

How do Religious Congregations Affect Congregants' Attitudes toward  
Lesbian Women and Gay Men?

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Abstract: Using a stratified random sample of 338 participants nested in 20 congregations within 3 denominations, we examined the relationship between religious service attendance, affirmation of LGBQ identities, their interaction, and attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men (ATLG) to better understand the potential role that congregational-level variables may play in the formation of ATLG. Hierarchical linear models indicated that 29% variation in ATLG could be explained by congregation-level variables. Religious service attendance on an individual level was related to more rejecting ALG. The relationship between religious service attendance and ATLG on a congregational level (i.e., average frequency of attendance within a congregation) was marginally significant. Affirmation of LGBQ identities on a congregational level (i.e., policies and procedures empowering individuals in same-sex relationships) was related to more affirming ATLG. Congregation-level predictors evidenced substantially larger effects than individual-level predictors. Interactions between service attendance and congregational affirmation were non-significant, indicating that increased engagement with a “less-affirming” congregation has no effect on ATLG. Results indicate that individuals may select a congregation whose ATLG mirrors their own. Further research examining the role of congregations in influencing congregants’ ATLG is encouraged.

Keywords: Religiousness; Attitudes toward Homosexuality; Congregation; Homonegativity; LGBTQ

### **How do Religious Congregations Affect Congregants' Attitudes toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men?**

Although many religious denominations and congregations have begun affirming that same-sex identities and relationships may be as fulfilling and healthy as heterosexual identities and relationships, others have reaffirmed their commitment to heteronormative doctrine and discourse. Psychological research has largely found a positive relationship between individuals' religiousness and rejecting attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men (ATLG; Doebler, 2015), perhaps because many religious denominations and congregations have historically condemned same-sex sexual behavior. This relationship is particularly concerning because religion is crucial in forming values and principles for many people (Fellows, 1996) and because rejecting ATLG may embolden individuals to discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals. This discrimination may directly (e.g., violence) and indirectly (e.g., increasing minority stress; Meyer, 2003) impact LGBQ individuals, particularly as many LGBQ individuals identify as religious (Pew Research Center, 2015). In addition, rejecting ATLG may negatively impact heterosexual individuals (Wells, 1991). Thus, even without intending to, religious denominations and congregations may be complicit in the suffering of LGBQ and heterosexual individuals alike (Lefevor, Paiz et al., in press).

Despite the general acknowledgment of the relationship between religiousness and ATLG, it is relatively unclear how ATLG are formed within religious denominations and congregations. One reason for the conceptual muddiness is that most researchers focus on the influence of either individual (e.g., Todd, McConnell, Odahl-Ruan, & Houston-Kolnik, 2017) or denominational (Doebler, 2015) variables on ATLG, neglecting to examine the congregation as an instrument of group socialization. This omission is particularly problematic as individuals

phenomenologically experience religion most frequently through the people and spaces connected to their local congregation. The small body of work that has examined congregations (e.g., Adler, 2012; Barnes, 2013) is typically limited to the analysis of a single congregation or does not include direct assessments of ATLG due to the difficulty and cost of conducting empirically sound research with multiple congregations.

To further our understanding of the role of religion and religiousness in the formation of ATLG, we present data from a stratified random sample of 20 congregations in a city in the mid-South United States. To frame our research questions and analyses, we review research on religion and the formation of ATLG, paying particular attention to the potential role of congregations and group socialization processes.

### **Religion and Attitudes toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men**

A number of variables have been found to be related to more rejecting ATLG including traditional gender roles, older age, less education, living in rural areas, and religiousness (Herek, 1988). Further, various aspects of religiousness—including religious affiliation, attendance, orthodoxy, and worldview—are all associated with affirming ATLG (van den Akker, van der Ploeg, & Scheepers, 2013; Todd et al., 2017). Several mechanisms have been posited to explain *why* religiousness is related to ATLG, including links between religion and moral conservativeness (Pearte, Renk & Negy, 2013), literal interpretation of sacred texts (Ammerman, 1982), and reinforcement of rejecting ATLG through contact with groups of like-minded individuals (Herek, 1988). Rejecting ATLG may have deleterious consequences to heterosexuals including limitations in emotional expression and sexual behaviors due to fears about stereotypical “homosexual” behaviors, which can negatively affect relationships (Wells, 1991).

Among sexual minorities, religious involvement, affiliation, and intrinsic religiosity are related to more rejecting ATLG (Brown, Babucarr, & Taylor, 2014; Meladze & Brown, 2015). Although there is some contrary evidence (Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2019), it largely appears that when LGBQ individuals hold rejecting ATLG, they are at an increased risk of anger, anxiety, depression, and substance use (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010; Swim, Johnston, & Pearson, 2009). These health disparities are thought to result from the increased tension and devaluation of self that comes from experiencing attraction to same-sex others while simultaneously holding beliefs that these attractions are morally wrong or unacceptable (Meyer, 2003). Many LGBTQ individuals distance themselves from religion, to reduce their exposure to rejecting ATLG (Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2019). Ironically, LGBQ individuals' exodus from conservative religions may perpetuate rejecting ATLG among heterosexual individuals within those religions, as more frequent contact with LGBQ individuals has been shown to promote affirming ATLG (Herek & Glunt, 1993).

### **Congregations as a Level of Analysis**

Although conservative religions have historically condemned homosexuality, contemporary religions evidence a much wider range of responses to homosexuality. Several denominations of Christianity and Judaism including The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The Episcopal Church, and Reform Judaism have passed resolutions extending full membership and rights to LGBQ members (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Churchwide Assembly, 1991; General Convention of the Episcopal Church, n.d.; Union of Union of Reform Judaism, 2019). Issuing these types of stances has been linked to more affirming ATLG (Doebler, 2015).

ATLG may also vary significantly within a given denomination (Barnes, 2013). Though some of this variation undoubtedly reflects individual differences, it appears that much of this variation may be attributable to differences between congregations within a denomination (Adler, 2012; Whitehead, 2013a). If congregations are an important level of analysis to understand ATLG, what characteristics of congregations are reliably linked to ATLG?

There is some support for the idea that the religiousness of a congregation may relate to the congregation's ATLG. Congregations that adopt conservative political and theological ideologies are likely to have more rejecting ATLG (Adler, 2012; Whitehead, 2013a). These ideologies may be mediated by the attitudes of the clergy, with congregations whose clergy hold rejecting ATLG having more rejecting ATLG on a congregational level than those whose clergy hold more affirming ATLG (Cadge, Girouard, Olson, & Lylerohr, 2012). Views of the clergy may be particularly impactful on the attitudes of the congregation (Toni-Uebari & Inusa, 2009).

Additionally, congregational openness and affirmation may relate to ATLG. Some religious congregations have adopted "open and affirming" identities, often through an official welcome statement, to signal their acknowledgement and acceptance of all sexual orientations as members of their congregations (Scheitle, Merino, & Moore, 2010). There is also variation between congregations who identify as "open and affirming," with some congregations creating policies encouraging congregants to accept the legitimacy of same-sex relationships, enabling LGBQ individuals to be full members of the congregation, and/or empowering LGBQ individuals to be leaders in the congregation (Barnes, 2013; Whitehead, 2013b). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it appears that individuals who belong to congregations who adopt more affirming policies and procedures tend to have more affirming ATLG (Adler, 2012).

Congregations that provide open and affirming environments may help their LGBTQ individuals experience less conflict when navigating their sexual orientation and religious identity (Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). Further, they may help reduce and protect against internalized homonegativity (Barnes & Meyer, 2012) by offering an alternative interpretation of religious teachings that condemn homosexuality (Lease et al., 2005). Consequently, this reduction of internalized homonegativity may help LGBTQ individuals positively integrating their religious and sexual identities without experiencing distress (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Nonetheless, we note that LGBTQ individuals have been found to flourish in a variety of religious contexts, including in congregations that hold rejecting ATLG, perhaps due to the buffering effect of social and relational connections (Barringer & Gay, 2017; Lefevor, Beckstead et al., 2019).

### **Two Ways Congregations May Help Form Attitudes toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men**

Although it seems clear that congregation-level variables are related to ATLG, relatively less is known about how these attitudes are formed. Drawing on literature in both social psychology and minority stress, we consider two potential ways that attitudes may be formed within congregations. On one hand, people may affiliate with religious institutions and congregations that reinforce their preexisting views of lesbian women and gay men. An increase in the belief that people close to an individual hold similarly rejecting ATLG has been correlated to an increase in the strength of the individual's rejecting ATLG (Herek, 1988). On the other hand, exposure to messaging from clergy about the impermissibility of same-sex relationships and identities may cultivate rejecting ATLG among religious individuals (Meyer, 2003).

**The affiliation hypothesis.** Social psychologists have proposed group entitativity as a potential factor for perpetuating ATLG in groups. Entitativity is the sense of internal cohesion in

values, opinions and outlooks within a cluster of individuals (Campbell, 1958) and may provide structure to social identity-based groups (Hohman, Dahl, & Grubbs, 2016). Highly entitative groups have similar views and may thus attract new members who are looking to affirm similar viewpoints or who see themselves as similar to the group already (Kim, 2004).

Research on entitativity and homophily has found that affiliation with like-minded people is a major motivating force for the formation of many groups. Homophily—the tendency for people to associate with people similar to themselves—has been found to motivate group formation among delinquents (Megens & Weerman, 2011), racial/ethnic minorities (Kim, 2004), and Christians (Kim, 2004). With the large number of religious congregations within a given denomination, it is likely that individuals select a religious congregation based on how similar they perceive the views of those in the congregation to be with their own views. Given that homosexuality has become a watershed issue in many places of worship, individuals may consciously or unconsciously choose to affiliate with a place of worship that shares their ATLG.

**The transmission hypothesis.** In contrast, theories of social influence suggest that social attitudes may be transmitted interpersonally, suggesting that ATLG may be cultivated or reinforced in a place of worship. The theory of social influence posits that people adopt shared characteristics after spending time with one another (Axelrod, 1997). Although attitudes may be different at the beginning, increased contact bring about an attitudinal shift.

Research on social influence has found that value transmission may explain phenomena such as support for same-sex marriage after becoming more involved with LGBTQ individuals (Lacour & Green, 2014) and disregarding conventional rules after spending more time with people who disregard those rules (Megens & Weerman, 2011). Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) inherently relies on some principles of social influence, suggesting that LGBTQ

individuals' affirming or rejecting views of themselves may be influenced by the affirming or rejecting views of those around them. Taken together, social influence and value transmission would suggest that exposure to rejecting ATLG in places of worship may inculcate rejecting ATLG in congregants, even when these attitudes did not exist initially. Further, this hypothesis would suggest that involvement in places of worship with more rejecting ATLG would increase rejecting ATLG among congregants.

### **The Present Study**

Because places of worship may play a crucial role in the formation of ATLG and little research has examined the role congregations may play in forming these attitudes, we explored two rival hypotheses about the formation of ATLG: (a) because individuals affiliate with places of worship that match their inherent values and attitudes, greater participation in places of worship with more rejecting ATLG does not affect individuals' ATLG vs. (b) due to exposure to messaging supporting rejecting ATLG, participation in places of worship with more rejecting ATLG fosters and deepens rejecting ATLG among its members.

## **Method**

### **Sampling Procedures**

Multilevel models require a sufficient sample size at each level of analysis. Evidence from a recent simulation study indicate that multilevel models with a level 2 sample size of 10 to 30 units, and a level 1 sample size of 5 to 40 units per cluster can produce unbiased estimates and yield acceptable 95% confident interval coverage and minimal Type I error rates. Notably, sample sizes at the lower end of these ranges may have reduced power to detect cross level interaction effects (Bell, Morgan, Schoeneberger, Kromrey, & Ferron, 2014). To attain this, we identified 1,514 places of worship within a major metropolitan area in the southern United States

in the White Pages including 1,493 churches, 11 mosques, and 10 synagogues. From these, we randomly selected 78 places of worship using stratified random sampling to ensure inclusion of a variety of religious traditions in the sample (68 churches, 5 synagogues, 5 mosques).

Where possible, we contacted the leaders of places of worship via phone. Where leaders did not return phone calls or a number was unavailable, the research team visited the place of worship to ask for permission to collect data following worship services. Of the 78 places of worship, we were unable to contact 18 (numbers disconnected, addresses no longer in use), 40 declined participation (either before or after learning about the content of the survey), and 20 agreed to data collection. Common reasons for declining participation included leaders of congregations feeling uncomfortable with survey aims or questions, and leaders' disinterest in or suspicion of psychological research. Additionally, we were unable to obtain data from many synagogues because congregants do not write or use electronics on the day of their worship services, and we determined that collecting data on a day/time different for one denomination from the others may bias results.

In consenting congregations, leaders were asked to make an announcement that research team members would be available following the service to administer a 10-minute survey. Interested congregants approached team members and filled out the survey via paper-and-pencil methods, though some used an online web platform (Qualtrics) to complete the survey. Participants were informed that they would be completing a survey regarding religious belief, practice and attitudes, and provided informed consent prior to completing the survey. Data were collected between January and December 2018 and the study was approved by the institutional review board at Rhodes College. Paper-and-pencil survey responses were double-coded, and

disputes were resolved by re-examining the data to ensure accurate data entry. Congregants were not compensated for participation.

### **Participant Characteristics**

Participants were eligible for inclusion if they (a) were 18 years of age or older, (b) currently attending a place of worship in the Memphis metropolitan area, and (c) completed survey items related to demographics, attitudes towards homosexuality, congregational procedures and policies, and the frequency of religious service attendance. Similar to the city from which the data were collected, the majority of the sample was Black (64.8%), with an average age of 47.22 ( $SD = 16.09$ ) and had either some college but no degree (27.8%), a bachelor's degree (26.3%) or a graduate degree (23.1%). Almost all participants (89.6%) identified as heterosexual/straight. Over half (74%) identified as women. Our sample reported attending worship services on average of between "nearly every week" and "every week" ( $SD = 1.24$ ) and reading scripture an average of "two or three times a month" to "nearly every week" ( $SD = 2.20$ ). Overall, 338 participants were included from 20 congregations (16 churches, 3 mosques, 1 synagogue) with an average of approximately 17 participants per congregation (see *Table 1*). Congregations belonged to a variety of religious denominations including Sunni Islam ( $n = 3$ ), Reformed Judaism ( $n = 1$ ), Baptist ( $n = 7$ ), Seventh Day Adventist ( $n = 1$ ), Pentecostal ( $n = 2$ ), Episcopal ( $n = 2$ ), Catholic ( $n = 1$ ), and non-denominational Christian ( $n = 3$ ).

### **Measures**

**Attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men.** Research has shown that measures of ATLG are often biased toward religious individuals because they fail to distinguish between attitudes toward same-sex sexuality and attitudes toward same-sex oriented individuals (Rosik, 2007). Consequently, individuals who believe in the moral impermissibility of same-sex sexual

behaviors are presumed to also hold rejecting attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men. A factor analysis of Herek's (1997) ATLG scale confirmed that items measuring attitudes toward same-sex sexual behaviors and attitudes toward same-sex oriented individuals loaded onto different factors (Rosik, 2007).

To reduce potential bias toward our religious participants, we elected to only use items from Herek's (1997) short form of the Attitudes toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men scale that assessed attitudes toward same-sex oriented individuals. These items were, "I think male homosexuals are disgusting," "lesbians just can't fit into our society," and "lesbians are sick." Participants were asked to rate their agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), and the mean score of the three items is reported. Internal consistency for the shortened form of the ATLG for the present study was  $\alpha = 0.81$ .

**Frequency of religious service attendance.** Participants indicated how frequently they attended religious services, responding to a 9-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "several times a week." This question was taken from the Duke University Religiousness Index (Koenig & Büssing, 2010).

**Congregational affirmativeness.** Congregational affirmativeness of LGBQ identities was assessed through four questions, drawn from the language of the second wave of the National Congregations Study (Chavez & Anderson, 2008), summed together to create a single affirmativeness score. Participants were asked (a) "Would an openly gay or lesbian couple in a committed relationship be permitted to be full-fledged members of your congregation?" (b) "Regarding leadership, if they were otherwise qualified, would an openly gay or lesbian couple in a committed relationship be permitted to hold all of the volunteer leadership positions open to other members?" and (c) "Some congregations have adopted written statements that officially

welcome gays and lesbians. Has your congregation adopted such a statement?” Responses included “no” (coded as 0), “don’t know” (1), and “yes” (2). In addition, participants were asked, (d) “when your clergy has spoken about homosexuality, do they say it is something that should be accepted, something that should be discouraged, or don’t they take a position?” Responses included “discouraged” (0), “no position” (1), “other/multiple positions” (1), “don’t know” (1), and “accepted” (2). Coding values reflect the relative strength of affirmativeness, with the assumption that answering “don’t know,” “no position,” or “other/multiple positions” reflected a degree of affirmativeness between affirming and non-affirming. Internal consistency for congregational affirmativeness items was  $\alpha = 0.84$ .

**Sexual minority congregants.** Participants indicated the number of sexual minority congregants they knew by answering the question, “how many people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or another sexual minority do you know who attend your congregation?”

### **Analysis Plan**

Multilevel modelling (MLM) was employed to evaluate the unique contributions of individual- and congregational-level variables on ATLG and to account for the nesting of participants within congregations. Data were analyzed in R (version 3.4.0; R Development Core Team, 2018) using restricted maximum likelihood estimation with the “nlme” package (Pinheiro, Bates, DebRoy, Sarkar, & R Development Core Team, 2013). The models include two levels: individual (level 1) and congregation (level 2). Group-mean centering was performed on the raw scores for all predictors to create separate variables for the individual level and congregation level effects. Group mean centering allows the model to capture pure level 1 and level 2 effects (Hox, Moerbeek, & van de Schoot, 2017). Models included a random effect for intercept and

fixed effects for all slopes. Effect sizes were computed in the form of standardized fixed effect coefficients and explained variance ( $R^2$ ) based on guidelines from Lorah (2018).

### Results

Prior to conducting modelling analyses, we examined the interrelations between our variables (see Table 2 for variable correlations, mean, standard deviation, and range). We found that on both an individual and congregational level, religious service attendance was related to ATLG. We found that the number of LGBTQ congregants known and the affirmativeness of a congregation were related to more affirming ATLG. We also found that congregations where individuals attended less frequently tended to be more LGBTQ affirming.

We used a bottom-up approach to model building that consisted of starting with a simple model and proceeding to adding additional parameter, which are tested for significance (Hox et al., 2017). The fit of models was compared with deviance, AIC, and BIC values, with lower values indicating better fit (see Table 3 for results). In Model 1, we estimated an empty multilevel model (i.e., no explanatory variables) predicting ATLG to decompose the congregation-level (Level 2) and individual-level (Level 1) variances for the purpose of computing the intraclass correlation. Results of Model 1 showed that the value of the congregation-level variance was 0.31, the value of the individual-level variance was 0.77, and the estimated intraclass correlation was 0.29 ( $0.31/(0.31+0.77)$ ). This indicates that 29% of the variance in ATLG was due to differences between congregations and 71% was from differences between people. Given the variation at both levels, we added individual- and congregation-level predictors to account for variations at both levels.

In Model 2, we added two individual-level predictors. Fit statistics showed that Model 2 (Deviance = 840.16; AIC = 863.88; BIC = 882.58;  $R^2 = 0.01$ ) was preferred over Model 1

(Deviance = 855.09; AIC = 863.24; BIC = 882.58). Results from Model 2 showed that knowing more LGBT congregants was marginally related to more affirming ATLG ( $\gamma_{unstandardized} = -0.02$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $t(293) = -1.95$ ,  $p = .052$ ;  $\gamma_{standardized} = -0.09$ ). Attending religious services more frequently was related to more affirming ATLG ( $\gamma_{unstandardized} = 0.09$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(293) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .037$ ;  $\gamma_{standardized} = 0.10$ ). The individual-level predictors in this model explained 1% of the total variance in ATLG.

In Model 3, we added the congregation-level predictors to the model. Based on examination of fit statistics, Model 3 (Deviance = 806.76; AIC = 843.32; BIC = 869.46;  $R^2 = 0.28$ ) was preferred over Model 2. Results from Model 3 showed that increased congregation-level religious attendance was marginally related to more rejecting ATLG ( $\gamma_{unstandardized} = 0.27$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $t(17) = 1.90$ ,  $p = .075$ ;  $\gamma_{standardized} = 0.07$ ), suggesting that congregations whose members attended more frequently (e.g., attending both weekly worship services and a group sacred text study) had more rejecting ATLG among their congregants. In contrast, congregation-level affirmativeness inversely predicted rejecting ATLG ( $\gamma_{unstandardized} = -0.24$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(17) = -6.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\gamma_{standardized} = -0.44$ ), showing that congregations that were more affirmative of LGBT individuals had less rejecting ATLG among their congregants. The congregation-level predictors in this model accounted for an additional 27% of the total variance in ATLG.

In Model 4, we added two cross-level interaction terms to test for moderation effects. We found that the association between individuals' frequency of attending religious services and ATLG was not moderated by their congregation's level of affirmativeness ( $\gamma_{unstandardized} = .01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $t(290) = -0.51$ ,  $p = 0.609$ ;  $\gamma_{standardized} = 0.02$ ). This finding means that individuals belonging to congregations that had more LGBT affirming policies had less rejecting ATLG, regardless of how frequently they attended services. Additional results from this model showed that the

association between individuals' frequency of attending religious services and ATLG was not moderated by how many LGBT individuals in their congregation that they know ( $\gamma_{unstandardized} = -.01$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $t(290) = -1.34$ ,  $p = .182$ ;  $\gamma_{standardized} = -0.06$ ). This finding means that individuals belonging to congregations with more LGBT members had more rejecting ATLG, regardless of how often they attended services. Model fit statistic suggested that Model 3 was preferred over Model 4 (Deviance = 804.55; AIC = 858.46; BIC = 892.00;  $R^2 = 0.28$ ). The interaction terms in Model 4 accounted for less than 1% of the variance in ATLG. Overall, Model 3 was retained as the final model given model fit values. Standardized coefficients for Model 3 are presented in the last column of Table 3.

Because our analyses indicated that both knowing LGBT individuals and belonging to congregations with more LGBT affirming policies were predictive of ATLG, we performed additional multilevel analyses to examine whether congregations with more LGBT people are more LGBT affirming. We explored this question by testing a model that included the number of LGBT individuals in a congregation predicting congregation affirmativeness. Results from an empty model with no predictors showed that LGBT affirmativeness had an estimated between-congregation (Level 2) variance of 3.28 and between-person (Level 1) variance of 2.88. The computed intraclass correlation value was 0.53 ( $3.27/(3.27+2.88)$ ), showing that 53% of the variation in affirmativeness was associated with differences between congregation and 47% was from differences between people. After adding the number of LGBT members as a predictor in the model, we found that that congregations with more LGBT members were also more LGBT affirming ( $\gamma_{unstandardized} = 0.52$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $t(18) = 6.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\gamma_{standardized} = 1.10$ ; Deviance = 1,288.02; AIC = 1296.02; BIC = 1311.08), and this predictor accounted for 53% of the between congregation variance and 37% of the total variance in affirmativeness. The relationship between

these two variables supports the idea that the affirmativeness of a congregations' leaders is related to the views and experiences of the congregants.

### **Model Diagnostics**

To check whether the analysis met assumptions of normality and linearity for multilevel modeling, we used assumption checking methods detailed by from Tabachnick and Fidell (2012) and Hox et al. (2018). The normality assumption requires normally distributed model residuals. This was assessed by plotting standardized residuals against their normal scores with a normal q-q plot. The plot appeared as a straight diagonal line, suggesting that the residuals have a normal distribution thus providing evidence that the normality assumption was met.

The linearity assumption was assessed by examining separate scatter plots of model residuals with each predictor variable. A random pattern with no systematic trend would indicate that this assumption was met. The scatter plots for the Level 1 religious attendance predictor and Level 2 religious attendance and confirmation affirmativeness predictors appeared random with no obvious pattern and thus provided evidence that linearity assumption was met for these predictors.

The linearity assumption was not met for the L1 variable of the number of LGBTQ people participants reported knowing in their congregation. The model residual scatter plot for this predictor showed a nonrandom pattern with many residual points accumulated near the 0 value for the predictor, likely because many participants reported not knowing any LGBTQ people in their congregation. Examination of the histogram and descriptive statistics for this variable showed a negatively skewed distribution consisting of 216 participants reported not knowing any LGBTQ persons in their congregation and 110 participants reported knowing at least one. The average number of LGBTQ people known by participants was 2 ( $SD = 5.38$ ) and by

congregations was 1.66 ( $SD = 2.94$ ). Although this variable was originally conceptualized as a continuous variable but given its skewness we chose to also model this as a binary predictor with responses coded as either 1 if the participant reported knowing at least one LGBTQ person in their congregation, or 0 if they did not know any. We estimated the final model twice: once with the predictor as continuous and a second time with the predictor as binary and compared the results. Both models showed that this predictor was significant whether it was modeled as a continuous ( $\gamma_{unstandardized} = -0.02$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $t(293) = -1.92$ ,  $p = .056$ ;  $\gamma_{standardized} = -0.09$ ) or binary variable ( $\gamma_{unstandardized} = -0.41$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t(293) = -3.14$ ,  $p = .002$ ;  $\gamma_{standardized} = -0.15$ ). Both models had identical results for the point estimate and significance of the other predictors in the model. Given the similarity in results, we chose to interpret the model with the continuous predictor given that it is conceptually more meaningful as a continuous variable.

### Discussion

With a sample of 338 individuals in 20 congregations, we explored the relationship between religious service attendance, affirmativeness of LGBTQ identities, their interaction, and ATLG on an individual and congregational level through the lens of two competing hypotheses: the affiliation hypothesis and the transmission hypothesis. Before examining how well each of these hypotheses fit our data, we discuss the role that congregational variables played in our data as little research has studied congregants on both an individual and congregational level.

#### How Large of a Role do Congregations Play?

Although religiousness is often seen as having a “multi-level” nature (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013), very few studies account for more than one level of religiousness (i.e., denominations, congregations, and individuals). Congregations influence more Americans than any other voluntary social

organization and remain both the most prominent site of religious activity and the most significant social form of religion in the United States (Chaves & Anderson, 2008). In the present study, we found that variation between congregations accounted for approximately 27% of the total variation in ATLG with the other 73% of the variation being accounted for by both individual differences and error. Additionally, after both individual- and congregation-level predictors were entered into our models, we found that congregation-level predictors accounted nearly all of the variation between congregations (i.e., the 27% of the total variation) where individual-level predictors accounted for only 1% of the variation (i.e., the 73% of the total variation) between individuals. Furthermore, the magnitude of congregation level predictors was nearly double that of individual level predictors. Taken all together, our results clearly indicate that congregation-level predictors were important in understanding ATLG.

That congregational differences accounted for such a large proportion of the variance in ATLG underscores the need for more research that examine congregation-level variables in understanding ATLG. Research examining the relationship between religious service attendance and ATLG may be able to account for some of the variation without examining congregations because members of congregations share many individual-level traits/practices; however, without including congregation-level predictors, research will not fully account for this variation or correctly attribute it to congregation-level constructs. Given the large proportion of variance accounted for by congregational factors and the larger effect sizes noted on a congregational level, we encourage more research in the broader field of the psychology of religion and spirituality that attends to both individual and congregational variables.

**Better Understanding Attitudes toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men**

**Religious service attendance.** In line with previous work (van den Akker et al., 2013; Todd et al., 2017), we found that the more often individuals attended religious services, the more rejecting ATLG they endorsed. It has been found that belonging to a religious community or congregation can provide individuals with a sense of belonging to a moral community with distinct views about moral behaviors (Graham & Haidt, 2010), and many religious communities condemn homosexuality on moral grounds (Herek & McLemore, 2013). If an individual is highly religious, they would likely be exposed to more frequent condemnation of same-sex behaviors and individuals who hold rejecting attitudes toward same-sex oriented individuals, and may thus be more likely to hold rejecting ATLG themselves.

These findings were marginally significant at a congregational level as well, suggesting that congregations that were characterized by congregants who attended frequently may be more likely to be characterized as having rejecting ATLG than other congregations. Given that our congregational sample size was relatively small ( $k = 20$ ), and that the relationship (e.g., effect size) between religious service attendance and ATLG was stronger on a congregational level than on an individual level, we cautiously interpret this finding. Congregations that are characterized by congregants who attend services more frequently may also have a stronger sense of community due to the more frequent engagement of members. This sense of community may lead congregants to be more likely to internalize communal values, which may be more likely to have more rejecting ATLG.

**Affirmation of LGBTQ Identities.** We also found that congregations that had policies and procedures that were explicitly affirming of LGBT identities and experiences had more affirming ATLG. Concretely, congregations that enabled individuals in same-sex relationships to be full members of the congregation and to serve in leadership positions, and those that adopted

official statements welcoming gays and lesbians tended to have congregants with more affirming ATLG. Though almost tautological on one hand, on the other hand, the finding that affirming congregations tend to have congregants with more affirming ATLG may indicate that policies and procedures have the capacity to shift the attitudes of an entire congregation. Alternatively, congregants with affirming ATLG may be more likely to advocate for explicitly policies and procedures affirming same-sex identities and behavior, as would be suggested by the transmission hypothesis (Axelrod, 1997).

### **How Might Congregations affect the Formation of Attitudes toward Homosexuality?**

In addition to understanding the influence of religious service attendance on ATLG, we set out to examine two competing hypotheses about how ATLG are formed in congregations: the affiliation hypothesis and the transmission hypothesis. We found that greater service attendance in congregations that organizationally did not affirm LGBT identities and experiences was unrelated to ATLG. Nonetheless, we found that affiliation with a congregation that was less affirming of LGBT identities and experiences *was* related to having more rejecting ATLG. These results support the assumptions of the affiliation hypothesis, indicating that people may select a group whose opinions align to their own (Kim, 2004), thus reinforcing previously held opinions. In contrast, the transmission hypothesis is rooted in the idea that as people pass time together, they take on views and behaviors akin to one another (Axelrod, 1997). Although results of interaction effects do not *disprove* the transmission hypothesis since longitudinal data were not collected, they are consistent with the possibility that people may affiliate with congregations that share similar views to their own and that ATLG may be an important aspect on which individuals select a congregation.

Our results suggest that religious congregations that are interested in promoting affirming ATLG in their congregants may face a Catch-22. The strongest predictor of ATLG that emerged in our study were the congregational policies and procedures surrounding their LGBQ members. Where having more policies and procedures that affirm LGBQ identities and experiences may encourage more LGBQ members to join a congregation and may be related to ATLG, these variables may estrange congregants with rejecting ATLG and encourage them to seek an alternative congregation as has been evidenced in recent reactions to policies among Protestant Christians (Pew Research Center, 2019). Given the importance of congregation-level variables highlighted in our study, we encourage leaders of congregations to consider the impact that their messaging around LGBQ identities and experiences has on the experiences of their congregants.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

Several studies have analyzed ATLG at the individual level but few have examined ATLG on the congregational level. One of the central findings from our study was that congregational-level differences explained a larger portion of the variation in our dependent variable than did individual differences. As such, we encourage researchers in the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality to more closely consider how religiousness operates at multiple levels (e.g., Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003) and particularly how congregational differences may provide additional insight into variables of interest. We offer our investigation as an example of how this kind of research may be done.

In the context of ATLG, we found that congregational differences in service attendance affect ATLG more than individual differences in service attendance. This finding may be a result of individuals participating in more religious activities within congregational spaces compared to private spaces. Further, people tend to pick congregations that are expressive of their individual

views, rather than having their views altered by the congregations they attend. According to the affirmation hypothesis (Kim, 2004), individuals, consciously or unconsciously, pursue others that are similar to themselves. Therefore, with homosexuality being such a controversial topic in religious settings, a plausible explanation may be that individuals consider this issue when seeking out congregations to join. Future studies could begin to characterize the process of choosing a congregation, including what factors individuals consider.

Our results highlight that participating in a congregation is different from affiliating with a congregation. Though these two indicators of religiousness are discussed as conceptually distinct (Koenig & Büssing, 2010), they are not always discussed as distinct in the literature (e.g., Lefevor, Park, & Pederson, 2018). Our findings indicate that increased participation in a congregation that does not affirm LGBTQ identities and experiences is not related to ATLG but that affiliating with a more conservative congregation may be. This finding signifies a need for greater clarity on the relationship between religious affiliation, participation, and ATLG. Research that analyzes participation over time in an affirming place of worship is needed to fully understand if active participation can influence ATLG in affirming places of worship.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

Our findings are inevitably limited by several factors. Although a rigorous and novel sampling approach was used, the sample is nonetheless limited to congregations in a single city in the United States that may not be representative of the entire country. Further, participation was limited to congregations in which leaders of the congregation permitted the survey to be distributed, and the leaders' attitudes were not directly assessed. Given the controversial nature of the subject matter, conservative congregations may be somewhat underrepresented in our sample. Two-thirds of congregations we approached to participate in the study declined

participation and although most of those 2/3 did so without a knowledge of the content matter of the survey, a substantial minority of those stating their reason for non-participation to be the content of the survey administered. We also note that most of participants in our study were Black women. Although this is characteristic of the city from which the participants were gathered, it is unclear how well our results would generalize to a more population-normative sample, particularly as women tend to be both more religious and have more affirming ATLG than men and Black individuals tend to be more religious and have more rejecting ATLG than White individuals (Irizarry & Perry, 2018; Negy & Eisenman, 2005). We invite the interested reader to consider our more detailed investigation of these topics among a subsection of this sample (Lefevor, Paiz et al., in press).

With a sample of 338 participants in 20 congregations within 3 denominations, we found that religious service attendance and affirmation of LGBQ identities were related to ATLG on both an individual and congregational level, with congregation-level variables explaining more variation in ATLG than individual-level variables. Our results supported group formation hypotheses indicating that people may seek out others with similar beliefs when looking for a congregation to attend. Given the importance of congregation-level variables in our study and their relative lack of examination in the literature, we encourage continued work to investigate congregations as a potential locus for the formation and change of ATLG. We particularly encourage work that examines the temporal associations with the adoption of LGBQ-affirming policies and procedures and the ATLG of the congregation.

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Table 1.

*Demographic Variables*

		<i>n</i>	%
Ethnicity	African American / Black	219	64.8
	Asian American / Asian	9	2.7
	Hispanic / Latino/a	3	0.8
	Multi-racial	10	3.0
	White	76	22.5
	Self-identify	3	0.8
	Failed to Report	21	6.2
Education	Less than high school	9	2.7
	High school diploma/GED	31	9.2
	Some college, no degree	94	27.8
	Vocational training	20	5.9
	Bachelor's degree	89	26.3
	Graduate degree	78	23.1
	Failed to Report	14	4.1
Sexual Identity	Heterosexual/Straight	302	89.6
	Lesbian/gay	7	2.1
	Bisexual	4	1.2
	Questioning	1	0.3
	Self-identify	3	0.8
	Failed to Report	21	6.2
Gender	Woman	218	64.5
	Man	104	30.8
	Gender non-binary	1	0.3
	Failed to Report	15	4.4
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age		47.22	16.09

Table 2

*Descriptive statistics and correlations of variables of interest*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. L1 ATLG	2.53	1.04	1-5	1.00					
2. L1 LGBT Cong	2.01	5.38	1-50	-.10	1.00				
3. L1 Rel_Attend	7.70	1.24	1-9	.11*	.09	1.00			
4. L2 ATLG	2.63	0.60	1-5	.00	.00	.00	1.00		
5. L2 Rel_Attend	7.77	0.57	1-9	.00	.00	.01	.68**	1.00	
6. L2 CongAffirm	3.77	1.84	0-8	.00	.00	.01	-.90**	-.61**	1.00

*Note.* \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$ . ATLG: attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men; LGBT Cong: number of LGBTQ congregants an individual knows; Rel\_Attend: frequency of service attendance; CongAffirm: congregational affirmativeness

Table 3.

*Results for Attitudes toward Homosexuality Predicted by Religiousness and Affirmativeness.*

<b>Model</b>	<b>Model<sub>1</sub></b> Unstd. (SE)	<b>Model<sub>2</sub></b> Unstd. (SE)	<b>Model<sub>3</sub></b> Unstd. (SE)	<b>Model<sub>4</sub></b> Unstd. (SE)	<b>Model<sub>Final</sub></b> Stand.
<b>Fixed Part</b>					
Intercept	2.61*** (0.14)	2.60*** (0.13)	2.51*** (0.06)	2.52*** (0.06)	-0.01
L1 Relig		0.09* (0.03)	0.09** (0.04)	0.09* (0.04)	0.10
L1 LGBT Cong		-0.02+ (0.01)	-0.02+ (0.01)	-0.02+ (0.01)	-0.10
L2 Relig			0.27+ (0.14)	0.30+ (0.14)	0.13
L2 Affirm			-0.24*** (0.04)	-0.23*** (0.04)	-0.44
L1 Relig × L2 Affirm				0.01 (0.02)	
L1 LGBT Cong × L1 Relig				-0.01 (0.01)	
<b>Random Part</b>					
$\sigma^2$	0.77	0.76	0.76	0.76	
$\tau_{00}$	0.31	0.31	0.02	0.02	
$R^2_{Total}$		0.01	0.28	0.28	
<b>Model Fit</b>					
Deviance	855.09	840.16	806.76	804.55	
AIC	863.24	863.88	843.32	858.46	
BIC	874.51	882.58	869.46	892.00	

*Note.* Unstd. = Unstandardized coefficients; Stand. = Standardized coefficients; L1 = level 1 variable; L2 = level 2 variable; Relig = religious service attendance; Affirm = LGBT affirmativeness; LGBT Cong = LGBT congregants;  $\sigma^2$  = Level 1 variance;  $\tau_{00}$  = Level 2 variance;  $R^2_{Total}$  = Amount of total variance accounted for in attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women by the model.

+  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$