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**YOUTH
THEOLOGY
INSTITUTE
JOURNAL
2021**

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Augsburg Youth Theology Institute

2021 Journal of Participant Essays



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About the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute

“They’re our future, so I think for us that’s the mission of this university, to educate students to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers, and responsible leaders. It starts with Augsburg Youth Theology Institute.” -President Paul Pribbenow

What is AYTI?

The Augsburg Youth Theology Institute (AYTI) is an annual summer program for high school students (9th-12th grades) focused on theological reflection and vocational discernment connected to an annual theme. It is a collaborative effort sponsored by Augsburg University’s Christensen Center for Vocation and supported by Lilly Endowment, Inc. This experience aims to offer young leaders an opportunity for place-based vocational discernment around a theological and leadership focused theme. Students who attend AYTI take their questions and curiosity to the public square to learn, listen, pray, and play on the Augsburg campus, in the neighborhood, and in the city. Participants engage in daily reflection with a theologian, community based learning, small group relationship building, and worship. This commitment to wonder about how God is calling us to the common good for the sake of the world, is the reason why high school students leave AYTI inspired to be God’s hands and feet in the world. Learn more at: <https://www.augsburg.edu/ayti/>

The History of AYTI

Augsburg Youth Theology Institute (AYTI) began in 2005 with a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment. We have received multiple grants from the Lilly endowment over the years to grow this initiative. Each year, high school students come to campus to build relationships, engage in theological reflection and community engagement, and take what they learn back into their communities and congregations to make a difference in the world.

Christensen Center for Vocation

The Christensen Center for Vocation equips and accompanies students, staff, faculty, and ministry leaders as they engage in place-based vocational discernment in the public square for the common good. These learning partnerships happen through a variety of initiatives that foster learning experiences and creative collaborations. Learn more at: <https://www.augsburg.edu/ccv/>

Sustaining AYTI for Many Years to Come

Dear AYTI Participants, Nominators, Supporters, and Stakeholders,

Each year we ask pastors and youth directors to nominate young people they believe would benefit from an AYTI experience. We receive letters of recommendation from these nominators all over the country telling us about these incredible young people. And then we have the opportunity to spend a week with them. Hundreds of young people who attended AYTI are now living and leading in their communities and congregations across the country. None of this would be possible without the financial support, time, prayers, and other in-kind gifts that make this institute run each year. We are so very grateful for these partnerships.

AYTI has been and is currently funded by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment. Augsburg University is blessed to have a long relationship with the Lilly Endowment and so many of our rich theological programs and initiatives have started with that relationship. They have been sustained however, by people like you.

As we look to our future, we ask you to consider how you will continue to support AYTI? Will you choose to be a partner congregation? Will you financially support a young person to attend AYTI? Will you encourage college admission to Augsburg University for future education? How will you support this legacy? We invite you to consider your investment today and we look forward to being in relationship with you for years to come.

Peace be with you,

Adrienne Kuchler Eldridge (*she/her/hers*)

Augsburg University
Christensen Center for Vocation
AYTI Program Director
Theology & Public Leadership Program Associate
ayti@augsborg.edu

Augsburg University Undergraduate Degree Programs

Many high school students who attend AYTI have also discerned that their future includes attending Augsburg University for their undergraduate degree. We employ college mentors each year to work with AYTI participants, many of them attended AYTI as high school students and then decided to attend Augsburg University as an undergraduate student. Augsburg University offers multiple majors, some of which focus specifically on religion and ministry.

All students who attend AYTI are eligible to receive a scholarship towards their financial aid at Augsburg University.

Theology and Public Leadership Undergraduate Degree

This interdisciplinary major forms leaders at the intersections of church and society. Students develop the necessary theological and theoretical frameworks, leadership skills and servant hearts to lead communities in their expression of faith and their public work for justice in the world. Graduates work in the areas of youth & family ministry, congregational ministry, community organizing, public policy & advocacy, nonprofits and graduate school. Students earn a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Public Leadership and are encouraged to combine this degree with a concentration, a minor or second major in an area of interest.

Public Church Scholars 5 Year BA/MDiv Pathway

The Public Church Scholars five-year degree pathway prepares students to be intentional leaders of a multiracial, multiethnic, public church. In this educational pathway, students will take a deep dive together in Christian community to explore theological education, leadership formation, experiential learning in an internship, and preparation to be public leaders in the church. Students in this pathway will complete two (2) degrees in five (5) years; a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Public Leadership from Augsburg University and a Master of Divinity from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.



SHAPE THE FUTURE

DO YOU KNOW A STUDENT CALLED TO MINISTRY?

Invite emerging young leaders to join a community of curiosity and theological exploration at Augsburg University.

AUGSBURG YOUTH THEOLOGY INSTITUTE

High school students explore their calling and put faith into action during this annual one-week summer program.

High school students, apply now!

➔ augsburg.edu/ayti

THEOLOGY AND PUBLIC LEADERSHIP DEGREE

Students can earn a degree focused on service and leadership in ministry at the intersection of church and society.

Encourage a student to apply to Augsburg.

➔ augsburg.edu

PUBLIC CHURCH SCHOLARS PATHWAY

Students can earn a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Public Leadership at Augsburg and a Master of Divinity at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in five years to become a pastor.

Join the next cohort—apply to Augsburg now.

➔ augsburg.edu/religion/public-church-scholars

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PUBLIC CHURCH SCHOLARS

Augsburg University and Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

5 YEARS, 2 DEGREES

The **Public Church Scholars** five-year degree pathway prepares students to be intentional leaders of a multiracial, multiethnic, public church. In this educational pathway, students will take a deep dive together in Christian community to explore theological education, leadership formation, experiential learning in an internship, and preparation to be public leaders in the church. Students in this pathway will complete two degrees in five years: a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Public Leadership from Augsburg University and a Master of Divinity from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

WE ARE CALLED | AUGGIES



HOLISTIC APPROACH

At Augsburg University, Public Church Scholars learn to practice and lead accompaniment, interpretation, discernment, and proclamation, and this framework supports their preparation to be pastors and leaders in the church. This work is enhanced and deepened at seminary. LSTC's curriculum cultivates competencies for leadership in a public church and focuses on community engagement, public witness, and social transformation. This holistic approach to theological education breaks academic disciplines out of their silos and allows creative collaboration to flourish.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND AFFORDABILITY

This pathway addresses barriers of the overall cost of education and reduces the length of time required to complete a pastoral leadership degree: five years instead of eight. This pathway also provides college access to the ministry profession for students from underrepresented groups. We are committed to significantly reducing debt for the student when entering candidacy, seminary, and then ministry.

Students accepted to the PCS cohort are eligible to receive the Regents Scholarship, which is a minimum of \$18,500. This award is not stackable with other merit scholarships. Accepted students will also receive an additional PCS scholarship (\$1,500–2,500) that is renewable as long as students are enrolled in the PCS pathway and are in good academic standing. Students in the PCS cohort will also receive financial aid for seminary tuition in their third, fourth, and fifth years.

ENROLL NOW

Emerging leaders who are discovering their own gifts for church leadership, and who are curious about how the church is responding to God's call in the world, can enroll now. Our team is committed to identifying, recruiting, and enrolling a diverse and hopeful cohort of emerging leaders to serve in the public church for the sake of the world.



UNIQUE ELEMENTS OF THE PCS PATHWAY:

- Four years of part-time, paid contextual learning and internship in a congregation
- Spanish language and theological study in Mexico
- Training in equity and inclusion, cultural competency, and vocational discernment
- Cocurricular formation including a supportive cohort of peers
- Spiritual direction practice (individual and group)
- Life coaching and professional mentors
- Accompaniment through the candidacy process for ordination
- Completion of Clinical Pastoral Education
- Distance learning and Intensive seminary classes

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Lutheran School of
Theology at Chicago

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augsborg.edu/religion/public-church-scholars

To find out more or to enroll in the PCS pathway,
contact Adrienne Kuchler Eldridge:

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2021 Theme

And It Was Very Good:

Affirming and Advocating
for Gender and Sexual Diversity in God's Creation

2021 Theme Description

What is the rightful place for LGBTQIA+ people in God's creation? After decades of fights over human sexuality, LGBTQIA+ people, gender, and gender roles, the church is moving to a place of acceptance, and even advocacy. This year at the institute we are going to look at the role of LGBTQIA+ people in scripture, in our church history, and the faithful advocacy to allow LGBTQIA+ people to be full members of society. We are looking at the events of the past several years through a theological lens, asking what God is doing, and where our discernment can lead us.

Virtual Institute- Year 2

As many programs were impacted by the Covid-19 global pandemic in spring 2020, so was AYTI and Augsburg University. We thoughtfully considered how God was calling us to respond to another summer in a pandemic, and considered our successes from holding a virtual Institute in 2020. Ultimately, we decided to host our second ever virtual institute in summer 2021 to allow participants from all over the United States to participate safely. Many students were unsure of another virtual event, but they took a chance on AYTI and left the week feeling so glad that they did.

2021 Institute Instructor

Ross Murray (he/him) is the founding director of The Naming Project, a faith-based youth ministry and summer camp for LGBTQIA+ youth and their allies. He has worked with youth and families in a variety of settings, and presented LGBTQIA+ youth ministry around the country.



In his day job, Ross is the Senior Director of Education & Training at The GLAAD Media Institute, providing activist, spokesperson, and media engagement training and education for the LGBTQIA+ community members, corporations, the media industry and advocacy organizations desiring to accelerate acceptance for the LGBTQIA+ community. Ross has secured national media interest in stories that bring examples of LGBTQIA+ equality across diverse communities in America, with a speciality in the relationship between religion and LGBTQIA+ people.

Ross is a consecrated Deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with a specific calling to advocate for LGBTQIA+ people and to bridge the LGBTQIA+ and faith communities. He is a producer for the “Yass, Jesus!” podcast, a faith and sexuality affirming podcast that believes you don’t have to pick between gay and God. In 2014, he was named one of Mashable’s “10 LGBT-Rights Activists to Follow on Twitter.”

Follow Ross on: Facebook
 Twitter @InLayTerms
 Instagram @InLayTerms
 www.rossmurray.org

The links to his projects:

My new book, Made, Known, Loved: Developing LGBTQ-Inclusive Youth Ministry, is available now. www.madeknownloved.org

The Naming Project: A faith-filled camp for LGBTQ Christians to explore faith, identity and community. www.thenamingproject.org

Yass, Jesus! is a faith and sexuality affirming podcast that believes you don't have to pick between gay and God. www.yassjesuspod.com

A Letter from the Institute Instructor

It was an unbridled joy to spend a week with young minds, exploring the expansiveness of God's creation, in the world and in our lives. I come to theology through my advocacy for the LGBTQ community in the world. I've been doing this work for a long time, and my perspective on scripture and theology have been shaped through my ongoing relationship with God, with my role in God's church, and my experiences doing advocacy in the world.

I went into the week with my curated passages of scripture and observations, both related to the LGBTQ experience in our world. For the week of the Institute, I shared that with young minds, who haven't been shaped by the same identities and experiences I had. Instead, their own identities allowed them to see themselves in the scripture passages we discussed. Their experiences with the LGBTQ community, the world, and the church shaped how they understand God working in the world.

This is the power and the beauty of the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute. It was not me teaching them how to be a Christian, an LGBTQ or allied person, but them who were figuring this out by grappling with scripture and applying the lens of the gospel to what they see in the world. They are building on centuries of theologians, critiquing and enhancing the history of voices that have dominated our Christian understanding on human sexuality and gender identity. As you read these reflections on theology and advocacy, ask yourself how these young voices are challenging what we think we know about gender and sexuality. Ask yourself what you can learn by looking at the world through the eyes of those who share identities different from your own, and how they expose you to what God is doing in the world.

And when God looks upon the creation of these young theologians and their theological work, God says, "It is very good."

Grace to you,

Ross Murray (he/him/his)

Participant Essays

Leviticus, Homophobia and the Bible

Rowan Lindholm (he/him), Breezy Point, MN

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, there's been times where I've looked at the Bible and the words and actions of some fellow church members and wondered if I'm really accepted in Christianity, the religion I was raised and still firmly believe in. The presence of possible homophobia in the Bible had always made me uncomfortable as a queer person who believes in God; attending AYTI in June 2021 helped me realize that no matter what, God loves me for who I am and nothing less, despite what others might think. Though there are a small amount of Bible verses that appear to be homophobic in nature, such as Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, the reality is that people in the LGBTQ+ community have nothing to fear when it comes to their validity in the Bible, because of the fact - which I have learned from my own experience - that an LGBTQ+ identity is unchangeable in a person, the amount of space and time between now and when the Bible was written, and the ways the Bible can be translated from its original languages.



There are many who believe that the Bible directly states that LGBTQ+ people are an abomination upon God because of their existence, which is dehumanizing and extremely discriminatory. Despite being raised in an accepting Christian family, it's

difficult to see people of my own faith disregard queer folk like me because of how they identify. It makes me wonder what Christians really stand for in their faith - prosperity for others no matter their origins or beliefs, or prosperity for only those that the people of faith are comfortable with? Before I attended AYTl in June I was struggling with the situation in particular, due to happenings in my community against myself (a transgender individual), my family, and the rest of the diverse population in town as a whole; these resulted in my family moving out of the community for my safety and everyone's mental health. This experience has taught me a lot about people and the different, and sometimes misguided opinions that are out there, and how some will try to use their faith to defend those opinions.

The fact that many of those opposing diverse identities miss, including the people in that community (who were mostly white and Christian), is that having an LGBTQ+ identity is something that those individuals are born with, and cannot change. As an example, I myself couldn't change my transgender identity into a "traditional" cisgender one, even if I wanted to (which, sometimes, I do, in order to escape the hardships that come with being transgender). My gay friends can't change the fact that they're attracted to the same sex, rather than the opposite; my non-binary and otherwise genderqueer friends can't change the fact that their gender lies outside the binary. My question is, if we are made in God's image, why are queer people made the way they are, if some believe they don't have a place in God's kingdom? It's hard to believe that God would have someone be born with a permanent LGBTQ+ identity (or any sort of permanent quality), only to not accept them because of it; that seems pointless and against Christian values as a whole to me, mainly because of the commandments. As Deacon Ross Murray pointed out on the first day of AYTl, in the book of Mark, Jesus

outlines the greatest two commandments: to love God with everything one has, and love one's neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:28-31). This suggests that discrimination towards any other type of people in the world goes against how God wants us to behave like towards others. Therefore racism, homophobia, xenophobia, etc. should not be in the preachings of churches or within any sort of heavenly ideals because they go against these teachings.

Despite the unfortunately common supposition that people with LGBTQ+ identities don't have a place in the Bible, there are a few instances where queer characters and angles show up that many people may not notice. "Queering" Bible stories is something that Deacon Ross Murray taught us how to do at AYTI, where one takes a story from scripture and finds an angle of interpretation that a LGBTQ+ individual could get some meaning out of. The most prominent queer story to me is of David and Jonathan, which is told throughout Samuel 1 and 2: the story points in fairly explicit ways to a possible romantic relationship between the two men. This spoke many good things to me when I learned and talked about the story at AYTI, because of the fact that the relationship the characters had was never condemned by God, suggesting that it was acceptable in God's eyes. This also says something about how the Bible can be interpreted: common assumptions, such as that everyone is heterosexual in the Bible, closes the mind to other ways of thinking and believing in God. Unique identities and cultures are welcome in God's kingdom, if we pay attention to how God regards and welcomes outcasts in the Bible.

Cultures and ways of life have changed significantly in the world in the past two thousand years, due to evolution of technology, innovation, and the resolution of some moral dilemmas in most lands, such as slavery. So much has shifted since the Bible was

written that some rules and ideas don't fit anymore. Especially from the Old Testament, where the book of Leviticus is from. Examples are: the forbiddance of consuming pork or shellfish, silencing women in the Church, and calling people with disabilities unworthy of God (Ring 2016). This doesn't mean the Bible is to be disregarded, but rather taken more figuratively instead of literally. Jesus taught in parables, where the lesson lied in the moral of the story. There's no proof that many of the parables actually happened, but they are still utilized to portray how God wants us to act towards God and one another; this can be applied to how we take the lessons in the Bible. Among the queer retellings of scripture, Deacon Ross Murray also pointed out at AYTI that having LGBTQ+ ideas be out and accepted in a community is still quite a new concept, therefore, it's not going to fit perfectly in the Bible because of the occurrent growth and changes in the world since it was written over two thousand years ago. That can be a reason why no one is explicitly "out" in the Bible as queer, simply because the labels to the multitudes of identities weren't in existence, nor was the thought of LGBTQ+ lifestyles being a part of community life. "In Western culture one is homosexual or heterosexual, bi-sexual or trans gendered, we are labeled and put in boxes... Yet in the Bible, people are just sexual..." (Wernik 2005). This brings up another great point: the Bible doesn't put people into boxes based on their sexual or gender identities; people are who they are and do as they please. Assuming that characters are homosexual is just as categorizing as assuming they are heterosexual, all of which block out other ways of thinking, as previously mentioned. Everything is open to interpretation in the Bible, though it would be in my best interest to take it with as inclusive of a standpoint as possible, which means to not disregard the chance that there were LGBTQ+ individuals in scripture.

Speaking of interpretation, the English translations of the Bible probably aren't as accurate as we imagine them to be. The books of the Bible were mostly written at different times, and many have slightly different influences from various countries on the language that was used to write them. Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic are the three languages the Bible was originally written in, as well as different Hebrew dialects as it went through alterations that made it easier to read. In her article "What Was the Original Language of the Bible?" Mary Fairchild states "Sentence construction in Hebrew might place the verb first, followed by the noun or pronoun and objects. Because this word order is so different, a Hebrew sentence cannot be translated word-for-word into English" (Fairchild 2019). This raises some complications when it comes to translating the original Bible into English, because we can't get an extremely accurate translation due to the disconnect between the two languages. The Old Testament, including Leviticus and its apparent homophobic verses, was mainly written in varying Hebrew dialects over the course of centuries; therefore, the homophobia in those verses may not have been homophobia at all, just language translated in a different way than it was originally intended. Additionally, in his 2019 article "St Paul, 1 Corinthians and Homosexuality," Reverend Dr. Jonathan Tallon goes into further detail on Greek words and the many different interpretations that alter the meaning of a passage written by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians. The blurry lines between Greek and English make it hard to decipher what the text is actually condemning, showing that the language is all up to what you might think it means and what the ideas of St. Paul might have been. As previously stated, LGBTQ+ ideas weren't around nearly as much in St. Paul's time, lowering the chances that he knew much of or was talking about homosexuality. The Aramaic language is difficult to decipher into English as well,

concluding that the English versions of the Bible are more than likely to have mistranslations in them that throw off the true meaning of some passages.

By piecing together these facts about the history of the Bible and the assumptions held by many, it's easier to see that God loves everyone, regardless of what their identity might be. This is such an important point, because everyone deserves to be loved for who they are, no matter the circumstances. Religious exclusion does the opposite of this, increasing the risk of mental illness among queer people. It is my hope that in the future, churches can become more mindful of how they include diverse peoples into their congregations, increasing the amount of acceptance within their communities to benefit everyone in them. To be loved is to be accepted, and I would like to see this happen so much more often in Christian churches around the world.

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The Rainbow Can Mean Both - LGBTQ+ Community and Religion are not Mutually Exclusive

Maggie Musolf (she/her), Edina, MN

When we're kids, we believe that everything is black and white. Something is good, or something is bad, and there's no chance or opportunity for it to be anything in-between that. In fact, a large part of growing up is learning about and experiencing new situations where it's impossible to deem it black or white, evil or good. Maturing is learning that there are shades of gray in most if not all situations, and that almost no occurrence is all black or all white. Yet there are still a surprising amount of people, including myself, who seem to think that something cannot be both all black and all white.

I am gay. It's taken me a while to admit this to myself, but I know that's who I am. I like people of my same sex, and I wear this identity with pride. And I've lost friends because of this pride, specifically one friend who I used to be incredibly close with. The reasoning behind this? This friend didn't believe that homosexuality was okay or aligned with God. And the way she believed this might have differed from other homophobic people, sure. It might have been less severe than some and more severe than others, but that's not what stuck for me as a queer person. What stuck was that my identity went against her religion, against her God. This belief is a commonly shared one among many people in the church, while it is being slowly dismantled. And it is a belief I am here to work through today.

If you disagree with the way I think, this paper will not be solely about changing your mind. Don't expect a rousing argument that's so rock-solid that those reading it have no choice but to agree. Don't expect confrontation on my part, because you will not be receiving it. This paper is about walking through the belief within gay and straight people in religious communities that you cannot be gay and be Christian. I am writing this essay to work through my own problems with religion, as a queer person with (admittedly minimal) religious experiences that have turned me away from a faith community. I can only hope that it may show those without similar experiences how people in the LGBTQ+ community feel in an effort to change the way it works and allow them to empathize with these experiences.

Most queer people I know in my personal life aren't fond of church. While my church has been a great community that I'm glad to be part of, many people I've met haven't felt the same or have had strongly negative experiences with their own place of religion. Some of them have strong emotional scenarios related to religion or religious people whose radicalism turned them away from religion. Some of them just don't feel very comfortable in a church community. Nearly all of them have been taught that their place isn't in a church. And it's not just my clique of gay friends, nor is it just "youth of today". A study done in 2014 by Pew Research center shows that LGBTQ+ adults are typically less religious than straight adults. When asked, 41% of LGBTQ+ people said they identified as atheist while only 22% of straight adults identified similarly. Even fewer attend church, the study says, with 19% of bisexual people and 16% of gay/lesbian individuals asked. Meanwhile, 36% of straight adults said they attend a place of worship. While the percentage gap between those who believe in a higher power is smaller (77%

LGBTQ+ individuals said they believed in God, while 89% straight adults said they also believed in God), the previous two percentage gaps are quite large.

So there's quite a large amount of people who are queer, both adults and children, who don't go to church. In my personal case, I never felt quite right at church when I realized I was queer. Churches everywhere debated about whether or not homosexuality was ethical to support due to the many Bible verses that appear to condemn it. For me, that debate was the reminder that I didn't necessarily belong in that space. That made me question my right to even exist in that space. A study doesn't need to explain that's how many queer people likely feel; that their community was fighting over their right to exist in the world, and that they no longer felt as though the church was a comfortable community. I can't blame people for not wanting to participate. After all, it's difficult to actively endorse a book that so many people believe makes you a sinner, or someone who's off God's ever-righteous path.

Luckily, the debate has been slowly reaching its curtain call as approval of homosexuality is reaching an all-time high in America. Roughly 70% of all Americans support gay marriage, with about 28% opposing the idea. As church has begun to get more open about the idea of queer individuals, queer people have begun to slowly return to church. That age-old feud, however, is still very prominent and ongoing in some places. There's a discomfiting quiet between straight people and queer people within church, a deafening silence that begs for communication between the two groups. But nobody dares fill the silence. If queer people aren't acknowledged within church, nobody has to face the uncomfortable reality that some people might not want to talk about it. Or the reality that some people might want to talk about it with opinions of LGBTQ+ individuals that are less than validating, making gay people feel like they

should hide again. If queer people aren't brought up in a heteronormative church, then people aren't really coexisting. Who is there to coexist with?

We as a community of faith need to be better about including those of other sexualities and genders - not only in our place of worship but in our community of worship as well. People who are queer deserve a place within these faith communities. They deserve to feel as though they shouldn't have to hide their identity in the face of God. People shouldn't have to balance their faith and their sexuality, hiding away one aspect of them to better fit into our heteronormative church community as though they cannot be both someone who is queer and someone who is religious. Queer people can and should be allowed to be people of faith if they so choose while also being open about their identity. Some already are open people of faith who are working to change the way the church reacts to and interacts with queer individuals.

An argument I've often seen plastered all over social media is that the LGBTQ+ community stole the rainbow as the flag that represented them because it was originally meant to showcase God's promise to Noah after the flood that filled the world for forty days and forty nights. I feel as though this analogy is perfect. The rainbow doesn't have to mean simply one thing to one group of people. Just because it is the symbol of the LGBTQ+ people doesn't mean it cannot also be the symbol of God's promise of mercy and compassion to the world. The rainbow can be motivating symbols of each group, rather than having people bicker over the custody of said symbol as though they cannot coexist. The rainbow encompasses both groups of people and their beliefs, allowing the two groups to fundamentally exist together. Because the rainbow is not simply one group; it can and should allow for intersection between the groups it represents. Queer people can be religious and religious people can be queer.

After all, no matter how you believe or what you were born as, you are still someone represented by the rainbow.

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Shocking Facts About LGBTQ+ Youth and Homelessness

Finn Mercier (they/them), Vancouver, WA

According to True Colors United, LGBTQ+ youth are 120% more likely to experience homelessness. LGBTQ+ youth contribute to up to 7% of the general youth population, but up to 40% of the homeless youth population. I heard this statistic shared during one of the days of AYTJ and I was shocked. After I heard that, I instantly wanted to research more about this issue. This is what I chose to base my project around.



Before starting this project, I already knew that LGBTQ+ youth already had an unfair disadvantage in life within many different areas which I will discuss, but I wasn't aware that increased rates of homelessness was included in this disadvantage. When looking further into why so many LGBTQ+ youth were experiencing homelessness, the most common reason was that they were forced out, or they had to run away from their family. The next most common reason was other family issues.

When starting my research for this project, I firstly decided to look into what homeless shelters were near me. After finding a couple of shelters, I decided to contact them and ask A) if they had specific resources for LGBTQ+ youth, or B) if they had any connections that did. I got responses from three out of four shelters and from those three shelters, only one of them had resources. I wasn't very surprised, I was not expecting many shelters to have specific resources.

My intention with this project is to firstly find a shelter or program that is local that has specific resources or programs for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. Second, my plan was to do a fundraiser with the help of my church so that we can give extra support to the shelter or program that I found through my research and reaching out to some of these different shelters. After looking into each of the shelters that were in my area, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to fundraise for two different programs. The two programs that I chose were New Avenues for Youth, and Transitional Youth.

I chose New Avenues for Youth to fundraise for because of all of the different programs and supports they offer to everyone, but also specifically to sexual and gender minority youth. Some of the programs that they offer are: Day services (meals, hygiene, engagement activities, legal counsel, etc), education (GED test prep, college prep, re-engagement with learning), job training and employment (work readiness, skill development, job placement), supportive housing, counseling, many others, and then my main focus: SMYRC.

SMYRC at New Avenues is a Sexual & Gender Minority Youth Resource Center. They provide a lot of support for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. They have a food pantry, hygiene supplies, a clothing closet, gender affirming garments, virtual and in person check-ins, virtual and in person groups, and resource referrals. In addition to these forms of support they also host different events such as a “Back 2 School BBQ” where they supply free food, a raffle, and games. For all of the different programs and forms of support that they offer for LGBTQ+ youth, they seemed like a good organization to choose to provide support for.

I chose Transitional Youth to support alongside New Avenues mainly since they are a partner with Braking Cycles. Braking Cycles describes themselves with the following words: “Braking Cycles is a non-profit under the umbrella of Transitional Youth, established to celebrate what makes Portland most beautiful, raise awareness in what is darkest, and utilize the tools at hand to create a platform of healthy opportunity for the marginalized youth of this great city. Through youth apprenticeship programs, Braking Cycles is committed to offering hope and tangible job skills and real-world knowledge that will provide youth a place and opportunity to dream, reach, and achieve. We believe this is where healthy self-sufficiency can become the new cycle.”

To sum up Braking Cycles; they take some of the youth that come to Transitional Youth and provide them jobs and internships within their coffee shop as well as their bike shop in order to give them real world experience and to help get them back onto their feet. They do not have as many specific resources for LGBTQ+ youth however they still focus on helping at-risk youth, which is why I will be splitting my fundraiser between New Avenues and Transitional Youth (Braking Cycles).

At the time of writing this essay I have not been able to carry out any fundraising, and I am still in the process of brainstorming different ideas. My next steps are to meet with my pastor as well as church council to figure out what I can do as far as fundraising, as well as scheduling a time/multiple times to do so. When fundraising I hope to not only raise money for these programs, but also gain some people willing to volunteer for these organizations.

My current decision for my project is that I will be fundraising for both Transitional Youth (Braking Cycles) as well as New Avenues for Youth. When I do

complete my fundraising it will be split between Transitional Youth and New Avenues, fundraising is currently underway.

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Support Through A Community

Zoe Rahberg (she/her), Saint Paul, MN

Christianity has a long history of being seen as unaccepting of LGBTQIA+ people. This topic is often on my mind. Am I welcome at my church? Will I be accepted? Who will accept me? I came out as gay in eighth grade to my parents and



some friends. One of the first people I came out to was the vicar in our church at the time. The first thing she said to me was that I was loved; that God loved me and that my family loved me. This was an incredibly reassuring coming out experience. Sadly, many people I've met didn't have it as easy, which made it hard to believe that my church would love and accept me. Going to the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute (AYTI) was a way to assure myself that it was okay to integrate religion and the LGBTQIA+ community. Creating a sense of support in a place of faith is important to youth like me who are living into their identities.

AYTI often reminded us that the whole LGBTQIA+ community is loved and accepted. It was like we all got to hear my vicar's reassurance. Another other thing that I loved about AYTI was that they pointed out specific places where LGBTQIA+ people could show up in the Bible and I found that very validating for me. Some stories that they used were the connection that David and Jonathan had (1 Samuel 20, NLT) and the

coat of many colors that Joseph wore (Genesis: 37:4. NLT). Because the LGBTQIA+ community often notices a lack of representation in churches -- in sermons, bible stories, and conversations in general -- it was important to hear that LGBTQIA+ people matter and their experiences are present in the bible. AYTI also helped us practice being advocates ourselves. They asked us to notice positions and places where LGBTQIA+ members might show up in church and to reflect on whether or not they did. For example, they asked if LGBTQIA+ people were present in sermons, songs, or positions of leadership. Beyond just noticing, I now appreciate how important it is to address the underlying uncertainty, confusion, and even hostility toward different people in church communities.

Part of these concerns can be addressed by strengthening and/or creating loving and safe spaces in churches. Some organizations and churches are taking steps to support and affirm LGBTQIA+ people's identities. For example, one church is the Saint Thomas More Catholic Church in Oceanside, CA. This church holds support group meetings for both parents and other LGBTQIA+ people (whether questioning or out). They are an open church that has a "goal that all LGBTQ persons may grow in love and hope, grace and fulfillment through participation in this ministry"(LGBTQ Support Groups). This organization holds meetings and worship services in a space that is accepting and loving of everyone. Having a space where people feel more at ease may make welcome more clear. Other Christians could follow in the footsteps of Saint Thomas More Catholic Church.

Having a support group begins to address the most significant issues I've seen facing LGBTQIA+ youth. In a support group, LGBTQIA+ people would experience the welcome, representation and validation that they could have been lacking at church.

Even this simple gathering of people who resonate with LGBTQIA+ issues begins to address some of the most prominent challenges. It would be a place for their voices to be heard and supportive friendships to be built. The church can't fix the fear that many LGBTQIA+ people have of being unwelcome, but they can create a space where those people are heard and represented. They can create a group in this space to show that they are welcoming and supportive of them.

Everyone is created in God's image. All people are made exactly how God wanted them to be "since everything made by God is good, we should not reject any of it but receive it with thanks" (Timothy 4:4, NLT). Even LGBTQIA+ people are created in God's image, regardless of the fact that some Christians might say otherwise. God loves all no matter what. God would want us to love each other as God loves us (John 15:12, NLT). God has an unfailing love for all creation. Christianity should embody this: unfailing love, support, validation, and inclusion. All of these things are extremely important to those who are exploring or coming to terms with who they are.

God has invited us, again and again, to love as God loves, not as humans do. Humans love with bias and sinful rejections. Some say God's love comes with a price or a requirement. God's love has never been conditioned upon you being good enough. God loves who you are. God loves the beauty in you that others cannot begin to understand. "Don't judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7, NLT). God calls us to love others without bias or thoughts on how they appear, but on their heart. And with love comes support. We must support people in who they are because that is how God made them to be. If God wanted it to be so, it is so. No matter your personal opinions on who someone is, God made them

exactly as they should be and loves them unconditionally. In the same way, we should love and support others unconditionally in who they are.

For congregations that want to be increasingly welcoming and validating, the lessons of the AYTJ apply: notice and advocate with concrete action. One form of this advocacy that follows the AYTJ's own model is creating a safe place for LGBTQIA+ people to gather. A congregation can sponsor a LGBTQIA+ support group that serves those at various stages of the coming out process and offers validation and encouragement. The Bible says "Share each other's burdens" (Galatians 2:6, NLT), and I believe this to be important because feeling unwanted and unloved is the kind of burden too heavy to bear alone. For people to recognize their importance within a community, they need opportunities to be heard in loving, non judgemental ways. A person's identity impacts one's entire existence, so allowing people to be themselves in a place of faith, can affect many aspects of a person's life.

Many religious people are deeply spiritual in more than just their faith, they are spiritual in their connections with the family they have found in their church community. It is important that this family is supportive. It can dramatically impact the LGBTQIA+ youth. LGBTQIA+ youth are much more likely to be depressed or suicidal compared to non-LGBTQIA+ youth. "In 2019, around 23 percent of LGB youth attempted suicide versus 6 percent of heterosexual youth" (Kerr). Nearly one in four LGBTQIA+ kids with attempted suicide feels like an undeniably horrible thing. One thing that their church communities could do to help these youth is to validate and support who they are. As well as expressing validation, encouraging young people and giving them an opportunity to practice being themselves are some other supportive actions. In addition, having others who can relate to what they are feeling could help

improve their mental health, by showing youth that they are not alone. This could be possible through a support group at church.

My project is to create a group where LGBTQIA+ members have a safe place to speak and gather. This will be a group of people that are either a part of the LGBTQIA+ community or strong allies. Creating a faithful and supportive space for LGBTQ+ people will allow them to meet up and discuss what is on their mind without fear. I will start my project by holding a meeting at church in late September to talk about my experience at AYTJ this summer. At this meeting, I will introduce my project. I will hand out a survey to see who would be open to this idea, who would be interested in supporting it and who would potentially like to be a part of it. Once I have heard back from people, I will talk to my pastor about where to go from there. My plan will probably involve recruiting people who are interested in being leaders or adults in this group. Our church has often been a place where openly gay vicars and other people who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community have completed their internship before becoming a pastor. Pastor Joy has long been supportive of LGBTQIA+ people and was thrilled with the idea of creating a safe space for LGBTQIA+ people. She was immediately supportive of my project. This was reassuring to me that my project would have a supportive environment at church. I am hoping that this group could be a place for young LGBTQIA+ people but my plans may change as time goes on. Hopefully this group will be a hopeful, supportive and safe space. I hope that it will increase people's security in their place in church, help them accept themselves, and allow for deeper connections between people.

Mainly, I want to create a safe and love-filled space in church for those who have been told that they don't belong or are unloveable by God. I want those people to know

their importance and how much God truly does love them. Everyone has their place in Heaven and I'm hoping to help others realize theirs.

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Gender Garden

Dominik Polley (he/him), Saint Paul, MN

My family started going to St. Tim's in 2014. I was in second grade. I remember going upstairs into the Sunday school room and watching the episodes of Holy Moly with their cartoonish retellings of the classic bible stories. I remember the time I got my giant blue bible in 4th grade and my first communion in fifth. This church is part of my community, and I want to make it more welcoming.

In summer 2021, I got the opportunity to go to Augsburg's Youth Theology Institute (AYTI). AYTI is a camp where high school students learn about that year's theme. This year's theme was "And it was very good: Affirming and advocating for gender and sexual diversity in God's creation." During the week, we talked in small groups with Augsburg students as mentors, we had a daily devotional lead by an Augsburg student, and we learned about the theme with Ross Murray, who is the founder of The Naming Project and is the Senior Director of Education and Training at The GLAAD Media Institute. During the week, we looked at bible verses through an LGBTQ+ lens. Some of the bible verses we looked at were Joseph and the rainbow "coat" that we found that was more of a dress than a coat, Jesus and the Roman Centurion, and how Jesus accepted everyone even if not everyone thought he should. We also talked about issues in the LGBTQ+ community and how they're represented in the media.

Because of this experience, I thought about how I, as a person who identifies as non-binary, could make St. Tim's more welcoming to members of the LGBTQ+ community. Some of you may remember three years ago when St. Tim's went through the process of becoming a Reconciling in Christ community and voting on a new

welcome message. I want to build on that. That's why I'm going to install a rainbow flower garden in the front yard as a sign that we welcome everyone and care for everyone. As Reverend Kittredge Cherry says, as a Lesbian woman trying to find a church in LA for LGBTQ+ people in 1985, "Immediately I was put at ease by the warmth of the congregation and the beauty of the rainbow flags hanging behind the altar and around the sanctuary."

This shows that for people in a minority that might not feel comfortable with the church in general due to bad experiences and trauma, a sign of welcome and acceptance can calm their nerves and make them feel more comfortable. A study also shows that bright and colorful gardens also promote inclusivity and welcomeness (Mortorff).

I will be planting tulip bulbs in this garden in the fall, and the flowers will sprout up in the spring just in time for Easter. I still have to find a date for the planting, but I hope to plant it in late September or early October.

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