

Religiousness and Homonegativity in Congregations:

The Role of Individual, Congregational, and Clergy Characteristics

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## Abstract

Attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men (ATLG) have a direct impact on the health and experience of these individuals. Understanding how these attitudes are formed and enacted, particularly within religious organizations, may point to ways that stigma may be reduced and health disparities ameliorated. With a sample of 239 congregants from 14 randomly selected places of worship, we examined the influence of individual, congregational, and clergy-level variables on homonegative attitudes. Using survey data from congregants and clergy and observational data from research assistants' observations from attending congregations, we used multilevel models to explore the ability of religiousness and affirmativeness at each level to predict homonegativity. Results indicated that congregation- and clergy-level variables explained 35% of the variation in homonegativity with individual-level variables and error explaining the remaining variation. Of the variables assessed, scriptural literalism (as a congregation-level variable), the lack of affirmativeness of clergy's preaching, and higher frequencies of quoting scripture in services explained the most variation in homonegativity. Overall, relationships between congregation- and clergy-level variables with homonegativity were larger than relationships between individual-level variables and homonegativity. We encourage continued work to examine how congregations and clergy may contribute to the formation and change of ATLG.

Keywords: LGBTQ, homonegativity, attitudes toward homosexuality, congregation, clergy

**Religiousness and Homonegativity in Congregations:  
The Role of Individual, Congregational, and Clergy Characteristics**

Religious ideas and arguments are central to many of the debates about same-sex sexuality in contemporary American politics. Because religion plays a significant role for a substantial segment of the American population, religious involvement can shape individuals' perceptions, and make or unmake prejudice toward sexual minorities (Whitely, 2009). These attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals (ATLG) may be enacted within religious organizations at several levels including by congregants within a congregation, by congregations as a social group with particular policies and procedures, and by clergy (Lefevor et al., 2020a; Lefevor et al., 2019).

The majority of research on religious institutions and ATLG has investigated how characteristics such as age, race, religiousness, or other individual-differences variables play a role in the formation and presentation of ATLG for religious individuals (Adler, 2012; Barnes, 2013; Whitehead, 2013a). Because individual congregants together form a larger congregation, other congregants—as well as the dynamic of the congregation as a whole—hold influence over individual congregants. Congregational policies and procedures about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) individuals, congregational norms around religious devotion, and congregation-level demographic characteristics may impact individuals' ATLG (Lefevor et al., 2020a; Lefevor et al., 2019). Further, clergy may explain, debate, and disseminate information and ideas in ways that are accessible to large audiences and may influence congregants' views (Neiheisel & Djupe, 2008; Toni-Uebari & Inusa, 2009). Thus, clergy's opinions may influence how individuals in their congregations think about same-sex sexuality

and LGBTQ individuals (Cadge & Wildeman, 2008) and how congregants act outside of services (Adler, 2012).

As the vast majority of investigations on the relationship between religiousness and homonegativity focus on individual-level variables (Whitely, 2009), congregational- and clergy-level variables are often left untested. When these variables are examined (e.g., Olson & Cadge, 2002; Whitehead, 2013a), they are typically examined without reference to individual-level variables. We are unaware of any investigation that simultaneously examines the relationship between individual, congregational, and clergy variables and homonegativity, leaving it unclear how strongly each of these levels of variables is related to homonegativity. We present data from a random sample of congregations—and their congregants and leaders—to understand how religiousness is related to homonegativity on congregant, congregational, and clergy levels.

### **Religiousness and Homonegativity**

Religiousness has been long noted to be related to ATLG with more religious individuals tending to espouse more homonegative views (Whitely, 2009). We define homonegativity to be “negative attitudes toward sexual minorities congruent with the stigmatizing responses of society” (Herek, 2007), which may be different from negative attitudes or views toward same-sex sexual behaviors (Rosik, 2007). Various aspects of religiousness, such as scripture reading, service attendance, and intrinsic religiousness, have all been tied to homonegativity (Lefevor et al., 2019; Whitley, 2009). However, religious fundamentalism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992), authoritarianism (Whitley & Lee, 2000), and orthodoxy (Barnes, 2013) have relatively stronger relationships with homonegativity and that, when any of the three is statistically controlled for, the relationship between other aspects of religiousness and homonegativity largely disappears

(Ford et al., 2009; Rowatt et al., 2006). Together, orthodoxy, fundamentalism, and authoritarianism represent much of what is termed “conservative religiousness.”

Social and religious conservatism often vary together and have both been associated with negative attitudes toward sexual minorities on a congregant level (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Terrizzi et al., 2010). This homonegativity may be conceptually similar to in-group biases held by socially liberal individuals against Christian fundamentalists (Conway et al., 2018) in that both are directed toward a perceived representation of a values framework that threatens the individual’s framework (Brandt & Van Tongeren, 2017). Because people are more likely to interact with others who are similar to themselves (Axelrod, 1997), religious individuals may have social circles filled with others who share their views of same-sex sexuality and LGBTQ individuals, leading congregants who are more embedded in their faith communities to hold more homonegative attitudes (Schulte & Battle, 2004). This could be perpetuated by a lack of contact with LGBTQ individuals or those with affirming ATLG (Finlay & Walther, 2003).

### **Congregants, Congregations, and Leaders**

Homonegativity is typically conceptualized as an individual-differences variable, assuming that differences between individuals are best accounted for by different aspects of those individuals (e.g., age, race/ethnicity). More recently, however, homonegativity has been conceptualized as an individual- *and* group-differences variable (Lefevor et al., 2019; Whitehead, 2010). Such thinking postulates two types of effects of religiousness on homonegativity: an individual effect (i.e., differences between individuals in religiousness may explain differences in homonegativity) and a group effect (i.e., differences between congregations’ religiousness may explain differences in homonegativity). In this light, congregational effects may be understood as the unique effects of existing in a particular

congregation on an individual (see Feaster et al., 2011 for a more detailed explanation of contextual effects). When examined together, congregation-level predictors of homonegativity appear to explain more variation than congregant-level predictors (Lefevor et al., 2020a; Lefevor et al., 2019), suggesting that the religiousness of *others of one's congregation* impacts one's homonegativity (or alternatively that one chooses a congregation based on the ATLG of one's fellow congregants).

Congregations may also influence congregant's homonegativity through congregational policies and procedures surrounding same-sex sexuality and LGBTQ individuals. More accepting attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men have been found among members of diverse congregations (both on the basis of race and sexual orientation; Adler, 2012; Perry, 2013) as well as members of congregations that have adopted policies and procedures that enable gay and lesbian members to be full members or hold leadership roles (Lefevor et al., 2019). By adopting such policies, a congregation can set the tone for affirmation among its congregants and foster a welcoming environment for LGBTQ members. Members of places of worship with formal statements of affirmation for LGBTQ members appear to evidence more homopositivity, which may indicate the influence of enacting congregation-wide policies to make a congregation's acceptance of sexual minorities known (Lefevor et al., 2019).

Congregations may also influence homonegativity through leadership. Clergy are often the first point of contact when it comes to controversial issues, such as same-sex attraction, behavior, and marriage (Park et al., 2016). Therefore, if and how clergy share their views around same-sex sexuality and/or LGBTQ individuals with their congregation may be especially important in the formation of congregants' views (Toni-Uebari & Inusa, 2009). Leaders' unique backgrounds may affect the way that they view same-sex sexuality and LGBTQ individuals,

which may then trickle down to their congregations (Olson & Cadge, 2002). Since clergy may influence how the church is structured and who gets to participate, how they react to same-sex sexuality and LGBTQ individuals may have downstream implications (Adler, 2012). Clergy's beliefs and preaching may also be influenced by larger denominational beliefs and structures.

How often leaders address LGBTQ concerns affects congregants' homonegativity (Neiheisel & Djupe, 2008), with clergy who speak more positively and more frequently about same-sex attraction, behavior, and marriage tending to lead congregants who share their positive views. Many leaders report pragmatic concerns (e.g. denominational conflict and membership loss) when discussing same-sex sexuality in worship, which can cause some clergy to avoid discussing LGBTQ issues altogether (Cadge & Wildeman, 2008). Meanwhile, other leaders may choose to discuss such concerns because of a strong personal drive and favorable social conditions (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2008). For example, clergy who have spent more time in the ministry may feel more confident about their positioning with their congregation and may thus be more likely to speak about LGBTQ concerns (Olson & Cadge, 2002).

### **The Present Study**

Research has found that homonegative attitudes are formed and maintained through a variety of processes occurring among individuals, leaders, and congregations. However, these processes have typically been examined in isolation, leaving it unclear how these various levels of measurement relate to each other. The present study addresses this gap by asking, "What variables are related to a religious individual's homonegativity on individual, congregational, and leader levels?" Guided by previous research, we used multi-level modelling to examine how well various predictors at each level are conjointly able to explain differences in homonegativity.

### **Method**

### **Sampling Procedure**

Multilevel modeling requires a sufficient sample size at each level of analysis. Simulation studies suggest that models with a level 2 sample size of 10 to 30 units and a level 1 sample size of 5 to 40 units per group can produce unbiased estimates (Bell et al., 2014). Prior research surveying congregations has indicated that approximately 25% of congregations approached agree to participate in research on ATLG (Lefevor et al. 2020a). To reach the recommended sample size of 10 to 30 units, 91 churches were randomly selected using a random number generator from a list of all places of worship (1,514 total) in a city in the mid-south United States that was generated using the White Pages. Institutional review board approval was obtained before commencing the study.

Participants were recruited to the study through a multifaceted approach. Selected churches were contacted via numbers in the White Pages or through internet searches. When churches could not be contacted via phone, research assistants drove to the church to verify its existence and to ask permission to collect data following worship services. Where church leaders were unavailable or could not give an affirmative or negative answer, research assistants followed up by visiting on a subsequent day. Of the 91 churches selected, 28 would not provide a straightforward answer about participation after a follow up visit, 47 declined participation after a leader had reviewed the survey, and 16 consented to participation. Of the 47 that declined participation, 16 reported not being interested in participating in research whether due to time commitments or lack of interest, 24 indicated that the content of the survey prohibited them from participating, and 7 did not specify a reason for declining participation. Additionally, 2 churches that consented to participation did not provide sufficient responses ( $n < 5$ ) to be included in data analyses. Churches represented both “conservative” and “liberal” denominations including

Church of God in Christ, Missionary Baptist, Southern Baptist, Presbyterian Church (USA), Disciples of Christ, and United Methodist.

Where a leader provided consent, a research assistant attended the services of the congregation and collected data using pencil-and-paper surveys following the service. Typically, the leader of the congregation made an announcement at the close of the service asking interested congregants to approach the research assistants to participate. Data were collected between September and November 2019. 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.

### **Measures**

Variables were assessed on both congregant and congregational levels through two surveys. The congregant survey contained demographic questions as well as questions relating to homonegativity and religiousness. The leader survey contained all questions included on the congregant survey and questions assessing congregational affirmativeness and leader variables.

**Homonegativity.** Because religious individuals may have different attitudes toward sexual minorities than toward same-sex sexual behavior (Moon, 2014), we measured homonegativity through a modified version of Herek's (1997) Attitudes toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men scale based on Rosik's (2007) factor analysis of this scale. This modified scale contained six items that assessed attitudes toward sexual minorities including "lesbians just can't fit into our society," "male homosexuals should not be allowed to teach school," "female homosexuality is bad for society because it breaks down the natural division between the sexes," "lesbians are sick," "I think male homosexuals are disgusting," and "female homosexuality is a

threat to many of our basic social institutions.” Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating more homonegativity. Internal consistency for this scale was  $\alpha = .94$ .

**Religiousness.** Service attendance, scripture reading, and intrinsic religiousness were assessed using the Duke University Religiousness Index (DUREL; Koenig & Büssing, 2010). The DUREL is a five-item assessment of religiousness with the three subscales aforementioned and has been shown to have high test-retest reliability, convergent validity, and internal consistency (Koenig & Büssing, 2010). Internal consistency for the DUREL for the present study was  $\alpha = .75$ . Scriptural literalism was assessed through the single-item, “which of the following statements most closely describes your views: (a) “sacred scriptures are written by men and are not the word of God,” (b) “sacred scriptures are the word of God, but not everything in them should be taken literally, word for word,” and (c) “sacred scriptures are the actual word of God and are to be taken literally, word for word” (Chaves & Anderson, 2008). Higher scores on this variable indicated more literal views.

Theological exclusivity and prevalence of church friendships were assessed following Scheitle and Adamczyk (2009). Participants indicated their theological exclusivity through their agreement with the following statement assessed on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5): “all the different religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth.” Prevalence of church friendships was assessed through participants’ responses to the question, “do you have any close friends in this congregation?” Response options were (1) No, I have little contact with others from this congregation outside of activities here; (2) No, I have some friends in this congregation, but my closest friends are not involved here; (3) Yes, I have some close friends here as well as other close friends who are not part of this congregation; (4) Yes, most of my closest friends are part of this congregation.

Each of these indices of religiousness was observed and recorded at the congregant level. Congregation-level variables for each index of religiousness were created by taking the average score of individuals within a given congregation (Hox et al., 2017).

**Congregational affirmativeness.** Congregational affirmativeness was assessed by leaders through three questions about congregational policies and procedures about LGBTQ individuals adapted from the National Congregations Study (Chaves & Anderson, 2008) with acceptable internal consistency (Lefevor et al., 2019). The three yes-no questions were, (a) “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?” (b) “some congregations have adopted written statements that officially welcome gays and lesbians. Has your congregation adopted such a statement?” and (c) “would an openly gay or lesbian couple in a committed relationship be permitted to be full-fledged members of your congregation?” Higher values indicated more affirmativeness.

**Leader variables.** Several additional questions were created for this study to assess leader’s experiences around sexuality. Leaders reported how frequently they discussed issues relating to gender and sexuality in their preaching on a 5-point scale from “never” to “weekly” (Discussion of LGBTQ Issues). Leaders also reported how they speak about same-sex relationships when they do (discouraged, no position, accepted; Affirmative Preaching). Finally, leaders reported how many LGBTQ congregants they know in their congregation (LGBTQ Congregants Reported) and how many years they have been a religious leader (Years Leading).

**Observed variables.** Twelve trained research assistants attended religious services of each congregation and recorded several variables. Research assistants counted the number of people in services the day they attended (Congregation Size), the length of the service (Service

Length), whether participants engaged in worship services (Participation in Worship), the number of times scripture was quoted in services (Scripture Quotation), whether any LGBTQ affirmative signs existed in the place of worship (e.g., pride symbol, announcement in bulletin, rainbow flag; Affirmative signage), and whether any same-sex couples were present and openly displaying affection (Same-Sex Couples Present). Signs of affection including hand holding, kissing, or putting an arm around a partner during services.

### **Participant Characteristics**

Participants were eligible for inclusion if they (a) attended one of the congregations on the day it was sampled, (b) completed the survey regarding questions about ATLG and demographics, and (c) were 18 years of age or older. The final sample comprised 239 congregants and 14 leaders from 14 congregations. Like the city it was drawn from, congregants were primarily Black (68.4%), with an average age of 55.40 ( $SD = 17.38$ ) and had completed college (49.1%). The sample was predominantly heterosexual (97.5%), female (73.3%), and Christian (100%). Participants were largely homopositive, responding “disagree” to ATLG questions ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). On average, congregants attended services every week and read scripture between two times a week and daily. Participant demographics are reported in *Table 1*.

Leaders of congregations were primarily Black (64.3%), heterosexual (100%), men (71.4%), with an average age of 55.00 ( $SD = 20.37$ ) and had completed graduate school (71.4%). They had been leading congregations for an average of 20 years and knew an average of 2 LGBTQ congregants in their congregation, though half of the leaders reported not knowing of any LGBTQ congregants. Leaders were also largely homopositive ( $M = 2.22$ ;  $SD = 1.01$ ), reported having “no position” when discussing whether same-sex relationships should be

discouraged or embraced, and reported that their congregations had an average of 1.5 affirming policies. Leader demographics are reported further in *Table 1*.

Congregations on average were small ( $M = 38.36$ ;  $SD = 24.73$ ) and had services that lasted for 1.5 hours. Most congregations involved congregant participation (71%) and with leaders quoting scripture an average of 4.5 times. Congregants belonged to various types of religious denominations including Baptist ( $n = 6$ ), Presbyterian ( $n = 2$ ), Pentecostal ( $n = 2$ ), Disciples of Christ ( $n = 2$ ), Methodist ( $n = 1$ ), and other Protestant Denominations ( $n = 1$ ). Only 2 congregations had LGBTQ affirming signs or symbols, and a same-sex couple was observed showing affection in only 1 congregation. See *Table 1* for additional demographics.

### **Analysis Plan**

Because congregants were nested within congregations, multi-level modelling (MLM) was employed to examine the unique contributions of congregant- and congregation-level variance on ATLG. MLMs were created in R version 3.6.0 (R Development Core Team, 2019) using maximum likelihood estimation with the “lme4” package (Bates et al., 2015). Non-dichotomous congregant-level predictors were group mean centered to remove congregation-level variation from the predictors (Hox et al., 2017). Dichotomous variables were coded as follows: race/ethnicity (1 = Person of Color), gender (1 = woman). Congregation-level variables (including leader variables) were grand mean centered to facilitate ease of interpretation of effects. Listwise deletion from relevant analyses was used to handle missing data. Each model included a random effect for intercept, a fixed effect for slopes, and a random effect for slopes of congregant-level variables.

Before constructing models, we examined the relationships between variables of interest. *Table 2* displays the correlations between congregant variables with congregation-level variance

removed through group centering as well as the relationships between congregation-level variables. These tables indicate that a) most congregation-level variables and some congregant-level variables were related to ATLG and b) many of the variables at both levels related to each other, suggesting the potential for overspecification and multicollinearity in our models.

Theoretically, we were interested in the relative ability of congregant, congregation, and leader factors to predict ATLG. We examined these relationships using a bottom-up model building approach. This approach involves beginning with a null model (Model 0) and then methodically adding predictors, testing each subsequent model using the AIC and BIC and added predictor for significance, and retaining only significant predictors in subsequent models (Hox et al., 2017). Because of the potential for overspecification and multicollinearity, at each step, we only included predictors that a) were substantially related to ATLG ( $r > .3$ ; Cohen, 1988) and b) did not increase the variance inflation factor (VIF) of any predictor beyond the commonly accepted value of 4 (Hair et al., 2010). VIFs were examined using the `vif.mer` function (Robinson, 2019). Six models were constructed with predictors grouped based on the source of predictors. The null model included no predictors, Model 1 included demographic predictors, Model 2 included congregant-level predictors, Model 3 included congregation-level predictors that were aggregates of congregant-level predictors, Model 4 included predictors reported by congregation leaders, and Model 5 included predictors observed by research assistants.

### Results

The null model (Model 0) indicated that 35% of the variation in ATLG occurred between congregations ( $ICC = .35$ ). Consequently, congregation-level predictors were added to subsequent models. See *Table 3* for a description of the models constructed.

In Model 1, we added demographic characteristics known to relate to ATLG, grand mean centered and with random effects for each demographic characteristic. This model indicated improved fit over the null model (AIC = 571.61; BIC = 625.54;  $R^2 = .41$ ). The only demographic predictor that emerged to be significantly related to ATLG was race/ethnicity ( $\gamma = 1.02$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $t(197) = 4.79$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with White individuals emerging as more homopositive than Black individuals. As such, race/ethnicity was retained in future models.

Model 2 comprised individual-level religiousness variables that evidenced significant correlations with ATLG (see *Table 2*) and race/ethnicity. Only two religiousness variables evidenced significant zero-order correlations with ATLG (theological exclusivity and prevalence of church friendships). Neither of these predictors emerged as significant in Model 2. Consequently, no individual-level religiousness variables were retained.

In Model 3, we included congregation-level aggregates of individual-level religiousness variables. The model evidenced improved fit over Model 1 (AIC = 569.88, BIC = 607.01,  $R^2 = .41$ ). Only congregation-level scriptural literalism ( $\gamma = 0.83$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $t(9) = 2.75$ ,  $p < .05$ ) was related to ATLG, indicating that congregations that saw scripture more literally were more homonegative. Scriptural literalism was retained in subsequent models.

Model 4 included predictors reported by congregation leaders that evidenced significant zero-order correlations with ATLG, in addition to race/ethnicity and congregation-level scriptural literalism. This model evidenced slightly improved fit over Model 3 (AIC = 512.63, BIC = 542.04,  $R^2 = .39$ ). The only variable that explained significantly more variation in ATLG than had been explained by previously included predictors was affirmative preaching ( $\gamma = -.51$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $t(6) = -3.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This trend suggests that congregants who attended congregations with clergy whose preaching around same-sex sexuality was neutral or positive were more likely

to have homopositive views than those who attended less affirming congregations. Affirmative Preaching was retained in future models.

In Model 5, we added predictors observed by research assistants when they attended congregations. Although five observed variables evidenced significant zero-order correlations with ATLG, only three were entered into the MLM (Service Length, Affirmative Signage, Scripture Quotation) because other variables evidenced unacceptable multicollinearity ( $VIF > 4$ ). Model 5 evidenced improved fit over Model 4 ( $AIC = 504.25$ ,  $BIC = 533.66$ ,  $R^2 = .41$ ). Only scripture quotation ( $\gamma = -.51$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $t(6) = 4.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was significantly related to ATLG, indicating that congregants who attended services where scripture was frequently quoted expressed more homonegative views than congregants who attended services with less frequent scripture quotation. Scripture Quotation was retained for the final model.

The Final Model consisted of variables that evidenced significant relationships with ATLG when entered and comprised race/ethnicity, scriptural literalism, affirmative preaching, and scripture quotation. The Final Model evidenced improved fit over Model 5 ( $AIC = 503.62$ ,  $BIC = 526.50$ ,  $R^2 = .41$ ). Race/ethnicity ( $\gamma = 0.59$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $t(181) = 2.88$ ,  $p < .01$ ), Affirmative Preaching ( $\gamma = -.39$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t(8) = -3.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and Scripture Quotation ( $\gamma = 0.11$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(8) = 3.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were all significantly related to ATLG. Despite evidencing the strongest relationship with ATLG of all variables entered, scriptural literalism emerged as marginally significant ( $\gamma = 0.60$ ,  $SE = .29$ ,  $t(8) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .07$ ) once other predictors were entered, potentially due to insufficient power.

## Discussion

### Congregant Factors

Although demographic variables like age, gender, and education have been historically linked with homonegativity (Adler, 2012; Finlay & Walther, 2003; Schulte & Battle, 2004; Whitehead, 2010), none of these variables predicted homonegativity in the present study. Race/ethnicity was the only demographic variable significantly related to homonegativity with Black congregants emerging as more homonegative than White congregants. Although this finding appears to exist on a congregant level, it is more likely that it is more accurately understood on a congregation level. Preliminary analyses indicated that the majority of congregations in our sample were racially homogenous with congregations being either entirely Black or entirely White. As such, our findings may indicate that Black congregations tend to be more homonegative than White congregations (Lefevor et al., 2020a). Despite this homonegativity, there is some evidence that Black sexual minorities are more likely than their White counterparts to continue to engage religiously (Lefevor et al., 2020b; Pitt, 2010).

The only congregant-level variables related to homonegativity, once congregation- and leader-level variance was partitioned out, were theological exclusivity and prevalence of church friendships. Both of these variables may discourage contact with dissimilar others, which may perpetuate homonegative beliefs (e.g., the more one believes they have access to the entire truth, the less need they feel to engage with different-minded others in truth seeking; Brandt & Van Tongeren, 2017; Rowatt et al., 2006; Whitley, 2009). Further, if one's social network is primarily comprised of others from their congregation, they may be less likely to have sexual minorities as close friends as sexual minorities are half as likely as heterosexual individuals to affiliate religiously (Lefevor et al., 2018). We also note that it is possible that theological exclusivity and the prevalence of church friends may represent a "grouping effect" whereby individuals find and affiliate with likeminded others both in terms of religion and ATLG (Lefevor et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, our findings indicated that both variables were related to homonegativity in correlational analyses; however, once race/ethnicity was controlled for, neither relationship remained significant. Thus, taken together, these findings indicate that theological exclusivity and the prevalence of church friendships are important individual differences that may covary with race/ethnicity (Lewis, 2003).

### **Congregational Factors**

Confirming trends from prior research, congregation-level variables explained much more of the variation in homonegativity than did individual-level variables (Lefevor et al., 2020a; Lefevor et al., 2019). Of the total variance explained in our final multilevel models, 86% was explained by congregation-level variables and only 14% was explained by individual-level variables. These findings contrast sharply with current research trends that focus on the relationship between individual-level variables and homonegativity (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Schulte & Battle, 2004; Whitehead, 2010; Whitley, 2009). Because congregation-level factors are infrequently examined (though see Adler, 2012 and Whitehead, 2013a as exceptions), this variation is typically either mistakenly attributed to be individual-level variation or it is not accounted for. Our findings suggest that the relationship between religiousness and homonegativity may be best framed congregationally, implying that one's choice to participate with a particular religious congregation may be particularly influential in understanding that individual's homonegativity. We hasten to note that congregational effects are shaped by the individuals who comprise the congregation, suggesting that individual- and congregational-level variables are not independent of each other.

Correlational analyses suggested that the majority of congregation-level variables examined in this study were related to homonegativity: service attendance, scripture reading,

intrinsic religiousness, scriptural literalism, service length, participation in worship, affirmative signage, and whether same-sex couples were present in services. These analyses also indicated that many if not all of these variables were related to each other. Multi-level models clarified at least 2 and possibly 3 different variables which explain unique variation in homonegativity.

First, scriptural literalism, as assessed on a congregational level, explained more variation in homonegativity than any variable assessed. When entered with other variables assessing general religiousness (i.e., service attendance, scripture reading, intrinsic religiousness, service length), only scriptural literalism emerged as significant, suggesting that other general religiousness variables may have explained a similar proportion of variance in homonegativity as did scriptural literalism. That scriptural literalism is related to homonegativity is unsurprising (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). However, what is more novel is the understanding that a) scriptural literalism evidenced a *stronger* relationship with homonegativity than any other variable and that b) these effects occur on a congregational rather than individual level. Likely, scriptural literalism reflected the degree to which congregants saw scripture as mutable or open to interpretation (Chaves & Anderson, 2008); having more flexible views toward scripture may have thus facilitated more homopositive views.

Second, the frequency with which scripture was quoted on the day of data collection was uniquely (though very minimally) related to homonegativity. Like scriptural literalism, the frequency with which scripture is quoted is likely tied to the conservativeness of the congregation (Lefevor et al., 2019). As such, the results about scriptural literalism and the frequency of quoted scripture may both indicate that the more religiously conservative a congregation is, the greater the likelihood is that it will be more homonegative.

Finally, multilevel models indicated that variables assessing how affirmative a congregation is of LGBTQ individuals were related to homonegativity. Correlational analyses indicated that the number of LGBTQ congregants in a congregation, whether affirmative signs were present, and whether same-sex couples demonstrated affection in services were significantly related to the homonegativity of the congregation. These findings concord with previous research suggesting that affirmation on a congregational level is related to homonegativity (Lease et al., 2005; Lefevor et al., 2019). Nonetheless, in multi-level models, none of these variables were significant, likely due to overlap with similar leader-level variables.

### **Leader Factors**

We found that leader characteristics had both unique and non-unique relationships with homonegativity. Correlational analyses indicated that leaders who had led their congregation for a shorter period of time, who knew more LGBTQ congregants in their congregation, who engaged in more affirmative preaching, and who were more homopositive themselves had more homopositive congregants. However, when understood in the context of other variables in multilevel models, only the affirmativeness of a leader's preaching as reported by the leader was related to congregants' homonegativity. On one hand, congregants take cues from the leader to determine what is acceptable within their group (Olson & Cadge, 2002; Toni-Uebari & Inusa, 2009). On the other hand, that the affirmativeness of leaders' preaching was related to congregants' views may also reflect congregants choosing a leader who embodies their views (Lefevor et al., 2019). More research with congregants whose leaders are assigned rather than chosen (e.g., Catholics, Mormons) is necessary to make definitive conclusions.

That only one of the variables that appeared to be related to homonegativity in correlational analyses was significant in the multilevel model suggests that the other variables

related to congregational affirmativeness on both a leader and congregational level may have explained the same variation in homonegativity that leader's affirmativeness assesses. As such, we understand leader's affirmativeness to represent a broader construct of congregational affirmation of LGBTQ identities. This finding suggests that doctrines, policies, and procedures within a congregation may affect—or at a minimum relate to—congregants' views. Leaders of congregations may thus metaphorically set the tone for the types of attitudes and behaviors that are permissible in a congregation (Olson & Cadge, 2002; Toni-Uebari & Inusa, 2009).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Our findings are necessarily limited by a number of factors. We relied on a relatively small sample of places of worship within a single mid-sized southern city. Our results may thus be limited by the kinds of places of worship willing to welcome researchers, the attitudes and religious views common to primarily small, Black congregations in the southern United States, and the kinds of people who attend religious services. Only approximately 18% of places of worship approached agreed to participate. Of those that did not participate, about 26% indicated that the content of the survey precluded their participation. It is possible that congregations that did not participate—and congregants within a congregation who did not participate—were characteristically more conservative than those that participated, restricting the range into our sample. However, we note that these concerns are reflective of the underrepresentation of conservative perspectives in psychological research more broadly (Duarte et al., 2015).

We also note that our results are limited by the relatively small sample size of both congregants and congregations obtained. Although the sample met minimum criteria for use in multi-level modelling, a larger sample—particularly with respect to congregations—may enhance confidence in the generalizability of our findings. Finally, we note that our study was

cross-sectional, which prohibit any conclusion about whether religiousness or affirmativeness leads to homonegativity, as a reciprocal relationship is also plausible.

Future work examining homonegativity in congregations may expand on the present work in several ways. First, multi-level analyses based on denomination will help to add nuance to the current congregational findings. Second, longitudinal analyses that examine the development of ATLG over time will help answer questions about whether one chooses a congregation based on pre-existing ATLG or changes views based on experience in that congregation. Finally, replication with diverse samples would enhance confidence in our results.

### **Conclusion**

The present study was, to our knowledge, the first study to include data from congregants, leaders, and observations of congregations to study homonegativity, presenting the results of 239 congregants in 14 congregations. This unique design allowed us to conclude that variables at each level of measurement were related to homonegativity. We found that many variables exerted similar relationships with homonegativity; however, our correlational and multilevel analyses identified three unique kinds of variables related to homonegativity: the race/ethnicity of the congregation, religious conservativeness (scriptural literalism and scripture quotation), and congregational affirmativeness. As congregants, congregations, leaders, and researchers continue to engage in difficult conversations about same-sex sexuality and faith, we encourage all to pay particular attention to the effects the conservativeness and affirmation of a congregation may have on congregants' views.

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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of congregants, leaders, and congregations.

Congregant Characteristics ( <i>n</i> = 239)		Leader Characteristics ( <i>n</i> = 14)	
Variable	Frequency	Variable	Frequency
Gender		Gender	
Woman	73.3%	Woman	28.6%
Man	26.7%	Man	71.4%
Sexual Identity		Sexual Identity	
Heterosexual/Straight	97.4%	Heterosexual/Straight	100%
Sexual minority	2.6%	Sexual minority	0.0%
Race/Ethnicity		Race/Ethnicity	
African American/Black	68.4%	African American/Black	64.3%
White	30.0%	White	35.7%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0%	American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0%
Hispanic/Latino/a	0.4%	Hispanic/Latino/a	0.0%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.0%	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.0%
Multi-racial	1.3%	Multi-racial	0.0%
Other/Self-identify	0.0%	Other/Self-identify	0.0%
Education		Education	
Less than high school	3.8%	Less than high school	0.0%
High school diploma/GED	14.0%	High school diploma/GED	0.0%
Some college/Vocational training	28.8%	Some college/Vocational training	21.4%
Bachelor's degree	27.5%	Bachelor's degree	14.3%
Graduate degree	21.6%	Graduate degree	64.3%
Continuous Variable	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Continuous Variable	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Age	55.40 (10.53)	Age	55.00 (20.37)
Congregation Characteristics ( <i>n</i> = 14)			
Variable	Frequency	Variable	Frequency
Affirmative Signs Present		Denomination	
Yes	14.3%	Baptist	35.8%
No	85.7%	Presbyterian (PCUSA)	14.3%
Same-Sex Couples Appear Present		Pentecostal	21.4%
Yes	7.1%	Disciples of Christ	14.3%
No	92.9%	Methodist	7.1%
Congregants Actively Participate		Other Protestant	7.1%
Yes	71.4%		
No	28.6%		
<b>Continuous Variable</b>	<b><i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)</b>		
Number of People at Worship	38.36 (24.73)		
Length of Services (Minutes)	92.07 (28.96)		
Number of Times Quoted Scripture	4.57 (2.71)		

Table 2. The relationship between homonegativity and study variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. ATLG	2.22	1.12	1 – 5		-.05	.05	.04	-.02	<b>.20</b>	<b>.17</b>											
2. Service Attendance	5.30	0.89	1 – 6	.49		<b>.30</b>	<b>.28</b>	.14	-.02	.04											
3. Scripture Reading	4.29	1.39	1 – 6	.49	<b>.64</b>		<b>.36</b>	.10	.01	.08											
4. Intrinsic Religiousness	4.51	0.74	1 – 5	<b>.58</b>	<b>.61</b>	<b>.79</b>		.13	.04	.11											
5. Scriptural Literalism	2.42	.65	1 – 3	<b>.87</b>	.52	.51	<b>.72</b>		.13	.07											
6. Theological Exclusivity	2.76	1.38	1 – 5	-.04	<b>-.55</b>	-.45	-.43	-.18		<b>.35</b>											
7. Prevalence of Church Friendships	2.85	1.24	1 – 5	.16	-.14	-.27	-.24	-.09	<b>.03</b>												
8. Years Leading	20.65	9.59	5 – 35	.49	.45	.46	.37	.43	.10	-.25											
9. LGBTQ Congregants Reported	2.18	3.14	0 – 10	<b>-.66</b>	-.03	-.25	-.28	<b>-.62</b>	-.32	.10	-.25										
10. Congregational Affirmativeness	0.58	0.27	0 – 1	-.08	-.22	-.26	-.28	-.32	.11	.11	.10	.28									
11. Affirmative Preaching	2.04	0.78	1 – 3	<b>-.68</b>	.17	-.16	-.08	-.49	<b>-.53</b>	-.36	-.18	<b>.72</b>	.24								
12. Discussion of LGBTQ Issues	2.67	0.88	1 – 4	-.06	<b>.60</b>	.41	.18	-.04	-.25	-.18	.01	.30	-.01	.29							
13. Leader’s ATLG	2.22	1.01	1 – 4	.45	.28	.49	.35	.24	-.36	-.40	<b>.57</b>	-.26	.39	-.15	-.01						
14. Congregation Size	38.36	24.73	4 – 85	.11	.26	.13	.15	.14	-.38	.06	.46	.42	.20	.23	.32	.18					
15. Service Length (minutes)	92.07	28.96	45 – 145	<b>.64</b>	.45	.24	.51	<b>.68</b>	-.32	-.02	.40	-.13	-.15	-.25	-.13	.33	.48				
16. Participation in Worship	0.71	0.47	0 – 1	<b>.60</b>	.25	-.08	.17	.62	.12	-.05	-.04	-.39	.11	-.20	-.02	.23	.05	.53			
17. Scripture Quotation	4.57	2.71	0 – 8	.37	<b>.73</b>	.60	.57	.33	<b>-.56</b>	< .01	.38	.05	-.05	.20	.33	.25	.30	.16	-.12		
18. Affirmative Signage	0.14	0.36	0 – 1	<b>-.64</b>	<b>-.56</b>	<b>-.55</b>	<b>-.64</b>	<b>-.73</b>	.06	-.10	-.44	.40	.34	.43	.11	-.08	-.05	-.51	.19	-.48	
19. Same-Sex Couples Present	0.07	0.27	0 – 1	<b>-.54</b>	.05	-.12	-.15	-.44	-.14	.15	-.07	<b>.78</b>	.52	.52	.14	-.35	.37	-.06	-.53	.17	-.11

Note: Correlations between level 2 variables are shown beneath the diagonal, and correlations between level 1 variables are shown above the diagonal. Means and standard deviations are calculated as unweighted averages using level 2 units ( $n = 14$ ); ATLG = Attitudes toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men; significant values ( $p < .05$ ) are bolded.

Table 3. Multilevel models examining the effects of religiousness and affirmativeness on congregant homonegativity

	<b>Model 0</b>	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>	<b>Model 4</b>	<b>Model 5</b>	<b>Final Model</b>	<b>Final Model</b>
	Unstd. (SE)	Stand.						
<b>Model n</b>	223	215	215	206	194	194	194	194
<b>Fixed Part</b>								
Intercept	2.12** (0.19)	1.43** (0.21)	1.95** (0.18)	1.55** (0.19)	1.96** (0.16)	1.69** (0.16)	1.78** (0.15)	
Age		< .01 (0.01)						
Gender		0.01 (0.13)						
Race/ethnicity		1.02** (0.21)	0.89** (0.19)	0.33 (0.23)	0.41+ (0.22)	0.65** (0.21)	0.59** (0.21)	.24
Education		-.02 (0.08)						
Theological Exclusivity			0.01 (0.11)					
Prevalence of Church Friendships			0.02 (0.13)					
L2 Scripture Reading				0.23 (0.19)				
L2 Service Attendance				0.20 (0.34)				
L2 Intrinsic Religiousness				0.03 (0.09)				
L2 Scriptural Literalism				0.83* (0.30)	0.76+ (0.36)	0.67+ (0.31)	0.60+ (0.29)	.35
Affirmative Preaching					-.51* (0.16)	-.45* (0.13)	-.39* (0.12)	-.27
LGBTQ Congregants Reported					0.04 (0.04)			
Years Leading					0.01 (0.01)			
Leader's ATLG					0.12 (0.09)			
Service Length (minutes)						<.01 (<.01)		
Affirmative Signage						0.58 (0.32)		
Scripture Quotation						0.13** (0.03)	0.11** (0.03)	.04
<b>Random Part</b>								
$\sigma^2$	.80	.61	.66	.68	.74	.72	.73	
$\tau_{00}$	.43	.11	.16	.04	.01	<.01	<.01	
$R^2_{Total}$		.41	.33	.41	.39	.41	.41	
<b>Model Fit</b>								
AIC	619.51	571.61	569.88	528.60	512.63	504.25	503.62	
BIC	629.74	625.54	607.01	555.22	542.04	533.66	526.50	

Note. Unstd. = Unstandardized coefficients; Stand. = Standardized coefficients; L1 = level 1 variable; L2 = level 2 variable;  $\sigma^2$  = 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. +  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$