

Understanding the Spiritual and Faith Community Needs of People in Alternative Relationships

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Chapter 1: Overview of Demonstration Project “Understanding The Spiritual and Faith Community Needs of People in Alternative Relationships”

I. The Statement of Need Addressed by the Project

There is a need for enhanced access to spiritual and faith communities for persons in Alternative Relationships (Appendix 2). This paper defines Alternative Relationships as relationships that fall outside of the mainstream model of two romantically connected monogamous partners of heterosexual orientation and cisgender identity who engage in sexually mainstream erotic activities. The term Alternative Relationship is “purposefully broad, and inclusive of non-conforming gender pairings, sexual orientations, and a spectrum of sexual preferences and behaviors” (D. Pitagora, MA, LCSW, MEd, CST, personal communication, January 4th, 2019) as well as diverse non-mainstream relationship constellations, dynamics, and configurations.

Improved access to faith communities for the Alternative Relationship demographic may be accomplished in part through 1) increasing clergy, leadership knowledge of and familiarity with this population and their spiritual and faith community needs; and 2) decreasing the misinformation and discomfort that has historically marginalized people who are in other than typical relationships.

We are in an era when Liberal and Progressive religious institutions are promulgating, in increasing numbers, policies that formally declare support for numerous non-mainstream and/or non-majority populations (Appendices I, II, VI), yet even the most sincere and well-meaning clergy today often lack a working vocabulary and related tools for addressing, interacting with and ministering to people who are in Alternative Relationships (Appendix 2). Likewise, clergy and other faith community leadership

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typically lack experience in understanding the spiritual values, needs, experiences, and issues pertinent to this population. Formal institutional policies and statements of openness and acceptance are laudable artifacts (Sanders, 2015), but there is an important distinction between propounding policy and public relations material versus acquiring the skills needed to actually achieve these announced ideals and apply them in meaningful ways to people who are in groups that are generally unrecognized or misunderstood by mainstream society—in this case Alternative Relationships. There is a present need to examine this situation more closely and to support faith communities in developing strategies to implement their own values of equality for all, such that people who do not or cannot fit the typical relationship mold can feel safe, secure, and truly affirmed within organized religion or in more loosely based spiritual or faith communities. Before educating clergy and faith communities on serving individuals, partnerships, and families who are in Alternative Relationships, however, one must first hear directly from people oriented to Alternative Relationships and learn directly from them about their experiences, faith journeys, values, needs, and perceptions. This evidence is both vitally needed and almost entirely absent from the published literature. I propose to investigate in this area by conducting a phenomenological study of this demographic group and its members' spiritual lives and faith community experiences.

In my private psychotherapy practice, in my ministry, and previously in my position as Chief of Behavioral Health at a New York City hospital, a significant portion of the clients with whom I have worked, or with whom my direct clinical supervisees have worked, identify as being in an Alternative Relationship. At present, 50% of my twenty-eight private practice clients identify as currently being in an Alternative Relationship or

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were in one or more in the past. Over the last three years, a total of 55% of my private psychotherapy clients identified as being in an Alternative Relationship or were in one or more in the past; or were considering or actively in the process of shifting their current mainstream relationship configuration or dynamic into an Alternative one; or circumstances such as developments in gender identity, age, disability, and sexual orientation was moving their once typical relationship into the Alternative category.

The term Alternative Relationship is often mistakenly and narrowly used to describe a marriage that is consensually “open” (meaning non-monogamous) in one form or another (Appendix 2), but I am utilizing the term Alternative Relationship in this study as a broad umbrella identity marker to encompass any relationships that fall outside of the typical model of what is an acceptable mainstream relationship with regard to gender, sexuality, sexual practices, dynamic, configuration, and constellation. I am also introducing the term Alternative Relationship Community (ARC) in this paper. While there is no unified ARC per se, or an homogenous Alternative Relationship demographic, the ARC spans diverse identities, constellations, arrangements, histories, values, and practices, much in the same way the marker of Jewish Community does not describe one type of Jewish person, but rather spans diverse ethnicities, practices, values, customs, and ideologies found within the Jewish population.

A majority of my clients over the years who self-identify as being in an Alternative Relationship, or have a history of being in one or more Alternative Relationships in the past, have expressed in the context of their counseling work with me as having had less than optimal experiences within their Liberal or Progressive-identifying faith communities and/or houses of worship due to their Alternative Relationship

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status/orientation. There is a need to educate, advocate, and illuminate Liberal and Progressive faith communities and clerical leadership on the spiritual needs and life realities of the ARC. It is my observation as a clinician and as an ordained Interfaith/Interspiritual minister that people from the ARC experience the same spiritual and faith community needs and aspirations as anyone else in a type of “normative”, “majority”, “mainstream” or “acceptable” relationship, but many of them have reported in our clinical and pastoral counseling work that they are currently experiencing, or have experienced in the past, a sense of disappointment, exclusion, stress, restriction, or disconnect with regard to faith community, religion, or spirituality.

Notwithstanding the official messages of inclusivity and LGBT Pride promulgated by generally open-minded Liberal and Progressive faith communities (Appendix 4) the realities of the lives of people in many segments of the ARC remain beyond the institutional pale. Thus, these spiritual seekers do not feel that they can be as spiritually fully open in return nor participate in ways that they perceive are as meaningful or authentic as that the more typically relationally mainstream seekers in their faith community are afforded. Additionally, they report to me feeling unsafe to make their relationship status, orientation, or identity known to their welcoming and well-meaning clergyperson(s) within the context of pastoral counseling (Leather and Grace, 2016)—such as premarital counseling, relationship counseling, and grief work—because being in an Alternative Relationship can come with stigma (Ray, 2008) and microaggressions (McClousky, 2014) and real risks to safety, employment, and child custody (Appendix 5). Overall, they have reported to me that they do not feel that their clergyperson has enough understanding of the risks that persons from the ARC face should they be

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causally or accidentally exposed by clergy or other faith community leadership or the clergypersons' spouse.

I have noted that most of my Alternative Relationship counselees have reported feeling pressure within their spiritual or faith communities to project an image that is palatably proximate to the heterosexual, cisgender (Appendix I), non-Kinky (Appendices 6) and monogamous modelⁱ. Some of my clients in Alternative Relationships report ultimately choosing to leave their faith communities, houses of worship, and even organized religion altogether due to feeling a disconnect between the mainstream expectations of the Liberal or Progressive faith community and the realities of how and whom people in the ARC love and connect. Some have reported feeling sadness and loneliness around not being able to show up with or acknowledge their partners or non-traditional family constellation, while mainstream congregants are allowed to openly have their typically oriented partners and families with them at faith community events and lifecycle celebrations. In leaving the community, or in feeling forced to consider leaving, or in feeling that they have to project an image that is inauthentic to their identity and relationship orientation in order to stay within the faith community, my Alternative Relationship clients suffer to varying degrees. Some elect to stay in their faith communities and live under pressure. Some elect to stay in their faith communities and experience only minor frustration as they feel that their needing to be covert is fact of life and one that they are generally adept at navigating. Some clients express relief when

ⁱ Politics influences faith communities. There is tension within the LGBTQAI+ Community (Appendix 2) with regard to gay, white male couples being viewed by mainstream institutions as the most acceptable, most palatable Alternative Relationship. The overarching ARC perceives that this demographic is benefiting from their whiteness and masculinity, whereas other ARC demographics such as Transgender, Queer Persons of Color, Gender Non Binary, Poly, and Kink are struggling to be recognized.

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they make the decision to leave their faith community. Some process the loss and then move on fairly easily while others suffer a pervasive, much deeper sense of exile, grief, depression, and feeling spiritually adrift and religiously injured.

Over the last two years, five people from the ARC whom I saw for initial intakes at my psychotherapy practice who reported experiencing substance abuse relapses after 5-22 years of sobriety identified that a relapse stressor was their choice to leave their religions of origin or long-term faith communities because their Alternative Relationship orientation was not within the scope of their community's knowledge or comfort level. For my clients who have stayed in their faith communities, a limited number have been able to educate their clergy with positive results, but mostly my clients from the ARC who stay in their faith communities do so with their spiritual, lifecycle, and community needs not fully met, and an understanding that the invitation to "Come As You Are" is not really intended for them.

II. Egalitarianism versus Inclusionism

This study's mission of community building and the fostering of rational egalitarianism (Tebbe, 2016) are based, in part, in my challenging of what I refer to as "Inclusionism"ⁱⁱ (Stone, 1997). Liberal and Progressive houses of worship have often led the way in the crafting and dissemination of forward-thinking and groundbreaking statements of Inclusion with regard to various minority populations. These populations include, but are not limited to, people with disabilities, immigrant groups, refugees, and

ⁱⁱ Not to be mistaken for Inclusionism (with a capital "I"), the doctrine teaches that humanity was "included" in Christ's death and resurrection.

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LGBT persons (Appendix 3) among others. These statements are laudable and there is no reason to infer that they are not framed with the best of intentions and a genuine desire to serve and carry out the communities' best religious values. Such statements of welcome and solidarity are a positive indication of the institution becoming aware of its own power to harm versus heal and its potential to provide a more enlightened and affirming spiritual home, but it needs to go further in order to be maximally effective. Absent a proper grounding in the more subtle needs, values, challenges, and issues facing the minority group that is the target of an inclusionary statement, such statements can actually add to the target group's experience of alienation and marginalization rather than resolving it (Stone, 1997). It is this incomplete though well-intentioned approach towards outreach to minority populations that I designate as "Inclusionism."

This demonstration project was the basis for gathering information with which to support clergy and faith community lay leadership in filling in the gaps inherently underlying inclusionism in connection with persons in the ARC, and to address that as of now faith communities seem to be aware of only a handful of some of the segments of the ARC. This study sought to examine: (1) What are the common themes that emerge with regard to religion, faith community, and spirituality as experienced by persons whose identity markers encompasses being under the umbrella of the ARC; (2) what do people in the ARC need to feel that they are not merely welcomed, but are an equal part of a faith community and/or house of worship.

This information could serve to inform ways in which to (1) turn the attractive but incomplete language of Liberal and Progressive inclusionism into the development of knowledge, policies, practices, and institutional structure that have a reasonable

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probability of succeeding in bringing the target population “into the fold” and/or (2) be a basis for organized advocacy and education efforts on behalf of ARC to support clergy and faith communities in developing an accurate understanding of the realities and faith needs of the ARC, and (3) work with clergy and leadership in addressing any unexamined biases or misinformation they may have about the ARC.

Egalitarianism versus Inclusionism has been a theme in my professional work for years. From 2010 to 2014 I was the Director of Social Work at Yachad/The National Jewish Council for Disabilities, the disabilities advocacy and programming division of the Orthodox Union, where I supervised a staff of mental health practitioners, community organizers, and professional advocates from diverse disciplines. It was in that position that our organization witnessed first-hand the limitations of inclusionism, not with regard to person’s in Alternative Relationships per se, but rather with regard to the Disability community. Yachad’s clientele generally consisted of individuals from various Orthodox or Orthodox-influenced Jewish faith traditions. In spite of the intense religious convictions and dedication of this clientele and their families, a high percentage of people who came through the organization’s intake department who were of Jewish heritage and with a disability were not in regular attendance at synagogue. On its face this was paradoxical. These were highly religiously observant or religiously interested families who wanted institutional affiliations—so why were they not participating?

At my direction, my staff sent short, informal surveys to several Orthodox houses of worship in the New York City area and Northern New Jersey. We quickly learned that numerous synagogues had issued truly groundbreaking statements under the rubric of

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“Disability Inclusion,”ⁱⁱⁱ only to find that these statements attracted persons with disabilities and their families to attend one or two synagogue services, but that some of these families never returned and almost never became members. This only compounded the paradox. Here we had a community seeking affiliation, and institutions seeking members. Yet the two remained separate. Why?

It turned out while a handful of groundbreaking synagogues had huge, flourishing disability programs and state-of-the-art religious schools with accommodations for children with physical, learning and behavioral needs, most all of the fifteen houses of worship in question had, at most, consulted with publicists in framing their groundbreaking statement of Inclusion and that was about it. The internal work to create an informed and attitudinally-affirming environment, even if the synagogue was not in a fiscal position to create physical accommodations, lagged. A few here and there had revamped their bathrooms and sanctuaries for wheelchair accessibility. Two-thirds of the synagogues we surveyed had not consulted with or assembled advisory committees with persons with disabilities, nor had they surveyed persons with disabilities on what issues they are facing, what they want or need out of a synagogue home-base, and what true environmental, attitudinal, educational, and liturgical accessibility meant *to them*.

Without this vital information from the point of view of the individual with a disability and their family members, synagogues with forward-thinking clergy and well-intentioned Inclusion messages did not have the data needed to educate staff on how to meet the

ⁱⁱⁱ Disability Inclusion refers to the majority “able” population making conscious efforts to include people with disabilities into everyday activities via practices and policies designed to identify and remove barriers such as physical, communication, and attitudinal, that hamper individuals' ability to have full participation in society, the same as people without disabilities. Segments of the Disability community have challenged Inclusionism since the 1920's and the slogan of Disability-led advocacy organizations is “Nothing About Us Without Us” in response to decisions and policies that effect them being made without their input and leadership.

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needs of persons with disabilities, leading to numerous instances in which children with behavioral or sensory disabilities and their families would be asked to leave by ushers for being “disruptive”. Little wonder, then, those institutional statements of “Disability Inclusion” were proving to be unproductive, even though the good intention and ethical motivation was clearly based in Jewish communal religious principles. In response, in 2014 I co-founded and chaired, along with Rabbi Lynne Landsberg of the Religious Action Center (RAC) of United Reform Judaism (URJ), “Hineinu: Building Jewish Community for People of All Abilities.” This was the first-ever disability partnership among all major branches of Judaism—Orthodox, Hassidic, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal—to foster, among other services, no-cost synagogue-based grass-roots advisory committees of people with disabilities designed to realize and implement the promise of Disability Inclusion.

My demonstration project “Understanding The Spiritual And Faith Community Needs Of People In Alternative Relationships” proposed to develop a similar body of practical and useful information, but this time instead of gauging what clergy and faith communities know or do not know, have in place or do not have in place with regard to the ARC, I started with direct interviews with persons in the ARC, because the ARC is just now starting to appear on the radar of mainstream America as a broad collection of identity marker groups and a study like this can help shape faith communities’ understanding of the perspective of spiritual persons in Alternative Relationships from the ground up.

This qualitative study focused on in-depth narrative interviews with people who were in present or previous Alternative Relationships, in order to implement an authentic

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understanding in connection with this population. If Liberal and Progressive faith communities who have messages of welcome and inclusion or affirmation of diverse identities—identities that are naturally going to have an Alternative Relationship that goes along with it (Appendices I, II, VI)—it is important to know what themes come up around the experiences and needs of persons in the ARC.

The traditional one-partner-cisgender-straight-monogamous-sexually-mainstream model continues to color if not dominate spiritual communities, through language, social programming, and life cycle events. The insufficient acknowledgement that diverse Alternative Relationships are a reality of our society (Sue & Sue, 2010) can be experienced by the sub rosa subject population as excluding, spiritually wounding, marginalizing and unwelcoming. Yet the need for spiritual connection and religious community is a universal human desire (Varma, 1994), and this is no less so among persons in Alternative Relationships.

III. Current Data on Alternative Relationships in the U.S.

At present it is extremely difficult to gauge how many people in the U.S. are involved in Alternative Relationships because so little scholarship has been done on a majority of the many subgroups, identities, cultures, communities, enclaves, and Alt community-unaffiliated individuals that comprise the ARC.

Not only is it difficult to determine whom to count, but also people who are in Alternative Relationships are often covert while in mainstream settings. In short, there is no existing research mechanism yet with which to count them as a cohort, community, or demographic. Further, people who are identified as being part of the ARC are often

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reluctant to discuss their experiences, family constellations, and relationship identities for fear of being exposed and facing violence, harassment, and discrimination in the workplace and in the legal system (Appendix V). Still, there are a number of estimates that show that the ARC is not a fringe sliver of the general population or a rarity. Here is data on just some of the subgroups and subcultures within the ARC:

Genderqueer. Genderqueer (Appendix I) refers to individuals who identify as one of many possible genders beyond strictly man or woman. It can include Transgender, Gender, Nonbinary, Genderfluid, and more (Appendix I). People who identify as part of the Genderqueer spectrum of identities, regardless of whether the individuals are involved are oriented to a poly, Kink, open relationship configuration, or otherwise, are counted in this study for the reason that their gender identities put them outside of the cisgender mainstream relationship expectation.

The demographic of youth who are Genderqueer are sometimes referred to as Gender Non-Conforming (GNC). The Handbook of Child Psychology and Development Science, 7th edition (Diamond, et al., 2015) defines Gender Non-Conformity as:

.... a state in which a person has physical and behavioral characteristics that do not correspond with those typically associated with the person's sex. Gender identity refers to an individual's internalized psychological experience of being male or female, whereas *gender nonconformity* refers to the degree to which an individual's appearance, behavior, interests, and subjective self-concept deviate from conventional norms for masculinity/femininity."

In 2017, the very first study on Gender Nonconforming identity in adolescents was published by UCLA entitled "Characteristics and Mental Health of Gender Non-

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Conforming Adolescents in California” (Wilson, et al, 2017). The study’s authors found that 27 percent, or 796,000, of California’s adolescents, identify as GNC. Of the two sub-groups, 21 percent were classified as androgynous^{iv}, and 6 percent as highly GNC.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer. Relationships encompassing persons of LGB and other identities on the Queer spectrum including, but absolutely limited to, asexual, Two Spirit (McMullen, 1999), Questioning, demisexual, pansexual, and beyond, are considered to be Alternative as their sexual orientations put them outside of heteronormative mainstream relationship markers.

An estimated 3.5-percent of adults in the United States identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual, (Gallup, Inc., 2017) with a prediction that this will reach the 1-in-10 mark as Millennials continue to come out. 7.3 percent of people born between 1980 and 1998 now identify as LGBT—up from 5.8 percent in 2012. (This new data reinforces a 2015 conclusion from the Public Religion Research Institute that a full 7 percent of Millennials identify either as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender,” based on a survey of 2,000 adults.) An estimated 0.3 percent of adults are transgender (Gallup, Inc., 2017).

This implies that there are approximately 9 million LGBT Americans, a figure roughly equivalent to the population of New Jersey. The 2013 Pew Survey of LGBT Americans found that LGBT adults are less religious than the general public. Roughly half (48%) say they have no religious affiliation, compared with 20% of the public at large. LGBT adults who are religiously affiliated, one-third say there is a conflict between their religious beliefs and their sexual orientation or gender identity. The 2013 Pew Report indicates that this is may not be because they do not want affiliation, but

^{iv} Partly male and partly female in appearance; of indeterminate sex.

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rather because they are afforded less opportunity to express their spirituality. The religious world is far more closed to LGBT persons, and there is a spiritual glass ceiling for persons who identify other than straight and cisgender. It is important to note that among all LGBT adults, about three-in-ten (29 percent) say they have been made to feel unwelcome in a place of worship (Pew Report, 2013).

In the 2016 book “Us versus Us: The Untold Story of Religion and the LGBT Community”, researcher Andrew Marin shared that his findings revealed that 86 percent of LGBT people spent their childhood in church. More than half of them left those religious communities as adults; and that three out of four indicated that they would be happy to come back if the faith community was genuinely accepting of them; and that 86 percent of LGBT people regularly pray even if they are not at a formal house of worship.

Polyamorous relationships. Polyamory (from Greek πολύ poly, “many, several”, and Latin amor, “love”) is the capacity to romantically love more than one person at a time. It is sometimes viewed as the practice of, or desire for, intimate relationships with more than one partner, with the knowledge of all partners involved and is described as ethical non-monogamy or responsible non-monogamy.

In the 2015 article in Psychology Today entitled “How Many Polyamorists Are There in the U.S.?”, Elisabeth Sheff, PhD, author of the blog “The Polyamorists Next Door”, relates the findings of a lengthy study on polyamory conducted by independent academic Kelly Cookson, who writes:

It appears that sexually non-monogamous couples in the United States number in the millions. Estimates based on actually trying sexual non-monogamy are around 1.2 to 2.4 million. An estimate based solely on the agreement to allow

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satellite lovers is around 9.8 million. These millions include poly couples, swinging couples, gay male couples, and other sexually non-monogamous couples.

Other terminology and configurations associated with polyamory include: open marriage, group marriage, polyfidelity, quad, and secondary relationship and Polycule (Appendix 2).

1. In a 2017 survey by the Portland Mercury newspaper revealed that nearly 42% of Portland, Oregon residents identify as something other than monogamous.
2. The 2012 Loving More Survey was the very first survey of persons who are likely to identify as part of the polyamory community. There were over 4,000 respondents to this study. Questions assessed several demographic categories including age, gender, education levels, and relationship needs, among other data.
3. Open Source Psychometrics conducted a survey on “The demographics of polyamory/monogamy from a general population survey” which found the following data about polyamory^v:

^v The figures on page 18 of this paper come directly from the polyamory study by Open Psychometric study homepage: <https://openpsychometrics.org/research/demographics-of-polyamory/>

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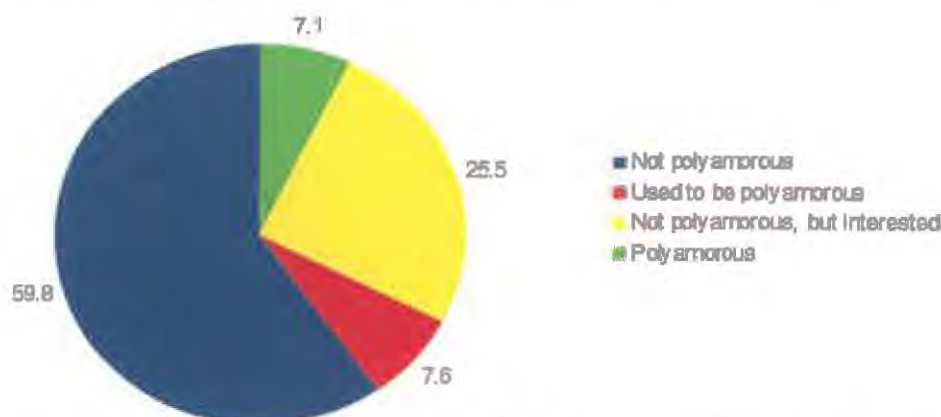


Figure 1. Participants were asked to select their religion from nine choices: Atheist /Agnostic, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Shinto, Sikh, or other.

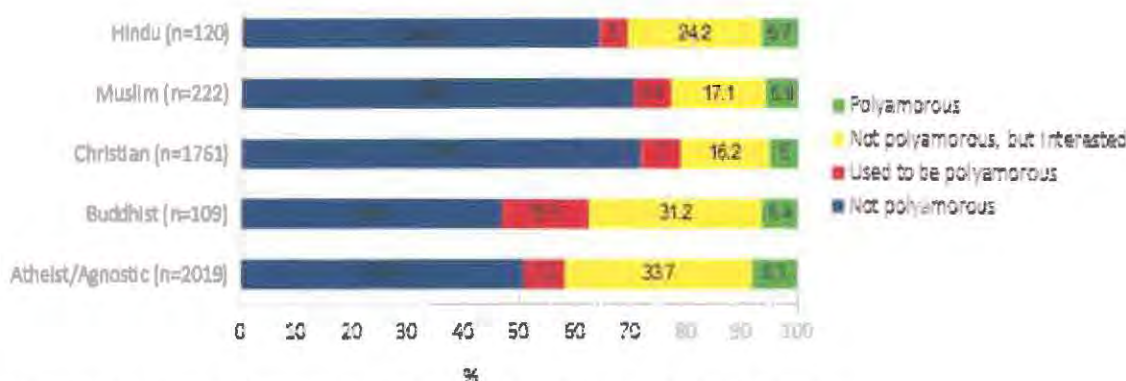


Figure 2. Only religions with at least 100 subjects are in this figure.

Swingers. According to the Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality, there is no standard definition of “swinging” (Appendix 2), though it can be explained as a context in which married couples, or couples in committed relationships, consensually exchange partners solely for erotic or sexual experiences (Bergstrand & Blevins, 2000) and do not form romantic or partnership bonds with those sexual partners. They may have casual or anonymous encounters, or have regular sex partners with whom they also have friendships, but whatever the connection is to those partners, swingers keep their primary

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love relationship/life partnership at the forefront of any encounters and maintain emotional monogamy with the primary love interest.

There are an estimated 13 million people in the United States engaged in swinging (Bergstrand & Blevins, 2000)—that is roughly equivalent to the population of Pennsylvania and Rhode Island combined. A recent study showed that swingers tend to be more religious than the average American (Bergstrand & Blevins, 2000). There is a growing movement within Christian communities to mainstream swinging, such as the dating app called ChristianSwingers.com for people who practice Christianity, have Christian values, and want to pursue open relationships with other practicing Christians.

Kink/BDSM/Leather. Kink is the use of unconventional or non-mainstream sexual and/or relationship practices (Appendix VI) that can include varying degrees of consensual and negotiated power exchange and hierarchical relationships. The broadly defined Kink Community is comprised of people who claim Kink as an interest, an activity, a need, an orientation, a culture, and/or an identity marker and they seek out social, romantic, partnership, educational, cultural, and/or sexual connections with like-oriented others in group non-sexual settings such as online forums and in-person brunches, meetings, advocacy planning, and conferences, and/or in sexual or play settings or dating and relationship contexts. Under the Kink banner are indefinite numbers of sub-categories of identities, interests, and relationship dynamics and configurations (Appendix II). The motto of the Kink Community is “Safe, Sane, and Consensual” to denote the core values of that culture.

One of the most well known groups within the wider Kink community includes persons who engage in BDSM sex, play, and/or BDSM Relationships (Appendix 6).

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BDSM stands for Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism. The Leather community (Appendix VI) is either seen as synonymous with BDSM or viewed as one cultural enclave within the wider BDSM culture (Lenius, 2010), and this distinction is often debated with the community. The Leather segment of the community typically wears leather garments as a visible marker of their cultural identity and heritage and engages in a variety of consensual hierarchical relationships of varying degrees, and follows sexual, ethical, social, and historical codes and customs specific to that enclave. The modern day Leather community is a descendant of post WWII gay male motorcycle culture and now spans diverse gender, ethnic, and gender demographics (Lenius, 2010).

The 1990 “Kinsey Institute New Report on Sex” found that 5-10 percent of the U.S. population engaged in consensual and pleasure-based sadomasochist-related sexual activity at least on an occasional basis. Fifteen years later, a 2005 survey by Durex revealed that 36 percent of adults in the United States use the bondage tools that the general public typically associates with BDSM play: masks, blindfolds and restraints during sexual activity and another survey revealed that 40% of Americans consider themselves Kinky, even if they do not affiliate with the culture of a Kink subculture.

Spirituality is a significant feature of some Kink, BDSM, and Leather communities (also referred to as the “Kink scene” which denotes members who regularly congregate in public social and cultural forums, and some extend that to meeting in sexual or dating forums). One of the religious groups advocating for acceptance in faith communities is Leather and Grace, a movement within the Universalist Unitarian Church (UU). Leather and Grace works to open discussions about the spirituality of BDSM/Leather and helping

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the persons whose identities fall under those segments of the ARC to find acceptance within the church (Leather and Grace, 2016).

Spirituality and the experience of spiritual ascension and surrender to the Divine has been a common enough theme for people engaging in BDSM sexual activity or physical play (called a “scene”), particularly BDSM impact play or power exchange play. In 2016 a groundbreaking study came out entitled “Sacred kink: finding psychological meaning at the intersection of BDSM and spiritual experience” (Baker, 2016). It was the goal of the researcher to understand the psychological meanings of spiritual experiences, occurring either spontaneously or through deliberate induction, of participants who were actively engaged in BDSM physical activities (called “scenes”). The key common spiritual experiences of BDSM sexual or physical contact play discovered through that research were: (1) ordeal, (2) surrender, (3) visionary experience, (4) embodied sense of an energetic force, (5) sense of spiritual presence, (6) self-surrendered/transcended state of consciousness, and (7) deeply personal and lasting transformation (Baker, 2016).

IV. Historical Context: 21st Century Sacred Sexuality Movement

Alternative Relationships seem to be viewed by modern mainstream faith communities as if they are a removed, radical, or a New Age sociological trend having nothing to do with mainstream spiritual practices, when in fact Alternative Relationships have been an integral part of just about every major world religion, for example:

North American Indigenous Faiths. Native American traditions historically celebrated Two Spirit People—Androgynous, Transgender, or Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual people (McMullen, 1999). Two Spirit people were revered for their spiritual gifts, their

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special connection to divine and to the ancestors, and their shamanic roles within their tribes. Many of the Two-Spirit people would be involved in same sex relationships, which was viewed as perfectly natural and encouraged by the rest of the tribe (Jacobs, 2005).

Christianity. Spiritual sadomasochism became the heart of religious practice of the Catholic Dominican friars beginning around the year 1055 up through the late 1300's. Their central religious practice was half-naked sacred self-flagellation with whips, and organized and consensual sacred flagellation of each other, for the purpose of penance and achieving the most direct route to divine ecstasy, surrender, and ascension (Schreiber-Byers, 2103). These practices extended to public and very popular self-flagellation processions through European towns. The Dominican Order later successfully petitioned the Pope to flagellate while fully naked to more fully spiritually ascend to the experience of a stripped Jesus on the cross (Scott, 1968). The sound of the cracking whip upon self and consenting others was considered a form of Catholic sacred religious music.

Judaism. The Matriarchs and Patriarchs—Abraham had agreed-upon relationships with women other than his wife, and Jacob Sarah, Leah, and Rachel all had Plural marriages. Further, the Hebrew God in certain interpretations is genderless or gender Nonbinary. In Exodus 3:14 in the Torah, when Moses asks God what God is, God responds with “I am that I am.” אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה 'ehyeh 'āšer 'ehyeh . Genderless and genderfluid concepts of God began to become popular in the mid 17th Century with the works of Baruch Spinoza who envisioned God as a presence that encompassed ever aspect of the entire universe and beyond (Paul, 2018).

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Hinduism. The supreme Godhead is genderfluid in nature, appearing as all of the following: a female goddess such as Lakshmi; a male god such as Krishna; the androgynous Ardhanarishvara, a composite of Siva or Shiva (masculine) and Parvati (feminine); or as all gender-encompassing Brahman (Universal Absolute, Supreme Self).

Ancient Egypt. Kinky sex, specifically flogging with leather straps, regularly appeared in temple practices as an act of religiously sacred sexuality.

These examples of the integration of spirituality, sexuality, interpersonal connection, and ascension still very much exist today within the modern Sacred Sexuality Movement (sometimes referred to as the Neotantric Movement). The Sacred Sexuality Movement (1) rejects the mainstream Western idea that sexuality is somehow at odds with or apart from holiness or spirituality; (2) promotes the acceptance and enjoyment of all the things that help one to heal on a spiritual level; (3) rejects the idea that Alternative Relationships are spiritually inferior to the normative models of the mainstream population; (4) focuses on erotic energy and positive connections more than on the heterosupremacist act of penetration and male ejaculation as the pinnacle of sexual achievement; (5) leans more toward the yogic viewpoint that sexual contact and relationships, when done with ethical intention and spiritual mindfulness, are a pathway in themselves to connecting to the Divine and dissolving the illusory self vs. other. This sacred emphasis on consciously constructed, radically accepting intimate connections is becoming more and more appealing to people from the ARC, as the likelihood of being shamed for being both Alternative and spiritual is reduced.

The Western, modern Sacred Sexuality Movement is most publically known for its communal tribal events on the local and grassroots levels, and at bigger, more visible

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events including, but not absolutely not limited to, Burning Man, a regional Leather culture conference for spiritually-oriented participants, and the Urban Tantra training series:

Burning Man. This week long annual art and “radical” self-expression (Doherty, 2006) event takes place in the remote Black Rock Desert of Nevada and in 2017 it attracted 70,000 participants, and is considered by many to be a tribal spiritual experience. It has been in existence for the last thirty-three years. A 2015 study “How Burning Man Participants Spiritually Self-Identify” (Lesuer, 2015) surveyed Burning Man attendees’ spiritual and religious affiliations: 71.3% of the Burning Man community surveyed stated that they do not belong to a religious denomination, yet over half of the Burning Man community (51.25%) hold some sort of religious or spiritual belief system. Of these people who hold some sort of religious or spiritual belief system, 45.8% are “spiritual, not religious” and another 5.45% would define themselves as religious. Some 40.7% of those are atheist, agnostic or deist.

Among the varied sub-communities within Burning Man are polyamory tribes, LGBTQ groups, sacred spirituality groups, Gender Non Conforming (GNC) groups, and the Orgy Dome. The Orgy Dome welcomes all seekers of diverse mainstream and Alternative Relationship constellations and sexual and gender orientations to engage in consensual sexual activity and utilize the massage tables, mattresses, lubricants, condoms, and sofas made available to visitors. In 2015 there were 9,000 visitors to the Orgy Dome over the course of the week (Bryant, 2016).

Spiritually-based BDSM-related Events and Conferences (names and locations not included in this paper, as I was not given explicit permission by conference

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organizers to disclose them). Within the Kink, BDSM, and Leather scenes there are online spiritual forums, households and naturally occurring communities that are spiritually based, spirituality-based meet-up groups, spiritually-based 12-step programs for Alternative Lifestyle persons in addiction recovery, and an annual Interfaith/Interspiritual conference that is known for its combination of BDSM/Leather pride and spirituality programs, and worship services.

Urban Tantra. Tantra (Sanskrit: for "loom, weave, system") denotes the esoteric traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism that co-developed around the middle of 1st millennium AD (Samuel, 2013) The term Tantra, in the Indian traditions, also means any systematic broadly applicable "text, theory, system, method, instrument, technique or practice" (Barrett, 2008). Tantra has also influenced Eastern religious traditions such as Jainism, Tibetan traditions, Daoism, and the Japanese Shintō tradition.

Tantric sex, which is one aspect of the overarching Tantra system and perhaps the most popular facet of Tantra in Western culture, is a form of sexual connection aimed to increase intimacy, connect with the divine nature in all people participating, and create a mind-body connection that can lead to powerful orgasms of the body and/or spirit. The modern Urban Tantra movement, based out of New York City but with an international following, was founded and continues to be facilitated by Barbara Carrellas. Her first book *Urban Tantra: Sacred Sex for the Twenty-First Century* was the first Queer, Transgender, and BDSM-friendly Tantra book to embrace those identities as a founding premise, which was indeed revolutionary as Tantra in the United States had up until then been based almost solely on binary feminine energy and binary masculine energy with little mention of anything but heteronormative, non-Kinky sexual congress. The Urban Tantra

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community—comprised of spiritual seekers, many of whom are a part of ARC demographics—offers courses for beginners in sacred Tantra; advanced workshops; and full retreats and certification training programs to educate professional sex workers, health and mental health professionals, medical doctors, and other healers in touch and/or no-touch tantric work for the benefit of their clients. It the first training program of its kind to embrace Genderqueerness (Appendix I) as a recognized identity.

V. Theological

My study “Understanding the Spiritual and Faith Community Needs of People in Alternative Relationships” was grounded in the theological concept of wholeness—resolving the illusion of self versus other (His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 2009). This concept is integral to the foundations and practices of several world religions including Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. In Buddhism the four immeasurable qualities of enlightenment are achieving authentic (1) loving kindness, (2) compassion, (3) joy, and (4) acceptance toward both self and others (Kraus, 2008) as the idea of separation of self and others is purely mistaken (Kornfeld, 2010).

As pertinent to this phenomenological study of the ARC, Progressive and Liberal religious communities tend to approach the idea of “inclusion” with the assumption that it means extending a welcome to strangers, i.e., bringing new members or participants into the community. This assumption is incomplete in that it manifests the illusion of “the other”—that the suppressed and ignored are elsewhere, rather than already present within the faith community.

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In Buddhism, the term *anattā* (Pali) or *anātman* (Sanskrit) refers to the doctrine of "non-self," that there is no unchanging, permanent self—that all human identity is fluid and that all humans are interconnected:

"When we look into the question of self and identity in spiritual practice, we find it requires us to understand two distinct dimensions of no self and true self. When the Buddha confronted the question of identity on the night of his enlightenment, he came to the radical discovery that we do not exist as separate beings. He saw into the human tendency to identify with a limited sense of existence. Then he discovered that this belief in an individual small self is a root illusion. It causes suffering and removes us from the freedom and mystery of life. He described this as interdependent arising" (Kornfield, 2010)

The effective extension of communitarian and organizational belonging to the ARC requires clergy and faith communities getting past this assumption, i.e., that persons in Alternative Relationships are somehow outside the known community, faceless outsiders or others. It requires that clergy and faith community leadership develop understandings of the ARC experience that will not inadvertently alienate the very people that religious organizations explicitly wish to welcome, or overlook a population that religious communities prefer not to outright acknowledge due to biases, misinformation, lack of awareness, or deeply rooted faith-based tribalism.

The reader may tend to approach this project with the assumption that the ARC are to be theologically treated as lost or rejected sheep and that addressing their needs should be rooted in theological issues of fairness and respectfully treating the oppressed, or the

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stranger. There is, of course, considerable theology concerning compassion for the outsider, e.g., Leviticus 19:33-34:

When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

This may be superficially plausible, since the presence of most segments of the ARC in mainstream faith communities appears to be vanishingly small if not absent. As noted above in Chapter One of this demonstration project,^{vi} however, it is a statistical probability that the ARC is already present in faith communities. Accordingly, the theology of wholeness upon which this demonstration project was based was not about inviting or including the “other” or making room for the “stranger.” Rather, this project posed the need to acknowledge and understand the experience of a part of the faith community that was already there—an integral if unacknowledged part of the body faithful and not alien to it—that is paradoxically suffering in silence, even within Liberal and Progressive faith environments that perceive themselves as Affirming or Inclusive. This is contrary to the very term community, the root of which is “common,” meaning all or everyone.

Instead of Leviticus, which addresses, in effect, codes of conduct pertaining to Inclusionism, it was more pertinent to my study to examine the theological concept of wholeness by referring to 14th Century Muslim theology, specifically the Persian

^{vi} Chapter 1 Sections on “Current Data on Alternative Relationships in the U.S.” and “Historical Context: 21st Century Sacred Sexuality Movement”.

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theologian, philosopher, and poet Hafiz,^{vii} whose iconic writings challenged the divisiveness of doctrine and narrow standards of behavior and conduct then imposed by the religious ruling class. In particular, Hafiz's poem entitled "Once A Young Woman Said to Me" makes a point that addresses the illusory oppositions of self and other, acceptable versus pariah, member versus stranger:

Once a young woman said to me
'Hafiz, what is the sign of someone who knows God?'

I became very quiet,
and looked deep into her eyes,
then replied,

'My dear, they have dropped the knife.
Someone who knows God has dropped
the cruel knife

that most so often use upon their tender self
and others.'

The knife to which Hafiz refers is the cutting edge of condemnation and expulsion. It is the cutting apart of wholeness into asserted acceptable and unacceptable attributes, the false severing of populations into "us" and "them." Those with knowledge of the Divine have moved beyond these harmful, false divisions, Hafiz suggests. Put more universally, when you turn the knife on others, you are actually turning it on yourself, and in turning it on yourself you are turning it on your connection to the Divine. Hafiz's insight that the heart of Divine inspiration and authentic wholeness is to be found in acceptance and gentleness toward the self as other and the other as self, rather than in harsh

^{vii} Khwāja Shams-ud-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfeẓ-e Shīrāzī (1325-1390), known by his pen name Hafez and as "Hafiz", was a Persian poet who wrote about ecstasy of the spirit and the flesh and targeted religious hypocrisy. Hafiz's works continue to be a staple in Iranian homes. He continues to be one of the most beloved poets of the Persians, and is considered by many—from different cultures—to be one of the seven literary wonders of the world. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe both agreed. As Emerson said of Hafiz: "He fears nothing. He sees too far, he sees throughout; such is the only man I wish to see or be." And Emerson gave Hafiz that grand and famous compliment, "Hafiz is a poet for poets."

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condemnation, has a seemingly incongruous origin. It was penned during the almost inconceivably chaotic, violent and divisive crossroads of the Hundred Years War and the devastation of the Black Plague. Hafiz composed his paeon to wholeness when world civilization was collapsing in on itself, awash in death and murderous tribalism.

Something approaching a like context exists with respect to the ARC, in that our society is struggling with an historical legacy of stigmatizing and at times violent suppression of relationship minorities. Hints of this past can be found in the English language. For example, the derogatory term “flaming faggot”, as applied to gay men, has roots in the fiery punishments meted out by the Inquisition to nonconformists and heretics. It is thought that the origin of the term “fagot” (literally, a bundle of sticks) as applied to homosexuals arose from the Spanish practice, during the burning of witches, to drench homosexuals in oil and set them ablaze, and use the burning bodies as kindling—a “flaming faggot”—to light the fire that would vanquish an accused witch, usually a woman. Turning the cruel knife on the accused female witch and the gay man was thought to be a way to enhance the morals, virtues, and holiness of the rest of the community.

This sentiment was carried into early colonial America where there was tendency to condemn homosexuality as occult and was punishable by expulsion from the community, and at times extended up to capital punishment by burning at the stake (Crompton, 1976). Diverse criminal penalties in Colonial America also extended to people convicted of other types of relations and expressions outside of mainstream model, such as masturbation, anal sex, oral sex, and heterosexual fornication outside of the monogamous marital union (Crompton, 1976).

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This is the forgotten but nonetheless unconsciously present heritage of the condemnation of people whose sexualities and relationships fall outside of the approved narrow mainstream ideal, even if burning at the stake has lost currency in the United States. Given this context, Hafiz's message of wholeness as true spiritual ascension via unity and compassion to self and perceived others has clear theological applicability even today: overlooking the various parts of the whole community wounds the fabric of the community as a whole.

A third, more contemporary religious source for this project, which was informed by the theological concept of wholeness and resolving the illusion of self versus other, or false binary thinking, was modern Queer Theory, a field of scholarship and activism that emerged in the 1990's in reaction to the rigidly dualistic male-female thinking that undergirded much of 1970's Feminism (Jagose, 2010). Particularly applicable here was the recent and still developing branch of Queer Theory known as Queer Theology. This field includes the religious scholarship of Episcopal priest The Reverend Elizabeth Edman, whose concept of her theological book "Queer Virtue" asserts that "to queer" means to rupture false binaries and polarities that lead to otherings and animosities in faith communities rather than communal harmony. Applying this Queer theory concept to my research on the wider ARC, ignoring or cutting out people in Alternative Relationships results in spiritual and faith communities falling deeper into the illusion of its self-perceived "oneness" and loses out the vast experience, mental flexibility, spiritual maturity, and the repeated cycles of ascension that come from the deep journey of being an individual in a marginalized relationship minority group. In chapter nine of *Queer Virtue*, Edman writes about the Queer communal experience:

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If the foundational statement of Pride^{viii} is ‘I exist,’ then the foundational statement of Pride in queer community is ‘We exist.’ For the community to be whole and authentic we have to peer into this statement deeply, and literally. We exist as a people with complex lives, with intersecting and hybrid identities. Queering as a discipline demands an appreciation for nuance, for complexity. Queerness in a community demands that we respect the nuance and complexity of one another’s authentic lives. Fortunately we as a people have a knack for this. Recognizing the ways that we queer the binary of male and female probably makes it easier for us to comprehend other kinds of people who are also intersectional and hybrid in their identities. Because we are born into families that span every race, religion, nation, and socioeconomic status, our community is inherently diverse. The art of queering therefore both obliges and facilitates our ability to declare that ‘we exist’ in all our complexity.

Reverend Edman describes Jesus as a queer being, meaning a rupturer of false binaries (Edman, 2017). That is, Jesus was not human or divine (in the ordinary opposition), but Jesus was human and divine; Jesus was masculine and feminine; alive and then dead and then alive again, thus queering the biggest binary of all. Edman reads the Bible as suggesting that Jesus walked the world in holiness and enlightenment—and in controversy—because all of Jesus’s parts were fully integrated, the spurious exile and ignoring of diverse parts of all of God’s children utterly resolved within Jesus to the point of total and ultimate spiritual ascension.

^{viii} Pride refers to LGBTQAI+ Pride

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Bringing this to the optics of the theology of wholeness as it applies to the modern day faith community, the point is that excluding a part of the community, such as the various segments of the ARC, through actively stigmatizing or exiling, or passively ignoring the presence and experiences of those in Alternative Relationships, does not strengthen the community nor lead it toward some sort of holier, more Divinely-connected condition. Rather, it shrinks and weakens the community and creates faulty indicia of morality, in which mainstream participants feel like they are fulfilling their communities' holy values of openness or affirmation when in fact they are unwittingly engaged in the reinforcement of the present condition.

As faith communities and diverse wisdom paths lead the way in issuing statements of acceptance of people in certain types of relationship demographics, it is imperative, among other things, to count the entirety of the ARC, with its diverse cultures, communities, and constellations, among that firmament and to understand what the ARC's spiritual and communal needs, realities, and hopes are, if policies, statements, and sentiments of benevolence and egalitarianism are to become living realities. No segment of humanity should be alien to a fully functioning faith community. The excision of a part weakens the whole, regardless of whether Hafiz's cruel knife cuts with intention or through inadvertence and lack of knowledge.

VII. Clinical

"Understanding the Spiritual and Faith Community Needs of People in Alternative Relationships" was grounded in the clinical concept of all parts belonging to the whole as

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highlighted in Schwartz's Internal Family Systems (IFS) Theory and Kohut's Self Psychology.

Notwithstanding the use of the word "family," IFS is a tool for understanding the individual psyche as a collection of aspects, or parts, each of which serves a function on behalf of the Self. IFS addresses the interaction among these different parts by identifying them and examining their movements, roles, and purposes. These diverse parts include, among other things, exiled aspects of the self that cause painful emotions such as shame, together with more managerial parts that try to control and protect the individual from experiencing those wounded feelings (Schwartz, 1995).

These sub-personalities are often at war with each other—indeed, in their attempt to keep psychological distress at bay they frequently exacerbate rather than resolve internal conflict. This conflict obscures connection to the natural Self, where psychological peace and wholeness can be found (Kelly, 2015). Put another way, like Muslim poet and philosopher Hafiz (see previous section on Theology), IFS challenges dualistic oppositions and conflict, e.g., between positive and negative aspects of the self, or the spurious divide between "self" and "other," and posits that such perceived divisions serve to wound and weaken the psychological ecosystem.

The ideal "Self" in IFS refers to the confident compassionate, loving, balanced, enlightened, and whole core of the individual—the part that remains untouched by pain, controversy, wounds, and defenses. IFS focuses on healing the wounded parts and restoring mental balance by changing internal dynamics to create calm and harmony between the parts and the whole (Schwartz, 2015). In short, IFS seeks to reconcile and re-unite the disparate parts of the internal community so that together they may uncover

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the pure, uninjured, natural Self. At the core of the IFS model is not a state or a part or the human ego, but is rather the unity of consciousness, the whole. It is the open-hearted awareness in IFS that us versus them is illusory, or that one part or facet of a person is exiled and therefore one can pretend to a certain extent that it does not exist anymore.

When one acknowledges and makes a place of honor for all parts of the Self and chooses not to turn the cruel knife on the purported other—or with regard to IFS, the othered, exiled, or ignored parts of one's internal life—then wholeness, functionality, and optimal mental and spiritual cohesion may be achieved. This phenomenology study of the experiences and needs of the ARC asserts that this principle may be applied to the psycho-spiritual context, i.e. that we are all a part of God's body and, in turn, God's body requires the needs and experiences of each person, even those in ignored or exiled human-made subcategories/subgroups, must be thoroughly understood and fully incorporated so that they may serve as the integral parts of the wider community that they are and foster a more harmonized body religious.

Secondly, this study of the ARC incorporated the Self Psychology work of Kohut. Self Psychology's central insight and methodology is that the subjective experiences of the individual in psychoanalytic treatment are of inherent value in understanding how they function and what they need to clear a path to the true self/internal balance (Kohut, 1985). This central insight of Self Psychology supported the phenomenological method used in this study of the ARC which proceeded from the assumption that the exploration of the subjective experiences and faith-oriented needs and aspirations from the point of view of individuals in the ARC are crucially important in order for faith communities to

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develop knowledge and effective ministry to meet the spiritual needs of this portion of their communities.

Kohut's Self Psychology describes individual self-awareness as being defined as the self looking inward at oneself—rather than looking outward at what to exclude or relegate or ignore, including emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. According to Kohut, these parts cannot be discovered by anyone else and must come from the individual articulating their own experience (Kohut, 1985). In like manner, my study aims to hear from persons in the ARC about their own journeys, without applying preconceived theories, assumptions, or standards.

Kohut explained that the acceptance of people not like you, or whom you perceive are not like you in some way, is difficult for narcissistic individuals, as well as for narcissistic societies, systems, and communities to digest. Kohut posited that people tend to feel safe when they perceive or project that others are like them based on narcissistic criterion, called Twining/Alterego, upon which he formulated the idea of Mirroring (Kohut, 1985). In this type of transference, others serve as a mirror that reflects back a sense of self-worth and value. Mirroring transference involves use of the affirming and positive responses of others to see positive traits within the self. Individuals that comprise houses of worship and faith communities can collectively fall into this type of transference when issuing statements of acceptance, welcome, and inclusion. The positive response or praise for making these statements may be experienced as a positive emotion/self-concept as having behaved morally, but it goes no deeper than that and no one was really helped. Further, if there is not even a little bit of authentic mirroring of understanding, love, and welcome by community leadership, people in

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Alternative Relationships are going to naturally assume that they do not belong or that the community feels poorly toward them.

Add to this Kohut's idea of idealizing, that "individuals need people who will make them feel calm and comfortable. An example of this can be seen in children who run to a parent for comfort after falling and being injured. The external other is idealized as somebody who is calm and soothing when one cannot provide that on their own" (GoodTherapy, 2016). This means that people have a need to cling to something familiar and overlook the people that are controversial. Clergy and community elders are often idealized and serve as parental figures and figures of comfort. If that idealized person does not explicitly treat persons from the diverse corners of the ARC as one of their own, equal in the eyes of the parent figure, how would it then be possible for that population to feel anything but exiled, ignored, unwanted, or unsafe?

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Chapter 2 – Approach and Procedures: Steps of Carrying Out this Project

I. Methods: Narrative Research Qualitative Study

There is a need for the ARC to be afforded access to affirming spiritual and faith communities, and to express, in their own words and through their own cultural lens, what this means to them. Their spiritual, faith and religious experiences are both vitally needed and almost entirely absent from published literature. I investigated this by conducting a qualitative phenomenological study of the ARC via one-to-one interviews with the purpose of identifying themes and common experiences pertaining to spirituality and faith community.

It was important for me to recognize that the ARC is not homogenous and that the term Alternative Relationship is purposefully broad (Pitagora, 2016). Not to say that there are no commonalities between these identities and communities (Appendices I, II, VI), but each group and sub-group has its own culture, its own history, its own traditions, and its own practices, values, and collective experiences. As a result of practical limitations in the scope of this project, and because so little research has been done on the ARC as a whole, this study focused on only one branch of the ARC to begin with. I chose to center this introductory, exploratory study on people who are in or have been in relationships where Kink/BDSM/Leather was an important part of that connection. The diversity of relationship configurations found within that demographic group is vast and varied. As not to limit my research only to people who fulfill the mainstream model of a relationship implying a romantic or sexual partnership, and so that my research would include the experiences of asexual and aromantic persons as well as people whose relationship needs are met in part or in full by communal connections, I extended my

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definition of relationships in this study to encompass dynamics, partnerships (romantic and non-romantic), households, polycules, enclaves, communities, friendships, or packs where Kink, BDSM, and/or Leather is an important or integral part of that connection.

Purposive sampling, a widely used in qualitative research tool for the identification and selection of cases related to the phenomenon of interest, was implemented in my requesting volunteer interviewees via New York City area Kink, BDSM, and Leather organizations, Kink, BDSM, and Leather spirituality groups, online forums, bookstores, sex stores, and events, and practitioners and associations for Kink-positive advocacy.

Qualitative studies are used when:

a problem or issue needs to be explored; we need a complex detailed understanding of the issue; and we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher the participants of a study (Creswell, 2007, p. 39).

Since there has been limited inquiry into the faith and spiritual community needs of persons who identify as Kink, BDSM, and/or Leather, and who have diverse relationships within that culture and its sub-communities, a qualitative study was appropriate to explore the perceptions, needs, and experiences of people in this group. However, qualitative studies can take many forms (Creswell, 2018). Page 76 of John Creswell's publication "Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches" describes that the purpose of a phenomenological investigation is to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence." In this research, a phenomenological investigation was used to understand the lived experience of 6-10 persons who identify as Kink, BDSM, and/or Leather.

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A phenomenological investigation had several philosophical assumptions that support the method. The reality of the experience for persons in the Kink/Leather/BDSM communities was interpreted through the meaning of the experience for the participant. In order to document this properly, the researcher had to “suspend all judgments about what is real until they are founded on a more certain basis” (Creswell, 2007). Collective themes are those that occur across a group of participants who are part of or experience a phenomenon. There were both collective and individual themes that emerged from analysis of the interviews in this study. A significant amount of data was collected during these interviews, so I organized it by using the following: (1) Bracketing, which is the process of identifying and acknowledging any preconceived beliefs, opinions or notions on the part of the researcher about the phenomenon being researched (Tufford, 2010);

(2) Intuition, which requires that I become immersed in the study and the phenomenon and that I remain open to the meaning of the phenomenon as described by those that are experiencing it (Levinus, 1995); (3) Analysis, which is the process of evaluating data and it involves my becoming immersed in the rich, descriptive information and using processes such as thematic coding (Gibbs 2007). Coding is a qualitative analysis that involves recording or identifying passages of text that are linked by a common theme or idea allowing the researcher to index the text into categories and therefore establish a “framework of thematic ideas about it” (Gibbs 2007); (4) Description—the goal is to examine any themes that may arise in the interviews that can then be used to describe the experience from the perspective of those that lived it, which will then allow me to describe and define the phenomenon and communicate it to readers of this study.

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Margaret Meade is one of the best-known phenomenologists and this study adopted her style of entering a specific community and documenting the words and experiences of the communities she was studying from their own point of view, rather than applying a preconceived lens or applying the values of the majority population to a minority or relatively unknown segment. Utilizing phenomenology, my study sought to explore the following topics: (1) What are the common themes that emerge with regard to religion, faith community, and spirituality as experienced by persons whose identity markers include being under the umbrella of the ARC; (2) what do people in the ARC need to feel that they belong and are an equal part of a faith community and/or house of worship.

While it assumed that I could bracket my judgments throughout the research, there was also an assumption that the Kink/Leather/BDSM-identifying participants would willingly and accurately report their experiences during the study. Creswell explained in *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* that delimitations address how a study will be narrowed in scope. My study focused on 8 people, all adults over the age of eighteen from the New York City area (specifically Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, The Bronx, Staten Island, Yonkers, and Nassau County, and Northern New Jersey) and people who are in, or have previously been in a relationship (platonic, familial, communal, sexual, romantic, etc ...) where BDSM/Kink/Leather is an important part of that connection. The reason that this study specified that the participants must be in or have previously been in a relationship of that type and identify Kink/Leather/BDSM as an important part of those connections is to improve the odds that the sample group was from within Kink/Leather/BDSM culture and sub-communities, rather than people who like to engage recreationally in the

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stereotypes of kinky sex (paddles, fuzzy handcuffs, blindfolds) but who do not hold Kink/Leather/BDSM as an important part of their lives, identities, or relationships, nor identify with aspects of the culture, values, histories, and experiences of Kink/Leather/BDSM communities, subgroups, and enclaves.

The challenge of carrying out a phenomenology study on people who identify a connection to Kink/Leather/BDSM is that the threat to the safety of people in that community is very real (Appendix 5). Thus, in order for this study to have happened at all, it was imperative that I disclosed in my invitation to participate in this study (Appendix 7—pending) that I am an ordained reverend and licensed psychotherapist whose ministry and psychotherapy practice is affirming of people in Alternative Relationships and affirming of people identify as being in a sex, sexuality, and/or gender minority group.

The research for this study was limited to a snapshot of the participants' experiences through one 45-90 minute interview per person. This study was designed to capture the lived experiences of 6-10 Kink/BDSM/Leather-identifying persons from the New York City Metropolitan area. While a longitudinal study of the Kink/BDSM/Leather culture in the future will provide even deeper dimensions of data, through multiple interviews this study aimed to understand the participants' perceptions to date.

Through interviews with participants in the study I collected personal accounts about the spiritual, religious, social, relationship, and faith experiences of adults from the Kink/BDSM/Leather subgroups of the ARC and assessed for themes and commonalities. The narrative interview format helped me to collect information from the point of view of the participants themselves, not utilizing a set of pre-written questions, thus avoiding

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distortion or limiting of the subjects' experiences, needs, and perceptions (Strother, 2009). Accordingly, I approached this project in an open-minded fashion and with open-ended questions that allowed for the subjects to discuss their own experiences from the point of view of the lens of their Kink/BDSM/Leather identity marker and/or activities (Appendix VIII). I was not looking for participants to answer specific pre-written questions, but rather I sought to gather information about some of the phenomena linking identity and spirituality and spiritual community. This open-ended method (Appendix VII) seemed particularly well suited to phenomenological inquiry into this largely private and under researched population.

II. Outreach to Prospective to Participants

The first step for carrying out this project was to send electronic outreach invitations inviting people who fit the following criteria to respond:

- 1) Identify Kink, BDSM, and/or Leather as an important or integral part of their lives.
- 2) Be in, or have previously been in, a relationship, dynamic, partnership, household, home, polycule, family, enclave, community, or pack where Kink, BDSM, and/or Leather was an important or integral part of that connection.
- 3) Identify currently as having some level of interest in spirituality, a spiritual practice, or a particular faith tradition, or used to be interested in spirituality, a spiritual practice, or a particular faith tradition.
- 4) Live in or around the New York City area in: Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, Bronx, Staten Island, Nassau County, Yonkers, or Northern New Jersey.
- 5) Be 18 years of age or over.

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I disseminated my electronic flyer on FetLife^{ix}, specifically to 7 faith, spirituality, or NYC area-specific online groups within that social media network; and to leadership of the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom^x. I also sent the flyer to 5 local New York City area Kink, BDSM, and Leather organizations that are not named in this study due to their leaderships' concerns for the safety and privacy of their members. I also reached out to 2 BDSM sex stores that serve the New York City area Kink, BDSM, and Leather community; and 2 underground sex clubs for adults that are not named in this paper due to the proprietors' concerns for the safety and privacy of their members (Appendix V).

III. Participant RSVP, Confidentiality, and Consent

I invited prospective subjects to participate in this study by sending out an electronic flyer with an electronic RSVP function (see: www.kinkspiritualitystudy.org). Applicants were able to RSVP in the affirmative via the contact form portion of the electronic flyer. I contacted respondents via email to set up a meeting time and offer to meet with them via Zoom (because it is HIPAA compliant), in their homes, or in-person at Kink/BDSM/Leather safe spaces (sex-positive bookstore, 2 erotica stores, underground adult sex club).

Participants were given a Consent Form (Appendix VII) to read, fill out, and sign, granting their consent to be involved in this project, making it clear that they can withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason or no reason, informing them of

^{ix} Fetlife is a social networking website that serves people interested in BDSM, fetishism, and kink.

^x The National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF) is an American sex-positive advocacy and educational organization founded in 1997. NSCF conducts research, has resource directories, and advocates on behalf of individuals and communities with respect to sexuality and relationship composition, specifically for tolerance and non-discrimination of those so identified, as well as education for adults.

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what will happen with their data, and informing them of how it will be stored, as well as other parameters of their participation in this project.

I brought audio recording gear to interviews, or if the interview was online I utilized the audio-only record function. I conducted the online interviews via Zoom because it is an approved HIPAA compliant forum. Zoom was also useful because if participants were not comfortable with providing me with a visual image of themselves due to safety concerns (Appendix V) they had the option of setting their Zoom account to block their image, although all 3 participants who were interviewed via Zoom elected to show their visual image during their interviews.

The success of this project depended on my being able to ensure the confidentiality and safety of the participants. I informed all participants that their voices would be disguised with voice-altering audio software post-recording to protect their anonymity when it was time for me to send the audio to a transcription service. Interviewees were listed by aliases, not by their names.

IV. Data Analysis

The qualitative methodology utilized in this study offered a diverse means of data analysis. A modified version of Ely's procedure for qualitative data analysis and theme construction (Eli, 1990) developed by Matias was used to guide the analysis for this study. With qualitative methodology, and in particular with regard to a phenomenological study of persons in a little known, largely covert minority demographic where published research is limited, data analysis occurred during the interviews I conducted, in that I remained open to themes and topics discussed by the

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participants, and also parallel to data collection. As each interview was completed, run through voice modification software for the purpose of an extra layer of confidentiality, and then transcribed into text form, I immersed myself in the interviews, reviewed the field notes taken during the interviews, and reviewed the transcripts to look for themes, such as statements, behaviors, feelings, topics, experiences, needs, desires, and ways of thinking that were repetitive. I also looked for topics that stood out on their own merit. As topics, events, and patterns were highlighted from the overall data, key words and phrases were employed to identify them. These were tentative coding categories, representing recurring ideas in the data, and were drawn from repeated reviews of the data, and the relationships between the initial impression and tentative categories studied and clarified, and refined. As coding categories emerged, I returned to the data to examine them for their fit into the tentative categories and to explore new impressions. Respondents' verbatim statements were drawn from transcripts and listed under appropriate categories to link data and coding categories (Ely, 1986). At that point I was able to make comparisons between participants with regard to the similarities and differences in their lived experiences, emotions, ideas, and perceptions.

As in any research paradigm, the qualitative researcher must be concerned with maintenance of scientific rigor (Leung, 2015), and the challenge to this is researcher bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) resulting in overlooking of data not going in the direction of their preconceived ideas. The following techniques were used to maintain trustworthiness in the present study (Ely et al., 1991):

- 1) Reflexivity: I reviewed interview transcripts and in-depth field notes in a recursive fashion following the completion of each interview before going on to the next one to

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sift out themes, note analytic thoughts about the data, and to record my own impressions, concerns, reactions, and biases. This method helped me to reflect upon the methodology and interview data, document analytic decisions and interpretations of the data, and monitor researcher biases

- 2) **Negative cases:** Negative instances force the researcher to reconsider and redefine categories and themes to account for the data (Ely et al., 1991). Transcripts were systematically searched for data to disconfirm findings. Such data then served to refine categories and themes. This negative case was discussed as a variation on a more common theme.
- 3) **Working with my doctoral advisor** to present and discuss the categories, themes, and hypotheses throughout the research and analysis process. My doctoral advisor critically examined my ideas, my perceptions, possible biases and assumptions, and the category development during the course of my data analysis.
- 4) **Throughout my doctoral studies and throughout my research,** I attended a monthly clergy professional and spiritual development group. We have been meeting as a group since 2016 each month. The group is an Interfaith/Interspiritual multi-ethnic, multicultural, multigenerational, multiracial group of ordained clergypersons from diverse wisdom paths including Buddhist, Baptist, Sufi, Earth-based, Christian, Jewish, and Yogic path. Participants in this group span diverse mainstream and Alternative relationship and sexuality demographics. The purpose of our group is to present spiritual and ministry-related projects and foster raw discussions, explorations, and feedback of each other's biases, discomforts, knowledge gaps, and prejudices (both hidden and obvious), transference, and countertransference, so that

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we may provide ministry and conduct research as effectively as possible. During the course of my interviews and data analysis, I utilized this group to help me process my own biases and preconceived ideas so that these factors would not influence my questions and subsequent analysis of the interviews.

VI. Applicants to Study/Selecting Participants

In total, there were 48 respondents to the invitation to apply to participate in this study. 34 of them were viable candidates. The other 14 were disqualified from the study—7 were disqualified when they noted on their participation forms that they lived outside of the geographical area of the study; 5 other applicants posed a potential ethical conflict; 2 others applied after I had already concluded interviews for this study. I selected 10 participants at random via lottery from the 34 viable applicants for this study via lottery. 8 of them agreed to be interviewed.

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Chapter 3: The Interviews

I. Participant Demographics

The 8 participants in this study spanned diverse gender, ethnic, racial, religious, sexual orientation, sexual practices, age, disability, and relationship statuses. Participants' self-identified markers in these areas—which were expressed organically through the course of their interview and not through any type of prepared survey questions on my part—often spanned more than one category per demographic section:

Table 1
Ages of Participants

18-24 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65+ years
1	3	1	1	2	0

Table 2
Ethnicities and Cultures Represented

Native American	Black	African American	African	Ashken- azic	Undeter- mined	Creole	Caribbean	White
1	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	4

Table 3
Current Wisdom Paths, Faiths, and Religions Represented

African Indigenous Faiths	Baha'i	Interfaith/ Inter- spiritual	Christianity	Goddess Path	Earth Based	No Religion or Path	Judaism	Atheist	Ancestor
2	1	3	3	2	2	3	2	2	2

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Table 4

Family of Origin Wisdom Paths, Faiths, Religions Represented

Secular Jewish	Fundamentalist Christian	Progressive Christian	Interfaith/ Interspiritual	Non Spiritual	Agnostic	Atheist
2	3	1	2	1	1	2

Table 5

Present Involvement in Faith Communities as Defined by Participants

Participates in one or more established faith communities	Actively looking to join an organized house of worship	Has no interest in practicing spirituality in a community or organized setting	Has spiritual needs met in part or in full by communities that do not identify as faith or spiritual settings
4	1	3	6

Table 6

Self-Identified Gender Identities Represented

Transgender	Gender Nonbinary	Cisgender male	Cisgender female	Gender Questioning	Gender-queer	Not Applicable
1	2	2	3	1	2	1

Table 7

Self-Identified Sexual Orientations Represented (Other than Kink/BDSM/Leather)

Gay	Lesbian	Bisexual	Queer	Heteroflexible	Questioning/ Exploring	Asexual	Does Not Identify with Orientation Descriptors
1	2	1	3	3	1	1	2

Table 8

Self-Described Current Relationship or Partnership Statuses Represented

Mono-gamous Partnership	Open Relationship and has primary partner	Not in a Relationship	More Than 1 Primary Partner	Is part of a poly-cule	Poly-amorous	Platonic Partnership	Not Oriented to partnerships
1	3	2	3		1	1	1

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Table 9
Employment Statuses Represented

Presently unemployed	Presently employed
3	5

Table 10
Self-Identified Disability Statuses Represented

Current Mental Health disability	Current physical disability or mobility challenge	Did not mention having a disability
2	1	6

II. Introduction to Interviews

The section is organized by participants' names and highlights segments of the interviews that encompass wider topics such as participants' spiritual journeys, Kink/BDSM/Leather journeys, instances of affirmation or marginalization in faith or non-faith communities, and insights that may be pertinent to faith community leadership. Participants' words are at times paraphrased and merged to organize and facilitate the presentation, and at other times block quotes are used. Participants' names and other identifying information were changed to ensure confidentiality.

The section at the end of the 8th interview discusses and categorizes the 7 deeper, more specific themes found within these topics and interviews.

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Participant #1 – Bax. Bax engages in aspects of consensual dominance and submission in Kink play. I asked how Bax identified on the Kink continuum, meaning did he identify as a Dominant, a Leatherperson, a submissive partner, etc. ... Bax replied:

I'm not thrilled about the labels because I think they are limiting. As a [person of his religion] I'm just not thrilled about the idea of ranking people or limiting people to being just one thing or just some other thing. Humans are more complicated than that.

What Attracted Bax to Participate in the Study. I asked each participant the same opening question, "What attracted you to want to participate in this study?" Bax responded:

My religious health and spiritual life is very important to me. The importance of God, regardless of the specific flavor. I'd have to say that it is very important to me as far as my own survival. I'd be dead without [my faith and spiritual practices] I want to now be able to offer up something to the people who are coming up behind me. They should know that you can be religious and Kinky, not religious or Kinky.

Spiritual or Faith Journey. Bax was raised in a religiously secular family of origin. As a young adult seeking answers, emotional healing, centeredness, and spiritual fulfillment, Bax embarked on an in-depth journey to explore his faith longings. He became a practicing member of a global faith tradition (that is not named in this study as to protect Bax's identity) and continues to be an active member and participant of that wisdom path.

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Bax described that what spoke to him most about his chosen faith was “the unifying nature of it all.” He examined several faith traditions prior to that, but that those paths seemed divisive and did not appeal to him. In his interview, he discussed at length the egalitarian core values of the his faith “and the set of [his religion’s] social teaching in its level of equality of the sexes, the equality of races, and universal literacy” that most drew Bax the most to become a seeker in that tradition.

Kink, Leather, and/or BDSM journey. Bax knew that he had sadomasochistic erotic leanings as a teenager, and he also knew that mainstream American society required of him to bury and repress those feelings and to never admit to them. Bax shared that no one ever explicitly told him that kinky feelings, relationships, or practices were bad or wrong, but that in the American culture in which he was raised anything that was not the stereotypical relationship norm was shameful or even illegal.

Beginning a few years ago, Bax decided to explore these lifelong kinky feelings and to not leave those parts of himself unexamined or relegated to a state of shame:

I’m single ... and I’m like okay, I’m starting to get this about myself, and so I am probably going to go get my feet wet ... I’m still trying to navigate like who I am, and what I think, and how this all works. I think coming out as a Kinky person, it’s really a need to get to know myself.

Bax also discussed how his religion and its ethical values influence his Kink/BDSM relationships, encounters, and friendships:

[My religion is] about equality and egalitarianism. I know I bring it into how I relate with whom I am playing with casually, or happen to be in a relationship with. Even though [my faith tradition] is not keen about sex outside of marriage,

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I know that the faith influence is there. I know that anybody who has any kind of intimate friendship with me knows about what my spiritual values are as part of my knowing who I am. I don't conceal it in any way. I really consider [my religion's principles of egalitarianism] in all of my interactions.

He went on to describe how his commitment to his faith manifests in his erotic and/or physical Kink activities. When he was younger,

When I was younger I felt pressure to be sexually promiscuous. [As a member of his particular faith community] there is that pressure off my shoulders as promiscuity is frowned upon. It was a relief for me. So, I play only with people who I want to. I feel in my [kink activities] I can say "this is what I want", "this is what I don't want." Because of my religious values, I will not be pressured into doing something that feels inauthentic to me. I apply the same to my partners. Nothing will happen that feels wrong or inauthentic to them. I may be tying them up and flogging them, but it is with mindfulness and consent. I'm not "above" them as a human being, even if I'm topping them in that particular moment.

The experience of affirmation in a community setting. Bax described two moments that were life changing in terms of feeling completely seen and affirmed in a community context. One was within his formal religious community and the other was an experience within the small local Kink scene in his town. Both experiences had to do with community leadership addressing him directly and explicitly affirming his journey and their taking initiative to convey to him that he belongs.

1) When Bax was early on in his exploration of what would eventually become his

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religion and faith community, he was concerned that he would not belong because he was raised in a different faith tradition. At a gathering of this particular faith community, the spiritual leader, a well-known holyperson whom Bax had not met previously, saw Bax standing in the back of the room, and got up from his seat and approached Bax. Without any prompting the spiritual leader assured Bax that he belongs here, and that his being raised in another faith would not prevent him from also being a full member of this religious community. Bax shared in his interview that this was a life changing moment for him and that he had never felt more affirmed and more seen in his life.

- 2) Bax discovered a small local Kink social group in his town. It was his “social connection ... I was terrified. I was absolutely terrified, and it was like oh goodness when I went there for the first time. I walked in for the first time and [The group leader] was like “Hi, how are you? Yes, you belong here.” This moment validated for him that his Kink desires are normal, that he belongs, and that he can have a social community of people who understand him. He followed up by sharing, “I’ve [recently] met a [kinky partner] who is wonderful and dear and can see me as I am.”

Insights for clergy, spiritual leaders, and community leadership. Bax shared that while his faith tradition is largely egalitarian and the community is based on principles of non-judgment, he has not considered sharing with anyone in that community that he is in an Alternative Relationship demographic. He does not feel that many formal faith communities are ready to understand these concepts, but that he would like for leadership across all faiths to:

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....be clear that [Kink, BDSM, Leather] is not deviant. We've done a very good job of attitude towards homosexuality that evolved incredibly in the last 20 years. It's normal now. [Young people say] I don't understand why people are upset about two guys marrying each other? Who gives a shit?" I have to [say to them] "You have to understand, in my lifetime you could go to jail for being gay." ... they can't believe it, because to them it's normal ... it's ubiquitous. I'm old enough and I've been around enough that I can offer some thoughts on this I don't want anybody to have to go through all of the self-doubt, shame kind of thing [about Kink and BDSM] that I did. That is really what [participating in this interview] is all about for me. I also want to make it clear to people that there's nothing incompatible about faith and being a kinky person, and having a rich spiritual life, whatever that means to you. That's important to me, and that's how I want to be. I want someone coming up behind me to know that it is not unacceptable to have a spiritual life and a Kink life

I asked Bax if he thinks that clergy and more mainstream Liberal and Progressive faith communities are going to become more affirming of people who identify with kink culture or kink relationships:

I honestly don't know if that is going to happen in our lifetime because there is so much taboo associated with it. [Clergy] does not understand that [Kink, Leather, BDSM] is about sharing an experience, even a close spiritual experience in many instances, not about seeking to hurt each other. People from all sorts of faiths are just seeing it as violence. It's sort of like, "Oh so you like violence?" or "You're

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fucked up and you like violence.” These are friendships and romantic relationships.

Participant #2 – Allie. When I asked how Allie how she identifies on the Kink continuum, as in what title, identity, or role she felt applied to her, such as Domina, submissive, Leatherperson, etc ... (Appendix VI), Allie said:

I don't really limit myself to boxes in that or categories in that way. I really just go off of how I connect with a person. I do let them know that Kink is an integral part of my sexuality and personality, so that's not something that is more or less up for discussion I'm like “Yeah that's who I am and I am not going to change that for you”, but I'm very up front about it ... There is always some form of kinkiness involved, not just sexually, but really in the day-to-day interacting.

What Attracted Allie to Participate in the Study.

I liked that you were coming from a place of being a reverend and looking at ...going to places of worship or spirituality and them not being as inclusive or affirming as they should be or that they preach. [This] is very intriguing, because most of the time [non Kinky] people just want the nitty gritty about the [sex acts], but they kind of leave out the spirituality, or where a person who might be dealing certain situations within their sexuality ... That is a very unique study and it was just something that I was like, “Yeah, let's see where this goes.”.. Yeah. It's awesome.

Spiritual or faith journey. Allie discussed her present spiritual identity and practice as deeply personal and that her connection to spiritual forces is intimate. She had been

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involved in organized spiritual communities in the past, but at this point in her life she values her direct relationship with the divine and does not feel the need for a clergy intermediary or to be affiliated with a spiritual community. She also does not feel that it is authentic for her to pick just one descriptor for her spiritual life, as it presently spans several faith influences and encompasses her own belief system:

I don't like the labels. At all. But I guess I definitely walk more of an Earth-based spiritual path. I'm not going to say Wiccan. I'm not going to say Pagan. I'm not going to say monotheistic or polytheistic. I'm just ... Earth-based and I kind of revolve around what spirit, or energy, or deity wants to chat it up with me [My faith] is a personal belief system ... A friend of mine asked me a couple of years ago, was like, "Has your spirituality ever impacted your sexuality or your relationships?" I responded to her then by saying, "No, because my spirituality is mine." I don't compare it. I don't share it. I don't have to explain it ... It is a reflection of myself in a tangible place. No, it's not a group effort.

Allie grew up in a secular home that observed a couple of major holidays. She attended some churches and went to Bible school sometimes, and that she experienced it as more of a social activity than a faith pursuit. She described growing up in a fairly religiously diverse town and was exposed to a plethora of faiths and wisdom paths:

My mother bought me my first Wicca book. I read a lot as a child. I read everything and anything from picking up the Bible or the Quran or the Torah, Wiccan, Pagan, Norse, Egyptian. I had read about a lot of different faiths, and one thing I realized is that they all pretty much preach the same thing. ... so I was like, "Why don't I just interpret it for myself?" I pick and choose from a lot of

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different spiritualities and faith-based practices and kind of formulated my own for it.

Kink, Leather, and/or BDSM journey. Allie described that she has been in the Kink community for several years and started off in the vampire and gothic Alternative Lifestyle scenes, which led her into BDSM. She is sporadically involved in her town's Kink scene, participating in community activities at various times, and she has held jobs related to Alternative communities.

The experience of affirmation in a community setting. Allie discussed feeling generally unimpressed with most communities, including communities within Kink culture and religion due to egos, braggadocio, and people posturing about who knows more or who belongs more. She said that "ego has no place in religion and it has no place in Kink." Allie discussed during her interview her own work in creating and fostering an affirming and egalitarian intentional community-based forum to support members of a certain demographic group (not inherently related to Kink) where participants can:

....come and hold space for each other. Sometimes there would be a topic that we would all discuss ... or sometimes [a participant] would [say] "Hey, I'm having a thing. Can I be held in a community that can maybe shed some light or hold me in a space where I can be heard or feel safe?" ... a place where I could [say] "Yow, help me out here. ...I need a circle of people ...

Allie shared that the forum she created aims to help its participants to feel seen and heard and acknowledged in a small, informal setting. When the topic of what makes an

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affirming community came up during her interview with me, Allie shared with me an example of her less than positive experience when she entered a well-meaning, self-described Progressive and welcoming faith community. She became involved with a religious order (not named in this paper as to protect the participant's identity):

... that was founded on [a certain faith tradition's] beliefs, which I thought was awesome ... I'm totally for like holding space, and holding light, and taking time to meditate ... I really, really liked the fundamentals that the organization was based on ... But there were times that ... It says that it's Inclusive ... but also being a woman of color is something that always seemed to be prevalent ... I know I'm Black. I don't need to be [asked], "How can we stop being so racist?" or "How can we hold space for you?" or "How can we meet your needs?" I'm like, "Hi, I get what you are trying to do, but you can't really put that on me. You gotta have that figured out on your own. I'm here to participate like everyone else, not train you.

Allie further discussed that experience of being a minority person in a self-perceived Inclusive and Progressive faith community:

I made some good friendships out of [that faith community], people I'm still friends with now, but overall I felt ... it's like the road to hell is paved with good intentions ... I think that the issue was that there was a little bit too much acknowledgement that I was there and therefore having me answer for all persons of color ... like I'm the spokespersons for all Black women or Black people.

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Insights for clergy, spiritual leaders, and community leadership. Allie said that she would like for faith community leaders to do their own research and reach out to leaders in various parts of the Alternative Relationship Community to request training and dialogue, rather than make sex, sexuality, gender, and Relationship Alternative people, as well as people in ethnic and racial minority groups, who come to participate in community programs to have to serve as the moral measuring stick for leadership. Allie said, "You are the leader. Your job is to know and to ask some, but not put it all on the person. You are there to serve their spiritual needs, they are not there to serve your lack of information."

Allie would also like to convey to clergypersons that people with Kink, BDSM, or Leather identities:

...are not deviants. I mean, some of us, some of us are blatant, debaucherous heathens, myself included, but I think what I want you to know mostly is that ... everybody I think in some way shape or form has thought about the alternative, whether they act upon it or not and that the people who are open about it are still people. It's the same thing with the Gay Rights Movement or the Trans Movement or the Civil Rights Movement. Just because something is different or out of the norm for maybe a lot of people, it doesn't mean that they are wrong or that they do not deserve the same amount of respect and openness and communication that 'normal people' or 'vanilla' people or whatever receive ... Shut your holy book and open your ears. That's it.

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Participant #3 – Ayana. Ayana accesses spiritual community largely online, and sometimes in-person. They^{xj} are of Christian background and grew up in the Black Church. They are currently on a faith journey of decolonizing themselves and becoming more connected to the pre-Diaspora African faith traditions of their ancestors.

Ayana discussed in our interview that their identity includes Kink and BDSM and also spans several other minority group identity markers encompassing gender, culture, race, body type, disability, relationship configurations, and more. In terms of their Kink self-perception they feel mostly aligned with dominance and submission. They said that their “brain is a switch, but my heart is a sub” (Appendix VI) and that they cannot be so easily categorized. They describe themselves enjoying consensual power exchange (Appendix 6) that involves power differential and consensual physical and emotional masochism.

What attracted Ayana to participate in the study. Ayana shared that what attracted them to participate in the study was:

Just the intersection of Kink and faith and I guess and I would have been, I think, interested regardless ... I am actually almost [several] years into a new spiritual journey. So that kind of helps pique my interest in a way that maybe it wouldn't have before it started. Also, just the fact that Alternative Lifestyles we often, whether it's kink or LGBTQ, non-binary folks like myself, there are not a lot studies about these different groups and especially not about the intersections

^{xj} They is a gender pronoun that people elect to use when they do not feel that she/her/hers or he/his applies to them. It is not a new trend, but rather major dictionaries have recognized singular they as grammatically correct for years, including the Oxford English Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster dictionary. The word “they” has been used as a singular pronoun since at least the 16th century, and some argue it goes back even earlier. The AP Style Guide has even started to allow the usage of singular they in cases where a subject doesn't identify as male or female.

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thereof and our needs and stuff. So a friend of mine, one of my friends on Fetlife actually, I think liked the study or followed it or something or showed interest in it so that's how I found out about it and decided to hopefully contribute something.

Spiritual or faith journey. Ayana identifies as having been raised in the Black church and did not attend church regularly as a child. Later on, when Ayana became a teenager, Ayana started going to a church when a friend invited them. They describe that as being “a very spiritual experience.” Ayana developed close friendships with peers their age at the church and with older members of the faith community. At that time, Ayana identified as cisgender female (Appendix I), but as a teenager they did not feel heterosexual (Appendix I). Ayana's church believed that sexual activity was reserved for marriage, and marriage should be for cisgender, heterosexual couples. Ayana and their mother attended pastoral counseling sessions with the church's clergyperson to help Ayana process trauma suffered as a young child. During these pastoral counseling sessions, Ayana discussed their attraction to girls and was treated by the pastoral counselor for the affliction of “lesbianism”. Ayana was “being taught that lesbianism was something you had to struggle against and fight, so to speak. It was something to be delivered from ... and you commit to God and commit to rejecting that ...”

People “talked about gay and bi in church,” and not in favorable terms, “but Kink never came up.” The church taught its young people that sex was meant for procreation only, so anal sex, oral sex, and any other type of sexual activity should be avoided.

Ayana shared:

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At the time I very much believed in Jesus as the savior, and stuff like that. At the end of the day there's always going to be Christians who don't believe that being Trans, or being Nonbinary, or being bi, or gay, or kinky, or lesbian or what have you is of God.

To this day, Ayana has a family member that still sends articles about people who, through their belief in Jesus, were "cured" of their homosexuality.

A few years ago, Ayana, who had long since left that church of their teen years, developed an interest in pre-African Diaspora traditional religion, faith and religious practices that are rooted in Pre-Colonial African traditions and belief systems. Ayana shared that Black people in America:

...were handed Christianity. That's the faith of [oppressors] and it had been used oppress us into complying. And I thought that I needed to challenge this whole thing in myself. So because of that, I have a lot of friends who are also kind of decolonizing and other Black friends who are decolonizing and trying to find those roots again of pre-colonial faiths ...

Ayana identifies at this point as agnostic, which has been immensely freeing for them to because they feel that where spirituality most resonates with them is through connecting with ancestors and ancestor-based spiritual practices, not with an anthropomorphized godhead. Ayana shared, "that is a very big part of the historic African religion, is being connected to those that come before you, talking to them, communing with them."

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Kink, Leather, and/or BDSM journey. Ayana described having “inklings” around BDSM starting at a young age:

Of course at the time I didn’t have language for it, so I just thought I was really weird and I felt like something was wrong with me and it wasn’t until I got to college that I found the LGBTQ spaces, I was learning not only a lot about the history of Queer folks and Trans folks but also about the different aspects of Kink.

The experience of affirmation in a community setting. During Ayana’s interview, they discussed three experiences in which they felt particularly affirmed by a community:

- 1) In their early 20’s they were part of a group of other seekers exploring their sexuality.

They all went out together to a museum exhibit on homosexuality and queerness in the animal kingdom, and another exhibit on pornography. So as a group “we were all exploring, we were like a team ... it was those type of group experiences that really helped me define my [Kink] journey.”

- 2) Even though Ayana was in a church during their teen years that firmly frowned upon pre-marital sex and LGBTQ identities, Ayana and their friends were assigned an older female mentor whose role was to answer questions about diverse subjects.

Ayana described that this was positive in some ways because they had a go-to person to whom they could ask questions about sexual activity. Ayana recalls that it was meaningful to be able to have an open dialogue with someone in an authority position who was genuinely willing to discuss sexual activities with them in a straightforward and mature manner.

- 3) Ayana is involved in an online spiritual community of Pre-Colonial

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African spiritual seekers and attributes feeling continually affirmed, safe, and welcomed in that space due to the forums moderators and administrators who:

... articulate right up that this is space where everyone is equal, where everyone's humanity is recognized, and that we all come from different experiences and being able to be in a space where folks can have those conversations about how these different [sexual and relationship] aspects relate to their spiritual journeys ... just in the fact that I'm in a spiritual community now where sexuality is generally speaking celebrated. ... recognize that everyone has individual needs and not everyone responds to everything the same way ...

Insights for clergy, spiritual leaders, and community leadership. Ayana discussed feeling that faith leaders of any Progressive or Liberal identifying community need to be the ones to open dialogue about Alternative Relationships and sexualities and to not rely on community members to teach them or to advocate for this to happen, because it will take that relationship minority member out of the role of parishioner and force them to be of service to the clergy. Ayana felt strongly that:

It is important [for clergy and leadership] to establish trust. If you try to just jump right into it, it can seem a little disingenuous, but start building relationships ... with folks who are in those [relationship minority] communities and seeing what their needs are ... what the specific needs are for that specific community, especially taking initiative to reach out to leaders in those [Alternative Relationship] communities on a regular basis.

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Ayana feels that is acceptable and understandable that clergy and faith community leaders make mistakes with regard to people in Alternative Relationships because they are uninformed and nervous, rather than ill intended. Ayana wondered in her interview if perhaps faith community leaders are reluctant to seek education on sex, sexuality, gender, and relationship Alternative populations because they are afraid to misstep and be viewed as being not as Progressive as they would want to be. Ayana suggested that a simple, no stress way to address this issue is for faith community leaders is for them to simply host an event such as a game night or social gathering for Kinky people “where you simply talk to people from those [Alternative Relationship Communities] and acknowledge their existence just by holding the event and showing up.”

Ayana wants faith community leadership to also know that:

The thing is you have to recognize where your ignorance is, and the things you don't know and being able to admit there are things you don't know, and getting that education first as well because ... you don't want little knowledge or zero knowledge ... because that's when you'll have those fuck-ups, because you are asking ignorant questions, or saying ignorant things ... Whereas if you take the time, which is why the walk-don't-run approach is so important, because you take the time to engage with Kink and BDSM community leaders, and learn on your own time, and through various resources ... and have a better understanding of what they are dealing with as a whole community.

Participant #4 – Judah. Judah is a very active participant in a Progressive house of worship in his town, he is a clergyperson (religion not disclosed in this paper as to protect his identity), and is involved in several aspects of that house of worship's direct services

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programming. He is in an open relationship (Appendix II) with his life partner and he engages in sadomasochistic (S&M) play (Appendix VI). He identifies as a switch (Appendix VI), and he generally domms or tops (Appendix VI).

What attracted Judah to participate in the study. Judah shared that what attracted him to participate in the study was:

Well, first of all, I think it's a very interesting topic and I know for a fact that there were some people in my [Progressive church] who were damaged by misunderstandings around this particular issue, like very serious damage around this particular issue, and have very deep wounds to this day because people [in leadership] did not understand that [Kink/BDSM/Leather] is not an aberrant, weird, deviant kind of behavior. That this actually can be very normal and very healthy and very affirming and very positive in a lot of ways for a lot of people. And I'm so very happy to tell that story and live my life very much out loud ... I don't broadcast my [relationships and practices], but if people ask me or if it comes up in conversation, I don't shun the topic.

Judah also said that he feels no conflict between engaging in BDSM and being spiritually oriented:

I have a very enthusiastic sex life and I'm deeply spiritual. These are all things that I don't see any conflict in and I'm so happy to tell my story to someone who is actively seeking out contexts for that conversation.

Spiritual or faith journey. Judah described that his family of origin was not religious or spiritual, but that at a young age Judah chose on his own to attend his town's

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very conservative church, “because I really desperately wanted to be involved with spirituality.” That stopped when he was a teenager and came out as gay and his community needs shifted away from his church and toward connections with others in his sexuality demographic. He was the first person in his conservative community to come out as gay, which was risky in terms of his safety.

Although participation in that church fell away for him because his attentions turned to exploration of his gay identity and gay community “it always remained a part of me. I was always deeply spiritual. I was deeply attracted to spirituality and spiritual occasions and rituals ...”

Kink, Leather, and/or BDSM journey. Judah shared that he was always very curious and wanted to explore his sexuality in ways that were “intriguing and exciting ... I didn’t really come to my formal BDSM kind of stuff oddly until I came into 12-step recovery and then I was looking for something more intense ... and that’s when I stumbled on to the more elaborate scenarios I now engage in” of BDSM and Consensual Power Exchange (Appendix VI).

Judah believes that the divine has a place in all aspects of his life, including his BDSM erotic encounters. He often has the image of [a specific religious figure] present when he engages in BDSM play because he wants a physical representation of the divine in that space:

I believe that God is there ... Because what’s really important for me in that play is to connect with people. I really enjoy trying to make a real connection with people and so within that intense kind of environment, to explore what we enjoy, explore how we can communicate with each other and how we can be with each

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other and to take people to the limits of what they can experience in physical pleasure and take them to the limit of what they can experience as emotional pleasure as well ... and those are all things that I think are important in divinity and I believe that God should be a part of that.

Judah discussed how his spiritual beliefs and inform his ethical values around Kink erotic activities, connections, and relationships, which he described, in summary, as: 1) harm no one; 2) that he is responsible for his partners' safety; 3) that he will not engage in S&M erotic play with someone who is in a relationship where their partner or spouse is not aware of or consenting to the encounter; 4) remains mindful that BDSM scenes are "quite emotional ... There can be very deep emotional and spiritual needs that are addressed in these kinds of [encounters] ... Submitting can be a need for nurturing. People want to be nurtured and cared for and that is quite graphically expressed in being tied down."

The experience of affirmation in a community setting. Judah discussed in his interview a affirming experience that he had within a spiritually-based community that honored of all aspects of his identity and personality, and, conversely, an experience that he witnessed in a Liberal faith community setting that was profoundly spiritually wounding to someone from the Kink community:

1. Judah was a member of a spirituality-based 12-step group, a forum where he felt that he could bring all of himself and be an equal contributing member. He said that the safety of the group allowed for "nothing [to be] left at the door. Everything is out there and I felt completely comfortable and completely exposed at the same time. I feel that same way with people that I play with [in BDSM] regularly."

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2. Some years ago Judah was a member of a formal faith community that actively hired staff members and recruited volunteers from diverse demographics and cultures. An adult-learning religious school instructor on the house of worship's staff did not conceal their Kink cultural identity. A senior clergyperson in that faith community approached the teacher and said that he was welcome there and that "we welcome all people", but that it would be "best if he left that part of his life out of the conversation." Judah shared that the teacher:

...agreed to do that, not realizing at the time that it was going to be deeply damaging for him ... He was a dear, sweet man, truly a really gentle soul and he walked away from that experience and from [the house of worship] deeply wounded because he felt he had betrayed himself by agreeing to leave that part of himself out ... but he wanted to be in the spiritual community badly enough that he agreed to do something that was inauthentic to him. It was crushing ... come as you are, but leave that at the door.

Insights for clergy, spiritual leaders, and community leadership. Judah recalled during his interview that the clergyperson in the house of worship who requested that the teacher in the adult religious education program refrain from discussing that he identifies with Kink culture and the Kink community:

"I really respect her as a spiritual leader. I think that she just didn't understand. She made the best decision she could with the understanding she had at that moment which was grossly inadequate ... not because she wouldn't look at it or didn't want to talk about it, but because she had never been exposed to it ... The most important thing for spiritual leaders to understand is what they are looking

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at, try to gain some understanding even if its completely outside of their personal experience. Weird and creepy makes them uncomfortable ... I get that, but understand that the Kink and BDSM people your faith community are okay. Understand what it means to them and I think when leaders understand this that it becomes much less threatening, frightening.

Judah also discussed in his interview having had a positive and transformative experience at a conference on faith, religion, and spirituality where there were several presentations on sex sexuality, gender, and relationship Alternative and Non Conforming sex, sexuality, gender, and relationship populations. He shared that at the conference the spiritual leaders:

...talked in terms of how these unexpected behaviors and situations where people are clearly coloring way outside the line for "normal" behavior within a spiritual worship service actually strengthen the community and make it more vibrant and more substantial for a lot of people ... it would have to be a level of tolerance that you rarely see in a spiritual community and it would have to be a message that was clearly messaged consistently and repeatedly that they are welcomed and affirmed I don't think that there would necessarily be a sign in the front of the room that says welcome BDSM people, welcome Fetish people, but I think it has to be deeply embedded in the cultural identity in the community.

Judah wants faith community leaders to remember that it was not long ago that sex workers, lesbians and gays, and mothers who had children out of wedlock were not permitted in houses of worship. He acknowledged that certain aspects of Kink, BDSM,

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and Leather relationships may look or sound alarming to people who do not have much other information to go on, and he feels compassionately toward people who might have a reaction to it if they do not have the information. He felt that there is a lack of understanding that Kinky people are:

... actually nice and caring people and that Kink can be a part of a loving and nurturing relationship. There can be deep spiritual, emotional, and psychological currents happening that clergy might just not be aware of.” He added, “I think that people that are not that familiar with [Kink, Leather, BDSM] find it even more challenging ... The leaders need to be educated ... that these people are not aberrant and they are not deviant.

Participant #5 – Zion. Zion identifies as being Kinky and is in the processes of exploring what that means to them. Zion identifies as Genderqueer or Gender Nonbinary, on the Asexual spectrum, and Queer. They reported that they are possibly aromantic (Appendix I) and feel oriented to be a part of a small and intimate community or committed friend group where Kink and Genderqueer identities is something that they all have in common.

What attracted Zion to participate in the study. Zion responded that they wanted to be a part of the study because they were “bored” and it looked:

Interesting and I was like, somebody’s doing the study and I’m interested in being part of the study ... I was like why not? And I was also like, it seems legit ... and I appreciate that you asked for my [gender] pronouns on the form and if I considered myself spiritual.

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Spiritual or faith journey. Zion is from a secular home of origin where certain major holidays (of a particular religion) were somewhat celebrated. When they were a pre-teen, a camp counselor introduced Zion to the idea of energy being a spiritual and physiological dimension of the human organism, which Zion now recognizes as something akin to Qi. Zion performs healing energy work on themselves as their primary spiritual practice. They practice their spirituality solo and do not feel comfortable with the idea of their spirituality being “collaborative or communal.” In college Zion was introduced to Tarot and more recently they have recently been exploring witch-related practices and “stuff that I sort of made up, which I feel like is what religion is—stuff people made up.” Zion believes in a higher power that is unknowable to humankind and should not be anthropomorphized.

Kink, Leather, and/or BDSM journey. Zion identifies as being a part of the public Kink scene. They discovered Kink several years ago when they were they were introduced to Fetlife online social media forum by a friend. Zion, who is relatively new to exploring Kink, reports that they identify as a switch “but humans are more complicated than that. Obviously I don’t know one-hundred percent and I am trying to learn more things and figure things out.”

The experience of affirmation in a community setting. Zion discussed two instances that stand out when they felt welcomed and affirmed in a community setting, one of which was at a Kink event and the other at a mainstream house of worship:

1. Zion described that they have a history of debilitating panic attacks in social settings.

Zion went to a big regional weekend Kink event out of town and was concerned that they would experience overwhelming anxiety there. When they arrived, however,

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they felt instantly relieved, safe, acknowledged, and affirmed because they were immediately greeted and welcomed by staff and participants at the door as soon as they stepped inside the event facility. Further, the event was specifically for Queer people, thus the attendees were vetted beforehand, which added another layer of feelings of security, safety, and belonging. Zion shared in our interview that it was life changing to walk into a community event and not have to explain themselves to anyone or educate any of the event leaders or participants on what their identity is and what their needs are.

2. Zion visited a Progressive house of worship to see if they might like to become a member there. Zion had a positive experience during that visit because they were met at the door by volunteer greeters. At the reception after the service they were seated at a table with other newcomers, which Zion enjoyed because they did not feel out of place or ignored. Zion did not ultimately pursue membership at that house of worship due to moving to another town.

Insights for clergy, spiritual leaders, and community leadership. Zion wondered in their interview if community leadership in diverse types of spiritual and non faith-related settings think that they have more to learn about Alternative Relationships than they actually do, and that perhaps the perceived learning curve may feel daunting for leadership and serve as a deterrent for seeking out knowledge around these groups:

Really, the only thing you are required to do is not to judge other people ... somehow communicate your acceptance without making it feel like a threat to the person. Reassure that I am not going to kick you out ... Having a setting where no one is judged, and there is not even an implied threat of being kicked out,

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because you have the power to really scare people into thinking that if they are authentically themselves that could go wrong and get themselves thrown out.

Zion said that the most powerful factor for them in terms of what makes for an affirming community of any kind—not just an Alternative Relationship setting - is having people in leadership positions that reflect the diversity values that the community self-perceives that it has, and for leadership to do their own research:

What would make me feel welcome is seeing other people who are like me. Seeing people who even if they aren't like me are familiar with the vocabulary I use that I use when I talk about things like sexuality and gender and even Kink ... it's like if you don't know what that means, do some research. I'm not going to explain it to you ... [instead of] having me sit there and make them feel better about me and educate them on how to do their work.

Participant #6 – Hope. Hope identifies as being oriented to consensual sadomasochistic play, is a female Dominant, and is the head of a Leather household. She is in a committed relationship with a life partner who is her submissive. She has had sexual partners of diverse gender identities. She identifies as Christian and attends a progressive church in her township.

What attracted Hope to participate in the study. When I asked Hope was attracted her to participate in the study, she responded:

I saw your [online flyer] and I wanted to help out. Also, I grew up in a church and I've always felt different. Kink and I guess religion are two big parts of my life. I have a friend who teases me because she knows me through the Kink

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community. She tells everyone that my secret life is not my kink—it's my religious life. I feel like I'm on both sides. Maybe there's not a lot of understanding. I feel ... people mocking religion in the Kink community because they are hurt by it. I agree that [formal and mainstream] religious communities are not so open to Kinky people. Maybe a little [open] to poly people—maybe—but not to kink. I go to some churches that are affirming [of LGBTQ], but I think that if [people] there knew that I'm kinky—that I'm the head of a [Leather] household—I think they would look at me like I'm weird.

Spiritual or faith journey. Hope was baptized and raised in a somewhat conservative Christian tradition. She describes her community of origin as middle class and “very male-centric and heterosexual.” During her interview she remembered that when a young person asked the minister if they would go to Hell if they had premarital sex, the minister replied, “‘If that’s the worst thing you do in life, you’re ahead of the game.’ I was like ‘Wow.’ I thought that was pretty cool ... conservative but not an Evangelical way.”

As a teenager, Hope became very involved in the church and volunteered for organizational, liturgical, and leadership roles after experiencing a voice telling her to deepen her involvement in the community. She recalled during our interview, “It was the only time I’ve ever had the experience. I’m sad that it never happened again. It was so long ago and it would be nice to hear something that direct from the divine again.”

As an adult, Hope, who has had sexual partners of diverse gender identities, attended a small church in her township specifically for LGBTQ congregants and Allies where there was explicitly Queer-affirming programming and LGBTQ-identifying people in the

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highest levels of leadership. She discussed feeling that it was one of the most important spiritual environments that she has been a part of because it was so open and outright affirming of Queer-spectrum identities, sexuality overall, and did not condemn anyone for their sexual orientations. I noticed, though, that she mentioned briefly in our interview that she did not feel comfortable coming out to anyone at that church as being Kinky or in a committed and loving Alternative Relationship dynamic with her submissive life partner, and I inquired about this. Hope shared:

I went to that church with a couple of kinky friends. I don't think we ever really came out to anybody. My one friend did a little bit, but they kind of knew ... they could tell something was different about her. I would always say to her, "but if you come out they're going to know that I'm the same."

Hope shared that the main reason that she did not feel comfortable about sharing her Kink identity and Alternative Relationship status, even within the Liberal LGBTQ faith community where sex and sexuality were freely discussed and affirmed within the liturgy, sermons, Bible study, and programming, is that clergy never actually explicitly extended their affirmation to congregants who were in BDSM or Leather life partnerships, and related Alternative Relationship demographic groups. Further, Hope felt a sense of guilt, "Guilt that if people [at church] knew about my lifestyle and I was with their children, then maybe they wouldn't want me around their children."

She ultimately left that church due to changes in senior leadership and feeling that the services and Bible study were becoming far less interesting after those staff changes. She now attends a Progressive and LGBTQ-affirming Christian church in her neighborhood. She does not feel that it would be received well if people in her faith community were

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privity to connection to Leather culture, nor her relationship dynamics with her life partner.

Kink, Leather, and/or BDSM journey. Hope described in her interview that she remembers becoming interested in erotic consensual sadomasochism as a teenager, although she did not have the vocabulary to name what those feelings were. Hope was initially intrigued by spanking and restraints. Hope, who is now a Domina and head of a Leather household (Appendix VI), started out as a bottom (Appendix VI). As a teenager she became sexually active and began exploring a diverse swath of sexual practices including multiple partnered sex and BDSM, and began to explore Kink pornography. She noted in our interview that she became sexually active and started exploring Kink at around the same time took initiative to become more active in her church community.

The experience of affirmation in a community setting. Hope discussed in her interview feeling affirmed and welcomed in various community settings including her church community of origin; a church she belonged to as an adult; and an online forum for spiritually oriented BDSM and Leather people:

1. Hope spoke at length in our interview about her positive experiences as a teenager at her church of origin, particularly around feeling affirmed for her intelligence and leadership capabilities. There was a woman in her church leadership that actively mentored Hope and fostered her talents and desires to support the mission and functioning of their church. Hope said that her relationship with that mentor who ultimately became an ordained clergyperson and moved on to work in leadership at another church—was life changing and empowering in that she felt seen and held in positive regard and that she was entrusted with real responsibilities.

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2. Hope shared feeling affirmed at the LGBTQ church she attended in her township as an adult, not specifically as a Kinky person, but as a sexual being who has had erotic and BDSM experiences with people of diverse genders. She reports that the senior clergyperson facilitated Bible study through the Queer lens and that “I felt like he was speaking to me because he gave of himself. He talked openly about [his Queer identity] and some of his personal challenges around that. He was honest and open about it ... he was pretty accepting of people.” Hope felt affirmed by “the atmosphere was accepting of LGBT in the very fibers of its programs.”

During the interview, Hope said that she does not disclose her Leather relationship at any church because she does not feel that it is an appropriate place for anyone to disclose their sex life in that context. I asked her if she felt that BDSM and Leather was primarily about sex for her, or was there also a relational component as well, and perhaps a cultural one. She thought about it and acknowledged that it is more than solely about sex. She went on to discuss that while her Non Alternative Relationship friends know about her relationship dynamics and practices, it can be stressful to hide the nature of her relationship with her life partner and her Leather friends when she is at church. She said, “It would be nice ... like when I bring my [Leather] friends to church ... and I am asked how I know this person. I can’t say I know them from my [Alternative Relationship Community] or something like that. Sometimes people will press for more information ... It would be nice to say, ‘I know them from this [BDSM] organization’ or ‘we’re both female dominants.’” Hope said that she leaves the Leather and Dominant identity markers out of her church community and “makes up how I know people.” She says: “If I was looking for that high level of spiritual satisfaction, I would find that more readily in

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the BDSM community. I like some of the spiritual and support groups on Fetlife” online social forum for people interested in Kink, BDSM, Leather and related topics.

Insights for Clergy, Spiritual Leaders, and Community Leadership. Hope, who is part of a formal, mainstream house of worship and describes herself as spiritual and has been involved in faith communities since childhood, discussed wanting faith community leadership from diverse wisdom paths to know that:

Just because I’m kinky and I like to have sex doesn’t necessarily mean I’m a sinner—I’m [not] going to Hell and I’m not going to abuse children or anything like that. I can still be a good Christian and a sexual being.

Hope also expressed concerns that faith communities who may want to support congregants in Alternative Relationships may take their Inclusion too far and risk objectifying congregants or participants by treating them as educational oddities rather than regular parishioners. Hope also shared that she wishes that leadership in any type of community setting, religious or otherwise, would let participants know that they are accepted “no matter what their relationship or sexual practice” and “Having some education about it and getting that education from an organization or something”, rather than from the parishioner.

Hope does not think that it is realistic to expect that mainstream houses of worship will be affirming of Alternative Relationships and households in our lifetime because faith communities “are still fighting about including the LGBT community. To throw in [Kink, BDSM, Leather] and poly, I don’t know. I remember one of the ministers was almost defrocked for marrying a gay couple.”

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Participant #7 – Sasha. Sasha described in her interview that she lives her life rooted in the principles of Feminine Empowerment. She is a dominant Mistress, has male submissive, and identifies as a Goddess and a sensualist. She has been involved in several types of Alternative Relationship and sexual practices communities over the years. She emphasized that she identifies with several other identity markers as well including Native American, African American, cisgender female, and survivor of a life-threatening illness.

What attracted Sasha to participate in the study. I asked Sasha, “What attracted you to participate in this study?” Sasha replied:

I thought it was interesting. I saw it on [a spiritual group] on FetLife and I thought it was interesting. I understood the nature of a phenomenology study. Then, the other thing was that I thought the subject was interesting, especially in the lifestyles, BDSM lifestyles, and there are so many, so that’s why I wanted to help out in that way.

Spiritual or faith journey. Sasha was raised in a deeply fundamentalist faith community where men were considered heads of household and woman submissive to their husbands. Sasha reported in our session that her husband had misused his authority and demonstrated patterns of dishonesty, so she left the marriage and then disengaged from the faith community, ultimately leaving organized religion altogether.

Sasha shared that even though she felt it necessary for her spiritual and mental health to leave her faith community of origin, there were many positives about being in that fundamentalist environment in that “you’re around people that had the same beliefs. The positives, too, were that it saved me as a teenager. I could have been out there on the

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street doing whatever” as she had grown up in an abusive and unstable household. She described in our interview that her strict religious community helped to keep her safe and grounded and that it was comforting for her.

When Sasha exited that community, she felt that she had betrayed God. It took her a long time to bring herself to have a conversation with God, and when she did she “started back to going into prayer and having conversations with God. I started to feel better and realize that God does not judge us according to religion. He is the examiner of the heart.”

Sasha shared with me that she will never be involved in an organized faith community again and that religion feels irrelevant to her. She said, “I’m very comfortable with my conversations with my Heavenly Father. I don’t need a religion to intervene.” I asked her if she speaks to God about being Kinky and being a Dominant and sensualist. She said that she does, especially in the wake of the death of her submissive partner whom she loved dearly and with whom she shared a close and passionate relationship. She asks God to “Please help me find a partner that is this and that. Please help me find. My heavenly father knows my heart. He knows me. Why would [I hide] any of those parts of myself from Him?”

Kink, Leather, and/or BDSM journey. Sasha describes that her Kink journey was a gradual process of self-discovery. After dating for some time, she began to realize that she wanted to dominate men. She met a male partner who taught her how to dominate him, and Sasha discussed finding a deeper level of relationship and closeness through that dynamic:

I found that I like the level of commitment when you have your [Kink] partner. I found the level of communication was very high. That was a sense of honesty

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that I could not get in vanilla, that I could get in the BDSM lifestyle, so that attracted me ... I found that in order to get what you need, there needs to be honesty. You have to come to the table 100% of who you are. You have to totally be vulnerable and expose who you are. That is not something you can find in [non-Kinky] life unfortunately. In this lifestyle, people get to be who they really are and how they feel inside or experience certain things without the fear of being judged. In this lifestyle people get to be who they really are and feel that comfort.

The experience of affirmation in a community setting. One of Sasha's ethnic and cultural identities is Native American. As an adult, several years after she left her fundamentalist Christian community of origin and organized religion altogether, she initiated a deep exploration of her

Indigenous roots, reached out to tribal leadership, and embarked on a ritual rite of passage. Sasha said, "It was about getting me in touch with, one, my heritage, celebrating it, celebrating [my lifecycle event], and me becoming more aware of myself. I wanted to be honest with myself The goal of the Rite of Passage is to own it, all parts of me, everything about me ... Being in touch with the community, being in touch with myself, that's what it was all about for me.'

Insights for clergy, spiritual leaders, and community leadership. Sasha felt strongly that spiritual leaders of any wisdom path do not have the right to decide which individual or group is more worthy of belonging, "Only heavenly Father is the one" to make that determination. She also said that in order to communicate effectively with people in Alternative Relationships, "you have to understand them, leave your judgments

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behind. You have to be able to come to them” rather than make them come to you to ask or advocate for acceptance. Sasha cited:

One of the greatest examples was Jesus Christ. There was Matthew who was the tax collector. There was Luke who the doctor. See my point? Most doctors don’t believe in God. Most of them believe in a completely different theory. The tax collectors are usually greedy, usually. But there was something about their personalities besides faith that Jesus chose to walk with them. As far as I’m concerned, he was the greatest example. Never judge anybody.

Participant #8 – Jenn. Jenn identifies as Queer, Kinky, poly, and partnered. She is currently actively seeking to join an organized house of worship. She began exploring Kink fairly recently and feels that she is at beginning of that exploration and identifies as a submissive.

What attracted Jenn to participate in the study. When I asked Jenn what attracted her to participate in the study, Jenn responded that she “used to be super religious”, and then “I just decided to stop and completely backburner faith for as long as I needed to.” She shared that she eventually came out as Queer, Polyamorous, and Kinky.

Spiritual or faith journey. Jenn became actively involved in faith and an organized religious community in elementary school. She was the only one in her immediate family who was religious and she ultimately became devoutly religious and was so influenced by the fundamentalist teachings of that church that her parents became worried about her level of intense involvement, particularly when Jenn was a teenager and the church began to formally teach the youth group participants that masturbation was a sin.

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I asked Jenn what the appeal of attending that church was for her. She said that she began exploring faith as a child when her mother was enduring a serious illness and that the idea of having a deep spiritual life spoke to her on a profound level. She also had a lot of school friends that attended that faith community, so she had a social network there. "It was also the first place I was able to have leadership roles and feel important and valued outside of my immediate family ... to have, I guess people, adults, outside of my immediate family that were also role models and acknowledged my capabilities ..."

Jenn remained deeply connected to that church community for years and then joined another church near her college campus. Jenn did not drink alcohol, she refrained from masturbating, and did not have sexual encounters of any kind because of her religious values. At her new church, however, she felt currents of judgment against young women for moral infractions and she left the church and organized religion altogether because she was tired of feeling guilty:

Guilty for not having continuous conversations with God. Guilt for not reading my Bible. For not doing ... for just for wanting to feel a little more free and less guilty for being my genuine self ... I don't want to lose [my faith] completely, but there's got to be something better than this. I was just like, "We're done.".. It hasn't been until the past couple of years that I've been missing the community."

Jenn, who has since come out as Queer, Polyamorous, and Kinky, among other identity markers, is presently searching for a new spiritual home where "people are kind and genuinely care about each other." She not think it is possible for her to be able to have all of her identity markers present in one spiritual home, while non-Alternative

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Relationship parishioners will be able to bring all of who they are into the community and worship practices.

Kink, Leather, and/or BDSM journey. Jenn recalled that her earliest Kink thoughts and feelings emerged at around the age of nine. For a long time she thought that she was not a sexual person and then recently, with the exploration of her interest in Kink, “that that was the opposite of the truth.” As an adult, Jenn joined Fetlife and realized that most every sex fantasy she has ever had involved some sort of consensual power exchange or humiliation. She and her partner of several years decided to opened up their relationship to allow each other to explore their individual needs with regard to sexuality, gender, and interpersonal connections.

The experience of affirmation in a community setting. Jenn discussed in her interview two experiences in particular where she felt a sense of affirmation and belonging in a community setting. One was when she was part of a Christian community and the other was during a psychotherapy session with her counselor:

1. Jenn recalled attending Christian music concerts that affirmed her spiritual desires and connectedness to God on a profound level, where:

We were all dancing and singing. You’re basically talking ... praying altogether but individually. Those were really powerful experiences for me. Because I felt the music a lot. To be able to not be praying in my room alone, but also really loudly. I felt so much for [spiritual] connectedness ... and one was competing with anyone else over who was more holy or faithful or had prayed more that day.

2. The other experience of affirmation that stood out for Jenn was when she started working with a psychotherapist. The therapist admitted to Jenn early on in their work

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together that they had never had a client involved in Kink, BDSM, or Leather. Jenn recalled that the therapist said to her:

‘Listen, I’ve never had anyone else that’s been into that or told me that they’re into that, but as long as you are healthy and you’re not hurting anyone that’s fine.’ I think she did her own homework on the side ... She gave me a statement of acceptance and validation by acknowledging that [she didn’t] know ... but let’s talk about it. She was like, ‘This just like any other relationship. There’s just a little more dynamics in it’ and I was like, “Yes! Exactly!”

Jenn shared that a major factor that deters her from pursuing membership at certain houses of worship is where there are no designated greeters. She describes herself as being an introvert, and is always grateful when she goes to a religious event and there are designated greeters at the door and around the worship space that take initiative to address her directly and not have to advocate for a place for herself. She said, “I probably won’t talk to anyone, but if anyone actually talks to me, then automatically I’m like “maybe I’ll come back here.” In terms of being a person whose identities span several demographics within the ARC, she would want a group of greeters or clergy who are educated in diverse lifestyles and identities, “basically a group of people that are open to talking about anything without judging people. It’s as simple as that ...”

Insights for clergy, spiritual leaders, and community leadership. Jenn is actively looking to join a house of worship. She wondered during our interview what it might be like to find a place where she is truly affirmed, “Even if it was in a space where I never talked about Kink at all, just knowing that if that came up ... I wouldn’t have to censor stories about my own life. That would be awesome.” Jenn is:

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“looking for some sort of community where we can have ... everyone is celebrated for being who they are and its not like you have to fit in one particular mold ... it would be really important for [faith community leadership] to know that [Kink is] fine and there’s nothing wrong with it and that someone isn’t damaged for being into it. There’s no need to fix anything.”

Jenn emphasized that Kink, BDSM, and Leather people exist in faith communities already. “We are passing [as mainstream] and we won’t generally volunteer any information until I know what the situation was” due to fear of stigma, judgment, prejudice, and exile.

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Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings, Recommendations, and Summary

I. Introduction

This study employed in-depth qualitative interviews around the experiences of eight individuals for whom Kink, Leather, and/or BDSM is an important part of their lives or is an integral or important part of their relationships; who have some level of interest in spirituality, spiritual practice, or a faith tradition, or were formerly involved in a spiritual practice or faith tradition. This study described participants' reports about their experiences with Kink, BDSM, or Leather identity, interactions, relationships, and/or culture, and also about their spiritual or faith community experiences.

In this chapter, the findings will be discussed across the eight participants in relation to existing literature, followed by practical considerations and the need for further research.

II. Themes Across the Interviews

Theme 1: There is no conflict between being kinky and being spiritual. All 8 of the participants in this study discussed that they currently live in accordance with the perspective that there is no contradiction between Kink, BDSM, or Leather and being spiritually inclined/connected to spirituality:

- 1) 8 of the 8 participants expressed belief in a higher power (definitions varied widely), spirit world, and/or connection to ancestors.
- 2) 1 of the participants in this study is a clergyperson.
- 3) 4 of the 8 participants in this study were involved in organized faith communities or

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formal houses of worship at the time of their interview and a 5th participant was actively engaged in looking for a formal house of worship to join.

4) 2 of those 4 participants who were members of faith communities at the time of their interviews did not conceal their Alternative Relationships and Kink identities within their present faith communities:

a) 1 participant reported that their faith community leadership are explicitly and consistently affirming of diverse sexualities, practices, and relationships and that one of the core missions of the community is to support its members in challenging and shedding white European colonial oppression and reclaiming the diverse aspects of their African spiritual identities and heritages.

b) 1 participant reported that their faith community does not have a statement officially affirming or condemning Kink, BDSM, or Leather. The participant will discuss their identity within their house of worship if asked.

5) All 3 participants in this study who did not feel that they would want to be affiliated with an organized faith community or house of worship reported that they were presently engaged in individual spiritual practices which were important or integral to them:

a) 2 participants' spiritual practices centered on direct dialogue with the divine and/or other presences from the ancestor or spirit realms.

b) A third participant whose spiritual life was engaging in spiritually based self-healing energy, which they practiced on a solo basis, believed in a higher divine

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power that is unknowable to humankind.

The topic of how faith and spirituality informs Kink relationships, activities, and practices came up in 6 of the 8 participant interviews and spanned the group of participants who were presently involved in faith communities and the group of participants who were not presently involved in faith communities:

- 1) 4 participants reported that their Kink lives, relationships, and sexual or physical interactions are enhanced by their religious or spiritual values and ethics around:
 - a) Non-violence (5 participants)
 - b) Egalitarianism (5 participants)
 - c) Staying true to themselves (4 participants)
 - d) Not engaging in sexual, romantic, or intimate physical BDSM activities with people whose spouses do not know or are not consenting to it (3 participants)
- 2) 2 other participants reported feeling that their spiritual life, spiritual practices, or religious values did not in any way influence their Kink lives, however upon examination of their interviews I noted that 1 of these 2 participants reported feeling that ego and pride are sources of divisiveness in both the public Kink or BDSM scenes and in religion. That participant said that they have made a conscious choice to limit their engagement with these types of communities in part as to not be exposed to that type of transgression.

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Modern sacred sexuality author and educator, Barbara Carrellas, challenges in her book *Urban Tantra: Sacred Sex for the Twenty-First Century* the negative myths around BDSM. These myths and stereotypes include that BDSM it is about perpetuating violence and that there is nothing spiritual or faith-based about BDSM practices or connections. These myths are unfounded. Combining spirituality practices, such as merging Tantra with BDSM, are not at odds with each other. They may be used together to increase and enhance the connection, trust, and intention between BDSM participants.

Even though there is a myth that BDSM practitioners are unable or unwilling to be religious or spiritual, it is important to remember that BDSM has been at the heart of several major world religious traditions including ancient Egyptian temple practices, Roman deity worship, and the hugely popular consensual spiritual sadomasochist rituals and rites at the heart of the Catholic Dominican friars beginning around the year 1055 and lasting up through the late 1300's. Their central religious practice was half-naked sacred self-flagellation with whips, and organized and consensual mutual sacred flagellation of each other, for the purpose of penance and achieving the most direct route to divine ecstasy, surrender, and ascension (Schreiber-Byers, 2103).

Theme 2: Kink, BDSM, Leather People are Not Deviant or Abnormal. 6 of the 8 participants in this study discussed feeling that Kink, BDSM, or Leather identity or practices does not mean that they are deviant or abnormal people (DSM, 2017).

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed the diagnosis of "homosexuality" from the second edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). In 2013 the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed the diagnosis of "BDSM" from the DSM along with other sexual behaviors considered outside the mainstream. In

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addition, there is published scientific research supporting that BDSM is not a mental health condition, disease, aberration, or pathology:

- 1) 50-60% of Americans engage in some form of BDSM play in their private lives (Eveleth, 2014) even if they do not identify with the culture, heritages, and identities found of the Kink, BDSM, and Leather demographics.
- 2) People who participate actively in BDSM are not more psychologically distressed than people who do not and BDSM practitioners did not appear to be more emotionally or psychologically troubled than the general population (Shindel, 2014).
- 3) Kinky people and BDSMers are not more likely than others to have ever been sexually coerced (Shindel, 2014).
- 4) Kinky people do not report more sexual difficulties (Richters, De Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008).
- 5) Kinky people in this study reported experiencing more secure feelings of attachment in their relationships as opposed to the less secure attachments found in the non-Kink people surveyed (Shindel, 2014).
- 6) The BDSM population demonstrates a higher level of mental flexibility and are more open to new experiences, are more extroverted, and are more conscientious than non-Kink participants (Shindel, 2014).
- 7) While a study found people who regularly engage in BDSM are more interpersonally disagreeable than non-Kinky people, they were also less neurotic and also scored lower than the general public on rejection sensitivity, a measure of how paranoid people are about others disliking them (Shindel, 2014).

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- 8) People think that BDSMers commit violence, when the truth is that they are aggressed against because of their BDSM orientation (Wright, 2006).

Theme 3: Kink/BDSM Activity is About Having About a Shared Experience.

6 of the 8 participants in the study discussed feeling that they experience Kink or BDSM sexual, erotic, or intimate physical activities and exchanges with others as being about having a shared spiritual, interpersonal, or communication-based experience.

There is existing scientific research to buttress the experiences and observations made by the participants of my study that Kink and BDSM play:

- 1) Improves Communication and Intimacy (Sagarin, 2003)
- 2) Encourages fidelity (Borrelli, 2015)
- 3) Reduces psychological stress (Borrelli, 2015)

It is worth noting that 5 of the 8 participants in my study reported that sexual contact/activity was a part of some or all their BDSM activities, and 3 of the 8 participants reported that their Kink activities were not necessarily connected to anything that they would define as sexual or erotic in the heteronormative, non-kinky sense. Only 1 participant in this study chose to delve into detailed descriptions of their BDSM or Kink sex acts in any explicit detail or for any length of time, and they did so tearfully within the context of processing grief and mourning around the death of their beloved partner with whom they engaged in these erotic practices.

By the third interview I noticed the emerging theme of Kink being about a shared intimate or emotional experience. I also noticed that almost none of the participants chose to expound on the sexual or physical acts they engage in that are associated with Kink, BDSM, and Leather practices. This stood out for me as people in Alternative

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Relationships are often stereotyped as sex-obsessed, or sexually threatening, or driven to lead with their sexual appetites. By the 4th interview I began to inquire as to why details of their sex lives or Kink intimate physical activities seemed not to be a point that participants wanted to pursue in their interviews. 4 of the 5 responded in the following ways:

- 1) Did not feel like those details need to be shared with anyone outside of close friends or intimate partners. (2 participants)
- 2) Were relieved to not be asked about those details during this interview because of past experiences of being asked invasive questions that are not so readily asked of non-Kinky people. (1 participant)
- 3) Would make the participant feel objectified in this scholarly context. (1 participant)
- 4) This study did not seem to be an appropriate context in which to delve into specific sex acts (1 participant).

Theme 4: Identity and practices are multidimensional and evolving. 5 of the participants in my study reported that their Kink, BDSM, or Leather identity, practices, partnerships, and needs change and develop over time. 2 of these 5 participants felt that the shorthand descriptors for Kinky people—such as Dominant, submissive, Leatherperson, top, sadist, bottom, domina, daddy, etc ...—felt reductionist or that they did not chose to apply any label or terminology to themselves, even if they tended to favor certain types of roles, scenarios, or dynamics. The 4 other participants reported feeling that they felt comfortable with particular labels or titles, but that the assumption that the labels or titles implied a rigid identity or set-in-stone preferences can be misleading or incomplete. This underscores (1) the inadequacy of narrowly defining and

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labeling of other people by their eroticism, and (2) their minority status imposes distinctive nuances to which faith community leaders must educate themselves lest they stereotype people in the ARC as being homogeneous.

Affirming the members of the ARC is more subtle than assigning “this” form of behavior to individual X, and “that” form of behavior to individual Y, and because someone appears “this” way they must be into “that”, or if they call themselves “this” title then they must only value, engage in, or participate in “that”:

... And if you capture anyone at one point in time, they may feel pretty certain that where they are [with regard to sexuality] is where they are, right The trick comes when you let their lives unfold. And most of our lives are a lot more complex than we think. And it looks like our human species just has a lot more capacity for fluidity and for plasticity than most of us imagine. (Diamond, 2009)

Theme 5: The transformative experience of affirmation from leadership. 7 of the 8 participants in my study revealed particularly transformational experiences of affirmation within faith-based or non-faith based community settings. These experiences pertained to Kink identity for some participants, and for others the affirmation experiences pertained to other identity markers including, but not limited to, female, Queer, Genderqueer, Jewish, Christian, Baha’i, Black, African, religious, young person, person in 12-step recovery, survivor of life threatening illness. The common denominators between these participants’ transformative experiences of affirmation in diverse faith and non-faith community settings was that community leadership took active and direct initiative to communicate their affirmation by:

- 1) Addressing the individual directly (6 participants).

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- 2) Addressing the individual first and not waiting for the individual to advocate to be seen and heard (5 participants).
- 3) Verbalizing to the individual clearly and directly that they belong (5 participants).
- 4) Conveying to the individual that their particular identity marker is needed to enrich the community's functioning and mission (5 participants).
- 5) Actively included the individual in meaningful roles within the community (5 participants).

When Good Intentions Aren't Enough: Microaggressions In Our Churches, authored by out Queer female pulpit clergyperson Rev. Dr. Angela Yarber, founder and Creator of Holy Women Icons, discusses the experience of sexuality minority persons facing exclusion, discrimination, and microaggression when serving progressive churches, seminaries, and religious organizations. These Left-leaning religious entities pride themselves on their official institutional position of inclusivity of sexual and relationship minority individuals and families, but despite these public statements and ideals, leadership often does not educate themselves on matters pertaining to these populations, nor are they willing to be challenged on their hostile attitudes and microaggressions toward these populations, and thus unwittingly create and perpetuate hostile religious environments for the Non-Conforming persons they feel that they support. Rev. Yarber discusses the impact these cultures of microaggression and outright bigoted actions have on Non Conforming people in terms of mood, physical health, and spiritual satisfaction, and faith.

Theme 6: Compassion: Leadership is Uninformed, Not Ill-Intentioned. 6 of the 8 participants expressed the view that although it is more common than not for faith

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community leadership to react poorly toward Kink, BDSM, and Leather oriented people that this reaction, and the varying degrees of spiritual wounding it causes, is the product of social and cultural stereotyping—that is, lack of knowledge rather than a considered judgment. 4 of those 6 participants in this study expressed feeling compassion and understanding for clerical interactions that were well intentioned but foredoomed to failure because of the lack of accurate information about Kink BDSM, and Leather identity, culture, and practices.

It is true that negative assumptions about relationship or sexual minority demographic groups are widespread in our Western culture. This background reinforces the human tendency to shrink from reaching out into unfamiliar groups, a tendency which may be heightened amid the tribalism of our time. The following is a quotation from How Can I Help, a guidebook for healing and spiritual practitioners, written by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman in which the topic of the illusion of the separate self preventing the most well-intentioned people, including spiritual leadership, from seeking to understand others:

Operating from the model of the separate self, fear and caution may be the first responses we notice that block the spontaneous expression of our innate generosity ... However much we might wish to reach out, a habit of self-protectiveness buried within may still hold us back. “Keep the doors locked and we’ll be secure,” says the ego. We may feel a little nervous and tentative, even defensive, about responding to the needs of others—particularly of those in considerable pain, who may make demands on us ... who may indeed remind us of our own vulnerability. One response of the separate self to the impulse to help them out, may simply be reluctance or inability to get involved ... An anxious,

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self-protective ego is most comfortable in a familiar role in which it knows exactly what's expected of it. This attachment, in the face of changing conditions or new demands, leads the ego to hold on to one model of identity ... it's reluctant to grow, which means opening to the ambiguity of the unknown and learning new roles. This clinging can hold us back from even the simplest actions.

Responsibility for addressing misgivings or correcting leadership's lack of information lies with leadership, not with parishioners. 5 of the 8 participants discussed feeling that the most important factor in creating a truly affirming community lies with addressing and correcting faith community leaders' lack of knowledge and consequent falling back upon negative stereotypes of people in Alternative Relationships. All 5 participants said that the burden of that education lies with leadership, as not to force ARC congregants, parishioners, or members into the role of taking care of the leader's emotions and discomfort and serving as their teacher and supervisor, while non ARC participants, as well non-minority participants from diverse cultural, ethnic, and gender demographics, get to benefit from being ministered to and nurtured by leadership. That is, an individual who holds themselves out as a community leader has a responsibility to equip themselves with the data and awareness required to meet their community members where they are. This education that clergy and leadership must engage in with regard to the ARC, my participants stated, should include:

- 1) Individual study. (5 participants)
- 2) Taking initiative to dialogue in-depth with leadership and teachers from ARC groups and sub-groups. (4 participants)
- 3) Acquiring supervision from clergypersons, psychotherapists, or educators who are

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also members of the ARC segment in question, so that the clergyperson can process their feelings and biases in a professional setting. (4 participants).

- 4) Attending conferences and workshops pertaining to segments of the ARC. (2 participants)

III. Summary of Themes

In summary, this study revealed the following 6 themes:

(1) There is no conflict between being kinky and being spiritual; (2) Kink, BDSM, and Leather people are not deviant or abnormal; (3) Kink/BDSM activity is about having about shared experience; (4) Sexual identity and practices are multidimensional and evolving; (5) The transformative experience of affirmation from leadership; (6) Compassion: faith community leaders are uninformed, not ill-intentioned.

IV. Researcher Recommendations for Spiritual and Faith Community Leaders

Participants in my study were able to describe feeling and experiencing the distinction between being in a community hostile to their diverse identity makers, versus a merely “welcoming” community, an “accepting” community, or an authentically “affirming” community. So that Liberal and Progressive faith leadership may developed a greater understanding of the nuanced spectrum within the communal journey toward fulfilling the ethical and faith-based ideals of supporting people in minority groups in ways that resonate and are received positively within that minority demographic—in this instance the ARC, and more specifically the Kink/BDSM/Leather culture and demographic—I

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have distilled the raw data from my study to compile a simple chart^{xii} by which spiritual and faith community leadership can (1) more accurately gauge their community's levels of rejection, welcoming, acceptance, and affirmation as perceived by the ARC; and (2) understand more clearly how their leadership approach may be perceived and experienced by people in Alternative Relationships. This self-evaluation chart for Clergy and Faith Community Leadership may be found in Appendix IX on page 129.

The study also reveals that the participants generally feel compassion and understanding toward clergy for the missteps they make with regard to the exclusion and less than optimal treatment of Alternative Relationship groups. Participants in this study reported feeling that the main culprit for their demographic and identity group suffering less accessibility to the full breadth and benefits of ministry and equality within faith communities stems not from leadership acting out of malice. Rather, the disconnect comes from leadership being uninformed or misinformed about the realities and humanity of people oriented to Kink, BDSM, and/or Leather. This study revealed that participants feel that this knowledge gap is remediable if clergy and faith community leadership take imitative to:

(1) Engage in individual study and research; (2) Dialogue with ARC organizations, leadership, and educators; (3) Engage in supervision with an Alternative-Relationship affirming psychotherapist or pastoral counselor to process emotions and develop deeper insight into understanding their own reactions and biases; (4) Attend Kink, BDSM, and Leather educational and cultural conferences and events.

^{xii} The chart is also influenced by *Sexual Orientation Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Expanding our Conversations about Sexual Diversity: Part I* by Keely Kolmes and Ryan G. Witherspoon

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V. Recommendations for Researchers

Become Proficient in Kink/BDSM/Leather Culture and Heritage. There has been limited scholarship done on the experiences of Kink, Leather, and BDSM individuals, communities, or associated subgroups. If you are conducting research pertaining to this population, I advise that as much as you seek out literature and studies on the challenges, violence, and discrimination that this population suffers (Appendix V), it is equally important for researchers to gain an understanding of the rich culture of this community, it's history spanning global faith traditions and eras, its history in post World War II United States, heritage, roots, music, visual art, literature, journalism, faith-based forums, social activism, and other accomplishments and contributions.

Learn about Kink, BDSM, Leather Sexualities. Even though almost all of my participants chose to not elaborate on details around their sexual, erotic, or physical experiences, Kink/Leather/BDSM is still considered a sexual orientation, a sexual interest, and/or a sexual minority group as much as it is an Alternative Relationship demographic and even a political identity. It is important for researchers to familiarize themselves with the experiences of persons within the community who elect to or are oriented to engage in BDSM play and for whom those activities may be experienced as sexual or erotic in nature.

Understand the Importance of Confidentiality in the Kink Community. It is imperative that researchers studying the Kink, BDSM, and Leather communities understand the significance of confidentiality and anonymity as experienced by this population. While some people within this segment of the ARC may live their lives as "out" Kinky people, as of now many if not most people in this demographic cannot do so

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without risking negative, even devastating, consequences on several fronts. When you are reaching out to prospective participants it is recommended that you emphasize and reiterate that your study is completely confidential.

It is reasonable to expect that prospective participants from this demographic, community, or culture will want to vet you to make sure that your motives are legitimate and that you can be trusted with highly sensitive personal information (Appendix V). It is your responsibility to make vetting a direct and simple process for respondents as to increase their positive experience of being a part of your research study. I recommend offering to provide prospective participants the option of requesting list of your professional references, as well as references from Alternative Relationship, LGBTQAI+, and sex-positive organizations and professionals.

The Most Direct Avenues to Finding Participants. Fetlife is an online global social networking forum for people who have an interest in Kink, BDSM, Leather, Fetish, or related practices and identities. Posting my research flyer to various faith, religion, and New York City area forums within Fetlife yielded a majority the applicants to my study. Be advised that researchers must contact Fetlife administration to request to post their flyer and other relevant information. There is a researcher and institution vetting and review process that can take several days to two weeks to complete, so plan ahead for this in terms of your research study timeline.

In-person contact with people in the Kink, BDSM, and Leather scenes is yielded a significant number of respondents to this study. I went in-person to the LGBT Community Center, two local sex stores, and a Kink community educational event to inquire with staff about posting my paper flyer on their public message boards. This

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face-to-face contact resulted in several of the staffers sending out word via social media and text message to their friends, colleagues, and communities that this study was happening, that they had met me in person, and that they felt positive about the mission of the study.

Emailing Kink, Leather, and BDSM organizations was not a particularly effective method for generating participant interest in this study. Of the 12 organizations I emailed about my study, 4 of them responded to my email and only 1 of those organizations confirmed that they disseminated my flyer. I do not know if the other organizations forwarded my flyer along to their membership and they did not respond to my follow-up emails. The additional organizations I contacted via text message or a chat forum app yielded immediate response and the immediate posting of my flyer onto their groups online chats. In the future I will not use email for outreach, but instead continue to text, use chat apps, and will create a Facebook page so that I may reach out to a wider network of Kink-related organizations and individuals.

Future Research. This study is a pilot study of one particular branch or enclave of the ARC, in one limited regional area. There are countless numbers of other Alternative Relationship enclaves, cultures, and groups that are also under-researched. It is my hope that scholars who wish to research the spiritual and faith community needs of other segments of the ARC will use this study and the research methods, clinical principles, and theological concepts that I presented in this paper as the basis for their own work.

My next step is to survey clergy and spiritual and community leadership on their knowledge, feelings, experiences, and perceptions of people in Alternative Relationships

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as to find out where the knowledge gaps are, where their information is correct, and to assess what obstacles they or their community may be experiencing with regard to moving their community toward a more becoming truly Affirming.

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Chapter 5: Conclusion

We are in an era when Liberal and Progressive religious institutions and faith communities are promulgating, in increasing numbers, policies that formally declare support for numerous non-mainstream and/or non-majority populations. These are immeasurably important religious and ethical goals and values, and it is my hope that this study will help support the efforts of faith community leadership to move from being merely welcoming to people in the ARC to becoming authentically affirming environments for the millions of people in this demographic group. This study has been intended to provide raw material to address clergy and leadership knowledge gaps and misinformation around this still largely clandestine, largely unstudied, diffuse cultural and identity group. By bringing out into the open the humanity, spiritual experiences, relationship realities, and need for spiritual affirmation expressed by Kink, BDSM, and Leather people, it is my hope that this study will help guide faith leaders in developing or at least considering truly affirming strategies, such that the Alternative Relationship Community will at last find an equal home among their chosen faith traditions and wisdom paths.

This study, however, is no more than a first step. Presentation of the issues and needs of this portion of the population, this mostly silent but very much present segment of mainstream faith congregations and spiritual communities, must meet with a suitable response by faith leadership. Clergy must decide if their own Progressive and Liberal ideals or their own fears and lack of information will win out, and how each of those outcomes has the potential to heal or to harm, to bless or to condemn. As the interviews in this study suggest, spiritual community leadership holds the power to create a truly

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equal and safe environment, a place of authentic affirmation, where all congregants and seekers can bring all of who they are to the body religious.

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Appendix I

Definitions of Some Sex, Sexuality, and Gender identities

Full list may be found at Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) --
www.pflag.org/glossary

Affirmed gender: The gender by which one wishes to be known. This term is often used to replace terms like *new gender* or *chosen gender*, which imply that an individual's gender was not always their gender or that the gender was chosen rather than simply in existence.

Agender: Refers to a person who does not identify with any gender.

Ally: A term used to describe someone who is supportive of LGBTQ individuals and the community, either personally or as an advocate. Whereas allies to the LGB community typically identify as straight, allies to the transgender community also come from the LGBTQ community. Transgender individuals who identify as straight can be allies to the LGB community as well.

Androgyne: An androgynous individual.

Androgynous: Typically used to describe a person's appearances or clothing as having elements of both femininity and masculinity.

Aromantic: Refers to an individual who does not experience romantic attraction.

Asexual: Refers to an individual who does not experience sexual attraction. There is considerable diversity among the asexual community; each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction, and arousal somewhat differently. Asexuality is distinct from celibacy or sexual abstinence, which are chosen behaviors, in that asexuality is a sexual orientation that does not necessarily entail either of those behaviors.

Assigned sex: The sex that is assigned to an infant at birth based on the child's visible sex organs, including genitalia and other physical characteristics.

Bisexual: Refers to an individual who has the capacity for attraction—sexually, romantically, emotionally, or otherwise—to people with the same, and to people with a different, gender and/or gender identity as themselves. People who identify as bisexual need not have had equal experience- or equal levels of attraction- with people across genders, nor any experience at all: it is merely attraction and self-identification that determine orientation. Bisexuality, as it is frequently used today, can act as an umbrella term that encapsulates many identities such as pansexual. Sometimes referred to as *bi* or *bi+*.

Cisgender: Refers to an individual whose gender identity aligns with the one typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

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Gay: The adjective used to describe people who are emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to people of the same gender (e.g., gay man, gay people). In contemporary contexts, *lesbian* is often a preferred term for women, though many women use the term *gay* to describe themselves. People who are gay need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction and self-identification that determine orientation.

Gender expansive: An umbrella term sometimes used to describe children and youth that expand notions of gender expression and identity beyond what is perceived as the expected gender norms for their society or context. Some gender-expansive individuals identify with being either a boy or a girl, some identify as neither, and others identify as a mix of both. Gender-expansive people feel that they exist psychologically between genders, as on a spectrum, or beyond the notion of the man/woman binary paradigm, and sometimes prefer using gender-neutral pronouns (see *Preferred Gender Pronouns*). They may or may not be comfortable with their bodies as they are, regardless of how they express their gender.

Gender neutral: Not gendered. Can refer to language (including pronouns), spaces (like bathrooms), or identities (being Genderqueer, for example).

Gender nonconforming or gender expansive: Terms used to describe those who view their gender identity as one of many possible genders beyond strictly man or woman. More current terms include differently gendered, gender creative, Genderqueer, gender Nonbinary, a gender, gender fluid, gender neutral, bigender, or gender divese.

Genderqueer: Refers to individuals who identify as a combination of man and woman, neither man or woman, or both man and woman. Is sometimes used as an umbrella term in much the same way that the term '*queer*' is used, but only referring to gender, and thus should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as genderqueer.

Intersex/differences of sexual development (DSD): Refers to individuals born with ambiguous genitalia or bodies that appear neither typically male nor female, often arising from chromosomal anomalies or ambiguous genitalia. Medical professionals often assign a gender to the individual and proceeded to perform surgeries to 'align' their physical appearance with typical male or female sex characteristics beginning in infancy and often continuing into adolescence, before a child is able to give informed consent. Formerly the medical terms *hermaphrodite* and *pseudo-hermaphrodite* were used, but these terms are now considered neither acceptable nor scientifically accurate.

Lesbian: Refers to a woman who is emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to other women. People who are lesbians need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

LGBTQ: An acronym that collectively refers to individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. It is sometimes stated as *LGBT* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender), *GLBT* (gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender). The addition of the *Q* is a more recently preferred version of the acronym as cultural opinions of the

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term *queer* focus increasingly on its positive, reclaimed definition, which recognizes more fluid identities; and as a move towards greater inclusivity for gender expansive people. The *Q* can also stand for *questioning*, referring to those who are still exploring their own sexuality and/or gender. Occasionally, the acronym is also stated as *LGBTQ* to include people who are asexual, *LGBTI*, with the *I* representing intersex, or *LGBTQ+* or *LGBTQIA* to represent all of the above.

Nonbinary: Refers to individuals who identify as neither man nor woman, both man and woman, or a combination of man or woman. It is an identity term which some use exclusively, while others may use it interchangeably with terms like *genderqueer*, *gender creative*, *gender nonconforming*, *gender diverse*, or *gender expansive*. Individuals who identify as Nonbinary may understand the identity as falling under the transgender umbrella, and may thus identify as transgender. Sometimes abbreviated as *NB*.

Pansexual: Refers to a person whose emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction is to people of all genders and biological sexes. People who are pansexual need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction and self-identification that determines the orientation. Often included under the umbrella of bisexuality.

Queer: A term used by some people—particularly youth—to describe themselves and/or their community. Reclaimed from its earlier negative use, the term is valued by some for its defiance, by some because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and by others who find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities. Traditionally a negative or pejorative term for people who are gay, *queer* is still sometimes disliked within the LGBTQ community. Due to its varying meanings, this word should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as queer (i.e. “My cousin identifies as queer”).

Questioning: Describes those who are in a process of discovery and exploration about their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or a combination thereof.

Same-Gender Loving: A term sometimes used by some members of the African-American/Black community to express an alternative sexual orientation (gay/bisexual) without relying on terms and symbols of European descent.

Transgender: Often shortened to *trans*. A term describing a person’s gender identity that does not necessarily match their assigned sex at birth. Other terms commonly used are *female to male* (or *FTM*), *male to female* (or *MTF*), *assigned male at birth* (or *AMAB*), *assigned female at birth* (or *AFAB*), *genderqueer*, and *gender expansive*. Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity. This word is also used as a broad umbrella term to describe those who transcend conventional expectations of gender identity or expression. Like any umbrella term, many different groups of people with different histories and experiences are often included within the greater transgender community—such groups include, but are certainly not limited to, people who identify as transsexual, genderqueer, gender variant, gender diverse, and androgynous.

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Appendix II

A List of Some Types of Alternative Relationships

A more comprehensive list may be found at: <https://fantasyapp.com/en/blog/from-a-to-v-alternative-relationships-glossary/>

Alternative Sexuality: a broad term that encompasses non-traditional gender identity and sexual orientation as well as the issues that deal with crossover of gender and sexual expression, unusual sexual practices (BDSM, other kinks) and non-monogamous forms of relationship.

BDSM Relationship: Also known as Kink and sometimes Leather. Characterized by consensual and negotiated power exchanges or hierarchical relationships. to varying degrees

Cellular Family: A family of three or more adults (eventually with children) that live together or next to each other sharing household liabilities and common budget and considering themselves to be a part of one single family.

Committed Friendship: Friends who become a committed, non-romantic partnership and live as a platonic couple.

Consensual Nonmonogamy: a generalized term used to denote polyamory and open relationships, swinging and other alternatives to traditional monogamous relationships started by mutual consent of all members.

Consensual Power Exchange: In BDSM, this refers to a relationship or activity in which the submissive gives to the dominant partner power and authority over parts of the submissive's life. The details, parameters, of the arrangement would be negotiated and may be set out in a formal contract and can be for any duration, according to the agreement of the participants, ranging from a single scene, to a proscribed period of hours, days or weeks, to a 24 hour a day open-ended agreement with no termination date.

Cross-couple: stands for relationship or intimacy between a partner from one couple and a partner from another couple.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT): the type of relationship that involves an explicit agreement between the partners: telling nothing about one's amours and never asking a partner about his or her relationships with other people in return.

Family of One: A person who identifies as being their own family or partner.

Intentional Family: the relationships in that three or more partners have intentionally chosen each other and decided to start a family in which partners may either live or not live together, in consideration of sexuality development possibility (i.e. they can keep sexual contact) for all family members by mutual consent and agreement. Sexual activity with all family members is not mandatory.

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Intimate Network: people who want to be in friendly and/or sexual relations with their partners' or friends' friends, setting a network of various contacts within their social community.

Love Outside The Box: one of the key symbols of sex positivism and polyamory. It represents sexual relations beyond context, time, culture and sexual orientation.

Monogamish: a word meaning "something like monogamy". Monogamish stands for couples in intimate relationships in that one or both partners have admitted they cannot live by the rules of strict monogamy but have so far not joined any other type of relationships. These couples are transiting from monogamy to alternative relationships, and this transitional period may never end.

Mono/Poly: A committed relationship in which one person is monogamous and consents to their partner practicing non-monogamy.

Non-monogamy: the relationship that admits one may have more than one sexual partner at the same time.

Open Marriage: is a marriage in which a couple agrees not to confine their relations to the two of them only. The primary couple is made of two while some "minor" love affairs and sex are also admitted. The rest of the rules are very much individual in view of partners' desires: some want to meet the partner's lovers and beloved, others don't.

Open Group Marriage: The difference between such marriage and polyamory is not very clear by intuition. Open group marriage is probably a name that's been circulating along with polyamory. They are in fact relations that involve more than two. Yet they are not between a couple but a group of people that have consented on having eventual lovers and love affairs beyond their open marriage.

Open Relationship: is a type of relationship which members want to be together but at the same time agree to having non-monogamous relationship apart from each other.

Polyamory: the relationship ethics that implies partner's simultaneously having romantic feelings and/or keeping sexual contacts with more than one partner by consent of all relationship members. you shall find more details about polyamory.

Polyfidelity: stands for a group loyalty. It is a kind of polyamorous relationship where they obey the rule of "having sex within your polyamorous group only". Adding other partners to such a group is done only by consent of every partner involved.

Polyfriendly: a person who supports the polyamorists' movement and/or shares their principles of relationship arrangement.

Polygamy: a form of marriage that allows a partner to have several husbands/wives at the same time.

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Polygyny: a specific form of polygamous marriage implying a man to be in marital union with several wives at the same time.

Primary Relationship: is a type of romantic and/or sexual affair known by the highest rate of intimacy between partners. A partner in primary relationship receives most of another one's time, energy and priorities; includes high degree of intimacy and liabilities, just like in marriage (i.e., common life journey, objectives, parenting, budget, housing, common values, permanent emotional support and so on), and usually implies aiming at common future: together for the rest of the life.

Quad: a type of polyamorous relationship with four persons involved. The most popular format of quad features 2 polyamorous couples.

Secondary Relationship: the relationship that a partner pays less time, energy and priorities than he/she does in primary relationship. Some aspects of primary relationship dealing with, for instance, sexuality and emotional support are present yet liabilities are not that big.

Swinging: in this case a literal "swing" stands for a partner in a swinger couple while the swing equilibrium point means two partners at home together. Swinging as a type of relationship involves partners' visiting other couples or dating new people for having sex without commitment.

Triad: any form of romantic relationship that involves three persons. Romantic affair between three people, each of them sharing intimate emotional and/or sexual contact with other members of the triad. Triad participants usually practice polyfidelity. In some USA states they also use the term Delta that stands for a triad every member of which has sexual and/or emotional intercourse with other partners. Originates from 'delta' letter of Greek alphabet, resembles a triangle.

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Appendix III

The Meaning of the Acronyms LGBTQAI+

LGBTQAI+ is an acronym used to refer to all sexual minorities:

L

Lesbian

G

Gay/Gender Neutral/Gender Queer/Genderqueer

B

Bisexual/Bigender

T

Transgender/Transvestite/Transsexual

Q

Questioning/Queer

A

Allies/Androgynous/Asexual

I

Intersex

±

The plus sign (+) refers to all populations of people having gender identities or sexual orientations that differ from the heterosexual and cisgender majority, and for people whose identities shift over time.

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Appendix IV

Sample List of LGBTQ Inclusion Statements Issued by Faith Community Leadership

1) Covenant Network of Presbyterians (excerpt)

“In this crucial time in church and culture, the Covenant Network remains committed to serving the church, believing that Jesus Christ has already made us one and that we are better equipped to carry out our larger ministry and witness when we are together. With the help of God’s grace, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians is called to strengthen the Church of Jesus Christ

by working for the unity of the church, seeking understanding and reconciliation, listening to voices long silenced, and fearlessly engaging in conversations for the sake of faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ;

by furthering the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) persons in the church; and by joining with others seeking a still more just and inclusive church; by offering prophetic witness, developing theological resources, and cultivating partnerships for learning and action.

The Covenant Network of Presbyterians is a broad-based, national group of clergy and lay leaders working for a church that is simultaneously faithful, just, and whole. We seek to support the mission and unity of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in a time of potentially divisive controversy. We intend to articulate and act on the church’s historic, progressive vision and to work for a fully inclusive church.”

2) Communion of Synodal Catholic Churches (excerpt)

“The Communion of Synodal Catholic Churches holds that because all women and men are created in God’s image and likeness and because the same divine teaching on how they should live is written in every human heart, all persons are to be treated with dignity and justice, each person having the same fundamental rights and responsibilities. In Christ, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female” (Gal 3:28), and therefore, all persons, regardless of race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, culture, or other demographic or class label, are to be treated with dignity and justice. Therefore, we are committed to welcoming all to the table of the Lord, particularly the poor, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the displaced, and those that find themselves spiritually homeless because they have been rejected from their former spiritual home.”

3) Conservative Judaism (excerpt)

“Therefore, be it resolved that the Rabbinical Assembly affirm its commitment to the full welcome, acceptance, and inclusion of people of all gender identities in Jewish life and general society; and Be it further resolved that the Rabbinical Assembly encourage all programs affiliated with the Conservative Movement, including seminaries, schools,

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synagogues, camps, and communal and professional organizations to educate themselves and their employees about the needs of transgender and gender non-conforming people, so as to create fully inclusive settings; and Be it further resolved that the Rabbinical Assembly encourage all Conservative Movement synagogues, camps, schools, and affiliated organizations to work toward becoming explicitly welcoming, safe spaces for transgender and gender non-conforming people and evaluate their physical site needs, workplace needs, and language that impact gender and gender expression; and Be it further resolved that the Rabbinical Assembly encourage Conservative organizations to educate their constituencies about the need of transgender and gender non-conforming people to be known by the identity, name, and pronoun of their choice

4) Episcopal Church (excerpt)

"In 1976, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church declared that 'homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church' (1976-A069). Since then, faithful Episcopalians have been working toward a greater understanding and radical inclusion of all of God's children. Along the way, The Episcopal Church has garnered a lot of attention, but with the help of organizations such as Integrity USA, the church has continued its work toward full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Episcopalians. In 2003, the first openly gay bishop was consecrated; in 2009, General Convention resolved that God's call is open to all; in 2012, a provisional rite of blessing for same-gender relationships was authorized, and discrimination against transgender persons in the ordination process was officially prohibited; and in 2015, the canons of the church were changed to make the rite of marriage available to all people, regardless of gender. To our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender brothers, sisters and siblings: "The Episcopal Church welcomes you."

5) Unitarian Universalist Association (excerpt)

"Each of us has worth and dignity, and that worth includes our gender and our sexuality. As Unitarian Universalists (UUs), we not only open our doors to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, we value diversity of sexuality and gender and see it as a spiritual gift. We create inclusive religious communities and work for LGBTQ justice and equity as a core part of who we are. *All* of who you are is sacred. *All* of who you are is welcome."

6) Reform Judaism (excerpt)

"THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Union for Reform Judaism:

Affirms its commitment to the full equality, inclusion and acceptance of people of all gender identities and gender expressions;

Affirms the right of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals to be referred to by their name, gender, and pronoun of preference in our congregations, camps, schools, and other Reform affiliated organizations;

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Urges Reform Movement institutions to begin or continue to work with local and national Jewish transgender, lesbian, gay and bisexual organizations to create inclusive and welcoming communities for people of all gender identities and expressions and to spread awareness and increase knowledge of issues related to gender identity and expression. These activities may include cultural competency trainings for religious school staff, the new congregational resource guide on transgender inclusion being created by the Religious Action Center, education programs on gender identity and expression, and sermons on the topic of gender identity and gender expression;

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Appendix V

Statistics on Discrimination Against People Who Practice BDSM

The following study “Survey of Violence & Discrimination Against Sexual Minorities (2008)” was authored by Susan Wright, MA. Copyright Susan Wright, MA.

Abstract

“The belief that sadomasochism (SM) is violence or abusive behavior has resulted in harassment, physical attacks, and discrimination against SM-identified individuals. Historically, they were often opposed by self-identified feminists. One reason the women who practiced SM were targeted was the official opposition to sadomasochistic practices promulgated by the National Organization for Women (NOW). Current statistics of incidents of discrimination, harassment and physical attacks against SM-identified individuals and SM groups are compiled by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF).” (Wright, 2008)

For the full study, visit: <https://www.ncsfreedom.org/resources/bdsm-survey/2008-bdsm-survey-fast-facts>

Some data highlights from from the study:

- 1) “The 2008 survey saw a total of 3,058 responses collected. Of those, 2,412 respondents resided in the United States (83.4%). Of the remaining 480 respondents, a total of over 42 other countries were represented.” (Wright, 2008)
- 2) “A total of 1,146 (37.5%) respondents indicated that they had either been discriminated against, had experienced some form of harassment or violence, or had some form of harassment or discrimination aimed at their BDSM-leather-fetish-related business.” (Wright, 2008)
- 3) “When respondents who experienced violence and/or harassment were asked, “Did you press charges?” 90% said no ...” (Wright, 2008)

Table 7. Reasons Declined To Press Charges

Fear of further harassment	41.0%
Fear of family disapproval	24.1%
Fear of job safety	22.2%
Fear of legal repercussions	21.9%
Fear of losing child custody	10.6%

- 4) “Gay/lesbian, Bisexual and Other respondents have slightly higher rates of persecution than their average percentage of total respondents, while Heterosexuals are less likely to be discriminated against.”

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5) "59.5 and 59.7% of respondents in the current survey who said they were not out to work and/or family." (Wright, 2008)

6) "11.3% (346) of the total number of respondents (3,058) reported being discriminated against by professional or personal service providers. That is 30% (346) of the respondents who were discriminated against (1,146). Those respondents could check one or more of the specific ways they were discriminated against (Table 8.), with 48.8% discriminated against by a medical doctor, and 39.3% discriminated against by a mental health practitioner." (Wright, 2008)

Table 4. Discrimination by Professionals

Medical doctor	48.8%
Mental health practitioner	39.3%
Police or govt. employee	25.4%
Other Professional service provider	8.4%
Lawyer	7.8%
Other Personal service provider	6.1%
Dentist	1.7%
Building contractor	1.7%
Accountant	1.2%
Other	6.9%

7.) "When asked, "Have you curtailed your use of the Internet for fear of prosecution?" More than one-third of the respondents, 1,065 (34.8%) of the 3058 respondents, said "yes". (Wright, 2008)

Table 6. Curtailed Internet Use

Didn't post image	71.5%
Didn't visit website	45.7%
Didn't post text	43.4%
Didn't link to website	38.7%
Didn't join email group	31.0%
Posted 18-over warn	25.7%
Barred users	16.1%
Didn't add meta-text	8.0%
Other	11.0%

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Appendix VI

Kink, BDSM, and Leather terminology

Text is extracted from “What professionals Need to Know About BDSM” by More, Pincus, and Rodemaker:

https://counselingbdsmclients.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/what_professionals_need_to_know_about_bdsm_1.pdf

1950s Household: A style of Dominant/submissive relationship modeled on gendered authority and power dynamics of United States family life in the 1950s. The male is generally considered dominant and is the primary economic provider while the female is submissive and responsible for household chores and child-rearing.

24/7: Engaging in some form of (relationship) BDSM, 24-hours a day, 7-days a week.

Alpha Sub or Alpha Slave: In a related group of submissive or slave individuals, the one who is considered senior or has the most authority.

Authority Transfer/Power Exchange/Total Power Exchange: A Dominant/submissive or Master/slave relationship structured around one person granting another authority to make decisions regarding some agreed upon portion of his or her life. The complexity varies depending on the relationship, context, scene or agreement.

Bottom: One who receives the sensations in a scene and as a sexual identity one who

D/s: Shorthand for dominance and submission.

Daddy: An individual of any sex or gender, but more commonly a male, who takes on a role with a partner that is usually based in mentoring and nurturing.

Domina: A female dominant who embraces a feminine gender role.

Dominant: A person who has (negotiated) authority over a submissive in a scene or relationship.

Dom: A male who is dominant.

Domestic Discipline (DD): Consensual corporal punishment in the form of spanking and caning as a form of maintaining discipline.

Dominatrix: A female dominant. The term is usually used to describe a woman who does professional domination.

Domme: Shorthand for a dominant female; pronounced the same as ‘Dom.’

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Emotional Masochist: A term for individuals whose masochism manifests through a sense of emotional pain, humiliation, or objectification rather than the reception of physical pain.

FemDom: Refers to female domination, usually in regards to relationships where a woman is dominant and a male is submissive.

Girl: A term that can indicate either a submissive female or slave (or male who has been feminized or is gender queer), to a woman in a Daddy/girl or Mommy/girl relationship.

Gor: A consensual relationship where all men are dominant and all women are submissive. This dynamic is maintained through a series of protocols and labels. This model of BDSM is adapted from a series of novels by John Norman.

Goth: A subculture that arose in the '80s often focused on morbid sensuality and Victorian romanticism. It has ties with the vampire subculture and with modern primitives as well as with the BDSM community.

Leather: Pertaining to Leather culture and one or more of the various leather communities. The difference between Leather and BDSM is the subject of many lively debates.

Leatherdyke: A term for a lesbian member of the leather or leatherdyke communities

Leatherman: A male who is a member of one of the leather communities.

Leather Family: A 'family-of-choice' within the larger Leather community.

Lifestyle: A term used by people in the kink or swinger scenes implying that their sexuality is more pervasive in their lives than the occasional scene and is a defining aspect of their relationship(s). It is important when working with clients using the term lifestyle to find out if they mean the kink lifestyle, the swing lifestyle or something else.

Masochist: In the BDSM context, a person who is sexually aroused by pain.

Master: A self-proclaimed title used by individuals in a Master/slave relationship. Sometimes used a general address for dominants and tops.

Master/slave (M/s): A relationship structure where authority to make various decisions has been transferred from the slave to the Master.

Mistress: A self-proclaimed title used by individual in a Master/slave relationship, considered to be the feminine form of master.

Mommy: A term for women who are dominant in a form of age play relationship or scene. Similarly to Daddies. Mommys are usually more nurturing than a traditional Domme.

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New Leather/New Guard: The values and protocols of the leather community of the 1980s and 1990s which were characterized by a rejection of the hierarchical nature of the Old Guard Leathermen and a more open acceptance of heterosexuals and lesbians.

Old Leather/Old Guard: Pertaining to the values or protocols of pre-1960s gay leather community which was characterized by a masculine ethos and an idealistic vision of military honor and protocol.

Pansexual Leather: Pertaining to the primarily heterosexual leather community that developed from the new leather movements of the 1980s and 1990s, characterized by a desire for inclusion and acceptance by the mainstream.

Pansexual BDSM: Pertaining to the modern, primarily heterosexual, BDSM community of clubs and conventions that frequently operate in the open.

Power Exchange (PE): Power exchange is generally considered a more limited agreement than authority transfer.

Sadist: In the BDSM context, a term for an individual who is sexually excited by the consensual application of force and infliction of pain.

Service: A form of D/s or M/s relationship where the submissive performs daily chores and mundane tasks for the Dominant.

Service Top: A top whose primary enjoyment comes from giving a bottom what the bottom enjoys.

Surrendered Wife: A term used in some fundamentalist Christian households to describe a wife's need to surrender decision making for many if not all matters to the husband's authority as granted through divine mandate in a scripturally-based relationship.

Switch: A person who can play either a top or a bottom role in a scene. Similar to bisexuality, switches do not always fall exactly in the middle of the spectrum, and often lean to one side or the other. Sometimes switches are the top in one relationship and the bottom in another, though people do also switch within the context of a given relationship.

Top: The person (or persons) who administer sensations in a scene and as a sexual identity one who prefers that role in a scene.

Victorian Household: A style of D/s or M/s relationship based and modeled on the class power and authority dynamics of Victorian England.

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Appendix VII

Consent Form

Consent for Participation in Interview Research for the Study

Understanding the Spiritual and Faith Community Needs

of People in Alternative Relationships

Conducted By Rev. Deborah Berman, LCSW

Email: info@altspiritualitystudy.org Phone: (646) 599-4899

Website: www.altspiritualitystudy.org

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Rev. Deborah Berman, LCSW, doctoral candidate at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the spiritual and/or faith community experiences and needs of people who engage in and/or identify as Kink, BDSM, and/or Leather. I will be one of approximately 6-10 people being interviewed for this research.

1. I attest that I am age 18 years or older.
2. I understand that my participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.
3. I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
4. I understand that I can use whatever name I want to identify myself to researcher Rev. Deborah Berman, LCSW and that she will protect my confidentiality by not including my name anywhere in the interview or subsequent work on this project, but will instead refer to me by an alias.
5. I understand that my privacy is of the utmost importance to researcher Rev. Deborah Berman, LCSW and that no one other than Rev. Deborah Berman, LSCW will be present at my interview. Rev. Berman will make available for my interview spaces known to the Kink, BDSM or Leather communities of the New York Metropolitan area; or she can meet at her counseling office in Manhattan; or meet at another agreed upon location.

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6. Participation involves being interviewed by Rev. Deborah Berman, LCSW either in-person in the New York City Metropolitan area, over the phone, or online via Zoom (because Zoom is HIPAA complaint to ensure confidentiality) and that I may chose to have the video function on or off if the interview is conducted via Zoom. The interview will last approximately 45-90 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made but I understand that Deborah Berman, LCSW will apply voice-disguising software to the recording after the interview to protect my identity, particularly in connection with the later transcription of the interview into written format, which may be performed by an outside service. Deborah Berman, LCSW will then permanently destroy all audio of our interview after her analysis of the recording/text. If I do not want to be audio-recorded, I will not be able to participate in the study. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

7. I understand that Rev. Deborah Berman, LCSW is willing to share the results of the study by providing me with a copy of this project when it is completed upon my request.

8. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the doctoral advisors at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, please contact Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion Doctorate In Pastoral Counseling—specifically, thesis advisors Dr. Sandy Barbo or Dr. Jessica Mitchell.

9. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

10. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

_____ My Signature (required)

_____ My Printed Name (required)

_____ Email (required)

_____ telephone number (optional)

For further information, please contact:

Rev. Deborah Berman, LCSW

Email: info@altspiritualitystudy.org

Phone: (646) 599-4899

Website and registration: www.altspiritualitystudy.org

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_____ Date

_____ Signature of the Investigator

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Appendix VIII

Sample Open Ended Questions Asked During the Interviews

What attracted you to participate in the study?

**What is the experience of being spiritual/religious (or formerly spiritual/religious)
and being Kink, BDSM, and/or Leather identified?**

What is the experience of being Kink, BDSM, or Leather identified?

What is the Kink, Leather, or BDSM experience with faith communities?

Is there anything you want to discuss about your identity/identities?

What is your spiritual story, identity/identities, and/or journey?

How do you identify with regard to Kink, Leather, or BDSM?

What has been your journey (with regard to Kink, Leather, or BDSM)?

**Have you ever experienced a sense of belonging or not belonging in a community
setting?**

**What are the most important factors in making a community feel positive for people in
Alternative Relationships?**

**Is there anything that Kink, BDSM, Leather-identifying people wish that clergy and/or
faith community leaders understood or knew?**

Appendix IX

Self Evaluation Chart for Clergy and Faith Community leadership



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