

Non-affirming churches force LGBTQ+ BGSU students to find community elsewhere

Despite the strides towards equality and inclusivity for the LGBTQ+ community made over the last decade, many BGSU students say they feel unwelcome in churches and are forced to find a sense of peace, belonging and understanding elsewhere.

Members of BGSU's LGBTQ+ community aren't the only ones experiencing this issue: According to the Pew Research Center, around half (51%) of people in the LGBTQ+ community have a religious affiliation. And more alarmingly, 55% of adults with a religious affiliation claim homosexuality “conflicts with their religious beliefs.”

This leaves many people in the LGBTQ+ community feeling unwelcome in churches and forced to find a sense of peace, belonging and understanding elsewhere. For many, this leads to spirituality.

BGSU first-year transfer student James Hignett is one of many LGBTQ+ students at BGSU who have been hurt in religious settings and have instead turned to spirituality to find that sense of belonging.

Hignett was raised in a Methodist church where his mother was the choir director. He realized his sexuality around the age of 12 or 13. Then around the age of 16, Hignett took a leadership position in the church like his mother. Around this time period, Hignett began to first understand how many people in the church truly felt about the LGBTQ+ community.

“I remember when I was around 13 or 14, a lesbian couple started attending our church and I started hearing the whispers,” Hignett said.

But unfortunately, it wasn't even at Hignett's own church where he experienced discrimination that ultimately made him turn away from the church. The instance of discrimination that put Hignett over the edge was at a Pride event.

"When I went to my first Pride and a different Methodist church was protesting, it was just seeing that emblem," he said. "There's a click that happens when someone from the same group that you find yourself so close-knit to calls you a slur. "

"There's no word that I could use to describe that other than just hurt. And that's when I started looking more into where I was," Hignett said.

Many religious people in the LGBTQ+ are forced to confront the idea of contradictory information, knowing who you are, but being told who you are is wrong.

"Don't say that God makes no mistakes and then call me an abomination," Hignett said, exemplifying the frustration of this feeling.

Since experiencing homophobia from the church he identified with, Hignett has distanced himself from traditional religion and identifies now with a mix of religion and spirituality.

"I would say I'm more spiritual. I like to call myself humble because I don't know what's out there, I have no idea who's right, who's wrong," Hignett said. "We're all going to experience God in different ways. I feel "God" when I'm walking outside [and] when I have interactions that I genuinely enjoy. I don't fall under the Christian God, I don't fall between religions because, for all I know, anything could be right."

Incoming BGSU graduate student Abbi Kneuss had a similar experience with a similar outcome. Kneuss was raised in a "Christian household" where every part of their life was centred around their faith, and that extended to their worldview.

“We were taught to believe that homosexuality or really any type of queerness was wrong but followed the ‘love the person, hate the sin’ doctrine,” Kneuss said.

Because of how ingrained this ideation was, it was hard for Kneuss even imagine the possibility of being queer.

“I always felt disconnected from our religious practices but couldn't understand why. I often felt a lot of guilt for this disconnect. I was blind to my own sexuality and queerness, but others around me knew before I did... I felt a lot of resentment towards religion, which was then reflected as resentment towards myself,” Kneuss said. “When I look back on my life, my queerness has been blindingly there since I was a kid, but religion forced me to deny it to such an extreme extent that I couldn't recognize it.”

Kneuss said she felt disconnected from her previously close community.

“It’s an odd feeling to hide a giant aspect of your life from people who you grew up with and who loved you. Knowing that that love is conditional is painful and frankly un-Christian, as Jesus teaches us to love unconditionally,” Kneuss said.

Kneuss’s experience with religion while trying to fully understand her queerness was difficult. She explained she had tried to remain religious, and even considered herself religious for the first two years after coming out, but her religion continued to get in the way.

“It was difficult to want to explore that aspect of my identity while holding onto my religious identity. They conflicted,” Kneuss said. “I couldn't explore using an open mind with religion.”

While Kneuss realized religion is not for her, and is still navigating what role a divine presence plays in her life, she’s found spirituality to be what works best for her.

“To me, religion is manmade and spirituality is believing in the Divine. I have faith that a higher being exists and that the mystics of the world can't always be explained. Religion becomes so toxic because it is created by human,” Kneuss said. “My spirituality centers around love, which is what most of Jesus' teachings are about. However, my true belief in love can't exist within Christianity because Christianity loves conditionally despite stating the opposite. So, there isn't a definition for what I believe which I think is beautiful.”

While many members of BGSU's LGBTQ+ community have turned to spirituality rather than religion, some affirming churches here in Bowling Green are trying to make religious spaces more welcoming for all.

“For us, the primary benefit of being an affirming church is that it is an expression of our faithfulness to Jesus Christ,” said Rev. Jeff Schooley, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Bowling Green.

Affirming churches are ones that fully accept people in the LGBTQ+ community and treat them equally. At affirming churches, people in the LGBTQ+ community can attend the church, get married, hold positions in the church and do really anything that any other church-goer could do.

Non-affirming churches' exclusionary practices can range from not welcoming members of the LGBTQ+ community at their services to not allowing them to hold leadership positions or get married in the church.

But at First Presbyterian, everyone is welcome always, Schooley said.

“It's not a marketing campaign. It's not a branding thing. It's just we are a church of people who are convinced that LGBTQ+ inclusion is an important part of what it means to be the church. That if we weren't being inclusive, we're not the church,” Schooley said.

But Schooley isn't ignorant to the fact that the church has "a lot to repent for," and is intentionally finding ways to do better in the future.

"We keep relationships going with the queer community, in part to make sure we're held accountable, and as new ways of being inclusive are sort of discovered or are cultivated. For us, it's really about listening first and then responding," Schooley said.

BGO Pride is one of the queer organizations that the church stays in contact with- which is pretty easy, given that their official office is actually in the church.

Schooley explained that at the center of it all, the goal of the church is "to be a witness to the way the world is supposed to be under the Lordship of Jesus Christ."

Schooley explained that this idea extended to anyone in society who too often gets overlooked or neglected and that this "absolutely includes the LGBTQ+ community."

There are many options when it comes to finding what works for you in terms of religion or spirituality. Whether you're finding your peace while on walks, with the Divine or while in church, it's a journey that's completely unique to you.

If you have a spiritual yearning and are looking for a place accepting of all, you can visit the First Presbyterian Church at 126 S. Church St. in Bowling Green, Ohio.

For more resources to help understand and cope with life, you can visit the BGSU Counseling Center at 715 E. Leroy St. in Bowling Green, Ohio or call 419-372-3081.

You can also check out the LGBTQ+ Resource Center in room 427 at the Bowen Thomson Student Union Mondays and Fridays 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Tuesday-Thursday 9 a.m.-7 p.m.

Social Media Posts:

1. [Facebook post] Non-affirming churches can make it difficult for LGBTQ+ to find a sense of peace and belonging within religion. But there's still hope. [Click here to read](#)

about what other members of the LGBTQ+ community have experienced, and what options you have.

2. [Twitter Poll] Have you ever experienced discrimination based on your sexuality/gender identity from a religious organization?
3. Affirming vs. Non-Affirming Churches Graphic

Sources

1. James Hignett

- a. BGSU LGBTQ+ student who grew up religious, then found his way to religion because of discrimination
 - b. hcjames@bgsu.edu
2. Abbi Kneuss
 - a. Future BGSU LGBTQ+ grad student who grew up religious and has become more spiritual over the years
 - b. 330-795-5518
3. Jeff Schooley
 - a. First Presbyterian Church Reverend (Affirmative church)
 - b. 330-931-9165
4. Pew Research Center
 - a. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2013/06/13/chapter-6-religion/>