



Gotta Have Faith

LGBTQ+ believers find solace and spirituality in faith communities

By Matt Alderton

When she was 16 years old, the Rev. Shelley Washington realized two immutable truths about herself. The first was that she felt called to serve in the ministry. The second was that she was a lesbian.

“I was raised as a Missionary Baptist, and in the Missionary Baptist church women were not pushed to the forefront of ministry ... and yet, I knew that was something God was leading me to do,” Washington says. “I also knew something was holding me back, and that was my sexual orientation. Because in the Missionary Baptist church, there was a lot of

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The Rev. Shelley Washington is an assistant campus pastor at St. Peter United, one of the oldest churches in Houston.

PROVIDED BY THE REV. SHELLEY WASHINGTON



Ministers lay hands on the Rev. Shelley Washington during her ordination.

PROVIDED BY THE REV. SHELLEY WASHINGTON



The Rev. David Figliuzzi, pastor of Rocky Hill Congregational Church, baptizes his grandnephew Levi Phillips. PROVIDED BY JOSH ALBERT

demonizing of homosexuality. They used scripture to condemn who I was, and that played with my emotions. I knew that I was chosen to bring people to faith, but I also knew that I was different. I wondered how both of those things could be true. It was very, very hard.”

For years, Washington struggled to reconcile her faith and her sexuality. Although she eventually found a church to license her, she continued to experience misogyny and homophobia. She left the Baptist church entirely in 2021 to become a member of the United Church of Christ (UCC). She became an ordained UCC minister in 2024, and is currently an assistant campus pastor at St. Peter United, one of the oldest churches in Houston.

“St. Peter United is an open and affirming church,” Washington says. “I was the first African American queer female to be ordained at the church, which was founded in 1848 by German immigrants. So, to be brought into that church with all its history has been a really phenomenal thing.”

The Rev. David Figliuzzi had a similar journey to UCC. “I was raised in the Pentecostal fundamentalist Christian tradition, which is not open and affirming of LGBTQ+ persons. So, for me growing up, the message I received in spaces of faith was that I was broken,” says Figliuzzi, who is gay. “That ultimately led me to

sever my involvement in Christian spaces, believing there was no place for me there to show up as my full, authentic self.”

After a decade-long absence from faith communities, he visited a UCC church whose associate pastor was a lesbian. “I sat in the back row and cried because I felt like I had found a place that felt like home,” says Figliuzzi, who in 2019 left a 25-year career in corporate America to pursue ministry, ultimately becoming the pastor at Rocky Hill Congregational Church in Rocky Hill, Connecticut. “Being in a faith space where people ... celebrated me and elevated me into roles of leadership gave me a whole new understanding of who I was and what was possible for my life.”

PROGRESS IN THE PEWS

Nearly half of all LGBTQ+ adults in the United States — approximately 5.3 million people — are religious, according to the Williams Institute at UCLA Law School, which studies LGBTQ+ issues.

Although it’s been ordaining openly gay ministers since the 1970s, UCC isn’t the only church opening its doors to LGBTQ+ worshippers. The Presbyterian Church, for example, approved the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy in 2011, has been performing same-sex marriages since 2014, and just this spring amended its

constitution to add “gender identity” and “sexual orientation” as protected classes against which the church will not discriminate. In May 2024, the United Methodist Church likewise voted to allow the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy and the recognition of same-sex marriages.

“There’s always more progress to be made, but as time goes on we’re seeing more and more denominations inching toward inclusion,” says Aiden Nathaniel Diaz, communications director at Q Christian Fellowship, which promotes the “radical belonging” of LGBTQ+ Christians in churches across the country.

Even the Catholic Church has made strides on LGBTQ+ inclusion. In January 2025, it approved new guidelines allowing openly gay men to enter the priesthood, provided they abstain from sex.

“The (Catholic) Church has changed, and the greatest catalyst for that change was Pope Francis,” says Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, a Catholic outreach that advocates for LGBTQ+ inclusion within the Church. “He created a tone and an approach in the Church that encouraged outreach to LGBTQ+ people ... because he had this idea that the Church is a church for everyone.”

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AFFIRMATION ASPIRATIONS

While denominational milestones like those in the Presbyterian, Methodist and Catholic churches are significant, progress on LGBTQ+ inclusion is thanks mostly to individual churches.

“It starts with a singular church in a local community that decides to break the rules by asking, ‘What does it look like for me to care for my LGBTQ+ neighbors?’” Diaz observes. “It’s those small wins from community to community that help people feel more welcome, more at home and more able to be their full selves.”

DeBernardo agrees. “People always think that change in the church happens from the top down, but it usually happens from the bottom up. As people at the grassroots become more accepting, welcoming and supportive of LGBTQ+ people, it filters up to the highest levels of the church where doctrine is defined.”

For years, LGBTQ+ people at the grassroots fought just to be acknowledged and accepted. What they seek now is deeper and more meaningful.

“A lot of churches engage with bait-and-switch terminology like ‘all are welcome’ and ‘come as you are.’ Those churches are comfortable with you being in their pews and giving them money, but they’re not comfortable with you volunteering, teaching Sunday school, being in leadership or getting married in the church. In fact, many of them have rules that prohibit these things from happening,” Diaz says. “So, what we want to see is true inclusion for LGBTQ+ people, which means they can do anything within the church that is permissible for a heterosexual, cisgendered individual.”

And yet, even “inclusion” feels insufficient, says the Rev. Dr. Israel Alvaran, director of United Methodist Connections at Reconciling Ministries Network in the Philippines, which advocates for the full participation of LGBTQ+ people in the United Methodist Church. “Every church says, ‘all are welcome,’ and that’s usually true,” Alvaran says. “So, while ‘inclusion’ is a good thing, it’s not enough. We’re already inclusive. What we’re pushing for now is affirmation.”

One religious group that embodies LGBTQ+ affirmation is Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), established by and for LGBTQ+ people in 1968. “At MCC, we don’t just welcome you. We celebrate you,” says the Rev. James Hartman, pastor at MCC of Baton Rouge in Louisiana. “My church is a judgment-free zone. We truly believe in people being equal.”



The Rev. Dr. Israel “Izzy” Alvaran is the director of United Methodist Connections Reconciling Ministries Network in the Philippines. PROVIDED BY RECONCILING MINISTRIES NETWORK

That manifests not only in the form of LGBTQ+ clergy and volunteers, blessings for same-sex marriages and baptisms for the children of same-sex parents, but also in the form of liturgy and doctrine — as it did for the Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, the Episcopal bishop who famously asked President Donald Trump to have “mercy” for LGBTQ+ children during a January 2025 sermon at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

“From a programming perspective, true inclusion means moving toward affirming theology,” Diaz says. “Are you hosting resources or events that give people the opportunity to learn about the LGBTQ+ community? Are you preaching love for LGBTQ+ people in your sermons? Are you helping your community look at scripture through different lenses that give them alternative ideas about how to treat people who are not like themselves?”

Increasingly, affirmation for LGBTQ+ people of faith also means activism. This spring, for instance, the Collective of Queer Christian

Leaders — a coalition of nearly a dozen faith-based organizations fighting for LGBTQ+ justice — released a joint statement opposing efforts by the Trump administration to “erase or criminalize” LGBTQ+ people. In support of that statement, it also organized a rally at the U.S. Capitol.

“We’re not interested in tokenism. If you’re really affirming and welcoming, you have to show it by advocating for (pro-LGBTQ+) policies in your community,” Alvaran says. “You have to actively be fighting for us, with us.”

Churches are vital partners in LGBTQ+ advocacy, DeBernardo adds. “Any and every civil rights movement that has happened in the United States has happened because the religious community was behind it,” he says.

Washington says, “Our roles as faith leaders are to stand up and speak out. We have to flip tables. That’s what Jesus did.”

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The Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde speaks at the 2025 presidential inauguration prayer service at Washington National Cathedral. CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

RECLAIMING RELIGION

“Oppression against LGBTQ+ people has predominantly been caused by faith institutions. It gets secularized into laws and policy, but what it comes from is religious sentiments,” DeBernardo says. “For that reason, I think it’s understandable that many LGBTQ+ people have — as a matter of self-protection — absented themselves from Christian churches. What we’re seeing now, I think, is that those people are reclaiming their rightful participation in church communities.”

In doing so, they’re also reclaiming their

identities. “Faith can provide a sense of belonging and community, meaning and purpose, resilience and social supports. But those things can only grow for a person in environments that are affirming,” Diaz says. “Just like someone who identifies as cisgender or heterosexual, there are multiple dimensions to people in the LGBTQ+ community. When we find those affirming faith spaces, we get to be LGBTQ+, but we also get to connect with all the other different parts of ourselves. We get to be whole.”

That was certainly the case for Baptist minister James Rice III. “I’m the son of a pastor. I’m

the grandson of a pastor. I’m the great-grandson of a pastor ... So, I grew up in church my entire life,” says Rice, communications coordinator for the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists, whose mission is promoting LGBTQ+ inclusion in Baptist churches. “I always said: ‘I don’t need a church that’s gay; I just need a church to be gay at.’”

Church is meaningful, he says, “Especially for Black people like myself. It’s part of our heritage and our culture. All I ever wanted was to be able to embrace that heritage and culture — but to also be who I am.”