt of people's emotions. They also carry the fear of the unknown. For example, will the church split over the difference between non-affirming and affirming stances? Will the debate generate adverse publicity, not just for the local church but also for the broader Baptist movement? These are not unfounded fears. Research conducted by Djupe et al. concluded that opening the conversation has the potential to highlight differences and may even be divisive. They suggested the results from the conversations are 'often uncertain, and conflict over issues can strike at the organizational robustness of the denomination and the local congregations.'³⁹ Nevertheless, is that enough of a reason to avoid the conversation? Someone needs to stand in the uncomfortable position of carrying the unknowable consequences of those conversations, with no guarantees of a happy or successful ending. Whose responsibility is it to facilitate the discussion? There is no clear answer from the interviews other than the propensity to 'leave it to others'. No one was referred to by name

³⁹ Djupe, Olson, and Gilbert, 620.

or position as having the responsibility for spearheading the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.

While conversations are happening between individual hetero/cisgender Baptists and LGBTQIA+ believers, it is a stretch to call the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches a dialogue. For example, Ken (P) frequently spoke of wanting to discuss with LGBTQIA+ believers their perspectives on LGBTQIA+ experiences and expectations of Baptist churches. He noted:

And it does concern me that as a movement, we haven't yet got this thing of excited invite and inclusion rather than an arm's-length, 'don't ask, don't tell', you know, keep away from me.

The access for LGBTQIA+ believers to dialogue with the Baptist community is a critical factor in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches. The inclusion of LGBTQIA+ voices is essential for a more comprehensive discussion within Baptist communities on LGBTQIA+ issues. Without LGBTQIA+ persons voicing their experiences in Baptist churches, there are no diverse perspectives to challenge the current LGBTQIA+ discourse.

Summary

The findings on the current LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches cohere with Buber's 'I-It' theory, thus supporting the theory's value and influence. I-It describes a conversation where the personhood of individuals becomes hidden, as they are reduced to a moral or sexual ethic or a problem to be resolved. In this context, the current LGBTQIA+ discourse typically centres on some topic-based discussion—for example, sin and discipleship. However, participants acknowledged that introducing these topics often undermined each other's personhood. For example, discussions about 'sin' can lead to devaluing personhood by labelling individuals as 'sinners' and consistently categorising LGBTQIA+ persons as 'broken', which negatively impacts LGBTQIA+ persons' mental well-being. Valuing personhood—as conceptualised by Buber—is to value the uniqueness,

wholeness, and goodness in others. Therefore, adopting a person-centred LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches would signify a deep commitment to fostering meaningful relationships and mutual respect as a basis for dialogue.

The study reveals a notable interest among some non-queer Baptists in engaging in an LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches that dialogue with LGBTQIA+ individuals rather than about LGBTQIA+ topics. There was a significant difference when participants shifted from discussing impersonal issues (I-It) to adopting an interpersonal (I-Thou) approach. Engaging in an LGBTQIA+ discourse based on dialogue with diverse perspectives and experiences led participants to recognise the dangers of forming an echo chamber. This was driven by their realisation that echo chambers often lead to one-sided views on complex issues. Participants acknowledged that LGBTQIA+ discourse held within the confines of like-minded opinions fosters a confirmation bias and hinders effective problem-solving. Further, it raises concerns about the feasibility of LGBTQIA+ affirming individuals safely engaging in a dialogue that encompassed their unique perspective and whether their contributions would be heard and respected.

Engaging in echo chambers in the LGBTQIA+ discourse, instead of directly engaging in dialogue with LGBTQIA+ persons, has the potential to lead to a lack of empathy, as individuals may not understand or relate to the experiences of others. The findings indicate that changing to a person-centred dialogue fostered understanding, which prompted participants to reflect on the experiences of exclusion for LGBTQIA+ persons in the current Baptist church LGBTQIA+ discourse. This transition to a person-centred dialogue was motivated by the participants' need to avoid perpetuating the marginalisation or exclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in Baptist churches. Additionally, there were concerns that the current LGBTQIA+ discourse leads to the isolation of LGBTQIA+ persons, their families, friends, and advocates.

The marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ persons from much of the current discussions in Baptist churches also prompts LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates to practise self-

censorship during the discourse. This reluctance to engage in the discourse stems from the fear of possible backlash or exclusion when their perspectives and experiences diverge from the prevailing majority view. The absence of a person-centred LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches represents missed opportunities for constructive dialogue and the potential critique of power imbalances in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Challenging this position in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse would involve those with the power intentionally ensuring the discussions were person-centred and ensuring easy access for LGBTQIA+ persons to the conversation.

However, the findings also reveal the challenge of weighing the individual's rights, beliefs, and personhood against the perspectives of the majority within the context of the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. The dilemma is whether individuals can remain in a non-affirming Baptist church while holding or transitioning toward an affirming theological perspective. Buber's response to the conflict between individual and communal rights emphasises a shift in the basis for the dialogue from problem-solving to ethical treatment of others. Authentic dialogue, in Buber's view, requires a focus on how we treat one another.⁴⁰ Applying Buber's concept in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches calls for the evaluation of the impact of the conversation on those with the lived experience of being marginalised and silenced to be taken seriously. This allows the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches to emphasise the ethical dimension of interactions rather than simply resolving problems.

One of the noticeable conclusions among the findings concerned how little person-to-person conversation with LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates is happening with the South Australian Baptist movement. Within the organisation, there was a conspicuous absence of explicit acknowledgment of individuals or groups tasked with facilitating the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches. Given the lack of any established space

⁴⁰ Blumenfeld-Jones, 115.

within the movement for such discussions, it poses the question of where an LGBTQIA+ discourse could find a platform.

Discussing the Impact of Colliding Horizons

I find nothing more frustrating than when people put words in your mouth; when people decide what you are thinking. Frustrates the life out of me but what I do is shut down and I won't defend myself. —Lyn

≈

I thought I knew it all at 20. Now at 55, I know I know nothing. —Seth

This chapter explores the second prevalent theme from the data results—the participants' experiences of clashing perspectives during the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. The chapter uses Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory on the fusing of horizons.. Additionally, it investigates responses to divergent perspectives, drawing on Claus Otto Scharmer's Theory U, which describes the ways individuals either 'presence' or 'absence' themselves in discourse when confronted with differing viewpoints. The chapter also focuses on the participants' experiences of liminality, which refers to transitional, in-between phases in thinking. This liminal space challenges established norms and boundaries and is therefore characterised by uncertainty and the opportunity for change.¹

The complexities implicit in disagreeing with someone proved to be a significant influence on the LGBTQIA+ discourse in the South Australian Baptist context. The theory of horizon fusion by Gadamer was the most suitable approach for comprehending and extrapolating the participants' experiences. Gadamer conceptualised personal perspectives as a 'horizon' shaped by cultural contexts. Personal horizons are limited but not fixed, enabling individuals to shift positions and see from another's horizon. Gadamer argues that seeing the world from another's perspective expands our own horizon, fostering the 'fusion'

¹ Gadamer, 182; Scharmer.

and emergence of a new shared perspective. He views ‘the fusion of horizons’ as the ideal outcome of dialogue.²

However, many of the participants’ horizons seemed to collide rather than ‘fuse’, and often remained two distinct individual perspectives. Participants faced the concurrent dilemmas of maintaining their identity and values and their anxiety over privileging one perspective to the detriment of others. They explicitly and implicitly expressed tension over dialoguing about LGBTQIA+ issues. This tension included conflict over the agenda outcomes and anxiety over how to disagree.

Tension resulting from the meeting of the horizons often prompted participants to enter a liminal space—a place betwixt and between—where questions constantly challenged what was known about self, God, and others. Many struggled with the resulting doublemindedness and responded with ‘presencing’ (deep listening and engagement with a new or differing perspective) or ‘absencing’ (which discounts new or differing information, relying on, and returning to familiar knowledge) themselves from the dialogue, which are responses outlined by ‘Theory U’.³

Privileging Perspectives

The convergence of horizons between some Baptists and LGBTQIA+ individuals reveals a power imbalance in the dialogue.⁴ It was described by some Baptist participants as a Baptist ‘privilege’, signifying an unearned advantage enjoyed by Baptists, which allows them to set parameters for inclusion and exclusion within their church. Fynn (B) emphasised how LGBTQIA+ persons are not as welcomed as ‘standard white, middle-class persons’,

² Carolyn M. Shields and Mark M. Edwards, *Dialogue Is Not Just Talk: A New Ground for Educational Leadership* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 69.

³ Scharmer, 11.

⁴ Nelson, ‘Homosexuality’, 271–4.

emphasising the inherent disparities in the treatment of different groups. Jacob (B) characterised Baptist churches as ‘white, middle-class, and unapproachable’, underscoring their limited inclusivity. Joseph’s (P) statement was stronger; he accused Baptist churches of idolatry:

It would definitely be true that in the Baptist movement, we have skewed the whole thing towards, we’ve idolised what it means to be married, kids, white, educated. We’ve set this thing, ‘us as an ideal’, and we haven’t given people who aren’t called to that way of following Jesus a lot of room to move or a lot of encouragement or talked about what their positive options are.

Joseph’s (P) accusation of ‘idolatry’ and the elevation of certain beliefs to an almost sacred status suggests a deeply ingrained issue that has the potential to hinder inclusivity. The idealisation of marriage and family, for example, marginalises those who do not conform to these ideals, including those who are single, divorced, or choose not to marry. Consequently, this marginalisation can negatively affect people’s sense of belonging and self-worth. Additionally, it can become challenging to empathise with individuals whose lives or choices deviate from ideal norms. This reduced empathy can hinder the community’s ability to support and understand its members fully. The introduction of the concept of ‘Baptist privilege’ serves as a significant critique of Baptist churches’ inclusivity.

Privileging of Heterosexuality

Participants also raised issues relating to the privileging of heterosexuality in Baptist churches. Cole et al. argue that for most people, the privileging of heterosexuality usually is ‘invisible’ akin to the ‘unearned advantages that makes whiteness invisible’.⁵ For example, Luke (P) told a story of ‘naively’ thinking that his sister-in-law was ‘just friends’ until she

⁵ Elizabeth R. Cole et al., ‘Against Nature: How Arguments About the Naturalness of Marriage Privilege Heterosexuality,’ *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012), 46–62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2012.01735.x>.

revealed her relationship with her same-sex partner. However, some observed and questioned the heteronormative context of Baptist churches. Brandon (B, Q) said:

We, the church, are very heteronormative, and if you don't fit in with that heteronormative box, then we welcome you but we don't know what to do with you. That's actually the issue. We don't embrace the whole person.

Annie (Q) debated the power imbalances for LGBTQIA+ persons created by heteronormative cultures in churches and pointed to the relationship between privilege and silencing:

I feel that hegemonic voices have the unfair advantage, that's why some people get marginalised in such toxic ways because it's not an equal conversation. There are voices that get handed a megaphone by virtue of tradition. And other voices get told no. I don't know if you use the words heresy. Some people are heretics just by being challenged.

David (former P) shared his experiences of realising the privilege he possessed as a white, male, educated Australian. However, he felt that his church was unwilling to discuss the privileging of heterosexuality:

While all my other understandings of my privilege was an interesting story for my church, my understanding of my privilege of being heterosexual and speaking up for the oppressed that was a bridge too far. People hated it; they couldn't cope. Some people, not all. But it started to create a polarisation in our church.

It is not unusual for some to find the challenge of heterosexuality confronting. In his book *Undoing Privilege*, academic Bob Pease argues that for heterosexuals to recognise and challenge 'the taken-for-granted' heteroprivilege involves 'discomfort, if not pain.'⁶ Pease states it is because 'it is the privileged who make the rules and construct the norms that govern our actions.'⁷ This was an observation made by some participants in my research.

⁶ Pease, 148.

⁷ Pease, 187.

They raised the concern that the privileging of heterosexuality meant (in Samuel's words) a 'double standard that was being applied' by Baptist churches. Samuel explained:

If we are sexual beings, why are homosexuals considered more sexual than heterosexual beings? Why is [homosexuality] something that requires extra maintenance and management [by Baptist churches]?

Joseph (P) raised the question of the problem with privilege:

I'm just hoping it's not over-privileged difficulty where I would look at someone's sexuality and consider that more carefully ... because it is hypercritical if we put that community through a different size hoop to another community.

One BCSA staffer noted that currently, while there is no obligation for candidates for accreditation within BCSA to disclose their gender or sexual identification, they do have to disclose if they are in a same-sex relationship.⁸ She noted this disparity, wondering whether asking the question of LGBTQIA+ candidates, privileged heterosexuality:

I don't have to declare that I am a heterosexual woman, so should I expect a lesbian woman who is putting her hand up to be part of a leadership team, should I require them or expect that they have to declare their sexual orientation before they could be nominated for leadership?

However, participants spoke of the problems when LGBTQIA+ orientations are only known after leadership appointments. Samuel, who had held various leadership positions within Baptist churches in South Australia, recounted his disclosure of being same-sex attracted and the subsequent decision by the church eldership to inform the congregation. Samuel addressed the issue of LGBTQIA+ Baptist pastors in a written communication with his church:

I maintain if these ancillary issues [i.e, sexual orientations] are of such importance so as to determine a candidate's suitability for the position of lead pastor, then they ought to be asked of all candidates as a part of the search process. Your suggestion that, as elders, you

⁸ Requirements on sexual/gender orientation disclosures and theological perspectives on LGBTQIA+ faith vary amongst the States.

feel the need to relate these issues directly to my sexual identity and thus betray my trust by exposing my sexuality to the rest of the leadership group is reckless.

Lauren was a member of Samuel's church, and she believed the leadership of the church forced him to disclose his sexual orientation. She said:

He had been in a position of leadership for a number of years ... But for me personally, I found it offensive the way he was treated. That he was being pushed to declare something that was very much his private life.

Having already acknowledged that she held a non-affirming theology (which may prohibit LGBTQIA+ persons from some roles within the church, particularly leadership) Lauren quickly realised she was feeling 'conflicted' over policies that excluded LGBTQIA+ individuals from leadership positions.⁹ She asked: 'Do we make exceptions for proven individuals ... who have demonstrated appropriate leadership skills? I don't know how you deal with that as an organisation.' Lauren's existing relationship with Samuel broadened her horizon to see from his perspective, which became the catalyst for wrestling with the praxis of her theology. Her story highlighted the crucial role relationship played in the colliding of different perspectives. In the context of fusing horizons, relationships are the bridges that connect disparate worlds. When love is prioritised, individuals are more willing to engage, listen, and genuinely connect with others, which is essential for fusing horizons. It becomes challenging to absence oneself from a conversation or avoid wrestling with differing perspectives when love is the guiding principle. Love compels individuals to emotionally invest in understanding others and genuinely seeking common ground.

Awareness of another horizon can lead to recognising privilege's power to shape perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, perpetuating systemic inequalities, and reinforcing existing power structures. As this section of narratives illustrates, participants created space to critically reflect on their privilege and 'decentre' themselves from the 'Baptist privilege' of cultural norms and the unearned advantages experienced by heteronormative cisgender

⁹ Church Clarity.

Baptist members.¹⁰ However, participants' self-reflection seems to initiate the process of deconstructing their individual privilege—something that the researcher might frame as collective conscientisation,¹¹ although the participants would be unlikely to draw on such a concept. Collective conscientisation is a critical theory concept developed by Paulo Freire. It is a shared understanding within a societal group of societal factors contributing to the marginalisation of others within the community. The awareness, gained through reflection and action, encourages the entire social group to address systemic issues, promoting social justice and change.¹²

The findings show limited references to critical reflection on privilege experienced by heteronormative cisgender Baptist members at a collective level.¹³ Consequently, it is not possible to determine from the data whether individual Baptist churches or BCSA are addressing the 'Baptist privilege.'¹⁴ However, the lack of reference to broader discussions raises the question of whether, and if so how, awareness of privilege results in action and addresses the inequalities experienced by LGBTQIA+ persons within Baptist churches. In the case of the Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT, the catalyst for initiating the LGBTQIA+ discourse at a collective level was the clash of perspectives between affirming and non-

¹⁰ Tonette S. Rocco and G. Wayne West, 'Deconstructing Privilege: An Examination of Privilege in Adult Education,' *Adult Education Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (1998), <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171369804800304>; F. Pratto and A. L Stewart, 'Group Dominance and the Half-Blindness of Privilege,' *Journal of Social Issues*. 68 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.154-560.2011.01734.x>.

¹¹ Pease, 187.

¹² Caitlin Cahill, 'Defying Gravity? Raising Consciousness Through Collective Research,' *Children's Geographies* 2, no. 2 (2004); Peter McLaren, 'Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Possibility,' in *Freireian Pedagogy, Praxis, and Possibilities*, ed. Stanley F. Steiner et al. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6.

¹³ The research data revealed a particular group of participants from the same church engaged in collective conscientisation to address the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ persons within their congregation.

¹⁴ 'Baptist privilege' is a term used by some participants to describe the unearned advantages experienced by heteronormative cisgender Baptist members.

affirming churches regarding the theological statement on marriage. This situation prompts the question of what factors would serve as incentives for BCSA member churches to actively reflect on and address the power and privileges influencing the current LGBTQIA+ discourse.

One of the arguments given by some of the participants for the privileging of a non-affirming theology within Baptists in SA was based in the definition of membership. Membership of a Baptist church was not simply formal inclusion and participation by individuals. It also included agreement with the rest of the members on shared beliefs, values, and practices.¹⁵ For example, Edward (B) said: ‘Yeah, well, membership is all about belonging and a place that you’re in agreement with the membership conditions.’ Luke (P) shared a similar conclusion: ‘I am a Baptist because it is the place where I can best express who I am.’ Many participants identified theology as a critical factor in their decision to join a Baptist church, with the majority emphasising the importance of finding a church that theologically aligned with their beliefs, including whether the church adopted an affirming or non-affirming posture towards LGBTQIA+ persons.

Value of Personal Perspectives

Awareness of another person’s horizon and the influence of privilege raised within some of the participants the challenge of remaining true to their values and safeguarding their own perspectives. It was explained through the phrase, ‘but this is us’:

A family in our church have decided they are going to be completely affirming ... and they recognise that is a minority opinion in our church and in our movement, and so it’s slightly awkward. They say: ‘We don’t want to fight about it *but this is us* and this is the path we are going to take as our own family.’ [my italics]

The word ‘but’ played a pivotal role in people’s conversations. For example, Ian (B) detailed his friendly relationship, posture, and welcome of LGBTQIA+ persons in his church

¹⁵ Kärkkäinen, 65–66.

and then added, *'but I hold a traditional Christian sexual ethic'* (italics mine). The use of 'but' highlighted that this was a place of tension, which Ian described as 'conflicted'. Kieran (P) shared a similar tension. He discussed pathways for including LGBTQIA+ affirming persons in his church, yet he kept returning to the same point of 'but for me'. He used it to reiterate the importance he placed on his non-affirming position:

And the healthiest expression of that relationship is in that marriage covenantal relationship between man and woman. I feel the tension with that. I would welcome and embrace someone who is identifying as part of the LGBTQ to explore and become part of the Christian community but for me, there is still that tension that exists in that space. Particularly if they are in a practising relationship and they can't see an issue with it. I would never say that to someone in the community but for me personally, I feel that tension.

Patrick (B) articulated a tension many felt: is it possible to acknowledge another's perspective and still maintain one's own beliefs? He asked how to navigate a divisive conversation without causing others pain: '[dialoguing or preaching from a non-affirming Scriptural interpretation] may be true but it offends people. So, one could question, "Well, was that badly managed?" In a sense, no, but, in another sense, maybe more empathy could be shown, more understanding, those kinds of things.' Other participants were cautious about the 'but this is us' posture and were careful to present their views as a personal conviction rather than implying a confrontational position or the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons from Baptist churches.

However, not all were careful about their posture when horizons collided. For example, Chloe (who began her same-sex relationship around the time of the plebiscite) shared that she had received a text from a fellow Bible student saying: 'Hey honey, I was wondering what was going on with the pro-homosexuality related stuff on FB.' Chloe shared:

This was going on during the plebiscite. That was a painful time for everyone. I wasn't going 'screw everyone, let's have equality.' It was nothing like that. I only posted half things, the main was basically: this issue is going to remain, so Christians be careful how you are presenting about the situation because the way you are presenting is actually impacting the

way people are seeing Christianity. My opinion was that it was going to pass whether it was this time or next time. It's going to happen in the foreseeable future. You can vote 'no', that's fine but just be careful how you are going about it because of the lives involved.

Immediately, the fellow student responded with a post on her own FB page: 'Homosexuality is a sin, vote "no", end of story.' Chloe said: '[It was] something blunt like that. I thought, you really are something difficult to handle.' The response effectively impeded the opportunity to discuss and understand differing viewpoints.

Regardless of how the tension 'but this is us' was articulated, participants who held a firm conviction that their perspectives were sacred values integral to their identity consequently found them non-negotiable.¹⁶ Sacred values are recognised as creating barriers and deadlocks to discourse.¹⁷ However, in colliding the horizons, some participants spoke of their willingness to stay in the uncomfortable place of not agreeing rather than breaking the relationship. For example, Zoe (B) said she felt '100% safe disagreeing' with her pastors in their discussions over the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in her Baptist church: '[my pastor, name given] would say many, many times, "there are things that we can agree to disagree on."' The priority given to relationships and the hope of building a more open relationship were primarily why participants were willing to stay in the position of disagreement over horizons.

The process of suspending the usual judgements and letting go of what is already known was the beginning of deep listening for some participants.¹⁸ Stephen Covey argues that colliding of perspectives offers the opportunity to either 'defend myself against you because you're wrong' or to deliberately seek out different perspectives and challenge new

¹⁶ Hanselmann and Tanner; Tetlock, 320; Sheikh Hammad et al., 'Religion, Group Threat and Sacred Values,' *Judgment and Decision Making* 7, no. 2 (2012): 110.

¹⁷ Covey; Atran and Axelrod, 223 and 42; Argo and Ginges, 15.

¹⁸ Scharmer, 65–68.

possibilities in thinking.¹⁹ Where could the dialogue take the relational dynamics between Baptists and LGBTQIA+ persons if there was an agreement to talk without the starting posture of ‘agree with my position’?

Difficulties Disagreeing: The 2017 Plebiscite

Disagreements about perspectives are evident in the data, but the coding in this regard was challenging due to the interconnectedness of ‘disagreements’ with other themes. For example, some opted for silence rather than dealing with the stress of disagreeing with someone. The most manageable context for analysing the data over disagreements was through participants sharing their experiences of the 2017 Plebiscite—The Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey—which gauged public support for legalising same-sex marriage.²⁰

The plebiscite exposed the divisive nature of the public debate and its impact on personal relationships. It was a space where the colliding of horizons occurred. Some participants revealed how ill-prepared they felt to debate LGBTQIA+ issues.²¹ For example, Jacob (B) shared that his friend solicited his views on the plebiscite, and Jacob debated the legalities of redefining ‘marriage’. Jacob explained how he and his friend debated with each other regularly on issues, so for Jacob, it was just another intellectual debate. However, Jacob’s friend—who is gay but had not disclosed this to Jacob—wanted to know if Jacob’s lack of support for same-sex marriages meant Jacob was rejecting him as a person. The different agendas for the conversation caused problems, and Jacob expressed remorse for

¹⁹ Covey, 24.

²⁰ Holmes.

²¹ Amanda Taub and Max Fisher, ‘Why Referendums Aren’t As Democratic As They Seem,’ *The New York Times* 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/05/world/americas/colombia-brexit-referendum-farc-america-santos.html>; Mark McCrindle, *Faith and Belief in Australia: A National Study on Religion, Spirituality, and Worldview Trends*, Baulkham Hills NSW: McCrindle Research (2017).

causing 'fear and anxiety' for his friend.²² According to Jacob, the subsequent 'three-hour' telephone call was 'profoundly useful' and strengthened the friendship. The commitment to not breaking the relationship was the reason for investing so much time in the conversation.

Jacob's emphasis on the length of the conversation points to the cost involved when hosting dialogues over differences, and the reason for a commitment to keep talking to overcome the offence and misunderstanding dialoguing differences generates. However, it also illustrated *Dadirri's* argument for listening and relistening over talking and the need to hear and contemplate the other perspective before discussing differences. Jacob used this narrative primarily to explain how hindsight had changed his praxis. Now, he intentionally seeks to fully understand another person's view on a subject before he engages in the conversation from his perspective.

This is a wise approach, and acting on it could have prevented some of the pain caused by the discourse around the plebiscite. Iris (B) has children and nieces in same-sex relationships, and her comments revealed her experiences of the discourse over differences in perspectives. Iris shared:

Our minister talked to us about which way to vote. And he kind of led us to believe that God loves everybody, and it would be okay to vote, but he hoped he wouldn't be asked to conduct any wedding services. And, yeah, I have a friend who was in my church many years ago, who is a Baptist, and he is now a marriage celebrant for gay people. And when some of my relatives who are Baptists heard about this, they said, 'That's absolutely disgusting because he's a good Baptist. Why would he do such a thing?'

Iris's openness in recounting the verbal judgment she faced regarding her children and family, with comments like 'that's absolutely disgusting because he's a good Baptist' raises questions on what those experiences were like for her. It is an example of Buber's theory that discussing a subject with an 'I-It' stance devalues human beings' inherent worth and

²² Garber, 7.

dignity, leading to a lack of empathy and genuine connection. In the clashing of the horizons, Iris's Baptist relatives ignored the principles of equality, respect, and dignity given to others in the space of dialogue. No care or attention was given to the pain caused by their words or the damage done to the relationship. Iris's narrative also illustrated the danger that when the horizons collide, the discourse is reduced to the dichotomies of 'good Baptist' and, therefore, 'bad Baptist' and right and wrong perspectives.

Faith Cultural War

During the plebiscite, BCSA did not issue a directive to churches on how to vote due to the autonomy of the local churches. Chaza (Baptist) noted BCSA's response to the plebiscite; its emphasis on the freedom of conscience for all members and its issuing of guidelines for engaging in public debates.²³ Joseph (Pastor) noted the 'very, very, very carefully nuanced' public statements where BCSA reiterated its non-affirming evangelical theological position and Baptist celebrants' abstention from conducting same-sex weddings.²⁴

Theory U argues that the response to dialogue is either 'presencing through deep listening' or 'absencing' by relying on familiar knowledge, and it could be argued that BCSA chose 'absencing'. However, Joseph (P) believed the aim was to keep to the boundaries of 'a very personal conversation', in the hope of mitigating the usual pitfalls of the conversation. He said: 'Everyone's story is very different, and releasing a media release, which is four or five paragraphs long, is not pastoral.' In this way, BCSA kept the priority for the discussion in relationship. However, there were no stories from the participants of BCSA engaging in dialogue with LGBTQIA+ or their advocates who held an affirming perspective during the

²³ Baptist Churches South Australia, 'Our Framework for Discernment and Conversation,' (Adopted by the Assembly Board 1 October 2019), <https://sabaptist.asn.au/>; 'SA Baptists and Marriage,' 2017, <http://sabaptist.asn.au/sa-baptists-and-marriage/>.

²⁴ BCSA responded to the Marriage Equality Debate by reiterating its commitment to the non-affirming evangelical tradition and restating its policy on Baptist celebrants only conducting heterosexual marriages; BCSA.

plebiscite. Therefore, it could still be argued that it was a missed opportunity for dialogue between those from different horizons.

However, there were stories of colliding of horizons happening between Baptist churches. James (P) assessed the plebiscite as ‘unfortunately ... quite a divisive thing’, and he mentioned some Baptist churches that were ‘heated’ and ‘condemning everything’. He replied to them equally strongly through a forum available for Baptist Assembly members. His conversation highlights the contentious nature of the debate within BCSA that is generating heated arguments and conflicting opinions.

Gadamer argues: ‘Collisions with the other’s horizons make us aware of assumptions so deep-seated that they would otherwise remain unnoticed.’²⁵ The plebiscite revealed the ‘unnoticed’ happening within the Baptist church. It showed the diversity and strength of opinions happening within the movement. However, it also revealed the different perspectives between the Baptists and the wider community. James described this a ‘combative stance’ between the sexual ethics and binary gender identity traditionally advocated by the church and ‘a world that is moving on from that’. He wondered about the long-term effect the public debate would have on the church:

I’ll be interested to see where things go from here as the church has had to take quite a combative stance I think because we do believe that God can speak into our identity and ethics. That we are not the sole source of authority. We’ve taken that voice of standing up for the traditional definition of marriage and sexuality.

The choice of the descriptor ‘combative’ indicates how many participants felt about the public debate over LGBTQIA+ issues. ‘Combative’ is the language associated with war; described by Marin as the LGBTQIA+ faith cultural war.²⁶ James noted that in the dialogue

²⁵ H. G. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. D. Linge, vol. Original Work Published 1977 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xxi.

²⁶ Marin, ‘Winner Take All?’, 501–10.

between 'the church and the world', the church '*has had*' to adopt a combative stance (italics mine). There was an inevitability in his language.

There was one lone voice that spoke positively about a conversation between a Baptist pastor and an LGBTQIA+ couple about same-sex marriage. Lyn (P) said: 'We talked it through, it was a really lovely conversation'. Most participants described the public debate during the plebiscite as an area of visceral tension conducted with poor communication, forcing people to take sides. American legal scholar, Cass Sunstein, noted the predictability with which 'members of a deliberating group ... move toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by the members' pre-deliberation tendencies.'²⁷ This was also an observation by Abigail (P), who discussed the public sphere of the conversation and the tensions she felt over the media's involvement in the dialogue, particularly in social media streams. She concluded: 'Of course, the media amplifies it. In the wider world, you [the church] can either be for them or against them [LGBTQIA+]. There is this polarisation of perspectives that is too simple; it's too simple.'

Colliding Perspectives

Many participants experienced a visceral tension in the colliding of different perspectives. They could not see a positive outcome to starting a conversation over their sacred values, which they knew they would not negotiate. All they could see was discord, partly due to negative or painful experiences they had already endured in the LGBTQIA+ dialogue happening in Baptist churches. Lyn (P) explained the problem when horizons collide: 'We can't be afraid to look like it is "us and them" because it *is* "us and them" until we become "them".' By saying this, she succinctly summarised Habermas and Gadamer's theories. Both theorists agree that it is by dialoguing with the other's perspective over differences that a new shared meaning happens. For Habermas, it is the force of a better argument that bridges

²⁷ Cass R. Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 74.

the gap between ‘us and them’ to create an agreement.²⁸ Gadamer believes shifting focus to examine another’s horizon leads to a different interpretation and, eventually, a new agreement.²⁹ However, neither of these men achieved their goal when they debated their different theoretical approaches. The debate, known as the Gadamer and Habermas Controversy, ironically—considering their expertise in addressing differences—left them further apart.³⁰ This was one of the fears of participants: that opening the dialogue would create division and polarise churches and their members.

Lyn said, ‘It is us and them until we become them.’ But what happens if someone does not become ‘them’? This is one of the critiques of Gadamer’s theory. In the fusion of horizons, Gadamer fails to consider that while there may be a shared understanding of what each other is saying, there may not be shared evaluation or agreement. Gadamer does seem to concede this point when he suggests: ‘understanding reaches its full potential only when the fore-meanings that it begins with are not arbitrary.’³¹ His dialogue theory is founded on the principle that dialogue is ‘questions and answers and not assertions’. Keeping inquiry as the goal for dialogue helps explain the differences between Gadamer and his critics. Gadamer argues that the aim is to understand the other’s perspective and work together towards a consensus on understanding and meaning.³² However, Veronica Vasterling concludes that it may be that the views are ‘too divergent’ and maybe ‘even

²⁸ Habermas, 25.

²⁹ Vessey, 534.

³⁰ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Michael Kelly, ‘The Gadamer/Habermas Debate Revisited: The Question of Ethics,’ *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 14, no. 3–4 (1988), <https://doi.org/10.1177/019145378801400308>.

³¹ Gadamer, 267.

³² Gadamer calls the goal of dialogue ‘Sache’; Kelly, 371; Joel Weinsheimer and Hans Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

incommensurable.³³ Vasterling's could prove to be the stronger argument when it comes to dialoguing sacred values and identity issues within a Baptist context. The fears of splitting churches and the Baptist movement into those for and against including LGBTQIA+ persons in Baptist churches, and the complexity of dialoguing different perspectives intrinsic to identity and values could be why some Baptists prefer to stay safe within a church filled with like-minded opinions.³⁴

However, Gadamer, Habermas, and Stephen Covey agree that the journey of fusing horizons allows for creativity, possibility, and growth. For the Baptist movement, the important question is not what could be lost in the journey of 'questions and answers' in understanding differing horizons. It is what opportunities could be missed in not engaging with different perspectives. Samuel (Q) argued this point:

I think it's becoming obvious that the continuing approach of the church is anything but satisfactory. [It needs] a serious rethink of the way the church engages, not that the church changes its fundamental view that's not even the question; the question is ... willingness to listen and learn and share. The way the church conducts itself, these are things that have suffered a great deal, to the detriment of GLBT (*sic*) and the churches detriment because when people feel that what they contribute to the ministry of their church is compromised, they don't contribute in the full way they could. It would add immeasurably to the blessing of the church if they could.

Richard J Bernstein—known for his interdisciplinary approach that merges philosophical traditions—examined the possible causes for the conflict between Gadamer and Habermas.³⁵ His work highlights significant differences between Gadamer and Habermas, suggesting that while they might fuse horizons on one issue, multiple

³³ Vasterling, 166.

³⁴ Also see Bennett's autobiography on the pressures to 'chose sides' and the fears of the repercussions and judgments of opinions; David Bennett, *A War of Loves: The Unexpected Story of a Gay Activist Discovering Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 178–79.

³⁵ Bernstein, 44–55.

unresolved issues would still remain.³⁶ The data research showed that participants similarly viewed initiating a conversation over differing perspectives as akin to peeling back the layers. Looking from the standpoint of the participants—and their expectation that a ‘fusing’ of horizons would only result in magnifying the difference—probably explains why many of the participants started the dialogue from the expectation that ‘other’ would have to join their perspective or stay as ‘other’.

Considering Habermas and Gadamer’s debate and the participants’ experiences that an agreement is found through ‘the force of a better argument that bridges the gap’ or the fusing to form new horizons still appears idealistic. For example, David (P) explained how seeing from an unfamiliar perspective changed his non-affirming position. He shared his affirming perspective with those he trusted at his church, and some were willing to listen. However, some remained adamant in their views. David explained:

One of them told me I was wrong and God’s not in it, and I’m making a very big mistake, and others sort of more respected my views but did not think this was going to be good for anybody ... it was really clear to me I had to resign. It was the only way forward that would keep the church somehow intact, this little struggling church.

Given the multitude of emerging differences demanding individual consideration reinforces dialogue theorists’ argument for the necessity of commitment to stay in the conversation.³⁷ However, Bernstein argues that in any ongoing debate, differences tend to be highlighted and ‘even exaggerated’. Yet, there is also the emergence of common agreement and insights. While this does not diminish the importance of their differences, clarifying implicit agreement may reveal our differences as a matter of ‘emphasis’ rather than insurmountable divisions.³⁸ Recognising that differences in opinion can often be a matter of emphasis rather than fundamental divisions can promote more constructive,

³⁶ Bernstein, 182–97; Kelly, 384.

³⁷ Kent and Taylor, 29–30.

³⁸ Bernstein, 59–60.

inclusive, and empathetic dialogues in the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches. It can lead to better problem-solving and consensus-building that address challenges and find solutions.

The strength of Gadamer's fusing of horizons is found in the process of the conversation—it results in 'greater articulation' and 'greater sympathy for each other's views'—and not necessarily in the resolution of the disagreement.³⁹ Empathy for each other's views is a better aim as Brené Brown argues: 'empathy fuels connection' while sympathy fosters a power imbalance that 'drives disconnection.'⁴⁰ The LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches is likely to generate controversy and numerous layers of differences that will need to be individually addressed. However, engaging with another perspective can also create empathy and the possibility of exchanging judgement for deep listening. It is a vulnerable space because there is no agenda for how the dialogue will end. There is only the potential to connect, build bridges, and possibly create something new. Gadamer's word 'fusion' is apt because there are no agenda outcomes for 'new'—only that the act of listening influenced and changed the community. Samuel (Q) said he had encountered some Baptists who were operating in this space:

I could name other individuals who have reminded me that there is such a thing as a true authentic community of followers of Jesus who are actually not about exclusion but are about finding God in the mysteries, and the travails, and the unanswered questions, the searching and the journeying, being far more interested in the process than they are in having concrete answers ... and [they] may never have concrete answers and yet their commitment is to people, despite all the many shades of grey that that [commitment] throws up. These are really inspiring people, and I was really encouraged by that.

³⁹ David Vessey is known for his interests in hermeneutics and Gadamer: Vessey, 525.

⁴⁰ Brené Brown et al., *Brené Brown on Empathy* (<https://www.thersa.org/video/shorts?search=empathy&page=1>: The RSA, 2013).

Agenda Outcomes: Persuading to Switch Sides

The agenda of persuading others to change their perspectives emerged as a significant obstacle in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. For example, Annie (Q) shared her problems over the agenda from the non-affirming wing of the church that ‘set up a a choice’ between faith or sexual and gender orientation. She responded to the agenda:

I think I said something like, ‘I am done with church people; I’m just going to be an atheist.’ Which is a lie; I can’t be an atheist. I can’t be any of the things that I am not, and that’s the problem when it is set up as a choice between being a lesbian or trans (I don’t really define who I am), a choice between who I am, and God and I can’t have both.

Participants from a non-affirming perspective also included ‘agenda’ as a specific topic that should be addressed. Liz (P) put it succinctly as she spoke about affirming LGBTQIA+ persons being members or leaders of Baptist churches: ‘The point of tension for me would be the agenda they would want to bring.’ John (B) struggled with the liminal tension of not wanting LGBTQIA+ persons to ‘push’ an agenda and their need to fight for a voice in the dialogue:

My only concern would have been what I might say to them if they pushed their barrow. I mean, you’ve gotta view some of this from the perspective of the LGBTQ people, and they’re struggling to find their position in society. They’re struggling to get recognition. Society has made significant steps in that arena. But you do see a lot of people try to, as it were, push it in your face.

Sarah (B) openly disclosed her fear regarding the perceived agenda of a gay couple who visited her church:

I don’t know how it happened but before we knew it, there was this, like, this panic, and I was a part of it going, ‘Oh my gosh, they’re gay!’ As though there was something incredibly fearful about them, that they had the potential to harm ... this is my reaction back then—I had a son ... he must’ve been like 18-19. And there was quite a few guys around that age. And I remember just thinking, ‘Are they all safe? Are they going to try and pursue these lovely, blossoming young men?’ And so there was this absolute panic around, ‘And how do we respond?’ and, ‘Oh my gosh, we’ve been infiltrated.’ It was just a very fear-filled response but

also with a little bit of mockery to it, like laughing at it, I guess ... I felt quite justified at the time, like we were gatekeepers of the church.

Sarah continued: 'Anyway. So that was interesting, yep, [I have] no responses like that anymore. It's a huge change in my spirit.' That she attributed her altered perspective to her capacity to view through the lens of LGBTQIA+ experiences is an illustration of Gadamer's theory of horizons.

Theory U: Experiencing Presencing and Absencing

The awareness of new and different horizons was illustrated by two distinct participant responses, which can be characterised through Theory U as 'presencing' and 'absencing'. Presencing happens when a person suspends their habitual judgements to see from the other perspective at the intersection of the new horizon with the old. It requires letting go of the need to control, allowing the envisioning of a new possibility and entering a liminal space betwixt and between. Presencing results in embodying the new. It is simply seeing differently because the standpoint has shifted to a lesser or greater degree. In 'absencing', individuals confine themselves to echo chambers of like-minded opinions, resulting in non-participation in dialogue, an absence of relationship with those with a differing perspective, and a closed mind to new possibilities.⁴¹

During the interviews, Richard (B) shared a powerful allegory of his experience of absencing. He said:

All this talk about the gay movement was just a very unnatural sort of thing ... how I picture it is as a little speck on the horizon [which] become a bit more of a cloud ... a bit more noticeable but still very distant. I thought very avoidable for me, my family, and the church ... [time] went by, I noticed that cloud had become a little bit closer, to the point where I started to feel a little bit more threatened in my world because I could see things around me

⁴¹ Scharmer; Bruce Hunsberger and Lynne M. Jackson, 'Religion, Meaning, and Prejudice,' *Journal of Social Issues* 61, no. 4 (2005), 34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00433.x>.

changing. So, my world, including my young family, myself, and my church, just that sense of being threatened.

Richard confessed he viewed LGBTQIA+ identities as ‘out there’ and as ‘not going to be part of my world. I can stay in a safe place.’ He described how he ‘suddenly’ realised (although he recognised that the ‘suddenly’ probably took years) that ‘the approaching cloud’ of LGBTQIA+ issues and discourse was a mist around him:

the cloud ... that I thought I could avoid ... I realised was a mist which was surrounding me. I couldn't clearly see my way out of it ... I couldn't see even a way through it.

This is a very graphic picture, and one wonders if others on either side of the debate also feel that the relational dynamic between LGBTQIA+ and Baptists is an unnavigable mist.

Richard's story demonstrated the impact absencing has on individuals and communities. He described how absencing prevented meaningful dialogue and deepened existing divides. It also impacted his resilience, preventing him from responding effectively to complex challenges and change. Richard's story would have been depressing had it ended there; fortunately, it did not. Instead, he attributed finding a pathway through the blinding mist to him presencing himself in the dialogue—from diverse perspectives—initiated by his Baptist church.

Tessa (Q), when facing a challenge to her existing way of thinking, also choose to ‘presence’ herself in the discourse with the new perspective and embarked on a liminal journey. Tessa, who is same-sex attracted, said that her pastor has encouraged her to embrace the feelings of ‘wilderness’ caused by the liminal space. Tessa described it as a four-stage journey: (1) Accepting the wilderness. (2) Acknowledging her identity and sexual orientation while simultaneously allowing herself to be unsure of her ‘Creator’s will’. (3) Recognising it is a journey. (4). Allowing time to ‘really think things through.’ For Tessa, staying in the liminality betwixt and between was a positive experience which gave her peace and the opportunity to plan her next step. She said: ‘I think something that I’m

realising is that it's okay to stand alone and actually be in the wilderness in who you are.' Saying this — 'to stand alone' — was her way of recognising that she was not 'conforming' to the expected norms of her church, and she acknowledged the difficulties of this. However, she juxtaposed her sense of being separated from the church with the actualities of being encouraged by the church pastor to 'be in the wilderness'; 'to be okay with not being okay'; and to 'be okay to stand up for your unique set of values.' Her story was interesting because nothing was resolved and she had drawn no conclusions. It was an example of a church community living with tension and difference.

Abigail (P) also shared an example of walking through the issue of unresolved tension:

There is a situation with someone who would clearly identify as part of the LGBT community. And so trying to walk with them as they do wrestle with a sense of can you publicly and strongly identify with both communities? And that's interesting on both sides as it's not just will the church accept me if I am a member of a fairly public, I don't know what words, I'm not trying to use their words, fairly public and political LGBT community. But also the other side; will this public and political group accept me if they know I am part of a church or will they see that as mutually exclusive ... That hasn't ended so I don't know how that is going to go.

Abigail defined the journey as walking 'in relationship with them'; 'mostly listening'; and 'asking them good questions to help them think it through.' She said: '[I'm] not trying to impose anything on them. I'm not trying to come to a solution but trying actually help them see some of the tensions and the challenges.' Her approach appears to fit with Gadamer's fusing of horizons and contains elements of *Dadirri* and the practice of deep listening, which advocates listening and relistening to understand the other person's perspective. Once there is a mutual understanding of the issue, a course of action is agreed upon and implemented. Abigail confessed that she does not know how the story will end; however, it does appear to be (to use Gadamer's words) 'a genuine conversation'.⁴²

⁴² Linda L. Binding and Dianne M. Tapp, 'Human Understanding in Dialogue: Gadamer's Recovery of the Genuine,' *Nursing Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2008), 124, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.146-69X.2007.00338.x>.

Despite the predominant language of ‘uncomfortable’, ‘tension’ and ‘wrestling’ used to describe liminal space, there were instances of individuals embracing the betwixt and between. For example, Fynn said: ‘This is our perspective, and our perspectives are always incomplete. So, we do look through a faded mirror. We don’t get a complete and clear perspective’ and Edward (B) spoke of his preference for ‘grey thinking’ instead of ‘black-and-white.’ James (P), who advocated for wrestling in the liminal space, said:

To not wrestle with the call to holiness, grappling with the biblical picture of male and female, marriage, faithfulness, to say those things don’t matter, is misguided. On the flipside of the coin to be so hard-line that you say this is right and this is wrong and there’s no room for the grey area of learning is also wrong. We need to be in a position where we are wrestling.

An example was given of a Baptist church teaching on liminal space. However, it was a topic introduced by Samuel, who is same-sex attracted and would bring his liminality experiences into his sermons. He said:

I would go where others wouldn’t dare to go and ask questions that had no easy answer ... But more to the point may not even have an answer ... [it] is one of life’s mysteries that we need to wrestle with. And helping people to understand that the place of tension is not a bad thing, it’s a healthy place to be. It keeps us alert, it keeps us sensitive and empathic to others, it keeps us humble and reminds us that the foundations of our own knowledge are far more subjective than we actually give them credit for.

The colliding of horizons offered participants the opportunity to presence or absence themselves from the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches. For some participants, absencing was the faithful response, demonstrating their commitment to the Scriptures. Those who chose to presence themselves in the dialogue experienced a journey of liminality and doublemindedness that did not quickly provide answers or resolve differences in perspectives. Instead, they described liminality as ‘uncomfortable’. However, most participants who opted to presence themselves in the dialogue and embrace liminality expressed their preference for the uncomfortable experience over the exclusion of those who viewed life from a different horizon.

Unsettling Experiences of Liminality in Theory U

The responses of ‘presencing’ and ‘absencing’ happening in the LGBTQIA+ discourse were a cause of tension and anxiety for many. William (B) (when speaking about his non-affirming doctrines versus the reality of having gay friends) said: ‘I think I sit in that schizophrenic confusion place.’ Journeying liminality is illustrated by a ‘U’ shape because when a catalyst hits and challenges a person to think differently, it is followed by the feeling of sliding down the lefthand side of the ‘U’. Joseph (P) described his liminal experience of when an LGBTQIA+ person joined his church and became the catalyst that made him ‘process some of this.’ In retrospect, he confessed that tackling the theological questions and the practical and pastoral implications was difficult: ‘Unfortunately, I had to do [make some decisions] on the fly, and so it’s not the way I would have liked to have done it.’ Joseph felt he should have studied the diverse theological perspectives on LGBTQIA+ orientations in a non-pressured situation. This is an astute observation. Embracing the liminal experience of engaging with different perspectives on LGBTQIA+ orientations, however uncomfortable, must be preferable to working out the implications of a theological perspective on unsuspecting LGBTQIA+ persons attending the church. This aligns with the views of theology scholar Donald Beggs, who argues that questions and doublemindedness about faith is the opportunity ‘to deliberate and act well.’⁴³

When a catalyst challenges belief systems, doublemindedness can ensue. Nowhere was this more poignant than when people shared stories of supporting family members exploring their gender and sexual orientations. It was a place of visceral tension for many. Paul (B) reiterated the word ‘tension’ in his narrative of his journey with his queer child, and he used it to introduce each new chapter of the evolving story. Paul spoke of ‘internal tension ... when your child doesn’t necessarily fit the stereotypes’ through to the external tensions with schools and church. He shared his struggle:

⁴³ Beggs, 430.

I guess I found myself resisting those urges to try and steer him in the way I thought society or our church environment would have him go. We wanted him to explore the interests he was passionate about. That's been the parental environment we've tried to [foster].

Louise (B) and Paul (B) are married and narrated their experiences together. Louise explained their posture towards their child in his formative years: 'We didn't encourage it but we didn't suppress it either.' Paul added: 'sometimes that was counter to some of the advice that was shared.'

These statements illustrate the wrestling parents go through when navigating not only their expectations and responses but also those of people around them. It also highlights the loneliness experienced in the liminal space. Although Paul and Louise agreed on their posture towards their queer child, they had their own stories of the liminal journey that each differed from the other's experience. Additionally, those around them were not wrestling with a changing perspective. Their advice came from the non-affirming viewpoint that Paul and Louise were fully aware of but that no longer gave them answers to the complexities they were facing. This added to the loneliness as there seemed to be no one to talk to without being interrogated over their exploring of a different perspective. Equally, nobody was as invested in the relationship with their child as Paul and Louise were. Their commitment to staying in dialogue with their son was more important than discussing differences over perspectives. Hearing their story was challenging and humbling because they put love and relationship above every other consideration. The challenge was wondering what a conversation about including LGBTQIA+ persons within the Baptist movement could look like if relationships were the utmost priority.

When participants narrated their internal tensions, it carried a sense of discomfort and disquiet. For example, Liz (B), shared the effect of the transitioning of a family member as the catalyst for her entering a liminal space and reflecting on gender identity issues that she had never previously considered. She said: 'I've never had to do this before; this sits uncomfortably with me ... I do not know how you reconcile those things.' Her descriptor

'uncomfortable' is apt. Comfort zones are internal boundaries by which people make sense of their 'individual identity ... and their complex relationships'.⁴⁴ Sarah (B) succinctly explained the experience:

I think there's been conflict with our own lack of resolution over things, so the conflict is more internal. I don't believe there's been any conflict in the way our church has handled it with my own convictions. I would say it's conflicted with my own internal comfort zone, comfort place, my own resistance to having to think in those spaces.

Sarah's confession of her resistance to having to think in those spaces echoes Rundel's critique that the influence of Evangelical teaching within the church leaves its members unable to face questions and uncomfortable journeying through the liminal space.⁴⁵ Rundel argues that to ask questions and not know the answers about Scriptures was interpreted by many evangelicals as failing and journeying in liminality, and doubt was akin to breaking or losing faith in God. Sarah shared how questioning doctrine was a visceral tension for her because of her expectation that she should know the answers: 'This is what I think has repelled Christians on this topic particularly, is that we actually don't have the answers. We actually don't.' Sarah's comments suggest that there is comfort in staying with the church's traditional teaching on LGBTQIA+ issues as, at the very least, it avoids the challenge created by a lack of definitive answers.

What was striking about Sarah's comment was her permission to *enter* the liminal space and *stay* in the uncomfortable space of not knowing the answers. Other participants experienced the same journey. Patrick (B) said:

In the church environment that I'm a part of, difficult discussions are welcome. And that's fantastic ... I don't feel pressured to adhere to someone else's view on a matter. I think we're given space to think and explore. So, I'm grateful for that. It's a positive experience.

⁴⁴ Rokelle Lerner, *Living in the Comfort Zone: The Gift of Boundaries in Relationships* (Florida: Health Communications, 1995).

⁴⁵ Rundel, 158.

The colliding of diverse perspectives and the decision to embrace a liminal journey has been described in this section as a place of confusion, questions and no answers, doublemindedness, internal tension, and loneliness. It is no wonder so many of the participants avoided the space by absencing from the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Yet, all of these participants who engaged and stayed in the dialogue spoke of the value and growth they experienced in the liminal journey. As Patrick said, 'an environment where difficult discussions are welcome, that's fantastic.'

Summary

In this chapter, the data results dialogued with Gadamer's concept on the fusing of horizons. Gadamer argues that personal horizons are limited but not fixed and therefore, in the challenge of differing perspectives is the opportunity to see from another person's standpoint and broaden one's own horizon. This is the fusing of horizons and the creating of something new. The chapter examined the way participants engaged with perspectives from different horizons. Employing Theory U, it investigated participants' responses, categorising them as either 'presencing' or 'absencing'. The findings showed that participants who chose 'presencing' and allowed different perspectives to challenge their understanding expanded their discourse beyond their own horizon. This initiated a liminal journey, a betwixt-and-between state in their thinking. This transitional phase involved discomfort and a sense of cognitive dissonance.

The findings revealed an awareness of the privileging of specific perspectives within the Baptist community, granting some Baptists an unearned advantage in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. However, some participants acknowledged this privilege as an inherent aspect of group membership. It was recognised that becoming part of any community necessitates embracing the groups' values, beliefs, and shared faith identity. Several Baptist participants emphasised the significance of joining a faith community that upheld similar theological perspectives and values to their own. The absence of an incentive for dialogue with differing

perspectives can result in a lack of motivation to actively seek out alternative viewpoints, leading to a stagnancy in the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches.

Identifying that privileging certain beliefs was intertwined with the concept of belonging shed light on why some Baptists do not prioritise dialoguing with perspectives that differ from their own. The power dynamics within a church, particularly when the majority shares the same perspective, often discourage engaging in dialogue with people with different viewpoints. This was possibly due to a level of complacency within the majority, as their beliefs and values are validated and reinforced by the group. However, the research also highlighted the significant anxiety for many of the participants regarding LGBTQIA+ discourse. There was a belief that having the conversation would create discord and might irrevocably break relationships. However, such a belief failed to acknowledge that this was already the experience for many on either side of the debate. Participants shared stories throughout the interview of the existing discord and the breakdown of relationships.

However, the findings also showed that for some Baptists, recognising the privileging of particular perspectives acted as the catalyst for re-evaluating the existing consensus within their church community. These participants were aware of how privileging their perspective had a detrimental impact on the dynamics of the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Notably, the focus of the LGBTQIA+ debate differed for these Baptists. Rather than emphasising issues such as safeguarding purity laws, sexual ethics, and fears of a slippery slope towards moral and theological relativism, their primary concern was the inclusion and exclusion practices of Baptist churches towards its LGBTQIA+ members.

Participants were concerned that the consequences of privileging specific beliefs resulted in the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals and their advocates. The participants' focus was the significant impact exclusion and ostracism had on actual individuals. The study showed that the consequences of privileging specific perspectives were not abstract or theoretical but deeply tangible and personal. Real people, with real emotions and lived

experiences, were enduring the pain and suffering caused by exclusion from conversations and the church community due to the privileging of certain beliefs. Individuals, who should ideally be embraced and supported within Baptist communities, were instead experiencing marginalisation, discrimination, and emotional distress.

The consequences of excluding people stood in direct contradiction to the deeply ingrained values of inclusion within Baptist theology of freedom of conscience. The act of excluding individuals based on the privileging of certain perspectives fundamentally contradicted the core values of acceptance, tolerance, and the open embrace of diverse viewpoints that are integral to Baptist theology. By failing to acknowledge and address this issue, Baptist churches risk perpetuating a form of exclusion that contradicts their fundamental principles. Consequently, the need to address the existing culture of privileging perspectives within the LGBTQIA+ discourse is a call for Baptist communities to recognise the tangible pain and harm caused by excluding differences in perspectives. To address this challenge, it is essential for Baptist churches to actively foster a more compassionate and inclusive approach that prioritises openness to diverse perspectives and a commitment to meaningful dialogue. It is only by recognising and intentionally listening to LGBTQIA+'s experiences of exclusion, embracing it as a concern, and taking deliberate steps to mitigate it that the Baptist community can fulfill its intrinsic value of inclusion.

The research findings also revealed that not all participants experienced Gadamer's fusion of horizons theory, suggesting that during disagreements understanding another's perspective can broaden personal horizons and lead to a new shared and mutually agreed-upon understanding. The research data indicated that while participants acknowledged alternative perspectives, there was not always a convergence of understanding between the two views. Instead of engaging in a liminal journey that challenged beliefs, some participants maintained two distinct perspectives. The absence of intentional dialogue between LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates and affirming and non-affirming

perspectives on LGBTQIA+ faith resulted in a like-minded discourse.⁴⁶ The findings highlighted the importance of intentional engagement with differing perspectives. However, it also revealed a noticeable trend of avoidance or distancing from differing perspectives in the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches, as has been explored in Chapter 6.

Overall, the effect of applying Theory U to the data resulted in an emphasis on the importance of cultivating empathy and awareness of different perspectives and experiences to foster collaboration, innovation, and positive change. Additionally, the findings highlighted two key components, agreed upon by the participants, to support ongoing dialogues with those holding different perspectives.

First was a commitment to a close relationship above every disagreement. Participants with LGBTQIA+ families or those in a close relationship with an LGBTQIA+ person exemplified this because they refused to break the relationship. The action and attitudes of these participants also revealed a commitment to dialoguing directly with LGBTQIA+ persons and those coming from a different perspective. This starkly contrasted with those reverting to the comfort of absencing into the echo chamber of like-minded opinions.

Second, the research data demonstrated that a church culture that actively encourages questions and opens conversations where there are divergent views encouraged the participants to embrace the liminal journey. Those who understood the concept of liminality were comfortable in being uncomfortable with the lack of definitive answers to questions arising from the dialogue between the familiar and the unfamiliar. For many, opting for the uncomfortable space of liminality was preferable to excluding from the discourse those whose perspectives differed from their own.

⁴⁶ Scharmer, 34.

However, the liminal journey is uncomfortable, especially for those who feel that questioning their biblical understanding is akin to a lack of faith in God. Therefore, using biblical themes such as journey, exile, desert, or pilgrimage can offer a commonality of language to encourage the exploration of the unfamiliar and serve as a solution to this problem of avoiding the liminal journey. Accepting the liminal journey of 'betwixt and between' has the potential to replace fear around questioning faith with understanding by framing the uncomfortable journey of questioning as a necessary and constructive aspect of spiritual growth.

Committing to the liminal process has the power to deconstruct and reconstruct a person's thinking, making it a catalyst for change. It does not necessarily mean adopting the other person's perspective, and people may hold the same beliefs as they did prior to the challenge of a different opinion. However, if embraced, the liminal journey can expand one's worldview, cultivate empathy, and foster open communication across diverse perspectives. It has the power to act as a catalyst that can lead to the emergence of novel ways of thinking and acting in the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

In contrast, absencing from the dialogue only postpones the inevitable challenges that arise when engaging with colliding horizons. In the current LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches, the churches would be better served by acknowledging that clashes over different perspectives are an inherent part of any community. Consequently, focusing on equipping Baptist leaders to navigate these encounters and facilitate the fusion of horizons will be a constructive and progressive step towards enriching the LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Baptist movement.

Discussing the Influence of Scripture

LGBT faith in a Baptist church? Ah. It's almost like asking you, in the old days, 'How would I describe a Roman Catholic being a Christian,' isn't it? Oh dear. —Rose

≈

I present as an anomaly ... And I've not found that an uncommon thing. People are looking at me saying: 'Hang on, when you speak, you speak with such engagement, and you know the Scriptures, and you obviously love God but you're gay, and it doesn't make sense. — Brandon

≈

My heart, everything within me, wants to say: 'Absolutely, yes' [to theologically affirming LGBTQIA+ lifestyle]. But there is something stopping me. Is that my hang-ups, or is that my biblical perspective, or is that this kind of thing of God within me saying, 'No'? I don't know. —Ashton

The primacy of the Scriptures, which is the fundamental concept in Christian theology that emphasises the authority and central importance of the Bible in matters of faith, doctrine, and practice, is a foundational value for Baptists, and therefore, it featured prominently in the interviews.¹ It was a focal topic for the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches, with participants repeatedly returning to their understanding of the Scriptures to either explain or process their thinking.² Stanley Grenz describes the Baptist tradition as having a 'non-negotiable commitment to the Bible ... for individual and corporate life.'³ Carol (B) illustrated this: 'I always go back to the Bible; I mean, that's what I've been taught. You know, we have a Bible for specific reasons, teaching us how to live the way of God.'

¹ Tom Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2013).

² Schlehofer, Omoto, and Adelman; Hood, 309–11.

³ Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation*, 82.

Participants used the Scriptures to explain the foundation for their stance on LGBTQIA+ discourse. However, the Scriptures were more than a matter of perspective or biblical interpretation; they were a means of sharing participants' core identity and sacred values. These sacred values were seen as non-negotiable as they conveyed the participants' understanding of their relationship and position before God.⁴

This chapter examines the influence of the biblical Scriptures and the way they are interpreted in the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches. The findings confirm the dominance of the non-affirming theological position on the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Non-affirming theology is the belief that sexual and gender identities that do not conform to the church's traditional teaching on cisgender, heterosexual relationships are not fully accepted or validated theologically—and therefore, LGBTQIA+ persons will be excluded from aspects of church life.⁵ The chapter discusses the influence of non-affirming theology on the structure of the current LGBTQIA+ discourse, particularly the implications of power. It examines the way viewing the LGBTQIA+ discourse through the lens of non-affirming theology applied in practice, particularly for same-sex relationships, and the expectation of celibacy for LGBTQIA+ persons. It also discusses LGBTQIA+ persons' experiences of 'mixed marriages'—a phrase used to describe the marriage of LGBTQIA+ persons to a heterosexual, cisgender person.

The findings in this chapter reveal some Baptists' dissatisfaction with an affirming/non-affirming debate that was seen as too narrow a basis for discussing the complexities of including LGBTQIA+ persons in their local church. The research also found dissatisfaction with the welcoming but not affirming posture adopted by Baptist churches

⁴ Atran and Axelrod. These authors identified the difficulties of attempting to reframe sacred values: 'The difficulty in reframing issues that involve sacred values lies in the people's general unwillingness to concede that they will ever abandon, or even significantly change, their attachment to a sacred value. Doing so would likely be seen as tantamount to abandoning or altering core social identity'.

⁵ Nelson, 'Homosexuality,' 272.

towards its LGBTQIA+ members. The chapter discusses the disingenuous nature of saying ‘welcome’ when the church is only offering conditional acceptance that results in the exclusion—at least in some aspects of church life— of LGBTQIA+ individuals due to their sexual and gender orientations. The chapter employs dialogical pedagogy to interact with David Bohm’s examination of the strengths and weaknesses of tradition in dialogue and Miroslav Volf’s theology of embrace.⁶ It concludes with a summary of the main findings from the research into the influence of Scripture on the current LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches.

Interpreting Scriptures: The Influence of Tradition and Evangelicalism

Baptists believe that individuals and local congregations have the freedom to interpret the Scriptures through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. However, interpretation is also guided by the traditional teachings of the church to ensure that any new revelations are consistent with Baptist beliefs and values.⁷ Abigail (P) explained why the historical tradition influenced her theological thinking:

I do my theology in a context of a community that has existed a long time before I got here. And that has done some very good thinking. And who am I to think that I can suddenly come along and have a better idea than all the people who have gone before?

Evangelicalism, which emphasises biblical authority, personal conversion, and evangelism, is also an influence on the dialogue. In the interviews, some Baptist participants self-identified as ‘Evangelical’ and the participants frequently categorised BCSA as ‘evangelical’, often supplemented with ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional’.⁸ Roger E. Olson, an

⁶ Bohm, McCoy, and Krishnamurti; Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*; Volf, ‘Faith, Pluralism, and Public Engagement.’

⁷ Stephen Holmes, *Listening to The Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

⁸ BCSA: Baptist Churches of South Australia, ‘Beliefs and Values’.

American Baptist theologian, argues that conservative evangelicals pursue 'rational certainty to support faith ... by defending tradition and propositional revelation in a relatively aggressive manner.'⁹ Though it is unlikely that participants from the Evangelical tradition would describe themselves as 'aggressive,' Olson's emphasis on rational certainty and defence of tradition corresponds with the way the Baptist interviewees portrayed and practise their faith.

Affirming and Non-Affirming Baptist Theology

The dominant theological perspective in Baptist churches, influenced by traditional teachings and evangelicalism, is 'non-affirming' towards LGBTQIA+ orientations. Non-affirming theology is the belief that sexual and gender identities that do not conform to the church's traditional teaching on cisgender, heterosexual relationships are not fully accepted or validated theologically and therefore, an LGBTQIA+ person will be excluded from aspects of church life.¹⁰ The extent of the exclusion depends on the individual church's policies on LGBTQIA+ membership criteria.¹¹ Within the theological discourse, 'non-affirming' represents one end of the spectrum. Affirming theology is its juxtaposition, which supports the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals, irrespective of sexuality or gender orientation, into the life and ministry of the church.¹²

⁹ Olson, 52.

¹⁰ Nelson, 'Homosexuality,' 272.

¹¹ Church Clarity (www.churchclarity.org/) advocates for transparency on LGBTQIA+ policies in churches; it states: Non-affirming policies in churches place restrictions on individuals based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (e.g. people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer). Therefore, a church may welcome LGBTQIA+ people, but it will not ordain, hire, or marry LGBTQIA+ people, and LGBTQIA+ may experience restrictions from membership, leadership, and some volunteer roles.

¹² Scheitle, Merino, and Moore.

Possibility of an Affirming Church in BCSA

Due to the Baptist's valuing in the local church's autonomy, it is possible within the movement to have churches that hold both non-affirming and affirming theological positions towards LGBTQIA+ persons' inclusion in the church. There are affirming Baptist churches in other states, such as New South Wales and Victoria; however, there are currently no known affirming Baptist churches in South Australia. Some participants were unaware that an affirming church could join BCSA or that the Baptist movement could together agree to hold an affirming theological position.¹³ For example, Nathan (B) said:

It clearly states in the Bible that man should not go with man and woman should not go with woman. And hopefully, the Baptist Churches of South Australia hold to those values.

Kimberly (P) said: '[an affirming church in BCSA] is not at all an impossibility because of our freedom of conscience and autonomy of local churches.' However, Luke highlighted the problem with the Baptist's distinctive in the autonomy of the local church—that many Baptists do not understand or agree with the premise of the argument. Scott (B) explained what many of the Baptist participants were saying:

I don't fully agree that a local church should have full autonomy. I don't think that's right. If they want full autonomy, then you also can't be part of a community thing, as a part of an organisation, the two don't work. You either have a working together, or you've got full autonomy. So, I don't think it's possible to have both.

¹³ Participants were offered two options ways to participate; interviews conducted through questions or narrative interviews. One of the questions asked the participants their opinion on an affirming church being a member church of BCSA. Primarily, Baptist participants chose a question-style interview; LGBTQIA+ participants preferred narratives, and therefore their stories focused on their experiences rather than the governmental structure of BCSA. However, the data did show the views of Baptist members towards affirming theology and the possibility of an openly affirming church being a member of BCSA. Consequently, additional research from an LGBTQIA+ perspective is required to reach a conclusion on the issue of an affirming church joining BCSA.

For many participants, supporting the membership of an affirming church within BCSA came with conditions.¹⁴ For example, William (B) said affirming churches ‘should probably still be members of BCSA’ and added a qualifier: ‘There needs to be transparency with the other churches and that they [BCSA] are not going to be influenced by said affirming church.’ Lauren (B) contained the proviso that the affirming church was ‘preaching the gospel’ and that she did not have to ‘attend’ the church. She said: ‘I would have trouble going.’

The varying responses seen in the interviews to the possibility of an affirming church in BCSA suggested that orthodoxy is of greater value than the Baptist distinctives. This is a conclusion that Stephen Holmes—researcher on the Baptist movement—also argued. He stated that today’s Baptists tend to believe ‘there is one and only one meaning of any given text’, which—coupled with the fear of ‘the possibility of misreading the Bible’—places Baptists on a trajectory that moves today’s Baptists further away from the foundational Baptist values.¹⁵ The Baptist values in freedom for individuals and churches to govern themselves according to their conscience and the autonomy of the local church should mean that Baptists are well positioned to navigate dialogue over differences in biblical interpretations. However, judging from the interviews, BCSA would need to engage in extensive discussions on the value in the autonomy of the local church before using it as a framework for dialogue on including affirming churches in the movement. The data analysis showed that for many of today’s Baptists, the value of trusting a local church to agree on theology and praxis in its context is not an important part of the conversation. Therefore, to use the Baptist distinctive of the autonomy of the local church as the reason for including and not excluding an affirming church will make little sense to many Baptists.

¹⁴ Moon argues it is because people do not think in dichotomies; instead, individuals ‘change their minds, hold contradictory views, or have a perfectly coherent view that draws from more than one category’; Moon, ‘Beyond the Dichotomy: Six Religious Views of Homosexuality,’ 1218.

¹⁵ Holmes, 422.

Assumptions, such as Baptists agreeing on their values and distinctives, can derail dialogue before it even begins and highlights how important it is to listen and ensure everyone agrees on the foundational values the dialogue is launching from.

There is a notable discrepancy between the value of local church autonomy and the institution's use of power to regulate church actions as BCSA does not accredit LGBTQIA+ individuals who live an affirming lifestyle. Kimberly (P) was the only participant to reference BCSA's position on the issue:

I know that we have a policy in terms of pastors; that a person is not precluded from being a pastor if they are gay or lesbian but there is a preclusion if they are not celibate because of the example that it is seen to hold and because of the possibility of being seen to sanction behaviour that is not part of God's original created purpose.

Church autonomy means a church can employ an affirming pastor not accredited by BCSA and remain in BCSA. It is a Baptist distinctive that Vincent described as: 'the hire and fire [of senior leaders]; it's sort of a semi-independence from a higher authority ... in the movement.' However, an unaccredited pastor cannot vote on Baptist matters at a state or national level, conduct marriages, or notarise papers (such as passports) for their congregational members. There is an obvious distinction here that privileges non-affirming theology and relegates affirming churches to a second class. It also raises the important distinction between non-affirming churches that are celebrated within the Baptist movement and affirming churches that are given qualified acceptance.¹⁶

It was clear from the interviews that the possibility of accepting an affirming church would be partly motivated by an awareness that LGBTQIA+ Baptists needed a safe space where they were included. Yvette (B) reflected theologically on her support for an affirming church in BCSA, basing her decision on the praxis of love and the injustice of the power imbalance against LGBTQIA+ persons in LGBTQIA+ discourse: 'Don't put them in the

¹⁶ Nelson, 'Homosexuality,' 272.

minority box and say: “No, can’t do this until you do this.” Jesus never did that. Not that I’m aware of’. However, Sophia (B) addressed the temptation to believe that an affirming church within BCSA would be a quick-fix answer to the problems in the relational dynamics between the sides:

I wouldn’t have a problem with a theologically affirming church being a member of BCSA at all ... The really naughty part of me goes, ‘Excellent, they’ll all go there. Then we won’t have this problem.’ But that’s not good. I think, for me, I still need to figure out more what theologically affirming means for me. I know there are churches out there that are very affirming for gays to go to. And that’s great. And I want to be a church that anybody can go to, whether they’re gay, straight or whatever.

Important to this discussion are the views of the LGBTQIA+ participants who stated they were not looking to join a ‘pro-gay’ church; their reason for attending church was their faith, and sexual or gender orientations were secondary to that. Chloe (Q) said: ‘I never wanted to be a part of a faith that says: “I come here because they accept me because I’m gay.” It’s not what I was looking for.’ Kate (Q) agreed:

Apparently, they have got rainbow churches and things like that just for gay people. I do think it is getting a bit extreme. Now there is a gay Bible. We don’t need to change everything. Just teach people about us and ask for a bit of acceptance because, as a whole, we can all work together, I mean, we are one race.

Affirming Churches as Members of BCSA Debate

Some participants were opposed to an affirming church joining BCSA. Patrick (B; NQ) is a good example because he expounded on his ‘absolutely not’ position and demonstrated how other participants were framing the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. Patrick said:

Yeah, this is one that I do feel strongly about, actually. I would say, ‘No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.’ An ‘affirming church’ would be modelling and normalising a form of sexuality and relationship that is God-forbidden, yet believing it’s God-honouring. So, this is an area where I think that BCSA would need to draw the line and say, ‘No, we can’t allow this.’ It’s not a second-category interpretive grey area; it’s a third-category, ‘Is it a sin or not?’ area.

Patrick acknowledged that those holding an affirming theology do not agree with his interpretation of Scripture:

Granted, an affirming church does not see it as a sinful practice because they've revised their theology to allow for it ... I don't think it's a case of saying, 'Well, that's just our interpretation of this.' My take is that if you fall on the wrong side of this one, you're going against God's will.

Patrick reasoned his position through the historical tradition of the church's teaching. Although he acknowledged that tradition had not resolved the disagreements over doctrines such as 'baptism, women's ordinations, creation[ism]', he defined these as 'grey areas' for the church, whereas homosexuality was sinful behaviour. Patrick said:

I would describe it this way, if we hold to the standard view of the church that the sexual practices, I've mentioned are sinful, then an 'affirming church' would be kind of synonymous with a 'sinning church.' That is to say, it would be condoning sinful practices.'

However, an argument for 'grey' is based on a belief that the global church has reasoned an—albeit uneasy—compromise on differences in interpreting the Scriptures is flawed. This is demonstrated by the continuing egalitarian-versus-complementarian debate over gender roles, rifts over divorce, and the ordination of women that revealed the diversity of Scriptural interpretation in the Anglican Church.¹⁷ Equally, some BCSA member churches view women in senior pastor roles as heterodox and not as 'grey'. This presents a dichotomy. Why is a church with a different Scriptural interpretation over gender roles or creationism perceived as 'grey' and affirming theology is seen as sin?¹⁸

Many Baptists accept women's ordination or the inclusion of divorced and remarried persons in leadership within Baptist churches. It is a cause for hope in some and fear in others. The non-acceptance of changes to Scriptural interpretations may be a reason behind

¹⁷ Beck; Gunter Prüller-Jagenteufel, Sharon Bong, and Rita Perintfalvi, *Towards Just Gender Relations: Rethinking the Role of Women in Church and Society* (Göttingen, Germany: V&R Unipress, 2019), 289; Baker, "'It's a Sin": How Sex and Women Split the Anglican Church.'

¹⁸ See Brittain's research which also argues that the LGBTQIA+ discourse is about who has the power to decide orthodoxy; Brittain.

the non-negotiable attitude towards affirming churches stated by some in the interviews. Is the need to keep LGBTQIA+ affirming faith in the 'sin' camp based on the fear of the consequences and the concern that affirming theology will be accepted in the same way that gender equality and divorce/remarriage are? Mascord argues that the problem for Baptists is their culture, which has turned 'disputed matters into articles of faith'.¹⁹ It raises the question whether those Baptists who now believe divorce is a 'grey' would have journeyed through liminal thinking when the issue was black and white, and divorce was described as 'not in accordance with Nature.'²⁰ Kelly (BC) asked this same question:

I haven't asked enough of that group of people, but how do they understand the change of slavery, the change of women's role in the community? ... How do they understand that which was held as the holy grail of sin and righteousness, and now are promoting and participants in that? They license women to be pastors, to teach men! Even the head of Baptist ministries is a woman.

Of equal importance is exploring who holds the power to decide what constitutes a theological 'grey area' or an article of faith within the Baptist movement. It was Kelly again who raised the issue of 'unconscious biases' that are used to privilege a theological perspective. She said:

that's what makes me feel sick about it. I feel like God, Christianity, faith, the gospel are manipulated to promote a power of privilege. And that's so opposite of what my experience of faith and Christianity is about.

Those who get to decide whether LGBTQIA+ orientations are 'grey' or 'sin'—or something else—will hold power over the direction of the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches.

The difference in theological perspectives that BCSA has already faced over women holding leadership positions was cited as an argument for and against the inclusion of

¹⁹ Mascord, 71.

²⁰ Philip Whitwell Wilson, 'Divorce and the Church,' *The North American Review* 224, no. 837 (1927): 477.

affirming churches. BCSA accredits women in leadership, yet some BCSA-affiliated churches will not employ women in senior leadership roles. One participant saw this as an example of how BCSA already successfully holds the tension of disagreement. Another suggested the churches who disagree with BCSA's accreditation of women were 'finding it increasingly difficult' to belong to a movement when they 'believe the movement is wrong.' The tension over differences never goes away. The cost to the movement—whether the price concerned the possible loss of churches to BCSA or the price individuals would inevitably pay in facilitating the conversation—weighed on people's minds. Ian (B) addressed the personal cost of dialoguing for inclusion: 'My feeling is one of, can't be bothered with the hard work! (Laughs) It creates work, it creates relational work, it will create conflict, and none of us like that.' Kimberly (P) assessed the cost of an affirming church joining BCSA: 'There would be a struggle. And whether it would come to the point of a split in the movement, I would hope not. We've weathered other potentially divisive issues.'

Influence of Orthodoxy

For many participants, orthodoxy was highly valued, and therefore, the discourse was structured to stay within the hetero/cisgender norms. There was evidence in participants' answers of intratextual fundamentalism—that the Scriptures were inerrant, self-interpreting, authoritative, unchanging—and a desire for simple cognitive structures.²¹ When Nathan (B) said: 'My point of view is not only my point of view, you know. It should be everybody's point of view. If we follow the Bible, that's it. There's nothing else,' this conveyed the understanding that there is one orthodox way to interpret the Scriptures concerning LGBTQIA+ orientations. Rose (B) demonstrated this. She described how LGBTQIA+ persons in a Baptist church would have to be 'mentored ... and taught the Scriptures' from a non-affirming position. This illustrates that she had no expectation of

²¹ Muluk and Sumaktoyo, 224.

wrestling over the praxis of LGBTQIA+ faith in Baptist churches and how the discourse is already scripted to confirm to the non-affirming position. It also highlights how the non-affirming Baptists hold the power. The non-affirming position was seen as non-negotiable and there was no expectation of dialoguing over differences, only the belief of LGBTQIA+ persons and those with affirming theology would change their perspective.

Non-Affirming Privilege

The privilege of agreeing with the majority meant that generally, non-affirming Baptists did not explicitly state their theological position as they assumed others shared it. Participants with different perspectives clarified their position. This dichotomy revealed that non-affirming was the accepted norm while affirming theology required constant explanation and justification. Being part of the majority results in the comfortable space of not having to justify a position. Vincent (B) suggested: 'I guess there's safety in being right. Once you've made up your mind about something, you can fix your mindset, and then you're safe.'

This exemplified Buber's argument that 'I-It assumes a position before things but does not confront them in the current of reciprocity' and therefore is not a two-way, reciprocal relationship.²² Interpretations of Scripture are a sacred value for people forming part of their identity. Consequently, even unintentional subjugation operating in unconscious biases can deeply affect those on the receiving end, devaluing their personhood and hindering genuine two-way dialogue. Buber argues that people do not have to agree. They should, however, ensure that every person has room to disagree and remain accepted despite the diverging opinions:

The true turning of his person ... includes this ... acceptance ... such a confirmation does not mean approval, but no matter what I am against the other, by accepting him as my partner in genuine dialogue, I have affirmed him as a person ... if genuine dialogue is to arise ... he must be willing on each occasion to say what is really in his mind about the subject of

²² Buber, *I and Thou*, 70.

the conversation ... on each occasion, he makes the contribution of his spirit without reduction and without shifting his ground.²³

Genuine dialogue involves accepting someone as a person, without necessarily endorsing their views, and allows them to express their true thoughts without wavering. However, the privileging of the non-affirming perspective left little, if any room, in the LGBTQIA+ discourse for people to share their views. Consequently, individuals feel excluded from the discourse, and, more significantly, they feel a sense of personal rejection. The power differential between non-affirming and affirming theology currently happening in the LGBTQIA+ discourse dialogue within Baptist churches highlights the necessity of exposing the power bases before genuine dialogue can take place.

Essentialism versus Constructivism: An Example of Orthodoxy

An example of orthodoxy was seen in the discussions on the created order (the Creation Myths in Genesis 1–3) which established a non-negotiable, essentialist framework that governed sexual and gender identity.²⁴ For example, Lauren (B) said: ‘Biology, sex, gender are in fact the same thing. And while people may choose to interpret that differently, I don’t think we can mess with that.’

Research by Kelly et al. indicates a correlation between Christians who believe the Bible is ‘divine, authoritative, inerrant, timeless, and superior to other sacred texts’ and a tendency to ‘view non-traditional sexuality as simply a matter of personal choice and inconsistent with God’s design for sexuality.’²⁵ Their findings were consistent with the data

²³ Blumenfeld-Jones, 116.

²⁴ The essentialist position states that gender identity and sexual orientation are innately binary and heterosexual, a biological/genetic predisposition, universal across both time and cultures; Stein; James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* (London: Mowbray, 1994).

²⁵ Heather L. Kelly et al., ‘Factors Influencing Christians’ Moral Appraisals of Nontraditional Sexuality,’ *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 37, no. 2 (2018): 169.

from this research. Essentialism's influence could be seen in the Baptists' moral theology, including categorising diverse gender and sexual identities as inconsistent with God's creation design for humanity with negative consequences for individuals and the community.²⁶ Ashton (B) reflected on the cost to LGBTQIA+ persons who deviate from God's innate design of male and female: 'Now, whether that's societal or whether that's biblical, who knows. But there does definitely seem to be a cost.'

Although not all churches or individuals hold an essentialist perspective, participants still considered such a perspective 'mainstream' for Baptists in SA. The social constructivist theory—advocated by queer theory—did not feature in the interviews, which raises questions on how its inclusion would influence the conversation.²⁷ Karma Chávez is a rhetorical critic specialising in the studies of people marginalised by existing power structures. She argues that non-engagement with queer theory gives power to the essentialist's argument, enabling it to set the boundaries and limits of the dialogue.²⁸ Insufficient knowledge of queer theory means that in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches, LGBTQIA+ persons must defend their orientations rather than assuming a mutual understanding that heterosexual and cisgender and LGBTQIA+ sexual and gender orientations are socially constructed. There is also the question whether engaging in the LGBTQIA+ discourse through the lens of essentialism reduces LGBTQIA+ persons to solely

²⁶ Hood.

²⁷ Annamarie Rustom Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 8–10. Also see Johnson on the reasons why 'queer studies must incorporate under its rubrics a praxis related to the sites of ... church'; E. Patrick Johnson, 'From Black Queer Studies Or Almost Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,' *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 (2000): 18–19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2000.0036>.

²⁸ Karma R. Chávez, 'Beyond Complicity: Coherence, Queer Theory, and the Rhetoric of the "Gay Christian Movement",' *Text and Performance Quarterly* 24, no. 3–4 (2004): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1046293042000312760>.

sexual beings rather than recognising their inherent worth as spiritual beings and as persons.²⁹

Fears in Studying the Scripture

For many Baptists, studying the Scriptures is an important aspect of their faith. All accredited Baptist pastors must have a theological degree and engage in professional development studies throughout their career.³⁰ However, most lay Baptists follow in the Protestant tradition for biblical studies, believing that the Bible is a self-interpreting revelation and therefore the text's fundamental teachings and messages can be understood by a broad audience without the need for complex hermeneutics.³¹ Consequently, within the framework of the four pillars of theological study—Scriptures, reason, tradition, and experience—most Baptist biblical studies centre around personal experience. This reader response approach involves personal subjective interpretation and emotional reactions to the text. Given its informal way of studying the Scriptures, the approach should recognise the influence of the reader's beliefs and cultural background, and the substantial differences in the contemporary world compared to that of the original author and audiences.³² Therefore, many Baptists seek to understand the meaning of the Scriptures beyond personal reading, often—but not exclusively—through engagement with their local church's sermons. In essence, the Baptist approach to studying Scriptures, emphasises the role of

²⁹ Rodriguez, 8.

³⁰ Baptist Churches of South Australia, 'Accreditation' (2022). <https://sabaptist.asn.au/pastors-accreditation/>.

³¹ Stanley James Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 103; Karl Koop, 'Scripture and Tradition: A Dilemma for Protestants,' *Vision: A Journal For Church and Theology* 12 no. 1 (2011); Timothy George, 'An Evangelical Reflection on Scripture and Tradition,' *Pro Ecclesia* 9, no. 2 (2000): 184–207.

³² Joel Green, *Seized By Truth: Reading the Bible As Scripture* (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2010), 118–19.

personal experience and reader response while acknowledging the value of professional theological education among pastors.

However, the interviews revealed that some participants believed the conversation on LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches would be difficult because Baptists were generally uncomfortable and even fearful of questioning the church's traditional teachings. David (former P who changed from a welcoming but non-affirming position to one of affirmation) gave an example from his experience:

[name given] told me three times that he was not prepared to do the study that I did because he was afraid of what it might reveal. I was astounded by that. He told me twice, and the third time I clarified that he was serious when he said that, and he said, 'Yes.'

Although the fear of what might be revealed is not explained in the example, David linked some Baptists' apprehension of studying the Scriptures to the potential consequences of challenging the prevalent non-affirming teachings in their community, and to a possible shift in their own LGBTQIA+ theological positions. Cadge and Wildeman's research also indicated that the dialogue between the church and LGBTQIA+ persons is influenced by the fear of misinterpreting the Scriptures.³³ However, Paul (Baptist with LGBTQIA+ family) suggested the lack of 'a genuine look at the Scriptures' was due to church systems preventing it and the fear of 'the fallout of public opinion.' Noah (B) made a similar argument. He stated that Baptist churches attempted to practice 'love the sinner, hate the sin,' but pastors and leaders faced a 'backlash' for seemingly abandoning the doctrinal notion of 'hating sin.'

Nyla (B) raised what she saw as the current problem of the consequences of Baptist churches as conforming to what she described as a 'very ridged structure'. She argued it

³³ Cadge and Wildeman, 588–89.

allowed some Baptists to use the Bible ‘basically as a weapon of mass destruction.’³⁴ Kate (Q)—who has only recently started attending a Baptist church—described what she knew of the Bible. She said: ‘Doesn’t [the Bible] condemn it? That it is a sin to be gay and pretty much we are all going to go to hell, which is fine as it’s more fun in hell; [laughs] heaven doesn’t want me.’ The statement ‘heaven doesn’t want me’ was confronting to hear.

The fear of the consequences seen in these narratives suggests that Baptists are lacking a safe space to dialogue and explore the Scriptures in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches. As Paul (B) said: ‘the systems prevent it’.

Parental Mode of Power

The influence of fear provided insight into how some within the Baptist tradition will enter conversations with an agenda to defend truth and safeguard their position. The data showed that the Baptists operate at times from a parental mode of power which aims to protect the church from the slippery slope of the influences from the world’s culture, including sexual and gender incongruences.³⁵ John (B) referenced the ‘list’ of ungodly influences that he had witnessed the church struggle to re-evaluate over the decades:

At 16, my first conflict, believe it or not, was dancing ... Well, the next thing was drinking alcohol. O shudder, shudder. The list goes on. I mean, we had, associating with Roman Catholics, speaking in tongues, singing (other than hymns). I believe these things will either pass or some way forward will be found.

Psychotherapist Carl Rogers argues that the parental mode of power is a ‘technique-centred culture’ rather than person-centred; this gives institutions the power to shape and

³⁴ Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide*, 65. Nyla said: ‘I think there’s still a lot of religion within the Baptist Church ... there’s still an element of that very rigid structure... rigid line, which meant that you could use the Word basically as a weapon of mass destruction.’

³⁵ Harisun, ‘Power, Polity, and Politics’ (PhD thesis), 81–83. Harisun’s research found that the Uniting Church adopted a defensive position towards the LGBTQIA+ debate.

control persons.³⁶ Derek (B) gave an example of the church operating in a parental mode when he shared that the subject of homosexuality ‘never came up’ in his forty years of church life and that the church’s teachings were ‘just pointed at us, you know, do this and such and so forth’. Oliver (B) agreed:

Years before [same-sex attraction was] ‘No way, Jose’ sort of thing ... it wasn’t really an issue. They kept quiet ... it was definitely preached against, and now we’re being told to accept it ... It’s a lot to get used to.

Joseph (P) suggested that generally, Baptists saw their church—especially Sunday services—as ‘a slice of heaven ... and every time they exited the building they are going back out into the big bad world.’ Sarah described the justification for excluding LGBTQIA+ persons from local Baptist churches as ‘Keeping sin out of the church’. She attributed it to ‘self-righteousness’: ‘probably like they’re pleasing God by saying: “You’re not welcome here to our house ... we are right. We’re gonna keep sin out of the church”.’ Len (B) recognised the fear operating behind the stories around safeguarding against the slippery slope and examples of the parental mode of power: ‘What are we afraid of? Because fear is a big question in all of this? ... And our fear is that we will somehow be diminished.’ He concluded that the motivation for safeguarding was based on protecting the church’s privileged position.

The issue with fear, safeguarding, and the church’s need to act in a parental mode is that these stances act as a barrier to the conversation. With so many forces pressing towards a ‘gatekeeper’ function, selectively permitting and denying access,³⁷ how will a dialogue happen? It was a question raised in various ways by some Baptist participants. For example, Ken (P) said:

³⁶ As cited in Cissna, *Moments of Meeting Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Dialogue*, 243.

³⁷ Pamela J. Shoemaker and Tim P. Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 62–75.

I actually think we need people on the margins to help us through the questions. I think part of the issue is a lot of these things are not talked about because they haven't needed to be talked about because we don't give a platform to anybody of a differing view.

Bohm: Tradition is Brain Damage

The generational age gap was identified in the interviews as influencing the adoption of traditional non-affirming teachings within Baptist churches. For example, Jacob (B) noted that many leaders in Baptist churches belong to the 'taboo, don't talk about it, generation.'³⁸ In Ashton's (B) opinion, the youth were better at examining the church's traditions on LGBTQIA+ issues:

Youth don't have the same hang-ups. They've got their own hang-ups, but they don't have the same historical distrust, maybe ... historical disgust around those kinds of things.

However, Nathaniel (a theology student and youth worker) noted that some of his Baptist friends preferred a simplistic approach to theology, adopting the traditional teachings of their church. He suggested that the next generation of Baptists may prioritise cultural homogeneity over engagement with discussions outside their faith tradition.

Dialogue theorist David Bohm in his conversation with Krishnamurti (whose philosophy examined the relationship between self-awareness and a free mind), discussed how thought is 'conditioned by hereditary tradition, culture, and environment' and how that conditioning can 'distort' the brain. Bohm concluded:

A great deal of brain damage happens through tradition. It occurs to me that tradition is a form of brain damage. Any tradition good or bad makes people accept a certain structure.³⁹

Krishnamurti expounded on this:

³⁸ Beverley Searle, 'Millennials, Gen X, Gen Z, Baby Boomers: How Generation Labels Cloud Issues of Inequality,' *The Conversation* (January 16, 2019).

³⁹ Bohm, McCoy, and Krishnamurti, 83.

People won't listen to a different perspective because they have little harbours in which they are sheltering themselves ... we have a tendency to go back because of tradition and habit.⁴⁰

Bohm argues that insight from 'a profound new truth' gained from a new perspective 'should cause the growth of a new society.' However, it is lost by the damaged brain that 'makes it into another tradition.'⁴¹

It is an interesting concept to apply to Baptists who invoke church traditions as an authoritative source for answering the questions raised in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. For example, Samuel (Q; B) suggested from his experience that Baptist churches preferred 'immutable truth'. He argued that the motivation behind attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ persons from 'well-intentioned people' was 'trying to safeguard what they believe to be immutable and immovable truth of life.' Ian (P) agreed, suggesting that within the Baptist movement, 'there tends to be a propensity towards some sectors putting a propositional truth above the value of a human being.' Bohm argues that tradition is not the ultimate truth; it is a place the brain, and therefore the dialogue, launches from. Consequently, re-examining the church's tradition is imperative as it is through fresh revelations and new perspectives that society, including Baptist churches, grows.

The Importance of Theological Distinctions

However, engaging with different perspectives does not negate the importance of distinctions in theological positions. It was one of the issues raised in the current LGBTQIA+ dialogue. For example, Abigail (P) spoke of her frustrations over conversations with people who hold an affirming position because of the 'assumption that we are all going to shift there eventually':

⁴⁰ Bohm, McCoy, and Krishnamurti, 84.

⁴¹ Bohm, McCoy, and Krishnamurti, 97.

When I talk to someone like [name given], I feel like he is basically saying to me, well I am wrong, and eventually you are all going to agree with me ... and maybe they are right but it's such a condescending posture.

The agenda to change position and conform or agree to another's standpoint is happening on both sides of the debate. It is a problem in the dialogue because it devalues the person's voice. Volf argues that universality and egalitarianism cannot be affirmed at 'the expense of difference.' He quotes Boyarin, who believes that interpretations of the Pauline epistles have been used to justify 'imperialist and colonizing practices' and '[are] a powerful force of coercive discourse of sameness, denying ... the rights of Jews, women, and others to retain their difference.'⁴²

However, the issue remains of bridging the gap between different theological perspectives and how to live faith in Christ as a community. Volf argues that the answer is found in the nature of God, who embraces and does not exclude us. He discusses God's 'refusal to let moral rules be the final authority regulating exclusion and embrace'. Instead, God 'readjusts' to 'make space within self for others in their alterity'.⁴³ God, in Jesus, is always positioned towards the embrace and not exclusion and several non-affirming participants spoke of adopting a similar posture. For example, Ken (P) said that while he still held a non-affirming theology, where he had changed was in his desire for relationship and dialogue with those from an affirming perspective:

The way I see Jesus behaving is inclusion, and so that's where my theology has completely changed. Whereas I would be keeping people—i.e, sinners—at arm's length ... now I've completely swapped over. It's like, 'What are we doing, telling people they are not included? That they can't participate? Where do we see that in Scripture?' It's quite the opposite.

Grace joined her Baptist church due to a shared theological perspective centred on love and inclusion. She said:

⁴² Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 47.

⁴³ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 140.

I agree on a lot of levels with the way they present the love of Christ and perhaps, you know, not agreeing with the choices somebody's making but Scripture says, 'love everybody, not those whom you happen to agree with.'

Grace's understanding brought clarity to her theology of love. Love did not mean agreeing with another's perspective. Rather, her theology of love made room for disagreements never to be resolved, and accommodating differences became a marker of unity within the church.⁴⁴ Other participants also spoke on allowing agency and autonomy to those they disagreed with. Participants valued individuals remaining obedient to the personal convictions that they held before God.

'Welcoming but Not Affirming' Praxis in Baptist Churches

Biblical tradition has led Baptist individuals and churches to primarily adopt a welcoming but not affirming praxis towards LGBTQIA+ persons.⁴⁵ For example, Luke (B) said:

I do lots of moderating [i.e, facilitating churches searches for new senior leaders] and while it doesn't come up yet because there is a basic assumption that none of our accredited ministers would be affirming ... if it became known that there was a minister who was affirming, there would be very few churches who would want them, to be blunt.

Welcoming but not affirming indicates that LGBTQIA+ persons are welcome to come to church; however, the church places restrictions on individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity and will not ordain, hire or marry LGBTQIA+ individuals.⁴⁶ Briony (B) said:

there would be rules [for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in a Baptist church] ... so maybe they're allowed to come to church and attend but if they were in a role of leadership, then that might be something that might not be okay with the church. But in my opinion, I'd probably

⁴⁴ See Jillian E. Cox, 'Love Is Better Than Knowledge: Paul, Luther and a Theology of Being Human,' *Theology & Sexuality* 21 no1 (2015).

⁴⁵ Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality*.

⁴⁶ Church Clarity.

feel a bit like that ... I suppose I would try not to feel uncomfortable but I probably would feel uncomfortable.

Welcoming but not affirming is perceived as a 'qualified acceptance' and a way to walk the middle of the road between LGBTQIA+ persons and non-affirming Baptists and not exclude LGBTQIA+ persons from the local church. However, as most welcoming but not affirming churches would not agree with acting on LGBTQIA+ orientations—for example, celebrating same-sex engagement or wedding, or a naming day for transgender persons—it is unlikely a local church would offer any 'acceptance'. Therefore, welcoming but not affirming fits more readily into the 'rejecting non-punitive' category.⁴⁷

Seen through the lens of many Baptists, welcoming but not affirming is welcoming LGBTQIA+ persons and allowing them access to belong to the church. However, seen through the lens of LGBTQIA+ personhood, the 'welcome' is a platitude because the 'welcome' only lasts as long as LGBTQIA+ persons conform or adopt a non-affirming theological praxis. According to the data, including LGBTQIA+ persons in the membership or leadership of Baptist churches was often conditional, requiring them to hold a non-affirming theological stance. Kieran (B) noted from his 'experience' of Baptist churches that: '[LGBTQIA+ persons] won't be able to hold a position of leadership, so there is a bit of a ceiling on how much they can be involved in the community'. The argument was firmly based on the Baptist belief that membership was not simply attending church; instead, it agreed with the church's constitution, values, and distinctives. Ian (P) accurately represents what many Baptists believe constitutes membership:

Baptist membership, it's not just attendance. It is an expressed desire to be a committed, contributing, functioning member of the church community and have a say in the discernment processes of that community. There is that dual thing. First, have they had that transformative experience, i.e, a living relationship with God through the saving work of

⁴⁷ Nelson, 'Homosexuality,' 271–74.

Jesus Christ? Secondly, are they, to the best of our knowledge, leading a God honouring life? Those are the key things. Whether they are in LGBTQ+ or not is, in a sense, irrelevant to that.

The community's commitment to leading a life that honours God is why the Baptists believe they have the authority to sanction an individual's choices. Although one Baptist interviewee used the phrase 'mind your own business', many of the Baptist participants believed the entire church was responsible for directing the way an individual lived their life.

Celibacy

Baptist participants who adopted a 'welcoming but not affirming' stance believed 'celibacy' was a way of accepting the orientation of a person without condoning their lifestyle. Abigail (P) suggested this was the majority view of the churches within BCSA:

To nail my colours to the mast, where biblically and theologically I would come down on, and I think it is where most of our churches would say, is we do see a biblical, theological case for celibacy amongst those who are same-sex attracted.

Although Abigail also observed: '[LGBTQIA+ celibacy] is part of a wider issue which is interesting to me because I think it is about how we don't do singleness very well, generally speaking.' Sarah (B) explained how people without faith in Jesus should live by their convictions. However, she added the following caveat:

I think that there is a different expectation on people if they're walking in faith with me. I would have different expectations around how they live if they're gay, homosexual ... in the sense of, like remaining celibate.

However, concerns were raised regarding the ethics in the church's expectation of celibacy, particularly whether LGBTQIA+ persons consider celibacy realistic or an unfair burden. Nathaniel (B) critiqued the expectation of sexual abstinence, suggesting his LGBTQIA+ family member found a 'clash between the person they feel that they are and the way the church is telling them to be.' The sexual ethic of Baptist churches advocates for celibacy from any single person and for monogamous relationships and marriages.

However, there is a significant difference between LGBTQIA+ and heterosexual singles who are Baptists: heterosexuals may have the option and the blessing of the Baptist church to marry; LGBTQIA+ persons do not. Some participants asked how the welcoming but non-affirming sexual ethic of celibacy addressed an LGBTQIA+ person's desire to be married or have children, or dealt with LGBTQIA+ families who did have children. There was dissatisfaction with the oversimplified solution of celibacy as a way to address complex issues. Chaza's (L) quote is a good example:

I put myself in that position with my husband and think if someone came to me and said that [my relationship was wrong] I would be thinking, that can't be right.

When discussing the impact of welcoming but not affirming on same-sex couples with children, there was a switch in tone from talking about 'it' (a sexual ethics issue) to I-Thou. There was empathy and a fear that not affirming LGBTQIA+ relationships would tear a family apart. Philippa (B) reiterated that this is a space where the church and its members 'have to do better; we have to do better'. She argued that the way the church related to monogamous same-sex families would leave an impression on the children, and concluded: 'Then that's another generation that's going to be bitter as well because the church is this evil place.' While the influence on LGBTQIA+ families of a Baptist church's welcoming but not affirming position was enough of a concern for Baptists to mention it, no participants specifically asked what the impact would be on the children if or when they witnessed their parents excluded from church ministry.

There was an interesting comparative assessment on celibacy between Andrew (NQ; B) and a gay man (Q; B). They both attended the same Baptist church and together attended a lecture by Ed Shaw.⁴⁸ Shaw is a same-sex attracted pastor who holds a non-affirming theological perspective and, consequently, chooses and advocates a celibate lifestyle for

⁴⁸ Conference co-hosted in 2019 by Trinity Church, Adelaide, and Living Hope Ministries (USA): <https://www.trinitycity.church/events/the-plausibility-problem-the-church-same-sex-attraction/>.

same-sex attracted people.⁴⁹ Andrew is (in his words) ‘comfortable’ with the welcoming but non-affirming posture, and he concluded that Ed Shaw had ‘some very useful information.’ However, when he asked his gay friend for his opinion, his friend disagreed that it was useful. He questioned ‘how realistic’ Shaw’s proposals on living a Christian life were for those who are same-sex attracted, or how they addressed his desires to be ‘hugged and kissed ... [because] physical contact is important.’

Andrew’s experience highlights how easy it is to find answers from the people we agree with. Is it the case that we look for solutions that match our preferences? What if the answer for the LGBTQIA+ person is found in a theological stream that differs from our own?

Mixed-Orientation Marriages

Brandon (Q; B) questioned the possibility of ‘mixed marriages’ — suggested by some on the conservative end of the spectrum on non-affirming praxis — to ‘answer’ LGBTQIA+’s desire for intimacy and children. ‘Mixed marriages’ (or mixed-orientation marriages) encourage same-sex attracted people to make a covenant commitment to a heterosexual partner.⁵⁰

Brandon (Q; B) shared ‘stories that promote this idea of, “find the right women, then this will work”.’ This refers to the belief that same-sex attracted persons can choose to change their sexual orientation identity to heterosexual.⁵¹ Brandon immediately questioned its effect on LGBTQIA+ personhood: ‘But what does it mean for the person? That they are not

⁴⁹ Shaw.

⁵⁰ VanderWal-Gritter, 73; Jill L. Kays, Mark A. Yarhouse, and Jennifer S. Ripley, ‘Relationship Factors and Quality Among Mixed-Orientation Couples,’ *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 40, no. 6 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2013.788107>.

⁵¹ Only two participants referred directly to ‘conversion therapy’ and the belief that sexual/gender orientations can be changed. In both cases it was viewed negatively. There was insufficient data to know Baptist’s opinions on conversion therapy as participants did not include the topic as part of their narratives. See also Erinn E. Tozer and Jeffrey A. Hayes, ‘Why Do Individuals Seek Conversion Therapy? The Role of Religiosity, Internalized Homonegativity, and Identity Development,’ *The Counseling Psychologist* 32, no. 5 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000004267563>.

gay?' Fred (Q) spoke about her mixed-orientation marriage and of 'just playing the part; the heterosexual (isn't it?) relationship'. She felt she had no other options than marriage to her boyfriend—'despite how selfish I sound'—as she 'wanted a partner that I could have children with.' She explained how her experiences of rape and an abusive father figure impacted her:

Yeah, I hated sex ... it was a chore, and it was dirty and for me; it wasn't a nice experience to have sex. It was ok to have children but anything beyond that, I just didn't feel comfortable with it.

Tessa (Q) shared how she ended up in a mixed-orientation marriage:

Part of what was normal at my church was getting married and usually fairly young because, obviously, you know, sex before marriage is looked down upon. So, I met my husband when I was 21, and we got married two years after we met ... The way I sort of let myself do that was, I don't know, this sort of doublespeak. I don't know if you've heard the term doublespeak but it's like you know something is a truth, but you can disregard it and make it seem like a lie or replace it with something else. And then that becomes your new truth even though the other thing doesn't go away. It's like you keep kind of piling on top of it and then almost just tricking yourself into believing something else. So, I guess that's kind of how I got to that point.⁵²

Research reveals that societal norms and expectations are maintained in part by ideologies that dictate acceptable actions and self-evaluation criteria. Ideologies serve as social roadmaps, establishing criteria for ideal behaviour and character. When individuals deviate from these expectations, whether by choice or coercion, they may experience feelings of unworthiness due to the fear of negative evaluation, including emotions like shame. This explains the initial conformity to conventional norms, like heterosexuality, and

⁵² William Lutz, 'Notes Toward a Definition of Double Speak,' in *Beyond Nineteen Eighty-Four: Doublespeak in a Post-Orwellian Age*, ed. William Lutz (National Council of Teachers of English: The University of California, 1989); Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide*, 55–56.

the subsequent struggle to return to the expected path when deviations occur.⁵³ The pressure to act according to heterosexual norms was evidenced through research on Christian, mixed-orientation marriages conducted by Yarhouse et al. The study revealed the majority of the same-sex attracted partners ‘kept their public identities as heterosexual or straight’.⁵⁴

The question is, to what extent do Baptists in South Australia promote mixed marriages as a solution for individuals who deviate from the heterosexual, married-with-children, ideal advocated by most church denominations? The findings from this study are inconclusive due to insufficient data. However, LGBTQIA+ stories such as those in *Growing Up Queer in Australia* and research conduct by Hollier et al. reveal that it is ‘microaggressions’—often overlooked by the non-queer—that left many LGBTQIA+ individuals little freedom to do anything other than try to conform to ill-fitting societal norms.⁵⁵ This suggests that there is implicit pressure on LGBTQIA+ persons in Baptist churches to not simply hide their LGBTQIA+ orientation but also maintain heteronormative public identities. However, the most direct way to ascertain the reality of this situation within BCSA is to engage in an open and respectful discourse with LGBTQIA+ Baptists. To

⁵³ Michelle Wolkomir, ‘Making Heteronormative Reconciliations: The Story of Romantic Love, Sexuality, and Gender in Mixed-Orientation Marriages,’ *Gender & Society* 23, no. 4 (2009): 154; Research involving Christians in mixed orientation marriages shows that changes in behaviour are not the same as changes in orientations; Mark A. Yarhouse et al., ‘Characteristics of Mixed Orientation Couples: An Empirical Study,’ *Edification: The Transdisciplinary Journal of Christian Psychology* 4, no. 2 (2011): 54.

⁵⁴ Yarhouse et al., 51–52.

⁵⁵ For examples see Thom Mitchell’s (Q) story of his mum’s boyfriend advising Thom ‘if you’re gay, don’t tell anyone,’ and Thinesh Thillainadarajah (Q), who disclosed their orientation and was told ‘don’t tell anyone about this’. Thillainadarajah stated: ‘There was silence, and in that silence it became clear that private tolerance — even private acceptance — was still public shame’: Thom Mitchell, ‘The Risk’ in Benjamin Law, 98; Thinesh Thillainadarajah, ‘When Worlds Collide, Words Fail,’ in Benjamin Law, 103.

gain an accurate understanding of the challenges and expectations experienced by LGBTQIA+ Baptists, it is best to directly seek their perspectives and experiences.

Dissatisfaction with a ‘Welcoming but Not Affirming’ Praxis

Although the majority of the Baptist participants held a non-affirming theology, the data from the interviews suggested that some Baptists were dissatisfied with their church’s welcoming but not affirming posture because, at some point, the ‘welcome’ would result in excluding LGBTQIA+ persons. For example, Briony (B) described her church’s welcoming of LGBTQIA+ as:

very accepting until it’s put in front of us ... and then there’d be questions like, ‘How do we deal with this?’ ... we have all good intentions around it. But then moving forward might be some real hiccups.

Edward (B) realised that he was comfortable with LGBTQIA+ persons being ‘welcome’ at his church. However, he was unsure whether his theological position meant they could also be members or leaders in the church. He recognised a gap between his welcoming theology and his practice which was not. Edward answered his dilemma by wondering how an LGBTQIA+ person would feel in the situation, and he concluded: ‘I would have thought they would have felt fairly uncomfortable. Coming along and then suddenly feeling like they just couldn’t come.’

Church pastors and those in leadership positions frequently spoke of wrestling with their congregations’ welcoming but not affirming expectations towards LGBTQIA+ persons. Chaza (L) explained:

It is such a delicate balance trying to balance the views and beliefs with people within the church around this issue, who just say, ‘absolutely, same-sex attracted people are welcome to the church’, and then they have a list of rules around that.

Prominent in the wrestling with these questions was the conundrum of where ‘the line’ between welcoming and not affirming—the ‘*but ...*’ that prohibited LGBTQIA+ persons from specific church ministries—would be drawn. Joseph (B) said:

I am adamant that people of all sexualities and all beliefs about sexualities should be able to gather with Christians. That Christians shouldn't feel that our worship is somehow 'tainted' because of that 'crowd'. The flip side is, of course, do we give the impression of 'Come amongst us, we love you, it is all fine, everything is great', and then when someone says: 'can I play the tambourine?' we suddenly hit the wall and (screaming) say: 'no, you can't do anything!' I'm joking about the tambourine, but it does reach questions when someone is asking about, 'can I lead worship?' So, conversations do need to be had. And people are going to have to wrestle with that.

Paul (B) raised the same issue, sharing his fear that his LGBTQIA+ son would be 'sidelined', specifically from leadership roles, by the church:

at some point the shit is going to hit the fan, and somehow we need to continue to provide a really great environment for him to come home to and to grow into who God has called him to be.

Luke (P), explained how welcome-non-affirming would outwork in his church:

My guess is if someone was a member of the church and came out, little would be said. If they went into a same-sex attracted relationship, then much would be said, and the leadership would wrestle with it. I don't know what the outcome would be ... If someone was in a same-sex relationship prior to becoming a member, that they probably wouldn't be accepted as a member, that would be my guess, and if someone was in a same-sex relationship or were active in other ways, then any responsible leadership position would be out of the question. But that is a really grey area for me. I would wrestle with the leaders about the consistency of the greyness. Yes, they could play the drums, but no, they couldn't sing, or certainly, they couldn't be an elder. But could they serve in crèche or morning tea? Those things would be talked about, but I don't know on what basis we would make the decision.

Luke's comment shows the complexities implicit in applying a welcoming but not affirming theology to church life and how subjective the boundaries can be.

Arbitrary Lines: How Can LGBTQIA+ Individuals Judge Whether It Is a Safe Church?

Genuine concerns arose regarding the arbitrary nature of the demarcation lines. Kimberly (B) observed: 'For some congregations [LGBTQIA+ inclusion] would be a complete anathema and others who would say: "well, actually yeah, we can't not".' LGBTQIA+ policies are not always available on church websites and the lack of clarity makes finding an LGBTQIA+ safe church difficult. Visiting a church is equally fraught as the subjective nature of the boundaries means LGBTQIA+ individuals have to experience them in order to discern the church's position. For LGBTQIA+ persons, it is a lottery as to what degree a church includes them. Brandon (B; Q) asked whether Baptist churches employed 'strategies that will make you feel more terrible about who you are.' He diagnosed it as 'very sad' and concluded that the 'hoops' the church expects LGBTQ to jump through made people feel unwelcome. He shared his experience—as a gay man—of being 'squeezed out' of the church:

I don't know if it's something they teach pastors to do at Bible college but I've actually seen people who leadership find uncomfortable get squeezed out. You can see the strategies of making them uncomfortable, no longer feeling welcome. I've certainly experienced that.

Although Brandon was joking about 'pastors' learning exclusion tactics at 'Bible college', he raised important questions. Significantly: What is the extent of the education received by accredited Baptist pastors on LGBTQIA+ theology and the pastoral care of their LGBTQIA+ church members? Theological education varies across countries and institutions; therefore, I can only speak from my experience. I completed a theological degree and a master's program focused on local church ministry, without encountering any opportunities for training in LGBTQIA+ theology or pastoral care for queer persons.

The pain behind Brandon's humour was real and raised further confronting questions: At what point does 'welcome' change to a 'squeezing someone out' strategy? Is the realisation that an LGBTQIA+ person is not going to change their perspective the catalyst

for side-lining them? Is the welcome of LGBTQIA+ based on a belief that if LGBTQIA+ persons love people in the church and hang around long enough, they will be ‘converted’ to a non-affirming perspective? It raised the question whether welcoming but not affirming is causing unnecessary harm to LGBTQIA+ members of Baptist churches. Len (B) was aware of this issue:

I have a fundamental problem with the way the church addresses not just questions of sexuality but of the human space, and that problem revolves around saying: ‘We love you, but we won’t condone behaviour.’ The problem is that isn’t heard in the way we intend it to be heard. It’s usually and nearly always heard as hurtful and a rejection and as destructive and dehumanising.

Some LGBTQIA+ persons expressed that for them, membership of Baptist churches was a positive experience. For example, Brandon ‘told’ the Baptist church he was ‘gay’, and the church supportively prayed for him when he attended LGBTQIA+ events. In another story, an LGBTQIA+ Baptist member was informed by an LGBTQIA+ community group that their church was homophobic, despite their personal experience of feeling well-loved by the Baptist community. The Baptist culture towards the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in a welcoming but not affirming church membership was summed up by Brandon (B; Q):

I think if [LGBTQIA+] are happy to sit at the back of the bus and just be quiet then that’s ok ... and [as long as the church] does not have too much recognition of who you are. Or they might find it better to be part of a church that supports their view a little bit more.

Vincent (B) did not believe that ‘welcoming’ Baptist churches equated to safe churches for LGBTQIA+ persons. He specifically mentioned that the leadership within Baptist churches had the ‘responsibility’ to inform LGBTQIA+ persons of what he described as ‘the anti-gay feeling that there may be in parts of the church’ Vincent’s observation endorses the argument for adopting the language of ‘brave space’ instead of ‘safe space’ for LGBTQIA+ persons in dialogue with some Baptist churches.⁵⁶ Although, the argument does highlight

⁵⁶ Lamont, 171–83.

again that, at times, LGBTQIA+ persons may not be aware that they need to be brave when in a ‘welcoming’ non-affirming church.

Time for Clarity with Non-Affirming Praxis

For Len (B), welcoming but not affirming is ‘destructive’ to personhood. It raised the question: Is it safer for LGBTQIA+ if Baptist churches stated that ‘we do not affirm or condone the lifestyles for LGBTQIA+ persons’ rather than try to soften the blow by adding the ambiguous term ‘welcome’? Brandon (B; Q) believed it was preferable to exchange ‘welcome’ for ‘invite to church’ as it carried different expectations for both the hearer and the speaker. The speaker derives a sense of comfort from the notion of ‘welcome’, as it rationalises and justifies the non-affirming position that ultimately may lead to the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals. However, to the hearer who holds an affirming perspective, the experience is not welcoming.

Re-Examining the Scriptures

Some participants’ desire to include LGBTQIA+ individuals led them to question non-affirming hermeneutics. Len (B) concluded that for Baptists, there was a ‘disconnect’ between ‘espoused and lived theology’ and Baptists are ‘schizophrenic’ in claiming a position and living contrary to it. Sarah (B) discussed her experience of the disconnect. She stated her belief in ‘sex to be between a man and a woman within marriage, and I can’t see anywhere outside of that in the Bible’ before explaining say how same-sex couples connected with her church had done a ‘beautiful job raising their children’, and she expected the church to honour ‘that they’ve actually worked hard to build a family unit.’ She acknowledged it was difficult to align theology and praxis: ‘I think there’s going to be spaces like that which I think don’t have any easy answer if we put love first.’ A sexual ethics approach to the Scriptures did not give them the depth of answers they sought when interacting with the reality of people’s lives. Nathaniel (B) said that pastoral workers, in

particular, ‘grapple’ with a theology that ‘is not practical enough and doesn’t reflect God’s nature’ to LGBTQIA+ persons.

Participants who were dissatisfied with the practical application of welcoming but not affirming engaged in ‘theological reflection’—where the Scriptures were used to make spiritual sense of a situation—and ‘practical theology’—where the implications of biblical studies (for self and others) are evaluated in light of the lived experiences.⁵⁷ These frameworks allowed them to explore the issues of LGBTQIA+ faith in Baptist churches without reference to the views of the Baptist movement. Theological reflection and practical theology are examples of types of new platforms referenced by Mahoney and Thelen’s study on *Explaining Institutional Change*, which highlights how those within an organisation can influence change from within by launching new ideas from new platforms that they create.⁵⁸ Commonalities in the themes of theological reflections included the question of how exclusion demonstrated the love of God and how other narratives in the biblical story—stories of justice and compassion, for example—applied to LGBTQIA+ persons.⁵⁹ David (former P) read the Scriptures through the lens of justice, and his study changed his theological position:

I feel confident that [the lens of justice] is a valid approach ... I found that the policy of excluding loving, monogamous same-sex relationship people from ministry is not crystal clear in Scripture.

Many of the participants reflected theologically on Jesus’ ministry, particularly how He included those excluded by the religious doctrinal practices of the day. There was a focus

⁵⁷ Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006); Robert L. Kinast, *What Are They Saying About Theological Reflection?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000); Stephen Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical Theology Selected Essays* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007).

⁵⁸ Mahoney.

⁵⁹ Marvin Mahan Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith, *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

both on Jesus associating with the sinners excommunicated by the religious leaders, and on how by including the sinners, Jesus was also labelled a 'sinner'. Fynn's (B) theological reflection led him to examine why Jesus was labelled 'a sinner and drunkard' and concluded it was because Jesus was with people the church would be 'shocked' to associate with.⁶⁰ He said: '[Jesus] knocked down barriers that were between the existing church structure or the existing hierarchy and those [who were excluded].' Fynn's reflection led him to question what he could do to fully include LGBTQIA+ persons in his local church rather than questioning whether he should hold a non-affirming or affirming theology. Ken's comment exemplified participants' spiritual reflection journey, which often began with an honest evaluation of their attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ orientations. This evaluation was considered alongside Jesus' inclusive behaviour towards those marginalised by religious doctrines. Some participants offered a practical application that explored specific aspects or modifications in their faith resulting from this reflection. Ken (P) in his spiritual reflection, said:

Where I think I've changed is, my attitude would have been, 'Well, there's no room in the kingdom of God, there's no place for people who are knowingly involved in sinful behaviour.' But I have seen that, my understanding and looking at the way that Jesus interacted with people who the church—or the equivalent of the church of the day—called sinners was very, very different from the way that I behaved. My way of behaviour was exclusion. The way I see Jesus behaving is inclusion and so that's where my theology has completely changed.

Some participants distinguished between same-sex relationships and gender orientations in their spiritual reflection on LGBTQIA+ orientations. Phillipa (B) expressed the belief that they were 'completely different', while Abigail (B) stated that transgender and nonbinary identities were separate conversations from sexual orientations. However, these participants offered no further clarification regarding the reasoning behind this distinction.

⁶⁰ Luke 7:34.

John (B) has a close friend who has transitioned. He discussed what he saw as the theological differences between same-sex relationships and transgenderism. Drawing on Genesis creation accounts, he explained his perspective of celibacy as the appropriate response to same-sex attraction. However, he added: 'I guess I see transgender people as being somewhat outside the scope of what God is talking about.' Although John did not elaborate on 'outside of the scope', he implied that transgenderism is not the focus of the Genesis accounts. Primarily, participants referred to the Creation accounts for a biblical understanding of gender incongruencies.⁶¹ Only one participant referenced the biblical account of Philip baptising the eunuch, which is a key text in affirming theology's position on transgender individuals. Philip's baptism of the nonbinary eunuch defied the eunuch's exclusion from the Jewish Temple, effectively including nonbinary persons in the early church.⁶²

Liminal Journey of Re-Examining Scripture

Many participants spoke of being in a 'grey space', where they wrestled with the gap between loving a person and an 'unloving action' of excluding a person. Richard (B) juxtaposed his 'old self'—'[It was] very easy to quote scriptures which would condemn it [LGBTQ] and justify my thoughts'—against his new aim of a stronger relationship with LGBTQIA+ persons:

Now over time, some of those passages aren't so clear to me. And there's other passages, other things I can see [that] I believe [are important passages]. The thought of knowing I want to accept people for who they are and love them for who they are. Let Jesus do the

⁶¹ Creation Accounts are found in Genesis 1 and 2.

⁶² Acts 8:26–40; Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 32; Justin Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2003); Anna Rebecca Solevåg, 'No Nuts? No Problem!: Disability, Stigma, and the Baptized Eunuch in Acts 8: 26–40,' *Biblical Interpretation* 24, no. 1 (2016).

work within them. Let him change people's lives; me [I need to] learn just to try to look at someone in the eye and to see them as valuable just as Jesus would see them. That's my aim.

Participants reflected theologically on their liminal journey over the interpretation of Scriptures. Some compared their experiences with those of Jesus. For example, one participant shared that Jesus spent most of his ministry life addressing and engaging in the 'grey' spaces of people's lives. If he had followed the rules of the religion, 'Jesus would not have had to spend his time arguing with the Pharisees and other religious leaders' about how he conducted himself and dealt with people. Other participants also shared theological reflections on Jesus dealing with grey areas—for example, ministry work on the sabbath; eating on designated fast days; eating at the home of sinners—stories that are too quickly glossed over because the cultural context is so different from that of today, it is easy to miss what Jesus was doing.⁶³ He was walking a countercultural path that included those that the religious of the day would have excluded. Another participant used the example of the woman caught in adultery, which he concluded that in the 'black and white' theology of Jesus' day, demanded death. Yet, in the space between theology and practical application, Jesus turned black and white into grey and gave the woman a second chance. A Baptist pastor in the interview summed this up as: 'Become a grey person and ask lots of questions and live with ambiguity! It's a difficult season but it is good for us!'

Chaza (L) was candid and honest about her struggles in this liminal space in her theology. She spoke of the tension of knowing the evangelical approach towards LGBTQIA+ as a 'sin' and feeling that it ultimately differed from her approach—where she determined not to judge another person's sexual and gender choices but instead would allow them to decide God's will for themselves. It was interesting to hear her narrative because while some participants spoke in immutable, immovable truth, Chaza's experience highlighted the reality of navigating life beyond the confines imposed by the church's established norms.

⁶³ Luke 13:14; Luke 6:1; Luke 5:30.

This resulted in an uncomfortable feeling of compromise: ‘I certainly don’t want to be preaching something that’s not in line with what God is telling us’, and she spoke of her struggle to reconcile the traditional church teaching with her praxis towards LGBTQIA+ persons:

I can’t see that it is my role to walk around in the wider community telling people that they aren’t living under God’s plan. That’s probably a more liberal approach. In a way, it does pain me to have that view because I don’t want to do anything to dishonour God, and I don’t want to appear as if I am promoting something that he finds abhorrent. But I just keep reminding myself that he finds so many things abhorrent, including my own behaviours, absolutely abhorrent and no matter how much I try, I’ll never be holy enough in my own strength. I guess that’s how I navigate.

Chaza approached the Scriptures to find the optimal pastoral response to her LGBTQIA+ members, and it is an orthodox form of theology. The emerging contextual theologies have impressed upon the global church the need for theology to always be a critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of lived experiences.⁶⁴ What is interesting to note is that Chaza believed her theology lacked orthodoxy. It raised questions about theology’s impact on people’s ability to engage in places of difference. How is dialogue possible if they immediately feel uncomfortable—even unorthodox—discussing even minor variants to the expected norms of the Baptist culture?

How Will the Conversation Progress?

Ken (P) questioned how the LGBTQIA+ discourse could progress within Baptist circles. He recalled being ‘cautioned’ by other Baptist leaders about his attitude that ‘welcomed’ LGBTQIA+ to his church. Ken does not explain why some Baptist leaders advised caution, and there was the inference that adopting an affirming theological position had negative implications for a Baptist church. In the interview, Ken responded incredulously at the assumptions as his theology is non-affirming; a theological position that he described as

⁶⁴ Stephen B. Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 2009), 54.

‘identical’ to many Baptist leaders. He was resigned to this being ‘par for the course’ when disagreeing. Still, he acknowledged the struggle within himself: ‘I find it so difficult when the church around me—the wider church, the Church with a big C around me—thinks that even taking that posture, that I am a sinner myself because of the posture.’ His frustration is evident:

So, I kind of like wonder how the conversation is going to progress if people aren’t willing [to discuss the Scriptures], if even the notion of anything different [from a non-affirming theology] is being seen as being outside of norms, even having the conversation is seen as acceptance [of the different perspective].

Ken’s experience highlights the existence of diverse perspectives within Baptists concerning the influence of Scripture on the LGBTQIA+ discourse. His personal struggles and frustration serve as a reminder of the need for engage with differing viewpoints. The current LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches necessitates a fundamental shift towards fostering more empathetic and open conversations.

While there are complexities to discussing interpretations of Scripture, neglecting such conversations leaves a void that can easily be filled with unfounded assumptions and biases, particularly in who is allowed to be a dialogue partner on the influence of Scriptures in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse. Engaging in the LGBTQIA+ discourse encourages individuals to critically assess their own assumptions and biases, including a re-evaluation of including who is and is not allowed to be a dialogue partner. The result of this introspection is the potential for a more considered and well-informed dialogue.

Summary

The Baptist distinctive values of freedom of conscience, the priesthood of all believers, and the autonomy of the local church provide an excellent framework for engaging in LGBTQIA+ discourse and facilitating lively debates over different theological perspectives. These values inherently position Baptists to be well-equipped for discussing theological differences and accommodating diverse interpretations of Scripture. While some

participants did engage in critical scriptural examination during LGBTQIA+ discourse, a majority confined their discussions within the traditional boundaries of the church's teachings on sexual and gender theology. This disparity between the potential framework and the current discourse represents a missed opportunity for robust and vibrant dialogue on LGBTQIA+ issues within the Baptist community. Embracing the Baptists' distinctive values and history of nonconformity could open the door to more nuanced and theologically diverse conversations, enriching the discourse for all participants.

However, in practice the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches often began with the presumption that there was widespread agreement on the use of non-affirming theology as the scaffold for the discussions. This dynamic disproportionately benefits those in the majority. Conversely, individuals holding perspectives outside this framework are compelled to constantly defend and explain their views. Drawing parallels with Martin Buber's philosophy, it is evident that creating an inclusive space for diverse opinions is essential. However, the dominance of non-affirming views in Baptist churches restricts the room and incentive for engaging in open discussions regarding diverse theological perspectives in the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches.

Concerns about theological orthodoxy and the logical fallacy of the slippery slope were common within LGBTQIA+ discussions. These concerns were significant barriers that hindered conversations regarding LGBTQIA+ Scriptural interpretations, creating obstacles to productive dialogue. There was a reticence to engage in dialogues about LGBTQIA+ issues, even among Baptists who shared the same non-affirming theology. The findings indicated that many fear the LGBTQIA+ discourse concerning the Scriptures might be divisive or difficult to address. This reluctance highlighted the potential challenges in fostering constructive conversations within the Baptist community itself.

It raises the question of how Baptists will manage to engage in dialogue with individuals holding opposing perspectives if they cannot accommodate internal disagreements. The study shows there were limited direct discussions between many

Baptist participants and those holding an affirming perspective. There was also a lack of dialogue between many Baptists and LGBTQIA+ persons and their family, friends, and advocates. Consequently, the firsthand faith experiences of LGBTQIA+ persons are missing from the current LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches. LGBTQIA+ participants expressed their dissatisfaction with Baptist churches, stating that Baptists do not listen to them, and that minimal effort was made to understand their experiences and perspectives. This highlights that the current LGBTQIA+ discourse does not adequately address the pastoral needs and concerns of LGBTQIA+ individuals within the Baptist community in an empathetic manner.

The consequences of a fear of deviating from a non-affirming based, theological discourse points to a significant gap in communication between these different parties in the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches. Addressing internal differences, actively engaging with diverse theological perspectives, and promoting open communication with LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates are essential steps toward bridging these communication gaps.

However, the findings show that pockets of conversation around diverse theological perspectives are emerging in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Some of the participants are engaging with reflective methodologies, such as Spiritual Reflection and Practical Theology, to develop fresh frameworks for those exploring and discussing possible approaches to LGBTQIA+ theology. This approach has created a liminal space for participants' thinking. While it may be argued that these individuals are seeking ways to circumvent established biblical principles, Professor Catherine Keller, in her advocacy for a 'theology of becoming', suggests that theology can either perpetuate the problem or provide a pathway for its resolution.⁶⁵ These participants genuinely desired to address the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons from many Baptist churches, attributing the exclusion to issues within the Baptist

⁶⁵ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 7.

theology. They employed theological reflection to develop innovative approaches for addressing this problem.

Theological reflection and practical theology served as a dynamic process, revealing a transformation in participants' thoughts and beliefs taking place over time.⁶⁶ This process exemplified the initial stages of merging horizons. By engaging with theological reflection and practical theology participants created a liminal space where different theological perspectives could intermingle. Their reflections extended beyond Scripture, encompassing perspectives from sociology, culture, and different theological viewpoints that had challenged their biases.⁶⁷ Notably there was a commitment to a gradual, thoughtful process, rather than quick fixes or forced agreement towards the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

The engagement with theological frameworks beyond the dominant non-affirming theology in Baptist churches prompted a critique of the welcoming but not affirming praxis, wherein LGBTQIA+ individuals are ostensibly 'welcome' to attend church but only under the condition of conforming to non-affirming practices. The findings noted that this 'welcome' often came with qualified acceptance, with specific parameters delineating an LGBTQIA+ person's involvement in the church. This raised questions about how genuinely 'welcome' LGBTQIA+ individuals felt within Baptist churches.

Notably, it was not only LGBTQIA+ participants but also those aligned with the non-affirming theological perspective who expressed dissatisfaction with a theology that ultimately resulted in the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates. The core argument revolved around issues of inequality, with the church holding all the knowledge

⁶⁶ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

⁶⁷ Participants specifically mentioned the authors Rachel Held Evans, Philip Yancy, and Justin Lee. Rachel Held Evans challenged conservative Christianity. Philip Yancy is a Christian author who brings a practical application to spiritual topics (e.g., grace). Justin Lee is a Christian LGBTQIA+ activist.

of what 'welcome' meant, while LGBTQIA+ persons entered with an open heart and often experienced hurt, rejection, and emotional damage at the hands of the church. This situation presents an opportunity and, arguably, an obligation to use people's concerns, whether for themselves or others, as a starting point for a broader conversation about what constitutes a safe Baptist environment for all parties involved in the dialogue.

The Baptist Care Perspective

It is hard to hate up close ... Agents of change are what we need. —Kelly

This chapter explores the findings from the interviews with participants connected with Baptist Care (SA), who were included in the research via the snowball sampling method.¹ This chapter exclusively features participants from Baptist Care (SA) who all opted for the narrative interview method for engaging with the study.

The chapter begins by reviewing the connection between Baptist Care (SA), BCSA, and its member churches, as discussed in Chapter 2. It then assesses the way Baptist Care participants contributed to the research. It proceeds to examine the experiences of those participants regarding the silence surrounding the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. It subsequently considers the findings that indicate how conversations about differing perspectives are shaped by the concept of immutable truth.

The chapter then investigates the new themes to emerge from the narratives of the Baptist Care participants. These are the influence of power and the importance of establishing and reiterating the agreed-upon values that form the basis for Baptist Care's LGBTQIA+ discourse. These findings are then summarised as a framework for safely navigating the LGBTQIA+ discourse. The chapter ends with a summary of the findings from the Baptist Care participants.

¹ Snowball sampling is a non-probability method in research where initial participants refer others to the research; Noy 327–44.

Exploring the Link: Baptist Care, BCSA, and Member Churches

Baptist Care SA, an Affiliated Ministry of BCSA, was founded to aid the disadvantaged in the community, significantly expanding Baptist churches' support beyond the capacity of a local church.² The close association between the two organisations results in numerous Baptists working as staff and volunteers within Baptist Care, which explains the context for the involvement of Baptist Care leaders in this study. Their participation offers a unique opportunity to observe how the LGBTQIA+ discourse influences both individuals and organisational practices. Seth (B; BC) categorises Baptist Care participants' connections with the broader Baptist community, as 'formal' (board and church leaders), 'informal' (friends), and 'staff' (Baptist Care employment). Additionally, through their employment, these participants regularly engage with LGBTQIA+ persons (staff and clients) regarding safety, inclusion, and celebrating personhood, providing them with specialised knowledge for facilitating dialogue.

Seth portrayed Baptist Care, Anglicare, and Salvation Army as the social arms of the church movement. Participants in the research detailed in this chapter brought diverse experiences to the study. For example, Seth shared obtaining 'the rainbow tick' accreditation for LGBTQIA+ safety in another faith-based organisation and how this experience influenced his work with Baptist Care, BCSA churches, and Baptist individuals.³ The participants, citing Baptist Care's roles at the 'marginal edges' of life', 'at the sharp end,' 'at

² 'Baptist Churches of South Australia Constitution'; Baptist Care SA, 'On Mission,' accessed 23 December 2023, <https://sabaptist.asn.au/baptist-care-sa/>; Cronshaw.

³ 'The Rainbow Tick is a quality framework that helps health and human services organisations show that they are safe, inclusive and affirming services and employers for the LGBTIQ community.' Marina Carman, Pam Kennedy, Shamini Joseph, and Matthew Parsons, 'Rainbow tick standards,' La Trobe University (2020), <https://rainbowhealthaustralia.org.au/>.

the cliff,' and 'on the frontline,' gained a unique perspective for facilitating conversations among diverse experiences.

The Baptist Care constitution stipulates that senior management be from a Christian faith tradition.⁴ Consequently, the Baptist Care participants represent different denominations, including one from a Baptist church. Their familiarity with the intersection of faith and LGBTQIA+ issues position them as insightful contributors, offering nuanced perspectives on how faith influences LGBTQIA+ discourse.

Gregory (BC) highlighted the complexity of ensuring safety for LGBTQIA+ persons within Baptist Care, given the organisation's vast staff of around 1,000 and numerous volunteers from diverse faith and CALD backgrounds.⁵ However, deliberate engagement in dialogue—at both an individual and organisational level—was seen as crucial in navigating differences in personal values within an organisation. Gregory said:

But do I have to be tolerant of people's different views on that? I do. Can I speak up as a manager and leader in Baptist Care about the effects of their words and behaviour? Yes, I can. We have worked ... to manage their views of the world ... and whether they are open to speak about those things and have an understanding of the impact.

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that continual dialogue held significant importance within the organisational context of Baptist Care. The participants shared their perspectives and experiences of the LGBTQIA+ discourse with individual Baptists. For example, Seth described cultural elements that he believed strongly influence the current LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches, saying:

⁴ This criterion only applies to senior management and does not apply to all staffing levels: Baptist Care (SA), *Constitution*: 'Values of The Association: [3.1] Foundational Values. [3.1.1] The Foundational Values of the Association are the Values of its Member, as prescribed in its Member's Constitution.'

⁵ CALD is the acronym for 'culturally and linguistically diverse' and describes Australia's religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity: Pham et al.

[there are] a number of spoken and unspoken cultural elements which are very strong drivers. Some are born from a fundamental orthodoxy within Christian movement and judgement and the more universal space of fear of the unknown.

Insights shared by Baptist Care participants regarding the current LGBTQIA+ discourse within BSCA and its member churches aligns with the previously discussed findings. The narratives of the Baptist Care participants included references to the pervasive culture of silence, the importance of person-centred discourse, the problems with colliding perspectives and the influence of the biblical Scriptures. This strengthens the research ensuring that the conclusions drawn are consistent and not limited to a specific group or biased sample.

However, the Baptist Care participants particularly focused on two topics: a culture of silence and framing the dialogue in binaries and immutable truth. I discuss these two findings in more detail below, starting with the observation of a culture of silence in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches.

Culture of Silence

The participants spoke of an observable culture of silence by Baptists towards LGBTQIA+ issues, even to the point where individual Baptists have advised against raising the issue with BCSA or Baptist churches. For example, Kelly said:

There's no appetite within the Baptist movement to discuss it and that I shouldn't raise it and that I should be very careful about encouraging any conversation within the organisation about it as it would do more harm talking about it than if we keep silent.

Kelly's quote summarises the findings of the data results from the Baptist participants. Seth gave numerous explicit and implicit examples of the culture of silence emanating from many Baptists and his determination to be countercultural: 'No more "Don't ask; Don't tell" ... we are going to talk about it.' Seth spoke of the 'grief' addressing the issue of silence had caused him, despite 'being comfortable in his own skin', when people either tried to silence him or responded in what Seth described as 'fixed positions; we are not interested in having

a dialogue.’ He summarised that ‘in a number of instances [the LGBTQIA+ discourse] was poorly received, in anxiety from people within the movement’. Gregory observed that some staff might be unable to stay, preferring silence to engaging in dialogue with LGBTQIA+ persons. However, none of the Baptist Care participants was willing to promote a culture of silence in the LGBTQIA+ discourse, and they were deliberately cultivating and navigating the conversation.

The negative impact of ‘silence’ on the next generation was a theme that was in common with the data findings among Baptist and Baptist Care participants. For example, Kelly argued:

If we don’t have a healthy appetite to talk about sexuality and sexual behaviours and consent, we are exposing young people to further harm, and that’s really important.

Kelly’s observation adds another perspective to the consequences of silence. In the Baptist participants’ narratives, a range of issues including self-harm, mental health and suicide among young people were raised as concerns. Here, the problem is with the vulnerability of young people in their relationships and how the silence can be filled by those who would exploit and coercively control LGBTQIA+ young people who are on the margins of the community.

According to Seth, the silence influenced how many Baptists dialogue over differing perspectives. He suggested the Baptists’ narrative as: ‘we’ve always done it this way, or this is what I learnt becomes the point of contention, and there is very little wriggle room.’ There was the implicit conclusion of an echo chamber and being caught up in habitual patterns, past conditioning, and narrow perspectives. In this way, the findings align with the concept of ‘absencing’ outlined in Theory U, which suggests that echo chamber’s tends to limit discourse by promoting rigid categorisation that hinder the emergence of future possibilities.⁶

⁶ Scharmer, 34.

The Power of Immutable Truth, Categories and Binaries

Absencing may explain Kelly's observation that the LGBTQIA+ discourse within a Baptist context often reduced to a binary mindset of 'good and evil ... saved or sinful.' Seth noted the consequences of dichotomies:

[It led to] judgement ... [that] becomes othered. It is always othered; the othering is extraordinarily strong, and there is no desire to move towards someone to understand to get a different view.

Kelly described the Baptist church as operating in 'one truth' with 'no concept of multiple truths' or differing perspectives. Her observation was reminiscent of Stephen Holmes's argument that Baptists tend to believe 'there is only one meaning in any given text' and consequently have lost their Baptist heritage of continually engaging and wrestling with the perspectives of all the believers.⁷ Kelly described the adherence to immutable truth as 'a strong power mantle'. The manner in which some Baptists engage in the LGBTQIA+ discourse seems to align with this assessment, for when there are, as Mascord explains, 'no disputable matters', then there is no room for discussion.⁸ This often results in operating from a power-over mode for the dialogue.

Kelly contrasted the Baptists' understanding of 'truth' with the Aboriginal attitude towards 'truth-telling', highlighting the differing agendas for 'truth-telling' in dialogue. She described how 'truth-telling' for the Aboriginal community is about retaining the right to recount in their own voice their stories of injustice and marginalisation:

There is something in there about being able to stand in there with them [a marginalised or persecuted community] and helping them to tell their truth, which is their experience.

Kelly then asked what it meant for 'the Aboriginal community, LGBTQ community, queer community to be able to speak their truth in a Christian context'. She concluded that

⁷ Holmes, 422.

⁸ Mascord, 71.

it was a doorway to a ‘diabolical conversation’ because ‘truth’ was not ‘a concept that would be shared’ for many Baptists because ‘truth’ is immutable, unchanging, and absolute. The data results from the Baptist Care participants showed that the outcome of binary thinking and singular truth influenced who was included and excluded from the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Equally, what appears as immutable truth to one person can be seen as intransigent arrogance to others.

Habitual binary thinking led some Baptists to adopt exclusionary language in their dialogue with LGBTQIA+ persons. Seth recounted the stories from LGBTQIA+ individuals who had engaged in dialogue with individual Baptists. LGBTQIA+ persons described the ‘hypocrisy’ of talking with people who exclude them, despite professing to be followers of Jesus’ way, which they understood to promote acceptance and inclusion to those on the margins of society. Seth said: ‘[LGBTQIA+ persons] can’t reconcile the two behaviours.’ There was also a concern that Baptists were unjust and uncompassionate towards LGBTQIA+ persons. Seth described the dialogue as conducted in ways that were ‘too provocative, too hurtful; it’s very pharisaical’. It was an uncompromising critique of how the LGBTQIA+ discourse is currently conducted by some Baptists.

The disconnect between holding to an immutable truth revealed in a Scriptural interpretation and its impacts on applied theology were seen in the wider data results from participants in Baptist churches. For example, Len (B) highlighted the inconsistency between the Baptist church’s ‘espoused theology and lived theology’. Gregory echoed this. He shared a story where a Baptist individual said, ‘show compassion’ to all on the margins and yet were—in Gregory’s words—extremely wedded to the idea that they had to respond to others by identifying their ‘sin’ and telling them, ‘How to live their lives’.

Kelly raised a similar question as to why there was a focus on same-sex relationships from many Baptists and yet comparatively little ‘outrage ... on the issues of justice and violence and seek[ing] no harm’ and why domestic and family violence in marriages is ‘dismissed and minimised’. She said:

Where is the conversation in Baptist churches over Domestic and Family Violence? Why on an emotional level, people's emotive state, you can get more reaction from who people are loving than who people are hurting. I don't understand that ... It's an intriguing dynamic that we need to challenge.

It is a challenging question. Why is there so much noise made by sectors of the church about same-sex relationships that are safe, equitable, and mutually beneficial and so little noise about the abusive relationships and marriages happening not only in society but happening in our churches?⁹

Kelly also raised the issue of the negative language some Christians used, reinforcing the dichotomous framework for the conversation. She said:

I've heard people do this, which just makes me feel sick in my stomach; tie the conversation [about LGBTQIA+] up with expressions of paedophilia or violent sexuality, which I think is really shocking.

Kelly's comment illustrates the damaging consequences when the silence is filled by those with the power and the platform to speak rather than listening to the stories and experiences of LGBTQIA+ persons.

Seth suggested that the Baptists in SA had narrowed the focus of the LGBTQIA+ discourse to five discussion points: '[Baptists discuss] gender mutilation, preferred pronouns, toilets, the destruction of the Christian faith, and persecution [of Christians in Australia]'. Seth had discussed all these topics with Baptist as part of the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening within churches, and he concluded that it 'causes us all sorts of strife'. Seth wondered how the subject of 'toilets' could be crucial to the discussion when compared to the issues of justice and safety for LGBTQIA+ persons. However, he believed that talking

⁹ Also see Fiona Hill, 'Disarming the "Bible-bashers": Claiming the Bible for Australian Abuse Survivors', Ph.D. dissertation (Melbourne College of Divinity, 2008); Ruth A. Tucker, *Black and White Bible, Black and Blue Wife: My Story of Finding Hope After Domestic Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *A Theology of Women's Bodies as Battlefield*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 131–22.

about the problem rather than ignoring it was the best way to navigate dialogue over difference, even if he viewed the subject as unimportant or ridiculous.

Discussions initiated by Baptists on 'persecution' were offensive to Seth as he has family in countries where Christianity is 'truly repressed' and his family have 'historically physically suffered persecution [whereas in Australia] there are still Christian prayers at the opening of Parliament.' Other participants raised the Baptist belief of being persecuted as a hindrance to the current LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist church, and there was agreement over the lack of understanding or empathy for this posture adopted by some Baptists in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Seth asked one Baptist individual how they could equate a loss of power or privilege with their right as a Baptist to speak to individual leaders and their access to submit issues at a board level. Seth did not give their response, although he and Kelly found irony in the notion of 'white, bright, Christians' feeling they were marginalised. Their observations seem to reiterate the argument that power is a subject not understood by those who hold it.

All the Baptist Care participants suggested that an undercurrent of 'fear' existed in Baptists about entering discussions on LGBTQIA+ issues. Kelly described how some Baptists were 'triggered' by conversation, and Seth describes it 'as being scared'. Kelly spoke of LGBTQIA+ advocates who feared that in 'holding more liberal views', they would be held accountable for 'allowing things or having an alternative view' by friends they had known all their lives. They all suggested that fear caused some Baptists to ignore the LGBTQIA+ discourse or respond defensively to discussions on LGBTQIA+ issues. However, the participants also attributed the silence and a 'Don't ask; Don't tell' strategy towards the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches to placating the majority who hold all the power. Kelly describes this as stemming 'from a concern that there would be too much backlash about promoting a conversation around this.' The Baptist Care constitution does give Baptist churches power over the organisation, and therefore the fear of offending the stakeholders is not without merit. However, as Seth argued:

The clear mission statement [for Baptist Care is] express God's love and compassion for people, especially for those who are missed or marginalised by journeying with them towards the attainment of their potential. So ok, there we go. I don't have to do anything else; that's all I have to do.

Therefore, the Baptist Care constitution empowers the marginalised by placing them at the centre of the LGBTQIA+ discourse.¹⁰

These findings challenge the prevailing culture of silence in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. They reveal that those outside the Baptist church context view the current conversation as driven from a place of fear, conformity, and a preference for comfort over inclusion of the marginalised. This is problematic, given the Baptist distinctive to be the priesthood of all the believers, yet fears surrounding the LGBTQIA+ discourse are silencing the voices of some within the Baptist movement. These findings served as another moment in the study for silent contemplation, as practised in *Dadirri*, urging reflection on the indictment and consideration of the LGBTQIA+ discourse the Baptist community aspires to be known for.

The Influence of Power

The participants' narratives highlighted the significant role power played in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. For example, Gregory said:

I think power is one of the greatest discourses and lenses that has ever been bought into our thinking, and we need to be aware of it ... Where does power not exist? As soon as two are gathered, as soon as you have any institution or community, as soon as you understand a sense of law, of decency, there is power. We don't talk about it, and so we are not aware.

Kelly argued that the subject of power was the 'first' place to 'start' the conversation. She defined 'power' as 'patriarchy', 'oppression', 'silencing people', 'colonising', and 'privilege', which she explained in this context included 'white privilege, male privilege, and Judeo-Christian privilege'. The consensus among all participants was that power

¹⁰ Baptist Care (SA), *Constitution: '[3.2.2] Operational Values'*.

structures were 'reinforced throughout society' and, often overlooked or unaddressed within Baptist church discussions. Gregory said: 'We have a long way to go in what's not talked about. But nor is power and control talked about in the church'.

This prevailing observation stands as a common thread within their collective experiences of the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening within Baptist churches.

However, the conversation did not stop at recognising the influence of power; there was also a culture of addressing power imbalances. Kelly exemplified this through two stories that illustrate both positive and negative impacts of power on discourse. She prefaced her narratives by explaining the context for the power imbalance. Kelly spoke of how many Baptist Care clients are children under sixteen with no control over many of their life choices. She said: 'our clients don't get to choose to be put in our care services. It's not picking a GP or a church to go to.' However, the power differential between staff and clients was recognised, and priority was given to the client's perspective and choices. This was true for LGBTQIA+ clients, particularly those with diverse gender experiences. Kelly then shared examples of how Baptist staff had responded positively and negatively to gender incongruencies among the clients.

In the positive example, Baptist staff were assigning dorms at a camp, and a child transitioning from female to male needed extra support because of the communal bathroom facilities. In this case, alternatives were found that did not draw attention to the issue for the child but still allowed them room to feel safe in their environment. In the other case, a Baptist staff member had responded with power-over a client by assigning them a dorm according to the sex assigned to them at birth. This was quickly rectified to give the client power over their life choices, and they were given a room according to their gender identity.

The proactive steps taken to address power imbalances within the client-staff relationship extended beyond resolving the problem for a single client. New structures were

introduced to prevent staff from operating in a power-over-the-clients mode in the future.¹¹ The introduction of new structures was not solely influenced by legal or professional mandates. They were primarily motivated by a strong personal conviction, indicating a commitment to proactively prevent future power imbalances. Notable in this narrative was the way Kelly engaged in elements of *Dadirri's* framework for listening. *Dadirri*, involving storytelling and communal value determination, prompts changes to address inequality and injustice within a community.¹²

Applying this scenario to the context of the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches highlights the crucial changes required to address power imbalance in Baptist' discussions. Baptist Care's LGBTQIA+ discourse lay in a values-led dialogue within the Baptist Care community, determined by fundamental communal values. The first value centres on individual personhood and agency. It emphasises dialogue with LGBTQIA+ persons ensuring engagement with those with firsthand experiences and thereby avoiding assumptions. Through deep listening, a second value emerged emphasising a commitment to avoiding power dynamics. This led to systemic changes to prevent the LGBTQIA+ discourse from operating in a 'power-over' mode of dialogue.

In their effort to continue this examination on modes of power, the Baptist Care participants discussed power dynamics not only at the individual level but also within institutional structures. For example, while Gregory acknowledged that 'there was positional power' (i.e, that some decisions rested with the CEO and the board), he also identified the 'tangible' actions taken to share power with the staff. He argued that the first step in disseminating power was talking about its influence:

¹¹ Harisun, *Power, Theology and Ecclesiology in Practice*.

¹² Leaver; West et al; Tanner, Agius, and Darbyshire; Megan Stronach and Daryl Adair, 'Dadirri: Reflections on a Research Methodology Used to Build Trust Between a Non-Indigenous Researcher and Indigenous Participants,' *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6.2 (2014).

We notice it, we name it with our staff, we talk about how we will use power well ... and if it's being misused by anyone, including me [i.e, representing leadership] speak up. Very deliberate.

Gregory then argued that the second step in rectifying power imbalances involved granting 'unfettered access' to leadership for LGBTQIA+ staff within the organisation to address safety concerns. He said:

the exec and for myself ... recognise that [LGBTQIA+] experience is different. And I can't treat them as everybody else because that's thinking there is no difference, there are. And I need to be attuned to those and be supportive of them and celebrate their sexuality, and not tolerate or anything else; I'd use the word celebrate.

There was a consensus among the participants regarding their decision not to engage in a 'power-over' mode with those they disagreed with. Although they all agreed that it was 'messy and difficult to manage' those whose views went against their own, there was a consensus not to exclude anyone from the conversation. For example, Kelly explained the way she dialogued with those who fundamentally opposed her views on affirming LGBTQIA+ orientations: it was because she believed excluding those voices could be more detrimental to the discourse surrounding LGBTQIA+ issues. As she explained:

the more dangerous feeling I can have around that is actually dehumanising that group of people because of the lack of respect that I feel for that perspective. And that, for me, is where I have to be cautious because I am buying into the type of behaviour that I'm rejecting as well.

There was agreement among these participants to treat all with 'respect'. Gregory explained the reasons for engaging with the diversity of theology and praxis:

We need to hold people in a window of influence, so they don't flip to that space of defend or attack or silence or fear. I need them to stay in the conversation; stay in the zone. Which means they are still listening, they are still reflecting and reflective, and we can influence, and they can influence me. They have a point, and I need to not be arrogant in thinking that what you are saying is fundamentally wrong, and I'm here to convert you.

Gregory's language can be seen as another example of Gadamer's concept of the fusing of horizons and the concept of being open to being challenged by the perspectives of others.¹³ However, unlike Gadamer's preferred resolution for the fusing of horizons, there was never a sense of this dialogue concluding with an agreement between the different perspectives. Gregory clearly stated that his objective was not to 'convert' anyone. Instead, the aim was to agree on the value bases for the culture of Baptist Care and the expectations of the community's posture towards LGBTQIA+ persons. This again evokes parallels with the concepts of *Dadirri*, aligning with *Dadirri's* practice of deep listening, which aims to identify instances of injustice within the community and collectively determine a path forward to ensure the safety of all members. It is also another example where the practice of *Dadirri* would facilitate not only a framework for listening to others in discourse but also to introduce pathways that challenge the power and privilege of one perspective over another.

One of the implicit power imbalances mentioned by the Baptist Care participants was in the power differential seen in the staff who were Baptists. Although they were contracted workers, the same as all staff, including the LGBTQIA+ staff, the title 'Baptist' was observed to privilege them, at times, within Baptist Care. Consequently, the participants shared instances where the label 'Baptist' led to non-Baptist staff deferring to Baptist-affiliated colleagues, and of occasions when Baptist staff exceeded their authority. For example, all the participants shared the story of the Baptist staff member who, during a staff training on case-noting, shared their views that gender pronouns were not at the client's discretion; instead, they should be noted by the assigned gender at birth. The conversation was described as 'very hurtful and painful' to the LGBTQIA+ staff in the meeting. What was notable in this incident was the Baptist staff member's belief that they had the power to

¹³ Gadamer's fusing of horizons theory suggests that meaning is situated in our own context and biases. These are challenged when engaging with a perspective that is situated from a different horizon and perspective. This leads to a new shared understanding and sense of meaning: Shields and Edwards, 69.

vocalise their opinion and have the organisation follow their perspective. Kelly observed that when the Baptist staff member was challenged on their behaviour, they responded that they were ‘very offended that we would even be having this conversation at Baptist Care.’ This speaks of a lack of awareness of privilege and power or the responsibility of those who hold power to use it equitably.

In addressing the power imbalances, the participants’ narratives illustrated how they were engaged in what Mahoney describes as ‘layering’. This is the process of adding new rules to existing structures, thereby modifying the ways in which the original rules shape both behaviour and the fundamental logic of the organisation. While each new element may represent a minor change individually, their cumulative effect can result in significant change over time.¹⁴ One of the ways layering was seen was in the participants consistently framing the LGBTQIA+ discourse around a list of agreed values.

Values

The framework for dialoguing over differences in perspective was firmly based on agreed-upon cultural values for the organisation. Gregory said: ‘And we are doing that out of a strong sense of our values – compassion, integrity, empathy ... we are unashamedly leading in that way.’ The values of love, compassion, generosity, inclusivity, ‘bringing and speaking justice’, and behavioural integrity and awareness of power were common words and themes repeated throughout the participant interviews. It suggested habitual and frequent discussions on the values of the organisation.

This was illustrated in the ease with which the participants expounded on the organisation’s values, using them as a practical framework for the LGBTQIA+ discourse. For example, Seth described six distinct values in his basis for engaging in this dialogue:

To work with people where they are at.

To see what God’s Spirit does in people’s lives.

¹⁴ Mahoney, 17.

To not 'put a barrier in front of people.'

To hold a 'moral ethical and legal responsibility to ... provide a safe space for all my staff and for my clients who identify.'

To recognise the power of privilege.

To interact without any underlying agenda to change people.

In relation to the power of privilege, Seth said, 'I don't have the luxury, nor want it, to say: "You don't belong here unless you do ABC"'.

Seth's discourse, driven by his values, illustrates that these values were more than mere rhetoric—they were validated through practical implementation. The articulated values emphasise creating safe spaces, acknowledging privilege, and interacting without an agenda to change others, thereby fostering an open and more hospitable dialogue within the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

While sharing his values, Seth realised that when others transgressed them, he responded by: 'getting on my high horse'. The other participants expressed a similar sentiment. However, it was not encountering a different perspective from their own that created conflict; it was violating the agreed-upon values. For example, Gregory said: 'there's no room for us in Baptist Care for us to be picky, to be choosy, to be judgmental, or to differentiate based on how someone comes to us.'

Gregory spoke of 'restraining' his responses in conversations over difference in perspectives:

I'm going to respond like this [i.e, with conflict] because of the beliefs I hold globally around ethics and treating people with respect, and that means I can show respect to someone who goes right against everything I hold dear.

Gregory argued that a culture that excludes anyone is visible, and when seen, causes all in the organisation to 'wonder how far exclusion extends.' He said: 'that's why you can't go there ... a sense of belonging [and] inclusiveness is vital'. Gregory firmly advocated for accessible dialogue, open to everyone, considering it an uncompromising necessity within the community discourse. His staunch assertion, 'you can't go there', signifies the non-

negotiable nature of his values-led discourse. Gregory believed that imposing exclusionary policies on discourse in one area might set a precedent for exclusion across multiple facets of community dialogue, thus proposing a detrimental effect on the entire communal discourse. His argument highlights the need for universally accessible conversations to uphold the integrity of all community discussions.

The participants shared a common emphasis on values shaped by their faith. Furthermore, they all engaged in theological reflection on the Scriptures, using them to substantiate and advocate for their held values. Kelly clearly expressed this:

In terms of what I see as the just outcome, and it's not because I hold that view politically, it's because that is the nature of God, that is my experience of God, my understanding of faith. And my experience of working in the church and the community is that God is inviting us into deeper relationship, into deeper expressions of love and care. That means that we recognise the unique humanity in every human and the way that they express love in the world. If that love is full of kindness and generosity and care and support and nurture, then it is a reflection of God's love and the way that God loves the world.

Inclusivity was an extension of their sacred values. Gregory stated: 'if I am saying that all clients are welcome no matter religion, sex, creed, whatever, then so are staff.' He then proceeded to share his theological reflections on inclusiveness: 'the Christ I follow ... chose friends who were rejects mostly.' He went on to highlight how the Apostles Peter and Paul, who were the pillars of the early church, 'had to be challenged with strong intervention from God' on the inclusion of Gentiles: 'God was saying directly that the outcasts were not outcasts anymore.' Seth also came to the same conclusion on inclusivity arguing that Jesus was found 'with those who couldn't even get into the Temple.'

These participants were wrestling with the Scriptures, looking beyond the church's traditional teachings on LGBTQIA+ orientations through spiritual reflections in ministry and practical theology, much like some Baptist participants in the previous chapters. Their narratives did not present as looking for a loophole in the Scriptures. Rather this was practical theology born out of journeying in relationship with people. Neither was there a

reliance on black-and-white theology or immutable truth, which were the hermeneutics much discussed in the previous chapter on the influence of the Scriptures on the LGBTQIA+ discourse. The Baptist Care participants' hermeneutics were person-centred, where the Scriptures were read from the non-negotiable value of inclusion.

To safeguard against conversations degenerating into what was described as 'defence and conflict mode', the participants incorporated the agreed values (such as inclusion) into the dialogue framework. However, participants found problems with 'values' as the words and phrases carried assumptions and different meanings to different people. For example, Seth observed how the agreed values—'which leaves no room for being anything other than inclusive'—were altered 'when they come up against several things that they [Baptist staff] consider to override that.' He attributed this to 'cognitive dissonance within the [Baptist] church'.

Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that individuals are motivated to modify their beliefs, alter their behaviour, or seek information that aligns with their existing beliefs to restore cognitive consistency.¹⁵ Consequently, cognitive dissonance plays a crucial role in shaping individual responses and decision-making processes, often influencing how individuals evaluate and process new information. This parallels the cognitive processes and behaviours observed in a liminal space described by Theory U. In Theory U, there are two responses: 'downloading' (relying on the echo chamber of past knowledge) and 'presencing' (suspending judgment and tapping into intuition). Downloading limits possibilities, while presencing enables transformative change and innovation.¹⁶ Seth's experience of the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches led him to conclude that many

¹⁵ Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills, 'An Introduction to Cognitive Dissonance Theory and An Overview of Current Perspectives on the Theory,' in *Cognitive Dissonance: Reexamining A Pivotal Theory in Psychology*, ed. Eddie Harmon-Jones (American Psychological Association, 2019); Anizor, 147.

¹⁶ Scharmer, 34.

Baptists respond to differences in perspectives by downloading responses from the echo chamber of past knowledge.

Assumptions over a word's meaning can significantly impact how people perceive and interpret information. However, the different definitions for 'values' do not negate the merit of a values-driven framework for dialogue. It simply highlights the importance of a commitment to keep talking, which is a central concept of all the major dialogue theorists. It also illustrates the commitment of those using *Dadirri* to relistening to ensure that what was heard matches what was said. However, it is also an example of Bohm's argument that only continual dialoguing and listening can confront our deep assumptions and challenge our worldviews.¹⁷

Seth shared his experiences of engaging in the LGBTQIA+ discourse with those who held a conservative theological position. He described how some conservative Baptists say:

It is more important that I stand up for this being anti-gay, anti-marriage, [anti-]pronouns and if I hurt people then bad luck, really bad luck because this is a heaven or hell issue.

However, Seth also spoke of those from a conservative background who could bracket their perspective and critically examine their praxis and decision-making process from the standpoint of the organisation's stated values. Seth believed these people could suspend their viewpoint because they were committed to the values of inclusion and compassion and because they had agreed on a framework on how to act with integrity.

Gregory explained that 'there were other things standing behind' the proactive engagement in dialogue about LGBTQIA+ issues:

Notions of social justice, not just our values of compassion, integrity, and empathy but also our notion of social justice and standing up for those we believe are being marginalised.

Hearing the emphasis from these participants on values raised the question of how to define the Baptists' values for the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. There is an

¹⁷ Bohm, Factor, and Garrett, 4–5; Bohm and Nichol, 17–19.

observable value in the local church's autonomy, which makes it difficult to attribute individual values across the movement. The values of 'love', 'compassion', and 'justice' were reiterated throughout the interviews from both the the Baptist participants and the Baptist Care participants.

Baptist Care participants shared a common observation of their experience of talking to Baptists about LGBTQIA+ issues. They observed a tendency among many Baptists to prioritise one biblical truth above another; namely, when choosing between the moral ethics law and the relational rule of theology, moral ethics wins. This suggests moral ethics is the guiding value for the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. The observations made by the Baptist Care participants reveals the influence that the belief in one biblical truth has on the LGBTQIA+ discourse. This is illustrated in the earlier example of the Baptist staff member who believed they had the authority to stand against a person's right to choose their pronouns. For some Baptists, what they saw as upholding the immutable truth in the Scriptures was more important than journeying with those who are excluded or marginalised. For the Baptist staff member, the critical issue was the metanarratives in the Scriptures, such as love and justice, and therefore, not advocating for these truths would be a lack of faith and integrity on their part.

It would be difficult to draw a conclusion as to whether the ultimate value for the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches lies in a theological perspective or in addressing the marginalisation of people in the church. However, in Seth's account of his conversations in the Baptist movement, he said: 'I haven't had any conversations that end in being inclusive, really.'

Navigating Conversation: The Necessary Framework

Gregory argued for an intelligent framework for the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches:

we are a broad church literally within Baptist and within society, and although I have a strong stance on [celebrating LGBTQIA+ orientations], putting a contrary view or pushing for [Baptists who do not affirm LGBTQIA+ life choices] to be different often either gets defensiveness or attack. That's not a very wise or sophisticated way to manage people, and it speaks of arrogance that I'm right and their wrong, which is what they are doing. So, let's not put the fire out with gasoline. Let's be a little more intelligent than that about how we are invited to talk about that.

Kelly argued for beginning the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches from the following foundational values:

What is the nature of God in the world and how do we experience God, and then what is humanity invited into in terms of how we express love, intimacy, and our identity, and how are we seeking to reflect the nature of God and live? That's where I go.

These quotes highlight how these participants believed the conversation should be based on values and not on the dichotomous issues of right or wrong theological perspective or questions of sin or salvation.

While participants shared their Baptist conversation experiences, they revealed their strategies for navigating the discussion over differences, starting with actively engaging and creating spaces for dialogue. For example, Seth appeared genuine when he said: 'Delighted to talk about this', reiterating his commitment to the conversation. Kelly also stated her commitment to keep talking. She shared how she had been in discussion for three years with a Baptist church about how to include LGBTQIA+ persons in the life of the church. The lengthy discourse was partly due to the church not understanding how the power systems worked in an organisation. Her account was reminiscent of the 'Gadamer and Habermas debate', which recognised that solving one issue still leaves a series of matters requiring attention.¹⁸ Kelly's narrative evidenced her unwavering commitment to progressing the dialogue, despite the emerging challenges that the LGBTQIA+ discourse encounter. This

¹⁸ Kelly, 369–89.

highlights the importance of facilitators in the LGBTQIA+ discourse in navigating and progressing the dialogue.

The Baptist Care participants agreed that dialogue was never about ‘placating’. Seth said: ‘It’s about a real robust conversation but with respect, and inclusion, and giving people a voice.’ Navigating the conversation about LGBTQIA+ inclusion was based on the value that dialogue is always *with* those with a different perspective rather than *about* LGBTQIA+ persons. Therefore, there was a deliberate policy allowing easy access for those in the minority to those with power.

Kelly spoke of the ‘great hope’ she held that while the LGBTQIA+ discourse was ‘a place of discomfort for the Baptist movement’, church history proved the faithfulness of God to address the issue of justice and the outworking of God’s love in the world. She said:

As our community, our society, evolves and develops a greater awareness and kindness and compassion is that we wrestle with these ideas, and change causes conflict, and conflict causes change. So, they go hand in hand, and we need to have the conflict to generate change. The tricky part is how we wound each other ... I guess the tension is how you generate the change process in a way that doesn’t wound ... those seen as other and marginalised and silenced.

Kelly’s comment encapsulated the approach of Baptist Care participants towards the LGBTQIA+ discourse. First, the approach prioritises collective engagement, emphasising dialogue inclusive of all community members. This is followed by a focus towards upholding agreed-upon values for the dialogue that minimises harm for those involved in LGBTQIA+ discourse. Finally, the approach includes a deliberate policy to tackle power imbalances, ensuring equitable access to the dialogue from marginalised voices. Collectively, these components form a comprehensive framework employed by Baptist Care participants, aimed at facilitating a more constructive and inclusive LGBTQIA+ discourse within the community.

Summary

The narrative interviews with participants from Baptist Care (SA) offer a unique gateway for observing and comprehending the link between LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches and its effect on discussions beyond the church's confines. This qualitative data becomes a valuable opportunity to examine the broader societal impact of the LGBTQIA+ discourse and the nuanced ways in which institutions like Baptist Care and BCSA navigate and conduct the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

The differences between Baptist Care and BCSA, primarily stemming from Baptist Care's legal and contractual obligations, do not negate the contextual similarities between the entities. Baptist Care, as an Affiliated Ministry of BCSA, shares foundational constitutional values with BCSA, indicating a common ground in their guiding principles. In addition, all the Baptist Care participants involved in this study are from a Christian faith tradition. Their shared religious background serves as a vital lens, enabling understanding and contextualisation of the complex dynamics of conducting the LGBTQIA+ discourse in a faith context.

The Baptist Care participants' data aligns with the prior chapters, strengthening the research with a new participant subset. However, in addition to observations on the current Baptist LGBTQIA+ discourse, the Baptist Care participants discussed the underlining influences on the discourse. For example, the narratives from the Baptist Care participants confirm the preference for silence, rather than discussing LGBTQIA+ issues, among individual Baptists and also at an institutional level. The Baptist Care participants attributed the silence to fear. In particular, the fear of conflicting with the predominant perspective held by the majority in the church, which was further complicated given the potential for jeopardising the close friendships many Baptists shared within the congregation. Their observations highlight the complex emotional and relational dynamics that impede open discourse within Baptist communities on LGBTQIA+ subjects. The findings from the Baptist

Care interviews confirm that a prevailing undercurrent of fear among Baptists manifests in a tendency to either avoid or respond defensively to the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

The findings derived from Baptist Care participants also reinforce the significance of hermeneutics among Baptists on the current LGBTQIA+ discourse, again aligning with the other research findings. These observations show a preference among certain Baptists to prioritise immutable truth in the Scriptures over actively engaging with marginalised groups in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. The Baptist Care participants recognised that this prioritisation led to a reluctance to engage in open conversations with diverse perspectives, thereby creating a potential barrier where marginalised voices may feel excluded or dismissed.

The findings from the Baptist Care participants also act as a contrast in approaches to the LGBTQIA+ discourse with Baptist churches, as Baptist Care participants prioritise relationships in these discussions over a subject-based discourse. However, their approach still stems from their understanding of their faith and the metanarratives of Scripture. By utilising their understanding of the Scriptures as guiding principles for the LGBTQIA+ discourse, Baptist Care participants advocate for values such as love, compassion, generosity, inclusivity, justice, and behavioural integrity. Hence, the participants' approach to an LGBTQIA+ discourse based in these values derives from deep reliance on the Scriptures and their interpretation of God's character. It is anchored to Scriptures, akin to participants from Baptist churches, albeit with different interpretations and different emphases on certain values. Using the metanarrative of Scripture as the foundation for the LGBTQIA+ discourse offers the potential to redirect the discussion away from possible conflict arising from differing hermeneutical perspectives. When the priority and values of the community are in relationship it has the capacity to contribute to a supportive and united community, even amid differences.

The approach embraced by Baptist Care participants for facilitating the LGBTQIA+ discourse reveals a deliberate framework aimed at constructive and constant dialogue. Their

strategy is threefold. First to prioritise dialogue over silence, promoting open communication instead of adhering to a 'Don't ask; Don't tell' mentality. This included dialoguing with everyone connected to the discourse, including LGBTQIA+ persons, their advocates, and Baptists who held a non-affirming theological perspective. In the LGBTQIA+ discourse, the Baptist Care participants stress the importance of incorporating diverse viewpoints in dialogue, regardless of personal agreement. This approach of including and respecting the diversity in perspectives is a difference from the current LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches, which has been described as dominated by the non-affirming theological perspective. Respecting the diversity of opinions has the potential to build relationships and nurture a tolerant environment where ideas are exchanged, facilitating the possible discovery of common ground for the discourse.

The second strategy, central to the Baptist Care participants facilitation of the LGBTQIA+ discourse, is their emphasis on initiating conversations based on clearly defined values rather than engaging in confrontational debates focused on competing truths. They advocate for deep listening as a means to avoid adopting defensive or combative stances towards differing perspectives.

Finally, their approach consciously addresses power imbalances in the LGBTQIA+ discourse, facilitating equitable access to dialogues and acknowledging the voices from the margins. The findings reveal a distinction in the contexts of Baptist Care and Baptist churches that impacts the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Baptist Care interacts with the 'other' on the 'other's territory', while Baptist churches engage in discourse with the 'other' on their own territory. By recognising and working to rectify this power imbalance, the LGBTQIA+ discourse becomes not just representative, but also equitable.

This framework, characterised by its commitment to dialogue, agreed values and, equitable participation, fosters trust, paving the way for open and constructive dialogue. It has the potential to serve as a positive model for constructive LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Baptist community.

Discussions and Conclusions

This study was designed to answer the question:

How is the current LGBTQIA+ discourse being conducted within Baptist Churches of South Australia (BCSA) member churches and what opportunities and hindrances are there to further dialogue?

Understanding the context of the current LGBTQIA+ discourse establishes whether the ongoing conversation allows for open discussion and exchange of perspectives, especially when differing viewpoints are involved. The study also considers the potential application of dialogue theories to improve the LGBTQIA+ discourse. The study focused exclusively on the LGBTQIA+ discourse within BCSA member churches. Although not all the participants belonged to a Baptist church, all had experiences engaging in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Baptist context. This includes the participants from BCSA's Affiliated Ministry Organisation Baptist Care (SA).¹

This chapter begins by revisiting the research process. It then outlines the main findings of the research on the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches in a pedagogical dialogue with the concepts derived from dialogue theorists reviewed in the literature. The concepts from the literature reviewed are examined along with the key findings on the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. These included: a culture that preferred silence to discourse; the positive effect on the LGBTQIA+ discourse when it is person-

¹ Baptist Care's relationship with BCSA is defined in BCSA's Constitution in the following terms: '[17.1] An Affiliated Ministry Organisation of the Association is a body set up by the Association to perform some special function on behalf of the Association. [17.2] The recognised Affiliate Ministry Organisations are: [17.2.1] Baptist Care (SA) Inc; [17.2.2] Such other organisations as the Association may establish from time to time.' At the time of this research, Baptist Care is the only Affiliated Ministry Organisation.

centred as opposed to subject or ethic-based conversations; difficulties in navigating dialogue when the discourse led to a colliding of perspective; the impact of power imbalances; and the influence of Scripture on the LGBTQIA+ discourse, in particular the dominant non-affirming theological perspective prevalent among most Baptists.

The chapter continues with the literature review and the findings by examining the common values held by the major dialogue theorists and drawing from the conclusion recommendations for the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. It explores the value of defining dialogue, engaging with Martin Buber, Mikhail Bahkin and Edward Said's theories on dialogue. It proceeds to examine the concept of a safe space, through Miroslav Volf's principles for dialogue, before turning to the value of a commitment to keep talking, which is emphasised by David Bohm. It then expounds on the associated risks of engaging in dialogue over differences through the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and with the literature reviewed on Theory U that explains the responses and consequences of 'absencing' and 'presencing' in a discourse.² It explores the risks of dialogue over differences found in the findings that indicate the difficulties for individuals on the liminal journey of the LGBTQIA+ discourse. It also investigates the potential of the disciplines of spiritual reflection on ministry and practical theology in facilitating a discussion of differences in theological perspectives.³ The last value is listening, which is explored through the practices of the Aboriginal method of *Dadirri*. The chapter then presents its conclusions and acknowledges the limitations of the research.

² Scharmer, 34.

³ Practical theology is when the implications of biblical studies (for self and others) are evaluated in light of the lived experiences. Stephen Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical Theology Selected Essays* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007).

Revisiting the Research Process

The study employed the qualitative research methodology of grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss.⁴ It allowed for the data to be collated—through question-based interviews and narratives—from the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants and for the generated theories to be in the empirical data rather than existing theories.⁵ Grounded theory also recognised and accounted for the biases I brought to the research.⁶ I consider grounded theory’s strength to be that it challenges my preconceived theories, mainly because of my roles as a Baptist and an Accredited Pastor with BCSA.

The research focused on the experiences of heterosexual, cisgender, and LGBTQIA+ laypersons belonging to member churches of BCSA. It also included pastors, staff, and leaders from the Association of Baptist churches of SA and the local churches. Non-Baptists also participated because of their connection with Baptist churches. This included staff from Baptist Care, which is an Affiliated Ministry Organisation of BCSA.⁷

Baptist Care has a unique relationship with Baptists churches; it is the community ministry arm of BCSA churches, committed to working with those most disadvantaged in South Australia.⁸ Therefore, Baptists view it as their community ministry, and as a consequence it has many paid and volunteer staff who are Baptists. The diverse participant representation naturally resulted in a wide array of experiences and levels of involvement in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. This broad spectrum of participants was valuable for capturing

⁴ Glaser and Strauss.

⁵ Corbin and Strauss, 1.

⁶ Tufford and Newman; Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know* (London: Ebury Publishing, 2021).

⁷ Baptist Care Australia. *Constitution* (updated). Adopted 7 June 2017. Shortened link: <https://bit.ly/3TCXbHw>.

⁸ Baptist Care South Australia, ‘On Mission: Baptist Care SA,’ accessed 23 December 2023, <https://sabaptist.asn.au/baptist-care-sa/>.

a range of perspectives and contributed to uncovering the complexities and nuances of the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.

Bridging the Literature and Research Findings

The literature reviewed the concepts found in the following dialogue theorists: Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jurgen Habermas, Edward Said, and David Bohm, and theologian Miroslav Volf.⁹ Each of the concepts propounded by these theorists either cohered with the findings from the participants' experiences of the LGBTQIA+ discourse or offered insight on the reasons for the successes and failures in the dialogue. Using the research findings in dialogue with the concepts from dialogue theorists allowed theories to arise from the reality of the current LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches. It also resulted in recommendations taken directly from the dialogue theories that, if implemented, would improve the quality of the LGBTQIA+ discourse. The discussion chapters investigate the results of this dialogic pedagogy in depth. However, the following overarching conclusions may be drawn concerning the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.

The research found that a pervasive silence and a culture of 'Don't ask; Don't tell' prevalent in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse was harming both the discourse and the individuals involved. The reluctance to discuss LGBTQIA+ issues was based on the fear of unknown consequences, particularly to relationships. There was a belief that having the conversation would result in conflict that would adversely impact individuals, churches, and the Association. The findings indicated that the experiences of fear and visceral tension experienced led many to view the LGBTQIA+ discourse as a divisive topic best avoided. However, the fears failed to recognise that the current LGBTQIA+ discourse is already a source of pain and conflict for some within the Baptist movement that was exacerbated by

⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*; Gadamer; Bakhtin and Holquist; Habermas; Said, *Orientalism*; Bohm, Factor, and Garrett; Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

the power imbalance in the conversation. The study revealed the harm was particularly experienced by LGBTQIA+ persons, their advocates, and those with LGBTQIA+ family and friends.

The prevailing ‘Don’t ask; Don’t tell’ culture perpetuated the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ individuals and their advocates, rendering them and their perspectives hidden and their voices unheard.¹⁰ The research findings support Mikhail Bakhtin’s assertion that truth emerges through dialoguing from the tension and dynamic interaction of dialoguing with others.¹¹ A notable hindrance to the current LGBTQIA+ discourse is the absence of direct dialogue between LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates and many Baptists. It was a significant obstacle that limited understanding of the often-negative experiences for LGBTQIA+ persons and Baptists with LGBTQIA+ friends and family in the Baptist church context. It presented a confronting conclusion: How can LGBTQIA+ issues be understood if the very people directly impacted by it are marginalised and excluded from the discourse? Therefore, the evidence from the research shows the current LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches cannot be characterised as a genuine dialogue.

A recommended approach is to restructure the current LGBTQIA+ discourse *with* LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates rather than *about* LGBTQIA+ issues. However, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the obstacles hindering this transition to a person-centred dialogue. Many LGBTQIA+ persons remain hidden, and their experiences, along with those of their families and friends, reveal that the current conversation is unsafe for them. Addressing these obstacles and creating safe spaces for the LGBTQIA+ discourse must be a concurrent and imperative part of the process.

The research found that when the LGBTQIA+ discourse originated from relationships with LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates, it was less judgmental of differing

¹⁰ Newheiser and Barreto, 58–70.

¹¹ Emerson and Bakhtin, 292–93.

perspectives. In a person-centred dialogue, the LGBTQIA+ discourse was primarily motivated by the deep desire to keep the relationship and a commitment to inclusivity rather than insisting on agreement regarding perspectives. However, when the conversation was approached as a subject (what Buber describes as an I–It dialogue rather than an I and Thou dialogue), the study revealed a noticeable change in attitude and language in the LGBTQIA+ discourse.¹² In addressing LGBTQIA+ orientations either as a topic or as an ethical problem to be solved, it became easier to establish demarcation lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’, by categorising LGBTQIA+ individuals as ‘sinners’ versus ‘saved’ and labelling those who deviate from heteronormative cisgender values as ‘broken’. Keeping the LGBTQIA+ discourse subject-based caused the conversation to lose its focus on real people and from the fact that these labels and judgments were hurting LGBTQIA+ persons and those with LGBTQIA+ family and friends in Baptist churches. Therefore, the recommendation is to shift the current LGBTQIA+ discourse from subject-based to person-based discourse. It is a simple step that could be adopted by Baptist churches to facilitate a dialogue of genuine understanding and empathy.

The research found that silence can be used to both control the LGBTQIA+ discourse in two keys ways. First, by selecting and determining who has access to the discourse. Second, by favouring specific viewpoints and granting them access to the conversation platforms, which ensured alignment with the predominant non-affirming theological perspective within the Baptist community. The participants raised this issue in their critique of LGBTQIA+ discourse that took place at the 2018 BCSA Pastors Conference.¹³ Questions arose concerning the lack of LGBTQIA+ representation that voiced their experiences. Although the data findings did not directly reference Theory U, some questions aligned with its concepts. In particular, whether the conference was downloading from what was

¹² Scott, 5–25.

¹³ See discussion on the Pastors Conference in Chapter 6, under the heading ‘Don’t Ask; Don’t Tell’.

already known rather than engaging with diverse perspectives that could lead to new possibilities for the LGBTQIA+ discourse. The control of discourse by the majority who hold the power raises the question whether Baptist churches operate in a ‘parental’ mode of power—i.e, ‘control over’— by deciding the safe parameters for the discourse rather than functioning as a community of equals.¹⁴

The consequences of power imbalances were an issue reiterated by the Baptist Care participants. They stressed the deliberate changes made within Baptist Care’s procedures to provide marginalised persons with easy access to those in positions of power. The Baptist Care participants attributed the positive promotion of dialogue to actively addressing power dynamics in communication through their numerous stories. The unique relationship and shared values between Baptist Care and BCSA provide an opportunity for a valuable dialogue partner for the Association. Baptist Care has the expertise and the practical experience of implementing changes to power dynamics that influence discourse at an institutional level. However, as one of the Baptist Care participants noted, little discourse is happening in the Baptist movement.¹⁵ Therefore, the power for initiating this form of dialogical pedagogy with Baptist Care lies with the Baptist Association who would need to deliberately break the silence and open the access to the platforms for the LGBTQIA+ discourse. It would be the Association’s responsibility to empower Baptist Care to be a dialogue partner. However, in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse, there is little evidence of the Baptist movement permitting this conversation or of the Association wanting to adopt measures that allow diverse perspectives from the margins access to the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

¹⁴ Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’; Harisun, *Power, Theology and Ecclesiology in Practice*; Teun A. Van Dijk, ‘Discourse, Power and Access,’ in *Texts and Practices*, ed. Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Malcolm Coulthard (Milton Park UK: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁵ Gregory said: ‘We have a long way to go in what’s not talked about.’ See Chapter 10: The Baptist Care Perspective.

The power imbalance inherent in the LGBTQIA+ discourse was apparent throughout the interviews, as questioning or challenging the prevailing theological framework and its practical implications were often disregarded as 'liberal' or even labelled as 'heresy' by those in the majority. It was notable how the 'liberal' label was occasionally self-assigned by Baptists who held non-affirming beliefs and were simply asking questions about its practical application. This demonstrated a problematic tendency for Baptists to conflate genuine intellectual curiosity with deviating from orthodoxy. This equating of questioning with heterodoxy reinforces a power dynamic that stifles authentic dialogue and discourages critical examination of the non-affirming theological framework. As one of the participants said: 'Who is critiquing the consequences of the framework of the discussion about how LGBTQIA+ faith is outworked in Baptist churches?' The current framework effectively discourages individuals from challenging the status quo within the Baptist community and impedes the possibility of creative and nuanced discussion in the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

As the majority of Baptist churches adopt a welcome-but-non-affirming theological position towards LGBTQIA+ orientations, the non-affirming position holds the power base for the current LGBTQIA+ discourse. For example, the research revealed that LGBTQIA+ discourse for Baptists often started with the assumption of a shared agreement of the orthodoxy of non-affirming theology and, therefore, the heterodoxy of theological positions that affirmed LGBTQIA+ orientations. This was evident in the findings as those with an affirming theology needed to justify or defend their position before they entered the dialogue. There was also the expectation within the Baptist community that LGBTQIA+ persons who joined a local Baptist church would agree with and live according to non-affirming theology; celibacy was a particular focus of the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Some non-affirming Baptists expected LGBTQIA+ individuals to be guided by the Holy Spirit, with the expectation that the Lord would lead LGBTQIA+ persons to adopt a non-affirming theological perspective. However, there was no mention of a corresponding expectation that the Holy Spirit could prompt LGBTQIA+ individuals to embrace and align with their sexual

and gender orientations. Nor was consideration given to the possibility that the Holy Spirit might prompt non-affirming individuals to change their stance towards the LGBTQIA+ community. This suggests a certain viewpoint within Baptist circles that expects LGBTQIA+ individuals to change their beliefs over time through a faith journey. It also illustrates an agenda on the part of some Baptists for specific outcomes from the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

These expectations of LGBTQIA+ persons conforming to non-affirming theological perspective showed that the prevailing discourse predominately revolves around a non-affirming theological context, firmly anchored by the homogeneous pillars of heteronormativity and cisgender norms. Within the Baptist community, there is a strong emphasis on aligning with the Association's rules and beliefs. These are sacred values that are not negotiated or compromised.¹⁶ Consequently, belonging to the Baptist church involves a shared commitment to these agreed-upon principles. In this context, the non-affirming theological position is part of belonging to the Baptist movement, establishing a sense of belonging and communal identity.

However, to include LGBTQIA+ persons, Baptists referred to welcoming LGBTQIA+ persons to attend the church but not affirming their orientation. The research showed the severe flaws in the practical application and the consequences on LGBTQIA+ persons of the welcoming but not affirming posture towards LGBTQIA+ adopted by many Baptist churches. It found that this is not welcoming of LGBTQIA+ persons; it is a qualified acceptance of the person. The application of the non-affirming theological posture means that at some point in their journey with a non-affirming church, LGBTQIA+ persons who affirm their identity will be excluded from aspects of the church.¹⁷ As Baptist churches are

¹⁶ Hanselmann and Tanner; Tetlock; Hammad et al.

¹⁷ Church Clarity advocates for transparency on LGBTQIA+ policies in churches; it states: Non-affirming policies in churches place restrictions on individuals based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (e.g, people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer). Therefore, a

autonomous, the demarcation lines are ambiguous and differ from church to church. The silence surrounding the LGBTQIA+ discourse further exacerbates the issue. Consequently, LGBTQIA+ persons spoke of not knowing the boundaries until they crossed them, which caused unnecessary pain. The study revealed that dialoguing and building relationships with LGBTQIA+ persons prompted some Baptists to change their view of their church's non-affirming stance. They saw their church's policies, which excluded LGBTQIA+ persons from certain aspects of the church, as incongruent with the idea of being 'welcoming'. For some, it is uncomfortable, even confronting, to face the fact that they are not as welcome to LGBTQIA+ persons as they once believed.

Church Clarity is an organisation that advocates for churches to clearly define their LGBTQIA+ policies, arguing that 'ambiguity is harmful' and 'clarity is reasonable'. The findings suggest that several Baptists concur. Thus, one recommendation for the current LGBTQIA+ discourse is for Baptist churches to aim for clarity in their communication with LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates. One essential step for Baptist churches to take is to acknowledge that the term 'welcome' should be more explicitly qualified as 'welcome to attend.' Baptist churches need to be honest about the limitations of the welcome and where the demarcation lines are drawn. This clarification would not only enhance communication but also promote fairness and respect within the church community. Qualifying 'welcome' is a step towards dialogue. It encourages church members to engage in constructive conversations and discussions on how to include LGBTQIA+ individuals within the church while respecting the church's beliefs.

Given the significance placed on theological alignment and the shared commitment to non-affirming theology within the Baptist community, it is understandable that expecting a complete shift in their social group—in this context, it is their local church—to include those

church may welcome LGBTQIA+ people, but it will not ordain, hire, or marry LGBTQIA+ people, and LGBTQIA+ may experience restrictions from membership, leadership, and some volunteer roles:

Church Clarity.

who disagree with their beliefs may be seen as unreasonable. Nonetheless, this situation carries implications for the ongoing LGBTQIA+ discourse within local churches and the broader Baptist movement, as the current discourse does not represent a genuine dialogue between LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates and the majority of Baptists who hold the power. This suggests there may be notable barriers and imbalances in the dialogue process as challenging the prevailing norms and engaging in conversations from a perspective that transgresses the status quo proved to be a formidable task.

Given the observed negative consequences of LGBTQIA+ discourse experienced in some of the other Australian states and the forming of the new Open Baptist Movement, it is understandable why BCSA may choose to embrace a culture of silence rather than risk splitting the Association. This, coupled with the tension, anxiety, and fear over the LGBTQIA+ dialogue, raises the question of why non-affirming Baptists would want to engage in the discourse. From an organisational perspective, it seems apparent that they do not want the conversation.

However, absencing from the LGBTQIA+ discourse fails to recognise the presence of small autonomous subgroups within the Baptist community where discussions beyond the non-affirming viewpoints are already occurring, both on an individual and church level. Some groups have formed among Baptists within their local church context or within the working environment of BCSA. Other Baptists joined dialogue groups that were outside of their local church and BCSA's framework. It is important to acknowledge that individuals with personal connections to LGBTQIA+ family or friends primarily drive conversations outside the non-affirming perspective. It is also worth noting that not all Baptists engaged in this conversation operating in the margins were affirming in their theological position. Some Baptists expressed their approach as not intending to alter their non-affirming theological standpoint. However, this was juxtaposed with a growing awareness of the hypocrisy implicit in expecting those with differing beliefs to change their perspectives. There was a conviction that a discourse based on choosing sides in the affirming/non-

affirming LGBTQIA+ discourse was too limited, too prescriptive, and did not allow room to discuss the complexities of the issues.

There was also recognition of the disingenuousness of the ‘welcoming but not affirming’ praxis adopted by the majority of Baptist churches. This disingenuousness arose from recognising the contradiction between the professed ‘welcome’ and the underlying non-affirming actions, which can lead to exclusion from aspects of the church’s ministry and feelings of confusion that harm those who do not align with the non-affirming perspective. Due to insufficient data, the trajectory of these subgroups remains uncertain. It is yet to be determined whether these Baptists will amass enough influence to challenge the prevailing majority perspective and gain access to the LGBTQIA+ discourse as equals or if they will ultimately be left with no option but to join the Open Baptist Movement.¹⁸

The findings from the Baptists engaging in a broad LGBTQIA+ discourse and the examples of Baptist Care participants highlighted the significance of values in shaping conversations and informing praxis. Notable in the Baptist Care participants was how they all repeated the same values for conducting the discourse over differences. Love, compassion, generosity, inclusivity, justice, behavioural integrity, and awareness of power and privilege emerged as recurring themes, indicating frequent discussions on the organisation’s values. The participants had a shared intention not to change others’ perspectives or theology but to prioritise maintaining relationships with one another.

This underpins the need to define the discourse based on shared values on personhood. A values approach to discourse acknowledges that conversations about LGBTQIA+ issues are complex and deeply personal. However, by anchoring discussions in shared values such as love, compassion, inclusivity, and justice, Baptists can bridge the gap between diverse perspectives on LGBTQIA+ issues. This approach places relationships and mutual respect at the forefront, allowing individuals to engage in dialogue while preserving

¹⁸ *Open Baptists*, <https://openbaptists.org/>.

their theological beliefs. Grounding these discussions in shared values holds the potential to create a more inclusive, respectful, and understanding basis for the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

Recommendations

As previously stated, the value frameworks advocated in dialogue theories have observable commonalities: (1) agreeing on a definition of dialogue; (2) creating a safe, brave space; (3) listening; (4) understanding that dialogue comes at a risk; and (5) making a commitment to keep talking.¹⁹ Applying these values to the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist church can foster an environment where participants are more inclined to engage in constructive discussions, even when discussing challenging or controversial topics.

The following discussion links each of these common principles found in the dialogue theories with the research findings. It also adds to this communal framework for discourse by investigating awareness of the risks of dialogue through the lens of Theory U and engages the principles of listening through the concepts found in *Dadirri*. The inclusion of Theory U and *Dadirri* to the dialogue framework is essential, as they emerged as the answer to issues specific to the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches that were highlighted by the research findings.

Defining dialogue

Defining the meaning of ‘dialogue’ as involving *both* parties would tackle the research findings that the current LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches cannot be characterised as a genuine dialogue with LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates. Instead, it resembles what Martin Buber describes as ‘a monologue disguised as dialogue’—a one-sided communication where alternative perspectives and voices are suppressed or ignored.²⁰ Given Buber’s argument that monologues are disguised, it is possible that some

¹⁹ Kent and Taylor, 25–29.

²⁰ Buber and Marx, 19.

Baptists are ignorant of the monologue. However, the research uncovered a number of Baptists aware of the issue and asking for dialogue with those who hold a perspective different from their own. Defining dialogue would be an opportunity for Baptists to critique the framework for the LGBTQIA+ discourse and to recognise Bakhtin's concept of monologism currently prevalent in the discourse. Monologism engenders a singular worldview that dominates the discourse and stifles the expression of diverse perspectives, effectively negating the very essence of dialogue.²¹ Identifying the current LGBTQIA+ discourse as a monologue provides the opportunity for Baptists to decide whether 'dialogue' will be a non-negotiable value of the future LGBTQIA+ discourse.

Framing the LGBTQIA+ discourse as a dialogue also serves as a powerful tool for exposing the negative judgments and labels that have, at times, overshadowed the experiences of LGBTQIA+ persons and their families within Baptist churches. By actively listening to the voices of LGBTQIA+ persons, their families, and their advocates, the study stresses the importance of giving a platform to stories of pain and injustice. As demonstrated, the adoption of person-centred dialogue empowers marginalised individuals to articulate their own lived experiences, avoiding distortion of their narratives by those in the majority wielding power, as argued by Edward Said.

This approach recognises LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates as equal dialogue partners in the discourse and holds the potential to bring about a transformative impact on LGBTQIA+ discussions within Baptist churches. The journey toward understanding is strengthened when all voices, particularly those of marginalised communities, are heard and respected. More importantly, such an approach fosters a compassionate environment for the LGBTQIA+ discourse. Ultimately, it paves the way for more inclusive, respectful,

²¹ Monologism was supported by the findings and discussed in the theme on the influence of personhood and the effect of person-centred versus subject-centred dialogue on the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches; Shields.

and equitable dialogue by challenging the power imbalances of the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.

The imposition of restrictions on participation in the LGBTQIA+ discourse reflects power dynamics privileging one group over another. Such limitations assert authority and contribute to a 'power-over' structure that reinforces hierarchical control within the discourse. Controlling access to discussions, thereby delineating who can or cannot partake, serves as a tangible expression of power dynamics that warrants critical examination within the broader discourse on authority and inclusivity. Dialogue, as opposed to monologue, is the opportunity to challenge established norms and rebalance the power to create a more equitable LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.

Safe Spaces

The research revealed a lack of safe spaces within the current framework for the LGBTQIA+ discourse where Baptists could safely engage in respectful conversations that acknowledged and respected differences in perspectives and experiences within the Baptist movement. The absence of acknowledgment of this raises a multitude of issues. The culture of silence about the issues LGBTQIA+ individuals face in Baptist churches, coupled with the dominance of the majority perspective in controlling the conversation and the lack of person-centred dialogue, has left many voiceless, making it challenging for Baptists to engage in meaningful dialogue.

Moreover, the absence of safe spaces has isolated individuals within the Baptist movement, particularly those with LGBTQIA+ family and friends, who have experienced loneliness and suffered the pain of hearing their loved ones negatively labelled by members of their Baptist church. These participants feared that their loved ones would be ostracised from the church. The existing LGBTQIA+ discourse hindered these Baptists from finding a conversation partner with whom they could openly engage in meaningful, authentic discussions concerning their questions related to LGBTQIA+ issues and theology. Equally

troubling is that LGBTQIA+ persons, as well as their families and friends, encounter inadequate support because they are unable to talk safely about the problems they face with many of the people in their church. The lack of safe spaces is exacerbating mental health issues, particularly for LGBTQIA+ persons, who frequently battle with the cumulative impact of stigma when disclosing their identities. Promoting safe spaces in the LGBTQIA+ discourse helps to address the pastoral needs and personal support for LGBTQIA+ persons and their families and friends.

The inability to openly address theological and practical aspects of including LGBTQIA+ journeys of faith within Baptist churches further compounds the issues in the current discourse. Publicly discussing affirming theology is often met with resistance, limiting the potential for a more balanced conversation. The research concurs with the dialogue theorists that a safe space is fundamental for authentic dialogue where diverse perspectives and experiences can be shared without fear of judgement and recrimination. Establishing safe spaces for discussing various theological and practical approaches to LGBTQIA+ orientations has the potential to expose the diversity of perspectives already held in Baptist churches, and the research shows that many find the experience of discussing different understandings of the Scriptures uncomfortable. However, avoiding the discourse and settling for the current status quo fails to acknowledge that Baptists are having conversations with differing perspectives; it is simply that their discussions are currently hidden and unacknowledged. The fears about the discourse over different theological views are not unwarranted as they are unpredictable and messy. This is where the Association and local churches would have to show the same courage in approaching the LGBTQIA+ discourse as LGBTQIA+ persons and their families, friends and advocates have demonstrated thus far.

The potential for positive change within the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches is clear. By promoting safe spaces for open and respectful conversations, Baptist churches can lay the groundwork for meaningful progress and the creation of

communities that allow for the Baptists tradition's distinctive of freedom of conscience for all believers and a diverse Baptist community that welcomes theological discussions over difference.

I argue that safe spaces are best understood through Volf's 'drama of embrace', which is a transformative process for resolving conflict and division. It comprises three elements: embrace, waiting, and giving space. Embrace symbolises the creation of a welcoming space and signifies forgiveness and healing. Waiting acknowledges the challenge of reconciliation and involves respecting the other's boundaries, as coercion undermines the embrace. The final element is giving space, which respects the need to preserve individual identities. This is important as it protects safe spaces from the expectation that this is a space where dialogue changes minds and negotiates conflict resolutions. Exploring the concept of safe spaces through Volf's three principles provides an apt framework for the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.

Volf's foundation is firmly grounded in a theological approach, aligning with the perspectives and values that resonate with many Baptists. It therefore offers a meaningful and culturally relevant approach for discussions within Baptist communities. This framework not only fosters a conducive environment for constructive dialogue, it also acts as a bridge over the potential gaps between diverse perspectives within the Baptist context. Therefore, utilising Volf's principles offers a theologically established safe space for navigating diverse perspectives in the LGBTQIA+ discourse within Baptist churches. This path holds the promise of fostering an environment that answers the fears concerning the LGBTQIA+ discourse through a commitment to a dialogue that values open and empathetic discussions based on continually building bridges in the relationships between those who participate.

Creating safe spaces is not just an ethical imperative; it is a practical necessity for developing and maintaining effective policies within Baptist churches. For example, currently, many Baptist churches adopt the policy that any person who is a member of a

Baptist church can transfer that membership to another BSCA church without requiring a membership vote from the new church. At present, there are no restrictions on transferring membership based on an individual's beliefs regarding various theological differences found in Baptist churches, such as differences related to women in leadership roles or limited access to ministry positions due to divorce. This raises the question whether, if a church was an affirming church, their members would be automatically accepted into non-affirming churches, as is the case with other differences in theological perspectives, or would affirming views on sexuality and gender prevent the transferal of the membership?

The primary aim in raising this issue is not to prescribe specific policies but to emphasise that the commitment to dialoguing within safe spaces should serve as a lens through which all the Baptist Association's procedures are viewed. Looking through this lens can reveal both the systemic obstacles that hinder the creation of safe spaces and the potential harm these barriers can inflict on Baptist members in their own churches. This includes the potential for conflict, exclusion, and division, which can undermine the unity and purpose of Baptist churches. It is for these reasons that a commitment to dialogue within safe spaces should become an integral aspect of BCSA and its member churches procedures. By viewing all procedures through the lens of safe spaces, the Baptist community can identify and rectify systemic obstacles that hinder inclusivity and dialogue. This commitment to fostering safe spaces is crucial for preventing discord, exclusion, and division and for ensuring that Baptist churches remain welcoming and supportive spaces for all their members. By guaranteeing safe spaces, the Baptist community can foster open and honest discussions about differing beliefs and affirmations, which, in turn, can help bridge divides and prevent exclusion.

This value for unity in diversity is seen in the Baptist distinctives of freedom of conscience for its members and the autonomy of the local church. Baptist history provides evidence that a discourse framework inclusive of diverse perspectives is not only possible but deeply established in the Baptist tradition. Given this history, it is reasonable to

anticipate that Baptists can cultivate a culture of dialogue over theological differences in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. The Baptist distinctive to embrace differences while maintaining unity is a valuable resource that can be harnessed to create a safe space for LGBTQIA+ discussions that are based on the foundational values that Baptists already hold dear and agree upon.

The creation of safe spaces is intrinsically linked to the following characteristic recommended for inclusive and productive dialogue—maintaining a commitment to keep talking.

Commitment to Conversation

Maintaining a commitment to continued conversation is a concept endorsed by David Bohm. Bohm was less concerned with resolving the differences. He advocated for staying together in the place of difference; to keep talking and listening even while not agreeing. Bohm believed that dialogue about different perspectives was a place of discovery, a way of thinking that could transcend previous traditions and create something new. In many ways, Bohm is countercultural as the usual expectation for discourse over difference is for it to be negotiated and resolved. However, to dismiss Bohm's theory on the grounds of a lack of practical application is to miss the weight he places on listening and the commitment to both the discourse and the relationship. Although this was a particular emphasis for Bohm, all the dialogue theorists agree that the opportunity for creative dialogue pathways and solutions is a commitment to keep talking in the face of the challenge of diverse perspectives.²²

Bohm's concept finds traction with Baptists distinctives, which emphasises that while it is important to encourage dialogue and understanding between different perspectives, it is also essential to respect the autonomy and beliefs of individuals within their social

²² Bohm, Factor, and Garrett, 'Dialogue: A Proposal,' 5–6.

groups. Throughout the history of Baptists, there have been notable instances where differences in theological perspectives have arisen, such as debates on women in ministry and permission for divorce. These disagreements have not resulted in the dissolution of the Baptist movement but have highlighted Baptists' ability to navigate dialogue over theological differences. For instance, the unanimous vote for a woman to be the director of ministry for BCSA, despite some churches aligning their rules for belonging around the non-affirming stance on women in leadership positions, demonstrates that Baptists can live with the tension of theological disagreements and still work together towards a common purpose.

However, this is where an understanding of Theory U would support a healthy LGBTQIA+ discourse that integrates the characteristics for a conducive framework in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches. Theory U, as developed by Otto Scharmer and colleagues,²³ demonstrates the two reactions arising when established perspectives are challenged: 'presencing,' which entails suspending judgment and being open to new possibilities, and 'absencing,' which involves connecting with pre-existing beliefs and biases.²⁴ Both reactions were reflected in the participants' stories of wrestling with questions that arose during the LGBTQIA+ discourse. However, 'presencing' was more often met with resistance due to concerns about its potential impact on faith and how challenging traditionally held church teachings on LGBTQIA+ orientations could potentially be a slippery slope, leading to heterodoxy. Theory U holds that without the challenge of liminality, faith stagnates into the 'absencing' from dialoguing with contrasting opinions and responds by shoring up previously held thinking. It further holds that the consequences of absencing for individuals, churches, and the Baptist movement is that the empathy for difference dissipates, and creativity and innovation are stifled or lost. Agreeing

²³ Senge et al.

²⁴ Scharmer, 34.

on a commitment to the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches is to presence oneself in the conversation over difference.

Risks of Dialogue: Theory U and the Liminal Journey

The emphasis on creating safe spaces to facilitate ongoing dialogue regarding LGBTQIA+ issues reveals the importance of raising awareness about the associated risks of dialogue. Individuals joining the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches need to acknowledge that engaging in dialogue over differing perspectives comes with challenges. They should be made aware of these risks so that they may approach the conversation with sensitivity, resilience, and a commitment to genuine dialogue. Stepping into a safe space requires courage because the potential for emotional harm exists when discussing perspectives of sacred value, particularly when those views are intertwined with one's identity and personal convictions.

However, engaging with LGBTQIA+ discourse poses a further risk as it challenges individuals to question, and at times relinquish hold on, their existing beliefs. The research revealed that participation in this discourse exposed some Baptists to diverse perspectives, initiating a liminal journey characterised by uncertainty, ambiguity, and shifts in their viewpoints. Notably, while some altered their stance, such as transitioning from non-affirming to affirming theology, many maintained their unique perspectives. While the research does not show a change in beliefs in some participants, the liminal phase did expand their horizons, fostering a willingness to embrace differences and prioritise inclusivity and diversity over exclusion.

The research mirrored Gadamer's theory on the fusion of horizons, reviewed in the literature. Gadamer's theory emphasises that when different perspectives fuse, it leads to the emergence of new insights, innovative approaches, creative exploration, and unexpected possibilities. The research findings align with this concept, as the participants who engaged in the liminal journey experienced the broadening of their horizons and gained fresh

insights. This was primarily seen through their engagement with practical theology and spiritual reflection, rather than through engaging in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches.²⁵ Baptist participants in this context moved beyond a binary view of affirming and non-affirming theology for LGBTQIA+ discourse. They re-evaluated their understandings of biblical themes such as love and justice and explored Jesus' ministry as a fresh framework for the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches.

For example, one Baptist Care participant reflected on the story of the adulterous woman to illustrate Jesus' ability to create a 'grey area' between the rigid theology of His time, which called for her death, and Jesus' practical interpretation of the Scriptures that allowed the woman to go free.²⁶ In doing this, the participant sought to challenge the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ persons. Engaging with practical theology and spiritual reflection was not an attempt to circumvent the teachings of the Scriptures. The goal was 'to love our neighbour, as we love ourselves', despite theological disagreements.²⁷ Reflecting on the practical theology demonstrated in Jesus' ministry towards the adulterous sinner resulted in a greater emphasis on the argument for relationship and providing pastoral care than on strict adherence to the rules in the Scriptures. This raised questions about the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches: specifically, whether it prioritises rules or relationships, and whether there is a need to reconsider this approach, which implies a call for a more compassionate and relationship-oriented approach to the LGBTQIA+ discourse.

The findings suggest an opportunity to capitalise on the existing space within the current LGBTQIA+ discourse through engaging with spiritual reflections and reflections on practical theology. Some Baptists were taught the concepts of spiritual reflection. However,

²⁵ Elaine L. Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005); Anderson.

²⁶ Luke 7:36–50; John 8:3–11.

²⁷ Matthew 22:37–39.

the research found that not all Baptists were. There is an opportunity for Baptist churches to equip their congregants on how to practice the discipline of spiritual reflections on the ministry and praxis of their faith and church, which in turn will prepare Baptists for conducting an LGBTQIA+ discourse in this space. Spiritual reflection on ministry can serve as a platform for collaboration among diverse viewpoints. By leveraging this opportunity, Baptists have the potential to bridge theological differences and pave the way for the development of a safe space where respectful and constructive conversations can take place.

While the research evidenced Baptists engaging in a liminal journey in the LGBTQIA+ discourse, it also found a lack of a comprehensive understanding and acceptance of liminality and of the transitional space of betwixt and between in Baptists. This poses significant challenges in exploring new perspectives on praxis and theology, as liminality can be misconceived as signifying doubt in faith and the Scriptures. However, such a belief fails to recognise that it is an intrinsic part of the biblical narrative and essential for spiritual growth.²⁸ Therefore, the consequences of liminality from the LGBTQIA+ discourse should not be feared. Embracing liminality recognises that spiritual maturity involves confronting uncertainty, and exploring the unknown cultivates humility and respect in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse. Liminality encourages the examination of biases and theological assumptions, and consequently, embracing it can promote a more inclusive and authentic dialogue on how LGBTQIA+ individuals could be included in the life of the church.

Without a supportive environment that accepts liminality, Baptists may struggle to engage in the wrestle with fresh ideas about God, His Kingdom, and the Scriptures. There is insufficient data to track the consequences for those immersed in the liminal space. However, with limited avenues for dialogue and a lack of celebration for innovative theological thinking and practice, individuals embarking on the liminal journey are possibly

²⁸ Liminality is seen in the stories of exile, desert, wilderness, pilgrimage, and the transformative symbolism of baptism. See Chapter 9, discussing the influence of Scripture.

left with two fundamental choices. They may seek external communities that are receptive to discussing their questions about their faith, thereby navigating beyond the confines of the Baptist movement. Alternatively, they may choose to prematurely abandon their liminal journey, depriving Baptist churches of an invaluable opportunity for growth and the emergence of new ways to dialogue over differences in Baptist churches.

Liminality addresses the tension that is always generated when perspectives intrinsic to faith and identity collide. Baptists should be predisposed to the tensions of the differing theological perspectives because of their non-conformist tradition that accommodates different views. However, the lack of discussion in the research findings on how Baptists have journeyed other challenges to their thinking suggests liminality is not a teaching that Baptists are familiar with. The research indicates that the lack of LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches does not reflect its non-conformist Baptist history; instead, it aligns with a more conventional and conformist discourse.

In light of these considerations, it is evident that the Baptist community should critically reflect upon its understanding of liminality. The failure to embrace this transformative process may impede the LGBTQIA+ discourse happening in Baptist churches. The significance of embracing the liminal journey lies not only in the personal growth and spiritual depth it offers to individuals but also for the Baptist community. Through it, Baptists examine old paradigms and embrace new, creative thinking that allows for a more nuanced theological discourse within the community, overcoming dichotomous arguments on welcoming but not affirming versus affirming. As different perspectives undergo a fusion process, new insights and ideas emerge, allowing for creative exploration and unexpected possibilities. Engaging in the liminal process helps overcome dichotomous arguments, merging diverse perspectives to spark innovative approaches anchored in Baptist history and values.

Listening: Embracing the Practice of Dadirri for Dialogue Transformation

The final recommendation emerging from the review of the dialogue theories emphasised listening as fundamental for inclusive and productive dialogue. The profound impact on many of the participants, myself included, from listening to the painful narratives shared by LGBTQIA+ persons and their families cannot be overstated. It evoked a sobering reflection on the suffering experienced by people who attend our Baptist churches. This was a moment for reflection, inspired by the concept of *Dadirri*, where deep listening generated a space for transformative contemplation.²⁹ If the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches is to be authentic, then it is important to resist the temptation to rush past the discomfort such narratives create and to fully acknowledge the pain and harm currently being experienced by people engaging with Baptist churches.

Using the practices illustrated by *Dadirri* to deeply listen to the LGBTQIA+ narratives led to questions about the current LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. Where is the space within the Baptist movement for the LGBTQIA+ stories and experiences to be shared and heard? Where is the *Dadirri* commitment to deep listening; where does the community sit with the pain and anguish experienced by others and not avoid it? Where are the opportunities to say: 'We are sorry'; the opportunity for repentance? Repentance, from a faith-oriented perspective, refers to genuine remorse. However, it also includes consciously changing one's thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours towards reconciliation with people and God.

Dadirri also invites us to question where the pathways are that further the LGBTQIA+ conversation in Baptist churches. Where are the opportunities for the Baptist community to discuss and decide what their values are in a discourse over difference and how their values may have been transgressed in the LGBTQIA+ discourse? Where are the pathways for implementing the community's chosen actions to prevent future pain and injustice from

²⁹ Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., '*Dadirri: An Indigenous Place-based Research Methodology*'; Atkinson.

being inflicted on others within the community? These questions are not rhetorical or hyperbolic. They reflect the essence of *Dadirri* practice, which would aim here to explore the implications generated from contemplating the contrast between the stories of pain inflicted by church members and the faith that calls for love among disciples of Jesus Christ to be evident to the whole world.

The practice of *Dadirri* emphasises repeated listening to the experiences of LGBTQIA+ persons and their family and friends, immersing ourselves in silent contemplation, and carefully considering the profound impact of what has been heard. Some Baptists willingly faced the discomfort associated with acknowledging the pain caused by their previous stances towards LGBTQIA+ persons and Baptists with LGBTQIA+ family members. They spoke of conviction, repentance, and a commitment to inclusion over exclusion. However, the prevailing silence surrounding the current LGBTQIA+ discourse isolated many, leaving them alone with no one to talk to about the stories of LGBTQIA+ persons' experiences in Baptist churches.

The research found that engaging in deep listening to the stories and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ persons led to envisioning necessary changes within the community that align with their values and prevent further harm to individuals in the LGBTQIA+ discourse. These changes include, expressing a desire for Baptists, collectively, to engage in direct dialogue with LGBTQIA+ individuals. They wanted a church that promoted a culture of safety and openness for discussing differences. They aspired for a church that prioritised inclusive discourse over silence and practices such as 'Don't ask; Don't tell' and challenged the hegemony in the theological perspectives. Their ultimate goal was to have a conversation.

However, the power of *Dadirri* was lost due to the absence of LGBTQIA+ voices. The lack of dialogue and engagement hindered the opportunity to address the pain caused by the current discourse and failed to explore measures for creating a safe and inclusive environment. Moving forward, Baptist churches must create spaces and opportunities for

authentic dialogue that prioritises reflection on the painful narratives of LGBTQIA+ individuals. This includes developing a culture of conviction, repentance, and a steadfast commitment to relationship. By actively engaging with the principles found in *Dadirri's* methods, the Baptist community can engage in an LGBTQIA+ discourse that works towards healing the wounds inflicted upon the LGBTQIA+ persons and their advocates, ultimately promoting greater understanding, empathy, and a more inclusive environment within their congregations.

Conclusion

This study was designed to answer the question:

How is the current LGBTQIA+ discourse being conducted within Baptist Churches of South Australia (BCSA) member churches and what opportunities and hindrances are there to further dialogue?

The research found that a culture of silence was the preferred response to any LGBTQIA+ discourse. The silence was based in fears that the LGBTQIA+ discourse created more pain, conflict, and broken relationships and therefore was best avoided. However, this silence comes at the cost of overlooking the pain and experiences of LGBTQIA+ persons and their family and friends and ignores the contribution of the current LGBTQIA+ discourse to their suffering.

The research confirmed that discussing deeply held sacred values tied to one's identity was uncomfortable and difficult to navigate. However, this discomfort can be lessened by reimagining the current LGBTQIA+ discourse within the framework of a values-based discourse, where the value of inclusion rejects the silencing of voices as a form of control and abuse of power.

Implementing the research recommendations would enhance the effectiveness of LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches as well as removing barriers to that discourse. The recommendations emphasise the need for a more inclusive and person-centred approach to

LGBTQIA+ discourse that prioritised *Dadirri's* methods for achieving the principles of deep listening. This would begin a change in the current LGBTQIA+ discourse from a monologue of like-minded opinions to a more open and inclusive dialogue.

However, for the LGBTQIA+ discourse to change, there would have to be a willingness and a posture of generosity on the part of Baptists within BSCA and its member churches to engage with diverse opinions. Diversity of theological perspectives and wrestling in a liminal space over differences in Scriptural interpretations is a value for Baptists, deeply embedded in their non-conformist history. The Baptist distinctives on the freedom of conscience for its members and the autonomy of the local church is an available framework that could be harnessed to facilitate this change.

The research findings ground the case for deliberately embracing the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Baptist churches. However, the challenge lies not in knowing what could be done to change the current LGBTQIA+ discourse but in having the inclination or power to initiate change. The research findings indicate that there is a noticeable lack of willingness or appetite for the LGBTQIA+ discourse among Baptists in South Australia. However, as the LGBTQIA+ discourse is already happening in the margins of the Baptist movement, it is just a matter of time before a catalyst arises. While recognising that the LGBTQIA+ discourse requires courage and wisdom, it is in the best interest of South Australian Baptists to actively prepare for this conversation instead of avoiding it.

Initiating a safe space for LGBTQIA+ discourse within BSCA and its member churches acknowledges the inherent risks in such discussions. It enables the facilitation of a fresh wave of dialogue, guided by the principles of deep listening, a commitment to relationships, and maintaining the conversation despite differing opinions. This, in turn, fosters a more welcoming and open environment, which has the potential to reduce internal divisions that may arise from avoiding the issue. Proactive and generous engagement in an LGBTQIA+ dialogue strongly aligns with the Baptist values and unequivocally demonstrates a resolute commitment to inclusivity and embracing diversity within the Baptist community.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Participation in this research was open to all individuals engaging in the LGBTQIA+ discourse with BCSA and its member churches. This included: (1) Senior leadership within both BCSA and BCSA-affiliated churches; (2) Members/attendees of BCSA member churches; (3) LGBTQIA+ persons and groups connected to Baptist churches. (4) Participants recommended through snowball sampling method who met the criteria of engaging in the LGBTQIA+ discourse with baptists belonging to BCSA churches. (5) Baptist Care (SA), an Affiliated Ministry of BCSA. However, it failed to garner participation from Aboriginal or First Nations peoples churches nor from Baptists belonging to ethnic churches, limiting participant diversity. Further research is necessary, considering the notable presence of Aboriginal and multicultural churches associated with BCSA.

As the current participants mainly originate from urban contexts, additional research is essential to understand how rural and urban locations influence LGBTQIA+ discourse in BCSA member churches.

The merger of BSCA and the Baptist Churches of the Northern Territories (BUNT) makes further research necessary, as these institutions have adopted different public stances during the LGBTQIA+ discourse. BUNT has strongly recommended that churches do not send LGBTQIA+ persons who live according to their orientations as delegates to the state Assemblies. In this, it differs from BCSA, which has made no public statements on the issue.³⁰ It is a dialogue space where obstacles and hindrances to the LGBTQIA+ discourse will be discussed as the newly combined institution emerges.

³⁰ Baptist Union of Queensland, 'Queensland Baptists Position Statement on Sexuality and Marriage'.

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Appendix 1:

Questions for Baptist Congregation Participants

Can you describe your theology/biblical perspective on LGBTQIA+ orientations?

Do you know the Baptist Church in South Australia's (BCSA) position on LGBTQIA+ orientations? How would you describe it?

Have there been times when the church's position towards LGBTQIA+ and your own position have been in conflict? What happened? What was it like for you?

Consider a time during your church attendance when you were aware that an LGBTQIA+ person attended or was attending your church. Think of a specific situation with them that could demonstrate what it was like for you personally to be in church with them.

Looking at a wider context than just you personally, when was the church at its best at welcoming LGBTQIA+ persons?

When was the church at its worst at welcoming LGBTQIA+ persons?

How would you feel about an LGBTQIA+ person:

- joining the membership of the church?
- serving in a leadership team?

Bearing in mind the Baptist values of freedom of conscience and the autonomy of the local church, how would you feel about a theologically affirming church being a member of BCSA?

What else would you tell me about your experience of connecting and dialoguing with the Baptist church?

Appendix 2:

Table of Participants

The following table contains the information that participants shared about their identities, using the following data coding system: **Q**=LGBTQIA+ person; **QF**=LGBTQIA+ family; **NQ** = heterosexual and cisgender person; **B**=Baptist; **NB** = non-Baptist; **P**=accredited Baptist pastor; **L**=ministry leader within their local church; **BC**= Baptist Care.

No.	Pseudonym	BCSA	P	L	BC	B	NB	Q	QF	NQ	3rd Party Research
1.	Philippa					√					√ A
2.	Sarah					√					√ B
3.	Ashton					√				√	√ AA
4.	Joseph	√				√			√	√	
5.	Liz		√			√			√		
6.	Kieran			√		√					
7.	Brandon					√		√			
8.	Carol					√					√ C
9.	Derek					√				√	√ D
10.	Len					√					
11.	Lyn		√			√					

No.	Pseudonym	BCSA	P	L	BC	B	NB	Q	QF	NQ	3rd Party Research
12.	David (real name), Former P										
13.	Edward					√					√ E
14.	Fynn					√					√ F
15.	James		√			√					
16.	Grace					√					√ G
17.	Gavin		√			√					
18.	Ken		√			√					√ H
19.	Kate							√			
20.	Iris					√			√		√ I
21.	John					√					√ J
22.	Nathaniel					√					
23.	Jacob					√					
24.	Lauren					√					
25.	Chazza			√		√					
26.	Samuel (ex B)							√			
27.	Nathan					√					√ K
28.	Karen	√				√					

No.	Pseudonym	BCSA	P	L	BC	B	NB	Q	QF	NQ	3rd Party Research
30.	Mary					√				√	
31.	Scott					√					√ M
32.	Luke		√			√					
33.	Abigail	√				√					
34.	Ian	√				√			√		3rd Party interview
35.	Noah					√					√ N
36.	Oliver					√					√ O
37.	Patrick					√					√ P
38.	Andrew			√		√					
39.	Nyla										√ Q
40.	Rose					√				√	√ R
41.	Thomas		√			√					
42.	Sofia					√					√ S
43.	Fred							√			
44.	Louis					√			√	√	
45.	Tessa					√		√	√		√ T
46.	Annie						√	√			

No.	Pseudonym	BCSA	P	L	BC	B	NB	Q	QF	NQ	3rd Party Research
47.	Paul					√			√	√	
48.	Briony					√					√ U
49.	Vincent					√					√ V
50.	William					√					√ W
51.	Richard					√				√	√ X
53.	Chloe (ex B)							√			
54	Zoe					√					√ Z
55.	Seth				√	√					
56	Kelly				√		√				
57.	Gregory				√		√				
58.	Ian		√			√					

Appendix 3:

Data Coding Maps

The mapped codes used for the Data Results in this research (as described in Chapter 5: Methodology) are set out below:

- Scripture
- Sin
- Tension
- LGBTQIA+ Mental Health
- Wanted Conversation
- Fear
- Feelings Named
- Marriage: Celibacy/Plebiscite
- Pastors v Church, Church v Pastor
- Church v LGBTQIA+
- LGBTQIA+ Membership and Leadership in Baptist Churches
- Possibility of Affirming Churches in BCSA
- Language
- Silence

