

stabanisation

**A discussion paper about disrupting backlash by reclaiming
LGBTI voices in the African church landscape**

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engaging the task at hand



The title of the convening that gave rise to this collaborative reflection *Breaking through the Backlash: Transformative encounters between LGBTI people and Churches in Africa*, implies a level of visible and tangible progress in pursuing justice for LGBTI people within the African faith landscape and a coordinated push-back against progressive gains and constructive progress.¹²

Consequently this contribution starts by critically engaging the African contextual faith landscape and reflecting on examples of both progress and emerging backlash when it comes to the full inclusion of LGBTI people within African faith communities. Following from this, we explore the contours of a possible theology of liberation for LGBTI people in the African context. We agree with Makau Matua who argues that to engage with backlash we require "...thoughtful analysis, courageous advocacy and fundamental reform."

A Theology by LGBTI people for LGBTI people

We take our cue for this work from the prophetic call voiced in the publication following the 2016 Homophobia and churches in Africa: A dialogue consultation hosted in Pietermaritzburg entitled *When faith does violence: Reimagining engagement between churches and LGBTI groups on homophobia in Africa*. The call emerging from the publication was for the development of a people's or, more poignantly termed, a prophetic theology from the margins. The challenge voiced within the publication called for theology done by LGBTI people in Africa for LGBTI people in Africa – in the process, disrupting the traditional status of authoritative voices when it comes to theological discourse as well as the dominant direction of theological reflection and engagement.

To engage with backlash we require thoughtful analysis, courageous advocacy and fundamental reform

izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology

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We proposed Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology within this contribution that calls for theological reflection(s) done by those, and starting from the lived experiences of those, who are often negatively identified in the African context with the term Isitabane.

We do this work self-consciously as four African Izitabane people who identify diversely within the LGBTI abbreviation and who have navigated our way through the African faith landscape in uniquely complex embodied ways. In the process of doing theology we broadly propose that Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology calls for an embodied reclaiming of all that is life-affirming within faith landscapes, re-imagining community and the engagement with the sources of faith and remembering our communal sacramental identity. We also weave into this contribution something of our own embodied experiences within faith communities when we recount narratives recalling personal experiences of the Eucharist in relation to navigating our sexuality and gender identity and expressions. The aim of these narratives are two-fold; they firstly illustrate our collective commitment to the process of doing theology from the body, and secondly they highlight something of the incomplete and ongoing nature of the work that we are engaged in. We consequently situate ourselves, through this contribution, in the uncomfortable in-between space, between that which we so painfully know and the collective embodied flourishing that we long for.

One of the deacons moves hastily after the cleric asked: "beloveds in the Lord are you served with bread?" In the back, one of the congregants put her hand up. The deacon needs to get to her. In his rapped movement the bread of the Eucharist falls accidentally from the silver plate and lands on the church floor. The deacon is dumbstruck for a moment and slightly embarrassed. He hastily turns around and fetched another plate and moves gently past the bread on the floor. He is not bothered, she needs to be served with bread. I, however, cannot stop gazing, there the bread lies, between me and the Eucharist table. I am sitting directly in front of the table. The bread just lies there, worthless, discarded and impure. "The body of Christ is broken for you", the consecrated words of the Eucharist are uttered. The Eucharistic words sounds so performative I think. I wondered, is this bread on the floor consecrated? Is this bread still the body of Christ? No! Surely not, the bread, it cannot be, its filthy. When last did someone vacuum that spot? The bread is unclean, you cannot clean that which is unclean, especially when it is bread that is on a church floor. The uncleanliness of the bread connects with something inside of me. I am the unclean bread that is on the church floor. That no one wants to touch. Because I am gay. I am unclean Leviticus proclaims. My uncleanliness is against nature Apostle Paul asserts. I am not supposed to be in the sexual position of women, it is against nature. The filth of the floor altered the nature of the bread. Consecrated words cannot save the bread from impurity. Consecrated words cannot save me from impurity. I am doomed. Am I?

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But why reclaim such a negative term?

Maybe appropriating the derogatory term Izitabane and (impossibly) coupling it with theology requires some attention before we move into a critical contextual reflection. “Nasi lezizitabane or lezizitabane,” which literally translate into “here comes these homosexuals, lesbians or gays” are words we often hear being uttered to LGBTI people walking the streets in local townships. Isitabane (singular) or Izitabane (plural) is the Zulu word most frequently used in communal spaces to discriminate, undermine and shame LGBTI people. This word is applied to both gender non-conformance and same sex desire and at times is used interchangeably with words such as Ungqingili (singular) or oNgingili (plural), Inkonkoni (singular) or Izinkonkoni (plural).

The term Isitabane originates from conceptual engagements with intersexuality and articulates something of the understanding of intersex people as people who possess both sexual organs traditionally associated with being a female or male. The term is consequently often applied to gays, lesbians and transgender people and insinuates the notion of an individual possessing both sexual organs and someone that subsequently does not conform to the heteronormative orientation and gender identity.³ Despite the populist argument, especially from African leaders that so-called ‘homosexuality’ is a Western import, historical research has highlighted that in the Southern African context ubutabane relationships were well established and documented.⁴⁵

In the South African context, the constitution is well known for its progressive stance on gender, sex and sexual orientation that finds pertinent expression in the bill of rights.⁶ However, with this being said, Izitabane in South Africa experience prejudice and sexual discrimination based on their sexuality and gender. We have heard and have been troubled by so many stories in Southern Africa about LGBTI persons being murdered under the pretence of ‘correcting’ in order to conform to heteronormative ideals. So called ‘corrective rape’ has become an ongoing violation that targets Izitabane in Southern Africa.⁷

Beyond the example of ‘corrective rape’ as a mechanism employed by heteropatriarchy in the process of controlling the sexuality of gender non-conforming individuals, as a further example in 2018 the former South African deputy minister of education resigned from office because he was charged with assault.⁸ Upon his appearance in court he claimed that he assaulted the three women because they called him Isitabane. Manana’s incident highlights how the word Isitabane is negatively perceived in our society and connotes the derogatory elements that fuel discrimination as it undermines the dignity of a human being and constitutes a dehumanizing stance. The question probably emerges why use this word at all in the process of working toward the flourishing of communal bodies of LGBTI people in the African faith landscape.



Taking it back and turning it on its head

Drawing on the insights posited within ‘queer theory’ we argue that the term Izitabane might be used as a better conceptual tool to conduct radical cultural and political critique in contemporary South Africa when it comes to LGBTI people.⁹ Isitabane is indeed a term that is complicated as it is dominantly used in a discriminatory manner. We argue that it is precisely this dimension that makes it particularly useful. Firstly, we argue that the pure shocking and offensive nature of the term in African contexts cracks open space for authentic conversation to begin and for the enhancement of the process of destabilizing neat gender and sexuality categories. Secondly and more recently the term has been reclaimed and re-appropriated as a signifier of proud self-identification. We argue that it is precisely the unsettling semantic nature of the word that we need to unpack and interrogate in the process of the re-appropriation of the term Isitabane.¹⁰

We do not deny the fact that the re-appropriation of the term Izitabane may evoke or bring to memory some painful experiences and encounters for those involved in this context. We do, however, believe that it constitutes a promising tool in pursuit of a radical sexual politics in South Africa. Milani Tommaso proposes Stabanisation as a radical practice of decoloniality that regards identity categories and ideological formations from the North through the lens of Southern African experiences. Stabanisation, therefore, resists settling on conclusive answers and stable constructions but instead unveils the uncomfortable ambiguities, complexities and raptures that ensue from the intersections of race, and non-normative gender and sexual subjectivities in the African context.



Izitabane as a verb

We propose Stabanisation as a tool in pursuit of a radical decolonial practice through the lens of Southern African experiences that is brought into critical conversation with the notion of ubuntu theology. We argue for this in order to counter theologies that have denied, negated or demonized the reality of the body and bodily desire as Marcella Althaus-Reid so poignantly denotes:

*“Denying lust, or the ‘lustful desires of the flesh’, determines when, how and with whom we go to bed, and as such it has been the issue of main interest in all heterosexually-based theology. All the concepts of sin and grace seem to be unendingly tangled around the theologian’s gaze at other people’s beds, bathrooms or sofas. Heterosexual theology has found in its development the same problems and difficulties that people usually find in their sexual lives, for instance, issues of hierarchical relations, positioned bodies and monogamic patterns of thought which tend to constrain and de-nurture people’s lives. While people struggle to find life and meaning in the relationships of the sofa beds of friends and lovers”*¹¹

Through this contribution we aim to affirm the humanity of Izitabane within the contours of ubuntu theology that calls for the reclaiming of African identities and for communal belonging, flourishing and well-being.¹² We hope that the humanity, dignity and value of Izitabane will be honoured as human beings made in the Image of God. By appropriating ubuntu theology for Izitabane through the process of Stabanisation we hope to enhance and deepen the meaning of the Zulu saying noting that “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” which literally translate into “a person is a person through others” or as John Mbiti poignantly summarises “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”

Before, however, exploring the contours of Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology and extending the invitation for further reflection and collective development, we now turn our attention to the contextual realities within the African faith landscape that demands the imperative call for liberation. Although by no means exhaustive, we engage different African contextual examples that might offer some illustrations of progress being made for LGBTI people of faith and systemic mechanisms of backlash that this progress has encountered. Although our engagement with these contextual realities might have a theoretical tone, we want to acknowledge the painfully high embodied price that those at the forefront of these ideologically contested developments pay and that the wounds of progress are most dominantly written on the bodies of LGBTI people.

All the concepts of sin and grace seem to be unendingly tangled around the theologian’s gaze at other people’s beds, bathrooms or sofas.

“I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”
– John Mbiti

two steps forward and one backward: considering con- textual backlash and progress

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It was clearly communicated that I and those like me were not welcome to the special General Synod meeting of the Dutch Reformed Church that took place in Pretoria in 2016.

The special synod was called precisely to deal with the disruption of LGBTI people and the unruly bodies that were welcomed during the 2015 synod, but that subsequently created a great deal of conflict and strife and therefore necessitated a special synod meeting. The Sunday newspaper announced that no disruption would be tolerated and that those with #Liefdeis liefde T-shirts would not be allowed to enter the meeting.¹³ Upon arrival at the meeting venue the reception was chilling and the aggression tangible. I slipped passed those who were stationed with strict orders not to allow us into the meeting venue and found a seat at the edge of the pew on the balcony. A man, not much older than me, probably an elder in the church structures approached me and demanded that I leave the meeting venue. He insisted that it was clearly communicated that I was not welcome and that I should leave. In response to my refusal he took me by the arm and indicated that if I refused I would be forcefully removed. In the midst of this threatening encounter the moderator of the church meeting started proceedings on the meeting floor and welcomed all present. He indicated that the meeting would start by all those present sharing the signs of the Eucharist and that also the guests to the synod meeting on the balcony would be invited to partake in the communal meal. In what felt like a heartbeat the hand that was instructed to forcefully remove me became the hand that had to share the broken body of Christ with me in the signs of bread and wine. To this day words escape me to express the violence, the disjunctiveness and the strange grace of these moments.

In Southern Africa, sexuality and gender are constructed, nurtured and regulated by faith communities and sustained by culture.



In Southern Africa sexuality and gender are constructed, nurtured and regulated by faith communities and sustained by culture.¹⁴ How does these constructions, nurturing and regulation of gender and sexuality look? What does faith communities gain from influencing sexuality and gender? At the heart of the next section we try to engage with the above mentioned questions and discuss and analyse the backlash and progress of faith communities in relation to the advancement of the human dignity of LGBTI people. In the first part of this section we look at some of the countries geographically located in the Southern African region and collectively take stock of some of the progress and also backlash to progress within these different contexts. After our contextual discussion we highlight some of the structural mechanisms and strategies that to our minds inform the backlash.

Botswana

The advancement of equality and human dignity of LGBTI people in Botswana has been a collective effort of activist organizations, law fraternity and faith communities. In 2017 the High Court ordered the government of Botswana to legally recognize the gender identity of a transgender woman. Following this landmark ruling, earlier in June 2019 the Botswana High Court decriminalized same-sex sexual conduct. Resistance from faith communities to maintain, nurture and regulate the criminalization of sexual conduct was evident in the national conversation around decriminalization. The Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana (EFB) played a key role in driving the narrative that decriminalization of same-sex conduct would erode the moral fibre of Botswana.

The protection of normative gender and sexual values and norms, according to these arguments creates conditions that enhances the well-being of families and communities that further supports the flourishing of the nation state.¹⁵ For years the EFB strategically ran campaigns portraying LGBTI people as “delinquent beings and deserving of nothing but to be thrown in prison cells and mental hospitals.”¹⁶ The religious rhetoric of the EFB became the bedrock for physical and virtual bullying and violence. The EFB’s violent rhetoric is not different from the associations that this organization belongs too. The EFB is a member of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA). In part the AEA is a member of the World Evangelical Alliance that promotes the right to “attempt to influence public policy on gay rights.” As a global religious body the WEA is therefore meddling in sovereign affairs of nation states. Kapya Kaoma in his book on *Globalizing the culture wars: US conservative and African churches and homophobia* gives a detailed account of how the US conservative churches recruited prominent African church leaders to restrict progress towards the inclusion and to advocate for the ban of LGBTI rights. US conservatives channelled funding to African churches in support of their restriction of LGBTI human rights, fuelling homophobic attitudes and violent anti-homosexual treatment. Numerous churches in Africa are the beneficiaries of this kind of funding and consequently adopt this US conservative’s stance that informs new forms of heteropatriarchal binary colonization.¹⁷



Contrary, to the EFB, AEA and WEA backlash the Botswana Christian Council (BCC), supported decriminalization. The BCC progressive stance on the equality and human dignity of LGBTI people can be attributed to the collaborative efforts of activists and faith communities that worked together to demystify stereotypes and stigma that fuelled religious prejudice. Engaging with faith communities is a messy and complex endeavour that requires some sort of understanding how faith, sexuality and gender interrelate. The EFB dominant narrative of morality is a colonial heritage of laws that regulated the bodies desire. Canadian political philosopher Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* points out that “subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency.” Botswana activists, advocacy workers, religious leaders and faith communities’ collective efforts can be attributed to seeking a just society where the human dignity of all people are intertwined. You cannot be truly human if the other’s, and in this case LGBTI people’s, human dignity is denied. The sensitization processes, where activists and faith leaders and communities get into one room and openly dialogue in safe-space destabilizes the boundaries of us and them. Proximity to the other through storytelling connects people’s minds, hearts and doors that destabilizes oppressive moral behaviour that was handed down by colonial powers.

Malawi

The position of religious leaders in Malawi is both viewed as stumbling block and an opportunity for the advancement of equality and dignity. In 2016 Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECM) and the Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM) marched in the capital of Malawi and handed over a petition to stop the decriminalization of homosexuality and abortion. The issue that mainly informed this collective protest action by above mentioned churches was the protection of the so-called ‘family.’ Initially the debate concerning homosexuality in Malawi was sparked by national interest in the arrest of Tiwonge Chimbalanga, a transgender woman, and Steven Monjeza, a cisgender man when they got married in 2010. Chimbalanga and Monjeza destabilized religious and cultural beliefs of the construction of marriage that is dominantly understood as being between one man

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and one woman. The incarceration of Chimbalanga and Monjeza ignited the conversation around international powers and development aid. The debate concerning development aid making demands for LGBTI rights and former president Joyce Banda is well documented. The landscape of the advancement of LGBTI equality and dignity in Malawi is confusingly complex:

“The political discourse on LGBTI human rights has been contradictory and often confusing. At times government has appeared willing to scrap discriminatory legislation, while simultaneously wishing to avoid the perception that changing existing laws are the result of external, donor pressure. Despite the government’s apparent reluctance to address the issue there is sufficient evidence to suggest that even within a hostile legislative environment significant progress is being made in terms of raising public awareness and sensitizing key stakeholders about the need for all citizens to have equal rights, and for those rights to be protected.”¹⁸

In recent election debates the rhetoric of confusion morphed into certainty when contenders in the presidential contest asserted their firm stance on the denial of LGBTI rights and human dignity. Cross-pollination of religious and political conservative ideologies on traditional family values, culture and citizenship is saturated with homogeneity. We agree with the analysis-argument of Basile Ndjio stating that:

“...in many African countries, sexuality has become a political and social landscape of privileged intervention by the post-colonial state seeking to purify the body of the nation ... It has also become a key site where the myth about African cultural unity is enacted by those who see a complex continent and its diverse populations through the lens of homogeneity and uniformity. In addition, sexuality has been made a cultural tool through which Africanity is expressed, and nativist ideologies are dramatized. Moreover, in this part of the world, sexuality is increasingly appearing as a marker of citizenship, and especially a critical mode either for claiming one’s citizen’s rights or denying other people their rights as citizens.”¹⁹



The Centre for the Development of People (CEDEP) and the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR) advocates for the advancement of equality and dignity of LGBTI people in the sectors of justice, health and social services. CEDEP and CHRR disrupts the sexual citizen marker by affirming the equality and dignity of LGBTI people.

South Africa

Same-sex sexual conduct in South Africa is decriminalized under law and same-sex people’s unions are recognized by South African law. Constitutional democracy in the state does not necessarily imply that faith communities affirms the human dignity of LGBTI people. Furthermore, the disconnect between the protection sanctioned by the South African constitution and the precarious lived realities faces by LGBTI people in the South African context has often been commented on and have given rise to rich reflection concerning the maturity of the South African constitutional dispensation. In this section, we will look at the following churches and ecumenical body: Dutch Reformed Church, Methodist and the Anglican Church in Southern Africa.

In the South African landscape, the backlash and progress became apparent within the Dutch Reformed Church.²⁰ In October 2015 the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) made the decision to fully affirm the human dignity LGBTI people. Joy was short lived as numerous documents of objection flooded the leadership of the DRC. In 2016, buckling under the pressure of these objections the DRC retracted its 2015 position statement of inclusion and regressed to a legalistic and conservative position pertaining to sexual diversity within the faith community.

A group of 11 DRC believers took the church to court to seek legal judgement. On 21 August 2018, the case of the 11 members against the DRC was heard in the Pretoria High Court. Essentially the two main issues for consideration was, on the one hand, a technical issue of alleged procedural misconduct as it was argued that the 2015 progressive decision was compromised and ultimately overturned when the meeting procedures were inappropriately led by those responsible for procedural oversight. The second issue engaged, on the other hand, was the complex process of the balancing of rights within the South African constitutional dispensation, when rights protecting the freedom of religion is brought into conversation with rights protecting personal liberty pertaining to issues such as race, class, gender and, particular to this contribution, sexual orientation.

Judgment was handed down on Friday 8 March 2019 and ruled in favour of the plaintive on both grounds. The misuse of church law and procedural process was highlighted as a strategy employed to overturn the progress that was made in the faith community to full inclusion of LGBTI people. More profoundly the ruling implies that faith communities, and this include all faith communities situated within the South African constitutional dispensation, cannot use claims of religious freedom in order to discriminate against the rights, liberties and freedom of LGBTI people protected by the constitution. The rulings constitutional grounds were affirmed when a conservative group, the Alliance Defending the Autonomy of Churches in South Africa (ADACSA), petitioned the ruling in order to confirm that the judgement that was handed down was not only made on procedural grounds but also by affirming the values of the constitution. The application was again dismissed by a full bench of judges and this marks substantial progress for the full inclusion of LGBTI people in the South African faith contexts.⁴¹



Openly queer ministers in the Methodist church face stigma, shame, and are treated as outcasts.

For a long time the Methodist Church of Southern Africa were dominantly in the spotlight when considering the position of LGBTI people within faith communities due to the churches discontinuation of Rev. Ecclesia de Lange. Much has been learnt concerning the full inclusion of LGBTI within faith communities by this ongoing process of mediation, discussion and discernment.²¹ South African Methodist minister and scholar, Simanga Kumalo, for instance argued that the Methodist Church in Southern Africa (MCSA) claims to accept gay and lesbian people to its membership and ministry, however, it has not taken further steps to recognize same-sex unions. The complexity of the issue and the disconnect between progressive and conservative perspectives on the realities faced by LGBTI people in the Methodist Church in Southern Africa has recently been further illuminated by a study conducted by Ntobeko Dlamini that drew on the methodological insights of oral history and engaged the embodied lived experiences of Izitabane or queer ministers in the Methodist church in KwaZulu-Natal. The findings highlighted that openly queer ministers in the Methodist church face stigma, shame, and are treated as outcasts.²² Dlamini's findings and the recent ruling of the Methodist church's ban on LGBTI suggest that the Methodist church has betrayed its own mandate and stance of claiming to be the loving and accepting church who stands in solidarity with the marginalized.

In the global Methodist arena, after years of debate, prayers and negotiations the Methodist church in February 2019 held a general conference in St. Louis, United States of America where a decision was taken by the church that a traditional plan was a way forward. The traditional plan retains the exclusion of the LGBTI clergy if they are practicing homosexuals. The United Methodist church maintained its position to accept LGBTI people but with the exception that they remain celibate. Same-sex relationships have generally been conceptualized as equal to lust, prostitution, and promiscuity, fornication, and these do not meet the standards, or the value as set by the church of marriage. The notion of equating homosexuality to fornication, prostitution, and promiscuity is born from the exclusivist interpretation of the bible by heteropatriarchal backlash. In the United Methodist church conference, out of the 41 percent of members who voted in favour of the traditional plan, 30 percent was from Africa. Sarah Dreier claims that "...Africans were not alone in rejecting LGBTI church members. African religious leaders formed alliances with conservative American Christians to oppose LGBTI inclusion." On a more positive note Dreier, however, points out that some African church leaders are in fact open minded and doing progressive work engaging LGBTI people in the church, with the hope to build acceptance. In her research with 50 national and regional Christian leaders from Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, Dreier reports that these leaders were portraying tolerance towards LGBTI people and highlighted their engagement with LGBTI congregants. However, she stressed that something is a play here as we see the public opposition to the inclusion of LGBTI people in ministry. So, although there seems to be a greater acceptance to LGBTI church membership, leadership is still considered solely within the domain of those who identify as heterosexual. Something noteworthy that inspires hope has been the fact that LGBTI clergy has still been publically ordained since the decision was taken by conference. This is an



important sign of resistance and resilience from the Methodist LGBTI members against the conservative church members, decisions and structures.

The Anglican Church in Southern Africa in the last two decades made significant strides in advancing the equality and dignity of LGBTI people. For the last two years, the Archbishops Commission on Human Sexuality travelled to various dioceses in the province to train reference groups to listen to the stories of LGBTI people, friends, family and even those who oppose the sexuality and gender of LGBTI people. The mandate of the commission is:

"... to present to Provincial Synod 2019 a proposal enabling the Church 'to minister to those in same-sex unions and the LGBTI Community in the context in which ACSA operates in Southern Africa.'. This mandate does not rescind the decision of Provincial Synod 2016: it neither assumes that ministry to members of the LGBTI community will include the blessing of same-sex unions, nor does it exclude that possibility, should that be the mind of Provincial Synod 2019. It also directs the Commission to consider the situation of Dioceses outside South Africa, in which there is no provision in law for same-sex unions. The mandate is in line with the injunction of the 1998 Lambeth Conference and Provincial Synod 2002 to listen to the views of the LGBTI community, and in particular with that part of Lambeth Resolution 1.10 which 'calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals.'"²³

The approach adopted by the Anglican Church of Southern Africa is remarkable if one considers some of the conservative trends noticeable in the global denominational landscape. In 2008, for instance, the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) met in Jerusalem as a separate body outside of the Lambeth Conference. GAFCON emerged as a response to a suggested threefold crisis namely: obscuring of Biblical truths for example the consecration of a bishop who is in a same-sex union, secondly ecclesiastical territorial friction and thirdly failure to discipline those who break church law. The Jerusalem Declaration states the foundation of the convening and charts the mission of the movement and of the numerous points raised by the declaration two addresses the intersection of the Bible, sexuality and marriage.²⁴

Of the 41 percent who voted in favour of the traditional plan, 30 percent was from Africa.



GAFCON reclaims the authority of the Bible as central source in the movement. The Bible from this perspective becomes the source book of fundamentalism and informs stable and binary gender constructions. This point is evident in the Jerusalem Declaration when it again states that marriage is between a man and a woman. It argues that marriage is the exclusive space of “sexual intimacy”, reproduction, and the basis for family. In recent years, GAFCON made several statements that further illustrates their stance. On the consecration of women as Bishops the movement is clear that they “retain the historic practice of the consecration only of men as bishops.”²⁵ Furthermore, GAFCON countered a Church of England decision to write a baptism liturgy to affirm the gender appropriation of transgendered people. The declaration and subsequent statements is a call back to orthodox Anglicanism that “guard[s] and [proclaims] the unchanging truth in a changing world.”

The movement back to ‘orthodox Anglicanism’ is an inward retreat for self-preservation of enclosed identity. Throughout history we have seen the detrimental effects of enclosed identities that others, stigmatize and dehumanizes the other and the development of set boundaries of “us” vs. “them.”²⁶

In contrast the approach of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa that seek to develop pastoral guidelines to provide a framework to minister to LGBTI people speak of some awareness of the importance of inclusion and embrace as Christian values. We commend ACSA for taking a bold step towards active listening to both sides of the conversation. However, we are of the opinion that the time has arrived where LGBTI people must respond to their own theological needs. Therefore, after considering something of the systemic and ideological issues underlying these examples of backlash and progress, in the next last section we propose Iztabane zingabantu ubuntu theology as a way of LGBTI people doing theology from their own embodied lived experiences in order to promote the full inclusion for all those who do not fit the heteropatriarchal ideal.

“the misuse of church law and procedural process was a strategy to overturn the progress made in the faith community to full inclusion of LGBTI people.”

pervasive waters of backlash

4



Pushback and backlash to much of what has been highlighted and discussed in the contextual examples of progress as posed above can be systemically understood when considering the pervasive normalcy of ‘the water we swim in.’

We understand the backlash that we witness and experience to various forms of progressive inclusion as systemic expressions of heteropatriarchy or a term that has recently been re-framed as heteropatriarchy.^{27 28} This new expression affirms the analysis that patriarchy and heteronormativity is the structural result when culture and religion align to inform dominant constructions of gender. This system is not a mere conceptual confusion, or an idea, but it has very real consequences for bodies and finds expression in the intersection of socio-economic realities, class, race, gender and sexuality construction.

Patriarchal heteronormativity

The pervasive construction of patriarchal heteronormativity is the result of a systematic normalization of heterosexuality and is dominantly present in African contexts.²⁹ According to Andrew Martin et al, “this is the idea, dominant in most societies, that heterosexuality is the only ‘normal’ sexual orientation, only sexual or marital relations between women and men are acceptable and each sex has certain natural roles in life, so-called gender roles.” Patriarchy and subsequent heteronormativity thus equates being human to being a man and a man understood over against a woman and in ideal union with a woman. This system then further informs dominant ideas about masculinity, family, marriage and citizenship.

Men and boys who deviate from traditional norms of masculinity which are dominant and aggressive over other genders, suffer violence, discrimination and abuse.

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Being an Alpha male

Heteronormativity informs dominant ideas of what it means to be a man. Connell et al argues that hegemonic masculinity as a dominant perception and ideal is maintained by using dominance and violence to safeguard and sustain masculinity against encroachment. It is also the same narrative that informs homosexuality is un-African and a product of colonial rule.³⁰ A real man is one who provides, protects, produces, leads and penetrates. Connell further argues that men and boys who deviate from these traditional norms of masculinity which are modes of masculinity that are dominant and aggressive over other genders, suffer violence, discrimination and abuse.

In spaces where it is not possible to remodel healthier forms of masculinity by creative reinventions, hegemonic ideals of masculinity teach men that showing 'soft' emotion is subjecting oneself to weakness and furthermore that it is acceptable to express violence and anger towards women and alternative genders. Marginalized men and women often assist in sustaining these ideals by supporting, supposing and applauding men who are violent.³¹ The protection from encroachment not only supports the bashing of women, Izitabane and other men from tarnishing the idea of masculinity, but upholds systems where those who would otherwise fall in the margins, such as women and MSM are celebrated for upholding the ideals of patriarchy.³² This further fuels social structures which degrade the value of an all-inclusive community by priding certain identities as important or powerful over others.

Marriage = one man + one woman

A second structure that is claimed to exclusively belong within the domains of econo-heteropatriarchy is that of marriage. In numerous faith discussions and church decisions, as also became apparent in our contextual discussion above, concessions are made towards the inclusion of LGBTI within faith communities but marriage as the foundational union construction in society is reserved for those who identify as heterosexual.³³ Religion and culture align to keep this idea in place as it is often argued that the focus of a marriage union is reproduction and the subsequent 'biological compatibility' of males and females is used as proof for this argument. When for instance listening to the reflections on the nature and value of marriage as an institutional container for union between one man and one woman as often proposed as the only possible option when contemplating the question of union within conservative faith communities, one would think that the Bible speaks in clear singular (positive) voice on the subject of marriage and that one unquestionable model is held up consistency within the body of Scripture. This is of course not the case as we see different models proposed and deemed acceptable in various parts of the biblical narrative. These different models speak of different contextual conventions and aim to address the needs of differently situated communities within the development and unfolding of the biblical story. Just as we encounter a diversity of voices in the process of interpreting the Bible, the inner voice of scripture is also rich and complex. We pick up on this notion when we further discuss the contours of Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology.



A father, a mother and 2.5 children

Closely related to the instance of marriage being a heteronormative construction that could only be constituted when one man and one woman is involved in the union is the notion employed within backlash rhetoric when arguing for 'traditional family values.'³⁴ The narrow, heterosexist definition of family informed by religion and culture is that of a mother, a father and their biological children produced from within the holy confines of heterosexual marriage. The embodied lived realities of real African families, however, undermine and deconstruct this single and restrictive notion of what family means. A diversity of family constructions has always existed and we would like to acknowledge and affirm the rich constellation of constructions that constitute family in the African context. Beyond traditional nuclear families, single parent, multi-generational, female- and child-headed households and childless families are but some of the examples what constitute family. Not only is the backlash notion of 'traditional family values' problematic because it implies one single construction of family, it also gives the impression that there are somehow universal 'family values' that exist and that can and should be appropriated by all. These so called traditional family values are, however, nothing more than ideological rhetoric based on culturally informed fundamentalist religions notions of econo-heteropatriarchy.

A noteworthy attempt to resist these limiting notions of family in the Southern African region has been the affirming and reclaiming statement that the Global Interfaith Network launched in February 2018. The Johannesburg Declaration signifies an attempt to protect the diversity of alternative and LGBTI families, to celebrate sexual diversity within African cultural and faith context.³⁵ The statement was the product of organizing across a range of sectors and a diversity of stakeholders in the process of reclaiming a diversity of family constructions as both Christian and African. Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology argues for the same style of organizing and engagement as illustrated in this example.

A diversity of family constructions has always existed and we affirm the rich constellation of constructions that constitute family in the African context.



The prescribed container of 'econo-heteropatriarchy' is not big or stable enough to contain the diversity of human experience.

A true citizen under the law

A final category that we would like to discuss that is often co-opted by econo-heteropatriarchal discourse is that of what constitutes a true African national citizen, especially if a nation appropriates Christianity as a value for the entire population.³⁶ Within these context LGBTI people are often demonized on the basis of homophobic religious and political discourse. These ideas find expression and are often protected within legislation. We recently witnessed this form of backlash in a very tangible way when on Friday 24 May 2019 the Kenyan high court ruled against the petition to repeal provisions 162 and 165 of the Kenyan Penal Code which criminalizes same sex conduct. The Court had been asked to review the constitutional validity and compatibility of Section 162 and 165 of the Penal Code, which provides for criminal sanctions to be imposed on individuals convicted of engaging in or permitting someone else to engage with them in 'carnal acts against the order of nature' as well as section 165 of the Penal Code which makes provision for sanctions against male consensual same-sex sexual conduct. The negative ruling declared a lack of evidence of extensive discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in the existence and application of the law in the Kenyan context. In order to fully understand the significance of this contextual example we firstly need to take into account something of the contextual and historical realities informing the existence of Section 162 and 165 within the Kenyan Penal code.

Laws against the body, particularly sexual laws, were paramount in the social ordering of genders and sexualities in the micro and macro scale.³⁷⁻³⁸ Sodomy laws, as particular examples of colonial law that has found space in traditional African dialogue on sexualities and has also been profoundly driven by religious fundamental beliefs, have had devastating and fatal outcome on LGBTI rights and identity.³⁹ Beyond this macro level impact, for individuals it has had rather distorted implications on the identities and experiences of LGBTI people in the African context as these laws does not only criminalize sexual expression between same sex people but also demonizes it and declares it un-African and un-Christian. Aiming to illuminate something of the complexities highlighted above the Kenyan National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC) launched an appeal against the constitutionality of section 162 and 165 of the Kenyan Penal code, which criminalizes same sex relations. The appeal was rejected based on the lack of evidence against it infringing on LGBTI rights, while the presiding judge made reference to the idea that there is nonetheless no scientific proof that LGBTI people are born that way. The "draconian colonial-era criminalization of homosexuality," according to the NGLHRC, disenfranchises Kenyans by preventing them from forming part of the national privilege of belonging and benefiting from the safeguards of the constitution, and does not guarantee them protection against "suffering violence, blackmail and torture" but rather subjects them to further risk of torture and discrimination.⁴⁰



In sum, the main thrust of our argument in this section was for the unmasking of econo-heteropatriarchy as a mere construction that is neither absolute nor stable or complete and yet remains pervasive. Izitabane bodies, lives and relationships shows that the prescribed container of econo-heteropatriarchy is not big or stable enough to contain the diversity of human experience. In the final section we call for Izitabane to reclaim, reimagine and remember together with those who long for a world where econo-heteropatriarchy is destabilized, unmasked and ultimately smashed.

Towards a contextual liberation theology

Despite Izitabane living their lives in a space that often deny their existence because of patriarchy, heteronormativity and the way in which the Bible is used to keep these systems in place, or maybe more importantly, precisely because of this we propose a different approach to doing theology. This approach does not call for new tools or a different gospel, but rather for the radical collective reclaiming of the good news of the gospel. As stated at the beginning, in the process of doing theology we broadly propose that Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology calls for and **embodied reclaiming** of all that is good and life-affirming within faith landscapes, **re-imagining** community and the engagement with the sources of faith and **remembering** our communal sacramental identity. We do this embodied theology together and we have tried to illustrate something of the movement of this approach by moving from personal and individual narratives to collective reflection. As a method or approach Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology thus implies an invitation to meet the other, and to be touched by the other, moving from 'I' to 'we' and in the process deepening the complexity of true community.

In the following section we offer a discussion of the contours that inform our collective understanding of Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology. We do this work collectively and from the place of our bodies. We speak from our own place and in the process we hope to make a different voice heard than the dominant discourse that so often want to tell us who we are, where we belong and what our bodies should be doing. We structure our discussion around the foundational notion of embodiment and the communal and collective actions of reclaiming, reimaging and remembering.

Ubuntu theology implies an invitation to meet the other and to be touched by the other, moving from 'I' to 'we'.



Observing sis Patience crouching late into church often gets my spirits high. Her boisterous energy and appeal follows her determined shuffles into the church, half shy and aware, yet continually affirming the poignancy and knowing strut in her step. A character indeed. Her flare, once present, always has a magical effect on the mood of the choir; her angelic voice creates the mood that makes possible the potential of music to move the heart and heal the soul. I've often been lost and taken in by effects of the pristine harmony of melody and heart in the communal sinning, that rarely have I observed that she remains behind, often, while the rest of the choir and the church move forward in time for the Eucharist. Awu, we know Sis Patience and her drama! Of such a sacred ritual of the church, the build up to the heart of connection, I find myself asking why she chooses to miss the blessings here entailed, that she knows are within her grasp, in part towards making the connection that she woke up for. I admit that I am at a miss when she insists that she cannot receive communion having been so late for church, as she then missed her one opportunity to confess her sins. I say, for a minute I marvel at how she, maybe like many others, holds to high esteem the concept of sin, to centralizing it within doctrine and classifying oneself unworthy even in the space of transformation. In that moment, I also take a step back, remembering that in that very same space of transformation what it is that sets me apart from the rest, that which many have seen as something that justifies my exclusion and gives other grounds to judge and conspire against people like me. That I forget that it is as much a space of hurt as it is for healing.

Sin, as reflected on in the story above is often understood as being something that concerns an individual and that call for the denial of the body. Foundational to Ikitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology is the centrality of the body as the site of experience, connection and meaning making and consequently the body is centred as the primary space for theological reflection.

Theological reflection that starts from the body

The theological reflection that we propose starts from the reality of the body and takes seriously the fact that our bodies give expression to sex, gender, longing, desire and comfort. Our bodies creates the landscape from which we interpret our lived realities and enables the possibility of human connectedness and therefore towards true humanity and community. Privileging the body stems from an African knowledge system that views the body as interconnected with nature, ancestors, deity and with the community.

Religion, politics and culture often, however, intersects with one another to compound and prescribe gender roles and behaviour. Religion has often been positioned to police the nature of sexuality and bodies into a heteropatriarchal system. Reclaiming embodiment essentially demands people of difference, especially the other and the oppressed, to own their spaces and destabilize oppressive narratives and systems, by speaking from the body.

“privileging the body stems from an African knowledge system that views the body as interconnected with nature, ancestors, deity and with community.”



Bodies denied

We encounter injustice, stigma and discrimination fundamentally in our bodies and by way of example this concretely manifests in the following ways:

- being denied gender affirming surgery (GRS) because health professionals view GRS as cosmetic surgery that often leads to the deterioration of mental and sexual health;
- illegal medical surgeries that alters sex characteristics of intersex children without their consent;
- the seemingly unquestionable insistence of gender specific bathrooms that denies gender non-conforming and trans-people alternative and affirming options;
- the denial that bisexuality is an orientation and conflating bisexuality with promiscuity;
- claiming that orientations of being gay and lesbian is un-African;
- criminal belief and behaviour that rape will “restore heterosexuality” of lesbian women.

Izibatane, or Stabanisation as a process, speaks from the margins into the centre of power, destabilizing dominant ways of being that is often strengthened and reinforced by religion, culture and certain ways of reading the Bible.

Bodies reclaimed, community reclaimed

For us Izibatane zingabantu ubuntu theology connects with African traditional thought systems, as expressed through Ubuntu philosophy that centres human relations and which locates community as pivotal to the crafting of personhood.⁴¹ Within this system individual flourishing or well-being is measured by relationships of mutual care with individuals and community at large. The responsibility of the individual to help maintain communal well-being in harmony and fairness is paramount to the balance of community.⁴² Humanness here, is understood as achieving one’s humanity through the engagement of others, in ways that do not prescribe or dominate or tarnish the good intentions of community living. Therefore, the discriminatory practices that Izibatane experience in their bodies (as listed above) is contrary to well-being of the community.⁴³

Reclaiming embodiment demands people of difference, especially the other and the oppressed, to own their spaces and destabilize oppressive narratives and systems.



Following from the above, the first movement of Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology is the reclaiming of the humanity of Izitabane. By applying the Ubuntu lens and insisting on Izitabane as human beings we hope to open life affirming spaces. Therefore, at its heart, Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology implies the reclaiming of humanity and the recognition that embodied communities are diversely constituted.

Beyond the inherent benefit for African communities in general, the appropriation of Ubuntu philosophy furthermore allows the church to be the space that is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, which Desmond Tutu highlights as element found in a person living Ubuntu. For Tutu in *Hope and Suffering*, “unity” or rather Ubuntu “is based on the value of justice.” We collectively choose to appropriate and radically reclaim the notion of Ubuntu although we are very aware of criticism against this African philosophical concept and the ways in which it has been ‘grabbed’ in the process to establish a false sense of unity or social cohesion. We are well aware of the fact that Ubuntu originated within patriarchal societies that advanced the interest of men. Patriarchy as hierarchal structure puts men on top and women at the bottom. Within this system, power is enforced from the top, and the bottoms are those who have to abide by the rules. The Stabanisation of this hierarchal structure, disrupts the top-bottom hierarchy and centres power on the margins. Stabanisation stands in this methodological tradition of tricksters that reclaim justice in a radical way. Applying Izitabane zingabantu to ubuntu theology is to embody ubutabane, an act of justice that seeks to reclaim the humanity of Izitabane as human beings. In sum, the first movement of Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology therefore implies a reclaiming of the humanity of Izitabane as people embedded within communities that does not merely tolerate diversity but rather celebrates it and values it as an aspect that contributes to communal flourishing.

Secondly, Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology calls for processes of re-imagining. Beyond arguing for the re-imagining of flourishing African faith communities by reclaiming the embodied humanity of Izitabane as highlighted in the previous sections, we also call for new ways of reading the Bible and ethically reflecting on issues located within the intersection of gender, sexuality, religion and culture.⁴⁴

Taking back the Word

The stalemate in terms of the discussion of Izitabane lived realities and the Bible has often been commented on and experienced by those who still find themselves in mainline faith discussions debating issues of sexual diversity. Rather than functioning as a conversation starter the Bible or Sacred Scriptures often function as a proverbial dead end to creative and imaginative explorations of what the contours of diverse life together, foundationally build on the interpretation of scripture, constitute.

Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu theology calls for us to think together about how life is possible for all in a good way as we draw wisdom and insight from our reading of the Bible. Rather than thinking about Bible reading as an objective activity that belongs in churches and universities, to be overseen by faith leaders and scholars, the call is for an imaginative taking back of the Word by *Izitabane* and those often marginalized because of fundamentalist engagement with scripture.⁴⁵ A central concern here is the continued questions about power. Who gets to say what the meaning of a specific piece of scripture is? Who gets to interpret and proclaim the results of that interpretation? Who gets to determine the dominant narrative? Rather than letting churches or academia decide what the Bible mean, *Izitabane* are called to read the Bible for themselves with others and to draw on their own embodied stories as entry point into the creative process of reading the Bible in community.^{46 47 48}



More than one voice in the Bible

Sometimes when listening to church discussions about sexual diversity one gets the impression that the Bible speaks with one voice on the issue of sex and sexuality. Just as we, however, encounter a diversity of voices in the process of interpreting the Bible, the inner voice of scripture is also rich, diverse and at times contradictory.

A notion that could be very helpful when engaging the above mentioned is understanding the Bible as a so called 'site of struggle' as proposed by the South African biblical scholar Gerald West.⁴⁹ This insight has been very helpful in the process of trying to understand how it is possible that when reading the Bible people can come to such different understandings. How, if we are reading the same text, do we end up with such very different interpretations? Not only is there a diversity of voices gathered around the Bible in the process of interpretation, but the Bible internally also contain a rich diversity of perspectives and positions. A problem often arises when those wishing to protect themselves and their identity connect with voices or perspectives within the Bible that aimed to do a very similar thing for vulnerable communities in transition in the ancient world.

When we believe that the Bible is not for us...

When contemplating the relation between *Izitabane* and the Bible, we call for a radical new way of reading the Bible because of our own embodied experience of exclusion and dehumanization due to certain life denying interpretations of scripture. We ask these questions because we are privileged enough live in community with those who have been excluded and who continue to be excluded on the basis of race, class, gender and sexual orientation and who yet still strive to read the Bible and to live by its principles. We have been shocked and at times saddened when we discover in conversations with those on the margins how these exclusivist interpretations of scripture have found internal traction and often become the inner positions of those most vulnerable and excluded. We saw something of this in 2017 when engaging with *Izitabane* of faith from rural KwaZulu-Natal in a contextual Bible reading exercise, as part of the Eudy Simelane lecture series, when listening to the sentiment expressed that the Bible is indeed against *Izitabane* love and that there is no conversation to be had on the matter with religious leaders or people of faith.^{50 51} When asked, all of us can probably remember a time when we thought that the Bible were not for us or did not belong to us but were the property of the church or to the university. By drawing on the notion of the Bible as a site of struggle *Izitabane zingabantu* ubuntu theology calls for honesty and imagination in the process interpretation and reappropriation of the Bible by *Izitabane*.



Reading the bible from our context and with others

The honesty called for above means that we are serious with ourselves and each other about the fact that all Bible reading is done in a contextual way. We read the Bible in our context and from our own position. Rather than seeing this fact as a problem, we understand this to be a gift as it allows us to bring the embodied stories of our own lives in conversation with the stories of the Bible. The comfort, support, wisdom and guidance that we find by doing this does not, however, belong to any group or individual but comes to its most profound expression when we read the Bible with others. The point is thus not to read the Bible with only those who look like us or who think like us but rather to meet others and the Bible, that is so different from us, together and in the process to create space for more bodies to matter in our collective communities.

The point is to create space for more bodies to matter in our communities.



As we partake in this sacred body and blood of Christ you need to make sure that your spirit, heart, mind and body are clean and sacred for if that is not the case then you are committing sin in the eyes of the Lord. If there is anyone amongst you who is not talking or in good terms with their brothers or any relative for that matter let them go outside and amend things before partaking in this sacred sacrament of the Lord.” These are the words I heard over and over uttered by my Father (who was the pastor of the church) each time he was serving the Sacrament. Sacrament was for those who have gone through the public confirmation as members of the church. Unfortunately for me I did not reach the confirmation stage as I was grappling with my gender incongruence. I delayed taking confirmation because that for me meant I would be agreeing to attend church in female’s uniform which did not sit well with me. Instead I began to withdraw and to isolate myself as I constantly felt that I was different, but I always longed to be served that body and blood of Jesus like everyone else. I thought to myself wait a minute....My father always puts that wine in the fridge at home and the white waffle is always in the cabinet at the dining room. It became a habit of me from that day that whenever I saw my father taking the sacrament to church in the afternoon I will also help myself when no one was noticing. Happily indulging in the sacrament alone, my conscience was clean because I knew that I had not wronged anyone, so I am not sinning. Self-exclusion became an answer to avoid being publicly excluded because I was not confirmed and I could not share my gender difference in the church. Indulging privately in the sacrament I was reclaiming the space to partake in the body and the blood of Christ as I believe myself to be of Christ made in God’s image.

The final movement that we would like to highlight as we collectively reflect on the contours of *Izitabane zingabantu* ubuntu theology is the process of remembering our communal sacramental identity that would hopefully inform the radical reclaiming of the signs of grace as foregrounded in the narrative above.

Sex and sacraments?

What is the commonality between sex and sacraments? Most Christians would probably not dare ask such an indecent question. Even the idea of linking these two concepts crosses boundaries between that which is considered holy and that which is understood to be of this world. And yet at the heart of both sex and the sacraments we find the body.

Rather than think of our bodies or our desires as dirty or something that we should hide, we call for the celebration of our embodied love and desire that disrupts and destabilizes dominant heteronormative ideas about love, desire and relationship. *Izitabane* love and desire destabilizes the understanding that sex is for procreation and that the only way to live in a meaningful relationship is by entering into a heterosexual marriage

Sex as encounter and expression of hospitality

Within *Izitabane zingabantu* ubuntu theology, the body, the site of sexual desire, becomes a space of joy, pleasure, belonging, justice and peace. Sexual desire that is in and for joy, pleasure, belonging, justice and peace stands in contrast to heteropatriarchal hierarchal power constructs of toxic masculinities that subjugate bodies into docile objects. Sexual desire can be defined broadly as a healthy self and mutual erotic stimulation that holistically enhances well-being and goodness. Although *Izitabane* sex is often demonized or made into something shameful within heteropatriarchal discourse, we believe that the sexual desire expressed by *Izitabane* is a unique expression of hospitality and mutual encounter. Where heteropatriarchal structural expressions of desire threatens the wellbeing of bodies, desire expressed by *Izitabane* resists the binary understanding of sex, relationship and marriage.

Encountering the God who first desired us

Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas writes that “through them we learn who we are.”⁵² Sacraments communicates the bodies wellbeing and capacity for joy, pleasure, belonging, justice and peace. The body for Isherwood & Stuart is sacramental and they ask the following critical questions pertaining to the nature of the body when understood as being sacramental:

“What more than the human body and its needs makes us present in the world? What reminds us constantly of the demands of relationship more than our body selves? In what other ways can we really become aware of the divine than by looking deeply and bravely into the face of divine matter? This looking does not make something descend that is not otherwise present; it rather makes demands and offers empowerment in the light of divine indwelling.”⁵³

For this reason, the body is sacramental because it allows us to encounter each other and to encounter God. Williams asserts that “the whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ’s body tells us that God desires us.”⁵⁴ The fact that desire springs from God makes it possible for us to rethink our understanding of our own longing, desires and crossing of boundaries to be with the other. Rather than buying into church politics that wants to order bodies into binary structures *Izitabane zingabantu* ubuntu theology calls for the reclaiming of our bodies and the destabilization of that which is considered normal, proper or holy.

Invitation to continue discovering together

In conclusion when asking ourselves at the outset of this collective writing and reflecting process what faith and belonging to a faith community mean, words and ideas like belonging, tradition, identity, continuity, possibility for life direction, social support, a community of care, ritual or sacrament that signifies a relationship to the transcendental came to the fore. All these words, concepts and ideas were familiar and part of our experiential reality at some stage of our lives and yet we were also so painfully aware of our exclusion, by choice or design, from faith communities. Despite being aware of the ‘not-yet-realized’ nature of our *Ubutabane* embeddedness within faith communities, we allowed ourselves and each other to dream, to think and to imagine an alternative and holistically flourishing community where the unique and embodied humanity of all is recognized and celebrated and where life in sacramental unity could be possible together. We argue that this could be possible in African faith communities if we reclaim our embodied humanness, if we reimagine our relationship to sacred sources and if we remember our collective sacramental identity. None of what we argued for can or should, however, come into being in isolation and therefore as a final word we would like to extend the invitation for more reflection, more conversation, more encounter and more embodied honesty as we truly believe that the sum is more than the individual parts.



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endnotes

- ¹ The current contribution is the result of a collective writing project between representatives from the Gender and Religion Program at UKZN, the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological community engagement and Research and Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) commissioned by The Other Foundation for the Africa regional religion convening entitled Breaking through the Backlash: Transformative encounters between LGBTI people and Churches in Africa. The consultation hosted in Durban from 21-24 July 2019 is the second of its kind and follows the first consultation hosted in Pietermaritzburg in April 2016 entitled Homophobia and churches in Africa: A dialogue.
- ² Although the full abbreviation LGBTIQA+ holds even greater expression of diversity and fluidity we employ LGBTI in this essay because of its dominant use in the Southern African region and across a variety of sectors.
- ³ Heteronormativity, a notion further engaged with in the development of the argument of this contribution, is the ideological worldview and belief-system that regulates societal formations according to heterosexuality as the accepted norm and value for biological males and females to constitute sexual desire.
- ⁴ African State leaders have objected against LGBTI persons and same-sex relationships on the basis that it is a Western import. Scholars have explored this further, please see: "Africa Overview," Human Rights Watch, 2003. <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/wr2k3/>; Jeanne Prinsloo, 'Negotiating transgender identities on the internet-a South African study.' *Agenda*. 25(4). (2011:). 30-41; Masiwa Ragies Gunda. *The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe: a socio-historical analysis of the political, cultural and Christian arguments in the homosexual debate with special reference to the use of the Bible*. (Bamberg: University of Bamberg press, 2010); Thabo Msibi. "The Lies We Have Been Told: On (Homo) Sexuality in Africa." *Africa Today* 58, no. 1 (2011): 54-77.
- ⁵ For more in this regard please see: Epprecht, Marc. *Heterosexual Africa?: The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*. New African Histories Series. (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008).
- ⁶ Section 9, Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution.
- ⁷ The names of Eudy Simelane (JHB-KwaThema: 2008), Thokozani Qwabe (Ladysmith: 2013), Thapelo Makutle (Northern Cape: 2012), Noxolo Nogwaza (JHB-KwaThema: 2011) are but some painful reminders of the lived realities faced by Izitabane in South Africa.
- ⁸ South Africa is also considered to be the birth place of so called 'corrective rape': an act of violence against women committed by men ostensibly to 'cure' lesbians of their nonconforming sexual orientation – or correct it – the belief being that homosexuality is an imported white disease (from the colonial empire). "It is especially African women and girls thought to be lesbian that become victims of corrective rape, with the claimed purpose of turning them into 'real African women'" Kelly, within the article by Di Silvio, further elaborates: "Attackers, often family members, friends, or neighbours of the victims, say they are teaching lesbian women 'a lesson' by raping them and 'showing them how to be 'a real woman'. Although Black Lesbians are the main targets of Corrective Rape, any person with a nonconforming sexual identity is at risk, seeing that the aim or goal is to 'cure' or simply to punish any nonconforming sexual orientations. Thus, any person



thought to be 'too different or insufficiently feminine' and who fails to stay invisible is at risk. Accordingly 86% of black lesbians from the Western Cape said they lived in fear of sexual assault. Lorenzo Di Silvio. "Correcting Corrective Rape: Carmichele and Developing South Africa's Affirmative Obligations To Prevent Violence Against Women." *Georgetown Law Journal* 99 (2011): 1469-717.

⁹ According to Schneider, Queer Theory "is a critical theory concerned principally with cultural deployments of power through social constructions of sexuality and gender." Derived from the idea of denaturalising and de-essentializing stable identities, queer theory is derived from a tradition that is interested in giving new language to criticise heterosexual and racial supremacy. The word Queer began to be deployed in order to encompass the emerging diversity of sexual minorities due to lack of attachment to specific historical identities and defiance of the stable identity allude by then gay rights movement to conform. Please see: Laurel Schneider. "Queer theory." In *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, edited by A.K.M. Adam, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 206-212.

¹⁰ In striving towards political correctness media and Izitabane allies have opted to use the Zulu words such as "Abathandana nobulili obufanayo" that literally translate as those in same-sex relationships. This may sound good and polite to Izitabane, however, terms such as these do not tease out the diversity and the uniqueness of our otherness or queerness (ubutabane bethu abufani). These terms for instance do not speak to the uniqueness of transgender individuals who regard themselves as loyal to the traditional gender binary, post-or in the process of transitioning, and whose relationships could consequently be classified as fitting within the contours of heterosexuality. Whereas on the other hand the term Izitabane does not only refer to non-normative sexualities, in a very literal sense of intersex individuals, it semantically embodies the blurring of the male/female dichotomy, bringing them together into a unique unity and in the process undermining the seeming stability of gender constructions.

¹¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid.

¹² Philosophy and theology have both had a key interest in the pursuit of and towards flourishing as a very fundamental element of humanity and well-being. Some uses of Ubuntu and Christian reflections informed by patriarchal power structures misuse these notions towards ways which deny embodiment. For further reading in this regard please see: Nadia Marais, "Imagining human flourishing?: a systematic theological exploration of contemporary soteriological discourses." PhD diss., Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2015; Janet Trisk, "'Springs of newness and beauty': Grace Jantzen and the search for God." *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 98, no. 1 (2008): 194-203 and Tinyiko Maluleke. "The misuse of ubuntu." *Challenge* 53, no. 12-13 (1999).

¹³ The T-Shirt slogan can be translated with #LoveisLove or #uthandoluthando.

¹⁴ In this paper when we are referring to Southern Africa the following countries constituted this geographical region: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. However, we decided to focus on Botswana, Malawi and South Africa, since this is an ongoing research paper.

¹⁵ Van Klinken argues that Pentecostal nationalism, which clearly pertains to EFB, though the article referrers to Zambia, advocates for "the sexual purity of the nation has eschatological significance and is believed to be under the threat of cosmic forces of evil. The defence of this purity, then, becomes both a nationalist duty and a religious obligation"

¹⁶ Lame Said, "The War on Homosexuality: A look to Botswana" 4 February 2016. <https://legabibo.wordpress.com/2016/02/04/the-war-on-homosexuality-a-look-to-botswana/> . Accessed: 21 June 2019



¹⁷ Hetero-patriarchal binary in this article refers to classification of sexuality and gender in two distinct different opposite and disconnected forms of masculine and feminine informed by social system or culture. Sexuality and gender as two rigidly fixed options male or female.

¹⁸ Browne, "Canaries in the Coal Mines: Phillip Browne, "Canaries in the Coal Mines: An analysis of spaces for LGBTI activism In Malawi Country Report", 4"

¹⁹ Basile Ndjio, 'Sexuality and Nationalist Ideologies in Post-Colonial Cameroon.' In *The Sexual History of the Global South: Sexual Politics in Africa, Asia, and Latin America*, edited by Saskia Wieringa and Horacio Sivori, 120-43. London: Zed Books

²⁰ For an extended version of this reflection please see: Charlene van der Walt, "When faith, love and dignity collide," *The Witness*, October 9, 2018, accessed 08 June, 2019, <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/the-witness/20181009/281479277366821>

²¹ For more on the complexity and intricacies of the processes please see in this regard please see: Donlu Thayer, "Ecclesia De Lange v The Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa for the Time Being: (726/13)[2014] ZASCA 151: The Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa: Ponnann, Wallis, Pillay JJA and Fourie and Mathopo AJJA: 29 September 2014." *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 4:2 (2015) 320-322. Shaun De Freitas. "Doctrinal Sanction and the Protection of the Rights of Religious Associations. *Ecclesia De Lange v The Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (726/13)[2014] ZASCA 151.*" *PER: Potchefstroomse Elektroniese Regsblad* 19:1 (2016) 1-22. Juanita Easthorpe. "Bruised but not Broken: De Lange v Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and Another 2016 (2) SA 1 (CC)." *Agenda* 30:3 (2016) 115-123.

²² Such treatment de-humanises queer ministers in the church and such treatment extends to and further fuels exclusion and stigmatization within communities. Dlamini suggests that for queer ministers to avoid being ridiculed and discriminated by church members and leaders they have to remain in the closet thus complicates the notion of the Methodist church acceptance of queer individuals in ministry and as part of the community of faith. Dlamini Ntobeko. "Queering Ministry: the lived experiences of queer clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa."

²³ By BishopsCourt Media, "Pastoral Letter from the Bishops" 27 September 2017. <https://anglicanchurchsa.org/pastoral-letter-from-the-synod-of-bishops-september-2017/>. Accessed: 18 June 2019.

²⁴ The Jerusalem Statement states: "2. We believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God written and to contain all things necessary for salvation. The Bible is to be translated, read, preached, taught and obeyed in its plain and canonical sense, respectful of the church's historic and consensual reading ... 8. We acknowledge God's creation of humankind as male and female and the unchangeable standard of Christian marriage between one man and one woman as the proper place for sexual intimacy and the basis of the family. We repent of our failures to maintain this standard and call for a renewed commitment to lifelong fidelity in marriage and abstinence for those who are not married."

²⁵ GAFCON

²⁶ Reclaiming orthodox Anglicanism in this narrow sense has similar traits to nationalism, where self-interests of nation-states are posed over and against migrant people. Poignantly, GAFCON met in Jerusalem while, Israel occupies Palestine illegally. There are no statements that calls the state of Israel to return Palestinian land. Justice as central biblical imperative ceases to exist because it is unsuitable for the ideological worldview of the GAFCON movement.



- ²⁷ For more in this regard please see forthcoming publications by Gerald West and Beverly Haddad.
- ²⁸ For more on the relationship between religion, culture and gender please see: Tinyiko Sam Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar. "Breaking the covenant of violence against women." *Journal of theology for Southern Africa* 114 (2002): 5.
- ²⁹ Gust Yep describes this process as follows: "The process of normalization of heterosexuality in our social system actively and methodically subordinates, disempowers, denies and rejects individuals who do not conform to the heterosexual mandate by criminalizing them, denying them protection against discrimination, refusing them basic rights and recognition, or all of the above." Yep, Gust A. "The violence of heteronormativity in communication studies: Notes on injury, healing, and queer world-making." *Journal of homosexuality* 45, no. 2-4 (2003): 11-59.
- ³⁰ For more see Mulaudzi, Mutondi Muofhe. "Corrective rape and the war on homosexuality: patriarchy African culture and Ubuntu." PhD diss., University of Pretoria. Accessed: 06/2019 https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/65700/Mulaudzi_Corrective_2018.pdf?sequence=1
- ³¹ Jewekes explain how women expect men to be violent in relationships. For more please see: Rachel Jeweks. "Intimate partner violence: causes and prevention." *The lancet* 359, no. 9315 (2002): 1423-1429.
- ³² Men who have sex with men (MSM) is a behavioral term used in the biological sciences. In social refers to men to men who identify as straight but have sex with other men.
- ³³ For more in this regard, please see: Tanya Charles. 'Marriage Above All Else': The Push for Heterosexual, Nuclear Families in the Making of South Africa's White Paper on Families. No. Evidence Report; 41. Institute of Development Studies (IDS), 2013.
- ³⁴ For more in this regard, please see: Marc Epprecht. *Sexuality and social justice in Africa: Rethinking homophobia and forging resistance*. Zed Books Ltd., 2013. Marc Epprecht. *Heterosexual Africa?: The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*. Ohio University Press, 2008.
- ³⁵ A full version of the statement is available at: <http://www.gjin-ssogie.org/johannesburg-declaration/>
- ³⁶ For more in this regard please see: Adriaan Van Klinken. "Citizenship of Love: The Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics of Sexual Citizenship in a Kenyan Gay Music Video." *Citizenship Studies* 22.6 (2018): 650-665. Adriaan Van Klinken. "Queer love in a "Christian nation": Zambian gay men negotiating sexual and religious identities." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83.4 (2015): 947-964.
- ³⁷ The use of female bodies in public breastfeeding is still contested and policed.
- ³⁸ For more in relation to public nudity and the policing of sexuality through the law please see: Bibi Bakare-Yusuf "Nudity and morality: legislating women's bodies in Nigeria" in *African Sexualities A reader* ed. Sylvia Tamale. (Johannesburg, Pambazuka press 2011), 116-129.
- ³⁹ Thabo Msibi here speaks to the 'anti-gay' rhetoric while drawing parallels to how the negation of same sex relations through Sodomy laws has Westernized same sex desire while the (Sharia) laws used to support them have colonial imports. Thabo Msibi. "The Lies We Have



- Been Told: On (Homo) Sexuality in Africa." *Africa Today* 58, no. 1 (2011): 55-77. doi:10.2979/africatoday.58.1.55.
- ⁴⁰ For more reflection on colonially inspired sodomy laws please see: See Thabo Msibi. "The Lies that we have been told: On (homo) sexuality in Africa" and Frederic Cowell. "Colonial sodomy: homophobic Threat within common law." *Consultancy Africa Intelligence*, 14 July 2010, www.consultancyafrica.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=472:colonial-sodomy-homophobic-threat
- ⁴¹ Personhood, as described in a sub-Saharan context, indicates virtue or human excellence based on attitudes and decisions, while it is a moral question in western thought. In Metz's understanding, in the West, a person is one owed moral treatment, whereas below the Sahara, a person is one who has given others moral treatment they are owed.
- ⁴² According to Shutte "Our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human [which] means entering more and more deeply into community with others. So although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded." Augustine Shutte. *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 30.
- ⁴³ We agree with Metz that "to seek out community with others is not best understood as equivalent to doing whatever a majority of people in society want or conforming to the norms of one's group... [but more] as conceiving of communal relationships as an objectively-desirable kind of interaction [...] that should instead guide what majorities want and which norms become dominant." Metz, Thaddeus. "Ubuntu as a moral theory and human rights in South Africa." *African Human Rights Law Journal* 11, no. 2 (2011): 532-559.
- ⁴⁴ For more on the ethical dimensions associated with Biblical interpretation and the call for responsibility and accountability please see: Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. "The ethics of biblical interpretation: Decentering biblical scholarship." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (1988): 3-17.
- ⁴⁵ For more on the process of reclaiming the Word by Ikitabane, please see: West, Mona, and Robert E. Goss. *Take back the word: A queer reading of the Bible*. Pilgrim Press, 2000.
- ⁴⁶ As argued elsewhere, this process will epistemologically privilege the knowing of Ikitabane bodies.
- ⁴⁷ Encouraging work has been done by NGO organizations engaged within the contested African faith landscape, when it comes to issues pertaining to gender and sexuality, in drawing on the theoretical insights highlighted above. Worth particular mention is the contextual Bible study resources developed by the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Engagement and Research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the new practical booklet *Reading Together* developed by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries. The *Reading Together* booklet draws from insights developed in Intercultural and Contextual Bible reading and IAM's theory of change. Both of these organizations develop resources that practically illustrate how activist and advocacy organizations are engaging the faith landscape and in the process confronting the backlash. For more on both of these organizations please see: <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Homepage.aspx> and <https://iam.org.za/>
- ⁴⁸ For more on the theoretical underpinnings of the process of Intercultural Bible Reading, please see: Van der Walt, Charlene. *Toward a Communal Reading of 2 Samuel 13: Ideology and Power Within the Intercultural Bible Reading Process*. Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2014.
- ⁴⁹ West builds on the notion of 'struggle' as identified by Itumeleng Mosala. For more on this notion and its implications please see: Itumeleng, J. Mosala. "Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa." *Grand Rapids: Eerdmans* 41 (1989): 67. West, Gerald O. *The stolen Bible: From tool of imperialism to African icon*. Brill, 2016.



⁵⁰ The Eudy Simelane Annual Memorial Lecture hosted by the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community engagement and research is an ongoing initiative that aims to mainstream conversations pertaining to gender, sexuality and religion. The project aims to honour the legacy of the South African woman's football star Eudy Simelane that was raped and murdered in KwaThema in Gauteng due to the fact that she was living openly as Isitabane. The lecture series and associated community engagement process was launched in 2016 and has addressed issues such as LGBTIQ+ lives and the law, LGBTIQ+ lives and the church and LGBTIQ+ and family and friends. The 2020 version of the lecture will aim to stimulate discussion on LGBTIQ+ people, sport and faith.

⁵¹ Similarly, one often find woman as gatekeepers of patriarchy based on certain interpretations of scripture.

⁵² Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas in Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 108

⁵³ Lisa Isherwood Elisabeth Stuart. *Introducing Body Theology*, 148.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Body's Grace*, 311.

⁵⁵ For more in this regard please see forthcoming publications by Gerald West and Beverly Haddad.

⁵⁶ For more on the relationship between religion, culture and gender please see: Tinyiko Sam Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar. "Breaking the covenant of violence against women." *Journal of theology for Southern Africa* 114 (2002): 5.

⁵⁷ Gust Yep describes this process as follows: "The process of normalization of heterosexuality in our social system actively and methodically subordinates, disempowers, denies and rejects individuals who do not conform to the heterosexual mandate by criminalizing them, denying them protection against discrimination, refusing them basic rights and recognition, or all of the above." Yep, Gust A. "The violence of heteronormativity in communication studies: Notes on injury, healing, and queer world-making." *Journal of homosexuality* 45, no. 2-4 (2003): 11-59.

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