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Abstract

The United Methodist Church (UMC) as an institution has strict language against lesbian and gay people and against the ordination of the lesbian and gay people. Prior research has focused on how denominations and congregations discuss issues around sexuality, how attitudes have shifted around issues of sexuality, and how to provide spiritual care for the LGBTQ+ community. This qualitative study interviewed lesbian and gay ordained elders in the UMC to learn about their experiences of serving as clergy people in the UMC even though there are prohibitive statements in church documents. Firstly, the interviews revealed that the participants feel loved and called by God and are attempting to live into their vocation. Secondly, they have ways of negotiating in the church, which include strategically deciding to whom they reveal their sexuality, the language they use in communicating their truth, serving in extension ministries, and feeling the pressure to do good work. Finally, cultural shifts have helped with the negotiating power of the participants. A final theme discusses why the participants stay in the church. The participants stay in the UMC because of relationships they have formed and it is their theological home, they see themselves as prophetic witnesses and they have hope in progress. This study reveals that lesbian and gay clergy are not incompatible with Christian teaching, but genuinely living into their vocation and serving God. This research provides the space for lesbian and gay clergy to tell their stories in hopes that LGBTQ+ might gain more credibility as religious leaders in the church.