Voice Lessons: Tempered Radicalism and the Use of Voice and Silence*

W. E. Douglas Creed

The University of Rhode Island

ABSTRACT This article explores the ontology of voice and silence in the context of tempered radicalism. The career experiences of gay and lesbian Protestant ministers illuminate key issues for understanding voice and silence in organizations. First, social actors’ discursive context provides genres and plots for the construction of self-hood that shape their use of voice and silence. Second, voice and silence are ambiguous, intertwined phenomena. When you are saying one thing, you are not saying another. Third, self-authorization – a form of institutional change agency – legitimates action that falls outside institutional norms for authorized resistance, while framing these actions as enactments of institutional values and beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

God respects me when I work, but [s/he] loves me when I sing.

Rabindranath Tagore

Current thinking about silence and voice in organizations shows a much greater sensitivity to the complex interplay of power, pluralism and agency in organizations (e.g., Ashford, 1998; Creed and Scully, 2000; Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Meyerson and Scully, 1995). A brief look at earlier work on voice – which unfolded in the context of research on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover – makes the significance of such a change clear. In both Hirschman’s (1970) familiar exit/voice/loyalty framework and the later exit/voice/loyalty/neglect typology (Rusbult et al., 1988), silence appears as a subordinate feature of loyalty – a phenomenon taken to be a function of economic factors that moderated the use of exit by making it too costly and of voice by making it too risky –
rather than as a discrete response in itself. In terms of organizational studies, this is an instance where the old saying that ‘silence speaks louder than words’ should come to mind.

Such a view of silence limits it to a matter of abstract economic calculation, like so many organizational constructs, ‘ripped from its historical roots and societal context and innocent of its deeper-lying power struggles and negotiations’ (Benson, 1977, p. 11). In contrast, in recent research on topics ranging from organizational adaptability and the social construction of issues worthy of attention (Dutton and Ashford, 1993), to the championing of charged issues (Ashford, 1998) and social identity and advocacy (Creed and Scully, 2000; Harquail, 1996) – we find themes of power, historical marginality, and resistance and a greater attention to the concrete experiences of the people making choices between voice and silence.

Across this emergent work is a common concern for the ongoing struggle over when and how to speak up and when to remain silent. As Morrison and Milliken note, despite widespread espousal of employee empowerment and the advantages of diverse perspectives, employees still ‘feel that speaking up about issues and problems is futile or, worse yet, dangerous’ (2000, p. 721). Yet, while this recent literature offers tremendous insight into the dilemmas of voice and silence in the context of problems like issue selling and advocacy, it tells us less about how people in organizations approach these choices when to speak up entails claiming those aspects of one’s self that not only depart from organizational expectations, but have been historically marginalized. The tension of claiming and preserving valued aspects of the self is implicitly at the intersection of work on tempered radicals (Meyerson and Scully, 1995), advocacy (Ashford, 1998; Harquail, 1996), and identity construction and deployment in organizations (Creed and Scully, 2000; Foldy, 2002). This same literature uses concepts like agency, self-authorship (Kegan, 1994), resistance (Ashforth and Mael, 1998), and voice to describe the efforts to contest the progressive loss of the self and to exercise some power over our lives and stories.

Here I hope to contribute to advancing our understanding of silence and voice as features of agency and self-authorship in organizations by exploring the unusual careers of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) ministers in eight mainline Protestant denominations. Many of my colleagues working in business school contexts have voiced surprise at this choice of population. Denominations operate according to institutionalized logics of action that differ greatly from those of most capitalist enterprises (Friedland and Alford, 1991), so although they are complex enterprises and are, in a sense, incubators of many of the institutions of civil society (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002), they are not often seen as offering lessons of use to management scholars. Second, explaining the motivations of ministers as a class of professionals can require reference to theology and notions of vocation that are unfamiliar to many readers of management journals. But as a group,
GLBT ministers meet ‘the criteria of an “extreme case”’, one in which the process of theoretical interest is more transparent than it would be in other cases’ (Eisenhardt, 1989, cited in Dutton and Dukerich, 1991, p. 520). At the same time, these findings, and the questions they raise, are transferable to the degree that scholars recognize in GLBT ministers’ use of voice and silence dynamics that are kindred to those found in any organizational context that is either potentially silencing or characterized by contestation over collective identity, purpose, and shared meanings.

BACKGROUND: THE DEBATE OVER THE ORDINATION OF GAYS AND LESBIANS

The growing debate in progressive Protestant denominations over the ordination of gay and lesbian people mirrors in many ways the century-long debate over the ordination of women (Chaves, 1997). In nearly all of the Protestant denominations where gay and lesbian ordination has actually been debated, opponents argue that homosexuality and ordained ministry are inherently incompatible and that the ordaining of open and self-affirming homosexuals would be a moral and institutional threat to the church (Cadge, 2002; Chaves, 1997). GLBT people who pursue ordination choose to work within and, at times, against difficult organizational constraints in workplaces that often demand the careful management of voice and silence. In what I will label ‘non-inclusive denominations’, policy precludes the ordination of openly gay and lesbian people (bisexual and transgender people are not mentioned in most cases).[2] As a result, gay and lesbian clergy in these officially non-inclusive denominations are in a tenuous and often untenable position; they are both institutional insiders and outsiders, whose status as leaders hangs on their masking marginalized identities. They have particular challenges about how to speak or remain silent about their identities, their relationships and families, and their experiences of homophobia in the work place.

But even in the three ‘inclusive denominations’ in my sample, where policy either allows for the ordination of openly GLBT people in the denomination as a whole (the United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalist Association) or leave the question of GLBT ordination to the discretion of a bishop (the Episcopal Church, USA), many GLBT ministers report difficult choices regarding the ways they speak from their experience or remain silent. The enduring effects of institutionalized homophobia and historical church condemnation of people with same-sex orientations leaves them with the challenge of managing the tension between these legacies of marginalization and their status as accepted professionals within their churches. So, despite the advantages of being in a denomination that officially welcomes them, they too experience the pull of their insider and outsider identities.
The challenges facing organizational participants who experience the pull of insider/outsider identities is at the heart of theorizing about ‘tempered radicals’ (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). Tempered radicals are people who experience the ‘competing pulls’ of being both effective, contributing organizational insiders and outsiders ‘because they represent ideals or agendas that are somehow at odds with the dominant culture’ in their organizations (Meyerson, 2001, p. 5).

To varying extents, they feel misaligned with the dominant culture because their social identities – race, gender, sexual orientation, age, for example – or their values and beliefs mark them as different from the organizational majority. . . . In all cases they struggle between their desire to act on their ‘different’ selves and the need to fit into the dominant culture. (Meyerson, 2001, p. 5)

While conceptually akin to role conflict (e.g., Gross et al., 1957), what distinguishes tempered radicalism as a construct is its explicit reference to ideological and political agendas. ‘Tempered radicals at once uphold their aspiration to be accepted insiders and their commitment to change the very system that often casts them as outsiders’ (Meyerson, 2001, p. 5). In approaching the dual tasks of challenging and upholding the status quo, they may speak challenging truths and seek change, but they do so as insiders – through choosing their battles, mapping out doable courses of action, accumulating and leveraging small wins, and creating opportunities for learning.

At the same time, they are constantly caught between a conformity that would entail the denial of different, but valued selves, and the rebellion that, while defining their distinctive identities, could cost them credibility. Their ways of using voice and silence affects not only how they will be heard then and in the future, but also how they will be agents in their own lives.

The act of putting this part of themselves out in the world . . . reminds them, and others, that they will not silence these valued parts of their selves and that they will not allow the dominant culture to define who they are. Not only is action driven by people’s valued selves, but it helps construct and fortify those selves. (Meyerson, 2001, p. 14)

In short, voice and silence are critical to their ability to be the creative contributors, leaders, and authentic people. For this reason, a tempered radical must navigate ambivalence, seeking ways to remain true to one’s selves, while avoiding the extremes of ‘submissive silence and aggressive confrontation’ (2001, p. 59). In a word, they are constantly making difficult choices about when and how to ‘speak “truths” and raise issues that have been suppressed’ and when and how to remain
silent without falling into a systemic collusion with their own cooptation and subordination (2001, p. 76).

Tempered Radicals and the Ontologies of Voice and Silence

Although early work on tempered radicals focused on cooptation and preserving valued identities and commitments to issues of social justice, more recent work has considered more directly the problems of voice and silence. When is voice voice, in the sense it is action for change, and silence silence, in the sense it is collusion? Four scholars recently posed these questions as they explored what they saw as differences in Black and White women’s engagement with hierarchy and injustice in the workplace, and in particular, differences between enactments designed to make a difference and silences that bordered on collusion (Bell et al., 2001). At the same time, they attempted to ‘differentiate between silence and forms of voice that may be heard on the surface as silence’ (Bell et al., 2001, p. 29).

For example, in their view, ‘what looked like silence might be a series of clever small moves, whose near invisibility is part of their artful avoidance of attention and backlash’ (2001, p. 29). Silence may also be an ‘active accomplishment’, or ‘rhetorical mask’ hiding more radical action behind a veneer of passivity (2001, pp. 30–1). At the same time, subtle acts are not necessarily clear cases of activism. ‘Silence and subtlety have their place as political strategies. [But] sometimes silence is just complicity or co-optation’ (Bell et al., 2001, p. 31). Similarly, voice can be complicity when it appears in the form of lip service or instances of politically-correct speech and hollow gestures where non-action speaks louder than words.

Their probing of the ontology of silence in the experiences of tempered radicals highlights that it matters whose voices and silence we consider; the natures of both voice and silence may vary across identity groups that have different historical legacies of oppression and avenues of resistance. It also points to the protean and ambiguous nature of voice and silence in the context of resistance to workplace injustices. If silence and voice are parts of a strategy of resistance, not only should activists and tempered radicals be self-conscious in their use of either or both (Bell et al., 2001), but we as scholars should be able to distinguish between the silence of co-optation and the silence of resistance and between the voice of resistance and the voice of complicity.

In this article, I offer a grounded inquiry into the role of voice and silence in GLBT ministers’ experiences in the context of their careers. My analysis of their uses of voice and silence reveals the following. First, the ontology of silence and voice is contextual so our understanding of either construct cannot be easily abstracted from the historical and symbolic contexts of the actor and the action. In the context of these ministers’ careers, some instances of voice and silence reflect efforts to sustain valued aspects of their values and identities – by definition, a central feature of tempered radicalism – and some instances reflect co-
opposition and submission. Second, speaking up and remaining silent are not mutually exclusive actions, nor is one necessarily active while the other is passive. Some acts of resistance require the use of both silence and voice in conjunction. Institutional rules, cultural scripts, and organizational demands can lead voice and silence to harmonize in strange ways. Third, in the context of tempered radicalism, the use of voice and silence entails legitimating actions that in some ways go beyond the organizational and institutional norms of resistance while they can, at the same time, be framed as enactments of those very norms.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION
This piece stems from an ongoing research project that began with the question: How do various institutional and organizational factors (which vary across Protestant denominations and work settings) affect: (1) the ways in which GLBT ministers enact and deploy their identities in their careers and work places; and (2) the ways in which they pursue greater inclusion for themselves and GLBT people in their churches and the broader society. I conducted in-depth interviews averaging three hours in length with 37 people who had trained for ordination by obtaining the Master of Divinity degree and applying for admission to the formal candidacy process in their respective denominations. My sample includes people from Kentucky, Wisconsin, Ohio, and the metropolitan areas of Atlanta, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. Of the 37 interviewees, 30 were ordained and active in parish ministry, while three worked in church administration (e.g., the denominational office for social justice concerns). In addition, one was a seminarian and one a director of religious education. Two had been denied entrance to candidacy and one had been defrocked because of their sexual orientations. Two (one man, one woman) were retired, having spent approximately 40 years in ministry; closeted for the majority of their careers, each came out in a highly public way after attaining extraordinarily high status in their denominations. Nineteen were gay men, 16 lesbian, one a bisexual man, and one a transgender person living as a woman. Sixteen were ordained in inclusive denominations. Although the remaining 21 were in non-inclusive denominations, none were entirely closeted in that their sexual orientation was at least known within a network of GLBT pastors. However, most were circumspect and selective in speaking about their sexual identities.

The interview protocol was designed in light of research on GLBT workplace experience and theory on the effect of institutionalized systems of belief on individual experience and behaviour (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Jepperson, 1991). For example, prior research on GLBT employees’ strategies for managing knowledge of their sexual identity in the work place (Chrobot-Mason and Button, 1999; Shallenberger, 1994; Woods, 1994) and GLBT workplace advocacy (Creed and
Scully, 2000) has typically considered these issues in terms of an interaction of personal, situational, and institutional factors. Drawing on, but ‘bracketing’ the contributions of this research (Miles and Huberman, 1994), allows these theories to provide initial constructs and categories for collecting and organizing data, while pursuing a grounded theory strategy for enabling the discovery of ‘new connections between theory and real-world phenomena’ (Marshall and Rosem, 1995, p. 35). In this sense, existing theory should play only a sensitizing role while allowing the data to speak (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). To get at the individuals’ emic understandings of their career experiences, I designed a semi-structured protocol to enable the subjects to relate their stories with a naturalistic narrative integrity (Mishler, 1986) that lends itself to various interpretivist strategies of analysis.[7]

At the individual level, the protocols asked questions about constructs likely to affect ministers’ beliefs about their capacity for action and their choices about speaking out about GLBT issues, claiming their identities, or remaining silent. The sensitizing constructs included their: sense of vocation or life purpose (Cochran, 1990); attitudes toward gay and lesbian group identity and self-acceptance as a GLBT person (Chrobot-Mason and Button, 1999); identification with and commitment to the denomination that might affect their choice between exit, voice, and loyalty (Hirschman, 1970); personal agenda relative to GLBT issues in the denomination; and sense of career vulnerability.

Most importantly, more than a third of every interview was devoted to a detailed exploration of the interviewees’ personal career histories. To elicit their own sense-making regarding their capacity for action and constraints on their actions in their institutional contexts, I instructed interviewees to think of their careers as unfolding like the chapters of a book. After identifying chapters, time frames, and exploring the significance of the chapter’s title, I asked interviewees to identify two episodes that captured how their sexual orientation was affecting their career during that chapter. In light of the selected episodes, I then asked how contextual factors and their sexual orientation were interacting to affect their ability to act as a minister during this period. This last question was designed to elicit directly their own sense making about the central questions of how institutional and organizational forces affect the enactment and deployment of their identities and their pursuit of greater inclusion for GLBT people. The discussion of each chapter ended with interviewees’ thoughts on possible unifying themes displayed during that chapter of their career.

One strength of this protocol is that it enables a composite picture of their use of voice and silence across time. A weakness is that in some cases, the resulting accounts are of events in the distant past and so reflect retrospection rather than immediate lived experience. In many, many cases, however, the accounts are of more recent events and events that are part of a still unfolding drama in their careers.
ANALYSIS: GROUNDED THEORY MIXED WITH THE SENSIBILITIES OF TESTIMONIO

Analysis followed procedures for developing grounded theory (Stauss and Corbin, 1998), starting with paragraph-by-paragraph open coding of transcripts using NUD*IST Vivo, an automated qualitative research package. Guiding questions at this stage were: Does this paragraph contained any explicit references or implicit allusions to voice or silence as phenomena? Does it have instances of speaking up and remaining silent as actions?

Based on the paragraphs identified as pertaining to voice and silence, I developed more refined ‘sensitizing questions’ such as: How are these interviewees using ‘voice’ or ‘silence’ as terms or metaphors? What meanings do they attach to speaking up or remaining silent as actions? What factors motivate or shape their choices about speaking up or remaining silent? Such question led to a proliferation of codes pertaining to voice and silence that were then the material for theoretical comparisons (using a constant comparison approach) to further an understanding of the dimensions of voice and silence in these people’s careers. Analysis continued to the point of ‘conceptual ordering’, a level of categorization and description designed to ‘depict the perspectives and actions of the portrayed actors’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 20). Then, for the purposes of this article, I considered these ordered concepts in terms of questions directly pertaining to how a contextualized examination of voice and silence advances our understanding of tempered radicalism in organizations.

At the same time, throughout my analysis and writing, I adopt the sensibilities if not the style of testimonio – a qualitative approach that has recently triggered controversy in the human and social sciences because it ‘intertwines the “desire for objectivity” and “the desire for solidarity” in its very situation of production, circulation, and reception’ (Beverley, 2000, p. 555). I adopt this epistemological stance because while as a business professor and organizational theorist, I am interested in issues of organizational diversity and inclusion and in the ways institutional forces shape action within organizations, as a self-affirming gay Christian, with theological training, I also have compelling interests at the intersection of faith, identity, social justice, and inclusive pluralism.[8]

My dual position has had implications for my choice of subject, my access to informants, the way interviews unfolded, and my ability – as a member of two meaning communities – to analyse, translate, and perhaps even demystify these workplace experiences. It also has implications for the perceived validity of my analysis. Although some social scientists might challenge the validity of my analysis because an epistemological stance incorporating a desire for solidarity is not neutral, others might see my dual position as fostering an analytical balance between an etic validity that is acceptable to organizational scholars and an emic validity that rings true with the people I interviewed (Latour and Woolgar, 1986).[9]
Below I present nine ways in which voice and silence mix—sometimes discordantly, sometimes harmoniously—in the careers of GLBT ministers: rationalized silence and perjury behind enemy lines; lying with good conscience; interpreting the Bible; building relationships and setting the tone for interaction; framing the debate on inclusion and exclusion; forcing discussion of the issue; helping others find their voices; allowing themselves to be poster children; and walking the talk. I then discuss these forms of voice and silence in terms of ontologies of voice and silence as it applies to resisting injustice in the experience of tempered radicals.

**Rationalized Silence and Perjury Behind Enemy Lines**

Churches have historically been ‘ready made closets’. According to one Episcopal priest, there have always been priests who were discretely referred to as ‘not the marrying kind’ who knew better than to talk about it. A retired Episcopal bishop described how he rationalized the silence for decades.

And maybe the biggest rationalization . . . was to convince myself that somehow this fact about myself was going to be so difficult for anybody to deal with, that if I was going to be sensitive to their needs I couldn’t speak it out loud.

By far the most common ways GLBT ministers made sense of ministering from the ‘stained glass closet’ was to speak of it in terms of a normatively coerced silence that forces the compartmentalization of the self. The pressure is so great that even ministers in inclusive denominations can find themselves closeted to some degree. One closeted minister in an inclusive denomination explicitly linked her compartmentalization to her career.

The big question is, parish or wholeness? Or, parish or sexuality? It was the thing that haunted me. But . . . what do we focus on in our thirties? We’re supposed to focus on our career . . . I had to put that first.

Another common way of rationalizing silence and ministering from the closet was in terms of fighting behind enemy lines with those in authority, the enemy.

. . . [the Presbytery] held the power to cut off my ministry [or at least] my professional ministry. And so . . . my citizenship in Presbytery . . . [was] kind of a being dropped behind enemy lines, a sort of subversionary activity. Here I am masquerading as a straight person.

Dan Smith, the man just quoted, had been in the same Presbytery for 11 years at the time of our interview. He pastored a progressive inner city church with a diverse congregation, some of whom knew he was gay. Half of his fellow Presby-
terian ministers in the city also knew, but he could not be completely out in that circle because of a paragraph in the denominational constitution. Speaking of the monthly meetings of Presbyterian clergy, he said ‘I don’t take off the disguise explicitly. Because . . . half of the people in that room still exert . . . real control over my ability to practice my vocation . . . That still distorts and warps choices that I make. It still distorts my freedom of God’s image.’ The paradox is that for Dan, it is that freedom that enables him to be the hidden subversive behind enemy lines.

My closetedness [with half of my colleagues] for the sake of preserving my service . . . which otherwise would at least hang in the balance . . . is because my freedom in God’s image inextricably entails my identity as [Paul’s] partner. . . . My selfhood is unimaginable to me . . . without that relationship. And because . . . that relationship [is] the primary gift of God in my life . . . denying that it even exists is a way of perjuring myself.

Dan points to an irony here, because for him, the aspect of his experience that is most subversive of the church is not that he lies in order to remain a pastor. It is that the threat of defrocking leads to a more serious perjury; denying the existence of his relationship is ‘a way of not telling the truth about who God is in the world and in my life’. For him, that is the real threat to the good of his denomination.

More often than not, those ministering from the closet are silent on these truths. One Unitarian Universalist minister who was closeted in her first pastorate told me of an epiphany. One day she had a car accident between her home and the church. The lesbian partner she had kept secret and several people from her church were quickly on the scene. She felt so vulnerable she acted as if her partner were just a stranger who had stopped. I asked what her partner said once they were alone: ‘Nothing . . . It was so normal in the context of that relationship for me to put the church first, and for her to disappear. . . . It’s heart rending . . . realizing the ways in which you’d been complicit.’

In some cases, the silence of those ministering from the closet seems an example of painful complicity – a justifiable, but self-abnegating lie. For others, like Dan Smith, it entailed a complex commingling of silence with some and voice with others – instrumental in terms of his vocation, but an act of perjury in terms of not telling the greater truths of his personal faith.

**Lying with Good Conscience**

Feeling like you are behind enemy lines may be an experience found in any number of professions, but ministry does differ, according to one American Baptist minister:
It is different than deciding you’re going to be a doctor or a lawyer. [It] depends on a certain amount of emotional [work] and – you can’t get away with stuff that other people might be able to get away with if they don’t want to deal with emotional and spiritual issues. . . . Our jobs depend on it.

One way GLBT ministers retain (or gain) some sense of integrity while doing the necessary emotional work is through learning to lie in good conscience. Indeed, in a sermon preached at the Reconciling Congregations Convocation in 1995, The Reverend Jeanne Audrey Powers pointed to a spiritual basis for GLBT ministers’ lying, found in the Book of Exodus.\(^{[10]}\) While Hebrew baby boys were being killed by Pharaoh’s order, Moses survived because Hebrew midwives, Moses’ sister and mother, and Pharaoh’s daughter all made false claims to save him: ‘Indeed, these heroic women model for us liberation, . . . using subversion to transform the faith community’ (Powers, 1995).

Many people give themselves permission to lie – and many may do it with a clear conscience – but for those still ministering from the closet, embracing lying in good conscience as a part of their vocation is at once an act of integrity and a self-conscious strategy for resistance. Paradoxically, this form of lying can move them closer to speaking their truths. For Dan Smith, this was an epiphany.

I brought my struggle with ordination and what it portended for my future as a closeted person . . . to one of my great mentors who is a Dominican priest. . . . [How was I] going to hold, on the one hand, my relationship with [Paul, his partner of now more than 26 years], and, on the other hand, my vocation, in the same life without going crazy or destroying myself. . . . So I said, ‘[Michael], how can I reconcile these two things?’ And he said, ‘Don’t you realize that [Paul] is your vocation?’ And it was an absolutely stunning revelation to me. . . . That moment was, for me, a conversion experience to the whole-ness, the seamlessness of my Christian faith, my vocation to ministry, and my identity as [Paul’s] partner.

In the careers of GLBT ministers, lying in good conscience can be acts of silence or of voice or both. While it does not entail an open challenge to a denomination’s system of exclusion, lying in good conscience is unlike the self-abnegating lying described above. First, it signals a movement toward wholeness, as seen in Doug Smith’s experience. Second, it points to a rejection of the normalized complicity of ministering from the closet. Rather than an act of perjury, lying can become an act of faith, especially for GLBT ministers in non-inclusive denominations.

**Interpreting the Bible**

As for any minister, one way for GLBT ministers to speak up is through interpreting Biblical scripture. Ginnie, a Presbyterian minister who started to come out as a
lesbian selectively after 18 years of parish ministry, put it is way: “The question that is always asked is, “Well, what do you do with those passages in the Bible that condemn homosexuality?” So, you get to play hermeneutics professor . . . and give some explanation about Biblical interpretation.’ Many contemporary Biblical scholars argue that we cannot ask what texts stemming from patriarchal tribal societies should mean for us today without understanding the contexts in which they were written and deconstructing the historical accretion of interpretations that surround the texts.[11] Yet, while studying interpretivist approaches to the Bible (as opposed to a literalist approach) is a taken-for-granted part of divinity training in the mainline denominations, inviting people in the pews into this process can be difficult in light of the powerful accumulation of anti-gay interpretation and rhetoric.

One lesbian minister shared this story of how one straight American Baptist minister taught the principle of interpretivism by posing a question, ‘what does the Bible say about baptism’ to a laywoman who argued that the Bible is really clear about homosexuality.

. . . this is a great question, because nothing is dearer to the Baptists’ heart. . . . There is only one way to [baptize], only one, and that is a wet way [i.e., in Baptist tradition, full immersion as an adult]. So, [the laywoman] said what . . . every other Baptist worth their shoes would say: ‘Well, Jesus was baptized that way, and so should I be.’ And [the minister] said, ‘Well, that’s interesting.’ And then she opens the text and shows the places where it says that whole families were baptized, and that must have included children. . . . [The laywoman] went home scratching her head.

Talking about what the Bible says about baptism enabled the laywoman to understand the point about interpretation without getting fixated on the hot topic of homosexuality.

GLBT ministers do not just explain how modern Biblical interpretation requires understanding how socio-political context and cultural understandings shaped not only its writing, but its translation and interpretation throughout its history. They also bring to bear their own life experiences as hermeneutical lenses through which to understand its meaning today.

Karen’s decision to come out in her application to seminary even though she was a member of a denomination that precludes the ordination of ‘open and self-affirming’ homosexuals illustrates this aspect of speaking up in several ways. She wanted to be honest but she saw herself more as a normal churchwoman than as an activist and feared that coming out would force her into that role while preventing her from pursuing her Calling.

[The application] was due Monday . . . But I didn’t know how to write it at all, because I didn’t know how to say, ‘Hi, I’m a lesbian.’ That didn’t feel like me
either because it was [only] a part of who I was . . . At that point in time in my life . . . I would drive and yell at God. . . . It was [Saturday night] like 12 o’clock. . . . I had the windows rolled down . . . just crying and screaming: ‘Why in the world are you doing this to me? I don’t know what you want from me.’ Because I thought . . . if God was really wanting me to be out, then God needed to give me the words to be able to explain what I needed to explain. . . . About 1 o’clock . . . I really felt . . . God’s arms around me. . . . [Now] when I start talking about it I feel like I’m some conservative evangelical because it sounds so much different than what I always talk about . . . There was this almost audible whisper ‘It’s all going to be okay. . . . Just go home and go to sleep.’ I mean . . . from yelling to all of a sudden this tremendous calm at about 1 o’clock in the morning.

The next day, Karen picked up the guest who would be preaching at her church, the Reverend Janie Spahr. Reverend Spahr’s call in the early 1990s to serve as an openly lesbian pastor in a large Presbyterian church in Rochester, NY was a well-known challenge to the denominational rule against gay and lesbian ministers. Ultimately denied the right to call her as its minister, the Rochester church determined to retain her as a missionary to the national church with the task of teaching about homophobia and inclusion. Karen recalled Spahr’s opening words that Sunday:

You know, I was going to preach about the power dynamics of the world, and the patriarchy, and how it runs. How it’s affecting our church. . . . But God woke me up at 1 o’clock in the morning last night and told me to talk to you about people. People who I’ve met who have struggled with coming out, and people who I’ve met who have struggled with being in the church. . . . And I hear this, I just started crying [because that was] what I was trying to figure out, is how to tell my story. . . . I went home and wrote it up within an hour.

Karen’s experience crystallized for her a life-based hermeneutic of a passage in the Bible that she reflected on as she described to me her having to appear before the council of her local Presbytery as it deliberated her case at the end of her second year of seminary:

It says it in like the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ when they are going to be [evangelizing] and [God tells them] ‘you’re going to be persecuted and you won’t know what to say as you stand in front of your persecutors’, or something like that, ‘but I’ll give you the words’. [12]

Interpreting Biblical text in ways that challenge and contradict accumulated anti-gay interpretation and institutionalized homophobia is clearly one way that GLBT ministers and their believing allies exercise voice. At the same time, voice here can
only be understood in terms of the way the stories in those texts provide these ministers with a narrative context for understanding their own acts of tempered radicalism. For Karen, voice in the face of persecution is sensible only in terms of her faith.

Building Relationships and Setting the Tone for Interaction

Many GLBT ministers emphasized in their interviews the centrality of relationship in their choices of when and how to speak up or remain silent. They have often had to be willing to engage people who would rather condemn, ignore or dehumanize them. Some ministers reported that sharing their own struggles with self-hatred and internalized homophobia, while entailing risks, can enhance their ability to build relationships and act as agents of change. A deep understanding of shared background can also be a resource, according to one American Baptist minister: ‘I grew up a fundamentalist basically. It’s not something that I would wish on anyone, but it does seem to equip me to be effective in conversations with people who are more conservative than I am, and who really struggle with this issue.’ One result is greater trust in him as an individual and as a committed member of their tradition.

There are [American Baptists who disagree with me] who have invested in me a sense of trust about how I will carry on those conversations, both on behalf of gay and lesbian people, and on behalf of denominational unity. . . . I do so from sort of loyal participation in it. . . . having every right to participate in the life of the denomination. On the other hand, I also have to recognize that I am engaging people who do not believe that. And if I take the risk of engaging them and do so in a way that is clear about why I think [Baptist principles support my right to be in the church] I will be likely to be more effective.

Many see the opportunity to be known concretely as a person as the key factor that makes relationships so important. Chris Glaser is an openly gay man whose failed quest for ordination is recounted in Uncommon Calling (Glaser, 1988). As the only gay member of the national Presbyterian task forces studying human sexuality and homosexuality, he shared in our interview his first hand knowledge of the importance of being known through relationship.13

One of the things I found in this whole process is that the smaller committees . . . [and] the task force . . . dealing with me as a person always recommended favourably. When it came to General Assembly, they were dealing with it as an issue, not always mindful that persons were involved here, and not of course, aware of gay and lesbian Christians who were in this.
Using voice in the context of relationship – something possible in the smaller bodies – consistently led to votes in favour of gay and lesbian inclusion. Larger bodies prevented the relational mechanism from helping participants understand the human aspects of the issues, enabling rejection.

While most of the ministers I interviewed voiced a commitment to relationality for reasons of principle, spirituality, and practicality, they also cited the psychological and emotional risks involved. Nor were these people blind to the some of the institutional forces that can make some approaches to relationship dysfunctional in terms of affecting greater inclusion and justice in their churches.

Being in relationship with opponents – who for reasons of tradition, principle, prejudice, or fear condemn you – can be a high price to pay for voice. Georgia believes that as a Christian and as a minister, she is called to listen to ‘those who would persecute us’ even if they can not listen in return, but ‘it costs a chunk of my soul to listen, because it’s so painful’. And even for GLBT ministers committed to listening, it can be difficult not to challenge more directly the positions and Biblical interpretations of those who oppose them. Dan Smith’s anger is particularly striking.

If we want . . . to insist that they hear us when we say ‘here’s why for me being a gay person is absolutely intrinsic to my being God’s creature, God’s minister’, then . . . we have to be willing to listen to them. . . . [But] that’s sort of entrapment on my part because there’s a huge part of me that believes that . . . all they can do is say, ‘Well, the Bible says’ . . . Why do you need to lift that verse out of its context and wield it like a sword when there are so many other equally sharp-edged verses that you either don’t pick up and wield like swords or have long since decided to disarm, to beat into plough shares, like the ones about slavery, and like the ones about women, and like the ones about Jews, and Greeks, and all the rest of that stuff? What is it about your life that prompts you to pick this one up and wield it as a weapon against other people?

Openly gay since the 1960s, Franco became an Episcopal priest after a long and very successful career as a teacher and principal. He freely speaks about disenfranchisement and marginality, but recognizes that his gayness heightens the risk that he and his message could be rejected. So, he puts a priority on being in relationship, believing that if someone wants to reject him once they know him, fine, but not without first knowing him. While on the diocesan staff, he purposefully would seek opportunities to forge connections with opponents of GLBT ordination. During the interview Franco was warm and extraordinarily thoughtful – fully the relational pastor he claimed to be – yet he also has the most developed critique of relationship without action.
Everybody in the denomination wants to have dialogue... For me, dialogue is important... but when you have these formal dialogues... the people who are in power, [who] have authority over the mainstream, [and are the] lawmakers, . . . they have no stake, really, in the outcome of those dialogues. Things won’t change if they don’t want them to change... So, when marginalized people come to a table . . . the people in the dominant community have no stake in that conversation. So dialogue cannot be the only thing that moves the church... I speak like this when I am in public forums around the church... I know I tick some people off, but I just say dialogue is not enough. Dialogue is just another way of not making waves, if it is the only thing that is used.

Framing the Debate on Inclusion and Exclusion

Christian ministers are often referred to as ministers ‘of the Word’, so it is not surprising that the power of language and of framing a question is intuitively clear to many GLBT ministers.[14] John was defrocked for being gay a year after being ordained a Deacon in the United Methodist Church.[15] In the painful years that followed this rejection, John learned leadership skills while rising to the directorship of a major multinational non-profit organization. This prepared him to became a co-founder and driving force in what is known as the Reconciling Congregations Movement, whose goal in the full inclusion of GLBT people in the life of the denomination. One of his guiding principles was this: ‘The greatest power in any public forum is the power to be able to define the questions being asked.’ In 1996, after some success with grassroots advocacy at the level of the local congregation, the Reconciling Congregations Movement leadership decided to wage a national campaign at the quadrennial General Conference. John explained the thrust of their campaign:

...for the last 20 years the church had been asking the wrong questions. . . . ‘Can you be gay and Christian? Is homosexuality compatible with Christian-ity?’ Instead, the real question, the right question was: ‘Can you claim to be the body of Christ when you’re excluding people from full participation within that body?’ In other words, ‘Can you be Christian and homophobic?’ That was the real issue.[16]

With no institutional power, the Reconcilers decided to adopt a ‘milder version’ of the ‘direct action’ model pioneered by Act Up (AIDS Committee to Unleash Power) – ‘just sort of’ being there, in their face’ – to shift the debate to being about ‘what does it mean to be in a church that has closed doors?’ The activists used imaginative ways to voice the theme that is was time for the church to ‘open the doors’: placards with the names of 10,000 Methodist signatories to a petition, little cards with knock-knock jokes with a variety of open-the-doors punch lines,
and welcome mats outside delegates’ hotel rooms asking if Jesus would have wanted the doors of the church to be closed. In what would ultimately become one of their most powerful symbolic actions, volunteers wearing Open the Doors T-shirts were literally opening the doors for people entering the convention centre.

It shifted the way people talked. Because during that ten days, as delegates were speaking on the floor of General Conference, [even] people who were anti-gay would get up and . . . the first thing they would say is, ‘I want the doors of the church to be open, but . . . ’

At the same time, the campaigners tried to be realistic about the prospects for success: ‘We were about making an impact, but we were not going to be able to change the policies of the church at this General Conference.’ Despite seemingly productive debate, in a single devastating afternoon, the vote on every issue relating to GLBT inclusion was anti-gay by a 60 to 40 margin. During the dinner break, the Open the Doors volunteers gathered in their command centre, crying and consoling each other: ‘In the midst of that rather chaotic time . . . someone says, we should go back to the convention centre and open the doors [for delegates attending the evening session]. . . . It just caught fire and everybody said, yes, let’s go do it.’

Storytelling has emerged as a key feature of organizational sense making (cf., Gabriel, 2000) so perhaps something can be made of the fact that this is an oft told story from the 1996 General Conference of the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the United States. As John recounts it, it contains the paradox of silent action as one of the most powerful ways of speaking up, while also showing its vulnerability.

. . . as [the returning delegates] walked up to the convention centre every single door of the convention centre was being held open by someone wearing an Open the Doors T-shirt. And I was sort of at the edges [watching] and people had stories and stories to tell about how the anti-gay voters were horrified, and they tried to go around the back of the convention centre to find a way in because they didn’t want to walk through these doors being held open. And people who were allies broke down in tears and came up and hugged – a couple of bishops walked up and down the line and went up to every single door where there was a person opening the door and hugged and told every person how much they loved them. So that was a very powerful experience. In some ways, because we were so successful, it only heightened the backlash.

The backlash came in the form of more organized anti-inclusion forces at the 2000 General Conference (Udis-Kessler, 2002).
Forcing Discussion of the Issue

The Open the Door campaign straddled two types of speaking up – framing the debate and forcing discussion. Like other forms of claiming voice, forcing discussion can entail both speaking up directly or combining indirection and silence. Forcing discussion can be a dramatic and singular act of conscience. Jack, a closeted Methodist minister in the Pacific Northwest informed me during his interview that he planned to come out publicly at the annual regional conference of his denomination.\(^{[17]}\) He pointed to the hypocrisy of the denominational policy of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’. It so precisely defines what constitutes telling (declaring your sexual orientation to each of four particular officers of the regional denominational hierarchy) that one lesbian minister was actually serving in a progressive congregation and sharing the parsonage with her same-sex life partner. She was fine as long as she did not say ‘the magic words’. While Jack applauded her ‘transparency’ strategy of ‘don’t hide/don’t declare’, he felt don’t ask/don’t tell places limits on the denomination’s tradition of a ‘free pulpit’ (ministers’ right to freedom of speech in their preaching) and undermined his ministry. By coming out a few months later, he triggered a debate that made the national gay and mainstream press as his congregation stood by him while the regional church hierarchy divided over removing him from his post.

Forcing discussion can also be something that gradually manifests itself in a GLBT person’s ministry. Rick recognized he was gay half way through divinity school in the mid 1980s, but despite the United Church of Christ policy of inclusion, he was not out in his first job as an associate pastor at a church that was surprisingly conservative despite its being in a very progressive eastern college town. A sermon by the senior pastor entitled ‘Homosexuality: Another View’ catalysed for him the need to force discussion.

He preached... about how he didn’t agree with everything the [United Church of Christ] stood for and actually, when he thought about two men having sex, it made him want to throw up. This was supposed to be his [welcoming and affirming] sermon. . . . I stormed into his office and said ‘[Tom], that was the most appalling sermon. What in the world were you thinking of? . . . We had [visitors] who had a gay child [who] came because they were interested in that sermon.’ Somehow I connected with them around that and I remember them leaving. I remember thinking, God, what in the world did you [Tom] give them? You didn’t give them any sense of hope . . . just a bunch of prejudice.

What followed was a gradual decision to challenge the congregation by saying to the church what he himself needed to be hearing as a gay man coming out. Nonetheless, his willingness to speak up to force discussion waxed and waned. ‘[My passion] came up episodically, very clearly and then every time I walked in the

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2003
door... I felt like... I had to hide part of myself... it was always this “I’m not me; I’m being somebody else”.’ He found ways of ‘coming out to the congregation without telling them’, such as asking the church library committee to obtain a copy of *Is the Homosexual my Neighbor?*, leading book studies including one of Malcolm Boyd’s (1993) autobiography *Taking off the Masks*, and becoming chair of the AIDS task force in town.[18] He is glib about the church’s resistance to naming the issues that he was raising; ‘by the time I left, it was “he is so well read”,’ but no direct discussion of exclusion and homophobia. For him, it was transforming, however. ‘In the naming [of it for myself] came a real growing sense of self and identity... I am gay, I am a minister.’

Rick’s decision to be with Rory, a Presbyterian minister he had fallen in love with at Yale Divinity School, led to a prolonged period of forcing discussion of the issues of GLBT inclusion and ordination in literally hundreds of congregations. Rory changed his ordination to the United Church of Christ (UCC) and they began applying for co-pastorates. After many rejections and a disastrous candidate weekend at a Midwestern church where they were openly insulted, while they were leading worship, by vocal opponents in the congregation, Rick saw his role clearly.

My Call [from God] is to knock on the door of the church and whether I never get a call [to a pastorate] again, it doesn’t matter; this is just what my Call is, a knock at the door... We applied to well over a hundred churches in the UCC and got over a hundred rejections... We’d keep knocking at the door... Don’t let the church forget that [its] Call is to open your doors to all people and what better way for the church to struggle with that than have, in this case, a gay couple seeking a place; having to talk about that as a search committee.[19]

Surprisingly, in 1994, Rory and Rick became the top candidates at one of the denomination’s largest congregations. However, after the search committee at the 1200 member congregation learned of their disastrous candidate weekend in the Midwest, it postponed their visit. For a month, it scheduled discussion groups and workshops so congregants could discuss what it really meant that they as a congregation had declared themselves open and affirming. After this whole process, the search committee again invited them out.

Although entering into one’s research as a ‘vulnerable observer’ (Behar, 1996) is unusual in organizational research, my own powerful emotional response as I report the story here echoes what I felt when Rick first told it to me. I try to imagine what it would have been like to witness this event and wish I had firsthand. Rick described the worship service they led during their candidate weekend.

We did a two-part sermon... I [began by preaching] about fear and the unknown. [Rory later] talked about walking into fear and... putting your hand

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2003
into the hand of God, who will show you a better way. . . . It was packed – standing room only. . . . It was just charged. . . . really, really charged. . . . It was a divided place. . . . [Some] people had been very clear in saying, 'I'm not going to support you, but this is why', but we didn’t run into any overt [hostility]. The search committee had been very careful we didn’t run into that.

Following the service, the entire congregation deliberated. Waiting a few blocks away at a member’s home, Rick tried to remain detached while Rory was getting excited.

An hour and a half later [the search committee called to say] ‘We counted once; we think we got the vote. Start to walk back and we’ll have a second count by the time you get here.’ . . . We came back and [Jill], who was the other associate [pastor] here in the church, came out and gave us a big hug. She was all teary. . . . Then we heard this huge uproar [as] we were coming closer. . . . We had 76 per cent of the vote. . . . The congregation went wild. . . . People who voted against us were walking out. . . . They were not going to stay to have us come back in and be introduced again and celebrated. . . . People crying, people kind of glum and leaving and then walking back [in] and getting a standing ovation. And [we were] clapping for all of them and what they had done. I was still totally overwhelmed. Everything about this was just way too much emotion.[20]

Rory and Rick made international news as the first gay male couple to be called as co-pastors of a mainline American church. The church lost some members, some absented themselves temporarily, but it actually ended up growing.

Helping Others Find Their Voices

Perhaps Rory and Rick helped more than one congregation confront the issues, but it was a lonely process. Nearly 20 years earlier, on ‘Holy Hill’ – the site of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California – several gay and lesbian Unitarian Universalist seminarians banded together to help each other establish their voices during their search for pastorates.[21] According to one member, they called themselves ‘The Fruit Bowl’ because they met on Sunday afternoons when everyone else was watching football.[22]

We would all be shell-shocked [by the questions people were asked in interviews so] we created a catechism of questions and answers . . . where we asked those silly questions in the best possible light, and tried to answer them in a rational way. . . . Questions like, ‘well, if you come here then the church will become a gay church’ or ‘if you come here then that’s all you’ll preach about’ or ‘if you come here then the rest of the city will burn the church down.’ . . . And we gave
rational answers to all these questions. We also wrote a shadow version of this catechism. (Laughter.) Where we said what we would like to say.

Once the denomination’s Department of Ministry learned of the catechism and the experiences that led to its creation, it asked that members of the Fruit Bowl take the catechism on the road as a way of offering congregations nationwide a glimpse into the denomination’s homophobia. What started as an informal, educational road show later evolved into a denominational programme that flew GLBT ministers around to consult with churches in the process of searching for a minister.

Helping others find their voices clearly has both personal and political dimensions. Franco, the Episcopal priest who wants more from the church than dialogue was involved in the founding of a group of gay and lesbian Episcopal priests.

My goal for that group is to be supportive of one another... However, I also felt that that group should have some political voice... So, one of my goals is... to help it become a voice, not to be reckoned with, but a voice to be heard, and a voice that the Bishop can use in his and in her sort of way of presenting the issue of sexuality to the Diocese.

For Franco, political voice is an essential companion to the relational voice because it pushes beyond the risk of dialogue that maintains the status quo while looking like action: ‘if the church is going to only engage in dialogue, then how do we move other strategies into the thinking of the church, in addition to dialogue?... I do think that we have a responsibility to at least explore how we can contribute to this process.’

At times, even the most relationally oriented GLBT minister wants to demand that others speak up rather than merely helping them find their own voices. One lesbian minister, who has so far retained her American Baptist credential after coming out, related this story of the after effects of an area planning meeting of ministers and lay leaders where she was subjected to a ‘spiritual attack’: ‘... the first time I had ever actually heard somebody pick up the word of God and say that I was not included in it.’ She later angrily challenged the lay leaders from her own congregation who were present, but did not speak up.

Whenever I step into one of those battles, it’s like... the rest of my ministry gets downsized. It gets less attention and that’s not as it should be. And part of me feels like I am on the front lines... because the only way things are going to change is by people sort of witnessing to the incredible pain and transformation that happens around all of these battles. But on the other hand, I have a church to run, and I feel like some of these straight lay leaders ought to be out on the front lines.
Allowing Themselves to be Poster Children

For some open GLBT ministers, speaking up leads to becoming a poster child, which can be an unwelcome and even an exploited role.

I do not want to continue to be the poster boy for American Baptist gay people in ministry. . . . There are times when the congregation would like me to be more gay-identified in the community in order to point to me as someone—their sort of pet gay person. I don’t mean to be patronizing by that, but . . . I don’t want to be used that way.

While the man just quoted is committed to the cause of GLBT inclusion, he recognized the irony that the expectations his leadership fuelled actually in some ways limited his freedom to speak and act on other issues: ‘. . . what I want [is to] normalize the way in which I am a gay person in ministry. . . . [So] I try to divide up my involvement on behalf of the congregation in ways that don’t just have to do with my sexual identity.’

Karen, the openly lesbian seminarian, pointed to two problems with being a poster child. One, the ‘spot white robe’, stems from having to be squeaky clean under intense scrutiny. But for her, that was secondary to being objectified. Here she speaks of an up-or-down vote on whether she could advance to the next stage in the preparation process.

The people who stood up [on the floor of Presbytery] and spoke against me, they have no idea who I am. . . . I was completely objectified . . . not even talked about as a human, basically. . . . That’s the part I don’t understand is how can you say these things when you haven’t even sat down to have a conversation with me in your entire life? [My mentor] calls it being a poster child . . . and I don’t like that role at all. So I fight with that, and everybody is like ‘You have to do it.’ You’re not [what your detractors say], but you’re ministering.

Karen has accepted that for now her ministry is being a poster child and despite disliking the role, she feels surrounded by a loving community at her relatively conservative southern seminary. For example, with classes still in session, several of her supporters could not attend the Presbytery’s deliberation of her case.

But there were students praying before they went to class, and people who left class to call to get the results and came back in and wrote ‘Yes, she made it’ on a piece of paper and held it up, and the whole class cheered. I mean, these are people who are so intimately involved in what I’m doing.

Still, she goes through stages when she is unconvinced by her ‘cheerleaders’ assurances.

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2003
People . . . are like: ‘We’re with you. You can do it. Everything is okay.’ . . . No, it’s not, because I’m the one who has spent her whole life crying because my church wants to turn me out. . . . I didn’t know what it meant to stand up and have people say bad things.

As we explored further what it felt like to be a poster child, it was striking how painful it was for Karen to be the object of anti-gay rhetoric. As she spoke, she seemed even younger than her 25 years, and it seemed that being objectified nearly eclipsed the support and love she also receives.

You know, I want to [challenge the ordination policy], but I’m also expected to do that by both GLBT people who are not out, and by straight people who want the world to be better. . . . Even though I know it’s not all about me, I didn’t know what that [being vilified] looked like then.

**Walking the Talk**

For GLBT ministers, eliminating the boundaries between their sense of vocation and identity can represent a critical form of speaking up. In the American vernacular, the phrase ‘walking the talk’ captures this idea of bridging the gulf between espousals and actions. For Georgia, the event that most captures her walking the talk was her decision to have a commitment ceremony sanctifying her relationship with her partner.

Up to that point, she had kept such a strict boundary between her ministry and her home life that while her partner was battling cancer, her congregants did not even know their minister was partnered. Depressed, she took a short sabbatical, during which she had a vision telling her to have a commitment ceremony. For nearly a year, she resisted the idea – although she prayed about it regularly. She finally decided to come out to a few of the lay leaders in her congregation, hoping the grapevine would, in effect, make the decision by coming out for her. The news never broke. No one spoke for her.

Georgia’s situation was unusual because she was ordained both in American Baptist Association, a non-inclusive denomination, and in the United Church of Christ (UCC), an inclusive one. At that time, she was pastoring in a Baptist church. Because she would be risking her job by coming out, she spoke about the potential career consequences with the UCC area administrative minister. He was ‘totally fine’ when she came out to him, but for every reason she offered for not letting her congregation know about the coming commitment ceremony, his response was, ‘Why not?’

And I [finally] said, ‘Because they’ll fire me.’ And he said, ‘Well, how do you know that?’ And I said, ‘I can’t take the risk.’ And he said, ‘Well, why not?’
. . . And I said, ‘Because everything that I’ve done for five years in that church will fall.’ And he said, ‘If you built that, it will fall. If God built it, it will stand.’ And I said, ‘I can’t do it.’ And he said, ‘Why not?’ And I said, ‘I’m afraid.’ And he said, ‘Have faith.’ And I said, ‘I’ll be alone.’ And he said, ‘I will walk with you. You will not be alone.’

Together with the UCC area minister and the lay leaders she had already come out to, she composed a letter announcing the commitment ceremony, saying all were welcome, and indicating that concerns or questions could be directed to the any of the several lay leaders who were also signatories. She recalled preaching the next Sunday on her failure to follow the Great Commandment and on why she was coming out and having a commitment ceremony.

On the day of my ordination, I had made a commitment to love my Lord, my God with all heart and soul and strength. . . . I had promised to love my neighbour in terms of loving and serving the church . . . but the part of the Commandment that I had never been able to fulfil was the part of the commandment about loving thyself. And the reason we were having this commitment ceremony was . . . [so] I could express love of myself in terms of committing publicly to my relationship with my partner, and that the reason I was doing that is that I did not feel I could teach my people about the love of Christ, until I managed to do that in my own life.

About 40 congregants attended the ceremony. About 22 left the church, which resulted temporarily in a financial loss. According to Georgia, however, the energy and giving increased, ‘so it didn’t feel like a smaller church; it felt like a bigger church.’

DISCUSSION: VOICE AND SILENCE IN SUBVERSION AND TRANSFORMATION

Throughout their careers, GLBT ministers do speak up or remain silent strategically for a variety of purposes consistent with Meyerson’s (2001) findings regarding the motivations and approaches of tempered radicals: self-protection and the preservation of their professional status; building relationships and setting the tone for interaction; framing the debate on a controversial issue; and being true to themselves and their values. However, the ways they do so reflect how the institutional rules of their denominations shape the organizational context of their careers.

Their uses of voice and silence cannot all be understood as instances of tempered radicalism, however. Being a closeted minister in an unwelcoming institution may not be the automatically subversive act of a tempered radical. Staying
completely closeted can be tantamount to colluding in one’s oppression, as in the instance of Marge’s silent denial of her partner at the site of her crash. Some see their earlier rationalized silence and the self-perjury of denying their relationships and the gifts of God in their lives as acts of complicity and submission.

At the same time, the experiences of these GLBT ministers illuminate aspects of the nature of voice and silence that have not been featured in the organizational literatures on tempered radicalism, resistance, or voice and silence. These include: the importance of the discursive context for understanding voice and silence; the ambiguity of voice and silence as constructs; and the ways in which self-authorization shapes the use of voice and silence.

The Discursive Context for Voice and Silence

A group’s historical legacies of oppression and resistance shape how members of that group use voice and silence (Bell et al., 2001). Not surprisingly, homophobia, fear, and the history of the GLBT civil rights movement combine in various ways to shape how these GLBT ministers use voice and silence. A distinctive feature of their legacy, however, demands consideration in terms of the genre of the life stories that they are constructing for themselves. For these ministers, their liberal Christian spirituality provides a distinctive discursive context that for them implies a particular model of the self (Jones, personal communication). A few common plots animate their personal stories, but the overarching drama that shapes their choices regarding voice and silence across their careers is what they understand as the spiritual struggle of moving from a state of human dis-integration to what they see as spiritual wholeness.

This sample of professionals is unusually self-reflective (life issues and meaning are their bread and butter), psychologically sophisticated (nearly all have some level of training in either counselling psychology or pastoral counselling), spiritually inclined, and religious. As a result, they often frame their stories in spiritual and theological terms. What they understand as the divine Call to spiritual wholeness and authenticity becomes the framework for their choices, such that speaking up or remaining silent appear as two broad types of intertwined action in a grander narrative operating at the personal, the interpersonal, the organizational, the cultural, and even the cosmic levels.

Embracing their sexual identities and their relationships as gifts from God comes to figure prominently in their understanding of their faith and of their life purpose. For example, while their stories of overcoming internalized homophobia, psychological denial, or feelings of stigma varied greatly – in terms of the particulars and the levels and tenacity of self-hatred – all of the interviewees reported having attained a strong level of self-acceptance. Often this self-acceptance was tied to some epiphany, unfolding in answer to a commonly shared angry question: ‘God, why did you call me to serve you and make me homosexual?’ The resulting self-
acceptance became for all of them the basis for strong feelings of solidarity with other GLBT people and other people who are marginalized. Paradoxically, in many cases, it is even the basis for relationship with their adversaries.

Self-acceptance not withstanding, many nonetheless had to grapple with fear, shame, or confusion over the conflict between their deep sense of calling to ministry and the institutional and cultural norms that hold that their sexual orientation is incompatible with ministry. This deepens the paradoxes of voice and silence in their careers. In a profession where a core responsibility is being ‘ministers of the Word’, a phrase that refers to the mandate to tell of the love of God, many of these people feel or have felt compelled to remain silent about aspects of their own experience of being loved by God. Perhaps even more paradoxical and painful for those in non-inclusive denominations is an institutionally imposed silence that makes one of most difficult dramas of their careers a kind of perjury that recalls for many of them one of the central stories of failed discipleship in the Christian scriptures, the apostle Peter’s denials that he knew Jesus.[25]

While this spiritual discursive context is specific to them, its importance in their experience suggests that in other contexts we also need to see the use of voice and silence not just as discrete acts, but rather as acts that contribute to a project – the constructing of selfhood – which is itself nested in some encompassing drama. In turn, we should consider how these real-life dramas might reflect particular genres and systems of beliefs that shape the symbolic meanings actors attribute to their actions.

The Ambiguity of Voice and Silence

In this research we see silence and voice are intertwined in several ways. For example, when you are saying one thing, you are not saying another. Candidates using the Fruit Bowl Catechism to help them address the concerns of a homophobic pastoral search committee were empowered to speak in part because of the unspoken shadow catechism that integrated their shocked indignation, their humour, their companionship, and their faith. Franco’s indictment of dialogue – as a false panacea in an institutional setting where those in power have little stake in the outcomes sought by those on the margin – points to the ways in which speaking up in institutionally bounded ways can be a way of remaining silent on critical issues. This raises questions of how organizational power structures can create the conditions for simulated voice and how organizations inhabitants struggle to make it real rather than Memorex. In instances of oppression, which constitutes voice and which silence – a Fruit Bowl Catechism or an unspoken shadow catechism, or is each both? In arenas of power, voice can be an apologetic for institutionalized power and silence can be what in the United States we call ‘walking the talk’ as opposed to merely ‘talking the talk’. Thus, we must deal with the question of how discretely bounded voice and silence can be as constructs.
In addition, neither silence nor voice is necessarily passive or active in how it challenges or capitulates to organizational inequities and injustices. For example, voice for the most visible tempered radicals – in this research, the voice of poster children – seems to tip oddly from active to passive as poster children are in some ways exploited by their supporters. Although usually thought as active, voice could also be passive in another sense. For example, we might theorize that the rationalization that enables someone to convince him or her self that something is unspeakable – ‘that if I was going to be sensitive to their needs I couldn’t speak it out loud’ – likely entails an internal dialogue of challenge, rebuke, and pacification that repeats until the individual is compliant if not invisible. In contrast, Georgia’s year of resisting the decision to have a commitment ceremony suggests that the nature and the outcome of such an internal dialogue can also be different. For her, the sequence is better described as hearing a call, resisting the message, asking if it is truly what she needs to do, saying ‘I can’t’, and ultimately doing what she believed needed to be done.

Instances of silence and voice are highly ambiguous – at times transgressive and subversive while at others, acquiescent and collusive. For example, Dan Smith spoke of a group of gay, lesbian, and straight ministers who gather monthly to subvert homophobia in their Presbytery. I asked, given the connotations, if they embraced the word subversion.

Oh, no, we would definitely use that word amongst each other. . . . We don’t announce our meetings. I mean, we know that there are groups of conservative pastors who get together to worry about the gay agenda in the Church at large, too. So it’s not like we’ve cornered the market on that. But there’s a group of people who have a faithful commitment . . . to get together and strategize.

Outside their circle, they do not call it subversion if they speak of it at all. Dan Smith’s continuing presence among them relies on their keeping the truth about his sexual orientation from half the people at the Presbytery’s monthly gathering of clergy. Silence and voice are implicated in the same acts of conscience.

At the same time, their subversion is of a surprisingly relational sort. These ministers use themselves as instruments of their message, so their words and silences both speak. Witnessing – a concept that straddles legal and spiritual contexts – is fundamental to how they aspire to walk through life. Relationship is a critical component of that witness. Even Franco, the Episcopal priest who is critical of dialogue without action, power without a stake, and coming together without claiming a political voice, sees action that undermines relationship as unacceptable.

Because it really is a mystery. . . . People don’t think that heterosexuality is a mystery, but it is. And homosexuality is a mystery that everybody thinks is a mystery. . . . and like every mystery, I don’t think that confrontation and in-
your-face is a way to explore mystery. . . . Now I would say that we need to say who we [as a church] are. We need to be vocal about the fact that we support gay and lesbian people . . . Because as a church we can come out, whereas there are many GLBT people who can’t come out.

Outward silence is, as Bell et al. say, ‘a noisy signal’ for social scientists (2001, p. 31). And we can filter the noise only by exploring the particulars of the actors and their settings.

The Self-Authorization of Voice and Silence as Forms of Resistance

One limitation of this study is that it relies on a sample of ministers who are out and self-accepting enough to have made themselves known to a network of other GLBT ministers. No people in my sample were so deeply in the closet that my invitation to participate in this research did not find its way to them. But to the degree this sample is representative of people who at some time have ministered from the closet, it appears that such people strive for and may ultimately celebrate the freedom of being able to speak up and tell their truths. But short of that, once they have moved away from the most extreme forms of hiding in silence and self-perjury, they embrace the legitimacy of lying and subterfuge in order to pursue their vocations and subvert homophobia, exclusion, and stigma. And they understand it as a form of a promised liberation that is central to their religion even if it is at odds with the edicts of their denominations. How are we to make sense of this form of resistance?

Ashforth and Mael (1998) have proposed that workplace resistance, particularly as it pertains to the sustaining of valued identities, can be thought of in terms of three bi-polar dimensions: targeted/diffuse, facilitative/oppositional, and authorized/unauthorized. In their framework, resistance can be ‘targeted’ on the perceived source of a threat or displaced in a ‘diffuse’ manner. ‘Facilitative’ resistance furthers organizational or societal goals, while oppositional resistance serves self-interests, often at the expense of organizational or public interests (Brower and Abolafia, 1995). ‘Unauthorized’ resistance refers to acts beyond the normative limits set by an organization, such as violence, while such institutionalized norms can also provide for ‘authorized’ forms of resistance, such as filing grievances (Prasad and Caproni, 1993).

If asked to describe their embracing of subterfuge in order to serve in terms of this framework, these people would likely say it is targeted on the threat of exclusion. It is facilitative because it furthers the goal of inclusion for the marginalized that is widely seen as a recurring theme in the stories of the ministry of Jesus, which show him ministering to prostitutes, tax collectors, soldiers of the occupying power, and those deemed unclean by the religious authorities. They would also acknowledge that opponents would label it as oppositional because it contradicts traditional notions of sexual morality and so, in their view, represents a threat to
the institutional church. Finally, in the case of non-inclusive denominations, these ministers and their opponents might label it unauthorized. It seems clear that subterfuge in order to flout rules precluding their ordination is outside the norms of resistance established by their denominations.

But at another level, these ministers would say that their subterfuge is authorized. Dan Smith points to the Presbyterian concept of ‘freedom of God’s image’. Reconciling Methodists asked if the doors of the church were ever meant to be closed and found in the story of the Hebrew midwives’ lying to save Moses a model of transformation for a community of faith. American Baptists and their allies point to ‘Baptist principles’ that emphasize individuals’ freedom in interpreting the Bible and in forging the tenets of their personal faith. In a sermon preached at a service for the Welcoming and Affirming Baptist Association, a straight woman minister used the story of Jesus’ healing of a bleeding woman – turned away by the doctors and priests because she was menstruating and thus ritually unclean – to conclude that it is not for church authorities to say who is unclean and that it is not our institutions who heals us.

Each of these examples shows that for these ministers, it ultimately does not matter if their resistance is authorized or unauthorized by their denominations. They find the authority for their resistance in the principles of Protestantism and in what they take to be the central message of Christianity. Their reinterpreting of the Christian gospel and claiming of their denominations’ principles to legitimize their resistance amounts to a form of self-authorization.

This self-authorization – how agents of change legitimize to themselves and to others their choices – is a critical aspect of action that needs to be explored if we are to understand voice and silence in organizational contexts. Such self-authorization mirrors notions of agency in institutional change that emphasize the reinterpreting and deploying of established cultural schemas in order to mobilize both people and cultural resources in new and different ways (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). It is arguably what distinguishes agency from mere participation in the ongoing and unchanging social construction of organizational arrangements (Creed et al., 2002). For the tempered radical, self-authorization may be a critical aspect of resistance that distinguishes enactments of voice and silence designed to make a difference from enactments that border on collusion.

CODA

Our ability to break silence and to speak our truths has figured prominently in myth and story as the essence of what makes us who we are. The capacity to speak is often depicted as a gift – inspired by a Spirit that supplies the words when our mouths are empty. Silence appears as a symbol of our deepest yearnings, while muteness figures as a loss of identity. In one of the most famous scenes in the Shakespearean opus, a broken King Lear wanders a heath – his howls competing
with the winds of a raging storm that mirrors the tumult in his soul. His companion in the storm, Poor Tom, a nobleman forced to disguise himself as a ragged maniac, tells us that in Lear’s wordless state we see ‘a poor, bare, forked animal’ (III:iv:110). The loss of voice and the loss of self are one. In the next act, Poor Tom shows us a vision for reclaiming the self. To prevent his father’s suicide, poor Tom uses subterfuge to make the blinded Duke of Gloucester believe that he has actually leaped from a great cliff and survived. Lifting him from the ground Poor Tom urges: ‘Thy life’s a miracle. Speak yet again’ (IV:vi.55).

**NOTES**

*This research was funded by the Wayne F. Placek Award of the American Psychological Foundation. I would like to thank Chris Glaser, the Reverend Mitzi Eilts, and the Reverend Keith Kron for their help in generating this sample and the anonymous participants for their candour, warmth, and inspiration. I would also like to thank Erica Foldy, Deborah Jones, and William Gamson, Kevin Karrige, Charlotte Ryan, and all the members of the Media Research and Action Project for their support and insightful feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

[1] The term mainline refers to the six or seven denominations in the United States that constitute the core of a progressive Protestant Christianity that is distinct from evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity in its approach to Biblical interpretation, individual autonomy, and the demands of faith. Wuthnow numbers among them the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, the American Baptist Association, and the Episcopal Church. Their aggregate membership in the USA is approximately 22 million, although they have, according to Wuthnow and Evans (2002), exercised a disproportionate influence on public policy. In this research I have also included two denominations, one that can arguably be numbered among the mainline, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The other, the Unitarian Universalist Association, has a shared history with one of the antecedent churches that merged to become the United Church of Christ. Religion scholars would almost universally place it to the political and theological left of the mainline.

[2] The five mainline churches that official preclude the ordination of openly GLBT people are American Baptist Church, the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Of these, some have precluding policies, but because of their traditions that have emphasized the autonomy of the local congregation, e.g., the American Baptist Association, some local churches nonetheless call GLBT pastors to serve their congregations.

[3] I recruited this sample with the help of Chris Glaser, editor of *Open Hands*, the ecumenical newsletter for a network of GLBT groups in seven different mainline denominations, the Reverend Mitzi Eilts, national coordinator of the United Church of Christ Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns, the Reverend Keith Kron, who has a similar role at Unitarian Universalist Association Faith in Action Office, as well as through the networking help of interviewees who will remain unnamed.

[4] The regions of the United States vary greatly in terms of the relative conservativism or progressivism of the dominant Protestant denominations. The south is typical more conservative than the Midwest, which in turn is typically more conservative than the east and west coasts. Within the mainline, congregations in urban centres are typically more liberal than those in rural areas.

[5] The one transgendered person spent over 25 years in parish ministry as a man and successfully beat a challenge to her ministerial credentials in the wake of her crossing over.

[6] This circumspection and secrecy is especially characteristics of GLBT ministers in the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Methodist Church. Anti-gay movements in these denominations have been more aggressive in pursuing action against GLBT ministers in their respective ecclesiastical courts.
I also designed the protocols to uncover data on individual level and institutional/contextual constructs. The contextual constructs focused on issues of organizational politics and institutional structure, including: (1) the denomination’s institutional identity or character; (2) the history of the debate over gay and lesbian ordination as it has unfolded within the denomination; and (3) the political landscape of the denomination as it has coalesced around the debate. These macro level variables are not the focus of the analysis for this paper. However, the ministers’ personal experiences of encounters with proponent and opponents of GLBT ordination or inclusion in church life did figure in many of their stories of voice and silence.

I use the term ‘self-affirming’ here because in one of the denominations I studied, ‘practising and self-affirming homosexuals’ are precluded from both ordained and lay leadership positions, suggesting that celibate, self-abnegating or self-loathing gay and lesbian people could serve in such positions.

Latour and Woolgar (1986) describe two types of validity: etic validity refers to the acceptance of results by members of an agonistic field of inquiry, or by those involved in the same field of inquiry as the analyst; emic validity refers to the acknowledgement by analytical subjects that the analysis accurately reflects their position or experience. One implications is that there is no absolute measure of validity which is an inherent property of the analysis. Instead, analytical validity is a social product.

Within each of the denominations I sampled there is a grassroots movement working for full inclusion in the life of the church for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Reconciling Congregations is the movement in the United Methodist Church. Some of the other groups include: More Light Presbyterians, Welcoming and Affirming Baptist Association, and Integrity. In most cases I will use the phrase ‘welcoming and affirming’ to refer to congregations that have declared themselves for full inclusion.

Discussion of GLBT inclusion in church life almost inevitably involves interpretation of a small number of passages cited as proof texts for condemning homosexual activity (England, 1991). It is far beyond the scope of this paper to offer exegetical analysis of the most commonly cited passages. However, it is worth noting that some scholars also argue that interpretation of the passages also requires some understanding of the history of psychology and the social construction of sex roles and sexual identities. For example, many scholars point out that our modern understanding of sexuality as an element of identity is conditioned by nineteenth and twentieth century psychological insights.


The task force’s majority report to the 1978 General Assembly of the denomination recommended that homosexuality should not automatically be a bar to ordination and that local Presbyteries and congregations be free to consider openly gay or lesbian candidates. The minority, which as ultimately accepted, opposed GLBT ordination.

I take this term for ministers to be a reference both to the Gospels themselves, believed by Christians to be the word of God, and to the metaphor that opens the Gospel of John, where ‘the Word’ is seen as a mysterious reference to Jesus. This opening passage reads: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things are made through him, and without him was not anything made’ (John 1:1–3).

The United Methodist Church used to have a two-stage ordination process. A candidate was first ordained a Deacon for a probationary period and then ordained an Elder. In many other denominations, deacon refers to an elected member of a congregational governing board composed of lay people, i.e., a Board of Deacons.

The ‘body of Christ’ is a central metaphor for the church. To be a Christian is to be a member of the body of Christ. It is a complex allusion both to the resurrection and to the central ritual of the Christianity, the Communion, where Christians become part of the resurrected body of Jesus by eating bread and wine.

Like several denominations, the Methodists have regional conferences annually and national conference quadrennially.

The title Is the Homosexual my Neighbor? is a reference to the great commandment, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. Malcolm Boyd is an Episcopal priest, civil rights activist, and writer-in-residence at the Cathedral Center of Los Angeles. He is perhaps best known for a 1965 bestselling book, Are You Running with Me Jesus? In 1977 he came out as a gay man with the publication of Taking off the Masks.
[19] Rick is using the word call in two ways here. I use capital C and small c to mark the distinction. By Call, he means a Calling from God or a Vocation to live as a follower of Jesus. By call, small c, he means a job offer issued by a congregation to a ministerial candidate.

[20] According to one informant, this is a good margin for a GLBT candidate. ‘No minister in her right mind would take a call with less than 85 per cent . . . . The conventional wisdom is that to effectively serve a church you need a united body. If you step into a church that already has a significant group of people that are not going to support you, you won’t be able to institute the changes necessary. But those conventional rules were written by straight men. . . . Two of my colleagues since then have had 67 or 66 per cent votes, and taken the calls. We [GLBT ministers] just are rewriting the rules.’ This of course means that GLBT ministers often start out with a higher risk of failure than heterosexual peers.

[21] The Unitarian Universalist Association had ordained ministers come out as gay in the late 1960s, but did not ordain an openly gay or lesbian candidate for ministry before ordaining this interviewee and other members of the Fruit Bowl in the late 1970s.

[22] Fruit is American slang for homosexual. Bowl is an American word for a football stadium and for end-of-the-season championship games.

[23] In the Christian tradition, the image of walking alone is a powerful one. For example, the imagery harkens to the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible, a.k.a. the Old Testament (e.g., in Psalm 23, the psalmist refers to walking through the valley of death, but fearing no evil, because God is with him). My assumption is that the area minister used the image purposefully in this exchange and the statements – ‘I will walk with you. You will not be alone’ – were not only meant to refer literally to his willingness to be supportive in the process.

[24] According to the Gospel of Matthew, when asked what was the greatest of the Ten Commandments of Moses, Jesus answered that all the Hebrew law and depended on: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Matthew, 22:33–40).

[25] A critical event in the story of the crucifixion is Peter’s fulfilling Jesus’ prediction at that on the night of his betrayal Peter, afraid of being arrested by Roman soldiers, would deny knowing him three times before the cock would crow the next morning.

REFERENCES


