

What's Love Got to do with it?

How a non-monogamous individual's sexual expression impacts their experiences of and/
or perceptions of the Christian faith and Christian faith communities in a North American
perspective.

By
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Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

AST REB File number:	0022017
Title of Research Project:	What's Love Got To Do With It? How a non-monogamous individual's sexual expression impacts their experiences of and/or perceptions of the Christian faith and Christian faith communities in a North American perspective
Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Susan Willhauck
Student Investigator	Patrick Woodbeck

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

Approval Period: 8 September 2017 to 16 April 2018

Dated this 12th day of October, 2017 at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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Abstract

“What’s Love Got To Do With It? How a non-monogamous individual’s sexual expression impacts their experience of and/or perceptions of the Christian faith and Christian faith communities in a North America perspective” is a research project by Patrick Woodbeck, submitted December 9, 2016, in partial fulfillment of the Master of Divinity degree at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This study explores the experiences and/or perceptions of individuals who self-declare as non-monogamous, and the Christian faith and Christian faith communities. Included is a review of literature which examines issues of monogamy and non-monogamy. Using Grounded Theory, this project endeavours to build a theory which might be used by Christian faith communities to formulate a pastoral response from these communities towards the non-monogamous community.

Introduction (Summary of Proposal)

As of 2015 there were 138 ministries considered to be Affirming¹ within The United Church of Canada.² In doing so, many of them invited in, and heard stories of, members of the LGBTTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Two Spirit³, Transgender, Queer, and questioning⁴) community and how these individuals might have been affected by the Church's historic mistreatment of this community.⁵ In many ways, the LGBTTQ community has reached a certain level of acceptance in many mainstream Christian denominations. In fact, it seems that in today's society it is rare to meet someone who either does not know anyone who is member of the LGBTTQ community, or does not know of someone who knows someone who is a member of the LGBTTQ community. So it seems as if sexual orientation is an issue that is currently being addressed in churches. This led me to wonder about how different forms of sexual expression outside the bounds of monogamy have been perceived in both churches and society and prompted me to

¹ The Affirming designation is a designation within the United Church of Canada that states that the ministry has entered into a time of intentional discernment to become open, welcoming, and affirming of the LGBTTQ community.

² Affirm United Annual Report 2015, page 9, accessed on July 17, 2017, <http://affirmunited.ause.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/10/AUSE-Annual-Report-2015-for-AGM-FINAL.pdf>

³ Two-spirit describes self-identified indigenous persons who understands themselves to be the embodiment of both the male and female spirit of life.

⁴ Questioning describes those in society who are in the process of discerning their orientation or gender identity by whatever means they choose.

⁵ See as examples: Travis Gasper, "A Religious Right to Discriminate: Hobby Lobby and 'Religious Freedom' as a Threat to the LGBT Community," *Texas A&M Law Review* (Oct 2015) (accessed July 20, 2017), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2671590; Bernadette Barton, "Abomination—Life as a Bible Belt Gay," *The Journal of Homosexuality*, 57:4 (2010), 465-484; Melinda Buchanan et al., "Challenges of Being Simultaneously Gay or Lesbian and Spiritual and/or Religious: A Narrative Perspective," *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 29:5 (2001), 435-449.

explore how those who practice different forms of sexual expression perceive the Christian faith and Christian faith communities.

I strongly believe that as human beings we need to have connection to other people. Mark Bartel, in a paper written for the *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, speaks of the need for intimate connections to others in one's life in order to be spirituality whole, and examines how disconnection from others can lead to spiritual pain.⁶ Connection to other human beings can and does play a vital role in one's spiritual health and wellbeing. If we look at our scriptures we see that the first thing in the creation story that was not good was that (hu)man was alone. Genesis chapter 2 states, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone.'"⁷ (Gen 2:18) We were created to be in relationship, and as Bartel implies we are only truly fulfilled spiritually when we have a connection to another human being. This brings about the question: what happens when your deep, intimate, sexual connections are not validated as authentic Christian relationships by Christians and church communities?

Another factor in choosing to look at the issue of the intersection of non-monogamy and experiences of the Christian faith and Christian faith communities materialized in the summer of 2015. I was in a class on ethics when the instructor critiqued polyamory as being akin to the wider consumer culture, where the culture in which we live encourages us to take only what we want from wherever we can get it and in doing so make very few, if any, real connections. Polyamory, as a non-monogamous

⁶ Mark Bartel, "What is Spiritual? What is Spiritual Suffering?" *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, 58: 3 (2004), 194.

⁷ All scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

expression of sexuality, was likened to going to a buffet of sexual experiences and only taking what one wants, as much as one wants, whenever one wants. I did not agree at all with this critique of polyamory and it helped me to realize that there is a great deal of misinformation in society about non-monogamous expressions of sexuality.

This has led me to ask a number of questions. We in the church have, in many ways, seemed to believe that we have become more accepting and understanding in regards to the diversity of sexual orientation, but do we believe the same thing when looking at sexual expression? What does it mean to be truly inclusive and accepting when one speaks of a different understanding of sexual expression? Do we as a society and as Christian faith communities see monogamy as the benchmark when it comes to authentic Christian relationships? These initial questions have led me to the focus of this study: How does a non-monogamous individual's sexual expression impact their experiences and/or perceptions of the Christian faith and of Christian faith communities, in a North American perspective? The importance of the North American context cannot be stressed enough because this study hopes to examine the experiences of those who have grown up with the experience of having a perceived understanding from the church that monogamy is the benchmark of authentic Christian relationships. We cannot be sure that individuals from other cultures would ascribe to these same values and therefore by keeping to a North American perspective we hope to better understand these experiences within our own specific societal context.

Literature Review

There is a great deal of literature that deals with the issue of monogamy in both the church and in greater society. I begin this literature review with some quantitative findings around non-monogamy in a purely Canadian context. I will then look at the idea of non-monogamy from a historical context, after which I move to a more sociological critique of non-monogamy. It is important to have an overview of sexual ethics from a scriptural point of view and I will complete this literature review by looking at theological perspectives in regards to monogamy and non-monogamous relationships.

In June of 2016 a survey was conducted across Canada regarding relationships that were self-declared as being non-monogamous in nature. What this survey showed was that of the 547 respondents, the majority of them lived in three provinces: British Columbia (35.6%), Ontario (28.7%), and Alberta (17.6%). This survey also found that the majority of those involved in non-monogamous relationships were between 25 and 44 years of age. Those who participated in non-monogamous expressions of sexuality were also more likely than the general population to have some level of post-secondary education, with 37% of respondents holding an under-graduate degree compared to 17% for the general population. Further, this study shows that the phenomenon of a non-monogamous form of sexual expression is shown across all of Canada.⁸

This brings me to the historical examination of non-monogamy. I will begin with the issue of polygamy, one particular kind of non-monogamous sexual expression. This issue was explored by 19th century activist Matilda Joslyn Gage in the book, *Women,*

⁸ John-Paul Boyd, “The Rise of the Polyamorous Family: New Research Has Implications for Family Law in Canada,” *Slaw: Canada’s Online Legal Magazine* (September 2, 2016) (accessed July 24, 2017), <http://www.slaw.ca/2016/09/02/the-rise-of-the-polyamorous-family-new-research-has-implications-for-family-law-in-canada/>

Church and State. Gage traces the history of polygamy from the 4th century CE as practiced by the emperor Valentinian I through to the Protestant reformation, and beyond this to the rise of Mormonism.⁹ At one point in this discourse Gage states that “monogamy is women’s doctrine, polygamy is for man’s.”¹⁰ This understanding then is that a non-monogamous expression of sexuality only serves the desires of men and their need for power.¹¹ While not disputing this historical reality, it becomes evident to me that in many ways these ideas around non-monogamy have not changed much since this exploration was written. There appears to be a real lack of research regarding the non-monogamous community and how they understand how their sexual expression impacts their experience of the Christian faith.

In 1979 Shulamith Firestone wrote *The Dialectic of Sex* and it was received as being one of the first daring explorations of radical feminism published.¹² In this text, she critiques the sexual dynamics between men and women generally using a psychological method. She states that non-monogamy is a result of the ego searching for positive reinforcement of the worth of the individual, and since a man’s ego undergoes different trauma such as early rejection, that means men are therefore more likely to be non-monogamous. From Firestone’s perspective, this is a way that men use to control

⁹ Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church and State* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2002).

¹⁰ Gage, *Woman*, 404.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case For Feminist Revolution* (London: The Women’s Press Ltd, 1979), 1.

women.¹³ This understanding shows non-monogamy as being embedded with power dynamics, which function as a negative force in any given relationship. This appears to preclude the understanding that non-monogamy might be built on values of equality and equity.

When I examined literature from other disciplines, which then intersect with Christian understanding, I found once again literature that spoke to, and critiqued, traditional understandings of marriage and relationships but there still appeared to be the understanding that the ultimate goal should be monogamy. Lillian Rubin in *Intimate Strangers* speaks to the power of sexuality but from a perspective of the psychological/religious. In critiquing non-monogamy, Rubin approaches this from the perspective that men are more than willing to be in a sexual relationship with a woman but fear any emotional connection.¹⁴ This leads men to desire non-monogamy so that they do not run the risk of losing a part of their individuality in the midst of sexual experiences, as sexual encounters are deeply connected to the emotional side of men¹⁵. Therefore, once again non-monogamy is seen as a tool that men use in relationships to control their emotional investment, and to control the relationship itself. Rubin argues that the ultimate goal still needs to be monogamy, but monogamy between a husband and wife.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid, 125.

¹⁴ Lillian B. Rubin, *Intimate Strangers* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1983), 110.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 98.

When looking at the issue of non-monogamy from a philosophical/religious perspective we also find an understanding of monogamy as the desired version of sexual expression. Jean-Luc Marion attempts, through a philosophical discourse, to explain love. He speaks to the idea of the erotic as an extension of love rather than from the ego.¹⁷ This allows one to depart from the idea that the erotic is, in many of its forms, strictly dealing with the head or the mind, but rather, that it is an extension of the emotions. Even though Marion speaks of what he calls the erotic phenomenon, he speaks of this type of erotic love from a purely monogamous perspective. Marion states, “How can I not see that my acknowledged intention—to remain forever ‘free’ for new ‘encounters’—contradicts itself, since this ‘availability’ implies either that noting has lasted from preceding ‘encounters,’ or that I have several ‘encounters’ going at the same time, without any hope of them lasting precisely because none even has the right to the whole present?”¹⁸ In this, Marion equates the idea of non-monogamy to the idea that one cannot be in lasting non-monogamous relationships precisely because individuals who are non-monogamous are not bringing their whole selves to the experience.

When we look at a scriptural perspective it appears that there is a consensus among the literature that when one is entering into a discussion around sexual ethics from a biblical perspective it can be difficult, as there are many different variations on what might be considered ethical sexual behaviour and what actions would not be seen as ethical. Instead of trying to untangle these sometimes contradictory statements, many

¹⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 6.

¹⁸ Ibid, 186.

authors believe that one needs to look to the broad themes that emerge when examining these issues.¹⁹ From this point though the literature diverges on what these themes might be saying.

Collins writes that as Christians we are to shun sexual immorality, including adultery, which I would read as a critique of non-monogamy.²⁰ When I speak of adultery I am speaking of an intentional breach of a covenantal relationship without prior negotiation; this is, many times, equated with non-monogamy. Countryman states that any conversation around sexual ethics needs to be addressed within the context of spirituality, but he believes that sexual ethics needs to be less about conformity to societal norms and more directed towards a healthy growth in the spirit.²¹ He even goes as far as to include a liberation perspective when speaking of sexual ethics. Countryman illuminates a theme of bias towards the marginalized in the New Testament and then carries this further to encompass those who are sexually marginalized.²² Although Countryman appears to be making inroads towards an eventual recognition of non-monogamous relationships, he quickly retreats back to monogamy being a the benchmark of Christian relationships: “Unless it is possible to find ways of reconciling polygyny²³

¹⁹ L. William Countryman, *Dirt Greed & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Raymond F. Collins, *Sexual Ethics And The New Testament: Behaviour and Belief*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000); William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012).

²⁰ Collins, Sexual Ethics, 185.

²¹ Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, & Sex*, 256.

²² Ibid, 263.

²³ Polygyny is a non-gender-specific term for one who has more than one partner vs. polygamy = more than one wife.

with Jesus' teaching about the equality of genders, the historic Christian stance in favor of monogamy should continue.”²⁴

Loader also looks to the concept that one needs to, when looking at scriptural texts, focus less on actions and more on attitude. In saying this he affirms that monogamy is once again important, even if it is approached from the perspective that when one has committed sexual wrongdoing it is less about the action itself and more about the spiritual and emotional damage that is wrought.²⁵ So although each of these texts do begin to address the idea of non-monogamy, each of them in their own way reverts back to an understanding that monogamy, as a form of sexual expression, is the only valid form of sexual expression. This leaves out a discussion about what might make non-monogamous forms of sexual expression valid from a scriptural understanding.

There is literature that does critique the idea that monogamy, in and of itself, is what is important in regards to relationships within the church context. In his article in *Moral Issues and Christian Response*, Marvin M. Ellison speaks to the issue of the church’s credibility concerning sex. Ellison believes that it is not marriage nor heterosexuality that is important, but rather, responsibility or justice is what should be considered the goal in any relationship.²⁶ Ellison believes that the church’s focus on “celibacy in singleness, fidelity in marriage” is inadequate.²⁷ This opens the door up for

²⁴ Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, & Sex*, 269.

²⁵ Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, 149.

²⁶ Marvin M. Ellison, “Common Decency: A New Christian Sexual Ethic,” *Moral Issues and Christian Response* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1993), 44.

²⁷ Ibid.

what could have been deep exploration of non-monogamy, but Ellison quickly defaults back to a discussion of marriage and what might make it more ethical. This is not to say that Ellison completely ignores the possibility of non-monogamous relationships; “Some marriages may make room for additional sexual partners while others will thrive only by maintaining genital sexual exclusivity.”²⁸ In either case, Ellison believes that what constitutes a breaking of the covenantal bond is not sex outside the relationship but rather, not acting in good faith or being willing to open the discussions to revisit the terms of the relationship in the face of changing desires.²⁹ There is an assumption made here that this is not what is practiced in non-monogamy. If this assumption is incorrect then the author has failed to take into account any possible values that might be practiced, by those who are non-monogamous, and fails to bring them into the conversation.

There appears, in much of the literature, a real desire to avoid the subject of non-monogamous relationships, except to critique them in a negative way. Even when the topic is examined, it appears to be almost an afterthought. Richard Price in his article “Celibacy and Free Love in Early Christianity” contrasts two opposing and critical views of marriage.³⁰ Price explores the early Christian attack on marriage from the perspective of those who are followers of Paul, who believed that celibacy was above marriage, and those who came from the perspective of freer, more open relationships, such as mid-

²⁸ Ibid, 45.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Richard M. Price, “Celibacy and Free Love in Early Christianity,” *Theology and Sexuality*, 12:2 (2006), 121.

second century theologian Epiphanes.³¹ Although Price is speaking from a Roman Catholic perspective, he uses this exploration of early Christianity to critique the Church's current stance on relationships by asking a pointed question related to our current context of desiring more freedoms: "Could she not argue more pertinently that more open sexual relations are all very well, but that they need to be more than a matter of personal indulgence, and should involve the ideals preached by Epiphanes in his advocacy of the fellowship and simplicity of the life that God had originally ordained and Christians are called to restore?"³² Although this question begins to approach the subject of non-monogamy and the Christian faith, it is left for others to explore, as Price offers no commentary but rather leaves us with only questions.

Queer theologians on the other hand have begun to address non-monogamy and critique monogamy. The Rev. Edgard Francisco Danielsen-Morales, PhD, offers a presentation on Queer Theology and polyamory with "Towards a Queer Theology of Relationships" at the Seminars in Memory of Marcella Althaus-Reid, September 23, 2014, in New York City. In this presentation, Danielsen-Morales speaks of the theology of Liberation/Theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid and her views towards current ideologies that have become embedded in modern Christianity. Danielsen-Morales believes that we are hesitant to explore polyamorous (read: non-monogamous) relationships because they upset the notion of stability, which is perpetrated by the church, and introduce a level of uncertainty and chaos. From his reading of Althaus-Reid,

³¹ Ibid, 128.

³² Ibid, 140.

Danielsen-Morales believes that this is the work of Queer Theology, to bring in chaos and uncertainty, but with a groundwork of love.³³ Although Danielsen-Morales begins to critique monogamy from a theological perspective, there is little indication that the non-monogamous community itself has been approached about their understanding or experience of the Christian faith, which has traditionally been based on an understanding of monogamy.

Robert Goss and Virginia Mollenkott also both approach non-monogamy from a Queer theological perspective. Goss speaks a new understanding of the eschaton where in the new heaven sexual love would be transformed into redemptive love.³⁴ He goes on to speak of this from the homosocial experience of monasticism and this in many ways becomes geared to an exploration of non-monogamy from a gay male perspective.³⁵ Mollenkott also critiques the binary understanding of marriage as being between a man and a woman, but does so from a transgender perspective, speaking of heaven as a place where “sex in resurrection bodies would have none of the binary, possessiveness and constriction of marriage in a fallen world.”³⁶ But like Goss, Mollenkott fails to bring into this particular discussion the diverse community in which non-monogamy is currently practiced.

³³ Edgard Francisco Danielsen-Morales, “Towards a Queer Theology of Relationships,” (presented at the Seminars in Memory of Marcell Althaus-Reid, New York City, September, 23, 2014).

³⁴ Robert C. Goss, “Proleptic Sexual Love: God’s promiscuity Reflected in Christian Polyamory,” *Theology and Sexuality*, 11:1 (2004), 54.

³⁵ Ibid, 57.

³⁶ Virginia Mollenkott, *Omnigendered: A Trans-Religious Approach* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 128-129.

Patrick Cheng also enters this discussion as he examines the concept of a Trinitarian understanding of God from the perspective of polyamory. In this examination, Cheng believes that the nature of the Trinity itself, in which the three persons of the Godhead are in faithful, erotic, intra-mingled relationships, breaks down the traditional binary notion of love and sexuality. According to Cheng, “As such, the Trinity can be a model for individuals who are polyamorous because the Trinity deconstructs the binary relationship model of marriage and domestic partnerships.”³⁷ Once again we have a theological examination and critique of monogamous relationships and marriage, he but does engage with the non-monogamous community to examine their experiences in regards to the Christian faith.

The last piece of research that I would like to address is from Akhila Elizabeth Ann Kolesar and her doctoral dissertation, “Spiritual Identities of Multiply Partnered People.” In her research, Kolesar also studied those who self-identified as non-monogamous and she did speak to their spiritual and/or religious histories. This is where the similarities in our research end. Kolesar’s research revealed individuals who all currently understand themselves to ascribe to either Wiccan or another non-traditional form of spirituality, and all of them were women.³⁸ She did not address the issues of how individuals who currently practice non-monogamy currently see themselves in relation to

³⁷ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 59.

³⁸ Akhila Elizabeth Ann Kolesar, “Spiritual Identities of Multiply Partnered People” (PhD diss., Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, California, 2010).

the Christian faith and Christian faith communities. This is the research that I am proposing to undertake with this study.

We can see by this review that there is research that speaks to non-monogamous relationships as a form of sexual expression. Much of the literature that was found critiques non-monogamy in a very negative way, such that it comes back to monogamy as the only valid form of relationship. When the literature does explore non-monogamy, it comes from the perspective of the queer community, or from a purely theological perspective. The one source that speaks to the spiritual practices of non-monogamous individuals was only speaking to women, who are currently practicing non-traditional forms of spirituality. I hope in my study to explore the experiences and perceptions of non-monogamous individuals, in regards to the Christian faith and its communities.

Purpose and Research Questions

In the introduction I spoke of the ever-increasing number of LGBTTQ Affirming congregations in Christian denominations. The issue that arises is that even though this has been taking place there are still a large number of members of the LGBTTQ community who still perceive churches to be places of judgment, hypocrisy, and pain. In this study I will explore the perceptions that those individuals who self-identify as non-monogamous have of Christian churches and the Christian faith. In this way, if Christian churches begin to address this issue they will have an understanding of the perceptions that need to be addressed, in any pastoral response to this community.

Method

The theoretical framework from which I will approach this question is Queer Theory in a post-modern perspective. Queer Theory revolves around the idea of one's individual identity and how this identity is shaped in relationship with larger society. Both Queer Theory and post-modernism critique the cultural understanding of identity as being static and normalized within society. These theories work to deconstruct societal understandings of identity, sexuality, power dynamics, and conformity. The construction of identity is a focus, while deconstructing dominant theories about identity itself as seen from the point of view of the larger society.³⁹ From this understanding, that the identities of the research partners that are chosen are constructed through their own contextual interactions with the world, I find that I enter into this study with no predetermined phenomena that is being explored. This leaves me to understand that any theories that might come from this study will need to arise from the data that is collected, and therefore I will be using Grounded Theory as the qualitative research method for this study.

Grounded Theory is based on the understanding that any theory that arises will come solely from the data that has been collected. From this data collection the researcher can formulate a substantive theory that has at its core a specific, everyday-world situation.⁴⁰ Although I will be using Grounded Theory in this study I will be using a more constructivist approach to this research. This approach will allow me to

³⁹ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 28-29.

⁴⁰ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 29-30.

emphasize the diversity of experience of those with whom I am partnering. Constructivism allows for multiple realities and the complexity of diverse local worlds, actions, and views, as we place values on the hierarchical form of power that is observed.⁴¹ Keeping in continuity with a post-modern, Queer Theory perspective, this adaptation of the traditional Grounded Theory method will help to keep this study true to its theoretical underpinnings as we understand that knowledge is constructed through our experiences rather than being something that exists in and of itself. This form of Grounded Theory will also allow me to enter into this study not as the all-knowing researcher, but to bring with me my own perspectives and contexts to the data collection, coding, and interpretation.⁴²

I planned to engage 16 volunteers to be research partners to interview during this study. I recruited volunteer partners for this study by posting an invitation to participate on social media, posting a poster at the local LGBTTQ resource center in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where a polyamorous group currently meets, and distributed the invitations through a couple of stores that cater to these communities. I would then use the snowball method for referrals of other participants for the study. I also understood going into the study that a limiting factor on the number of research partners is the fact that this research project deals with very personal experiences and their possible intersection with the Christian faith and Christian faith communities and therefore some of these conversations might be difficult for some participants.

⁴¹ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 64-65.

⁴² Ibid, 66.

Theological Considerations

In looking at the issue of non-monogamy one might not think that one needs to be looking to the Bible. Yet, as one examines the biblical texts one sees that there are many forms of relationship and marriage that are illustrated in the scriptures. Donita Wiebe-Neufeld, in “The church and non-traditional marriage,” highlights what some of these are, as she speaks to monogamy in the stories of Adam and Eve (Gen 1-2) and Hosea and Gomer (Hos). She then speaks to the polygamy that appears, in particular in the Old Testament, as we look at stories from Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar (Gen 16), Jacob, Leah, and Rachel (Gen 29), David and his many wives (1Sam), and Solomon and his foreign wives (1Kings 11).⁴³ We can examine these texts from a purely relational perspective and when we do this we can see that many of the texts that deal with non-monogamy have other issues at play. Jacob works for seven years to marry Rachel, only to be tricked into marrying Leah. (Gen 29) Solomon and David both had many wives who served many purposes from love, to lust, to political ambitions. (1Kings 3)

These scriptures may not speak to a sense of non-monogamy as being underpinned with theology, but rather as a possible means to an end. Yet, if we were to look deeper at the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar we might find something that speaks to God’s blessing, notwithstanding the underlying issues of patriarchy and slavery within their stories. Sarah, who has not given birth, gives Abraham her slave Hagar that he might have an heir. (Gen 16:1) After Sarah herself gives birth to a child, she has Abraham drive Hagar and her son Ishmael out of their camp and into the wilderness

⁴³ Donita Wiebe-Neufeld, “The church and non-traditional marriage,” *Waterloo*, 2:21 (Oct 26, 1998), 6.

alone. (Gen 21:8) With the water that Abraham had given her gone, Hagar wept and God heard her weeping: “And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.’” (Gen 21: 17-18) God, through the angel, passes a blessing on Hagar’s son Ishmael. We also read earlier in Genesis that God had also already blessed Sarah’s child, Isaac: “God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.’” (Gen 17: 15-16) This is a story of non-monogamy, and as we see, both offspring that have resulted from these unions have been blessed by God. Can we then not extrapolate back to an understanding that the relationships themselves were blessed by God? If this is the case then this can tell us that there are cases in which we see that non-monogamous relationships are blessed by God as relationships that can lead to blessings themselves.

Patrick Cheng in *Radical Love* critiques monogamy from a deeper level as he speaks to the erotic nature of the Triune Godhead.⁴⁴ Cheng speaks of the concept of perichoresis, which he describes as the “ecstatic dance or interpenetration of the three persons”⁴⁵ of the Trinity. This in some ways can speak to the polyamorous nature of the Triune God. Not only can God by God’s very nature be polyamorous, as we see by God’s

⁴⁴ Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 56.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

very nature, God is in deep relationship with each of the members of the Trinity and they are in the same relationship with each other. This becomes therefore a part of this examination of the polyamorous nature of God because as Christians we understand that God also desires and moves toward authentic, deep, loving relationship with humanity. So God's polyamorous nature is due to Godself itself, and Godself's desire to be in relationship with God's creation. If we can begin to see that non-monogamy can be viewed as a natural authentic form of sexual expression, then I believe it is then prudent for us to look at this issue from a deeper, intimate, erotic relationship standpoint, examining our relationship to God and to each other.

If we are to understand from the scriptures that God created everything—"In the beginning when God created" (Gen 1:1)—then we can understand that God created (hu)man. As I mentioned already, from the creation story in Genesis we also find that the first thing that was not good in creation was the fact that (hu)man was alone—"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone.' " (Gen 2:18) As I examine this text I am led in two directions. From a purely relational understanding this text indicates that, according to God, it is not good for us to be alone; we were created to be in relationship with others. So, God desires for us to be in relationship with others. This leads to the question of how many others are we called to be in relationship with? Is there a specific number of others that we are to come into relationship with in our lives?

On a deeper level, I ask myself the question, can we truly be alone? In the story of creation we come to understand that God is also present in the garden: "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden on the evening breeze." (Gen 3:8) So if God

is in the garden, how could Adam have ever been alone? I believe that this has to do with the idea of how and with whom we are to come into relationship. God has created us in God's image: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;" (Gen 1:26) such that being in the image of God, we might be able to come into relationship with God. What I see here is that we have been created to be in relationship, and being created in God's image, into some form of relationship with God. However, we are not God, and therefore we might be only able to come into direct relationship with God in a limited capacity. This is where I see the idea of (hu)man being alone coming into the story. If we return to Cheng and the idea of the deeply intra-mingled erotic nature of God⁴⁶, might (hu)man being alone help us to understand that although we might be limited in how intimately and erotically we can come into relationship with God directly, we might be able to come into deep, intimate, and erotic relationship with God through another human being, who was also created in the image of God. Then if we are in deep, intimate, erotic relationships with more than one, might that allow us to come into an even deeper and more intimately erotic relationship with God? Laurie Jungling understands this in the following way: "The call of creation is a call to be, do, and seek the 'image of God' in one's relational life."⁴⁷

This idea of an intimate relationship with God can be related to the concept of God's love. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for

⁴⁶ Ibid, 56.

⁴⁷ Laurie Jungling, "Creation as God's Call into Erotic Embodied Relationality," *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 224.

God is love.” (1John 4: 7-8) According to Jungling this love as “erotic love is the force that gives life the relational essence that fills and empowers all of creation.”⁴⁸ The love of God is then understood to be the love of eros in which all creation has been created, in which we as humanity have been created. This leads us to know that we were created in deep erotic love, to love in a deeply erotic manner. Matthew Fox quoted the 12th century mystic Hildegard Von Bingen: “As the Creator loves his creation, so creation loves the creator. Creation, of course, was fashioned to be adorned, to be showered, to be gifted with the love of the creator. The entire world has been embraced by this kiss.”⁴⁹ Von Bingen imagines a deep reciprocal love between God and creation as symbolized by all of creation being engaged in a sensual kiss with the Creator. This love is the love of all creation, not just the love of one piece of creation, is highly non-monogamous in nature.

Yet to be balanced we also need to understand that there might be a part of this creation story that gives a theological rationale for monogamy. In the creation story we can see the creation of the companion as a creation of one particular other who, in essence, completes us. “So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.’” (Gen 2: 21-23) One might even

⁴⁸ Ibid, 217.

⁴⁹ Matthew Fox, *Christian Mystics: 365 Readings and Meditations* (Novato: New World Library, 2011), 21.

use this story as the Biblical and theological rationale for the understanding that who we are to be in relationship with is destined.

The theological implications of this examination of non-monogamy can lead me to conclude that, although the current church seems to believe that monogamy constitutes the only authentic Christian relationship, there is a great deal of diversity when it comes to relationships in the scriptures. These stories can speak to non-monogamy as a natural form of relationship as authentic, as an expression of sexuality, as monogamy. What might this then say to the church? How might the church start to expand its understanding of Christian relationship?

Language

Throughout the course of this study I will be using non-monogamy and polyamory as interchangeable. Therefore, I am generally going to use non-monogamy to indicate both non-monogamous relationships as well as polyamorous relationships. In using this I have relied on the following definition that I will use in regards to polyamory, which comes from the Polyamory Society website and is defined as: “Polyamory is the non-possessive, honest, responsible and ethical philosophy and practice of loving multiple people simultaneously. Polyamory emphasizes consciously choosing how many partners one wishes to be involved with rather than accepting social norms which dictate loving only one person at a time.”⁵⁰

Categories of Data and Analysis

⁵⁰ Polyamory Society, *Introduction to Polyamory* (accessed on November 20, 2017), <http://www.polyamorysociety.org/page6.html>

When using Grounded Theory one endeavours to ensure that in the process of interviews we receive a saturation of data. Although I wanted to conduct 16 interviews, I eventually was able to conduct 11 interviews in total via phone, internet, and in person. In the course of these interviews there was a great deal of diversity in the research partners themselves, but there were also some important themes that came forward. Each of these themes showed up in between 80% to 100% of the interviews. As themes were being repeated and no new major themes were coming forward I consider this to be a saturation of data, enabling me to begin to formulate a theory from the data collected. The following, therefore, are the major themes that arose out of the data that was collected: Identity, Christian Monogamy, Worthiness, Spiritual Fulfillment.

Identity

Throughout the interviews there were a number of research partners, six to be exact, who identified what they understood to be a misconception of non-monogamy within larger society. This misconception is the idea that non-monogamy is solely about sex. This is not to say that all of the respondents did not verbalize that non-monogamy has a physical nature to it. All eleven research partners verbalized the understanding around a physical aspect to non-monogamy, with two even speaking about the physical nature of a polyamorous relationship in an asexual context, but they understand that there is much more to non-monogamy. During the interviews I heard the research partners use language such as, “going on dates,” “holding hands,” “watching movies,” and “cuddling,” as authentic forms of physical expression for their non-monogamy. So

although the research questions were focused on sexual expression, the research partners themselves opened up about the diversity of forms of physical expression.

The data gathered from the interviews indicated that for all of the research partners, they understand that non-monogamy goes much deeper. Although there can be and very often is a physical component to the relationships, every one of the respondents spoke about the depth of the relationships. The language used goes beyond the physical as they used words that expressed a deeper understanding of non-monogamy in regards to themselves. It was as though they were speaking of a facet of their identity as they spoke of their experiences of non-monogamy as with language such as: “natural,” “authentic,” and “this is who I am.”

In coming to understand that non-monogamy is not just about sexual intimacy, but rather encompasses much more, the research partners spoke about many values that needed to be present for non-monogamy to work. These distill down to a couple of very important ideals that must be present. First and foremost was the idea that communication was of the utmost importance in these relationships. Communication about what each of the partners wanted and needed from the relationships and real communication about each and every interaction both within the relationship and outside of the relationship was paramount. This communication engendered trust between each of the partners and in the relationship itself. Honesty was imperative in these relationships. Another ideal that surfaced during the interviews was of consent from all parties involved, which is an indicator of a healthy understanding and attitude towards sexuality.

Christian Monogamy

Although there was a broad spectrum of Christian communities represented in the histories of the research partners—United Church, Anglican, Latter Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventist, Roman Catholic, Evangelical/Pentecostal—there were significant themes that came out of all 11 of the interviews. The main theme that came out was regarding what constitutes an authentic Christian relationship. What the research partners lifted up as their understanding of what constituted an authentic Christian relationship was a monogamous, heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman. One of the partners went so far as to state that within their understanding of authentic relationships there was also an understanding that divorce was not appropriate within their Christian community. A number of participants used phrases such as, “one for one,” “it was very black and white,” “monogamy was the only option,” “growing up in a really religious home meant that I had to portray a set-monogamous, that I was faithful, virginal, all of those things,” and finally, “Christian people always say non-monogamous relationships are not real.”

Another subset of this theme was that for these participants sexuality and sexual expression was not a topic that was addressed in any helpful manner. In fact there were comments from five of the participants that the only time that sexuality and sexual expression was addressed was in a negative way, telling the participants what was not allowed, what one should not or could not do in regards to sexual expression. For all of the participants this was a negative experience for them as they were left with an overwhelming feeling that sexual expression was something that one did not speak of in a church context and that it was something that was inherently bad, or wrong.

Once we begin to look at the current perceptions and experiences with Christian faith communities we come to a place where the data begins to diverge in what came out in the interviews. Of the eleven interviewees conducted, four are currently deeply involved in Christian faith communities. The others are not currently involved in organized communities of faith, but three of them have deep connections to Christians in their lives. The majority of the respondents, a total of nine, have a negative view of how they think that non-monogamy would be viewed by Christian faith communities today. For these individuals there is very little if any chance that they would be accepted and welcomed into a Christian faith community if the community knew that they were non-monogamous. One of these, individuals, who ascribe to this understanding of not being accepted, is currently involved with a Christian faith community but is not willing to be open about their understanding of their identity as it relates to their sexual expression. For two of the research partners who are currently deeply involved in a Christian faith community, these communities know, in some limited way, about their non-monogamy. This is not to say that there has been in-depth conversation. Rather, it has been expressed in passing. This hesitation to disclose has as a result, on the part of all the research partners, impacted the relationships that these individuals have with Christian faith communities in a negative way.

Worthiness

Both the historical understanding of Christian faith communities and current experiences and perceptions of these communities have had a profound impact on how these individuals view themselves in the world. These impacts are overwhelmingly

negative as all eleven interviewees related negative thoughts and experiences around their understanding of self because of their history or understanding of the Christian faith. The most profound repercussions were verbalized by two of the interviewees as they spoke of a feeling of being shunned—actual words used by two individuals—by faith communities and, by extension, society. Others who were interviewed spoke of a sense of disconnection and with that, negative feelings around their perceived self-worth. One individual articulated that they felt “devalued” as an individual because of their experience of faith and their understanding of their non-monogamy. Others spoke of feeling of pain: “It hurts because we are still people with feelings,” “It was hurtful,” and, “I wasn’t worthy.” Others felt fear around disclosing who they were to people within communities of faith and some fear that accompanies this reality for them: “Not going to intentionally set ourselves up in the line of fire,” “Here is another part of myself that might be an issue within the church,” “For years and years I was really scared to come out as poly, really didn’t think that I would ever be able to be out as a poly person,” and, “I always expect there to be backlash.” Although this was not articulated in the same way by all of the participants, the emotional results seem to be indicative of this process of feeling rejected. The emotional repercussions were consistent with those that one would expect to see in the LGBTTQ community historically with the church. There were intense negative feelings and ideas around the concept of loss: “inability to connect to a community of faith very much around that (non-monogamy) leaves a big deficit in my life,” “I was forced out of my previous congregation,” “They turned me away,” and, “They forced me away from my God.”

Spiritual Fulfillment

In spite of the negative repercussions that were felt by the participants due to their history, experience, and perceptions of the Christian faith, there were strong feelings identified by the all eleven of the participants when speaking of their understanding of the intersection of their non-monogamy and Christianity. These feelings were overwhelmingly positive as each of the participants identified their understandings that Christianity is a faith that is based on relationships with a God of their understanding⁵¹, based on love. Being that this relationship is based in love they identified that they themselves, all eleven of them, don't see that there is a contradiction between their understanding of themselves and their expression of their sexuality through non-monogamy. In fact, many of the respondents see that they are validated as who they are and that they have had, and continue to have, a deep connection to the God of their understanding. For those who are currently connected to a community of faith, four of the eleven, faith and a relationship to God was central to their understanding of their world. "Faith being so central to who I am," one respondent related, "I still pray." Another involved in a Christian community understood their faith in the following way: "Spiritual relationship with God that sort of fulfills the spiritual aspect of my life." An understanding that there was a connection to God was very important to all eleven of the respondents and this helped each of them understand their relationships in a different way as they spoke about the "life affirming" nature of their relationships, or that they are

⁵¹ I use "God of their understanding" because this is the terminology used by one of the participants who is deeply involved in a Twelve-Step program, although they understand that this terminology identifies God as the God identified by the other participants.

“something that sustained me,” or that God is present within their understanding of their sexuality; “I don’t believe in anything good that my Higher Power doesn’t exist.”

As illustrated in the previous discussion all of those who were interviewed felt that they had a deep connection with God, not in spite of, but including their practice of non-monogamy. This then translated to ten of the eleven interviewees understanding themselves to be spiritually fulfilled. The one interview where spiritual fulfillment was a question ended up being because the individual from this interview had already recognized that there was an explicit lack of spiritual nurturing in their life at the current time. This was articulated as not being from their understanding of themselves as being non-monogamous, but rather from their lack of tending to this part of their life. The other ten interviewees expressed spiritual fulfillment from understanding themselves as being fulfilled—“in a good place,” and “emotionally/spiritually fulfilled”—to those who understand that their lives are so spiritually fulfilled that it borders on extreme joy: “extremely fulfilled because I am not trying to conform to something that I can’t actually agree with,” “more love than I ever imagined in my life,” “my relationship with Christ is one of joy,” and, “It is just the most beautiful thing that I have been a part of.” This sense of spiritual fulfillment was so powerful for eight of the ten respondents that they spoke in extremes, such as those listed above. This then impacts all of their lives in a positive way. Even the one who spoke of struggling understood that the struggle was on their end and was not a reflection of their spiritual relationship with God or those around them.

Theory Development and Pastoral Implications

As I began to explore the data I received from the interviews, there were some surprising results that came forward. These results seem to revolve around a main theme, from which I will build a theory, with the hopes of enabling the church to better connect to the non-monogamous community. The main theme to which the others are related is that non-monogamy goes much further than only a physical aspect, in that there is a much deeper meaning when speaking of non-monogamy. Each of the research partners expressed, in many different ways, as shown in the data analysis, that their understanding of their non-monogamy is much more than something that they do, but rather it is something that they are. For these individuals, their sexual expression is an integral part of how they view themselves in the world. It becomes then, and is, to be seen as an aspect of their identity. With an understanding of this part of who they are in the world, they then understand that there is no contradiction between who they are and their connection to a “higher power” articulated as God. All eleven research partners feel a connection to God. They understand that they are accepted as complete human beings. This connection leads to a sense of fulfillment in their lives on a spiritual level. One could then extrapolate that one might even say that they understand that their entire God-given identity is accepted and worthy.

The data collected from the research partners during the course of this study, around the perceptions and experiences of non-monogamous individuals of Christian faith communities both historically and in the present, contradicts this understanding in a very important way. These experiences and perceptions have brought forth the understanding that for Christian communities, sexual expression is an action that we as

human take in the world. As such these actions can therefore be judged to be either right or wrong, moral or amoral, good or bad. As such there can then be formulated a series of rules that will dictate what constitutes appropriate action in the world. In this case, the research partners understood that the appropriate action in the world was based around heterosexual, monogamous relationships, which as one research partner stated, “was for life.” This then becomes the perceived form of authentic Christian relationship in the world.

The issue then becomes when the church understands sexual expression as action in the world rather than an aspect of one’s identity, it becomes easy to judge. These judgments are not passed on actions, in the minds of those who see this as an aspect of identity, but rather they become judgments on these individuals themselves. The repercussions are such that the church loses its ability to engage pastorally with those who understand themselves to be judged as people, to be “less than.” This loss becomes manifest in two ways. The first is that those who understand themselves to be non-monogamous might not reach out to Christian faith communities because they don’t see these communities as a safe place for them to find support. This means that their perceptions and experiences of Christian faith communities impedes their ability to find support within these communities. As a result of this, Christian faith communities are then not given the chance to offer a pastoral response to these individuals because the need is never vocalized. So when Christian faith communities hold tight to their ideas around what constitutes correct, moral, or appropriate behaviour in the world, they lose the chance to engage in the work to which they are called, to be a community that spreads

love in the world. So therefore, our Christian faith communities live into the inability to understand sexual expression as a part of one's identity which can and does impact our ability to be a community of love and support to the non-monogamous community. We are not approached and the result is that another community understands itself to be marginalized by Christian faith communities, and therefore these perceptions never are addressed and persist. This becomes a cycle of marginalization, exclusion, and pain.

Even though the majority of the research partners, nine out of eleven, articulated a deep fear of self-disclosure to Christian faith communities around their non-monogamous understanding of themselves, they were not willing to completely cut off any connection or contact with these Christian faith communities. In reality, a number of the research partners, six out of the eleven, expressed a desire for a deeper, more authentic connection with Christian faith communities. This was articulated in a number of different ways: "I would not want to open the conversation, but if the church wanted to talk, I would be there," and, "I think that this is a conversation that churches should have." Another of the research partners believes that if the church were to engage with the non-monogamous community then it might find that its idea of theology, community, and faith are being stretched and pushed in ways that allow the church to become more inclusive.

This struggle seems to be a place where the church has found itself in the past, as it struggled through issues of gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. So, if we as Christian faith communities can move from a place of judgement to a place of engagement, we might be able to move past this place of judgment and speak to all people about what it means for all of us to live into our full authentic selves in a healthy

way. I would like to end with my own updated version of a well-known scripture from Galatians, Chapter 3. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, there is no longer straight or queer, there is no monogamous or polyamorous; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” In my understanding, this passage is not telling us that each of these identities is not important, but rather that each of these identities is an authentic, worthy, and valid identity in which we find the love of Christ. When we come to this place, all are accepted in our Christian faith communities as members of the body of Christ.

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Appendix 1

Research Ethics Board Proposal

Name of Student Investigator: Patrick Woodbeck

Title of Research Project:

What's Love Got To Do With It?

How a non-monogamous individual's sexual expression impacts their experiences of and/or perceptions of the Christian faith and Christian faith communities in a North American perspective.

Summary of Proposed Research

Description

As of 2015 there were 138 ministries considered to be Affirming within The United Church of Canada.⁵² This means that each one of these ministries have in fact taken it upon themselves to embark on an intentional process of learning and discernment. In doing this many of them invited in, and heard stories of, members of the LGBTTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Two Spirit, Transgender, Queer, and questioning⁵³) community and how these individuals might have been affected by the Church's historic mistreatment of this community⁵⁴. In many ways the LGBTTQ community has reached a certain level of acceptance in many mainstream Christian denominations. In fact, it seems that in today's society it is rare to meet someone who either does not know anyone who is member of the LGBTTQ community, or does not know of someone who knows someone who is a member of the LGBTTQ community. So it seems as if sexual orientation is an issue that is currently being addressed in churches,

⁵² Affirm United Annual Report 2015, page 9, accessed on July 17, 2017, <http://affirmunited.ause.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/10/AUSE-Annual-Report-2015-for-AGM-FINAL.pdf>

⁵³ Two-spirit is a self-identified indigenous person who understands themselves to be the embodiment of both the male and female spirit of life. Questioning are those in society who are in the process of discerning their orientation or gender identity by whatever means they choose.

⁵⁴ see as examples: Travis Gasper, "A Religious Right to Discriminate: Hobby Lobby and 'Religious Freedom' as a Threat to the LGBT Community," *Texas A&M Law Review* (Oct 2105) (accessed July 20, 2017) https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2671590; Bernadette Barton, "Abomination"—Life as a Bible Belt Gay," *The Journal of Homosexuality* 57:4 (2010) 465-484; Melinda Buchanan et al., "Challenges of Being Simultaneously Gay or Lesbian and Spiritual and/or Religious: A Narrative Perspective," *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 29: 5 (2001), 435-449.

to one degree or another. This leads me to wonder about how different forms of sexual expression have been perceived in both churches and society and has prompted me to explore how those who practice different forms of sexual expression perceive the Christian faith and Christian faith communities.

I strongly believe that as human beings we need to have connection to other people. Mark Bartel, in a paper written for the *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, speaks of the importance of these connections in one's life as he understands that all people need intimate connections to others in order to be spirituality whole and disconnection from others can lead to spiritual pain.⁵⁵ Connection to other human beings can and does play a vital role in one's spiritual health and wellbeing. If we look at our scriptures, we see that the first thing in the creation story that was not good, was that (hu)man was alone. Genesis chapter 2 states, "The Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone;⁵⁶" (Gen 2:18) We were created to be in relationship and as Bartel implies we are only truly fulfilled spiritually when we have a connection to another human being. This brings about the question; what happens when your deep intimate, sexual, connections are not validated as authentic Christian relationships by Christians and church communities?

Another factor in choosing to look at the issue of the intersection of non-monogamy and experiences of the Christian faith and Christian faith communities occurred in the summer of 2015. I was in a class on ethics when the instructor critiqued polyamory as akin to the wider consumer culture where the culture in which we live encourages us to be the consummate consumer, where we take only what we want from wherever we can get it and in doing so make very few, if any real connections. Polyamory, as a non-monogamous expression of sexuality, was likened to going to a buffet of sexual experiences and only taking what one wants, as much as one wants, whenever one wants. I did not agree at all with this critique of polyamory and it helped me to realize that there is a great deal of misinformation, in society about non-monogamous expressions of sexuality, I have heard a number of times individuals confusing non-monogamy with promiscuity,

These experiences have led me to ask a number of questions. We in the church have, in many ways, seemed to believe that we become more accepting and understanding in regards to the diversity of sexual orientation, but do we believe the same thing when looking at sexual expression? What does it mean to be truly inclusive and accepting when one speaks of a different understanding of sexual expression? Do we as a society and as Christian faith communities see monogamy as the benchmark when it comes to authentic Christian relationships? These initial questions have led me to the focus of this study; How does a non-monogamous individual's sexual expression impact their experiences and/or perceptions of the Christian faith and of Christian faith communities, in a North American perspective? The importance of the North American

⁵⁵ Mark Bartel, "What is Spiritual? What is Spiritual Suffering?" *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, 58: 3 (2004): 194.

⁵⁶ All scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

context cannot be stressed enough because this study hopes to examine the experiences of those who have grown up with the experience of having a perceived understanding from the church that monogamy is the benchmark of authentic Christian relationship. We cannot be sure that individuals from other cultures would ascribe to these same values and therefore by keeping to a North American perspective we hope to better understand these experiences within our own specific societal context.

Proposed Research Field Sites

I will be interviewing people who are at least 25 years of age at the time of this research, have intentionally self-declared as a member of the non-monogamous community, and are willing to speak openly and candidly about their experiences.

A video invitation will be circulated through social media networking, and a written invitation will be circulated via email to the LGBTTQ resource centre in Winnipeg and also via email, distributing the invitations through a few of stores that cater to these communities.⁵⁷ The distance and variety of the people who express interest will determine the scope.

Interviews if they will be conducted face-to-face; in either a quiet public place where there would be some level of privacy, or in my windowed office at Windsor Park United Church, during regular office hours.⁵⁸ Considering the nature of my research topic, but also in keeping with general norms of safe pastoral practice, I will not be alone with participants away from scrutiny. For individuals outside of the Winnipeg area, Skype (or an equivalent which is familiar to the participant) will be utilized.

Principal Research Consultants -

Shannon Pringle - Sexuality Educator, Venus Envy, Halifax, N.S.
Reece Malone, DHS, MPH, CSE, CST - Certified Sexologist, Certified Sexuality Educator, Certified Sex Therapist, Winnipeg, MB.

Methodology

The theoretical framework from which I will approach this question is Queer Theory in a post-modern perspective. Queer theory revolves around the idea of one's individual identity and how this identity is shaped in relationship with larger society. Both Queer Theory and post-modernism critique the cultural understanding of identity as being static and normalized within society. These theories work to deconstruct societal understandings of identity, sexuality, power dynamics, and conformity. The construction of identity is a focus, while deconstructing dominant theories about identity itself, as seen

⁵⁷ See Appendix B

⁵⁸ See "Methodology" below.

from the point of view of the larger society.⁵⁹ From this understanding, that the identities of the research partners that are chosen are constructed through their own contextual interactions with the world, I find that I enter into this study with no predetermined phenomena that is being explored. This leaves me to understand that any theories that might come from this study will need to arise from the data that is collected, and therefore I will be using Grounded Theory as the qualitative research method for this study.

Grounded theory is based on the understanding that any theory that arises will come solely from the data that has been collected. From this data collection the researcher can formulate a substantive theory that has at its core a specific, everyday-world situation.⁶⁰ Although I will be using Grounded Theory in this study I will be using a more constructivist approach to this research. This approach will allow me to emphasize the diversity of experience of those with whom I am partnering.

Constructivism allows for multiple realities and the complexity of diverse local worlds, actions, and views, as we place values on the hierarchical form of power that is observed.⁶¹ Keeping in continuity with a post-modern, queer theory perspective this adaptation of the traditional Grounded Theory method will help to keep this study true to its theoretical underpinnings as we understand that knowledge is constructed. Grounded Theory will also allow me to enter into this study not as the all-knowing researcher, but to bring with me my own perspectives and contexts to the data collection, coding, and interpretation.⁶²

I am planning to engage 16 volunteers to be research partners to interview during this study. I plan to recruit volunteer partners for this study by posting an invitation to participate on social media, posting a poster at the local LGBTQ resource centre, where a polyamorous group currently meets, and distributing the invitations through a few stores that cater to these communities. I will then use the snowball method for referrals of other participants for the study. I also understand that a factor that might be limiting as to the number of research partners is the fact that this research project deals with very personal experiences and their possible intersection with the Christian faith and Christian faith communities and therefore some of these conversations might be difficult for some participants.

Initial interviews will commence after REB approval, as participants come forward and sign an informed consent agreement.⁶³ These interviews will be broad

⁵⁹ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 28, 29.

⁶⁰ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 29, 30.

⁶¹ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 64-65.

⁶² Ibid, 66.

⁶³ Informed Consent and Confidentiality are expanded on, starting on Page 5, and provided in Appendix C.

spectrum; beginning with some simple demographic questions and proceeding to questions around the experiences and/or perceptions of the research partners with the Christian faith and Christian faith communities (churches). The intent for initial interviews is to gather as much raw data as possible, and to begin interacting with that data in open coding and establishing potential categories.⁶⁴

The results will be presented in a public presentation at a time to be determined, on November 30, 2017 in Winnipeg Manitoba, where I am located. The final course paper is due by December 9, 2017.

Potential Benefits from Study

The potential benefits from this study come under the pastoral nature and work of the church. This study hopes to illuminate the ways in which this community, the non-monogamous community, may have been marginalized by the perceived understanding in North American Christianity that monogamy is the benchmark of authentic Christian relationships. If we come to understand this, as a church, we might then be able to begin to address that marginalization. Paul Lakeland, in his essay, “Ecclesiology, Desire and the Erotic states, “There is a great deal of erotic attraction and desire that is unconnected to the spousal union, and some indeed that doesn’t have much, if anything, to do with the drive toward sexual union. Indeed, the polymorphous nature of human sexual attraction is not something the church deals with well and it certainly cannot be contained with the spousal metaphor.”⁶⁵ The Christian commitment to monogamy is not something to be dismissed but rather if we broaden our understanding of authentic expression of sexuality we might find within the experiences and perceptions of those who practice non-monogamy a way that we, as Christians, might be better prepared to engage with this community on a pastoral level.

Potential Risks from Study

The main risk that I perceive in this study are possible issues that might arise with the participants and their personal experiences with any particular Christian faith community. When I send participants the informed consent agreement to sign, I will let them know that their participation is voluntary, will be confidential and that, should the need arise, I will locate someone who can offer them emotional and spiritual support. The Rev. Karen Lumley has agreed to offer pastoral support to participants.

Process for Obtaining Informed Consent

⁶⁴ Questions for Interviews are summarized in Appendix A.

⁶⁵ Paul Lakeland, “Ecclesiology, Desire, and the Erotic,” *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 257.

After I have identified potential participants, I will telephone or email them to ask if they are willing, in principle to participate. If their answer is affirmative, I will arrange an interview place and time. I will indicate to them that they will be asked to sign an informed consent agreement, but they are free to decide at that point or at any point to withdraw. At the beginning of the meeting and before the interview begins, I will share the background of my project, answer questions they might have and ask them to sign the informed consent agreement.⁶⁶ I will inform them that should they become distressed in any way during the interview that I can refer them to a helping professional. The Rev. Karen Lumley has agreed to offer pastoral support to the participants of the study. They will be able to end the interview at any point and I will delete the recording if they decide to withdraw from the study.

Process for Protecting Identity of Participants and Confidentiality of Data Protecting Identity of Participants and Storage and Destruction of Data:

1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent from research participants I will:
 - a) provide one copy for the participants
 - b) keep one copy for myself which I will place in a envelope separate from all other materials and store in a locked file cabinet in my home office.
 - c) provide one copy for my supervisor Dr. Susan Willhauck, also placed in a separate envelope, who will store it in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST.
2. Participants will be given code names. Audio tapes of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device. These digital recording devices will be kept in locked brief cases or safes and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent until deleted permanently from my device at the completion of the research January 9, 2018.
3. Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document. The Word Document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final paper is due December 9, 2017.
4. When the final paper is submitted to my supervisor on December 9, 2017 the Word Document transcripts of interviews will also be submitted to her, either printed as hard copies or disposable CDs and deleted from my computer and trash bin.

⁶⁶ see Appendix C

5. My supervisor Dr. Susan Willhauck will store transcripts of interviews in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST for one year and all data materials will be destroyed by shredding or crushing.

Appendix A: Proposed Interview Questions

- 1. Non-monogamy is a broad term that encompasses many different forms of sexual expression. What does being non-monogamous mean to you?**
- 2. How long have you self-declared as non-monogamous?**
- 3. What drew you to non-monogamy?**
- 4. Are you currently in a relationship where non-monogamy is practiced?**
- 5. Can you relate any experiences and/or perceptions around faith communities as you were growing up?**
- 6. Are you currently involved in a spiritual or Christian faith community?
How long have you been involved in this faith community?**
Does this community know about your non-monogamous expression of your sexuality?
- 7. As a non-monogamous person, what are your experience, or feelings, or perceptions around non-monogamy and the Christian faith?**
- 8. As a non-monogamous person, what are your experience, or feelings, or perceptions around Christian churches (faith communities)?**
- 9. If you have had experiences, in a Christian church, can you tell me a story about any of those experiences and how you felt in the midst of this experience?**
- 10. How fulfilled, spiritually, do you feel in your life currently?**
- 11. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?**

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

Are you at least 25 years of age? Do you currently self-identify as a member of the non-monogamous community? If you answered yes to both of these questions, then I would love to have a conversation with you about your experiences.

My name is Patrick Woodbeck, and I am a Master of Divinity student at Atlantic School of Theology. I'm conducting research on the experiences of individuals who ascribe to a non-monogamous expression of their sexuality and the Christian faith and Christian faith communities (churches). Whether you had a positive or negative experience, your input into my research will help shape theories around effective church responses to sexual expressions other than monogamy.

If you are interested and willing to be a participant in my research, you can choose to speak with me either in person, if you are in the Winnipeg area, or through a video interview. Either way, your participation will be kept anonymous through the analysis and presentation of my research.

This is an opportunity for you to share your experience and insight with the church, and safely add your voice to a complex and difficult topic in the church. If you would like to know more, or if you are interested in participating, I would really appreciate hearing from you. I can be reached by phone at (204) 962-1060, or by confidential email at patrick.woodbeck@astheology.ns.ca

Please consider participating, and thank you for that consideration!

Patrick Woodbeck
Principal Researcher

Appendix C: Informed Consent

What's Love Got To Do With It? How a non-monogamous individual's sexual expression impacts their experiences of and/or perceptions of the Christian faith and Christian faith communities, in a North American context?

Patrick Woodbeck – Principal Investigator

Atlantic School of Theology

660 Francklyn Street

Halifax, NS B3H 3B5

Phone (cell): (204) 962-1060

E-mail: patrick.woodbeck@astheology.ns.ca

I am a student enrolled in the Master of Divinity Program at Atlantic School of Theology. As part of my course work, under the supervision of Dr. Susan Willhauck, I am conducting a study on how a non-monogamous individuals sexual expression impacts their experiences of and/or perceptions of the Christian faith and Christian faith communities in a North American context?

I will be interviewing people who:

- are at least 25 years of age at the time of this research,
- who self-declare as members of the non-monogamous community, and
- are willing to speak openly and candidly about their experiences with the Christian faith and its communities.

I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purposes of this work are to examine what ideas and experiences participants may have; to increase the churches knowledge around any such experiences and to help the church, possibly, look to the future.

Your participation in this project is appreciated. I will ask you a series of questions, in the context of a larger discussion about your experience, and will audio tape your responses.

The recordings and transcripts will be held in a secure environment throughout this study, and after the final project is completed, they will be held in a locked file in Dr. Susan Willhauck's office on the AST campus for one year, at which time they will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please read the following and indicate your willingness to be involved by giving your signature at the end.

I acknowledge that the research procedures outlined have been explained to me, and that I have been given a copy of this consent. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I know that I can contact the researcher at any time should I have further questions. I am aware that my participation in this study is purely voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at

any time. I understand that the personal record relating to this study will be kept confidential.

I know that the researcher will make every effort to keep all information obtained in this study as confidential and anonymous as possible. Names and potentially revealing facts will be changed, thus affording me anonymity. To further protect individual identities, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored separately. Furthermore, the results of this study will be aggregated and no individual participant will be identified.

I have been informed that, at my request, spiritual and emotional care will be available.

The following is a timeline for the storage and destruction of data:

1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent form from research participants, the researcher will:
 - a) provide one copy for the participant.
 - b) keep one copy, which will be placed in an envelope separate from all other materials and stored in a secure location.
 - c) provide one copy to the research supervisor, Dr. Susan Willhauck, also placed in a separate envelope. The supervisor will store these in a locked file cabinet.
2. Audio files of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device or password protected computer. These devices will be kept locked and secured at all times during data collection – from the time of Informed Consent through the public Grad Project presentations – and will be deleted permanently from the device on December 9th 2017.
3. Within two weeks of each interview, the researcher will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document or pdf. The Word document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final Grad Project paper is due on December 9th 2017.
4. The public Grad Project Presentation takes place on November 30, 2017, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the final project paper is due December 9, 2017. On that day I will delete recordings of interviews and bring all transcriptions and copies of Informed Consent to my supervisor by December 16th 2017. The supervisor will store these documents in a locked file cabinet at AST for one year, at which time they will be shredded on December 9th 2018.

If you have questions, please contact Patrick Woodbeck, the principal researcher, at (204) 962-1060, or via email at patrick.woodbeck@astheology.ns.ca

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology in keeping with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. If you have questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Alyda Faber, chair of the Research Ethics Board, at afaber@astheology.ns.ca.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.

Appendix D: Thank you letter to Participants

<Name of Participant>

I'm writing to express my heartfelt gratitude for your participation in my research on the intersection of non-monogamy and the Christian faith. Your involvement has been invaluable to the exploration of this question both for the church and for the community as well. At this point, I have obtained everything I need to move forward with my project, so again, my thanks for your involvement in this undertaking.

Deeper understandings can only emerge through the listening to many divergent voices sharing stories of personal experiences. I have appreciated your willingness to engage in this sometimes difficult topic, your integrity in speaking openly and honestly with me, and your trust and grace in opening yourself up to vulnerability in sharing your personal experiences. I do not take this sacred trust lightly, and am all the more grateful for your involvement because of it.

Your participation in this project has helped me to understand the role of the church as it continues to explore what it means to be open and welcoming to other forms of sexual expression and in the future sexual expressions. As I move forward with analysis and presentation of my research, know that I carry with me the responsibility to give your contributions a voice, and will work diligently to do so with the same integrity, courage, honesty, and grace which you have modelled through this process.

My research will be presented on Thursday, November 30, 2017 at Windsor Park United Church, 1062 Autumnwood Drive, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, this presentation is open for any and all to attend should you like to be present to see what I have discovered through my interviews.

With thanksgiving,

Patrick Woodbeck
Principal Researcher