



# The Experience of Gender Incongruity in the Christian Church: A Qualitative Study

Megan Best<sup>1</sup> · Patricia Weerakoon<sup>2</sup>

Accepted: 8 May 2021

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2021

## Abstract

This study was designed to understand the interaction between Christian faith and gender incongruence. An anonymous online survey was advertised to the Australian Christian community. Individuals with first-hand experience of transgender issues were eligible to participate. There were 122 eligible responses. This paper describes the experience of the 30 participants experiencing gender incongruence. Persons in the church experiencing gender incongruence desired to hold onto faith. As a result, they experienced a tension between the desire to remain in the church, and the desire to live congruously with their gender, which could lead to expulsion. Strategies to reconcile these two factors varied.

**Keywords** Transgender · Church · Religion · Gender incongruence · Identity

## Introduction

Religion has been a powerful influence on social norms regarding sex and gender. While it is known to play a protective role in personal identity formation (Smith & Denton, 2009), this relationship can be complicated for those whose personal gender identity does not reflect religious norms (Bockting et al., 2006). Religious affiliation may therefore provide either a safe space to explore one's identity or an increased risk of discrimination, depending on the context (Halkitis et al., 2009; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Modern ideas about gender diversity and gender fluidity stand in stark contrast to the binary model set out in Christian Scripture which has been the understanding of Christians for millennia. While there are a range of Biblical interpretations,

---

✉ Megan Best  
megan.best@nd.edu.au

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Ethics and Society, University of Notre Dame Australia, 104 Broadway, PO Box 944, Sydney, NSW 2007, Australia

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

the text can be interpreted as follows: Genesis 1:27 reveals that God has made two human sexes. Consequently, every person is either male or female—even if there can be developmental complications and the sex of some whom Jesus calls ‘eunuchs from birth’ might be difficult to identify. The Bible is unashamedly ‘cisnormative’, everywhere indicating that what we call ‘gender’ is simply the personal/social/cultural/relational expression of biological sex. This means that the sex of the body determines the gender of the person. While biblical anthropology teaches a duality of body and soul, it is decidedly ‘hylomorphic’ (e.g. P. 139)—that is, body and soul are so united that there is no possibility of mismatch between the two. Otherwise put, the body is the body of the soul and the soul is the soul of the body. The Bible strongly prohibits cross-gender behaviour (e.g. Lev. 18:22; Deut. 22:5; Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9, 11:13–15), insisting that all expressions of gender should be congruent with a person’s biological sex. Finally, God has promised to resurrect our bodies (1 Cor. 15:20–23), indicating that our personhood will eternally take its gender from the sex of our bodies (cf. v. 53: ‘For *this* perishable body must put on the imperishable, and *this* mortal body must put on immortality’ (ESV)).

While the topic of diverse gender identities has become an area of interest and discussion among Christians who are grappling with the implications of a rapidly changing, emerging perspective (Beilby & Eddy, 2019), some churches still hold to the historic view and consequently, it is not unusual for roles and programs within such churches to separate by gender. Previous research has identified an association between conservative Christian views and cognitive dissonance regarding how to reconcile transgender issues with traditional beliefs or even prejudice towards transgender people (de Jong, 2017; Campbell et al., 2019). In view of the findings of the Australian Human Rights Commission report of 2014 that 11% of Australians are of diverse sexual orientation, sex or gender identity (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014), institutions such as those churches who accept the historic Christian view of binary gender should consider how to respond to members who experience gender incongruity and/or embrace gender ideologies contrary to its teaching (Walker, 2017).

Gender incongruence (GI) describes a mismatch between one’s biological sex and gender identity (i.e. self-perceived gender) (Gainor, 2000). Gender in this context refers to the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female, which authors such as Butler have promoted as a choice, rather than an extension of one’s biology (i.e. ontologically relativist) (Butler, 2011). This understanding is promoted by Queer theory, which aims to deconstruct latent power structures within society, including the traditional gender system, which are thought to oppress minority groups (Sanlon, 2010).

The social debate over gender has to a large extent been played out in the battlefield of definitions. Those who advocate for new meanings undergird their campaign with a new set of definitions which reflect a changed understanding, for example, long lists of gender alternatives, and the introduction of the term ‘cisgender’ to represent an alignment of gender identity and biological sex (Winter et al., 2016).

This shift in language and related terminology has influenced not only academia but also segments of the medical fraternity. The American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) Diagnostics and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders

(DSM) changed the pathological diagnosis of incongruence of physical gender and self-perception of gender (gender identity disorder) in its 4th edition to being pathological only if distress is experienced as a result of this incongruence (gender dysphoria) in the 5th edition (A.P.A., 2013). It is important to note that, as a result, gender incongruence is no longer to be regarded *ipso facto* as a disorder and in this context should only be seen as something negative when the patient themselves expresses distress over the incongruence. This change was made partly in response to ideological factors and the desire to de-stigmatize gender incongruence, with controversy over existing empirical research (Beek et al., 2016; De Vries & Cohen-Kettenis, 2016).

In view of this change, consideration of pastoral concerns needs to be done carefully, as some individuals experiencing GI (which was until recently identified as a mental disorder) may have extensive support needs (Dhejne et al., 2016). The appropriate response to issues around gender identity is controversial internationally (Cretella, 2016). This survey is a preliminary step aimed at understanding the interaction between Australian individuals who experience GI and their faith, in order to identify what issues require further examination by the Church. This information will also be useful to inform mental health care to conventionally religious clients.

Little is known about how gender incongruent persons negotiate the potentially conflicting identities of gender non-conforming and Christian, and most research has been done in the USA (Ghazzawi et al., 2020). In a study of five Transgender and Gender Nonconforming (TGNC) people (Levy & Lo, 2013), the authors described a process involving five stages leading to resolution of conflict between gender identity and religious belief: experiencing gender socialization; having conflicts between views of self and socialized gender; defying gender norms; exploring gender and religious identities; and continually resolving issues as they arise. They suggested that this process may not be linear, and tended to be ongoing. In a study of eight transgender participants, Ghazzawi et al. described aspects of dual identity development that could be painful or comforting, with faith inseparable from other aspects of participants' lives (Ghazzawi et al., 2020). Benson and colleagues, in a study of seven self-identified transgender people, found that participants had a range of experiences within faith communities, ranging from supportive to discriminatory. All were unwilling to forgo their faith, even in the face of rejection from their faith community. (Benson et al., 2018).

There may be benefits to embracing the tension between faith and gender identity: a study of 32 transgender Christians found that many reported a strengthening of faith as a result of the process (Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012). Regression analysis in another study examining a sample of 129 young TGNC individuals found that suicidal ideation was significantly lower with more frequent religious service attendance ( $p < 0.001$ ) (Grossman et al., 2016). This is consistent with research which has demonstrated the positive effect of religion and spirituality on well-being for the general population (Koenig et al., 2012).

In summary, it appears that Christian individuals who experience GI are committed to reconciling the two facets of identity and can experience both supportive and discriminatory responses from others in the religious community. However, we are not aware of any previous studies that have explored the experience of TGNC

individuals who have attempted to stay within churches that maintain the historic view of gender, in order to inform pastoral care guidelines.

This study was therefore designed to explore the following research questions:

- What is the impact of GI on Christian faith, and
- How does contemporary church practice impact people with experiences in transgender and gender identity issues.

As a relatively new area of research, a qualitative approach was chosen. Those with direct experience were asked to share their experiences. The outcomes of this project are intended to help inform church pastoral guidelines for supporting Christians with experience in gender identity issues. This information will also be of assistance to those providing mental health care to conventionally religious clients.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were a subset of a larger study which focused on the issue of Gender Incongruity in the church. Adults who had first-hand experience of GI were eligible. Individuals who had no first-hand experience of GI were excluded. Church affiliation, or its absence, did not affect eligibility, although participants needed to identify with the Christian faith currently or in the past to be included in the analysis. Due to the sensitive nature of the issues involved and the possible stigma attached to GI in the church community, the researchers suspected that TGNC individuals may be reluctant to come forward to participate. Therefore, an anonymous online survey was designed which targeted the church-going community in Australia.

### Data Collection

The survey was designed by all researchers in association with a literature review. The survey link was advertised in print and online, with primarily non-denominational Christian publications being used to specifically target the Australian church community. The research was conducted on the Survey Monkey platform. No participant could access the survey without responding to the participant information and consent items on the first page. Online responses were reviewed daily and monitored for indications that the survey was causing respondents undue distress. The number for a free crisis support telephone counselling service (Lifeline) was provided on the opening page to help participants deal with any distress experienced during completion of the online survey.

Participants were invited to respond to a series of questions. There were 11 items. The first three items asked for details of the participant's transgender experience and its relationship to their Christian life. The next two items asked about things that made their experience easier and more difficult. The next four items

asked how the respondent's church dealt with transgender issues, where relevant, and invited the respondent to make suggestions on how they thought it could be improved. Responses were in free text. A short demographic questionnaire completed the survey (See Appendix 1).

## Analysis

Responses were downloaded, and any identifying data were removed. Data were analysed according to the method of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) to iteratively develop themes and identify the process by which TGNC individuals in the church community experience life. Six transcripts were manually coded line by line by all researchers to form an initial code tree. These preliminary codes were then used to synthesize groups of data into focused codes which were applied to a further 4 transcripts to establish agreement on coding and refine the codes, which were then applied to the remaining transcripts.

After each interview, examples and contradictions were sought in the data and memos were written to record the analysts' developing thinking. Using the constant comparative method, new codes were written as required. Through iterative reading of data grouped by focused codes, axial codes were established and the relationships between them studied to build theory. Rigor was derived from successive rounds of discussion and development of focused codes, definitions and themes and review of the coding process by the authors until theoretical coding was complete. Differences in researcher interpretation of the data were resolved through discussion, with the multidisciplinary nature of the research team minimizing researcher bias by allowing for the reflection on the role of individual perspectives regarding the interpretation of data (Berger, 2015).

The study was ethically approved by the Notre Dame University of Australia research committee (RN-017028S).

## Results

Due to the online nature of recruitment, the response rate is unknown. This paper describes the findings for the 30 participants who experienced GI personally. Major themes are described below.

The thirty respondents ranged from individuals who suffered from gender dysphoria (GD) without treatment, to fully transitioned, to reversal of transition. Biological sex was female for 11 (37%) participants. Mean age was 48.2 years (range 18–78 years). Data were missing for 3 participants. The majority (73%) were Australian. See Table 1 for full demographic details. Throughout the transcripts, there were expressions of great pain. The major themes were: (1) holding on to faith; (2) desire for acceptance; (3) seeking resolution; and (4) seeking understanding.

**Table 1** Participant demographics ( $n = 30$ )

Variable	<i>N</i> (%)
Age (mean)	48.2 years
Biological sex (f)	11 (37)
Current gender identity <sup>a</sup>	
Trans man	8 (27)
Trans woman	8 (27)
Gender Dysphoria, biological male	7 (23)
Gender Dysphoria, biological female	2 (7)
De-transitioned biological male	1(3)
De-transitioned biological female	1 (3)
Not clearly stated	2 (7)
Country of residence	
Australia	22 (73)
USA	3 (10)
UK	1 (3)
Religion	
Anglican/Episcopal	13 (43)
Roman Catholic	1 (3)
Pentecostal	4 (13)
Other Christian	7 (23)
No religion	2 (7)
Attends church > 1 × month	21(70)
Reads bible > 3 × week	
Yes	12 (40)
Usually	5 (17)
Sometimes	6 (20)
Never	4 (13)

## Missing data

<sup>a</sup>This question was not included in demographic survey, and information is extracted from text responses. A trans man is a person, biologically female, who now identifies as a man. A trans woman is a person, biologically male, who now identifies as a woman. De-transitioned biological male has previously transitioned to female and subsequently reversed the process. De-transitioned biological female has previously transitioned to male and subsequently reversed the process

## Holding on to Faith

While respondents were aware of the tension between their identity as TGNC and their identity as Christian, it was clear that the great majority were not prepared to let go of their faith in order to resolve the tension. There was great confusion for many respondents who were trying to reconcile why they were TGNC, if they were created by an all-powerful God who designed sex and gender to go together and who did not make mistakes. The inevitable questioning of whether something was wrong

with them, or with God (a thought that could lead to guilt), caused enormous suffering. However, some were able to accept that they were still made in the image of God, as taught in the Bible (Genesis 1:27; 9:6), despite being different from others, although this could take time to discover. *I wish I had known [earlier] that I wasn't some sort of evil abomination. That gender can be broken in the same way as everything else [after] the fall and that it is still possible to be acceptable to God and live a godly life [while experiencing gender incongruence] (122).*

Some respondents stressed the importance of the Church maintaining the traditional teaching on sex and gender, with only one participant expressed a rejection of the Biblical binary gender model as normative. The idea of gender fluidity, or that gender moves on a continuous spectrum between male and female, was not expressed, despite the inability of some people to fit within the normative model. As one participant explained: *My faith leads me to affirm binary genders as a fundamental ideal, but to recognise that in the disordered world in which we live not everyone, myself included, can fit within this framework (107).*

Despite their suffering, most respondents reported that their faith was increased as a result of the personal challenges they faced and helped them to cope with hardship. The isolation from other Christians increased their dependence on God, and they were *homesick for heaven* (where all things are made new, and there will be no pain or suffering, according to the Christian scripture in Revelation 21: 1–4).

A small number of respondents reported an ongoing challenge as they asked God to 'cure' them, with some questioning their faith when this did not occur. Others accepted an ongoing daily 'battle with the flesh' as they tried to resist urges to transition. Some respondents described the initial welcome they received from the gay community when they identified as TGNC, then upon finding that the Christian side of their identity was rejected, not feeling truly at home in that context either, as they were not prepared to renounce their faith. The experience of being a TGNC person was therefore one of loneliness for the majority of the cohort as they sought to establish genuine personal identity as gender-confused Christians. *I don't feel that I fit in anywhere (253).*

## Desire for Acceptance

Most respondents believed that if they were honest about their GI, they could be rejected by their church congregation. This was anticipated due to prevailing beliefs in the conservative church regarding TGNC people, and the common conflation of TGNC people and lesbians and gay men (and associated judgemental attitudes towards these groups). Many had found that GI was seen as a sinful choice within the church, rather than an unavoidable crisis of personal identity.

'It would be helpful if the church could make a clear distinction between gender identity and sexual preference... before making judgements, and be sufficiently rich in its thinking to realise that you can affirm binary gender and [at the same time] recognise that in this world not everyone will neatly fall into one category' (230).

This meant that if the respondents wanted to stay within the church, they had to hide their GI, thus being unable to worship as the gender they felt themselves to be. *Basically [my gender incongruence] has been driven underground. I've never really felt free to discuss this with other Christians (125).*

For some, 'coming out' as a TGNC person (i.e. telling others about their gender identity struggles) would allow for authenticity in faith, but would lead to loss of fellowship. One respondent, after revealing his GI, was told 'Repent or leave the church', resulting in a parting in great pain. Another described angry statements from fellow churchgoers, as they heard in his story of experiencing GI the message that God had made a mistake.

Three respondents reported being divorced as a result of church-based advice to their spouses. The longing for a loving church that could accept them as they were was prominent in the testimonies. *I feel that I will never truly be accepted as a full member of the local church, unconditionally welcomed and allowed to fully participate in its life (122).* Church was understood as a place where God's love and his approach to the marginalized should be reflected, but generally wasn't in their experience. This meant that the TGNC person's experience in church was also isolating, and they had to deal with their theological and identity questions alone. *I have felt as though I was not welcome within the church if I was open about my identity...so I have not disclosed...I've had to deal with my gender identity issues alone, separate from any faith community (124).*

For others, such experiences have led to a strengthening of faith. *It has placed more emphasis on my personal relationship with God because of the isolation from other Christians, being in the church but not belonging. As soon as I reveal my gender issues, others tend to draw away and any ministry opportunities tend to be withdrawn. There is an immense temptation to lie about my gender so that my place within the congregation will be evaluated on the basis of my godliness, willingness to serve, and ... ability (122).* Others still described how they would not have been able to cope with their situation without faith. A minority found a Christian community where they could be honest about their experience and still be welcomed and supported. *Having openly acknowledged my transgenderism, my capacity for prayer and a real lived faith have grown dramatically. I can now feel that I can pray in my authentic voice and serve with my authentic self, although that voice and self don't match my biology (107).*

Many participants expressed ongoing decisional uncertainty regarding whether to stay or leave a particular faith community, and whether to let others know about their GI or not. The conflict between gender identity and religious belief was often worked on over a lifetime, within several faith communities.

## Seeking Resolution

A range of pathways were taken by participants in an attempt to find a way to resolve the tension between desiring to worship with integrity, but fearing exclusion when their GI was expressed. Due to the strength of commitment to faith, most



respondents were committed to finding a way of coping with the opposing identities. Only a small minority of respondents left the church (in terms of the institution).

Methods of coping with the tension included finding a church that was open to embracing TGNC people and whatever actions were taken to resolve GD, such as transitioning.

*(My faith) held me back for a long time, but I..realised I didn't have to separate the two. I've never wanted to give up on my faith, and now that I'm transitioning, my faith is giving me strength to let go of the people that don't support me and to trust God that they will come around...I have a good church family now that encourages me in my faith and my life (281).* Another respondent came to her own conclusion, after studying the Christian scriptures and other texts that *God is perfectly fine with trans people and whatever transition they need to make (126).* She noted that there was no negative references to gender identity issues in the Bible, despite *'the (New Testament) cultural context, the fact that Judaism of that time recognized six genders...and the fact that these genders were not cited negatively in the scriptures, nor by Paul who certainly knew this as a learned Pharisee, nor by Jesus. The closest we have to the Bible talking about people such as me is when it positively considers "eunuchs"... It can be argued that Eve is the first transsexual woman, having been made from Adam's body. God made humanity in their image, and God is both genders and beyond; moreover we are made "male AND female", not "male OR female", the former allowing for people who fall outside the typical understanding of male and female (like intersex people and transpeople), rather than the latter which limits humanity to only two ways of being'*. She reasoned that this allowed for people who fall outside the traditional understanding of male and female to transition without abrogating Biblical teaching.

Other respondents were moving along the transitional path with varying degrees of satisfaction, some with support of their Christian minister. *God has always needed to come first with everything, including gender identity issues. My beliefs led me to consult numerous pastors at my church, and together we concluded it would not be against our Christian faith if I were to transition' (113).* One respondent expressed their journey not as transition to become male or female, but to be *my most authentic, congruent self (126).*

The tension between adhering to conservative Christian teaching (against transitioning) as opposed to their medical advice (supporting transitioning) was distressing to the point of triggering depression for some respondents. Participants recognized that the decision to transition may not be accepted by all Christians. *It may be difficult to have fellowship with Conservative Evangelicals (124).* Several participants also described conflict with Christian family members who opposed transitioning, with most hoping for eventual reconciliation.

One respondent had transitioned in an attempt to resolve GD, but found it an anxiety-provoking, dangerous experience which he regretted. He felt he had been deceived and remained angry about the false promises he was given of 'cure'. He reversed the transition and found it easier to live with GI within the church community than as transitioned. A second respondent tried leaving the faith and transitioning, but did not lose their faith, although they tried to turn away from it. They returned to faith and *let God restore me as the person he had intended me to be as*

a female (189). She felt God confirmed that He had not made an error, but that she was not a typical female, and that that was okay.

Some participants were surprised to find that the imagined trauma of articulating their GI did not eventuate, and that authenticity and community were possible in their original church setting. They thus regretted struggling alone for so long: *I wish I had known that my family and close friends and especially my wife would be able to accept it—I may have been able to deal with it sooner before it did so much damage... I wish I had known that being honest about my struggles ...would strengthen and enliven my faith and enrich my relationships with my family (107).*

Alternatively, some pursued an individual relationship with God, with the belief that they would never be fully welcomed in the church. Some chose to remain in their faith community but not disclose their GI. *I told one person in 35 years about it and he thought it was funny. My old senior minister who had no idea what to say 'but you listen to the devil tell you lies'. Now I keep it hidden so no-one will know (276).*

Whether staying in a traditional church, moving to one that embraced gender fluidity, or worshipping in isolation, respondents usually adapted their theological beliefs to embrace their GI ideology. Some had never found resolution. *I am a paradox to my fellow believers because they cannot understand how a person can love God...AND be transgender. Yet they see Jesus in me. I am a paradox to my beloved transgender community because they cannot understand how I can love and obey a God that we are told despises our very existence...Yet they see Jesus in me also (107).*

## Seeking Understanding

Many respondents were frustrated at the amount of misinformation they found in churches, which they believed made their situation even harder than it should have been. The problem of a stereotyping of male and female gender roles in the church was considered a barrier to understanding the complexity of gender identity. The stress and anxiety experienced by those with GI was aggravated by the rejection they experienced when they could not fit into strict gender roles within the church. *There is a great need for those who hold to a complementarian theology [i.e. subscribe to the theological view that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities] to work out what to do with someone who doesn't fit...I find it terribly hard to find my place in it, and others have a tendency to give up and push me away as they find it all too much work (122).*

Christian reticence to discuss gender identity was also noted. Once participant desired a healthy culture in the church where issues [of gender identity] are discussed maturely, instead of sniggering...sometimes even from the pulpit (125). The view was also expressed that the societal push to accept TGNC individuals was unhelpful, describing it as 'a pro-gay narrative' (189) that did not embrace the complexity of gender identity. Similarly, the societal refusal to listen to people who had de-transitioned was listed as something that made the experience of being a Christian TGNC person more difficult.

Many respondents expressed a wish that they could speak to other Christians with the ‘same’ experience, and some were making themselves available for this purpose, through Internet connections. A strong desire to be understood, and thus accepted, by the church community was expressed: *Good information [is needed] to counter the flood of rubbish, especially [that] this is a very complex area that we don’t fully understand yet, [and that] people with gender issues are sinners just like everyone else, not in a special way, and need Jesus’ offer of salvation in exactly the same way as everyone else. Being Christian means needing to be a part of the church fully, both in receiving ministry and fully participating in it. You don’t need to be afraid that people with gender issues are going to destroy what the bible says about gender roles...we are an exception which does not destroy the norm. Some things in life are an awful lot more difficult...but like with the disabled and others with special issues, the church should be a place where we come to feel welcomed and built up, not a place which is, if anything, even more hurtful than ... society in general (122).*

## Discussion

In this study of people experiencing GI, we found that Christian individuals with GI are aware of a tension between their personal faith, their perception of church understanding of transgender, and medical advice to transition. Most of our cohort, who needed to have identified with the Christian faith at some stage to be included in this analysis, were not willing to forgo their beliefs, although some experienced periods of religious struggle. A strengthening of faith during hardship was also described. Other authors have described a similar range of faith experiences in a cohort which identified as Christian and TGNC (Benson et al., 2018; Sabia-Tanis, 2018; Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012). At the same time, many respondents made an effort to explain that they did not disagree with church teaching on the binary nature of gender, nor seek to disrupt it. It was this acceptance of church teaching that created the internal conflict for them.

There is lack of consensus in the literature regarding the impact of religion on the establishment of individual identity. Research involving transgender individuals is scarce, and, despite the drawbacks of the ‘LGBT’ grouping, some insight into identity integration can be obtained from the research on lesbian and gay populations (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). While Wuthnow has suggested that religious individualism may facilitate LGBT Christians’ efforts to create internal coherence (Wuthnow, 1998), Roof has suggested that spirituality is never an entirely individual construct because it is inevitably shaped by background institutions and influences (Roof, 2001). Regardless, religious individualism was not the preference for our cohort. Desire for membership in a Christian community was prominent in our transcripts.

Research involving a majority of TGNC participants has been only recently published, acknowledging the problems of comparing disparate groups in the LGBTI acronym (Rodriguez & Follins, 2012). Results have been conflicting, for example, regarding whether religious coping has positive or negative effects on health (Golub et al., 2010; Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012). The conflict between religious upbringing

and gender identity is a more recently identified tension, and the process of gender identity formation has been found to be lifelong for some TGNC Christians (Levy & Lo, 2013; Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012). Levy and Lo found that core religious beliefs and religious identity were mostly foundational and persistent, as was the case for this cohort. Ghazzawi et al. (2020) also found that faith was a mediator in gender identity development of transgender individuals, and inseparable from other aspects of their lives. Similar to our study, and in contrast to some LGBT communities, they also found transgender individuals seeking fellowship within their faith communities, rather than just in transgender communities (Ghazzawi et al., 2020). Indeed, rejection of faith by LGBT communities was one source of alienation for some of our participants.

In view of this commitment to faith, it was necessary for this cohort to navigate the faith–GI tension and this was done in a variety of ways. Participation in traditional churches created a conundrum where honesty about GI was expected to lead to expulsion, if GI was interpreted as a sinful abrogation of the created order and the church insisted on conformity to Scriptural norms. Some participants who attended a traditional church therefore kept their GI hidden to avoid conflict and remain in the congregation. Others found a home in churches that chose to support people suffering from GI by adopting the surrounding culture’s ideology and rejection of binary gender models. Some respondents found individual support within a church whose denomination held conservative views. Some participants ended up isolated from both TGNC and religious communities. The process was fluctuating and ongoing for the majority of participants. This aligns with previous research (Levy & Lo, 2013; Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012).

We found that some participants attempted to integrate their opposing identities of GI and Christian by ‘sifting’ or ‘screening out’ potentially conflicting practices and attitudes of religion according to their own personal values, needs and feelings, and finding Christian support from others who shared these beliefs. This has been found in LGBT cohorts, albeit with a small proportion of TGNC participants (Dufour, 2000; Wilcox, 2002). Other ways to navigate the conflict between gender and religious beliefs included rejecting the gender identity, even when it required de-transitioning, and ‘carrying the cross’ of ongoing distress. This has also been reported in gay and lesbian populations (Halkitis et al., 2009).

Several authors have found that affirming some form of essentialism is part of the coping strategy for LGBT Christians and their families (Canales, 2018b; Warner, 1993; Wilcox, 2002), citing it as a defence against charges of sinful behaviour. Wilcox found that some participants reframed their essentialism so that rather than ‘born this way’, they had been ‘created by God’, thereby legitimizing their experience, whether as a blessing or a cross to bear (Wilcox, 2002). Ghazzawi and colleagues also found that transgender people expressed an inner certainty that God made them that way, and that this assisted in the move to greater self-acceptance (Ghazzawi et al., 2020). We also found evidence of this belief, and that it was a source of comfort to participants to view themselves as made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).

We also found evidence of the ‘sifting’ of theological interpretations of several Bible passages, including Genesis 1:27b (which describes the creation of humans

with binary sexuality) and Deuteronomy 22:5 (which prohibits cross-dressing). Some participants at more conservative churches simply stopped attending when faced with ideas that negated their self-constructed identity, as has been found by authors examining lesbian and gay populations (Wilcox, 2002). In such situations, the lived experience of religion was one of solo personal spirituality.

Therefore, there was a persistent theme of isolation in these transcripts, which has been previously noted in TGNC cohorts (Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012). Interestingly that a minority of respondents had found unexpected acceptance when finally revealing their GI to family and church friends. This suggests that advertising acceptance of people experiencing GI by individual churches may be helpful in reducing hardship for this population. Our cohort expressed interest in hearing about the experiences of others in similar situations.

A prominent underlying theme in these reports is poor understanding in the church regarding what gender incongruence represents. It has been recognized that gender identity is infrequently discussed in churches (Levy & Lo, 2013) and that Christian pastoral carers are often ignorant of the needs of transgender individuals (Canales, 2018a). We found that 17 respondents to our larger study conflated TGNC people with gay men, lesbians and/or intersex individuals, which is likely to be representative of a larger group. The TGNC community has often been socially, politically and methodologically (in research terms) associated with lesbian, gay and bisexual populations, which can be unhelpful considering the fundamental difference between the two. The latter, terms refer to sexual orientation, while gender identity is an awareness of self which focuses primarily on identity. Intersex is different again, as a disorder of physical sexual development before birth (Rodriguez & Follins, 2012). Gender dysphoria is also distinctive as a psychiatric illness which can be significantly debilitating and requires expert treatment (A.P.A., 2013). Addressing this knowledge deficit would be relatively easy to do and should be considered an important step towards welcoming individuals with GI into the church (see Is 56:7 'Then my house will be known as a *house of worship for all nations*'). Education targeted at ministers and promotion in the church of seminars addressing TGNC issues are possible avenues. However, it is possible that part of the problem is the conflation of Gender Dysphoria (a psychiatric pathology with no religious agenda), with Queer ideology (which is opposed to the binary gender model to which most churches adhere). These two groups are often combined, even in empirical research (Kidd & Witten, 2008). By clarifying this distinction, increased sympathy and understanding for Christians experiencing GI may be generated. Relaxing of societal and church gender stereotypes would also be helpful.

## Limitations

This is a qualitative study which is not meant to be generalizable, although it gives helpful insight into the experience of individuals experiencing GI within the Christian Church. Most of this cohort continue to identify as Christian and those that have left their faith may have different experiences. An interview format in future studies would allow further exploration of the identified themes.

## Conclusion

In this exploration of the interaction between faith and GI, we found that Christians experiencing GI need to find ways to manage the tension between perceived opposing identities of TGNC and Christian. In this cohort, most respondents were not prepared to relinquish faith but had varying success in finding a religious community which would accept them. Confusion between Gender Dysphoria and Queer theory may be contributing to marginalization of Christians who experience GI. Christian Ministers need to become better informed and teach more helpfully in this area, and churches need to be more gracious and empathetic in their care of those who are trying to manage GI in the light of their Christian convictions.

## Appendix 1: Survey

1. Could you please explain your experience with gender identity issues?
2. How have your Christian beliefs and faith impacted the way you deal with gender identity issues?
3. How has your Christian life been impacted by the way you deal with gender identity issues?
4. What and/or who have you found helpful? (Please don't use actual names)
5. What and/or who has made your experience more difficult? (Please don't use actual names)
6. Has the topic of gender identity been addressed at your church? Y/N
7. If it is addressed, how is it done? (Choose all applicable answers)
  - Sermon
  - Bible study
  - Informal discussion
  - Seminar
  - Other (please specify)
8. What do you think the Bible says about gender identity and transgender?
9. Is your view the view of your church? Y/N
10. What information do you wish you had before you encountered gender identity issues?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add to help the church engage in a helpful way with those experiencing gender identity issues?

**Acknowledgements** The authors would like to thank Rev Rob Smith and Dr Andrew Dunstall for their assistance.

**Funding** This study was funded by the Social Issues Committee of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** The study was ethically approved by the Notre Dame University of Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (RN-017028S) and conducted in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki.

## References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-5®)*. American Psychiatric Pub.
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2014). *Face the facts: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and inter-sex people*. Australian Human Rights Commission.
- Beek, T. F., Cohen-Kettenis, P. T., Bouman, W. P., de Vries, A. L., Steensma, T. D., Witcomb, G. L., et al. (2016). Gender incongruence of adolescence and adulthood: Acceptability and clinical utility of the World Health Organization's proposed ICD-11 criteria. *PLoS ONE*, *11*(10), e0160066.
- Beilby, J. K., & Eddy, P. R. (Eds.). (2019). *Understanding transgender identities: Four views*. Baker.
- Benson, K., Westerfield, E., & van Eeden-Moorefield, B. (2018). Transgender people's reflections on identity, faith, and Christian faith communities in the US. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, *33*(4), 395–420.
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, *15*(2), 219–234.
- Bockting, W. O., Knudson, G., & Goldberg, J. M. (2006). Counseling and mental health care for transgender adults and loved ones. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, *9*(3–4), 35–82.
- Butler, J. (2011). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Campbell, M., Hinton, J. D. X., & Anderson, J. R. (2019). A systematic review of the relationship between religion and attitudes toward transgender and gender-variant people. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, *20*(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1545149>
- Canales, A. D. (2018a). Ministry to transgender teenagers (part one): Pursuing awareness and understanding about trans youth. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, *72*(3), 195–201.
- Canales, A. D. (2018b). Ministry to transgender teenagers (part two): Providing pastoral care, support, and advocacy to trans youth. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, *72*(4), 251–256.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.
- Cretella, M. A. (2016). Gender dysphoria in children and suppression of debate. *Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons*, *21*(2), 50–54.
- de Jong, D. H. (2017). "Living in the tension in-between"-faculty members talk about faith and transgender issues in christian social work programs. *Social Work and Christianity*, *44*(3), 75–93.
- De Vries, A. L. C., & Cohen-Kettenis, P. T. (2016). Gender dysphoria in children and adolescents. In R. Ettner, S. Monstrey, & E. Coleman (Eds.), *Principles of transgender medicine and surgery*. Routledge.
- Dhejne, C., Van Vlerken, R., Heylens, G., & Arcelus, J. (2016). Mental health and gender dysphoria: A review of the literature. *International Review of Psychiatry*, *28*(1), 44–57. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2015.1115753>
- Dufour, L. R. (2000). Sifting through tradition: The creation of Jewish feminist identities. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *39*(1), 90–106.
- Gainor, K. A. I. (2000). Including transgender issues in lesbian, gay, and bisexual psychology: Implications for clinical practice and training. In B. Greene & G. L. Croom (Eds.), *Psychological perspectives on lesbian and gay issues* (Vol. 5, pp. 131–160). Sage.
- Ghazzawi, A., Suhail-Sindhu, S., Casoy, F., Libby, N., McIntosh, C. A., Adelson, S., et al. (2020). Religious faith and transgender identities: The Dear Abby project. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, *24*(2), 190–204.

- Golub, S. A., Walker, J. J., Longmire-Avital, B., Bimbi, D. S., & Parsons, J. T. (2010). The role of religiosity, social support, and stress-related growth in protecting against HIV risk among transgender women. *Journal of Health Psychology, 15*, 1135–1144.
- Grossman, A. H., Park, J. Y., & Russell, S. T. (2016). Transgender youth and suicidal behaviors: Applying the interpersonal psychological theory of suicide. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, 20*(4), 329–349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2016.1207581>
- Halkitis, P. N., Mattis, J. S., Sahadath, J. K., Massie, D., Ladyzhenskaya, L., Pitrelli, K., et al. (2009). The meanings and manifestations of religion and spirituality among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender adults. *Journal of Adult Development, 16*(4), 250–262. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-009-9071-1>
- Kidd, J. D., & Witten, T. M. (2008). Understanding spirituality and religiosity in the transgender community: Implications for aging. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging, 20*(1–2), 29–62.
- Koenig, H., King, D., & Carson, V. B. (2012). *Handbook of religion and health* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Levy, D. L., & Lo, J. R. (2013). Transgender, transsexual, and gender queer individuals with a Christian upbringing: the process of resolving conflict between gender identity and faith. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought, 32*(1), 60–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2013.749079>
- Rodriguez, E. M., & Follins, L. D. (2012). Did God make me this way? Expanding psychological research on queer religiosity and spirituality to include intersex and transgender individuals. *Psychology & Sexuality, 3*(3), 214–225.
- Rodriguez, E. M., & Ouellette, S. C. (2000). Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and religious identity integration in the members and participants of a gay-positive church. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 39*(3), 333–347.
- Roof, W. C. (2001). *Spiritual marketplace: Baby boomers and the remaking of American religion*. Princeton University Press.
- Sabia-Tanis, J. (2018). *Trans-gender: Theology, ministry, and communities of faith*. Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Sanlon, P. (2010). *Plastic people: How queer theory is changing us Great Britain*. The Latimer Trust.
- Smith, C., & Denton, M. L. (2009). *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. Oxford University Press.
- Walker, A. T. (2017). *God and the transgender debate: What does the bible actually say about gender identity*. The Good Book Company.
- Warner, R. S. (1993). Work in progress toward a new paradigm for the sociological study of religion in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology, 98*(5), 1044–1093.
- Wilcox, M. M. (2002). When Sheila's a lesbian: Religious individualism among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians. *Sociology of Religion, 63*(4), 497–513.
- Winter, S., Diamond, M., Green, J., Karasic, D., Reed, T., Whittle, S., & Wylie, K. (2016). Transgender people: Health at the margins of society. *The Lancet, 388*(10042), 390–400.
- Wuthnow, R. (1998). *After heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. University of California Press.
- Yarhouse, M. A., & Carrs, T. L. (2012). MTF transgender Christians' experiences: A qualitative study. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 6*(1), 18–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2012.649405>

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.