

## Talking about Homosexuality: The Views of Mainline Protestant Clergy

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*Homosexuality is one of the most divisive issues within mainline Protestantism today. In this article we portray the many sides of mainline Protestantism's debates about homosexuality through the lens of statements clergy made about the issue in early 2000. In interviews with 62 mainline Protestant clergy across the United States, 40 volunteered their views on homosexuality without being prompted. We describe the frames through which clergy understand and articulate issues related to homosexuality in the midst of contentious denominational debate about the subject. The majority of clergy who discussed homosexuality focused on the issue in their churches instead of in society at large, and in their denominations rather than in their own congregations. Moreover, virtually none of the clergy interviewed took hard and fast stands on the issue of homosexuality. Most approach the issue in a pragmatic, rather than prophetic, way. Our interviews also show that pastors who choose to speak on homosexuality tend to frame the issue in terms of the diffuse notion of "homosexuality," rather than talking about gay men and lesbians as people.*

Since they first addressed homosexuality in the early 1970s, mainline Protestant churches have been thinking, talking, and quite often arguing about the subject.<sup>1</sup> These debates have increased in intensity over the past decade as they have been broadcast on the front pages of newspapers across the country: "Protestants Face Schism on Homosexuality," "Issues of Sexuality Split the Presbyterians Again," "At Gay Wedding, Methodists Vow to Take a Stand Against Church Ban" (Kloehn 1999; Niebuhr 1998; Sanchez 1999). The church court trials of Episcopal Bishop Walter Righter for ordaining a gay man and United Methodist minister Jimmy Creech for marrying a lesbian couple have attracted substantial national attention, as have contentious national denominational meetings where votes on ordination and marriage for gay men and lesbians are tallied.

Throughout all of this controversy, mainline Protestant clergy have played important roles in setting the terms of debate about homosexuality. Clergy have participated in denominational conversations about homosexuality by joining national and local interest groups and by ministering to people in their congregations who are concerned about the issue. More than 100 United Methodist clergy recently officiated at a lesbian couple's commitment ceremony—risking their ministerial credentials in the process. On a less visible level, clergy across the United States have the opportunity each week to influence and lead their congregations' opinions about homosexuality. They are discoursemakers with the capability, if they choose to take advantage of it, to affect public opinion in three separate arenas: the congregation, the denomination, and the community at large. How do mainline Protestant clergy understand gay and lesbian issues? On what terms do they feel called to act upon their beliefs?

Mainline Protestant clergy have long been involved and interested in politics. They played nationally visible roles in the civil rights movement, the nuclear freeze movement, and the sanctuary movement for refugees during the Reagan administration (Findlay 1993; Friedland 1998; Hertzke 1988; Smith 1996). Today, many mainline clergy express particular concern about disadvantaged

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and marginalized members of society (Crawford and Olson 2001; Guth, Green, Smidt, Kellstedt, and Poloma 1997; Olson 2000, 2002). They should be expected to take action on their political concerns because of mainline Protestantism's historic embrace of Niebuhr's (1951) notion of "Christ the transformer of culture"—involvement by the faithful in the broader society is not just tolerated, but encouraged and expected.

Not all mainline clergy, though, find it easy or even possible to involve themselves in politics. Relatively few mainline laity wholeheartedly endorse the liberal political outlook that often accompanies mainline theology—and that clergy learn in seminary.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, since at least the 1960s, dividing lines have been drawn between many mainline clergy and the moderate-to-conservative people in their pews. Homosexuality forms one of the most contentious of these dividing lines. Many clergy hesitate to speak about issues that have the potential to rip their congregations apart because to do so might threaten their job security. Of all contemporary political issues, homosexuality probably has the most potential to divide congregations. As such, even clergy who would like to be vocal advocates for gay and lesbian rights might feel constrained from doing so out of concern for their tenure and legitimacy in their congregations. And many homosexual clergy do not reveal their own sexual orientation out of fear that they will lose their positions (Comstock 1996).

Recent research describes the history of mainline denominations' debates about homosexuality (Anderson 1997; Beuttler 1999; Burgess 1999; Cadge 2002; Wood and Block 1995), but few studies investigate how clergy understand the conflict and become involved in addressing it. Wagenaar and Bartos (1977) do examine clergy's attitudes toward homosexuality, but their study is very dated. Wellman (1999) maps clergy's opinions about homosexual ordination, but he does not study how individuals understand or articulate their positions on the issue. In short, more research is needed about where clergy stand on the issue of homosexuality, particularly because they have the capability to shape discourses both within organized religion and beyond.

In this article we portray the many sides of mainline Protestantism's debates about homosexuality through the lens of statements clergy made about the issue in early 2000. In interviews with 62 mainline Protestant clergy across the United States, 40 volunteered their views on the issue of homosexuality without being prompted. We are primarily interested in the frames clergy use to describe their thoughts and feelings about homosexuality. By frames we mean what Goffman (1974) called "schemata of interpretation," or the lenses through which people understand and make sense of events occurring around them. As Benford and Snow (2000) state in their recent review article, "frames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action." We describe the frames through which clergy understand and articulate issues related to homosexuality in the midst of contentious denominational debate about the subject. We organize our argument around the following key questions: When clergy mention homosexuality, do they speak about conflict within their congregations or within their denominations? Do they refer to homosexuality within the church or in the broader society? What terminology do clergy employ in their discussions of homosexuality—do they speak of homosexuals or gay men and lesbians as people, or of the more nebulous notion of sexuality or homosexuality?

#### MAINLINE PROTESTANTISM AND CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

American society at large is expressing increasingly favorable opinions about homosexual people.<sup>3</sup> While 67 percent of those surveyed in 1976 believed sexual relations between people of the same sex were always wrong, only 56 percent in 1996 agreed (Yang 1997). Aside from their opinions about the morality of the sexual behavior of gay men and lesbians, increasing numbers of Americans support the civil rights of homosexual people.<sup>4</sup> Sodomy laws have been repealed in the majority of the 50 states. Many towns and cities have passed laws that forbid discrimination against homosexuals. Increasing numbers of corporations are offering health care

and other benefits to the partners of gay and lesbian employees. Vermont recently legalized a form of domestic partnership, called "civil union," between people of the same sex. In the 1990s, homosexual characters appeared on prime time television shows and openly gay candidates were elected to public office.

All of these changes, though, have not automatically translated into favorable treatment of gay men and lesbians by organized religion in the United States. Even though recent data suggest that mainline Protestants are growing more tolerant of homosexuals (Petersen and Donnerwerth 1998), during various historical periods Christianity has been intolerant of homosexuality (Boswell 1980; Greenberg and Bystryn 1982). While mainline Protestantism has taken the rare step of actually debating and discussing homosexuality and related issues, it is not a stretch to say that no issue is more controversial in the churches today.

Homosexuality, after all, means and represents many different things. It is a prism through which all of the denominations' central questions and issues reflect and refract. For these reasons, participants in debates and discussions about homosexuality realize that much is at stake. Homosexuality is about scripture: How is the Bible to be read, interpreted, and understood? It is about creation: How ought the people that God creates behave sexually? Homosexuality is about families and reproduction: Who can be married? Bear children? Adopt children? Raise children? What lessons should those children be taught about sexual behavior? Homosexuality also raises important questions about who can serve the church and about how those people and the church are to act in the world.

Mainline Protestantism has approached homosexuality primarily through policy debates in denominational bodies and congregations, and through substantial grassroots activity related to the subject on the ground. At both the denominational and congregational levels, the issue has been addressed broadly in terms of homosexuality and more specifically in terms of the rights of gay and lesbian people. Much of the debate about this issue would not have occurred were it not for the efforts of clergy. Clergy helped found the first religiously oriented group designed specifically to address homosexuality, the San Francisco Council on Religion and Homosexuality, in 1964. This organization was designed to work for social justice for homosexuals in San Francisco. After its first event, a New Year's Eve dance for the gay and lesbian community, the Council found itself in the midst of a court battle protesting the arrest of four people at the dance and the use of intimidation tactics by police at the event. D'Emilio (1983) argues that this was a significant moment in gay and lesbian history. The presence of clergy among the Council's defenders, he argues, "Provided a legitimacy to the charges of police harassment that the word of a homosexual lacked."

Clergy also helped to draft many of the first mainline Protestant statements on homosexuality. In 1969, the United Church of Christ (UCC) became the first mainline denomination to make an official proclamation: "The time is long overdue for our churches to be enlisted in the cause of justice and compassion for homosexual persons" (Council for Christian Social Action 1969). Other denominations followed suit, though with less overtly supportive statements about homosexuality. Support groups for gay men and lesbians who belonged to mainline churches also emerged. The UCC's Bill Johnson started a Gay Caucus in his denomination in 1972 to provide support for gay and lesbian UCC members. In 1974, David Baily Sindt founded Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns. In 1978, Robert Davidson, a minister at West Park Presbyterian Church in New York City, wrote a statement of conscience that was the first step toward the founding of a grassroots network of congregations that formally welcome gay and lesbian people into their churches. By the 1990s, programs supporting gay men and lesbians existed in all major mainline Protestant denominations. Focus throughout the decade turned instead to the issues of homosexual ordination and marriage, both of which have direct implications on the actions of clergy.

Despite the increase in grassroots activities and public debate during the 1990s, it is important to recognize that the opinions of many mainline clergy and laity on issues related to homosexuality are mixed (Presbyterian Panel 1989, 1996). While some commentators suggest

that homosexuality and other social issues are further evidence of the polarization of mainline churches into conservative and liberal factions, recent research in fact suggests that mainline opinion about homosexuality is divided right down to the local level (Ammerman 2000). It is within this local, and often contentious, context that mainline clergy must decide whether, when, and how to express their views on homosexuality.

#### SOURCES OF DATA

To examine the frames through which clergy understand homosexuality, we rely on data collected from in-depth telephone interviews conducted between January and May 2000 with 62 mainline clergy across the United States. All these pastors are ordained, and all but three were serving congregations at the time of the interview. On average they had been in the ministry for just over 20 years and had been serving their congregations for just over seven years. The interviews ranged in duration from 15 minutes to more than an hour.

These clergy, who represent 35 different states, plus the District of Columbia, serve in the American Baptist Churches; the Episcopal Church; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; the Presbyterian Church (USA); the United Methodist Church; and the United Church of Christ. Clergy from all six denominations spoke on homosexuality, but Baptist and Methodist ministers were slightly more likely to mention the issue.

Half the clergy interviewed were chosen on the basis of a national random sample of church ZIP codes, whereas half were specifically identified by their denominations as clergy who are interested in politics.<sup>5</sup> The presence in the sample of so many clergy who are politically aware is valuable because it allows us to assess the attitudes of clergy who are perhaps most likely to become involved in public debates about homosexuality. Exactly half of each of these two subsamples of clergy mentioned homosexuality.

While the interviews were not explicitly designed to assess the clergy's views on homosexuality, 40 of the ministers spoke voluntarily about various homosexuality-related debates occurring in their congregations, denominations, and the broader society.<sup>6</sup> Their comments came in reaction to three questions in particular:

- "What is the biggest problem facing your denomination today?"
- "Is it important for your denomination to stake out clear positions on social and political issues?"
- "What issue or set of political issues concerns you most in this day and age?"

Although homophobia is not the same as sexism, women clergy might have special incentives to emphasize gay and lesbian rights because they have often experienced discrimination firsthand (Crawford, Olson, and Deckman 2001; Olson, Crawford, and Guth 2000). And though homophobia and racism should not be equated, the same could be argued for mainline clergy of color because they constitute a distinct minority in their overwhelmingly white denominations. Indeed, 10 of the 13 women clergy (77 percent) mentioned homosexuality, as compared with only 61 percent of their male counterparts. The same general pattern holds for clergy who are members of racial or ethnic minority groups: five of the seven African-American and Hispanic clergy (71 percent) mentioned the issue as compared with only 64 percent of white clergy.<sup>7</sup>

Rural clergy might be less likely to speak on the issue than their urban counterparts because they encounter less diversity on a daily basis than urban clergy. Indeed, the difference between rural clergy and urban clergy is quite striking: 54 percent of rural clergy mentioned homosexuality, as opposed to 71 percent of urban clergy.<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, clergy in the more progressive northeast and midwest might feel more at ease speaking out on homosexuality than those in the southeast and the west, where conservative views on gay and lesbian rights hold greater sway. Fully 82

percent of all midwestern clergy and 67 percent of their counterparts in the northeast discussed homosexuality, but only 53 percent of clergy in the west and 50 percent of southeastern clergy followed suit.<sup>9</sup>

In early 2000 when these interviews were conducted, issues related to homosexuality were simmering in the mainline denominations. Conversations about the subject had been heating up through the 1990s, and by the end of the decade most denominations were debating one or more issues related to homosexuality. The Episcopal Church, for example, was deciding whether to develop marriage or union rites for same-sex couples, and the United Methodists were continuing to think about how to discipline clergy who were performing marriage or union rites for same-sex couples (in clear defiance of denominational policy). The Presbyterian Church (USA) was officially taking a "sabbatical" from the issue, though concerns were clearly still present, and the American Baptist Churches were struggling to decide what to do about some of their churches that had been disfellowshipped from their regional bodies for taking actions that were supportive of gay men and lesbians. Such supportive activities at the grassroots were continuing in Baptist congregations and gay and lesbian interest groups alike. Outside the churches, issues related to homosexuality were also in the public eye. The State of Vermont was considering the issue of homosexual unions, and plans were underway for a nationwide gay and lesbian march on Washington (the "Millennium March" was held in April 2000).

The clergy's comments fall into several different categories, and they use varying language to describe the subject. We begin by presenting three "voices from the field," which are particularly clear representations of the range of views expressed by these clergy. Their voices are presented as examples of how clergy make sense of the multiple issues embedded in the topic of homosexuality. We then describe the range of substantive frames through which the ministers in the sample addressed the issue. Finally, we explore the language clergy use in their discussions of the issue. Do they use the terms "gay," "lesbian," or "homosexual," or do they confine their words mainly to the more diffuse notions of "homosexuality" and "sexuality"?

#### THREE VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Mainline clergy understand the debate about sexuality and homosexuality in many ways. The case studies that follow illustrate how three clergy feel about the issue and what they think about how the church handles it. One of the ministers openly shares his opposition to gay and lesbian rights and goes on to illustrate the danger the issue poses for his denomination. Another pastor explains that she cannot fathom why gay and lesbian people are ostracized by organized religion. Finally, a third minister portrays the depth of policy struggle over the issue both inside his denomination and in the broader society within which he lives. These three case studies clearly demonstrate the range of opinion among mainline clergy on this issue and how different frames can come together in the comments of individual clergy.

Ethan Thomas,<sup>10</sup> an Episcopal priest in a suburb of a major northeastern city, brought up the subject of homosexuality early in the interview. "There are certain issues, of course, that are tearing at the fabric of who we are. One of those social issues is how we respond to the gay community at this particular time in history." He continues, detailing the substantive and procedural issues that impinge on denominational considerations of homosexuality in great detail. Then, without prompting, he explains his position:

I'm on the conservative side of this issue. I feel that this is an issue that is really going to be a litmus test for many clergy. . . . I'm a liberal in every other sense except for this particular issue. I object to it on certain biblical grounds and moral grounds and have a feeling of inclusion for homosexuals, but not an openness to their whole agenda, is the best way of saying it. That's where I'm coming from. But this is really tearing us apart as a denomination. It's probably on the front burner as a social issue in the Episcopal Church [but] it's not my favorite issue.

Thomas clearly thinks sexuality is an important, and even symbolic, issue. As a "litmus test" for clergy it seems to represent more than its face value. He goes on to describe the issue as creating a kind of divisiveness in which conservative and liberal churches will be able to align themselves with the bishops of their choice, moving further and further apart in the process. Thomas makes it clear later in the interview that liberal churches will be the losers in this debate. While there are many liberal churches, not enough of them are liberal about sexuality issues to allow a liberal church so defined to manage financially, he argues. The characterization of liberal churches as open to homosexuals' "whole agenda" further emphasizes the "us versus them" polemic implicit in Thomas' characterization of the debates.

Presbyterian pastor Janet Langenbein, who serves in a suburb of a city in the mid-Atlantic region, is "appalled by the length to which the homosexual debate is dividing the church." She characterizes herself as "open minded about it" and wants "the church to be open and inclusive," but is mostly concerned about the extent to which her denomination's focus on homosexuality is detracting from attention to other issues. She explains: "The church is never going to be able to move on and deal with these other political questions like economic justice and everything if we don't get past this." Furthermore, she expresses concern about the "real fear and paranoia of some factions of the PCUSA" as if the "whole church is going to go to hell" if homosexuals are ordained or married in the church. She believes that due process at national meetings has been disrupted because of the issue, and she worries that concern about the issue has an impact on other church decisions. She cites one example:

I was on the Ecumenical Partnerships Committee and there were people on that committee who didn't want to enter the Churches Uniting in Christ agreement because one of the other churches was UCC, [because] what if a UCC church, which does ordain gay people, . . . had a gay pastor and that person came and preached at our church and administered communion?

While the motion to enter this agreement finally did pass, Langenbein is frustrated at how concerns about homosexuality influence denominational business on all levels.

Langenbein is ambivalent about what the Presbyterian Church should do about the "homosexual debate." She does not want the denomination to split, but "there are other times when I'm not sure that the church should stay together because it is so divisive." She continues, "I'm not sure there could ever be an authentic peace, so maybe they should just have a gracious split and [create] two denominations [and] move on." While such a split would make her very sad, she explains, "there are times when we probably all know marriages that shouldn't stay together, where everybody would be better off if they would try it again. Try it in a new way." Such a split, while unfortunate, might be a good way for the church to get on to other more important issues.

Lutheran minister Tim Anderson, who serves a church in southern California, emphasizes just how complicated gay and lesbian issues—and clergy's involvement in the politics surrounding them—can be. He begins to discuss gay and lesbian people in the interview by describing California's Proposition 22, a March 2000 primary ballot initiative that sought to outlaw homosexual marriage (and passed with over 61 percent of the vote, failing only in some Bay Area precincts). As a result, if gay men and lesbians are married in another state and move to California, their marriages are not recognized.

Anderson viewed Proposition 22 as "really a kind of discrimination." He also has "a real problem" with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's current stance that gay men and lesbians who are in open covenant relationships cannot be ordained. "That really seems to be contrary to what Christ's message was." Despite the clarity with which Anderson presents his personal stance, he finds homosexuality a very difficult issue about which to take a position in his congregation. "I have to be careful what I say, because . . . people surprise me." People who are "open about these issues will leave the church over it. It seems to touch some real nerves." Although he feels that the Christian perspective against homosexuality "hurts the whole church"

and "even our own personal faith element," he has difficulty deciding when and how to articulate his position to his congregation.

While Anderson does not mention any specific instances when he has discussed homosexuality with his congregation, he does mention speaking about Proposition 22 with two visitors to his church.

I had some people here the other day [who] were from a church and they were surprised when I said I was a Lutheran pastor and I think that proposition is full of hate and I'm going to vote against it. They were kind of surprised. I said, "Well, I don't have all the answers when it comes to this." I'll be the first one to say I've struggled with it and I don't have a clear-cut answer on it explaining everything. But all I know is that when I get to heaven, if anything, I'm going to err on the side of grace.

Anderson explains that the two people to whom he was talking

hadn't thought about it that way before. The older gentleman just kept on, "Well, you're responsible for trying to set other people's lifestyles [that] are wrong right." I said, "Well, that's true in many ways." But again we're judged by the basic question of "Are we loving each other the way Christ loves us?" I think that's the key question to ask. . . . Love, does it mean judge someone or does it really mean being involved and trying to understand someone?

In sharing this example with us, Anderson presents himself as a persuasive spokesperson against Proposition 22. At the same time, though, he reveals a surprising ambivalence about addressing the issue with his congregation because of what its divisiveness could mean to his community.

#### DISCURSIVE FRAMES ON HOMOSEXUALITY

These case studies suggest several frames through which clergy may present their opinions on homosexuality. Is it a "love" issue as Anderson argues, or is it a question of justice for gay men and lesbians? Are concerns about denominational processes on the forefront of clergy's minds, as is the case for Langenbein, or are these pragmatic concerns secondary to broader ideological positions on the issue? We now examine the content of the 40 clergy's comments more broadly. We consider the ministers' statements on homosexuality through three separate lenses. First, do the ministers confine their remarks to homosexuality's effect on the *church*, or do they speak more generally of its impact on *society in general*? Second, do they speak about the issue as it affects their *congregation*, or the *denomination* more broadly? Finally, we examine the frames that the clergy employ in their commentary on homosexuality.

Despite the visibility of debates about gay and lesbian rights in the broader society, clergy are more focused on the issue *inside* the churches than outside. This fact is reflected by the ministers' propensity to discuss homosexuality's ramifications inside the church instead of its place in more general societal discourse. Of all the comments clergy offered on homosexuality, 72 percent of these statements were directed toward the question of gay and lesbian rights inside the church rather than in the broader society. For the most part, the ministers talked about denominational conflicts, and to a lesser extent, intracongregational squabbles. We discuss both of these themes in further detail below.

Specific policy questions constituted some of the principal themes stressed by the few clergy who discussed the impact of homosexuality on issues external to the church. Two California pastors mentioned Proposition 22, the March 2000 ballot initiative that sought to nullify gay and lesbian marriages. A New England pastor mentioned Vermont's legalization of civil unions. A pastor in the southwest explained that his congregation had been involved in protesting against a violent hate crime against a gay man, and a midwestern pastor outlined his personal involvement in the fight for gay and lesbian rights:

Some of the things I have done would include attempting to offer legislation to repeal sodomy laws that are on the books, . . . testifying before [state] Senate committees, . . . visiting a number of state representatives, speaking publicly at a number of church meetings, writing a number of articles either as letters to the editor of the paper or through interviews that have taken place, developing and presenting in a number of cases biblical and scriptural understandings that would support this particular philosophy that I and many others espouse. (U8)<sup>11</sup>

In a more general vein, an Episcopal priest expressed concern about "the whole political issue that's come up around same-sex unions and rights of coverages, things of that nature . . . [It's] really discriminatory the way things are being done right now in this country" (E5). Several others decried homophobia among the American public, and some expressed happiness that the gay rights movement has made progress.

Perhaps not surprisingly, clergy were far more likely to speak of homosexuality in their churches than in the broader society, and more specifically in their denominations than in their congregations. Fully 78 percent of all the ministers' comments occurred within the frame of denominational, rather than congregational, conflict. While the clergy who made these comments share a concern about issues related to homosexuality at the denominational level, they differ in their responses to these concerns.

A northeastern Baptist pastor's comment is quite typical of the majority who focused on denominational conflict: "We've been struggling over issues like homosexuality and sexuality in general. It's very clear within the denomination that there are widely differing opinions" (B2). Another Baptist minister expressed concern that "this last [denominational] convention caused a great deal of trouble because of the homosexual issue in the church, and a lot of homosexual churches pulled out because they were not affirmed by the American Baptists" (B6). As one Presbyterian pastor stated, "the issue is homosexuality . . . It is really tearing the church apart and we need to find ways that we can agree to disagree and learn to live together" (P8). The same issue surfaces among UCC clergy: "We've lost a lot of churches and a lot of members . . . because the national church has taken a stand in favor of supporting gay and lesbian activity" (U3). The theme of denominational split also surfaced among clergy in other denominations. An Episcopal priest stated, "If you follow the news lately over homosexuality, there is that branch that wants us to make a clear, hard and fast pronouncement that this is right or this is wrong" (E7). "News" here clearly refers to denominational rather than secular developments.

Despite their common concerns about homosexuality at the denominational level, clergy differed markedly in their responses to the debate. Most clergy avoided taking a hard and fast stand on the issue. As one said, "the main mission of the mainline Protestant church is not to . . . convince people one way or another on homosexuality" (M3). Some clergy did try to influence the terms of the debate. One Methodist pastor admitted that she has tried very hard: "I've tried to . . . be a voice in the circles that I walk in and use my own personal influence . . . to ask the church to be broad enough to address sexual orientation issues in how open and inclusive we are" (M8). Others were more sanguine about the debate within their denominations: "I'm happy that the ELCA continues to . . . [take] positions on the social issues . . . they continue to study aggressively the whole matter of homosexuality" (L1). A Presbyterian pastor praised her denomination for being "really ahead of society in struggling right now . . . [About the] rights of gays and lesbians" (P1). However, definitive positions on the issue may not be the solution to the debate, as one Methodist minister explained. "I think that on both sides of the issue, some of the extreme opinions have been quick to call names. If you have one opinion, you're automatically a homophobe . . . If you have another opinion, you're automatically damned" (M3). A midwestern Lutheran pastor concurred:

There are so many nuances and we're on kind of a curve of discovery or exploration about . . . this issue of homosexuality. To have one unified position and then not . . . deviate from that as more information comes along seems to me to be too narrow, and in effect does a disservice because then it shuts down further inquiry. (L7)

Indecision was a common theme among the clergy who focused on gay and lesbian issues in their own congregations. "We haven't joined the Welcoming and Affirming Association, but we've talked about it. That's an issue that we continue to debate actively within our congregation, not in a nasty way, but we hold it up as an issue that we need to be paying attention to" (B8). A handful of ministers explained that their congregations were, in fact, open and affirming of gay and lesbian people. "We have openly gay people ordained here and we send openly gay people to seminary here" (E7). A midwestern Methodist pastor echoed this situation: "We're involved in the gay/lesbian issue. We have a number of gay and lesbian people in the congregation and have taken a leadership role in changing the stance of the church on gay and lesbian issues" (M7). A few clergy also suggested that their congregations were involved in activism surrounding gay and lesbian rights. As one shared, "this congregation has gone so far as to write letters to the College of Bishops, and to delegates of the General Conference stating the views they hold" (M1).

To provide a broader sense of the types of comments clergy made about homosexuality, we have explored the frames they used to discuss the issue. Some are general; others are specific to particular debates. Some have normative implications, while others are more objective. Some of the frames suggest that debate about homosexuality is healthy, yet others imply that it is divisive and dangerous. The various frames are listed in Table 1.

Denominational struggle of the sort described above, as well as the possibility of denominational split and membership loss, were two of the three most prevalent frames clergy used to discuss homosexuality in the interviews. Also frequently used was the frame of promoting justice, rights, and equality for gay and lesbian people. A typical statement was a UCC pastor's concern about "marginalized people, gay and lesbian people in particular" (U1). As a Lutheran pastor shared, "I think . . . of the whole issue of gay and lesbian [equality] in terms of just integrity and basic political rights and human rights" (L6). Another Lutheran pastor expressed similar concern about "whether same-sex couples can be legally united and recognized as legal entities in the eyes of the law with respect to property ownership and insurance benefits and tax, IRS code kinds of provisions and so forth" (L7).

The next most frequently employed frames were homosexual marriage and the notion that one's congregation is open to and affirming of gay men and lesbians. As one Episcopal priest stated, "There is a tremendous disagreement over . . . whether or not the church ought to offer same-sex blessings to homosexuals" (E4). A Presbyterian pastor went quite a bit further in explaining his view: "It's a little scary to be Presbyterian right now, because . . . of these cases that are coming to the Judicial Commission on same-sex unions" (P9). For those who share this uneasiness about the exclusion of gay and lesbian people, perhaps the best recourse is to open one's congregation to

TABLE 1  
FRAMES USED TO DISCUSS HOMOSEXUALITY

Denominational struggle	30
Justice, rights, equality	17
Denominational split, member loss	11
Gay marriage	8
My church is open to gay men and lesbians	8
Homosexuality is not important	7
It is good to study this issue	7
This issue is overblown	6
Specific events, policies	5
Comparison with other issues	5
Gay ordination	5
It is hard for me to deal with this issue	3

N = 112 individual mentions.

homosexuals in an official capacity. Eight of the clergy interviewed said that their congregations are open and affirming, which as one pastor explained, "means we're working to remove barriers that would inhibit all people from participating" (U5). The decision to become an open and affirming congregation, however, is not always easy. One UCC pastor's story is particularly illustrative:

At [my regional] Conference, they said, "We are inclusive. We welcome gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals," and the challenge for our churches was to do that, and we've kind of come out of the closet here at [my church] in that arena [by doing] that. I have to say, I'm much more out now, that we are a liberal church. It feels good to do that. [Now] I think I know kind of how a gay or lesbian person coming out of the closet might feel. (U11)

Three other frames that emerged in the interviews center around the question of how relevant the debate about homosexuality ought to be for the church. Some argued that the issue is not important. Others said its importance is overblown. Still others, however, made the argument that it is useful and beneficial to study the issue. Among those who complained that homosexuality is either unimportant or overblown, one general sentiment was that focusing on this issue means that other issues get short shrift. As one Baptist pastor argued, "homosexuality right now . . . tends to be at the forefront of everything else, where everything else is sort of neglected, such as racism . . . . You don't see as much of this enthusiasm over having a viewpoint on racism" (B5). Another view is that clear denominational statements on homosexuality will have no impact on the bigger issue: "It becomes like the old cliché about rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. What difference does it make? Who really cares? . . . I'm not convinced that it really matters" (B10). There are also those who would agree with a Presbyterian pastor who confesses: "I honestly for the life of me don't understand why it's the biggest issue in the church" (P9).

Some clergy, however, do not dispute the issue's importance and argue instead that it is a valuable topic for debate. As an African-American Baptist pastor observes, "homosexuality is one [issue] they're going to have to bring to a point like they did slavery" (B6). Debate about the issue can serve the purpose of extending understanding, according to an Episcopal priest in the Southwest: "What is our attitude about sexual orientation? . . . [Asking that question] allows us to learn more, to gain greater awareness" (E8). Successful discourse about homosexuality is also at times a source of pride for clergy, as it is for this northeastern woman: "I thought that the ELCA did a good job. It takes more work for them to do it the way they did it, to do the research" (L10).

Less frequently used frames involve comparison of the issue to other issues, discussion of specific events and policies that touch on homosexuality (such as hate crimes), and homosexual ordination. The African-American pastor mentioned above compared the issue to slavery. Others, such as this Episcopal priest, relate the issue to racism: "I truly believe that all other issues . . . poverty, . . . education, . . . health issues, including AIDS, even . . . sexual orientation, in many respects have their basis in the issue of racism" (E8). Similarly, "There's a lot of homophobia in the culture and that is certainly present in United Methodist churches, . . . they can be just as prejudiced about it as they have been about racism and sexism" (M10).

Finally, a few pastors admitted that it is difficult for them personally to discuss the issue. In one instance, a minister explained that he feels uncomfortable addressing the issue, even with fellow clergy members: "Just speaking from my own experience here in my conference, it's not even always the case among clergy gatherings [that] it's safe to share your opinion" (M3). He continued by sharing that "both my wife and I have siblings who are gay and lesbian," which makes the issue very personal for him. Stating one's view on homosexuality publicly can be even riskier. As one UCC pastor explains, "[I am] always wrestling with what [I] feel is right in [my] conscience on the whole gay issue . . . those sticky wickets are the ones [about which] you may or may not be called upon to make a public stand, but you always have to have your opinions" (U4).

In sum, the majority of clergy who discussed homosexuality focused on the issue in their churches instead of in society at large, and in their denominations rather than in their individual congregations. The three case studies presented above notwithstanding, it is important to note that virtually none of the clergy interviewed took hard and fast stands on any homosexuality-related

issues. Interestingly, most of the clergy appear to approach the issue in a pragmatic, rather than prophetic, way. Pragmatic concerns about denominational conflict, struggle, split, and membership loss top the list of frames through which clergy present their opinions on homosexuality. While some are concerned with justice, rights, and equality, these prophetic concerns are secondary to more pragmatic matters.

#### LANGUAGE USED TO DISCUSS HOMOSEXUALITY

In addition to their substantive comments about homosexuality, clergy also frame the issue in terms of the language they use to describe and address the topic. The majority who commented on the issue employed the term "homosexuality." Twenty-three ministers (58 percent) defined the issue specifically in terms of "homosexuality" or the "homosexual" issue. One United Methodist minister offered a typical comment: "A social issue that concerns me most is just how we as a society, as a church, we deal with homosexuality" (M3). In addition to those who framed it in terms of "homosexuality" or the "homosexual" issue, an additional 11 ministers (27 percent) talked about these issues by using the terms "gay" and "lesbian." Thus a full 85 percent of the clergy discussed issues related to sexuality exclusively through the language of "homosexuality," the "homosexual" issue, or the "gay and lesbian" issue.

At various points since debates about homosexuality began in the mainline churches, denominations have tried to steer the conversation into broader considerations of sexuality or human sexuality more generally. The Presbyterian Church (USA), for example, set up a task force to study homosexuality in 1976 and later commissioned studies that considered sexuality more generally (Presbyterian Church (USA) 1980, 1991). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America responded to debate about homosexuality on the ground (in part) by drafting a social statement in the early 1990s that addressed homosexuality briefly but was framed more generally in terms of "human sexuality" (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 1996). The Episcopal Church has also responded to questions about homosexuality with efforts to focus on human sexuality more broadly. In 1979, for example, dioceses were asked to develop educational programs about sexuality. When many dioceses did not follow through on this request, the Episcopal Executive Committee called on a denominational committee to develop such materials in 1982. While these materials were designed to address homosexuality, they were to do so in the context of other issues related to sexuality that are also of concern to the Episcopal Church.

In general, efforts to reframe denominational conversations about homosexuality into more general dialogues about sexuality are not evident in the language these clergy use in discussing the issue. Table 2 shows that three clergy (8 percent) in the sample did, however, frame the issue in more general terms. These clergy were disproportionately Episcopalian. While only one minister from a denomination other than the Episcopal Church framed the issue exclusively in terms of "sexuality," one-third of all the Episcopal clergy framed it this way. As the minister of an

TABLE 2  
LANGUAGE USED TO DISCUSS HOMOSEXUALITY

	"Homosexuality"	"Sexuality"	Both	Neither
Baptist	5	1	1	0
Episcopal	3	2	0	1
ELCA	6	0	0	1
Methodist	4	0	1	2
Presbyterian	4	0	1	1
UCC	1	0	0	6
Total	23	3	3	11

N = 40 clergy.

TABLE 3  
DISCUSSION OF ISSUE IN THE ABSTRACT OR IN  
TERMS OF PEOPLE

	Abstract	People	Both	Neither
Baptist	4	2	1	0
Episcopal	2	1	2	1
ELCA	2	1	3	1
Methodist	3	2	2	0
Presbyterian	3	3	0	0
UCC	1	6	0	0
Total	15	15	8	2

N = 40 clergy.

Episcopal church in the midwest explained, "we are willing to confront difficult issues . . . issues of sexuality" (E1). Three respondents (8 percent) also framed their comments using both the specific frame of "homosexuality," the "homosexual" issue, or "gays and lesbians" and the more general frame of "sexuality" or "human sexuality."

The dominant focus on "homosexuality" and the "homosexual issue" among mainline clergy has not, however, translated only into detached descriptions of the issue as a distant concept. In fact, one of the main contributions of some mainline churches to the debate has been their ability to personalize the issue. Instead of discussing homosexuality generally, some mainline churches, and especially the 800 gay and lesbian welcoming congregations in the United States, have slanted the discussion toward people who live in the neighborhood or attend the church (Cadge 1997). As Table 3 shows, just over half of mainline clergy who spoke about issues related to sexuality commented specifically on gay and lesbian *people* in their remarks.<sup>12</sup>

A United Methodist minister in Iowa, for example, raised the question of what the "godly approach [is to] people who are gay and lesbian" (M3). Asked to identify the biggest problem facing the Presbyterian Church today, a Presbyterian pastor in the midwest referred to "the rights of gays and lesbians" (P1). She continued,

I think as people become more and more open, people are recognizing more and more that their friends and neighbors who they love are gay and lesbian and recognizing that suddenly this isn't some issue that's facing somebody else, now, it's facing us as a family. (P1)

The extent to which sexuality and homosexuality were defined abstractly rather than specifically (in terms of actual people) was largely dependent on the denominational affiliation of the pastor. Most notably, all but one of the seven United Church of Christ ministers in the sample discussed "gay and lesbian people" (U3), "gay and lesbian folk" (U5), or the "place of gays and lesbians in the community" (U11).<sup>13</sup> The American Baptist clergy, on the other hand, spoke more vaguely and abstractly about "homosexuality" (B5), "homosexual churches" (B6), or the "homosexual issue" (B10). Differences in how United Church of Christ and American Baptist clergy talk about sexuality and homosexuality suggest, tentatively, that clergy in progressive denominations such as the UCC that welcome homosexual people into all aspects of church life (including ordination and marriage) are more likely to talk about homosexual *people* than are clergy in denominations such as the American Baptist Churches, which consider homosexuality incompatible with Christian teachings.

#### CONCLUSION

Since the early 1970s clergy have been central to mainline Protestantism's national debates about homosexuality. Their opinions have likely influenced how the mainline Protestants in their

pews perceive the debates and the issue more generally. The voices of clergy presented here, coupled with the range of frames they employ in their comments, illustrate the richly textured and complicated nature of these debates at present. While our sample is too small to indicate reliably which clergy are most inclined to speak about homosexuality, our interviews suggest tentatively that denominational affiliation, gender and racial background, and geographic region may influence a pastor's likelihood of being willing to speak on the issue. Pastors who do speak tend to frame the issue in terms of "homosexuality" or the "homosexual" issue—despite some denominations' attempts to broaden the discussion to a more general focus on sexuality. It is especially noteworthy that many of the comments discussed here come from clergy who have an intrinsic interest in politics because they are networked with their denominational Washington offices.

Pastors who do speak about homosexuality tend to focus on the issue's impact on the *church* rather than its significance for the broader society. They also focus more on *denominational* debates and division than on discussions or actions within their own congregations. Rather than being played out in terms of what is "loving" or "just," as some denominational debates would suggest, the frames clergy use to discuss homosexuality reveal an overwhelmingly pragmatic approach to the issue. Concerns about denominational struggle, split, and membership loss dominate clergy's comments, and the majority of pastors do not take clear positions on specific issues.

This pragmatic focus on conflict suggests that denominational debate may be breeding more denominational debate, rather than additional denominational debate being sparked primarily by congregational action. The ministers' focus on the denominational level also raises questions about the exact nature of the relationship between local (congregational) and national (denominational) debate. The clergy who spoke about homosexuality with reference to their congregations were *supportive* of efforts to make the church more welcoming to gay men and lesbians. The evident silence of more socially conservative clergy about how homosexuality-related issues affect their congregations may mean that they support the denominational status quo. In short, the debate about homosexuality within and among churches is perhaps a bit more muted than national debates about the subject might suggest. Meanwhile, the debate may now be orienting itself around denominational conflict rather than individual congregational concerns.

The fact that so many clergy spoke about homosexuality without prompting in these interviews clearly indicates that the issue is on mainline pastors' minds today. Clergy have been and will remain central players in debates about homosexuality in mainline churches, so understanding how they frame the issue is central to grasping the complex texture of the debates. Our data do not allow us to connect particular framings of homosexuality to clergy's specific actions around the subject in their congregations, denominations, or communities. We will leave this for scholars to investigate in the future.

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#### NOTES

1. We use the blanket term "homosexuality" throughout this article to refer to denominational debates and clergy's comments about homosexuality, sexuality, homosexual people, and gay and lesbian concerns. We opt to discuss this issue throughout the article primarily in terms of homosexuality because this frame has historically dominated denominational discussions, and it was the primary means by which the clergy we interviewed conceived of and talked about the issue.
2. On the "clergy-laity gap," which posits that mainline Protestant clergy are more liberal than most members of their congregations, see Adams (1970), Hadden (1969), and Koller and Retzer (1980). On the notion that mainline clergy

- are liberal, see Guth et al. (1997) and Wuthnow (1988). On the political lessons inculcated in seminary, see Carroll et al. (1997).
- The phrases "homosexuals" and "gay men and lesbians" are used interchangeably throughout this article. While we prefer "gay men and lesbians," the denominations have and continue to use both phrases, so both are used here. With the exception of the United Church of Christ, bisexual and transgender people have not been commented on specifically by the mainline clergy, and are therefore not addressed in this article. The UCC presently refers to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as one group, and supports them all.
  - In recent surveys, 44 percent felt that homosexuality should be considered an acceptable alternative lifestyle while 84 percent believed that gay men and lesbians should enjoy equal employment opportunity (CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll 1996a, 1996b). See Yang (1997) for a detailed discussion of longitudinal data.
  - The names of the politically involved clergy were obtained from denominational offices in Washington, DC, state-level denominational officials, and denominational websites. This sampling technique was employed because the central aim of the original project was to examine the differences in attitudes that exist between average clergy and those who are networked with their denominational Washington offices (see Olson 2002).
  - Speaking about homosexuality does not automatically translate into support for gay and lesbian people. It is commonly assumed that mainline clergy are more liberal than the members of their congregations. This assumption led us to expect that clergy who spoke about homosexuality would speak in support of gay and lesbian people. Our expectation was bolstered by the fact that some of the questions the clergy were answering when they mentioned homosexuality required them to identify a problem. We assumed that clergy who support gay and lesbian rights would be more likely to think about homosexuality-related matters as problems, because in many religious traditions people who oppose gay and lesbian rights represent the status quo.
  - One caveat is necessary here. In-depth interviewing produces rich ethnographic detail, yet the tradeoff is frequently a rather small sample size. Our data will not allow us to establish the generalizability of the patterns we observe, but they are certainly suggestive of broader trends among mainline Protestant clergy. While our small sample size keeps the relationships we report from attaining statistical significance, they are nevertheless noteworthy.
  - We define urban clergy as those who serve in a city of at least 60,000 people, or who serve in the metropolitan area of a major city (such as New York, Los Angeles, or Washington, DC). By this definition, 38 clergy are urban and 24 are rural.
  - The northeast encompasses all states to the east of Indiana and to the north of Virginia, plus the metropolitan area of Washington, DC, including its Virginia suburbs. The midwest includes the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan. The southeast includes all states to the south of (and including) Kentucky and east of the Mississippi River, as well as West Virginia, Louisiana, Arkansas, and all of Virginia except for its Washington, DC suburbs. All other states are considered to be in the west (including Alaska and Hawaii).
  - Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the interviewees.
  - Interviews are coded according to the following system: B = Baptist; E = Episcopal; L = Lutheran; M = Methodist; P = Presbyterian; U = UCC. Numbers greater than or equal to 6 indicate that the pastor has explicit ties with his or her denomination's political leadership; lower numbers indicate that the pastor was from the random sample.
  - None of the clergy interviewed spoke about "ex-gays" (former homosexuals). These are people who previously understood themselves to be homosexual but now understand themselves to be heterosexual.
  - United Church of Christ clergy were also the only clergy to mention "bisexual" or "transgender" people.

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