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Whosoever Will May Come: Challenging Homonormativity through Radical Inclusivity in an LGBTIQ2S+ Faith Community

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Abstract

Intersectional queer activists and scholars have critiqued mainstream gay and lesbian social movements for losing their radical edge and promoting homonormative political agendas. Homonormativity concentrates power in the hands of LGBTIQ2S+ activists with race, gender, and class privilege. The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of Toronto is Canada's largest LGBTIQ2S+ religious community and a significant player in global LGBTIQ2S+ human rights movements. This paper explored the perceptions of inclusion and representation of members of MCC across embodied social identities including sexual identity, gender identity, race, age, socioeconomic status, and ability. Three dimensions of inclusion were examined: personal feelings and experiences, alignment of personal social justice priorities with those of the church, and representation in church leadership. In the fall of 2015, BSW student researchers collected survey data from 146 respondents attending MCC Sunday services. The study found that most respondents, across identity categories, felt personally included most of the time and nearly all felt that their social justice priorities were aligned with the priorities of the church. Respondents who reported exclusion across all three dimensions identified as pansexual, trans male, gender non-binary, intersex, and Asian. Others who generally felt included but not represented in leadership identified as Indigenous, Black, heterosexual, bisexual, gay, and cisgender. Findings suggest that this activist spiritual community has resisted homonormatization to create a space of radical inclusivity but must continue to work hard to extend this space and to prevent the reinscription of social hierarchies.

Keywords: LGBTIQ2S+, inclusion, heteronormativity, spirituality

Introduction

Intersectional queer activists and scholars have critiqued mainstream gay and lesbian social movements for losing their radical edge and promoting homonormative political agendas. Lisa Duggan is most often credited with popularizing the term *homonormativity* to describe this watering down of LGBTIQ2S+ politics (Stryker, 2008). Duggan (2002) defines homonormativity as:

...a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions – such as marriage, and its call for monogamy and reproduction – but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. (p. 179)

According to some queer scholars, LGBTIQ2S+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, Two-Spirit, plus) rights movements struggle with tensions between assimilationist and liberationist agendas and strategies (Kinsman & Gentile, 2010; Mulé, 2006). Assimilationists pursue legal strategies for equality and sameness within a narrow neoliberal framework while liberationists seek to expose and disrupt social norms, celebrate difference, prioritize equity over equality, and build an alternative social order.

Assimilationist strategies have been very successful, yet these successes have disproportionately benefited LGBTIQ2S+ people who are the most proximate to heterosexual norms i.e. male, cisgender, white, middle and upper-class, able, and in long-term domestic partnerships (Agathangelou, Bassichis, & Spira, 2008; Mananzala & Spade, 2008; Sears, 2005). Gay men who, apart from their sexual orientation, are proximate to heterosexual, white, male norms may seek to advance their own specific interests and fail to represent those whose lives are much further from these norms, such as effeminate gay men, lesbians, people of colour, trans, genderqueer and non-binary people, poor, incarcerated or homeless queers, bisexuals, pansexuals, individuals living with disabilities, sex workers, single people, etc. (Ferry, 2012; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Reck, 2006). If homonormativity concentrates power in the hands of queer activists who are proximate to social norms, how do queer activist communities resist and challenge these tendencies to create spaces of radical inclusivity?

This paper reports on the first piece of research to emerge from a long-term community-based participatory action research study, *What Difference Does God Make in LGBTIQ2S+ Global Human Rights Movements?* In partnership with the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of Toronto, Canada's largest LGBTIQ2S+ religious community and a significant player in global LGBTIQ2S+ human rights movements, this paper explored the perceptions of inclusion of members of MCC across embodied social identities including sexual identity, gender identity, race, age, socioeconomic status, and ability. A survey methodology was used to explore whether the MCC was meeting its own goals for radical inclusivity across three dimensions of inclusion: personal feelings and experiences, alignment of personal social justice priorities with those of the church, and representation in church leadership. The survey was developed and carried out in 2015 by a group of BSW students enrolled in the York University third year *Foundations of Social Work Research* course in collaboration with Reverend Kevin Downer, Executive Pastor at MCC Toronto (2013-2015). To what extent does this large, urban queer faith community

reproduce or overcome the homonormative tendencies of secular, mainstream, queer activist communities?

Background

Homonormatization of LGBTIQ2S+ Spaces

This study was designed to support a specific LGBTIQ2S+ faith community's goals of radical inclusivity and to challenge tendencies towards homonormativity. To do so, we first explored the meaning and origin of the concept of homonormativity. The sex and gender order has been the subject of analysis and critique from within feminist and queer theory for over four decades.

Feminist and lesbian feminist theorists, such as Adrienne Rich, Gayle Rubin, and Catherine MacKinnon laid some of the early foundation of thought about the relationship between gender, sexual orientation, and the oppression of women and sexual minorities. Rich (1980) theorized that gender inequality is underpinned by compulsory, institutionalized heterosexuality. Gender is defined in oppositional and hierarchical terms (man as opposite and superior to woman) and produced and maintained in this configuration through compulsory heterosexuality; compulsory heterosexuality, in turn, as the only natural, moral, legal, and sane form of sexuality, produces and maintains the hierarchical gender binary. MacKinnon (1982) also linked (hetero)sexuality, as a form of power, to gender inequality:

Women and men are divided by gender, made into the sexes as we know them, by the social requirements of heterosexuality, which institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission. If this is true, sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality. (p. 533)

Gayle Rubin expanded on this analysis to link compulsory heterosexuality with the oppression of sexual minorities. In "The Charmed Circle", Rubin (1984) described a hierarchy of normal and deviant sexual behaviours. Individuals at the top of the hierarchy are engaged in "good sex": heterosexual, married, in pairs, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in private and vanilla, while those at the bottom are engaged in "bad sex": homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, casual, alone or in groups, in public and fetishistic or sadomasochistic. In so doing, she illustrates how particular configurations of acceptable sexual orientations and behaviours are historically specific effects of a social and political order that is based on a universal, heterosexual ideal.

Theoretically, the project of understanding the sex and gender order has evolved and been taken up in many ways by queer theorists and activists, such as Judith Butler (1990), Judith/Jack Halberstam (1998, 2005), Eve Sedgwick (1990), Joan Nestle (2002), and Kate Bornstein (1994), who have uncoupled gender identity (man/woman/trans/non-binary) and gender expression (masculine/feminine/androgynous/fluid) from sex (male/female/intersex) and sexual orientation (hetero/bi/homo/pan/poly/asexual). Queer theory has shifted our attention from overt and hostile acts of state-sanctioned prejudice and hate that marginalize LGBTIQ2S+ people (homophobia, biphobia and transphobia) to the production of seemingly innocuous sex and gender norms that produce exclusion. The concepts *heteronormativity* and *cisnormativity* were developed to explain

the normative and normalizing mechanisms of oppression of sex and gender minorities in day to day interactions. Schilt and Westbrook (2009) define *heteronormativity* as:

...the suite of cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain normative assumptions that there are two and only two genders, that gender reflects biological sex, and that only sexual attraction between these "opposite" genders is natural or acceptable. (p. 441)

The word cissexual was first used in an academic journal by Logie, James, Tharao, and Loutfy (2012): "Cisgender refers to non-transgender people and cissexual to people who experience alignment between gender identity and physical sex" (p. 2). Many studies (Kitzinger, 2005; Nielson, Walden, & Kunkel, 2000; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009) show clearly how much interactional work goes into maintaining cisnormativity - the illusion of a natural, essential cissexual sex (male/female), gender (man/woman), and (hetero)sexual orientation - by erasing, marginalizing, and punishing those with non-normative identities and presentations.

Feminist and queer theory has been accompanied by activism to challenge legal, political and social institutions for the recognition of the rights of LGBTIQ2S+ people to exist, to have access to the same human rights as heterosexual and cisgender people and to live livable lives. Since the 1960's and 70's, we have witnessed widespread social change, including the decriminalization and demedicalization of homosexuality and growing protection and acceptance of sex and gender diverse people (e.g. legalization of same-sex marriage, positive cultural representations of trans, lesbian, and gay people). The importance of these gains to the lives of queer people should be celebrated and acknowledged, as well as their limitations and recognition of the work that remains to be done. One of the central critiques of current LGBTIQ2S+ social movements is their tendency to be co-opted by dominant norms and values, in the wake of decades of neoliberal political restructuring. The radical political protests of the 1960's and 70's that threatened to tear down and rebuild the sex and gender social order have gradually given way to more palatable demands for inclusion and equality within existing political, economic, and social structures. In other words, Rubin's (1984) hierarchy of "good sex" and "bad sex" remains largely intact, just shift "homosexual" from the lowest rung up to the highest, right alongside "heterosexual", if it is expressed in monogamous, paired, marital, procreative, vanilla, non-commercial, private, and, adding some important ones that Rubin missed, white, cisgender, affluent, and able-bodied ways.

The homonormatization of LGBTIQ2S+ spaces creates polarizations between affluent queer couples who can participate in a neoliberal, consumption lifestyle and the rest who are made invisible and irrelevant within LGBTIQ2S+ politics (Sears, 2005). As such, mainstream queer organizations seem to have lost sight of many of the early observations of feminists linking gender inequality and sex and gender binaries with the oppression of sexual minorities. As a result, they have failed to adequately theorize and represent racialized queers, queers with disabilities, queers who are poor, and transfolk, who are increasingly voicing discontent within queer spaces. In this study, we engage with the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto in a self-examination of its own tendencies to reproduce or resist these homonormative tendencies.

MCC Toronto: From Charismatic to Community-Engaged Leadership

MCC Toronto is a significant player in Canadian and global LGBTIQ2S+ human rights struggles. It is a part of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC), a Protestant Christian denomination founded by Reverend Troy Perry in Los Angeles, in 1968, by and for gay and lesbian people. Since then the UFMCC has grown to over 300 churches in 22 countries around the world (MCC Toronto, 2016a), including 3 in Canada (London, Toronto, and Windsor). MCC Toronto is the largest of all the UFMCC churches with between 500-800 members attending one of three Sunday services. The church's commitment to inclusivity is clearly stated on its website:

We started as a gay and lesbian church, but we have become so much more – straight, bi, gay, trans, lesbian, queer, questioning, immigrant, Canadian-born, young and old – a diverse Christian community that includes all people. We are Vibrant, Inclusive and Progressive. (MCC Toronto, 2016a, para. 1)

The MCC Toronto has always had a dual purpose, to provide pastoral care to marginalized communities, and to transform the social and political conditions that produce marginalization. Under the leadership of Senior Pastor Reverend Dr. Brent Hawkes, from 1978-2018, the church has been at the forefront of many successful LGBTIQ2S+ human rights battles, including most recently the passage of Bill C-16, the “Transgender Bill.” With Reverend Hawkes’ retirement and transition to new Senior Pastor Reverend Jeff Rock, MCC Toronto is in the midst of change to a new model of leadership, which has been described by MCC leaders as a shift from charismatic to community engaged leadership. This study was designed with a goal of supporting this shift in community culture; to not only study but promote radical inclusivity.

Method

The research project was carried out in the fall of 2015 by a research team of nine BSW students enrolled in *Foundations of Social Work Research* at York University under the supervision of the Course Director and co-author of this paper. The thirteen-week course used an experiential education research design which required groups of BSW students to team up with community collaborators to carry out a focused piece of community-based research. This team collaborated with Executive Pastor Kevin Downer at MCC Toronto. A survey design was used to gather information from as many MCC attendees as possible to explore the relationship between identity categories and perceived inclusion. Survey questions were created jointly by student researchers and the community collaborator. The survey was made up of sixteen questions including five Likert scale questions, three open-ended questions and eight demographic questions. Perceptions of inclusion were measured across three dimensions: participants’ subjective experiences, the alignment of their social justice concerns with those of the church, and how well they perceived themselves as represented in church leadership. The first two questions asked how well the church includes people and personal experience of exclusion based on the following identity categories: sexual identity, gender identity, citizenship, race/culture/ethnicity, age, ability and socioeconomic status. Because people with multiple marginalized identities often must hide or suppress one or another of their identities to find acceptance in identity-based communities, we also asked respondents if they had to choose between their racial identity or their sex/gender identity to feel included.

The open-ended survey questions allowed participants to fill in their own responses with narrative responses: “If I could change one thing about MCC Leadership, it would be...”; “An example of a time I did not feel included is...”; and “One new social justice concern/project which I would like to tackle with MCC Toronto is...”. On the second page, they were asked 4 identity-related questions (age, race/culture, gender identity/expression, and sexual identity) and 4 questions about their type and level of involvement in MCC. Demographic data was not collected on socioeconomic status or ability. For all questions except race/culture/ethnicity, demographic questions provided discrete response categories. Race/culture/ethnicity was open-ended allowing respondents to self-identify. The project received departmental-level ethics approval through the York University School of Social Work Research and Ethics Committee.

Surveys were distributed to all attendees at three Sunday church services in November 2015 (approximately 500 surveys). The church leaders made an announcement to encourage congregants to complete the survey and members of the student research group were on-hand to answer questions. An information sheet explaining the survey and its confidentiality at greater lengths was also distributed and the congregation was informed that all personally identifying information from surveys would be removed in any future reports on the data findings. It was up to participants whether they completed the survey during the service, after the service, or at home, returning the survey over the following two weeks. Confidential drop-off boxes were left at the front and the back of the church for 3 weeks. In total, 146 surveys were completed and returned for a response rate of 29%. Survey responses were entered into an excel file for descriptive and correlational analysis. Open-ended questions were coded and organized thematically by a three-person team. When disagreements arose over what theme to categorize a response in, it was coded in multiple categories to capture the multiple dimensions that a response reflected.

Results

Participant Demographics

Table 1 describes the age, sexual identity, gender identity and racial identity of participants. The largest proportion of participants who completed the survey identified as gay, white, cisgender, male, and over the age of 50. Of participants who self-reported on their age, the least represented group was 18-29 years (11%), just over one quarter were in the 30-49-year-old range and the remainder were over 50. Within the identity category of sexual identity, most respondents identified as gay (46%), with the second highest response as lesbian (20%). The proportion who identified as heterosexual and bisexual was the same at 12% each. Very few respondents identified as Two-Spirit, pansexual, queer, or questioning.

For gender identity, a considerable proportion of participants (13%) did not respond to this question or checked the ‘other’ box. We received some comments that not everyone understood the meaning of cisgender. In hindsight, we realize that we also conflated gender identity (cis/man/woman/trans/non-binary) with gender expression (masculine/ feminine/ androgynous/fluid). It can be difficult to capture these elements of identity which are continually shifting as the gender binary is challenged and greater complexity is recognized within and beyond LGBTIQ2S+ communities. Of those who did complete this section, over half identified as cisgender male (54%) and nearly a third as cisgender female (30%). A very small minority

identified as non-binary/genderqueer (2%), trans female (2%), trans male (2%), or intersex (6%).

Table 1
Participants' Age, Sexual, Gender and Racial Identity

	Number	Percentage
Age (n = 140)		
18-29	16	11%
30-39	22	16%
40-49	18	13%
50-59	42	30%
60-69	37	26%
70 or over	5	4%
Sexual identity (n = 138)		
Pansexual	2	1%
Questioning	1	1%
Queer	1	1%
Two-Spirit	4	3%
Other	5	4%
Bisexual	17	12%
Heterosexual	17	12%
Lesbian	28	20%
Gay	63	46%
Gender identity (n = 127)		
Non-Binary/Genderqueer	2	2%
Trans Female	2	2%
Trans Male	2	2%
Other	7	6%
Intersex	8	6%
Cis Female	38	30%
Cis Male	68	54%
Racial Identity (n = 109)		
Multiracial	1	1%
Indigenous	2	2%
Hispanic	4	4%
Asian	10	9%
Black	13	12%
White	79	72%

One quarter of respondents did not answer the demographic question about race/ethnicity. Unlike the other demographic questions which provided a range of discrete categories, this question was based on self-report. It was sometimes difficult to make sense of the racial identities that were reported. Of those who did self-report, nearly three quarters identified as White (72%), followed by Black (12%), Asian (9%), Hispanic (4%), Indigenous (2%), and Multiracial (1%).

Perceived Exclusion Based on Embodied Social Identities

In this section, we report on the respondents perceived exclusion across three dimensions, linking these perceptions to respondents embodied identities according to sexual identity, gender identity, racial identity, age, socioeconomic status, and ability.

Sexual identity. Most respondents across sexual identities reported feeling somewhat or very much included, aligned with the church's social justice vision and represented in church leadership. Those who reported that they did not always feel included one pansexual respondent and one-fifth of heterosexual respondents (see Table 2). One pansexual respondent reported not being reflected in MCC's social justice vision or leadership. While nearly one-quarter of heterosexuals were less likely to see themselves reflected in MCC leadership, they all reported that their social justice vision was aligned with that of MCC. Some lesbians (11%) did not perceive their social justice vision to be aligned with MCC and some bisexual respondents (14%) did not see themselves reflected in leadership. Although a small proportion of participants (4%) identified their sexual identity as 'other', of these, one third felt excluded and half did not see themselves reflected in leadership.

Table 2

Perceived Exclusion Based on Sexual Identity

	Felt Excluded	Misaligned with Social Justice Goals	Not Represented in Leadership
Bisexual	0%	0%	14%
Gay	9%	5%	11%
Heterosexual	19%	0%	24%
Lesbian	4%	11%	8%
Other	33%	20%	50%
Pansexual	50%	50%	50%
Queer	0%	0%	0%
Questioning	0%	0%	0%
Two-Spirit	0%	0%	0%

Respondents who were most likely to perceive being excluded based on sexual identity and not reflected in MCC's social justice vision or leadership were those who did not identify with the lesbian and gay majority (i.e. pansexual, heterosexual, bisexual and 'other'). In responses to open-ended questions, one respondent indicated that they would like a straight person to be represented in church leadership. Familial status also emerged as a source of perceived exclusion. For example, three respondents commented on the challenges of being single, polyamorous or "not in a family." One respondent reported that "MCC Toronto sometimes has trouble including single and polyamorous people (but this is also a wider social problem)" while another felt excluded "when they acknowledge people who are in couples but always ignore single people."

Gender identity. Most respondents across gender identities reported feeling somewhat or very much included and that their social justice vision was aligned with the church. However, those who didn't feel included or represented were more likely to be trans male, gender non-

binary or intersex (see Table 3). Both trans female-identified respondents felt included and all trans and gender non-binary respondents saw MCC's social justice vision as aligned with their own. Despite some findings supporting the exclusion of trans, intersex and non-binary respondents, none of the examples of exclusion reported in response to the open-ended question related to gender identity. Response to open-ended questions related to leadership and social justice included more sensitivity to pronouns, trans awareness, and trans rights activism.

Table 3

Perceived Exclusion Based on Gender Identity

	Felt Excluded	Misaligned with Social Justice Goals	Not Represented in Leadership
Cis Female	3%	8%	11%
Cis Male	10%	6%	11%
Intersex	0%	14%	60%
Non-Binary/Genderqueer	50%	0%	0%
Other	17%	0%	50%
Trans Female	0%	0%	0%
Trans Male	50%	0%	50%

Racial identity. Most racialized respondents reported feeling included and aligned with MCC's social justice vision. However, a sizable proportion of Asian respondents (20%) reported feeling excluded and not aligned with social justice goals, and close to half of Asian, Black and Indigenous respondents did not see themselves reflected in MCC leadership (see Table 4). Hispanic respondents did not report feeling excluded or marginalized in any way. Most respondents did not feel that they had to choose between their racial identity or their sex/gender identity to be included. Of those who did feel they had to choose, 30% identified as Asian and 8% as Black. Racism and lack of racial diversity in leadership did emerge as problems in answers to open-ended questions. Two Asian respondents wanted MCC to do "more outreach programs to Toronto's actual (LGBT) community: Asian, South Asian, Persian, Middle Eastern, and Black" and for MCC to address "racism inside of the gay community." Other respondents wanted to see more cultural diversity in church leadership and greater representation of Indigenous people and people of colour. Two Indigenous respondents gave examples of feeling excluded, one when the national anthem was being played, and another in the social hall where "people seem to be a bit locked into their own friends - but that changes bit by bit over time."

Age, socioeconomic status, and ability. Most respondents felt included regardless of their age, ability, or socioeconomic status (see Table 5). However, because we did not collect demographic data related to ability or socioeconomic identity categories, it was not possible to correlate the findings of perceived exclusion with respondents' lived experience. Therefore, we can't know what proportion of disabled or low-income respondents might have felt excluded. In response to open-ended questions, one respondent reported feeling excluded "when disabled friends visited and were subjected to harassment." Another reported feeling excluded for

financial reasons: "I am broke and unable to contribute financially, so I feel like I am not able to participate in activities that cost money."

Table 4

Perceived Exclusion Based on Racial Identity

	Felt Excluded	Misaligned with Social Justice Goals	Not Represented in Leadership	Had to Choose Between Racial & Sexual Identity
Asian	20%	20%	40%	30%
Black	8%	0%	42%	8%
Hispanic	0%	0%	0%	0%
Indigenous	0%	0%	50%	0%
Multiracial	0%	0%	0%	0%
White	9%	5%	7%	9%

Table 5

Perceived Exclusion Based on Age, Ability and Socioeconomic Status

	Very much/ Somewhat	Neutral	Not really/Not at all
Age	8%	6%	86%
Ability	8%	4%	88%
Socioeconomic Status (SES)	11%	4%	85%

Other sources of exclusion. Many of the responses to open-ended questions did not map clearly onto social identities. The top three themes of a time where felt exclusion happened were on first impressions, within the social hall, and through religious differences. Exclusion in the social hall was mentioned several times or “when around an established group such as the choir (just an example!) they won’t talk to anyone outside.” The need for spiritual and political inclusion also emerged such as when respondents felt excluded during the worship songs and lack of inclusion in spiritual language for atheists/agnostics or “when politics are too biased to the left.” Yet even in the open-ended comments that asked for examples of exclusion, many respondents gave these types of examples: “Nothing. I feel included in everything” and “Never. God is here with us.” From a thematic analysis of the open-ended question about social justice priorities, the top activist priorities that respondents wanted to take part in addressing included refugee concerns, senior issues, transgender rights, poverty, homelessness and housing, and disability. In addition to wanting to see greater racial and cultural diversity and diversity in sexual identity in leadership, respondents also wanted to see less staff turnover, and better communication.

In summary, the findings suggest that most members of MCC feel personally included most of the time and nearly all felt that their social justice priorities were aligned with the priorities of the church. Based on the identity categories that we explored, members were least likely to feel included based on their non-heteronormative sex and gender identities (pansexual, trans male and non-binary), and race (Asian). Respondents who did not see their social justice priorities aligned with the church identified as pansexual, intersex, Asian, and lesbian. Respondents who did not see themselves represented in church leadership identified across a wider range of identity categories, including sex and gender minorities within a lesbian and gay majority community (pansexual, trans male, intersex, heterosexual, bisexual), racialized people (Asian, Black, Indigenous), and some members of the dominant gay/cis majority.

Discussion

At the beginning of this paper, we asked this question: has this LGBTIQ2S+ faith community been able to resist or overcome homonormative tendencies that limit the radical potential of mainstream queer activist groups? We argue that MCC has created a more radically inclusive space than many secular political activist groups, but it has not achieved full inclusion and must continue to work hard to maintain and extend this space. Inclusion may always only be partial, and requires continual, conscious effort to undo and prevent the re-inscription of social hierarchies. In this discussion, we identify some of the structures and mechanisms that have promoted radical inclusivity.

The Structure of the “Gay Church”: Assimilationist or Liberationist?

For many LGBTIQ2S+ individuals, sex and gender identity and religious faith are irreconcilable, and they are forced to choose one or the other. The MCC denomination was created by and for gay and lesbian people who had been excluded from their own Christian religious communities but refused to give up their faith. As the denomination grew, it became widely known as “the gay church.” For queers who have been “radically excluded” from Christian organizations through rampant, overt, institutionalized condemnation and discrimination, the MCC has provided an inclusive space where it is safe to be queer *and* Christian. In this space, inclusion is a matter of affinity based on a shared stigmatized identity (Tonstad, 2015). Yet, this study found that even in a gay and lesbian majority community, respondents who didn’t feel included were more likely to occupy non-cis/heteronormative sex and gender identities. It’s okay to be queer, but better to be gay or lesbian than trans, intersex, non-binary, pansexual, or bisexual. Sexual and gender identities that are more proximate to cis-heterosexual identities are more valued, indicating that homonormatization of this space is occurring. This follows a similar pattern to other homonormative queer spaces, in that the partial disruption of a social hierarchy based on sexual identity does not necessarily disrupt other social hierarchies based on, for instance, gender identity, race, class, and ability (Agathangelou, et al., 2008; Mananzala & Spade, 2008; Sears, 2005). It’s okay to be queer, but better to be white, affluent, able-bodied and part of a stable, same-sex, monogamous couple. Rubin’s (1984) “charmed circle” remains largely intact even within a gay majority community.

Is MCC different from secular, political LGBTIQ2S+ organizations which use assimilationist political strategies that benefit homonormative identities? We argue that, to some extent, it is. Because of its independent dual pastoral and political mission, funding structure, and progressive leadership, MCC can be categorized as both assimilationist and liberationist (Mulé, 2006). If we look at MCC’s political achievements, it may be tempting to conclude that MCC is assimilationist. The big wins have been made in the legal arena within an equality framework: changes to the Ontario Human Rights Code (1986), Old Age Security Act (1996), Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1999, 2001), Ontario Marriage Act (2001), Canadian Human Rights Act, and Criminal Code (2016) (MCC Toronto, 2016a). Yet, MCC’s dual mission, to provide traditional worship and pastoral care, and to change the social and political conditions that lead to the oppression of LGBTIQ2S+ people, is linked to dual political strategies that are both assimilationist and liberationist. Because of its spiritual mission, local and less media attention-grabbing initiatives have focused on building an alternative, self-defined, radically inclusive LGBTIQ2S+ community. Groups such as the Refugee Ministry, Lifelong Learning, Hola

(Spanish) Ministry, Trans Research Education and Advocacy Team (TREAT), Soulful Worship and Praise (African and Caribbean focus) service, Social Justice Network, Peace and Justice Strategy Team, Young Adults Ministry, and other groups bring together a diverse community with radical potential.

As a religious institution, MCC is neither corporate nor state-funded, but relies largely on its own membership. The greatest strength of this community may be that 87% of its million-plus-dollar budget comes from donations and revenue generated by church events and membership (MCC Toronto, 2016b). While MCC is not immune from the constant need to appeal to potential funders, it does not have the same constraints as organizations that are fully co-opted by corporate governance models (Mananzala & Spade, 2008). Additionally, due to its progressive leadership, MCC continues to push the boundaries for inclusion. Leadership has never become complacent or narrow in its vision of equality, and increasingly seeks to bring this vision outside of LGBTIQ2S+ and Christian communities, which is reflected in the open communion table: all are welcome to participate weekly in this sacred ritual, regardless of religious belief or background, church membership, political affiliation, age, or identity.

Mechanisms of Inclusion: Affinity, Capacity-Building and Love

In this section, we identify three mechanisms of inclusion used by MCC to overcome physical, social, financial, emotional, and psychological barriers to full and equal participation: affinity, capacity-building, and love. To begin, we examine the dimensions of inclusion and a framework for understanding inclusion as a generative praxis that has been theorized by new social movement scholars. There is a lack of clarity in the literature about the definition of inclusion and even less research on the specific processes of inclusion and exclusion (Allman, 2013; Oxoby, 2009). Most agree that inclusion has to do with access to opportunities and resources and has both objective and subjective dimensions. Objectively, real material barriers to access and opportunity exist for certain individuals or groups through physical or social segregation; and subjectively, individuals make decisions based on their perceived access to opportunities and resources based on accumulated social disadvantage (Oxoby, 2009). According to Avramov (2002), social inclusion as a form of praxis is “the process of opportunity enhancement for building or re-establishing social bonds” (p. 26–27). The transformation of a hierarchically organized social field to one in which all members are equally valued and have an equal chance to have their views heard and acted upon requires the equalization of the political capacities of all members of that field (Samuel, 2013). It requires what Nancy Fraser (1998) calls “parity of participation” (p. 5). The creation of a social space that builds individual and community capacity for greater participation and agency falls within a set of new social movement practices that are generative rather than oppositional (Voss & Williams, 2009). In other words, rather than organizing in opposition to the state, these new activist organizations generate alternative spaces with new collective capacities for civic participation. Generative strategies are more aligned with liberationist goals of disrupting and redefining social norms than assimilationist goals of inclusion within the status quo.

The first mechanism of inclusion is affinity. Simply through its existence as “the gay church”, MCC has created a space of inclusion for gay and lesbian people of faith that counters the lack of access and opportunity in mainstream Christian churches. Welcoming sex and gender diverse people and telling them repeatedly “you belong” and “you are loved” creates a healing

space where individuals with stigmatized identities may begin to experience a felt sense of inclusion. The overwhelming positive sense of felt inclusion that this study found supports the effectiveness of affinity alone as a mechanism for inclusion.

The second mechanism is capacity-building. Through intentional institutional support and leadership to build the capacity of all members to participate and access institutional opportunities and resources, MCC resists homonormative tendencies. Capacity-building is promoted through targeted and resourced programming and through grassroots initiatives. For example, the Refugee Ministry and Lifelong Learning program are staff-led and resourced. The Refugee Ministry has sponsored 27 refugees since 2007 and supports over 1,000 refugee claimants each year, primarily from Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. A quarterly Soulful Worship and Praise (SWAP) celebration and affirmation of African and Caribbean worship styles has emerged to provide spiritual support for this community. A small Hispanic community is also supported by MCC's Spanish Ministry, HOLA. These targeted programs may in part explain the higher level of inclusion reported by Black and Hispanic respondents than Asian and Indigenous respondents who do not have formal leadership-supported opportunities for affinity-based participation and capacity-building.

Grassroots initiatives also play a role in capacity-building and inclusion. The Trans Research Education and Advocacy Team (TREAT) is run by and for trans members and is very socially and politically active. Members of TREAT were instrumental in the passage of Bill C-16. TREAT consists mainly of trans female identified members which may explain why trans male identified respondents felt excluded and trans female identified respondents did not. Since the time of the survey, two trans male staff have been hired to lead the Refugee Ministry and the Children's Ministry and Ministry of Lifelong Learning. The church itself had identified a gap in trans leadership which it took steps to fill. Despite institutional support for trans and non-binary people's rights, it may not yet "trickle down" to interpersonal acceptance. Sex and gender diverse individuals that felt most excluded (pansexual, polyamorous, or single) did not have any leadership-supported or grassroots programming. Furthermore, individuals with low incomes or with disabilities may be among the most vulnerable to exclusion and have the least capacity to have a voice.

The third mechanism we identified is not one that usually makes it into academic articles: it is the mechanism of love. Because love is at the centre of the church's pastoral and social justice mission, it constantly seeks to expand its membership and to bring diverse humans across all spectrums of identity, religious belief and political affiliation into a community of love. This may be the most important distinction between MCC Toronto and secular activist queer organizations because it allows the church to transcend the limits of affinity or identity-based inclusion, seeking a more radical inclusivity. Identity-based organizations have inherent limits to inclusion. Identities are, by nature, exclusionary as an in-group is defined against an out-group (Oxoby, 2009). Tonstad (2015) argues that queer religious communities often define themselves against an exclusionary "other" (i.e. the Christian right) thereby upholding a binary between who is truly human (worthy of love and inclusion) and inhuman (not worthy). According to Tonstad (2015), "If queering theology is about *radical* inclusion, inclusion cannot stop at the limits of affinity" (p. 5). It is this more radical vision of inclusivity that MCC Toronto seeks to embody.

Moving beyond the “gay church”: Radical inclusivity. There are two obvious ways that MCC transcends affinity-based inclusion. First, while it is colloquially known as the “gay church”, we can point to the growing membership of individuals, couples and families that identify as heterosexual. Conversations have begun about rebranding itself as the “human rights church”, a church for all people to come together in the practice of love. This links back to the church’s dual focus on worship and political activism, where activism is the practice of love, and the practice of love includes loving our “enemies.” Therefore, a second way that MCC differs from many other progressive activist organizations is the way it openly welcomes difference and diversity across the political spectrum as the practice of love. For example, during the 2014 federal election, all political party leaders were invited to speak, not just those on the left (although only the left-leaning Green Party and New Democratic Party leaders accepted). In 2015, Michael Coren, an outspoken Christian right anti-gay activist, was invited to preach at MCC after having an awakening about the true Christian meaning of love (Toronto Star, 2015). He later published the book *Epiphany: A Christian's Change of Heart & Mind over Same-Sex Marriage* (Coren, 2016). MCC’s unwillingness to engage in political polarization creates a unique activist space where people with very different political viewpoints may rub shoulders and build capacity to engage in loving, respectful dialogue that can lead to true transformation. The title of this paper begins with the phrase *Whosoever will may come*, paraphrased from a verse in the Bible that is sometimes called The Invitation:

And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.
(Revelations 22:17, The New King James Version)

At MCC Toronto, the invitation is repeated weekly, in the open communion table, and the words, “All are welcome. Come.”

This study makes an important contribution to our understanding of homonormativity as a threat to the inclusion of specific embodied social identities within queer spaces. It identified mechanisms of inclusion which point to practical strategies for communities to resist homonormative tendencies. It also provided a unique opportunity to engage BSW students in community-based research through an experiential learning model. The study was limited by some weaknesses in the design of the survey. The demographic section included terminology that was not understood (cisgender), the use of self-report instead of discrete categories for racial/cultural identity resulted in missing data, gender identity and gender expression were conflated, and data on participants’ socioeconomic status and ability was not captured. Findings on higher rates of perceived exclusion by trans male, gender non-binary and intersex respondents was based on a small number of respondents. While some degree of exclusion based on race/culture was identified, particularly among Asian respondents, these findings should be taken as partial due to the amount of missing data. Future research should focus specifically on the experiences of minorities within the gay and lesbian minority and explore socioeconomic status and ability. Despite these limitations, the study offers important insights for social work practice.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This study illustrates the heterogeneity of embodied social identities within a gay and lesbian majority community. Social workers will practice with more efficacy and sensitivity by understanding how nuances in identity affect inclusivity and representation. Social workers engaged in advocacy and community development can implement this study's findings on the mechanisms of inclusion to develop practical strategies that recognize yet go beyond identity and affinity to create generative liberationist spaces. Even marginalized communities must engage in a continual process of critical self-reflection on their own practices and invest resources to build capacity for their most vulnerable members to participate equitably. We are not sure how secular grassroots groups, or the profession of social work, can center love as a mechanism of inclusion, but we, the authors, are convinced that this is the most important strategy for bringing about lasting social change.

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