

silent no longer!

**Narratives of engagement
between LGBTI groups and
the churches in southern Africa**

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introduction



Southern Africa, like the rest of the African continent, is grappling with the increasingly visible reality of homosexual and bisexual women and men, as well as transgender and intersex people. Increasing numbers of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) organizations and openly LGBTI individuals populate both the public sphere and many people's private lives. The struggle for equality and social inclusion of LGBTI citizens is intensifying in the region. Since the population remains deeply religious, religion plays a vital role in this struggle.

Southern Africa is predominantly Christian. Although there are multiple manifestations of the faith, Christianity in the region is largely unreceptive to progress on social issues such as women's empowerment, gender diversity and advances in the understanding of human sexuality. While some southern African Christians have opened their hearts to their LGBTI sisters and brothers in the spirit of an inclusive Gospel, most continue to act in an exclusionary way.

Homophobia¹ in all its forms is a major challenge in the region. And many churches are hotbeds of homophobia.

Their hostility towards LGBTI people not only holds back long-overdue legal and policy reforms in southern African countries but also drives stigma, bullying and violence in the larger society. The resulting shame, social isolation, loneliness, alcoholism, drug abuse, family conflicts, unemployment, homelessness, relationship problems, higher rates of HIV infection, violence and sometimes suicide suffered by many LGBTI Africans damage countless lives.

Homophobic church leaders preach that God commands Christians to rebuke and exclude sexual minorities. Through the powerful influence they have on their congregations, they contribute strongly to the discrimination, hatred and violence faced by LGBTI people in the region.

¹ The term 'homophobia' is used in a generic sense to mean the irrational hatred of all forms of sexual or gender diversity, including homophobia, transphobia and biphobia.



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Dr Gunda produced this report in collaboration with the Ujamaa Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The paper was edited by John McAllister.



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Homophobic church leaders preach that God commands Christians to rebuke and exclude sexual minorities. Through the powerful influence they have on their congregations, they contribute strongly to the discrimination, hatred and violence faced by LGBTI people in the region.

Some church members do not accept such attitudes. They believe, on the contrary, that God commands them to love and accept others, especially those that society marginalizes, rather than spreading hatred.

This report examines the state of engagement between LGBTI groups and the churches in southern Africa in regard to both the propagation of homophobia and the promotion of equality and acceptance of LGBTI people. Based on a review of what church-related LGBTI groups are currently doing, it proposes approaches that can be used to engage churches about their role in either exacerbating homophobic violence and exclusion or promoting respect for all people, and discusses strategies for how that can be done effectively.

“The greatest obstacle to the full acceptance of LGBTI people in southern Africa is religiously sanctioned homophobia.”

background

2



Several arguments are used by some Christian denominations to create or reinforce homophobia in their congregations and among the general public. Homophobic interpretations of scripture are usually the basis of this anti-LGBTI preaching.

Also playing important roles are a narrow, functional approach to sexuality, a mythology of the “purity” of African traditional cultures, a view of sexual and gender diversity as decadent, neo-colonial imports and a paranoia about the threat sexual minorities are thought to pose to African culture, African youth and even the future of the human race also.

Most southern African Christians belong to such churches and falsely see LGBTI people through this ‘us and them’ dichotomy. They frame LGBTI rights in terms of “religious people versus homosexuals” (Barwick 2013:6). Christians are seen as followers and protectors of Biblical and traditional values, sexual minorities as the opposite: immoral, unfaithful, anti-life, anti-family and anti-society.

These beliefs are mainly based on fundamentalist readings of scripture, with secondary support coming from equally blinkered understandings of “African tradition” and “the laws of nature”. This combination is powerfully toxic.

Not only is the combination deeply entrenched, it also enables close collaboration between churches and political leaders. In many parts of southern Africa, denouncing ‘gayism’ is a reliable way to whip up popular support or distract attention from governance failures. Both conservative church leaders and reactionary politicians find this convenient.

Increasingly, homophobia and transphobia in Africa are reinforced by well-funded American missionaries. For several years, conservative evangelicals from the United States have been targeting Africa, holding workshops and trainings to indoctrinate some African pastors and lay leaders in a fanatical anti-LGBTI theology and training them in how to propagate it in their congregations and society.

American preachers have been famously instrumental in stirring up moral panic over homosexuality in order to promote anti-LGBTI legislation in Uganda. They have also played a pivotal, if less publicized, role in other eastern and southern African countries. The support they provide to African allies “ranges from popular agitation and sideline cheerleading to outright [political] intervention” (Baptiste and Foreign Policy in Focus, 2014).



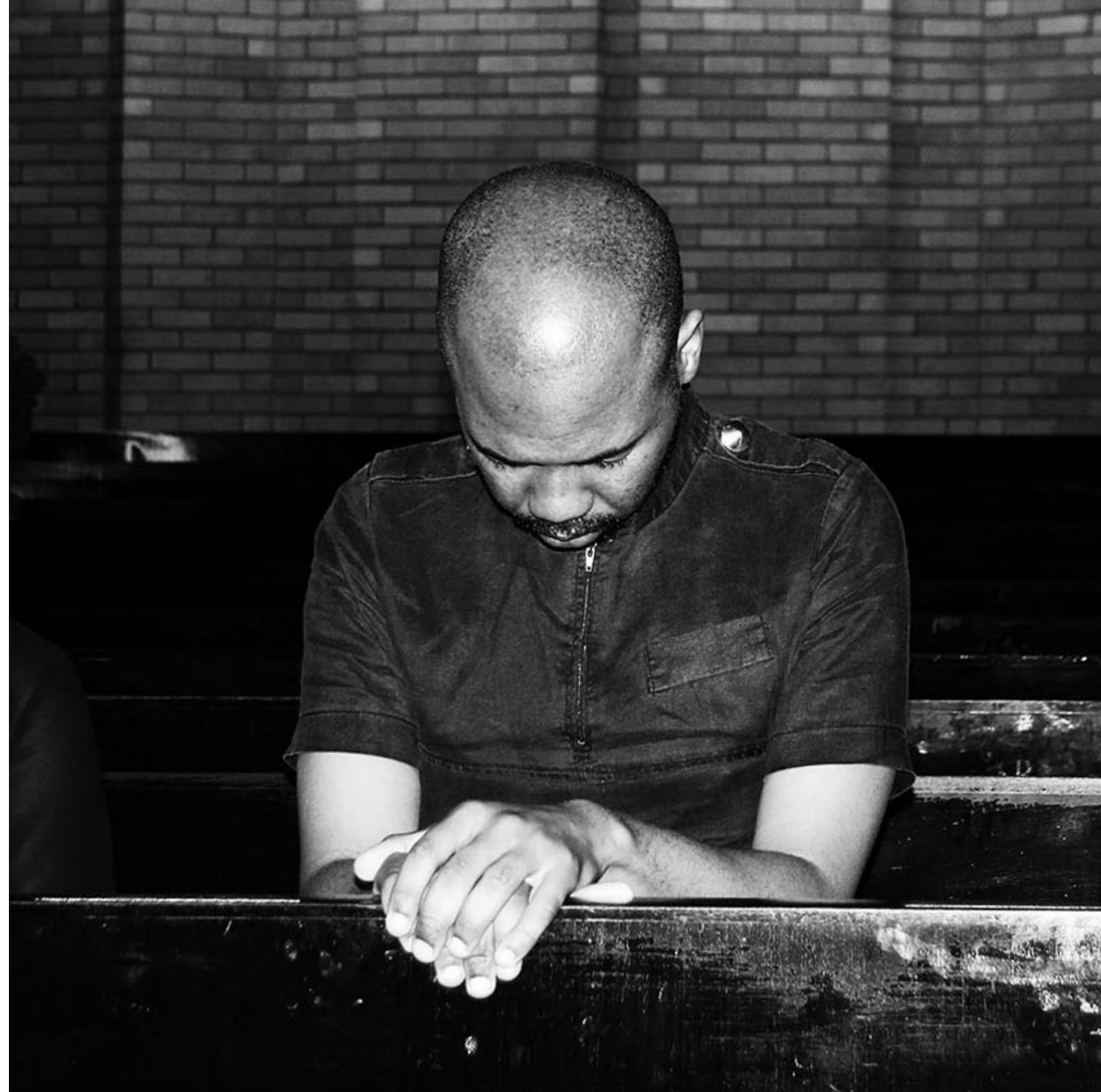
It may seem surprising that African preachers denounce the African movement for LGBTI equality as a Western neocolonial import but then welcome homophobic and transphobic missionaries from overseas. Less surprising is the fact that across southern Africa the relationship between LGBTI communities and most churches is one of “tension, confrontation, hatred and even violence” (Chitando and Mapuranga). Indeed, the greatest obstacle to the full acceptance of LGBTI people in southern Africa is religiously sanctioned homophobia.

This situation is complicated by the fact that homosexual relations are still criminalized in most of southern Africa with the exception of Mozambique, Lesotho, and South Africa. As well as inhibiting LGBTI activism through fear of the criminal repercussions of ‘coming out’ as LGBTI, criminalization reinforces church-sanctioned homophobia by creating the impression that LGBTI persons are enemies of the law and the state as well as of religion.

Even in the three countries where old colonial laws on “carnal knowledge against the order of nature” have been repealed, homophobia remains deeply rooted in society, thanks in large part to the moral influence of the preaching of most churches. As Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, noted in 2011, “a climate of homophobia, intolerance and violence” persists throughout the region regardless of whether homosexuality is criminalized.

“A climate of homophobia, intolerance and violence persists throughout the region regardless of whether homosexuality is criminalized.”

- Navi Pillay,
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011



LGBTI activism, human rights and secularism

3

silent no longer - narratives of engagement between LGBTI groups and the churches in southern Africa



The development of organized LGBTI activism in southern Africa cannot be divorced from the rise of the women's empowerment movement and the African human rights movement generally, both of which became prominent in the 1990s. Of course, LGBTI persons lived in communities in southern Africa long before this. There is ample evidence showing that most communities knew about individuals whose sexuality differed from the majority well before this time, even before colonial times.

However, the international human rights discourse that became prominent in Africa after the end of the Cold War presented for the first time an opportunity to acknowledge the existence of LGBTI persons and openly promote their human rights. Accordingly, most early LGBTI organizations, such as GALZ in Zimbabwe, formed in 1990, LeGaBiBo in Botswana (1998) and The Rainbow Project in Namibia (2000), started from a base in international human rights discourse.

The early association of the LGBTI movement with universal human rights principles originating in the West has enabled conservative churches and demagogic politicians to label LGBTI groups as Western-sponsored groups that promote an unAfrican, secular ideology. This ignores the view that the global human rights movement in fact arose as a result of Western excesses and has been shaped largely by grassroots civil rights, anti-colonial and anti-Apartheid struggles – all supported by most church members. As South Africa's social development minister, Bathabile Dlamini, put it in her address to a United Nations meeting on sexual and reproductive health and rights in September 2014,

“international human rights instruments all stem from essentially western excesses starting with the Peace of Westphalia Treaty in the 1600s that ended 30 years of war and bloodshed in Europe. This was followed by the Charter of the United Nations that emerged from the two World Wars that were fought primarily amongst western countries. The other major human rights treaties and instruments also emerged as responses to western colonialism, western racism and the global oppression of women. Let's not forget that it was through global solidarity based struggles against the denial of fundamental human rights in South Africa that Apartheid is today a crime against humanity under international law. Human rights are therefore essentially products of southern, including African, struggles against all forms of oppression.”



From the earliest days of African LGBTI activism, there have been Christian LGBTI groups that were inspired by the message of the Gospels rather than by international human rights discourse. IAM (Inclusive and Affirming Ministries), for example, was founded in South Africa in 1995. It is one of many faith-based LGBTI organizations that understood the importance of engaging with churches and other Christian organizations on the basis of an LGBTI-inclusive approach.

Such faith-based LGBTI organizations have increased in number, especially over the past decade. They reflect a growing realization that, in African contexts, it is difficult if not impossible to divorce LGBTI issues from the religious traditions of LGBTI Africans and the communities in which they live.

In fact, almost all LGBTI groups in southern Africa are either faith-based or have an office that promotes dialogue with religious communities. Activists know that religion plays a critical role in the rejection or acceptance of LGBTI persons in southern Africa and that there is a need to engage the churches.

“Most southern African Christians falsely see LGBTI people through an ‘us and them’ dichotomy.”

churches in southern africa: an overview

4

silent no longer - narratives of engagement between LGBTI groups and the churches in southern Africa



Southern Africa is predominantly Christian, but with a strong element of traditional African religion. Statistics on the number of followers of African traditional religions are very difficult to gather, but in most communities, the two religious traditions are not regarded as mutually exclusive. Many believers live comfortably in both worlds.

Originally, the Christianity of southern Africa, as elsewhere on the continent, was a product of the “trinity” of commerce, civilization and Christianity of Imperial Europe. It was brought to Africa by the Portuguese, Dutch and British empires beginning as early as the sixteenth century and reached its peak of influence with the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the subsequent carving up of most of Africa by the major European powers.

As an essentially Victorian colonial discourse, Christianity in southern Africa has been conservative on most social issues. It has been especially reactionary about sexuality and gender, promoting, with rare exceptions, a heteronormative and puritanical Victorian concept of sexuality as inherently dangerous and sinful and of male and female roles as fixed and hierarchical.

As Sylvia Tamale (2014: 154) notes, “many sexual practices that were acceptable in precolonial ... Africa were encoded [by colonial Christianity] with the distinctive tags of ‘deviant’, ‘illegitimate’ and ‘criminal’ through ... proselytization and acculturation.” This fear of sexual and gender ‘deviance’, most notably of homosexuality and trans* identities, has persisted in some Christian denominations up to now, even in syncretistic churches that blend African traditional beliefs and practices with conventional Christian ones.

Western-mediated Christianity in southern Africa entrenched a sexual discourse that anathematized open discussion of sexuality in families and communities. This was a Christianity that even went as far as deciding which sexual positions were godly or ungodly. African societies that had traditional forums for talking and teaching about sex and sexuality, such as initiation schools, and traditional ways of accommodating different sexual orientations became societies that denied the realities of sexual diversity and associated non-procreative sex with damnation and hellfire.

More recently, a new style of “megastar” preachers renowned for their flamboyant lifestyles, miracle-working powers and extreme social rigidity has become popular. Their success in the religious “market” has pushed other conservative preachers even further to the right. The megastar preachers tend not only to be highly homophobic but also more aggressive in disseminating their views.

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churches and homophobia: a message of death

5



Ever since the emergence of LGBTI persons into the public sphere in southern Africa in the 1990s, most churches in the region have taken a strongly negative approach to homosexuality and gender diversity. Their homophobic preaching has received acres of space in the media, making their views influential among a much wider audience than just their own congregations.

The key arguments against homosexuality and gender non-conformity used by conservative Christians in southern Africa can be summarized as follows:

5.1 The Bible

According to this argument, the “Word of God” unambiguously forbids any non-heterosexual relations or violations of patriarchal gender distinctions. Homosexuality is an “abomination”, women are subservient to men and gender is strictly binary. The Sodom narrative (Genesis 19), the Levitical laws on sexual purity (Leviticus 18 and 20) and certain Pauline texts (Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6, 1 Timothy 1) are read as evidence of the Bible’s unequivocal opposition to homosexuality.

By invoking supposedly unchallengeable statements from the faith’s foundational text, such Christians imply that any Christians with different attitudes are “challenging God” and are not “true” Christians. This is a very difficult argument to counter in a region like southern Africa where a literal reading of Biblical texts still enjoys a largely unquestioned status as the revealed Word of God.

5.2 Secularization

If LGBTI people are enemies of God, it follows that the “homosexual agenda” is anti-religious. Since this agenda is perceived as originating in the “secular” West, equality and inclusion of LGBTI people are seen as part of a Western, or even a Satanic, plot to secularize Africa. Standing against LGBTI equality therefore becomes a way of protecting Africa’s position as a bastion of faith in a secularizing world.

The struggle for LGBTI rights is often seen as part of a Western plot to secularize Africa.



5.3 African culture

In this argument, precolonial African culture was unitary and strictly heterosexual, and homosexuality and gender diversity are decadent, neocolonial Western imports. This is not a religious argument as such. Some Christians share this view with African traditionalists and nationalists generally and invoke it precisely for its resonance with culturally conservative allies in these other domains.

The power of the argument comes from the universal African rejection of colonialism and the resulting tendency of many African nationalists to promote an idealized vision of precolonial African culture that excludes gender and sexual diversity.

As Africans struggle with the often uncomfortable and unstable realities of post-colonial hybridity, this vision of a utopian African identity uncontaminated by Western ideas is an attractive refuge from the troubling complications of modern life. It also goes well with the Christian ideal of being “saved” or “born again” and the comfort of finding all the answers in tradition and scripture.

African culture is romanticized as communal and unified, while sexual minorities are seen as individualistic and selfish as well as unAfrican. By rejecting African communal values and advocating self-centred, Western ideas of human rights, LGBTI people are thought to undermine the community, which is then justified in repressing them for its own protection.

5.4 A functional understanding of sexuality

According to this argument, which is partly based on a selective reading of scripture, partly on an instrumental concept of nature, sexuality is only a means to an end. We are designed by nature to use our sexuality to reproduce and are commanded by God to “go forth and multiply” (Genesis 1:28).

The penis is understood as having been specifically made for the vagina, and sexual intercourse without procreative potential – for pleasure alone – is sinful and dirty. In this argument, God and nature are essentially one, and LGBTI persons are simultaneously unnatural and ungodly.



5.5 Survival

In this argument, homosexuality and gender diversity are seen as existential threats to society or even to the human race. The procreative heterosexual family is considered the God-ordained foundation of human society, and sexual minorities are assumed to be anti-family and therefore a threat to social cohesion. They are seen as a particular threat to children, whom they must “recruit” in order to sustain their own numbers. Societies that accept their LGBTI members risk becoming extinct either through the “wrath of God” or from a failure to procreate.

These arguments get a lot of their strength from an alliance of convenience between homophobic churches and a sensationalist media. Stories of homosexuals preying on children, comparisons of homosexuality and trans* identities to infectious diseases, visions of non-procreating LGBTI people taking over the world and humanity going extinct sell newspapers and drive up radio and television ratings. Unfortunately, these fantasies also help entrench homophobia and transphobia, especially when preached by respected church leaders.

5.6 Priorities

Like some politicians, church leaders who want to avoid declaring themselves on the equality, safety and social inclusion of LGBTI people declare that the issue is “not a priority” and downplay the need to face up to it. Africa, they say, has far more urgent problems.

This is a strategy to avoid talking about sexuality, violence and exclusion and to deflect attention from homophobia and its consequences in the lives of LGBTI people. It is used mainly by churches that do not want to come out openly in opposition to LGBTI people. In pretending that the discrimination and violence faced by LGBTI Africans is not important, this strategy helps perpetuate and justify homophobia.

Societies that accept their LGBTI members are thought to risk extinction either through the “wrath of God” or from a failure to procreate.



influence of the media

6



The negative effects of all these arguments on the lives of LGBTI Africans are amplified by the homophobic churches’ aggressive use of the media, with the new megapreachers leading the way. Newspaper columns, television and radio programmes (and even dedicated networks), the internet and social media, DVDs and CDs – all are used to disseminate homophobic messages based on one or more of the arguments described above and to oppose any move towards recognizing or accepting LGBTI people.

To try to show grassroots support for the demonization of LGBTI people, marches organized by churches, with placards denouncing sexual minorities, especially “gays”, have become common. Anyone who steps forward in support of LGBTI rights, especially a fellow religious leader, becomes a target of such protests, as well as of attack broadcasts and social media shaming.

This aggressive strategy has silenced many church leaders who do not support the promotion of homophobia. It has enabled messages of hate and fear to reach every corner of the region and to create a generalized homophobic attitude.

Many Christians in southern Africa have long been champions of liberation and social justice.

the church as antagonist and as ally

silent no longer - Narratives of engagement between LGBTI groups and the churches in southern Africa



Although messages of hate and fear dominate church-sponsored discourse on LGBTI people in the region, they are not the only messages coming from religious leaders and institutions. A minority advocate the inclusion of LGBTI people not only in society but within their own faith communities as well.

These Christian allies see the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross as a symbol of God welcoming all into His kingdom. They oppose narrow, homophobic interpretations of scripture and point out that the key message of the Bible is God's love for all human beings.

The presence of such accepting voices in the church may seem surprising, given the dominance of hostile ones. However, many Christians in southern Africa have long been champions of liberation and social justice. They have promoted freedom, respect for the equal dignity of all people and the rule of law and have consistently spoken out against poverty, injustice and violence.

Indeed, the churches' role historically has been mixed. In South Africa, for example, many churches supported Apartheid or acquiesced with it based on the Biblical injunction to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mark 12:17). A minority used more positive Christian principles to oppose Apartheid.

Similarly, most currently oppose LGBTI rights, but a minority is again standing with those on the margins. In short, there is no single Christianity in the region when it comes to attitudes towards LGBTI persons.

The voices of accepting Christians, however, receive scant attention from the mass media. The co-opting of the media by social conservatives has created the impression that an anti-LGBTI consensus exists among Christians in the region. This makes it difficult for more accepting voices to be heard outside the limited circles of LGBTI activists and their allies.

Nevertheless, LGBTI Christians have not given up hope of being acknowledged and eventually accepted in their faith. Although messages of rejection and dehumanization have driven many away from homophobic churches, most LGBTI Christians still want to be a part of their churches.

They do not want to feel dehumanized, ostracized and cast out from the kingdom of Jesus Christ, who died for all that believe in Him. However, they wonder how to overcome the fear and hatred sown by those who call themselves followers of Jesus yet call for LGBTI persons to be excommunicated, disowned, imprisoned or worse.

**Most LGBTI Christians
still want to be a part of
their churches.**

counter-arguments and strategies

8



Based on an assessment of approaches currently taken by LGBTI groups to engage the churches in southern Africa, there are seven promising approaches that appear to work to address church-sponsored homophobia.

8.1 Show that the Bible and its underlying principles support acceptance of sexual minorities

Church-sponsored homophobia justifies itself through a narrow reading of cherry-picked Biblical passages dealing with human sexuality and gender relations. This misuse of scripture can be exposed by using the Bible to make a counter-argument in favour of inclusion and acceptance. If some Christians condemn homosexuality and gender diversity because they believe scripture commands this, it can be shown that an interpretation that is truer to the core principles of scripture calls on them to love their LGBTI brothers and sisters.

The Bible, like any complex text, needs to be read and understood as a whole rather than by cherry-picking passages that are convenient for your argument and ignoring those that are not, for example, passages on “sins” such as wearing mixed fabrics or eating shellfish. Reading the Bible holistically reveals that principles such as love, compassion, tolerance and selflessness are much more important than the so-called bullet texts used to condemn homosexuality and gender diversity.

Modern Biblical scholarship has shown that many of these bullet texts, when translated more accurately or interpreted in their historical context, do not condemn homosexuality or gender non-conformity at all. They are actually directed against evils such as sexual exploitation, selfishness and inhospitality.

Many ordinary churchgoers, however, find such arguments unconvincing coming from LGBTI activists. In any case, activists have little opportunity to talk directly to congregations, especially in homophobic churches.

Seminars and workshops with pastors and lay leaders, where these counter-arguments can be presented in depth to small groups, are a more realistic way to get this message across. These insiders are much more likely to persuade other believers to reject the homophobic and transphobic readings of scripture so deeply embedded in many ordinary Christians' belief systems.

The anti-LGBTI “message of death” is based on misinformation. Participants in workshops and seminars where these falsehoods are exposed continually tell activists that they “did not know all this”.



Attitudes at the grassroots, especially inside the most homophobic churches, can only be changed through the work of activists and allies who are known and respected within local communities and congregations.

8.2 Engage with homophobic and transphobic Christians non-confrontationally when possible

Many homophobic church leaders are spoiling for a fight. They thrive on publicity and sensational news reports. Protesting aggressively against their hate speech can make them look like victims of the “homosexual agenda” or as brave defenders of “religious freedom”.

LGBTI activists who realize this prefer non-confrontational strategies such as workshops and seminars, dialogues (such as traditional forums with chiefs and elders) and even public debates where they can try to engage their opponents in rational and respectful discussions. If conservative church leaders come armed with debating points, LGBTI activists respond with dialogue points, asking to be listened to and understood. This strategy works particularly well with local communities, especially in rural areas where traditions of dialogue and consensus are still strong.

8.3 When non-confrontational methods are not possible, “fight fire with fire”

When homophobic Christians cannot be persuaded to engage in a respectful dialogue, LGBTI activists may be forced to pay such opponents in their own currency. For example, the argument that homosexuality and gender diversity are a neocolonial, foreign conspiracy and that LGBTI Africans should be treated as aliens or traitors can be “returned to sender” by pointing out that the Bible and Christianity are not African in origin either.

It can even be argued that homosexuality and gender diversity are more African than the Bible. Research shows that many precolonial African societies had traditional ways of accommodating, and sometimes even honouring, sexual minorities.

The extreme of this “you reject me, so I reject you” attitude is the wholesale abandonment of Christianity or organized religion in general by some LGBTI activists. However, this strategy is unlikely to get very far in a region where faith is as central to people’s lives, including many LGBTI people’s lives, as it is in southern Africa.

8.4 Build support for LGBTI acceptance through local support groups

One of the most painful realities of being an LGBTI person within Christian families is rejection by, or isolation within, the family. Countless LGBTI Africans, especially youth, have undergone untold suffering after being disowned by their families.



In Africa, losing your family means losing the central pillar of your life. Most LGBTI organizations therefore run support group programmes to conscientize parents, family and friends to accept and stand up for their LGBTI loved ones.

This not only enables LGBTI individuals to reconcile with their families but also undermines homophobia and promotes awareness and acceptance of LGBTI people in the community generally. In church, members of the congregation who have learned through family support groups to understand and accept their LGBTI family and friends will no longer tolerate the demonization of LGBTI people from the pulpit.

8.5 Engage homophobic churches more actively in the fight against HIV and AIDS

Historically, HIV prevention and access to treatment have been the wedge issues that enabled LGBTI equality to be broached and LGBTI activist groups to operate in countries where homosexuality is illegal. Many churches have played very active roles in campaigning for improved HIV awareness and access to treatment for the general population.

HIV/AIDS work provides opportunities to sensitize churches on the realities of LGBTI communities who are also struggling with the epidemic and who are at even higher risk of infection than the general population. Appeals to Christian teachings on compassion and healing can be used to engage the churches more actively in LGBTI-related HIV work and, through that, to conscientize them on the need to accept their LGBTI brothers and sisters as fellow human beings equally in need of compassion and healing.

HIV/AIDS workshops and other forums provide opportunities that would otherwise not arise to speak about sexual practices, sexual orientation and sexual diversity in communities. Since they are often attended by both church representatives and LGBTI activists and allies, they are an opportunity to raise issues about sexual minorities that the church representatives might not normally want to talk about.

The resulting discussions may not always be positive, but they can be critically important. The church representatives engage face to face with openly LGBTI individuals, often for the first time, hear things they may never have heard before and are able to ask questions that would be impossible to ask in any other forum.

This strategy has led to the formation of the International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA+), one of the most important strategic partners for LGBTI groups engaging with religious leaders in southern Africa. Malawi and Zimbabwe provide particularly instructive examples of productive engagement and collaboration between LGBTI groups and INERELA+.

Many homophobic church leaders are spoiling for a fight.



Homophobia is sinful and contrary to the Gospel.

8.6 Foster strategic partnerships with local and regional allies

Some homophobic churches are effectively impenetrable by openly LGBTI groups. No out LGBTI person can get a foot in the door of the most homophobic churches, never mind initiate a dialogue. However, it is these extreme churches that are the main drivers of homophobia in southern African societies.

If LGBTI acceptance is going to be achieved in the region, dismantling the hate and fear emanating from these churches is crucial. The only way for LGBTI activists to engage with such “closed shops” is to forge partnerships with straight or closeted-LGBTI Christian allies who may be able to get access.

A number of African Christian leaders have stood up to defend not only the rights of LGBTI people but the image of God in each and every LGBTI person. Their message is that homophobia, not homosexuality, is sinful and contrary to the Gospel.

This argument is the key to fighting church-sponsored homophobia. Heterosexual African Christian “insiders” can make it very effectively, especially in extreme circumstances, whereas LGBTI Christians are seen as self-interested, and Christian allies from outside Africa are dismissed as neo-colonialists.

For historical reasons, allies are more numerous and more vocal in churches in South Africa than in the rest of the region. Most faith-based LGBTI groups in South Africa have partnerships with some Christian denominations and regularly engage with congregations.

The same cannot be said for the rest of the region, but in every country there are pastors, lay leaders and scholars who are sympathetic and supportive. In most, there is now at least an informal network of individual church leaders interested in addressing church-sponsored homophobia. The potential of this approach is clear, and the base for activism that exists should be further developed.

The men and women who are following their conscience and working towards the full integration of LGBTI persons into the house of God need to be supported. There can be a huge price to pay for taking such a stand, and these individuals, especially outside South Africa, are taking huge risks with their livelihoods.

Intra-regional partnerships with South African organizations carry some risk of being labeled neocolonial, given South Africa’s “Westernized” reputation among some groups in the region. Nevertheless, partnerships with well-established South African organizations such as the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) and IAM have been crucial in creating platforms for sharing research and ideas, accessing resources and developing common strategies adapted to local conditions.



8.7 Foster strategic partnerships internationally

Southern Africa is part of a globalized world. As with all struggles, allies are needed in the international community as well as in the region. Christian homophobia is also international. In fact, much of the impetus – and funding – for church-sponsored hate-mongering in southern Africa comes from abroad, especially from American fundamentalist churches who see Africa as a new and more promising battleground for the “culture war” they had been losing at home.

LGBTI groups and allies need to be equally unapologetic about getting support and inspiration from like-minded groups internationally – in keeping with the universal nature of the church. Although care should be taken to avoid the impression of mimicking Western cultures and political agendas – by making sure that principles, messages and methods are rooted in local realities and cultures – it is not necessary to shy away from linking with international church and other partners who stand in solidarity and from proclaiming allegiance to universal human values.

importance of local initiatives

9

silent no longer - narratives of engagement between LGBTI groups and the churches in southern Africa



International and regional alliances are vital sources of ideas, political support, legal resources, financial resources, networking opportunities, access to research and expertise of all kinds. However, attitudes at the grassroots, especially inside the most homophobic churches, can only be changed through the work of activists and allies who are known and respected within local communities and congregations.

They need to speak out and engage directly with their homophobic fellow believers. This work is difficult. It is also risky for those who do it, and it will take time. However, there are some specific methods that can bear fruit.

9.1 Base LGBTI activism on larger Christian principles:

This strategy begins by inviting Christians to discuss their position, as Christians, on broad issues such as injustice, violence, oppression, marginalization and diversity. The discussions can then be directed to the plight of LGBTI persons in relation to these issues. This can help Christians to realize that they are called by their faith to be in solidarity with all those on the margins.

9.2 Encourage teaching on sexuality and gender in theological schools:

Allies in seminaries and university theology departments in South Africa have been critical in opening doors for the discussion of gender, sexuality and sexual diversity in the context of pastoral and academic training of clergy. This strategy is now finding a foothold in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi and Zambia. In some cases, the discussions are still informal, but progress is being made on introducing these subjects into formal curricula, especially in university departments, which have a greater commitment to disinterested scholarship than many seminaries.

In every country in the region there are pastors, lay leaders and scholars who are supportive of LGBTI inclusion and equality.



9.3 Research and publish more locally relevant material:

Until recently, most research on sexuality and gender diversity originated in the West, but in the past few years, increasing numbers of African scholars have entered the field. As a result, locally researched studies are beginning to be the default resources in discussions around sexual minorities. This not only ensures that the materials speak to the local context and reflect local values, it also forestalls the charge of “foreign influence”. Such materials are already abundant in South Africa, and Zimbabwe is fast becoming a leader in the rest of the region.

“One of the most painful realities of being an LGBTI person within Christian families is rejection by, or isolation within, the family.”



the way forward

10



Behind the various approaches and strategies that LGBTI activists and allies can use to overcome church-sponsored homophobia, there is one essential question: how do we develop and promote a vision of social justice that reconciles sexuality, human rights and the Christian faith?

The answer has to be a theology of sexuality that addresses the lived realities of all marginalized groups. How then do we tap into grassroots theologizing already being done by suffering LGBTI communities and make this the starting point of our own theology?

There are four main ways of addressing these questions.

10.1 Make the case that sexual rights are God-given, universal human rights

Homophobic churches in southern Africa have tended to see human rights as secular and anti-Christian. To overcome this, it needs to be shown that there is no conflict of substance between the foundational Christian belief that all human beings are created in the image of God and the equally foundational human rights principle of the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings.

If, as Christians believe, it is God who blessed human beings with dignity and equality, human rights must be God-given. A holistic reading of scripture will support this.

By making this case, church-based LGBTI people in southern Africa will be able to keep their LGBTI identities rooted in their religious traditions. An exclusively human rights discourse is easily subsumed into the political frame of alleged foreign influence. One that uses the Christian discourse of dignity and compassion to justify the same rights is immune to this danger.

10.2 Reclaim Christianity for LGBTI communities by focusing on the central tenets of the faith

The history of Christianity is littered with perversions of the faith justified at the time by cherry-picking the Bible: the oppressive "holy" empires of medieval Europe; the murderous

If, as Christians believe, it is God who blessed human beings with dignity and equality, human rights must be God-given.



Seminars, workshops and conferences that enable dialogue between LGBTI groups and churches are vital for building trust.

Crusades; the invasion and depopulation of the Americas; the Atlantic slave trade; the oppression of women; the missionary-enabled “scramble” for Africa; the obscenity of Apartheid. The hatred of LGBTI people by many southern African church leaders and churchgoers is only the latest of these perversions.

In all these episodes, a minority of Christians always struggled to reclaim the Christian faith. They prevailed in the end by proclaiming the spirit of the Gospel rather than the “letter”, as the New Testament itself commands (Romans 2:29).

LGBTI activists and allies need to package and deliver this message consistently at all levels. Sermons, publications and Bible studies need to be employed to drive this message home. A focus on Christ’s love for outcasts and others on the margins, on the Golden Rule and on the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22:35-40) must be the central messages to the churches and society as a whole.

10.3 Expand existing structures that enable information-sharing with church leaders and congregations

Seminars, workshops and conferences that enable dialogue between LGBTI groups and churches are vital for building trust, understanding and rapport through direct human interaction and engagement. They are expensive, but they are an indispensable component for long-term success in overcoming homophobia in the region.

They require constant follow-up, but research by IAM shows that repeat participants become increasingly accepting of LGBTI people. HIV and AIDS platforms, especially those conducted under the auspices of the World Council of Churches - Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (WCC-EHAIA), provide excellent opportunities for engagement with the churches. LGBTI groups urgently need to establish links with the EHAIA offices in Harare.

10.4 Facilitate new research and disseminate the findings widely

Awareness of the indigenous history and development of LGBTI communities in southern Africa is vital for combating homophobia. Until recently, most information about homosexuality and gender diversity in Africa has been academic and inaccessible, while the materials tailored for general audiences have been copied from Western sources. Now that more African researchers are investigating local LGBTI histories and cultures, there is an urgent need not just to encourage more research but to make the findings accessible to everyone.



These goals require a collaborative strategy to bring academics and activists together. Some groups are already engaged in this kind of collaborative materials development. For example, IAM has been working with Stellenbosch University, and the Gay and Lesbian Network based in Pietermaritzburg has been working with UJAMAA-UKZN.

Such partnerships need to become the norm rather than the exception. We also need to mobilize scholarships for students to do research at Master’s and Doctoral levels on the intersections of sexual minorities, gender and religion in the region. There are already programmes at UKZN and Stellenbosch, but they need to be expanded, as well as replicated in other universities in the region.

Awareness of the indigenous history and development of LGBTI communities in southern Africa is vital for combating homophobia.

conclusion

silent no longer - narratives of engagement between LGBTI groups and the churches in southern Africa



The greatest desire of most LGBTI people in southern Africa is not securing legal rights, important as these are. They want something more fundamental: acceptance in their families, communities and churches.

Christian churches should be promoting acceptance. Instead, many are among the most virulent drivers of the homophobia and transphobia that prevent LGBTI people from enjoying either their legal rights or the acceptance they need at a deeper level.

The four strategic focuses outlined above are “baby steps”, but they will and can drive the activism of LGBTI groups and straight allies towards successfully challenging homophobic churches as well as shaping social attitudes throughout the region. Above all, they will enable further progress towards making the church welcoming to all children of God.



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