

Engaging Human Sexuality: Creating Safe Spaces for LGBTIQ+ and Straight Believers in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights several resources developed and applied in South Africa regarding LGBTIQ+ persons and faith. It charts the evolution of human sexuality workshops for faith communities in South Africa; the findings from a 2019 empirical research study with local church congregations around LGBTIQ+; and offers feedback from safe space work that bring together people of diverse sexualities and genders from various Christian faith contexts in South Africa. It draws on and adapts certain methodologies developed initially in the USA but also shaped by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It reworks these to go beyond binaries into a continuum approach to sexuality and gender identity by also developing new tools and using the lens of intersectionality. The aim is to showcase the importance of creating safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ and straight engagement and to build solidarity among local churches in South Africa. The article explores the potential of this human sexuality workshop by drawing on participant feedback from its two pilots in 2020. It suggests that it be used more widely in faith settings, to create spaces for safe encounters between straight and LGBTIQ+ people engaging in questions on human sexuality and spirituality, seeking to build solidarity, and strengthen ally-ship. It concludes by suggesting that this African liberationist queer theological pedagogy can help bridge a gap in both LGBTIQ+ activism and LGBTIQ+ theology.

Keywords: LGBTIQ+, sexuality, diversity, inclusion, gender, queer theology, churches

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INTRODUCTION

For many centuries, much religion has been used to stigmatise a range of sexual and relationship practices. However, despite shifts on a number of these issues, many religious spaces still condemn lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) sexualities and gender identities today. This has also been true in the South African context, home to one of the most progressive rights-based Constitutions in the world and, in 2006, one of the first countries to legalise same-sex marriage. This issue has however at times been problematically portrayed globally by using an African/Western binary. As a result, South African experiences on LGBTIQ+ issues offer a unique positioning within a historically complex set of intersectional oppressions of race, colonialism and gender that have also been both legitimated, and contested here, by religious voices and by theological justifications.

South Africa, like Indonesia where this journal article is being published, are both shaped in part by a Dutch-colonial history. However, South Africa's advent into democracy is more recent than Indonesia – only achieving a constitutional democracy in 1994 due to the apartheid system here. As a result, South Africa's liberation struggle against a racist apartheid regime is still relatively fresh in its memories. Its various strands included an armed struggle and comprehensive international sanctions against apartheid South Africa. Inside the country, a wider movement of resistance involved mass action and civil disobedience, but also substantial academic work to develop contextual theologies for change, closely informed by black and liberation voices.³ Because apartheid and its hierarchical categories of race were underpinned by harmful colonially-infused theological justifications, a number of theologians here took a leading role to dismantle these harmful scripts and the misuse of Christian sacred texts to support social injustice and refuse human rights to certain parts of the population.

3 See Allan Boesak. *Farewell to Innocence: a socio-ethical study on Black theology and Black Power*. 1977. Orbis Books, Maryknoll; John de Gruchy. *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate*. 1991. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Gerald West. *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*. 2016. Brill.

This role was important because local church congregations formed, and still form, an important hub in many South African communities, where nearly 80% of the population have active Christian affiliation. Religious ministers hold considerable authority and influence over their constituency's beliefs and behaviours and are uniquely positioned to shape community attitudes on a range of social issues including gender and sexuality.

A small but significant minority of Muslims are also present within South Africa, particularly in and around Cape Town in the south. Positive interfaith relations have shaped this region for decades with faith leaders standing together publicly for social justice in the apartheid struggle years. South Africa's colonial history has informed the diverse ethnic and religious makeup of the Cape as well as the strong Christian missionary influence of Northern settlers here, often escaping either religious persecution or religious liberalisation elsewhere. Religious leaders therefore have a historical and ongoing influential role within South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

The article adopts an African liberationist queer theological pedagogy centred on embodied storytelling. Section 1 showcases how theological engagement to disrupt South Africa's historical apartheid system can offer promise for the ongoing struggle for LGBTIQ+ recognition within faith spaces and points to queer theological voices here that challenge a homogenous African homophobic religious narrative. Section 2 highlights three key findings from an empirical study based on key informant interviews conducted in 2019 by the lead author in South African church congregations around LGBTIQ+ belonging. Section 3 turns to five thematic insights emerging from human sexuality workshops designed and piloted by the authors in response to the study findings, drawing on feedback from both queer and straight participants. The article concludes that this evidence-based approach can offer safe spaces for embodied, storied encounters between LGBTIQ+ believers and straight believers that meets a current gap in South Africa.

DISCUSSION**South Africa's intersectional struggle for social justice**

The decades of struggle against apartheid were forged broadly to include people from different faiths as well as members of trade unions and of the South African Communist Party. As a result of this unique history, which included both harmful theological scripts that legitimated social injustices, and resistance to, and transformation of those scripts, several South African theologians developed global reputations as human rights icons. Many drew on South Africa's experience of racial segregation and exclusion, even within churches and mosques, to apply a similar critique to other forms of social injustice and exclusion that still shaped faith communities. They have continued to pioneer new ways of becoming inclusive faith congregations in relation to issues such as gender and sexuality as logical extensions of their commitment to a liberating faith. These figures spanned denominations and included Archbishop Desmond Tutu⁴ and Allan Boesak⁵ who as prominent faith leaders in the past struggle against apartheid, were also explicitly inclusive of intersectional struggles for inclusion and diversity in churches as far as sexuality and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) are concerned.

For Tutu, any type of exclusion of some of God's creation was, as the new 1994 South African Constitution also made clear, part of the same logic of discrimination historically used regarding other traits like race or gender. In this Tutu declared forthrightly, "the church has joined the world in committing what I consider to be the ultimate blasphemy – making the children of God doubt they are children of God".⁶ At the start of the post-apartheid dispensation, Tutu could declare with credibility to South African Christians their ongoing responsibility to address the social injustices faced by people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) by saying, "If the church, after victory over apartheid, is

4 Rebecca Davis, "Analysis: Why Tutu's support for gay rights matters". *Daily Maverick*. 29 July 2013.

5 Allan Boesak. *Kairos, Crisis and Global Apartheid: The challenge to prophetic resistance* (Palgrave-Mac Millan, 2015).

6 Desmond Tutu in the Foreword to *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa* ed, Paul Germond & Steve Gruchy. (David Philip, 1997).

looking for a worthy moral cause, then this is it: the fight against homophobia and hetero-sexism. I pray that we will engage in it with the same dedication and fervour which we showed against the injustice of racism”.⁷

In the last decade, this new social justice struggle around LGBTIQ+ inclusion is receiving increased attention within churches and other faith institutions in South Africa and around the world. Unfortunately, African religious voices have often been positioned monoculturally and unhelpfully by some as homophobic in comparison to Northern or Western voices. Terry Brown, in response to the 1998 Lambeth Conference’s negative stance on homosexuality, and the media depiction of this as a ‘North’ versus ‘South’ conflict, insists instead that religious realities within the global South are far more complex and nuanced, noting that, “There are other voices to be heard from the global South – from lesbian and gay Christians there and their friends.”⁸ It is on the promise of South-South connections that South Africa may have valuable lessons to share with contexts such as Indonesia around developing inclusive faith practices regarding the LGBTIQ+ community that challenge oversimplifying binaries (that often position the global South as religiously homophobic and the global North as secular and LGBTIQ+ affirming). Both South Africa and Indonesia are developing postcolonial theologies that reject the imposition of imported theologies of hatred and of binary hierarchies of value. They seek to strengthen “other voices” emerging from these different contexts, that are at risk of being drowned out by Northern media narratives of homogenous religious homophobia. It is to those other voices within South Africa that this article now turns.

Queer Theological Voices within South Africa

The development of queer theology in South Africa, whilst relatively recent, has had fertile liberatory soil to nurture it both from the years of anti-apartheid theological struggle, and in the South African Constitution, founded

⁷ Tutu, *Aliens in the Household*, x.

⁸ Terry Brown, (ed.) *Other Voices, Other Worlds: The Global Church speaks out on Homosexuality* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006), Introduction.

on the principles of human dignity and equality for all and with a transformative approach to correcting discriminatory practices of the past and preventing future discrimination. Due partly to the roles of queer people in the apartheid struggle and their influence,⁹ this included stipulating a legal prohibition on discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. This remains unique and led in 2005 to South Africa becoming only the fifth country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage, ahead of other African countries, many of whom still criminalise LGBTIQ+ activity.

This legalisation provides a firm foundation to further LGBTIQ+ rights and inclusion. Recent research has shown that these laws are slowly playing a role in reshaping social attitudes within South Africa.¹⁰ Nevertheless, a significant gap still exists between the Constitutional legal framework provided, and the grassroots reality of a largely traditional and religiously conservative society. There are of course pockets of safety and diversity, but there has been a spike in hate crimes especially against black lesbians and gender-nonconforming persons in high-density urban township areas as well as in more rural settings. So called “corrective rape” has been documented a concerning issue here, as men use rape to seek to “correct” the orientation and sexual behaviour of lesbian women.¹¹ This shows the intersectional realities and risks within the high levels of gender-based violence experienced in South Africa in its post-apartheid dispensation.

In recent years, the ongoing lack of safe, inclusive spaces for LGBTIQ+ people in many local church congregations in South Africa has been increasingly noted as a concern.¹² A conservative backlash by some at senior church levels has led to hiding, exclusion and trauma for many LGBTIQ+ Christians who seek to worship at ‘mainstream’ churches and has often led to a retreat into ‘separatist’ gay church

9 See an LGBTIQ+ timeline here: <https://ourconstitution.constitutionhill.org.za/?s=lgbtqia+timeline>

10 The Other Foundation, *Progressive Prudes: A survey of attitude towards homosexuality & gender non-conformity in Southern Africa*. 2016. HSRC, Johannesburg.

11 Melanie Judge, *Blackwashing Homophobia: Violence and the politics of sexuality, gender and race*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

12 Gerald West, Charlene Van der Walt, & Kapyra Kaoma, “When faith does violence: reimagining engagement between churches and LGBTI groups on homophobia in Africa”. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* (Online), Volume 72 Number 1 (24 November 2016). See also Ragies M Gunda, “How the Stigmatisation and Bullying of LGBTI People Is Driven by Churches”. *Huffington Post*. January 2017.

spaces. West highlights the need to nurture embodied traces of “African queer theology”,¹³ in ways that ordinary people (including LGBTIQ+ congregants) can embrace within local congregations. Mark Gervisser suggests that both ‘backlash’ and ‘progress’ cycles exist in Southern Africa on LGBTIQ+ issues, and that churches need to be equipped to better navigate this reality.¹⁴ He charts six problematic narratives within Southern Africa, including a moral discourse which frames LGBTIQ+ practice as a sin against God or of LGBTIQ+ persons as demon-possessed. However, the one he identifies as causing most pain is a narrative of social exclusion where LGBTIQ+ persons are told ‘you do not belong here’ – in families, communities, churches, and are excluded from religious rituals such as weddings and funerals.¹⁵ This reality foregrounds the need for nurturing faith spaces that centre the full belonging of LGBTIQ+ persons.

South Africa has lower rates of acceptance around LGBTIQ+ issues than all other countries who have legalised same sex marriage, but higher acceptance rates than any other African country.¹⁶ This offers a window of opportunity on which to build. While social attitudes are becoming more positive, only 51% of South Africans believe that gay people should have the same human rights as other citizens.¹⁷ A large ‘moveable middle’ is identified who could be persuaded either way, but many churches here still resist making this shift. The need for many religious communities in Southern Africa to create affirming spaces and offer full acceptance remains an urgent task.

However, at the same time, promising trends are being seen. Collison suggests that in recent years “a queer thing is going on in Southern African churches” with a

13 Gerald West, “Towards an African Liberationist Queer Theological Pedagogy,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 155 (2016): 216-224.

14 Mark Gevisser. *Canaries in the Coal Mines; An analysis of spaces for LGBTIQ activism in Southern Africa*. (The Other Foundation, South Africa, 2016), 7.

15 Gervisser, *Canaries*, 24,

16 The Pew Research Centre. The Global Divide on Homosexuality: Greater Acceptance in More Secular and Affluent Countries. 2013. <https://www.pewglobal.org/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality>.

17 The Other Foundation. *Progressive Prudes: A survey of attitudes towards homosexuality and gender nonconformity in South Africa*. (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council, 2016), 46.

vocal minority disrupting religious narratives that refuse full acceptance to LGBTIQ+ persons.¹⁸ In 2013, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu publicly announced, “I cannot worship a homophobic God,” equating the LGBTIQ+ cause directly with the struggle against apartheid.¹⁹ He stresses the potential of religious leaders and the need to equip them to think differently about interpretations of their sacred texts. If LGBTIQ+ acceptance in South Africa is to grow, he insists that religious leaders have a role to play.

Ragies Gunda reinforces this call by suggesting that “the greatest obstacle to the full acceptance of LGBTI (sic) people in southern Africa is religiously sanctioned homophobia” which he argues maintains an ‘us and them’ dichotomy.²⁰ However, despite this dominant narrative, he highlights the existence of inclusive churches and religious leaders who offer a different path, driven by an incarnational theology of welcome. He suggests that these voices and practices are in urgent need of amplification. However, many churches in South Africa remains divided and disunited on this issue with the rise of so called ‘gay churches’, disturbingly reminiscent of the separation of the churches into black and white under apartheid here.²¹

South African scholars have called churches “to ground their theological work on LGBTIQ+ sexualities in the lived experience of LGBTIQ+ Christians”²² and to develop prophetic theologies of sexuality from the ground up. This includes centring LGBTIQ+ voices in discussions which requires creating safe spaces which move away from having conversations ‘about’ LGBTIQ+ people to having conversations ‘with’ them, as agents who can give voice to their embodied realities. Going beyond merely debating specific sacred texts to dialogues that engage with core values

18 Carl Collison. “A queer thing is going on in Southern Africa’s churches”. *Mail & Guardian*. 7 December 2016,

19 Davies, *Tutu’s support for gay rights*, n.p.

20 Ragies M Gunda. *Silent no longer! Narratives of engagement between LGBTI groups and the churches in southern Africa*. Johannesburg: The Other Foundation, 2017.

21 Potgieter, Cheryl. & Reygan, Finn. “Disruptive or merely alternative? A case study of a South African Church”. *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 17 no 2(2011): 58-76.

22 West et al, *When faith does violence*, 13.

and use storytelling methods within churches is also recommended.²³ Finally, an intersectional social justice lens is needed that focuses on the indivisibility of justice and recognises multiple axes of oppression that seek to control others' bodies and employ religion to justify this.²⁴

South African queer theologies can help reshape LGBTIQ+ engagement away from a secular, top-down Western discourse, to open opportunities for a bottom-up intersectional approach around social justice that drinks from the wells of South African contextual and prophetic theology. In many African contexts this is an important shift since the LGBTIQ+ struggle is so often positioned by conservative religious voices as being a Western imposition. This draws attention away from the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ African people who desire social inclusion and acceptance within society and within religious communities. Gunda insists that, "LGBTI Christians in Southern Africa have not given up hope of being acknowledged and accepted. Despite messages of rejection and dehumanization which have driven many away, most still want to be a part of their churches".²⁵ A consultation on churches and homophobia in South Africa notes that "Christian churches should be promoting acceptance and reshaping social attitudes, journeying towards making the church welcoming to all children of God".²⁶

For churches to move from communities that tolerate diversity to inclusive communities who celebrate, claim, and insist on diversity, research here shows they need to develop tools and safe spaces for embodied engagement between queer and straight congregants to develop a vision of social justice that reconciles sexuality, human rights and faith.²⁷ Safe spaces for local encounter can then become places where cycles of LGBTIQ+ shame and hiding are broken and where webs of relationality generate bondedness, a united 'we' that supersedes 'us and them'. In

23 Hadebe, Nontando. & Chitando, Ezra. (eds). *Engaging the Churches about Homophobia in Southern Africa: Understanding the Past, Present & Future Strategies*. Johannesburg: The Other Foundation, 2016.

24 Judge, *Blackwashing Homophobia*.

25 Gunda. *Silent no more*, 27.

26 Hadebe et al, *Churches and Homophobia*, 3.

27 West et al, *When Faith does Violence*.

the light of this, a 2019 empirical study in South Africa documented some of these alternative models of LGBTIQ+ inclusive church congregations including the stories of queer and straight Christians within them as a contribution to this reshaping of African narratives around LGBTIQ+ faith belonging. It is to key findings from this study that this article will turn.

Journeying towards LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Faith Congregations

The need for safe faith spaces for experiential encounters between people of diverse sexualities and genders was the focus for this 2019 qualitative research study²⁸ that documented lessons from within five local church congregations in Cape Town, South Africa, from Presbyterian, Congregational, Dutch Reformed, Methodist and Metropolitan Community denominations who were all on a journey to re-imagine and embody LGBTIQ+ belonging within Christian faith spaces. The study aimed to showcase “‘peoples’ theologies”²⁹ from below to highlight alternative faith voices to inspire more congregations to journey from exclusion to places of embrace, healing, and belonging.

At the heart of this qualitative study were eighteen in-depth semi-structured interviews with religious ministers and diverse church members across five inclusive local congregations to identify how they approached and perceived LGBTIQ+ belonging within a more inclusive church ethos. An inductive methodology drawing on Atlas.ti8 software tools was used to surface key themes including, 1) a transformative church vision that normalises welcome and belonging; 2) building models of celebration and accompaniment; and 3) a theological commitment to be united across diversity within the household of God. Some key insights from the study are shared below as they informed the sexuality workshops that form the second part of the article.

²⁸ Palm, S. 2019, *From Exclusion to Embrace*. International ethical clearance received from Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee (REC-2018-1720). All quotes in this section are from this report.

²⁹ West, *Queer Theological Pedagogy*, 223, points to a “Kairos-like process of ‘people’s theology’ to shape a new prophetic theology around LGBTIQ+ issues in South Africa to develop collaborative liberative praxis.

Welcome and Belonging

Interviews showed that many LGBTIQ+ people have an initial sense of caution on entering the church with one queer youth saying, “if you are queer, you will be nervous when you come into a church, you will want to see ‘will it be ok?’” An embodied, visible welcome for them was therefore important. Inclusive churches also spoke of the sense of being on a shared journey together into a future that was ‘enlarging circles of dignity’ and ‘embracing new possibilities’. This vision enabled discriminatory language to be changed, families to be reimagined, and faith spaces to be made safer. Leadership was critical to driving this ethos but also in taking the time to build a critical mass of support through allowing dissent and confusion, an open-door policy for those with questions, and by supporting families pastorally who were struggling with LGBTIQ+ issues. This offered a way for congregants to go beyond their denominational histories on this issue, without feeling as if they are betraying it, an exercise in shared imagination pointing towards a radically inclusive kin-dom of God as a beloved community;

(T)he congregation should be assisted to understand the possibilities of being bigger and greater than what has been given to them.... There is a greater identity... because we could not restrict ourselves to the limitations given by our parents and denomination... I say to the congregation let us imagine the new identity, let us see it emerging, it cannot happen without us fully committing (black male minister)³⁰

Genuine welcome was seen to go beyond token inclusion or shallow friendliness to full embrace and belonging by LGBTIQ+ people to all aspects of the church, including a refusal by the church to tolerate unwelcoming messages, and to call them out. Church leaders stressed their role in setting the ethos and ensuring it becomes part of how everyone treats everyone else. Churches committed to go beyond initial welcome only to an embodied, ongoing experience of solidarity and accompaniment on the human journey – including celebration over the lifecycle from recognising diverse gendered formation from birth, learning about sexuality in non-heteronormative ways, support in coming out and celebration in finding a partner and/or having children. Hope was expressed of a community where there is no ‘us and them’ but a ‘we’, a safe home reflecting God’s family where everyone’s

30 Palm, *Exclusion to Embrace*, 7.

diverse gifts and talents are made visible and nurtured in full and where no one way of living is held up as the only God-ordained way;

(A)ll LGBTIQ+ folk need to feel not only welcome but celebrated ...we do weddings for same-sex couples, we help people who are on a trans-gender journey, so we do more than say you are welcome in this space, we say, we want to be part of your journey (white lesbian minister).³¹

The theme of helping churches move from 'Disunity' to being 'United-in-Diversity' also emerged. LGBTIQ+ people interviewed did not want to be part of a separate gay congregation as this was not how they thought church should be. Those who were had often done so because of painful exclusion from other mainstream churches. One trans-man who had hoped to train for ministry noted the need for safe spaces but not an LGBTIQ+ ghetto church which he saw as doctrinally flawed. Many LGBTIQ+ people carry wounds from their church experiences and experienced needing to hide aspects of their identity. Safe faith spaces to speak their truth and talk about these wounds were rare.

Theologies that Move from Exclusion to Embrace

Many queer people highlighted being presented with harmful models of God as a punishing figure to be feared as a 'fire and brimstone model' of faith. Sin was used to make LGBTIQ+ people feel dirty or unaccepted by God and was often strongly tied to sexuality, inducing, for many queer people in particular, an internalised stigma and self-hatred often for years of their life, and shaping their own attitudes to God. A number described years of self-doubt and shame within their church settings. Some had experienced so-called pastoral support founded on seeing homosexuality as a disease from which they needed to be 'healed', even used against them as part of the process of church discipline where LGBTIQ+ people would have to pray for healing or receive so called conversion therapy. This approach took on an 'aura of morality' within some church leadership spaces, of claiming to be 'helping' the

31 Palm, *Exclusion to Embrace*, 8.

person to turn back to God. It endorsed a sense of self-righteousness in the church leadership which some members were able to critique;

(W)e get caught up in doctrines, but we don't want to care about the people that we can see... stick to these doctrines that kill and can do violence to people... Every time we exclude someone from the community of humankind we are spitting in the face of God (but are doing it) in the name of God, of Jesus, (black female congregant).³²

A significant step in the journey of all five churches studied was the emergence of theologies of celebratory embrace and of creational difference (including diverse sexualities and genders) as a theological blessing, (rather than a distortion caused by the fall) As a result, radical inclusion formed a positive theological container where the emphasis lay on connecting the rich diversity of God's creation to human diversity;

(I) have always believed in the God who loves God's creation in its diversity and complexity... I do not look at anyone else and see [them] as different or needing to be excluded for whatever reason... a radical inclusion based on the nature of God as loving and embracing (black male minister).³³

This openness to the future was lived out in a transforming ecclesial vision of what it means to be the church journeying together into a future in hope with a God who makes things new. This offers a possibility orientated approach grounded in theological doctrine that is open to the task of being 'always reforming' and to develop an overarching hermeneutic of human dignity that connects human rights and the gospel;³⁴

Our church has a philosophy of embracing the dignity of an individual, ...it does not matter who you are. There is acceptance for you from congregants. If we are all born by the creator and are all going to die and be seen by the creator, the people amongst us as community, who are we to say we cannot take you that way? (black female congregant).³⁵

Churches also highlighted the importance of opportunities to meet and get to know LGBTIQ+ people and to hear their stories. Forums such as café style panel events opened spaces for embodied storytelling on sexuality, workshops focused on how to re-read scripture in the light of pre-existing harmful biases and with diverse

32 Palm, *Exclusion to Embrace*, 13.

33 Palm, *Exclusion to Embrace*, 14.

34 Selina Palm. "Always Reforming? Nurturing a Church for Human Rights". *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4 no 1 (2018): 321-346.

35 Palm, *Exclusion to Embrace*, 15.

readers. Sensitive engagement with LGBTIQ+ persons within the local congregation opening spaces for them to share their stories were seen as critical catalysts for structural change.

A theology of embrace offers a positive framing based on a celebration of creational diversity, a transformational vision of the future and a relational way of being church. This gives congregations a prophetic theology around which rituals, songs and symbols can be built, avoiding the negative framing of disease, sin and abnormality which often frames LGBTIQ+ debates. This asset-based model celebrates the positive and looks at LGBTIQ+ people in the light of the gifts and talents that they bring. It also enables faith communities to see themselves as part of the solution, constructs a shared identity of which people can feel proud without excluding others and opens space for ‘conversations that matter’.

South African churches also resonated with the importance of an intersectional approach where identifying commonalities between LGBTIQ+ issues and other identities such as gender, race and class reinforced a social justice paradigm. This helped different people to connect up their experiences and recognise their multiple biases. Pastoral support and capacity building, supporting family members and LGBTIQ+ persons to emerge out of denialism and embrace themselves were all important aspects of an inclusive church. One minister highlighted that a lot of her time is spent “walking alongside folk who are queer and trying to reconcile their sexuality and spirituality, [or with] parents trying to come to terms with their kids being gay, or with being trans.”³⁶

Promising practices

The study ends with ten promising practices identified across the five congregations. These centre the need for building relationships and storied personal encounters between queer and straight people of faith as the single most important factor catalysing change. These spaces also model a visible symbol of safety for other LGBTIQ+ persons. Religious leadership plays an essential role here

³⁶ Palm, *Exclusion to Embrace*, 8.

in creating those spaces and in building a critical mass around a transformational vision of what it means to be the church. This enables an asset-based approach and a positive framing which gives churches something to stand for with pride and to invite potential new members to wholeheartedly join around creational diversity and celebrating relationships.

Recognising and addressing harmful theological scripts of exclusion to nurture a holistic theology of embrace, were seen as crucial in order to instead hold together the spirituality and material dimensions of life, shaped by a lens of human dignity. Those that do this can begin to make this church ethos of belonging continually visible through language and ritual and to develop cross sectoral partnerships. Using an intersectional social justice lens also avoids exceptionalising queer people and focuses on being united across many forms of difference. A 'no labels' policy and a refusal to tolerate forms of double talk (we love you but....) are therefore necessary. Creating open spaces of dialogue for LGBTIQ+ stories of both exclusion and embrace to be shared and heard emerged as essential but along the way, many other stories of change also emerged from cis and straight ministers, congregants and from initial resisters to LGBTIQ+ inclusion. These diverse stories offer hope and complexity, make the issue real and textured and open up ways to invite others onto the journey too.

This study showcases African faith voices and local churches in South Africa who are nurturing a more diverse celebratory container of God's 'family' within communities of embrace, accompaniment, liberation and celebration. It concludes by saying,

The negative framing of the LGBTIQ+ debate in many churches (are 'we' going to let 'them' in) needs to be challenged at its roots for a positive framing of belonging together that celebrates creational diversity as an invitation to all to listen, learn and change. Seeing LGBTIQ+ persons as storied gifts of God to each congregation, not disordered problems to be socially excluded, reinforces a theological imperative that human experiences, individual and communal be recognised as an embodied source of revelation by congregations.³⁷

³⁷ Palm, *Exclusion to Embrace*, 34.

In the light of these study conclusions, its author, Dr Selina Palm, a gender and sexuality researcher, activist and theologian based at Stellenbosch University, partnered with Reverend Laurie Gaum, a queer activist and minister in the Dutch Reformed Church to design and pilot Human Sexuality Workshops that drew on members from these five congregations and beyond. It was intended to help create safe spaces of encounter where healing, conversation, storytelling and celebration could be embodied between straight and queer people of faith. It is to this process that the next section turns.

Piloting the Human Sexuality Workshop

In early 2020, the authors developed and piloted an experiential two and a half day workshop that centres a continuum approach to sexuality and gender, and uses an intersectionality lens as within the South African context. Gaum and Palm were both already trained in facilitating the Gender Equity and Reconciliation (GERI) programme which had been developed as an experiential, embodied modality for change by Will Keepin and Cynthia Brix, delivered over a period of three decades in the USA and in recent years, had expanded into other countries including South Africa.³⁸ The original workshop focused on engaging with women and men (often of diverse sexualities and gender identities together) to provide an experiential encounter for first-hand accounts of their own gendered stories and experiences and spaces to listen to those of others. The programme also drew on learnings from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) post-apartheid process, applying it to gender relations between men and women.

Trauma psychologist Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela who was herself one of South Africa's TRC commissioners in reflecting back notes that there is an ongoing need within the context of societal trauma to "make public spaces intimate".³⁹ "Safe-

38 These GERI workshops have also been facilitated on several South African university campuses while Gender Equity and Reconciliation International is operational in several other countries e.g., India, Kenya, the USA, Canada, Puerto Rico and Colombia. Find out more at: <https://www.genderreconciliationinternational.org/>

39 Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, "Trauma, forgiveness and the witnessing dance: Making public spaces intimate" in *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 53, 2 (May 2008). 169-188.

enough” spaces are built together through methodologies such as the Gender Equity and Reconciliation programme. Initially this was a space for women and men to meet each other and share their stories of gender wounding and injustice and then break through together to powerful experiences of healing. This dialogue avoids the danger identified in much gender-based violence prevention work where men can re-centre themselves in patriarchal ways when work is done with men alone. It also diverges from an approach which sees men only as perpetrators and fails to explore how they also experience gendered wounding. Equal space is created for an authentic encounter with the gendered other. Women and men as well as people who experience themselves outside the socially constructed gender-binary are encouraged to show vulnerability by expressing emotions, sharing their stories with each other, and listening deeply to the other’s lived experience.

The approach unearths gender and sexuality conditioning, often underpinned by faith justifications. Truth-telling and witnessing others doing so are enabled through carefully facilitated activities such as ‘silent witnessing’ which provides building blocks for envisioning and creating an alternative reality. The shifts in awareness which occur through first-hand sharing of and listening to each other’s life experiences, means that new pathways can be forged to rebalance relationships between people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations and to work towards a partnership-model rather than a domination (hierarchical) model⁴⁰. This approach draws on spirituality as an asset. Trained GERI facilitator and former deputy speaker of the South African Parliament, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, points out that “key to the methodology of gender reconciliation is (also) the application of spiritual wisdom and teachings, which makes this work effective across a broad spectrum of religions and cultures”.⁴¹

A shift into a mode that works with the gender spectrum and focuses on sexuality and spirituality is part of the facilitator level training for Gender Equity and

40 Riane Eisler, *The Power of Partnership: Seven Relationships that will Change Your Life*. (Novato: New World Library, 2010)

41 Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, “Reconciliation between Men and Women” in *The Evil of Patriarchy in Church Society and Politics: A Consultation held at Mount Fleur Conference Center, Stellenbosch* (Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, 2009) <https://iam.org.za/publications/>

Reconciliation but had not previously been developed into an actual introductory workshop. Experienced facilitators spent time in 2020 to develop an approach which drew on some of these pre-existing methods but also designed and/or adapted new approaches from other sexuality toolkits to put together a two-and-a-half-day unique human sexuality pilot programme. This was then piloted twice in 2020 in Cape Town with a range of adults of diverse SOGIE including a significant number of people who identified as cisgender or straight. The intention was to bring together straight and queer people in safe spaces for conversation and storytelling and in this way to add an extra dimension into the LGBTIQ+ sector here which has historically focused either on workshops for LGBTIQ+ Christians or on diversity and anti-bias training for straight people within churches.⁴² It aimed to offer a complementary third step for churches and their members who may have already completed these steps. Participants came from a range of ethnic groups, socio-economic locations and ages. The team of facilitators also included racial, sexual and gender diversity. A comment was made post-workshop in an email from a queer participant involved in church leadership:

I found the workshop I attended to be a very profound and healing experience. It was a wonderful reminder that “communion” can truly happen at the deepest level with relative strangers if facilitated with gentle and carefully considered paths of conversations... that bring us closer to one another... I was really appreciative of the tools you provided, the dialogue you created, the creativity you used and most importantly the beautiful respect shown for our fragile humanity. I would certainly want to give myself more such opportunities for self-care and reflective journeys... with companions who are prepared to share the road with open hearts and minds... what a privilege.⁴³

In the post-workshop invitation to participants to reflect on what stood out for them from the initial workshops, the following themes emerged:

42 For more on these other important LGBTIQ+ related workshops which are run primarily in faith spaces in South Africa by the organisation *Inclusive and Affirming Ministries*, see <https://iam.org.za>.

43 All quotes and insights about the human sexuality workshop are taken from post workshop feedback forms completed by participants and collated at the time by Palm and Gaum in a 2020 internal report to the donors.

1. A safe space was created to reflect and to feel

One gay male participant in his 50s identified the workshop as creating “a safe place to share and be honest... We were walking the path together” whilst a gender non-conforming person in their 20s pointed to how a space of shared vulnerability created bridges quickly between vastly different people by noting, “This workshop was very worthwhile. It was a safe enough space in which I could explore my embodiment, physicality, or sexuality in light of the complexity of my whole being and story. The vulnerability shared encouraged rapid bridge-building”. Straight participants noted that it also offered them new opportunities to engage around their own sexuality in ways that they had not even been given before. One women participant in her late 50s noted that “I have never before attended any session regarding my sexuality. I have been on gender and gender sensitization events but not sexuality per se – this was a significant change for me and offered deeper awareness.”

Queer participants also highlighted that the activities facilitated created a safe space that was sensitive to queer needs, with one female lesbian participant stating, “All of the activities were relevant, helpful and dealt with great sensitivity and non-judgement”. The workshop also capacitated people across the spectrum to become more familiar with the complexity of the gender and sexuality spectrum through their engagement with real people in the room, with one young female participant saying,

I also feel so much more comfortable around the language of queerness and understanding how complex the spectrum of gender and sexuality is... The vulnerability of the facilitators, the creative variety of exercises, the fact that the workshop was also centred around getting to know everybody in the room, that there was a knowledge or content component (female participant, 20s).

2. Enabled healing spaces and rituals to reconnect spirituality and sexuality

Participants shared that they found the experience as centring personal and communal healing from the many wounds experienced in relation to gender and sexuality in ways that catalysed their own processes. One person highlighted this as the most significant change they experienced by sharing several embodied insights

that the workshop had enabled in their own journey of gender transitioning. Understanding the connection of body and sexuality in ways that helped them heal and reconcile with the past, they noted;

Healing starts with myself; Human sexuality and spirituality, how they connect and also the time of letting go what has been sitting on my chest - this has been a helpful process for me; Identifying and acknowledging my hidden shame stemming from past experience relating to sexuality, the area of my life where I have experienced the most pain; I believe empathy, the ability to relate self, other and earth and to open our hearts (after trauma) are one of the few ways to heal our broken world; The most significant change that I have experienced in this workshop is 'letting go of my fears and negativity that I held against myself because at some point I was held back by anger and confusion due to injustice and unfairness in society. I believe we are still far from celebrating sexuality within ourselves. Healing starts from within.

To name just one example of an activity employed in the programme, the workshop ended with a communal process of developing celebratory rituals around sexuality and spirituality that also draw on participants' own spiritual traditions. Each group was invited to collaborate to design a unique participatory spiritual ritual which they then delivered for and with the other group. These often reflected the journeys of learning made within the workshop. In one workshop, one group centred their ritual around coming to 'the Altar of Acceptance' and the other centred theirs around letting go and 'crossing over into celebrating diversity together' which focused on seeing each other in their diversity and then embodying the acts of singing and dancing together as a vision of what the church could be in its own worship spaces.

3. Created depth of connection and knowledge across multiple differences

Many participants highlighted increased recognition of similarities between their struggles despite differences and as a result, the possibility of building connections. One gender non-confirming participant noted that, "The workshop highlighted that sometimes we can feel so different [as queers] but if we have more sessions like this, the enlightenment is that we as (all) people are so similar and have the same struggles that should connect us rather than drive us further apart". This same insight was reflected by an older gay man who noted with surprise in relation to straight stories shared that, "We are actually more alike than different".

This was also reinforced by straight participants who also found healing in these conversations and expressed a desire for more young people to have access to safe spaces like this earlier in life. One noted,

Personally, I went through a phase where I questioned my sexuality – it was very confusing. I was lonely and I could have used this sort of space back then. I could relate to lots of what this man (gay participant) said even if I have not experienced the same things as he has (straight black male, 20s).

4. Opened up people's stories to start courageous conversations

Participants noted that seeing how their stories have an effect on others enabled them to also become more courageous in speaking and listening to others. One gender non-conforming person in their 30s said that “the workshop was very valuable to me for the deeper understanding of how this conversation affects so many people. I made a few new friends from the workshop which has been a great way to continue the conversation”. At the same time, straight people became more aware of their privilege when asked to listen to the stories of others and to also make connections to their own, more privileged experiences. One participant noted,

I felt like I didn't have a story to tell, no difficulties or challenges with gender and sexuality. And in some cases I don't, my story is very different to the people I met on the workshop. So I was reminded that I have so much to learn from other people. But even as a straight person a lot of the bigger themes about body/sacred, sin, pleasure, shame, anger, hurt etc. all apply to my story and it was really helpful to reflect on those things. It was also important for me to have chatted to a friend after the first day of the workshop when I was lamenting that everyone had their own story and I didn't have one, to which she not-so-gently replied that maybe I didn't have a story and didn't need a story. I was very irritated by that and I got angry because I've grown up with everyone around me telling me how much I matter. But ...I came to realize that she had a point, in that as a straight white woman in South Africa, my story has always mattered, and often at the expense of others' stories. So going into the second day, I felt much more relaxed that my story exists and is important, but that I needed to make much more room for the stories of those around me” (white cis woman).

5. Created courage to engage with taboo topics

Participants also highlighted the value of having a wide diversity of participants across age, race, orientation, and gender identity and the chance to walk alongside each other in affective emotional ways that required bravery and vulnerability from

both participants and facilitators alike to talk about topics that had often been historically taboo within faith spaces, as was noted by one Christian participant:

I feel braver! To talk about topics that are taboo! Church-pleasure, women-pleasure, queer-church, etc etc! And I have been talking to soooooo many people since the workshop about these topics. Because I had been uncomfortable using the language/vocabulary of queerness beforehand mostly due to a deeper understanding and what exactly everything meant. I'm happier speaking and engaging from a point of knowledge (white cis-woman, 20s).

Other themes that emerged in the post-workshop feedback included the importance of engaging the fluidity of sexuality and transitions in people's lives, as well as the task of straight people becoming allies, and appreciation for the diverse, harmonious modelling by the four facilitators as a cornerstone of the methodology. This led participants into a deeper understanding of their sexuality journeys and the need for faith communities to support and not stifle these. One participant highlighted, "feeling more comfortable to own my truth around my sexuality as valid and real, and it's okay if it changes; The diversity brought richness of experience to the fore."

The workshop also opened the eyes of many straight people to the different experiences of many queer others and how they have often been wounded by their treatment in churches, with one participant explaining that she was only now "awakening to the reality that there are different sexual genders and how they are treated by churches and communities. I knew about this (but) had never voiced my opinion to support".

A strong desire for the replication of this workshop model so that more in their churches could benefit was noted by participants and by facilitators, as was the unique contribution which this workshop offers with one participant insisting that "the programme is perfect, and it should continue so that more individuals can be enlightened and informed". The workshop also helped educate some of the facilitators who had been initially trained in a more binary gender model and found themselves stretched and enriched by this adapted model. One senior workshop facilitator noted,

I stepped into the workshop as a facilitator with the outline and structure of the plan and intended flow of the workshop and left as a member of a community

having received the gift of being seen, heard and witnessed in my truth and realisations which I have never shared and spoken of before. It was a lived experience of being with gender and sexuality in a new and different way. I expanded into deeper awareness of how I am, and may have been, knowingly or unknowingly complicit of othering those who most wanting to be accepted for their full, human selves. I was enriched, stretched and wonderfully enlightened.

Feedback from the initial pilot, especially from gender non-conforming participants, helped the model to become consolidated and several of the participants in this workshop have continued on to be trained as facilitators within the wider GERI process enabling a more continuum based, sexuality focused lens in this work in South Africa. As further funds are secured, the Human Sexuality workshops will continue to roll out to more churches within South Africa, and possibly even beyond, offering experiential accompaniment to local faith communities who seek to travel a different path towards the inclusion of all sexualities and genders within their faith beliefs.

CONCLUSION

This article shows that alternative theological voices who support LGBTIQ+ inclusion and belonging are to be found within South African faith contexts. These often emerge from their lived experiences of an intersectional history on social justice and this offers postcolonial opportunities on which to build. However local congregations must begin from a confession of the current disunity of the global church where LGBTIQ+ Christians have sadly had to create separate churches to feel safe enough to worship. Hard work needs to be done by all people of faith, for a genuine reunification which is based on trust, freedom and diversity and not on a conforming uniformity, shame and hiding.

Safe containers are urgently needed for healing spaces that do not negate the living realities of fear, pain and lament by LGBTIQ+ Christians, but enable difficult stories to be held, heard and told within churches. The Human Sexuality workshop described in this article contributes in this respect. It assists faith communities to let go of a cheap welcome or double talk patterns to undergo the hard process of seeing, hearing and building diverse belonging. Local faith congregations can potentially be equipped to offer transformational storytelling and relational containers that hold space for change to happen. However, few embodied spaces like this currently

exist within faith communities and need amplification if the tide is to be turned on LGBTIQ+ exclusion.

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