‘Making Space for Queer Religious Youth’
Professor Yvette Taylor (PI) and Dr Ria Snowdon (RA), Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research, LSBU.

Summary
‘Making Space for Queer Religious Youth’ is a specific case-study exploration of religion and sexuality in young people's lives (n=38). Adopting an intersectional framework it asks how religious identity interplays with other forms and contexts of identity, specifically those related to sexual identity. It does this through a detailed investigation of the experiences, choices and identities of queer (lesbian, gay, bisexual) young people involved in the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in the UK. The MCC is an ecumenical Christian denomination that was founded in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community; part of its remit is to include those who feel disenfranchised by Christianity (while not all members of MCC identify as 'queer').

In the context of a rapidly changing contemporary religious and sexual landscape, this project eagerly explores young people's motivations for attending Church, how this shapes their identities, how they manage marginalisation or discrimination associated with religious-sexual practices, and the ways in which their religion might serve as a vehicle for various forms of belonging, identification and political expression. The reasons for Church attendance - and other engagements with religion - are investigated in relation to influences upon senses of belonging and everyday identities. Non-heterosexuality is often associated with secularism, and this study problematises this dominant discourse by exploring the experiences of young people's connections with religion and spirituality. In so doing, the importance that the politics of sexuality and spirituality can offer people in maintaining ontological security is recognised.

The key objectives are:
1) To explore the 'voices' and experiences of queer youth involved in the MCC - what motivates their involvement and commitment? How do MCC youth perceive their religiosity? Is this experienced as a 'contradiction' in terms of youthfulness and/or in terms of sexuality? When do such 'contradictions' - or intersections - become ir/relevant? How and why are young people selecting religion identities/affiliations?
2) To analyse how identity is negotiated within different (religious and/or sexual) spaces. Do different spaces/sites (e.g. home/Church/non-commercial LGBT space) generate various dis/identifications? What facilitates or impedes access to and comfort within varied 'community' spaces?

3) To interrogate what material and subjective im/possibilities are allowed, fostered or negated in occupying 'marked' religious and sexual positions. How do these intersect with, for example, gender and class?

4) To connect the sociology of religion, sexuality and youth. Sexuality and religion is an important intersection, inseparable from the broader social context of youth: what youth transitions are respondents experiencing? Are they in school/education/employment? What are their housing transitions? What other cultural youth identities are important? How do these transitions shape sexual and religious identities?

**Methods**

Interviews (n=38) were conducted across three sites: Newcastle, Manchester and London. The choice of locality built upon pre-established and ongoing contacts with key gatekeepers. Leaflets were distributed to congregations and groups, and links to our project website [http://queerreligiousyouth.wordpress.com/](http://queerreligiousyouth.wordpress.com/) and closed Facebook group ‘Queer Religious Youth’ were disseminated through mailing lists, posted to their websites and social media. This included postings to and dialogues with other inclusive churches, university LGBT societies, LGBT youth groups, support services, and publications (e.g. Diva).

There were two main phases of data collection:

1) **Individual interviews and social identities mapping exercises**–individual interviews on the everyday experiences of queer-identifying religious young people. Key themes explored include: the location of religion in their lives; changes in religiosity over time; management of religious and sexual identities; religious identities and family life; participation in ‘community’ spaces; biographies, transitions and materialities. The interview process was also supported through the social identities mapping exercise where participants constructed A3 maps that represent important sites in their everyday lives and the ways in which their identities change across these spaces and times. This exercise is characteristic of the work within participatory research where participants are open to shape agendas (Kindon et al., 2008; Taylor and Addison, 2012).

2) **Personal diaries**–participants were asked to keep a diary over the period of a month in order to reflect upon the multi-intersections of their religious and sexual identities, the ways
that these are mediated by space and time and the strategies they adopt in the management of their identities.

Since the ‘social identities mapping’ and diary exercises were intended to be participatory an overly prescriptive approach was avoided. These methods offered insight into identities in a format alternative to the interviews and to ‘triangulate’; participants were free to use this approach in an open-ended and creative way in order to represent various aspects of the multiple places and identities of their everyday lives. Some of the approaches included various forms of ‘mind-maps,’ participatory diagrams, evaluation wheels and body maps (Chambers, 2002). Personal diaries were structured around three main themes: key moments; space and time; and management strategies. Briefly, the ‘space and time’ section, for example, offered the opportunity for young people to record places/occasions when they felt a heightened sense of their religious and/or sexual identities (such as walking down the street, during a meeting, at a family meal etc.). The data collected offers a valuable contribution to the project alongside the social identities maps and interviews. All transcripts and diagrams have been analysed and key themes identified, coded via Atlas.ti.

**Project Findings**
The project found that participants’ ‘church hopping’ practices of moving in and beyond MCC and ‘traditional’ churches, intersected with specific ‘queer transitions’, including ‘coming out’ in public-private places (these were also variously religious, such as in the Queer Religious Youth facebook group) (see chapter ‘Mapping Queer…’).

Other findings include the importance of embodied feelings of being present and included, where both ‘queer’ and ‘religious’ spaces/subjects induced certain sounds (e.g. music), tastes (e.g. non-alcohol, food sharing) sights (e.g. architecture) and touch (e.g. church pews) (see journal article for New Media & Society and Journal of Ecclesial Practices).

UK ‘Equalities’ debates often posit Christian ‘backlash’ against more integrative inclusion. However, young people’s interpretations and experiences suggest a more complicated sense of how they intervene in religious/sexual landscapes, desiring and contesting specific futures, as welfare/equalities legislation both promise and prohibit certain material futures, which are imagined nonetheless (and via ‘imagined communities’ of religion and sexuality) (in progress monograph ‘Queer Convictions’).
Outputs have been recorded on the ESRC website, listed below:

**Publications:**

**Books**

**Chapters**

**Edited Journals**
- Taylor, Y. and Snowdon, R. (eds), Special Issue ‘Sexuality and Religion’, forthcoming 2014 *Sexualities*

**Journal Articles**
- Falconer, E., Snowdon, R. and Taylor, Y. (in-progress) ‘Queer Youth, Facebook and Faith: Facebook Methodologies and Online Identities’ *New Media and Society*
- Taylor, Y. and Snowdon, R. (in-progress 2014) ‘Queer Identifying Religious Youth: Mapping Methods, Meanings and Meeting Points between ‘Sexuality’ and ‘Religion’’ *Sociological Compass*

**Newsletters**
- Issue 4 (July 2013):
• Issue 3 (October 2012):  

• Issue 2 (April-May 2012):  

• Issue 1 (December-January 2011/12):  

Blogs (available on the Weeks Centre and GEA blogs):

• ‘Report from the Gender and Education Association’s 2013 Conference’
• ‘Making Space for the Straight Talking/Acting Interviewer?’
• ‘Making Space for Queer-Identifying Religious Youth (2011-2013)’

Presentations delivered:


• (13 April 2013) ‘Queer Religious Youth: An Intersectional Analysis’, Annual Association of Geographers (AAG) Conference, Los Angeles, USA.


Conference Panels organized:

• (24 April 2013) ‘Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Educational Experience’ Panel for the Gender and Education Association (GEA) Conference, Weeks Centre, LSBU.