



From Exclusion to Embrace

Re-imagining LGBTIQ belonging in local South African church congregations

Dr. Selina Palm
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Executive Summary



This research report documents lessons learned from local church congregations in Cape Town who are seeking to embody increased inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender intersex or queer (LGBTIQ) persons in their faith communities. It offers insights emerging from their practice on which activism for change can build. It is carried out by the Unit for Religion and Development Research (URDR) at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. It focuses on five church congregations from different Christian denominations in the Cape Town area that, in partnership with Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), are developing an LGBTIQ inclusive and affirming stance. This is often in defiance of their wider denominations' positions.

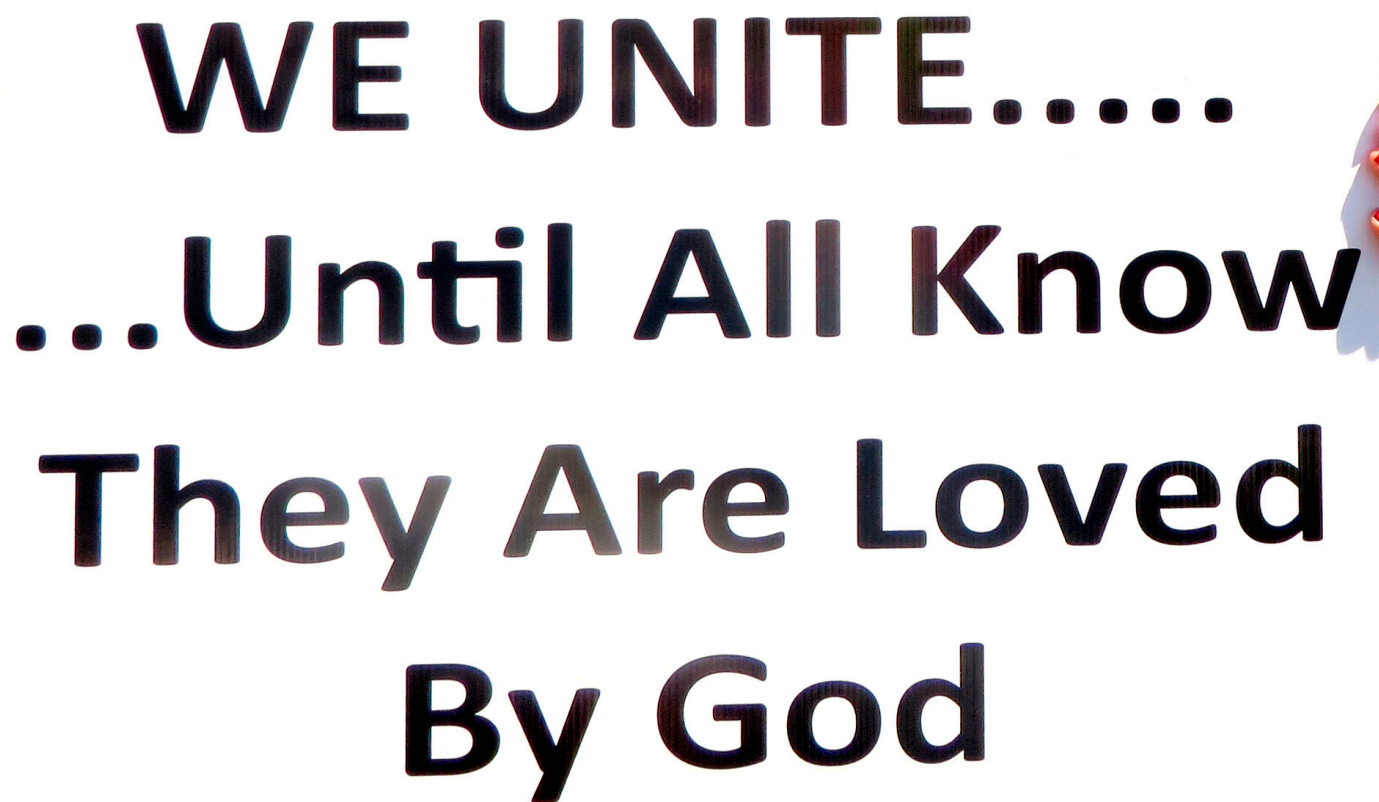
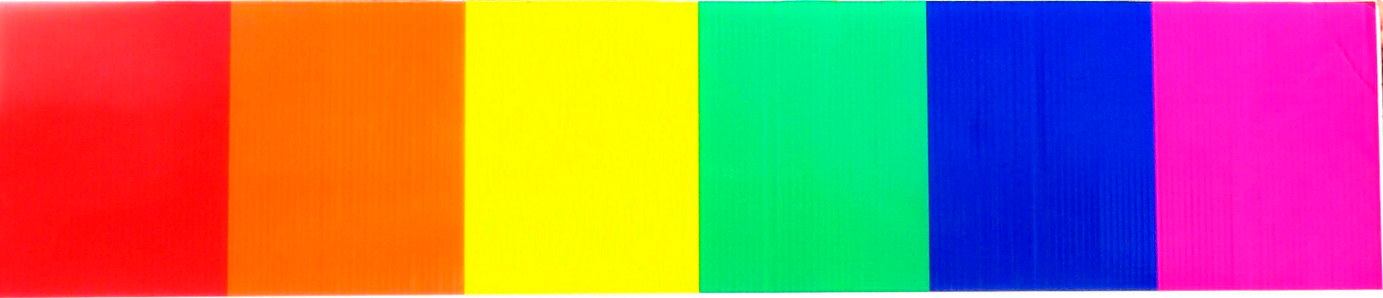
Evidence shows that many churches, and their religious beliefs, play a role in stigma faced by the LGBTIQ community and hold considerable authority at grassroots level within the African continent. They are uniquely positioned as part of the challenge of exclusion, but also form potential spaces where communities of belonging can be nurtured. This report explores this possibility through the self-perceptions of leaders and members within five congregations. It does not suggest that they are representative of churches in South Africa. On the contrary, it highlights their current 'minority' position, and therefore the need to document their stories.

This report serves as a synthesis of the study findings. The study employed a qualitative methodology to explore the self-perceptions of five diverse church congregations around LGBTIQ inclusion. The researcher carried out a brief literature review and then semi-structured key informant interviews with 5 ministers and 13 congregation members at five local churches within different denominations in the Cape Town area. Half of those interviewed were LGBTIQ Christians.

The report gives a brief overview of recent South African literature in Section 2 and then the empirical findings are structured around seven key themes from the interviews in Section 3. These are; a church ethos of belonging; visibility; theologies of exclusion and embrace; leadership; partnership; advocacy; challenges and opportunities. Section 4 summarises the findings to identify ten promising practices:

Key findings

1. Focus on the gifts and talents of LGBTIQ persons in an asset-based approach, re-constructing scripture together as a resource for social justice.
2. Use contextual storytelling as a methodology for bringing change, using stories from sacred texts and from the 'texts' of peoples' lived experiences, especially LGBTIQ persons.
3. Develop a positive theological position that celebrates diversity, including sexual orientation and gender identity. This framing is rooted in creational diversity, Jesus-centred inclusion and liberating scriptural interpretations.
4. Use an intersectional lens by not seeing LGBTIQ in isolation but pointing to a positive holistic approach that celebrates all forms of diversity seen through a social justice lens.
5. Make an ethos of full church belonging publicly visible and concretely embodied in language, sacraments, leadership and witness inside and out of God's radical embrace.
6. Identify courageous, committed, visionary church leaders who can take their wider leadership with them longer term and open up space for diversity within church structures.
7. Nurture relationship with LGBTIQ Christians as key for churches to change, to break the cycles of fear, hiding and separatism and for LGBTIQ relationships to be more visible.
8. Build critical mass in congregations shaped by a transformational vision of becoming church together. This can lead to an ownership of the issue from below and beyond just the minister.
9. Develop creative cross-sector alliances for leverage that can work beyond denominational structures. Identify other faith-based allies who are heading in the same direction.
10. Avoid a 'double talk', where LGBTIQ orientation is accepted but not LGBTIQ practice. An ethos of radical inclusion nurtures full belong, acceptance and celebration.



WE UNITE..... ...Until All Know They Are Loved By God

List of abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome
FBO	Faith-Based Organisation
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HIV	Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus
IAM	Inclusive and Affirming Ministries
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
URDR	Unit for Religion and Development Research
VAW	Violence against Women

1 Introduction



Local church congregations form an important hub in many South African communities, where recent statistics show that 80% of the population still claim active Christian affiliation. Religious ministers hold considerable power and authority and influence their constituency's beliefs and behaviours (Le Roux et al, 2016:23). They are often key role-players in formalising and celebrating major life events such as births, deaths and marriages. Thus, they are uniquely positioned in relation to shaping community attitudes regarding sexuality, relationships and understandings of family and parenting.

The aim of this research study was to document and share lessons and good practices within five local congregations in Cape Town that model an alternative to their wider denomination's stance by seeking to radically re-imagine and embody full LGBTIQ inclusion. In this respect they reflect what is currently a 'minority' church position on this issue. It points to good 'peoples' theology'¹ practices on which activism can build and offers qualitative research to support IAM and their church partners in deepening engagement, embodied resistance and imagining alternatives, in collaboration with LGBTIQ voices. These bottom up models of belonging can help to enable inclusive congregational practices across denominations and nurture cross denominational strategic alliances to build theories for transformation from below. This study focuses on developing a better understanding of alternative minority 'prophetic' positions being taken by selected local congregations. It offers the hope that their witness to a different reimagining may enable more congregations to journey from modelling theologies of exclusion to becoming embodied places of healing and radical inclusion.

There are three partners in this project. It was carried out by Dr Selina Palm at [The Unit for Religion and Development Research \(URDR\)](#), based at Stellenbosch University. [Inclusive and Affirming Ministries \(IAM\)](#) are a formal partner on this research study in the selection of the five churches and the provision of counselling support for participants if needed. The research received some funds from [The Other Foundation](#), an African trust with a focus on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Methodology

The research study used qualitative methods, combining a brief review of relevant academic and grey literature with the collection and analysis of primary data collected during eighteen semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) within five different local congregations of different denominations around Cape Town. International ethical clearance for this study was received in 2018 from the Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee: Humanities (Project number REC-2018-1720)

Literature review

The brief literature overview focused on recent grey and academic literature on inclusive LGBTIQ theologies, as well as selected documents, media articles and consultation reports giving background to the current debates within denominations. It focused on South African contributions to ground the whole study in a particular context. It included selected theological journal editions on sexuality in Africa, as well as key documents produced by The Other Foundation and Inclusive and Affirming Ministries. Insights from this were used both to inform the design and the interview guides and also to guide the thematic analysis of the data.

¹ According to West (2016:223) there is a need for a "kairos-like process of 'peoples theology' to shape a new prophetic theology" around LGBTIQ issues in the South African context. This draws on past theological struggle methods in the 1980s used to mobilised faith voices from below to challenge the South African church's roles in apartheid.

Key informant interviews

Participant churches are all partners with Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, selected in consultation with them based on their journey towards LGBTIQ inclusion and their diverse reflection of different denominations, socio-cultural makeup and locations. Potential KII participant lists were identified by the minister of each church and then some of those were approached directly by the URDR researcher. For purposes of confidentiality, the minister was not informed who was selected for interview. All semi-structured interviews were conducted individually and face to face, with 18 congregant members and ministers from the following local congregations; [NG Kerk Bloubergstrand](#) (Dutch Reformed Church), [Central Methodist Mission](#) (Methodist), [Guguletu Uniting Presbyterian Church](#) (Presbyterian), [Rondebosch United Church](#) (Congregational/Presbyterian) and [Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church](#) (MCC). Each church was offered anonymity in the research process and chose, in the light of its findings, to be publicly named.

The minister from each congregation was interviewed. The remaining 13 interviews were with active congregation members including worship leaders and elders. A diverse range of participants was selected, with half of the interviewees identifying as being of LGBTIQ orientation. Interviewee ages ranged between 22-62 years. A diversity of racial grouping, ethnicities, socio-economic status, ages and genders was secured. One trans man was interviewed and one person openly living with HIV. Six interviewees were black, two were coloured and ten were white. Care was taken to ensure that all interviewees had access to confidential counselling. Pseudonyms are used for all individual participants for safety purposes.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study. It was a small, location-specific study, with only 18 people interviewed. However, participants were intentionally selected from diverse denominations, socio-economic, racial and language groups and a deliberate strategy was employed to highlight the voices of LGBTIQ people within each congregation. Second, the limited literature review focused only on recent South African contributions to the debate in English. Third, only English-speaking participants were interviewed. However, those whose first language was isiXhosa or Afrikaans were included.

Interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti software.





For many centuries, religion has been used to stigmatise and condemn a wide range of sexual and relationship practices. However, despite shifts in recent decades on a number of these issues, there has often remained an emphasis within many religious spaces on condemning LGBTIQ sexualities. This has been particularly true in the South African context, home to one of the most progressive rights-based Constitutions in the world and, in 2005, one of the first countries to legalise same-sex marriage. This specific issue is receiving significant global attention at this time, even seen as at risk of fracturing the worldwide church and has been problematically portrayed at times using an African/Western static binary. The South African experience on LGBTIQ issues is therefore important, due to its unique positioning, situated within a historically complex set of intersectional oppressions of race, colonialism and gender that have been, at least partially, shaped by religion.

The specific problem that this research seeks to engage is the current lack of safe, inclusive spaces for LGBTIQ people in many local church congregations in South Africa. This should be seen in the light of a formal conservative backlash at denominational levels (West et al 2016, Gunda 2017a). This leads to hiding, exclusion and trauma for many LGBTIQ Christians seeking to worship at 'mainstream' churches and often a retreat into 'separatist' gay church spaces. Progressive congregations have experienced disillusionment in the light of recent refusals by senior church leaders in multiple denominations to move forwards significantly on this issue. This raises the need for concrete theological approaches from below to be better identified, nurtured and documented within existing local congregations. West (2016) points to the need to nurture embodied traces of "African queer theology", in ways that ordinary people (including LGBTIQ congregants) can embrace within congregations. This research contributes to developing approaches from below by documenting local insights across multiple denominations that seek to reflect inclusion within their churches.

The five church sites engaged by the research study are geographically, linguistically and racially diverse. The sites represent five different church denominations; include are urban, peri-urban, and township congregations; and serve Afrikaner, isiXhosa and English-speaking communities. Three congregations have refugees and migrants from other Africa countries as long-term members. They range from a congregation of 50 people to one of 5,000. All the ministers interviewed have been involved in challenging or standing up against the recent decision by their wider denominations around same-sex unions and marriage, and all five ministers have carried out same-sex marriage blessings either in defiance of or in consultation with their denomination. Some have been doing so for decades. Four are attached to traditional denominations – United, Presbyterian, Methodist, Dutch Reformed. One is part of an LGBTIQ-specific denomination. To ensure the confidentiality of all speaking out within these churches, this study will keep the names of all five churches and their ministers anonymous, despite a willingness of all the ministers concerned to reveal their names.

The four traditional denominations related to the churches studied are all currently facing stalled processes of high-level discussions on the LGBTIQ issue. A conservative backlash has been seen in recent years within most denominations fuelled by increased visibility and pressure for change. This has led to the reversal of progressive Synod decisions by some church leaders, the refusal to circulate sexuality reports perceived as too progressive for discussion, the perpetuation of 'don't ask don't tell' models around ordination, as well as a possible rescinding of freedom of conscience requests by ministers to do same sex blessings. Gervisser (2016) suggests that both 'backlash' and 'progress' cycles currently exist in Southern Africa on the LGBTIQ issue, and that there is a need to equip churches to navigate this to understand what can lead to progress and find ways to counter the backlash cycle. He charts six problematic narratives in Southern Africa, including a moral discourse that frames this issue as a sin against God or of LGBTIQ persons as demon-possessed. However, the one causing most pain is a narrative of social exclusion where LGBTIQ persons are told 'you do not belong here' – in families, communities, churches and from religious rituals such as weddings and funerals (Gervisser 2016).

A 2013 poll (Pew Research, 2014) notes that South Africa has lower rates of acceptance of homosexuality than all the other countries who have legalised same sex marriage, but higher acceptance rates than any other African country. This offers a window of opportunity on which to build. A gap exists between the Constitution's approach and many ordinary attitudes. Recent research (HSRC 2016) shows that 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. While a large 'moveable middle' is identified who could be persuaded either way, many churches here still mitigate against this shift (Gunda 2017a).

Recent studies elsewhere (Kuruvilla 2018) suggest that while religion is generally a protective factor against youth suicide, it typically plays the opposite role in the lives of LGBTIQ youth, creating harmful conflict between their faith and their sexual identity. The need for religious communities to create affirming spaces and offer full acceptance is named an urgent task in the light of this if religion is not to make LGBTIQ youth feel "valueless as a relational being" (Kuruvilla 2018). Similar realities may exist across Southern Africa where, according to black African scholar Ragies Gunda, "many churches are hotbeds of homophobia" (Gunda 2017a:1).

However, this is also not the whole story. Collison (2016:1) suggests that in recent years "a queer thing is going on in Southern African churches" with a disruption of 'majority' arguments in churches that continue to refuse full acceptance to LGBTIQ persons by a vocal 'minority'. In 2013, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu publicly announced, "I cannot worship a homophobic God," equating the LGBTIQ cause directly with the struggle against apartheid (Davies 2013). Tutu has been forthright on this issue since the start of the post-apartheid dispensation (Tutu 1997). He stresses the potential of religious leaders and the need to equip them to think differently about interpretation of their sacred texts. If LGBTIQ acceptance in South Africa is to grow, he notes that religious leaders have a key role to play (Davies 2013).

Gunda notes this same ambiguous reality, suggesting that "the greatest obstacle to the full acceptance of LGBTIQ (sic) people in southern Africa is religiously sanctioned homophobia" which maintains an 'us and them' dichotomy (Gunda 2017b). However, despite this dominant narrative, he also highlights the existence of minority churches and religious leaders who offer a different path, advocating the inclusion of LGBTIQ people both in society and within faith communities - driven by an incarnational theology of welcome. These minority voices are in urgent need of amplification if the ambivalent relationship of many churches to human rights in post-apartheid South Africa, is to be bridged by nurturing a church ethos that takes an active role in social transformation for human rights (Palm 2018).

The church is already divided on this issue, with gay denominations forming a visible sign of this disunity due to the lack of safe space in other churches for LGBTIQ Christians. Questions have been raised about this separation, reminiscent of the separation of the churches into black and white under apartheid in the South African context (Potgieter and Reygan 2011). While understandable in the light of exclusion, they suggest that a separate denomination may be limited in its ability to 'disrupt' mainstream church narratives on LGBTIQ issues and may also itself need to take an intersectional lens on other social justice issues.

Increased research around the religion/LGBTIQ connection has been seen in Southern Africa in the last few years (Gevisser 2016, Gunda, 2017, West et al 2016, Hadebe & Chitando 2016, Boesak 2011, Kaorma & Chalwe, 2016). Two events in the wider faith world have been noted as shaping this: the Anglican schism over gay priests and North American Pentecostal denominations importing of an anti-LGBTIQ agenda into African Christian contexts (Gevisser 2016). The call has been made by South African theologians for churches to make a reimagining shift "to ground their theological work on LGBTIQ sexualities in the lived experience of LGBTIQ Christians" (West et al 2016:13, West, 2016:216) to develop a prophetic theology of sexuality from the ground up. Three recommendations stand out:

To ensure the epistemological privilege of LGBTIQ voices in discussions. This requires safe sites that can nurture a theological interpretive resilience. Moving from conversations 'about' LGBTIQ people to conversations 'with' them, as agents gives voice to their embodied realities (West et al 2016:15).

To contest life-denying scriptural hermeneutics on sexuality. An alternative framing reclaims liberating approaches for engagement, recognises LGBTIQ bodies and reimagines relations between human rights and religion. South African theologians highlight (Boesak 2011:12, West 2016:221) that the bible does not speak with one voice and is itself a site of struggle. Going beyond debating specific texts to discuss values and use storytelling methods in churches is recommended (Hadebe et al, 2016).

To employ an intersectional social justice lens rather than a private morality lens. This recognises the multiple axes of oppression (Judge 2018) and different ways of controlling the bodies of others and employing religion to justify it. It also opens a dialogical approach around the indivisibility of justice (West 2016) and the importance of reshaping theological education (Hadebe et al, 2016).

Most LGBTIQ persons here still have a desire to belong to churches: "LGBTIQ Christians in Southern Africa have not given up hope of being acknowledged and accepted. Despite messages of rejection and dehumanisation which have driven many away, most still want to be a part of their churches" (Gunda 2017b:27). However, it highlights that grassroots attitudes can only be changed through those known and respected within local congregations taking the risk to speak out and engage with fellow believers over time (Gunda 2017b:29).

Suggested change strategies include:

- Local churches being pro-active and capacity building their clergy and congregations
- Developing multi-sectoral coalitions
- Documentation of an evidence base
- Mobilising courageous pastoral engagement that does not wait for institutional approval
- Careful listening to the experiences of LGBTIQ persons of faith

Challenges included the economic consequences of taking a stand, leading ministers to shy away from a prophetic stance but also the presence of ‘double-talk’ (Kumalo 2016) where a distinction between orientation and behaviour splits apart a holistic understanding of life in the name of a ‘cheap piety’ requiring LGBTIQ persons to apologise rather than celebrate (Jones and Davids, 2018).

Despite a conservative backlash by many church leaders, recent consultations (Hadebe et al, 2016) note it is essential to engage them and that churches have a role in creating spaces of belonging. There is a need to learn from past struggles, identify signs of hope and recognise energy, progress, victories, and safe spaces. A positive shared task exists to develop a vision of social justice that reconciles sexuality, human rights and Christian faith. This requires safe spaces for local encounter where vicious cycles of LGBTIQ shame and hiding are broken (West et al, 2016), It also requires changing theological narratives to reflect a radical neighbourism fuelled by a dialogical ethics of ubuntu (Kaorma & Chalwe 2016: 176). Nurturing these webs of relationality may generate a radical bondedness, a united ‘we’ that supersedes ‘us and them’.

A recent consultation on churches and homophobia in South Africa notes:

“**Christian churches should be promoting acceptance and reshaping social attitudes, journeying towards making the church welcoming to all children of God (Hadebe et al, 2016)**

For churches to move from friendly communities (that tolerate diversity) to inclusive communities who celebrate, claim and insist on diversity (West et al, 2016:28), they need tools.

In the light of these suggestions from secondary data, we now turn to the primary empirical findings of this research study from its eighteen key informant interviews.



3

Empirical Research Findings



At the heart of this study is a semi-structured empirical component carried out within a South African local context. It aims to amplify the voices of ordinary congregants, local ministers and LGBTIQ Christians who reflect minority voices of increased acceptance. It offers concrete hope and lessons from below that show that more churches can nurture congregational spaces for LGBTIQ belonging.

This section is organised into seven key themes that emerge from the interview data. It highlights diverse contributory voices by using quotations to re-enforce the researcher's thematic analysis. It foregrounds the stories shared in interviews and the epistemological privilege of LGBTIQ persons. Where they are quoted, their sexuality is noted. It is to the seven themes of church ethos, visibility, theology, leadership, partnership, advocacy and challenges/opportunities that this section now turns.

3.1 A Church Ethos of Belonging

No more "aliens in the household of God"

When describing the ethos of their church on LGBTIQ issues, the words 'welcoming', 'belonging' and 'embracing' emerged consistently from all respondents. Those of minority sexual orientation highlighted a sense of acceptance in the space and a lack of fear or discrimination, experienced consistently from the leadership but also within the congregation. This went beyond initial inclusion and a superficial welcome to a deeper sense of normalised belonging to the life and work of the church, with a feeling of having roles to play and talents and gifts to contribute. Most LGBTIQ interviewees highlighted an initial sense of caution on even entering the church. They were wondering whether it will be a receptive space, with one lesbian youth saying, "if you are queer, you will be nervous when you come into a church, you will want to see 'will it be okay?'" As a result, an embodied, visible welcome from both members and the minister was very important:

“

From the sermons and the activities in the church that I have witnessed ...we are welcoming to people of different sexual orientation...there is no discrimination when people see this person has a different sexuality, they are treating and welcoming that person, not neglecting that person and I like the fact that most of the people are open....they are showing that they are not having a problem with that person and I have seen a number of gay people coming (black male congregant)

”

The overarching metaphor used in all five churches was 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 spaces to be made safer. This was described as part of the DNA of the congregation and not only as the task of the minister. Leadership was seen as critical to driving this ethos but also in taking the time to build a critical mass of wider support. This included allowing dissent and confusion, an open-door policy for those with questions, and spending one-on-one time to support families struggling with the issue.

Four components were identified from responses given in this area of shaping an inclusive church ethos;

- A transformative ecclesiological vision.
- Normalising welcome and belonging.
- Developing models of celebration and accompaniment.
- Building a sense of being united across diversity.

These four components are discussed below and illustrated with reference to interviewee quotes and stories.

3.1.1 A Transformative 'Ecclesiological' Vision

Numerous interviews highlighted the shared metaphor of being on a church journey together towards a better and more inclusive future that the congregation can embrace. "We need to be aware of becoming rather than being" said one black female respondent. This is seen as oriented not to merely preserving the past but instead to shaping a different, more just future requiring each church to acknowledge their specific challenges and see it as a work in progress to overcome them.

Ministers highlighted their desire to take their congregations on a journey into a different future and the sense of excitement that this gave them on this issue. This involved them reflecting theologically on what it means to be 'church' and allowing this to be part of driving a social change from exclusion to embrace on LGBTIQ issues but also on other social justice intersections:

“

There are possibilities for a great change...the more the church opens up the more the church begins to realise its greatness, its greatness is in its ability to embrace (black male minister)

”

This need for a shared vision for congregants to actively buy into has often been part of what religion has offered communities through history. While this, at times, has been connected mainly to the afterlife and spiritual matters, ministers pointed to the potential of the churches to create holistic, compelling and positive images of our relationships to one another as human beings today. Dreaming big by embodying a breadth of vision offers an alternative to a narrow exclusive religious identity. It offers a way for congregants to go beyond what they may have inherited from their denominational and parental history, without feeling as if they are betraying it, an exercise in shared imagination that points towards a radically inclusive kin-dom of God, a beloved community:

“

The 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 you, the new identity, let us see it emerging, it cannot happen without us fully committing (black male minister)

”

Ministers and congregants both pointed to the inspiring potential of this liberating vision, of a journey that requires challenging and crossing social boundaries. They drew on theological resources such as many stories within Scripture, showing ways in which Jesus crosses both religious and social boundaries to affirm the human dignity of those stigmatised in his time. Ministers highlighted that in shaping this journey, rereading the stories of Jesus contextually with congregations was key. Congregants also pointed to this as an important part of their own pathway towards change within the church, to be able to embrace changes and emerging diversity with a sense of possibility not fear:

“

I think there are opportunities, the image we want people to walk towards, people will only move to what they are excited about, to what they really celebrate and so I want to think of possibilities, I have enjoyed life, people that have never crossed boundaries do not know what it is to cross them, it is exciting...I am a strong fan of Jesus of Nazareth, he is the sort of person who did not see boundaries, think of this guy that two thousand years ago had a real conversation with the woman at the well. To come up with so many ways to challenge boundaries, I think the church has so much to build on (black male minister)

”

In some situations, this journey built on a pre-existing history shaped by the church's struggle here against apartheid and for racial justice. In two cases the congregations had long struggle histories on which this new issue was able to build. In others, it arose in relation to new issues emerging post 1994 (such as HIV & AIDS). Despite different histories, all the churches mobilised stigma constructively to drive the church forwards. One congregation even faced a 'crisis' in the 1990s, as its minister noted:

“

The church was in dire straits, with difficulties in the memberships but also there were a lot of independent churches popping up all over, with strong Methodist and Baptist churches so they decided not to preach in English so not to compete [with others]. In terms of theology, the ethos was a deep spiritual thing to decide, "give us those who no one else wants", and that prayer really shows the future of the church (white female minister)

”

This identity of radical inclusion was also embraced by congregants in other churches who noted:

“

Our church is a free church because we are allowed to be who we are. Our church was the first church to accept HIV people and we were labelled the HIV+ church. Our minister said never mind what people are saying, if God is about love then we should be loving one another, irrespective of our status or what not. He emphasised love for one another to a point that everyone is free at church. We are also labelled the gay and lesbian church... in all we have been through, the stigma attached to the church kept us going forward. If God is about love, then love should be the centre (black male congregant)

”

This also required some churches to challenge existing racial or denominational stereotypes:

“

Our minister would say as black people, white churches would look and say, this is what we expect 'their' churches to be like...because of all the stigma attached to race. He would say, let us be above that, let us show that black people can do this (black male congregant)

”

Doing church differently by connecting to all in the community also challenged the idea that a church was just a building. A conversation with everybody in the community was the place from which a new holistic and world affirming theology arises with, and not merely 'for' people. Diverse images of human families reflected God's family to celebrate, not reject, differences, including sexual orientation.

3.1.2 Normalising Welcome and Belonging

Many people of LGBTIQ orientation interviewed pointed to the desire to be treated as ‘normal’ – asking not to be singled out for special attention but neither to be shunned at the tea table or frowned at for holding their partner’s hand in church. However, the word that came through consistently in interviews was the importance of a sense of genuine welcome. This went beyond surface inclusion or shallow friendliness to a sense of deep embrace and belonging to all aspects of the church. It included a clear refusal to tolerate unwelcoming messages and to call them out. This created a sense of belonging that did not reduce LGBTIQ persons to their sexuality or place a gay sign above their head:

“*We need to get it into the DNA of the church so if someone comes in from outside they know we welcome and embrace everyone regardless of race, gender or sexuality (black male elder)*”

The theme of acceptance was also highlighted as important. LGBTIQ members stressed this and often contrasted it with their experiences of other churches that focused on a list of don’ts. They pointed out that knowing that the minister was aware of their sexual orientation and accepted them was an important affirmation. This acceptance of diversity applied to a range of people, and not just them – where human characteristics such as gender, skin colour and sexual orientation were all embraced equally. For most of the people interviewed, it was the first church they had found that had openly accepted their sexual orientation, many after years of hiding within other churches:

“*This is the first church that has accepted me, it is nice to finally be accepted. My family accepted me, my church accepts me, and God accepts who I am (white lesbian congregant)*”

This theological turnaround from an emphasis on fearing God to a loving God was stressed as well as a shift from people only hanging out as ‘like with like’ – to a model of engaging across difference:

“*One of the nice things in coming here, the ministers greet everybody the same. To me that is key. I feel part of the congregation. In other churches people hang out with people like them, it is not like that here. You get a sense of caring, loving, welcoming (white lesbian congregant)*”

Ministers highlighted that nurturing a genuine ethos of welcome and belonging required asking hard questions and going beyond ministering to their present congregants to ask who they are being called to minister to and offer a home to, by paying attention to those outside the gates who were left out.

Leadership was seen as critical for church ethos and is explored later. Leaders stressed their role in setting the ethos and ensuring it becomes part of how everyone treats everyone. Deepening welcome with all the congregation is needed if LGBTIQ people are not to experience ‘surface’ welcome:

“*Everyone is welcome, what does it really mean?...can I walk into that church with my partner or will I get looked at weirdly, do I have to just come on my own and just sort of pretend to be single for a while until I can see what the church is really like (white lesbian minister)*”

Leaders stressed the need to prioritise the creation of a safe respectful space for all, something to be made explicit when people become members, in terms of what is expected and what is not accepted e.g. the use of abusive, derogatory language to or about others despite a diversity of opinions:

“*At the beginning I was very worried that here we say we are affirming but people meet over tea, and suddenly someone says something, but actually somehow my sense is that this is not going to happen... I think we have created enough respect so no matter where you stand that you are not going to make anyone else uncomfortable (white male minister)*”

3.1.3 Nurturing Models of Celebration

LGBTIQ persons need churches to go beyond initial welcome and shallow inclusion to an embodied, ongoing journey of solidarity and accompaniment on the whole human journey – including celebration over the life-cycle from accepting diverse gendered formation from birth, ways of learning about sexuality in non hetero-normative ways, support in coming out and celebration in finding a partner:

“*Are we going to let people be in leadership and celebrate that, are we happy to see a [gay] couple holding hands, will we be excited when they want to get married, when they want to adopt a child, or are we going to treat them differently (white lesbian minister)*”

The hope was of forming in time a community where there is no ‘us and them’ but a ‘we’, a safe home as a rainbow reflection of God’s family where everyone’s diverse gifts and talents are made visible and nurtured to the full and where no one way of family living is held up as the only God-ordained way:

“*All 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)*”

Figure 1 - Is 'the church' welcoming?

Betty, a church minister, spoke of the clash of faith and sexuality in her traditional denomination. She had been working for six years as a local pastor there when she 'came out' as lesbian. Her contract came to an abrupt end soon afterwards which created trauma for her at a vulnerable time. She left the congregation and only then felt free to marry her partner. Her denomination is currently grappling with this issue and she has spoken out at synod level. She now ministers in a gay denomination. Ministers from her old denomination can be subject to church discipline if they invite her to preach.

She says; "the irony of my journey is that the church, where I started to be truthful and authentic, to be honest, when discovering my sexuality and have integrity, was when I was pushed back. I was getting messages, God loves you, you are amazing, draw near to God, be truthful and the truth will set you free but the moment I discovered a truth in my journey that didn't quite fit the mould, the church did not know what to do. At the end of the day I had to be authentic to my own journey, even though the church was not. I have to remember the church is not God, it represents God and sometimes not in the most perfect way, just because the church says it, does not make it right."

In discussing what full welcome really means for LGBTIQ persons in church settings, she spoke of her embodied experience of holding her wife's hand during communion; "When I walked into this (gay inclusive church) for the first time and I could hold my wife's hand during communion, it changed my life, it was a beautiful moment...to hold her hand and share in a sacred meal with others and get prayed for, blessed and encouraged, that is life changing."

Betty believes that many ministers in her traditional denomination have open hearts but no backing from their denomination or tools to deal with her reality. In retrospect she wishes she had been able to speak her truth to the congregation at the time. But she admits, "I was too afraid. Which speaks more about the church I guess, than about me. That I could not feel safe".

3.1.4 Moving from 'Disunity' to 'Diversity'

Most LGBTIQ people interviewed did not want to be part of a separate gay congregation and many expressed that this was not how they thought church should be. Comments included, "I do not want to go to a church that is only for lesbian, gay, bisexual people ...though I owe a huge amount to that gay church" and "I felt, why am I here? I want to go to a normal church". Those who had joined a gay church had often done so because of painful exclusion from mainstream churches. One trans-man emphasised, "We need safe-spaces not an LGBTIQ ghetto church... doctrinally it is flawed."

The dangers of a gay church and its "ecclesiology of separation" was highlighted despite the undoubted welcome that many LGBTIQ people stressed that they had found there. Gay-specific church spaces were seen, even by those ministering in them as designed to be important "docking stations" that should offer a "bridge" back into wider safe church spaces but not become a permanent separate denomination. While its ongoing existence was seen as still needed, it symbolised the pain of rejection as a visible sign of the disunity of the church, much like churches split by race under apartheid, due to the lack of public affirmation of LGBTIQ relationships in mainstream churches:

“

It is a safe space for many people who have been hurt – you can come with your partner for communion – this is a public affirmation – it is important (white lesbian minister)

”

Despite the welcome found within the specific local congregations in this study, many LGBTIQ people carry significant wounds from previous church experiences and the need to 'hide' aspects of their identity. If churches are serious about LGBTIQ belonging, they must extend a more public welcome, done by one church in this study which has developed a formal partnership with a gay church. Each church also drew on their particular histories and strengths to build shared identity with the past as they drew congregants into new issues. There is no 'one size fits all' model but all five churches found creative ways to build LGBTIQ welcome into their DNA in ways that congregants can start to buy into.

Figure 2 - It's about intersectional social justice

Church D has a history of engagement as a 'struggle' church in the apartheid years, mobilising youth congregants as activists and conscientious objectors, inviting banned ministers to preach, advocating to their wider denomination and running provocative boundary crossing activities such as an interracial creche. In the last two decades it has taken this struggle history into the LGBTIQ space to help its congregation and leaders slowly make connections and become more vocal on this issue, providing reports on human sexuality to the denomination. LGBTIQ youth in the church felt safe to 'come out', growing up seeing others accepted. Same sex blessings by leaders have been normalised. One young coloured male congregant said; "I feel a large part of our theology is based on a social justice model...its stance against apartheid was based on a theology of social injustice and now shapes its open attitudes to LGBT(sic) community.... The justification is very powerful around its interpretation of the Bible with willingness to continuously review. It's not just black and white."

3.2 Visibility

“If I visited how would I know?”

Five components emerged under this theme: explicit visibility on LGBTIQ welcome within the congregation, the need to be aware of language and non-verbal signs, the power of sacraments and leadership, churches as public witnesses and the need to challenge wider gendered social norms. These are each explored below as strategies for improving the visibility of LGBTIQ belonging in church.

3.2.1 Build visibility within the congregation

Regular ways of making the stance of inclusion visible across leadership are important, particularly for LGBTIQ persons interviewed. Those within may know it is safe, but from the outside, it may be unclear. They asked for honesty, not just a ‘we love everyone’ banner but clarity in what is being offered, e.g. a safe space to come with a partner or a place where weddings/baptisms for LGBTIQ people are done.

Effective examples given were placing a welcome statement on the weekly service sheet that mentions sexual/gender identity (adopted by one church from an overseas congregation), explicit mention of groups within service rituals such as the peace or communion, and visual symbols recognisable by the LGBTIQ community such as the rainbow. Placing something small both outside and inside makes it clearer to all using the building what the church ethos is and form a public witness. When people from IAM speak, taking the time to explain the partnership or include in in pew booklets and also the importance of the minister raising it directly when people want to join the church:

“*I bring the issue up directly in conversation with new members, we talk about it and sometimes I know that is their position, that is why they actually want to come along, or I tell them that this is where we stand. I understand if people are on a journey, but that they know before they join the congregation that is where we are. It is quite important (white male minister)*”

LGBTIQ visibility can also unintentionally ‘reduce’ in a congregation if LGBTIQ staff, champions or the minister leave. It requires creativity to ensure that reversals do not happen at this point and that visibility does not become a one-off tick box exercise. Asking new people what they see and hear or asking a group such as the youth to do an annual ‘audit’ may mainstream ongoing systemic awareness:

“*It can be a forgetfulness in myself, as in, everyone should know what I think, but that is not necessarily true. The predominant default of being excluded makes perfect sense. This has been helpful to just stop and think. Were I to start my ministry here tomorrow for the first time, would I know...about the visibility stuff, it is obvious, now you mention it (white male minister)*”

One issue raised by many LGBTIQ people was the question of “Can I bring my partner to church?” There was a fear by many that the sight of a couple holding hands might elicit homophobic responses and that finding a church where this is not the case is important. It was noted that “It’s easy to hide in a church” and that this then reinforces the commonly held ‘Don’t ask don’t tell’ church approach where you are welcome as a celibate individual but not in a relationship. As a result, LGBTIQ persons say, “Being a couple is huge” and experiencing church together without a sense of shame or rejection can be a large part of what motivates people to seek ‘gay churches’. Visible spaces of affirmation, offering capacity building workshops for congregations and making LGBTIQ educative resources much as those provided by IAM easily available to congregants that speak to faith issues were also noted.

3.2.2 Be aware of language and non-verbal signs

LGBTIQ congregants especially note the value of inclusive messages on church walls around different kinds of marginalisation as visibly reinforcing a religious message of welcome to those who are often socially stigmatised in particular in ways that “entrench the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth”. Other congregants noted the strategic use of clothes by church staff to signal accepting welcome:

“*Our minister is strategic about wearing clothes when he is going to be preaching, or pointing to LGBT (sic) issues, he will wear a t-shirt that is rainbow themed (black female congregant)*”

Other comments included thinking critically about gendered spaces, including bathrooms, often a source of anxiety for trans-people, and fellowship groups. The point was also raised that language matters, in prayers, songs and liturgy and some flagged the value of gender diversity in images of God:

“*Language is an obvious one, certainly from the pulpit, and from what you print and share with people, how you speak about God so that it is more inclusive, include the feminine side of God, it is often traumatic for people to make that shift, but if they can make that shift it would make a huge difference because then folk would see... the bigness, the diversity (white lesbian minister)*”

Part of creating a visible ‘safe space’ is an awareness and trust from LGBTIQ members that certain kinds of language or behaviour would be challenged by the wider congregation as unacceptable:

“*I think the welcome in church, so if a gay person comes in ...to put in some physical contact to make sure they are welcomed. So, no one can use words like when a preacher man used the word sissy, we all cringed, we need that collective response...We do not associate ourselves with anyone who will insult people using scriptures or using the pulpit (black male elder)*”

There was a need expressed to ‘celebrate’ gay identity and not always make it something that is a negative issue. This involved being open for gay people as part of celebrations and to be able to bring friends who feel welcome. As one self-identified queer youth member of a traditional congregation said, “I don’t want to go up to the front but...a little celebration of queerness would be nice to see.”

3.2.3 Use Sacramental and Leadership Power

Visibility of LGBTIQ people, especially those in relationships, in various 'sacramental' tasks such as serving communion, reading scripture, joining the choir or leading worship all make LGBTIQ belonging visible in ways that contest and continually subvert current denominational rules or screening about leadership in many ways that go beyond only the ordained/non-ordained debate. For LGBTIQ people seeing that they can have an accepted place in church leadership is an important step beyond mere welcome as a member into a full belonging where there is no line beyond which their embodied sexuality becomes unacceptable. This also negates the don't ask, don't tell' policy of many churches. As one person noted, "People are not afraid to be visible about alternative sexuality. It is not a 'no pink jumpers'." This plays an embodied, symbolic role in a church where wider institutional welcome is still often denied. One lesbian interviewee noted that in her Dutch Reformed congregation:

“The guy who plays the organ and stands out front, he leads the singing and for a gay man to be there, that is a symbol and he is embodied...I see young people collecting the offering, gay people are involved in doing things in the church, there is visibility and participation

The public witness and visibility attached to the core 'sacraments' of the church cannot be underestimated. Acts such as baptising the child of a gay couple publicly was likened to blessing interracial marriages under apartheid. However, a more consistent way is to reshape liturgical or sacramental language for all baptisms, weddings communions etc. One example given by a minister was his practice of adding the explicit words "neither gay nor straight" to the words "nothing can separate us from the love of God" and also in the words used to invite people to the communion table:

“I am quite purposeful in terms of when a topic allows it to bring that issue (LGBTIQ) in as an example, in sermons at times I do that, when I feel that I can reinforce, but then baptisms almost always now when we have the, "in Christ we are all one, neither Jew nor gentile", then I keep adding, neither male or female, neither gay nor straight (white male minister)

This not only creates welcome for LGBTIQ people themselves in a way that they may have never had but it also raises the awareness for the whole congregation of the command not to exclude. While this may create initial discomfort for some, over time it becomes normalised. Baptisms were highlighted by many as an important ritual, that the local church is also the home for that child whoever they are:

“You see parents who are same-sex getting children baptised...It is a lesson for me, I can see two girls getting a child baptised and I feel uncomfortable then I see all the straight people who have no trouble and it teaches me to accept myself and not see it differently (white lesbian congregant)

Finally, a more open policy regarding who is allowed to stand visibly in the pulpit or at church meetings enables more diverse participation within leadership in ways that benefit many types of people but especially LGBTIQ persons who have often been systematically excluded from formal leadership.

3.2.4 Being a public witness

Banners and websites were mentioned as ways to make a public statement about the church's inclusive approach overall but also to enable those who are LGBTIQ to find the church. For example, a banner about Jesus and sex work at one church created an opportunity to engage with a group of sex workers in discussion and some congregants felt that more provocative conversations like this needed to happen. Beyond that, church visibility with banners or clergy uniforms at LGBTIQ events like Pride offer education opportunities for congregants but also challenge the overwhelming message that LGBTIQ people will not be welcomed in church. One lesbian youth member noted, "As a church to say, 'hey we don't hate you'. Just to be very visible at an LGBTIQ event as a group from a church." Due to the default belief that churches will be unsafe, signalling safety in advance publicly is needed:

“A lot of people discover our church through the website, they search for a "gay church", so you have got to get the right wording in. So, we say that we do same-sex marriages, that we are an inclusive church, with gay and lesbian specifically worded there (white lesbian minister)

While there can be a fear that the church may be stigmatised or put at risk when people talk about them 'behind their back', churches interviewed highlighted that this so-called 'stigma' had often been constructive pushing them forwards, not holding them back and led to new members joining and a sense of pride from many existing members that their friends see their church as different.

“My evangelical friends say, "you go to that church that gay people are allowed to go to" so there is publicness about the fact your church allows that (black female congregant)

Word of mouth was highlighted as another form of safe visibility around LGBTIQ issues, with some churches saying that "people recommend us to others," although there was also a fear from some that while a minister might be inclusive this may not always translate through to the congregation:

“We are inclusive in this specific way otherwise people are going to wonder... word of mouth is quite key, like if they know a friend of a friend who goes to a church and they can be a couple and they can go to church and be sincerely welcomed and celebrated (white lesbian minister)

At the same time, it is important to be sensitive to individual people's desire for privacy. Not all LGBTIQ people want to be activists and it was noted that churches don't always need to 'wave a flag' to be inclusive. One example was the first gay wedding done by one congregation of two church members. They wanted it behind doors to avoid publicity, but others do stress the importance of having a flag:

“

The church should put something up at the front saying, we are an LGBTIQ friendly church, so someone who is gay, who has not gone to church because they are shunned driving past on their way to work will see and think there is a church that will not hate me and will tell their friends. We need to be obvious about it. I can understand being subtle but while we want everyone to be treated the same but before we get there we don't want to pretend or do it quietly, so no other church hates us but to say 'we are LGBTIQ friendly' (white lesbian congregant)

”

Various public days of remembrance were highlighted as opportunities for leadership to raise visibility and reimagine families in inclusive ways e.g. mother's day, as well as specific days of remembrance around homophobia issues or prayers in responses to current LGBTIQ violence. A diversity slot in services is another way to celebrate difference and raise intersectional issues, including LGBTIQ belonging.

Interviewees highlighted how when LGBTIQ issues became visible within a particular family in the church, this could be a catalyst for wider change and education in the church, if done in sensitive ways. Opening spaces for discussion and personal testimony can be important concrete 'teaching moments' for the wider congregation if it is done well, as the example of Chris, a young black person shows:

Figure 3 – A story that changed a congregation

Chris was born with both genitals and their church-going family decided to chop off the male genital immediately and treat Chris as a girl. It became a problem as the little 'girl' grew up to be more of a boy and had, in time, a serious conflict with their gender identity. Chris's complex reality became a story that reshaped the entire congregation from within a primarily black 'township' (a poor part of the city historically linked to the apartheid regulations). All four members interviewed highlighted this story as part of their own process of change. The questions it raised became a 'tipping point' for the congregation due to the minister opening space for discussion. One black female congregant comments; "The journey was not nice. I remember Chris asking to join the men's association. Chris was seen as being born a female but was not into being a female at all". Chris came to live with her for a while when he was rejected by the birth family. She notes that "one thing that brings change is families experience it in their own children". A black church elder also noted this as a catalyst for change:

"A girl who is trans wanted to join our men's guild branch, but the men's guild had denominational rules. After a hot and robust debate over weeks, the fear was not about accepting her but the other guilds and their Constitution that says, "male figures" which raised the question of interaction with Chris if we go to regional meetings? The younger men were used to having Chris in the youth group but it was when we moved into the men's guild that it became a question. The minister broke up the men only meeting and taught that we needed to discuss issues that pertained to us as a church congregation. In those conversations we were able to help people consider different situations: what if your son was gay, how would you engage with him? This practical engagement became part of the teaching... We decided Chris would be part of the men's guild... amongst friends and in my zone".

This story first shaped the isiXhosa Minister and then journeyed into the wider church. Its concrete dilemmas required brave and complex decisions including a public push back by the whole local denomination on denominational gender binaries and an interrogation of religious forms of masculinity, including the use of words such as 'sissie' to describe unmanly men by visiting preachers. This congregation will never be the same again.

3.2.5 Challenge gendered social norms

Challenging gendered dress codes was noted as still being needed, for example, women wearing pants used to be a taboo in church reflecting the complex entanglement of religion and culture, it was seen as both unAfrican and unPresbyterian. These expectations can prevent changes from taking place and reinforce restrictive gendered patterns:

“

Culture is a thing that is evolving but in traditional black churches, people will say you cannot wear pants! But our minister always says, who cares if you wear your miniskirt, if you are invited into God's kingdom. Lesbians and gay people can feel free to be whomever they are, they will feel welcome that this is a place for you (black male congregant)

”

Issues that affect women and LGBTIQ persons can intersect to change ongoing church patterns of policing dress codes where hurtful comments are still experienced. It also opens up hospitable space for those who are trans-identified to be more accepted, an area still seen as work in progress in some congregations, one lesbian congregant noted, "so if a transgender person walked in, or a drag queen, I am not sure what would happen."

There was nervousness expressed by older LGBTIQ people of others being too visible in their clothing. A desire of being able to dress how you want regardless of your sexual orientation was noted by many of those interviewed.



3.3 Theology

"Going beyond doctrines that do violence"

Three key aspects emerged under this theme; Theologies of exclusion that need explicit rejection in all their forms, the development of alternative theologies of embrace and the importance of reinterpreting scripture as a whole differently in both storied and subversive gospel ways.

3.3.1 Rejecting theologies of exclusion

In all five churches in this study, none of these theologies of exclusion were experienced inside them by the LGBTIQ persons interviewed. Most narrated experiences of these theologies as encountered in other churches to explain what still needed to change and why. Theologies of retribution, rejection and punishment had still been directly experienced by most LGBTIQ interviewees in their life. Examples were given by LGBTIQ people of being told by church ministers that their gay identity was a punishment for bad choices they had made, or an attack by satanic forces on them or on their family:

Many ministers only preach hate and quote hate in the Bible. The scriptures I mentioned, a lot of ministers preach that, and their primary message would be to turn away gays and lesbians (black gay congregant)

This often tied into models of God as a punishing figure to be feared, what one interviewee termed a 'fire and brimstone model.' Sin was noted as a 'sticky' theological concept, often used to make LGBTIQ people feel filthy, dirty or unaccepted by God and strongly tied to sexuality. This induced for many, but not all, interviewees an internalised stigma and self-hatred for many years of their life, shaping their own attitudes to God with some describing years of self-doubt and shame in church settings:

I went through it all again when I joined the (Pentecostal) Church aged 20. All my internalised anxieties came back, and it was a whole new process. Whenever there were prayers for healing I would go up and ask God...I wanted to change (white gay congregant)

However, a second and arguably more insidious metaphor still used by some churches points to the idea of homosexuality as a disease from which they needed to be 'healed', often used as part of the process of church discipline where LGBTIQ people would be expected to pray for healing. This could even take on an 'aura of morality' within leadership spaces, of 'helping' the person to turn back to God and using a model focused on 'the Bible says' to endorse a sense of self-righteousness in the church leadership on this approach and to shape a wider congregational response to the issue:

“

The guy that I worked for in the church was the poster boy for anti-same-sex relationships, it was rough. When I spoke to him about what was going on he sent me for two and a half years of therapy in the church working through what the church saw as "mummy issues... Their stance is, "you are broken, and we will fix you" (lesbian white congregant)

”

Whilst experiences of outright theological rejection of LGBTIQ persons were noted by some, more interviewees noted a more complex harmful theology through the approach of many churches to say, "we love you BUT..." reiterating a theology where they feel God says "I love you but you are rubbish" by 'accepting' or tolerating LGBTIQ orientation but not its embodied practice, by embracing only the single celibate individual but not the whole person in the midst of their concrete loving relationships.

The use of the Bible in literalist ways was noted by many using the justification that the 'Word of God is perfect'. It played a strong role in churches holding theologies of exclusion particularly the use of the seven 'terror' texts, despite their theological deconstruction. Interviewees noted that this is despite the rejection by these churches of similar biblical texts on issues such as slavery and genocide. The Bible is used indirectly to endorse paradigms of hierarchical domination and submissive obedience as 'God-ordained' within multiple biblical texts and stories. The Bible has long been abused to serve those in power across many hierarchical intersections; black/white, male/female, rich/poor but also the straight/queer binary. Interviewees note that this becomes a justification for the treatment of LGBTIQ people as second-class citizens, presenting difference not as to be celebrated but pushed down. It often ties into the treatment of women as second class, using the Bible and the name of God to perpetuate patriarchy and police gender binaries:

“

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

”



Photo: By David Shankbone

Figure 4 - Gay identity seen as a curse

Derek and Simon are an older white gay couple who had both individually faced and overcome early internal conflict around reconciling their faith and sexuality. They were leaders in a traditional church for decades, in a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy and were much loved by the congregation; however, when a new member complained, Derek recounts the church disciplinary process that ensued;

"The leadership body held sessions with us both over months to discuss 'what does the Bible say about homosexuality.' They emphasised that the 'Word of God' was perfect and unchangeable – every word although both men pointed out that the church was highly selective about which texts it took literally in practice. Finally, the pastor preached publicly telling the congregation they were not allowed to 'fellowship' or worship with the couple in church settings – and this is when we decided to leave".

One of the things they were told by elders was that "God couldn't have made you like this it does not make sense" and that "you made a series of choices which led you astray." An argument used was that because one of them had a grandfather who had been an important denominational leader, this pattern of 'gayness', seen in subsequent generations was a way in which he was being targeted by the devil who was "cursing his offspring". This points to a theology of punitive retribution in relation to gay identity but also suggests 'demon possession,' an argument used abusively around LGBTIQ persons in some Pentecostal denominations within Africa. This story shows the role of theology in exclusion and the 'backlash cycle' that can ensue in churches due to increased LGBTIQ visibility (Epprecht 2017).

The third concern expressed pointed to the use of ecclesial power, especially by pastors, to impose an interpretation onto the whole congregation and to negate the creation of a space where congregants were encouraged to think critically for themselves. This was described as a need to move away from models of 'one guy with one word' who aimed to create 'cut and paste copies' of Christians. This model was seen by some interviewees to encourage a sheep-like following in ways that negated the critical thinking required by all to move forwards. It was suggested that ecclesial power often corrupts and that pastors may need to take an oath to 'do no harm.'

Theologies of exclusion often focus around a holiness, purity model with homosexual practice seen to make you sinful, dirty, unclean, unnatural, sick or ungodly and the solution being celibacy and prayer. This often involves a complex, static entanglement between religion and culture in relation to certain sexual practices. Interviewees suggested the need instead to "think outside the box":

More churches in Zimbabwe are Pentecostal and they go into the Bible to find verses to define sexuality so they believe only the heterosexual relationship is 'godly' (black male)

However, a second model seen is a limited love typology of "We love you but...." which was named by LGBTIQ people as deeply problematic 'double talk', often tied to a 'brush it under the carpet' model of 'don't ask don't tell' on LGBTIQ issues. This enables churches to sit on the fence whilst claiming a superficial acceptance predicated on LGBTIQ invisibility and silencing. As one white gay man, thrown out of his church after many years in formal leadership, highlighted, "To say 'God made you like this and it's fine, but you can't have a partner is double talk."

3.3.2 Theologies of Embrace

In contrast to the varied exclusionary theologies articulated by interviewees above as problematic, the five churches studied demonstrated theologies of embrace in ways that showed similarities; First, the celebratory embrace of creational difference as a theological blessing, (rather than a distortion caused by the fall), led to a stance of radical inclusion as a positive theological container where the emphasis lies 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...been excited about the loving nature of God who does not exclude what God has created, ... I do not look at anyone else and see it 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)

Second, an (eschatological) openness to the future, lived out in a transforming understanding (ecclesiology) 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 sees opportunities not threats and is open to the task of being 'always reforming' (Palm 2018).

I believe in God who makes all things new and that is something that is as frequent as the tick of the clock, every second there is the possibility of something new ...something we have not thought of or something we have never seen as important (black male minister)

Third, a willingness to engage with the world rather than a reactive stance that sets the church against the world. This is not to negate the need for critique of harmful patterns within society, but it is to take a fundamentally open' stance to the world as the place loved by God and to hold together holistically way the spiritual and the material aspects of life, even when this led to difficult questions with no simple answers, seeing the church as on a journey of learning alongside the world:

Continuously educating people, it is very scriptural, God creating out of nothing. Presbyterianism is all about reformation, we constantly want to reform, seek constant change, new ways of doing church (black male elder)

“

Church is about engaging with the world, engaging with humanity with situations that we have never thought we could have a conversation with. It is out of those conversations that a new thinking and a new theology arises. A congregation for me is that space that creates opportunities for and a difference for a new exciting nature of God (black male)

”

Fourth, a deliberate decision to develop an overarching hermeneutic of human dignity that connects human rights and the gospel. Interviewees pointed to the need for an overarching interpretive lens of human dignity to underpin a synergistic relationship between the gospel, church and human rights, also seen as an important strategy by South African theologians today (Palm 2018):

“

The search for dignity, the intersection with human rights and the gospel ... what is the relationship between human rights and the church, it seems such a given but it is not... Ultimately it is about where are the scriptures pointing us, the direction that we have to go... a matter of hermeneutics and what we mean by the word of God (white male minister)

”

This explicitly moves away from a proof text approach to sacred texts towards understanding the wider journey within Scriptures and in its individual stories moving from concerns of purity to compassion. One congregation placed at the heart of their church vision the theme of ‘enlarging circles of dignity. (Palm 2018) and another highlighted the creational imperative for human dignity of all:

“

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 if we 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)

”

The eschatological vision of the church was one way that various ministers had found effective in building a shared theological vision across leadership, by drawing on themes of exclusion or embrace. What churches believe about the future matters on this issue, as it shapes the church narratives in the present whether it holds to an ‘apocalyptic’ or a ‘transformational’ eschatology:

“

You know there are a number of issues, not just sexual issues, that border on human rights violations. I do not think God would throw any of these individuals into hell, God will always embrace everybody as God's creation (black male minister)

”

Fifth, a Christological focus was seen on the values, life and actions of Jesus of Nazareth in the context of the society of his time and not merely an abstract focus on his death alone. One lesbian youth congregant highlighted that Jesus hung out and had dinner with lepers and prostitutes in his time so who is the church to judge others. Another noted:

“

If I read the Bible, if you look at God on earth, what he was doing with people, that is what I want to be, that is like this church. Acting like Jesus. When Jesus flipped the table, those people who thought they were holy, they lacked love. The woman at the well, the way Jesus interacts with her. He looked at the bigger picture and that is how we should be (white, lesbian congregant)

”

This involves the explicit retelling of gospel stories in ways that highlight not the conformity of Jesus but his subversive role in crossing both social and religious boundaries in his day as a trouble maker. One minister pointed to this willingness to provoke the religious system from within, saying, “with Jesus, he is within the system as long as they tolerate him, but he does not leave, they are the ones who get rid of him”. Another white female minister also highlighted this focus on the person of Jesus:

“

We are really evangelical. We focus on the love of Jesus, that is the driving force, the example of Jesus We preach a lot from the gospels about the life of Jesus, gospel theology.... become really good with storytelling, so we are not scared of the Old Testament (white female minister)

”

The need was articulated to reshape the patriarchal and limiting theological language still used about God and to involve and reclaim creative and diverse imagery from within sacred texts themselves:

“

For years our church has not referred to God as "he," we say "them" or "they," we don't gender God or we say, God is "father and mother." I love that is how we project the words of the songs up, I know the original version and our version is politically correct and I love it because we are making an effort to be "no, God is not a he, God is he and she"... the changed language might also give them (trans people) confidence, because they do not assume that God is a "He or a She."...(it offers) a gender fluidity about God which means people would also feel a little less "iffy" about it for humans (lesbian white youth congregant)

”

This also needs to go deeper into a reorientation of divine power itself to rethink classic models of pastor's power away from being dictators of divine, unquestioned truth-telling to a passive obedient audience. Instead ministers interviewed were opening up space for churches as places of shared learning and critical thinking, convening non-judgemental spaces of grace and connection to God.

3.3.3 Engaging Sacred Texts differently

The need to deconstruct and reconstruct sacred texts by reading contextually was highlighted by all the ministers interviewed as a key task. It was also noted by congregants and ministers as a critical part of their own journey towards change... learning to read the Bible differently and apply it:

“Contextual preaching, preaching and taking the context of the scripture seriously.... Reformed theology is good for that, to understand what is underneath...When the women in front of Jesus is caught in the act of adultery, it is easy to call her an adulteress, but you need to see the context of her oppression (white female minister)

A primary task noted by all ministers is to help congregations to understand ways in which Scripture can and has been used to legitimate LGBTIQ and other oppressions within the South African context:

“People have given Scripture authority over their life, through their faith journey and if that authority seems to be validating oppression in any way, that is an extremely powerful stumbling block to liberation and so my primary work then is to deconstruct that - a crucifixion analysis of scripture to expose and transform the powers (white male minister)

Many religious leaders still use sacred text to justify homophobia and exclusion and to oppose efforts to build fully inclusive congregations. Therefore, leading congregations into sustained change requires engaging with these harmful Scriptural interpretations. Furthermore, where individuals and faith leaders see sacred text as the highest form of religious authority, arguments for reshaping LGBTIQ inclusion that draw on Scripture will carry value and weight. A recent study on engaging faith leaders on harmful traditional practices (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017) identified engagement with sacred texts as a key approach to working with faith leaders to end various harmful practices, explaining that:

“It is a way of engaging faith leaders in terms that they are comfortable with, that they trust, and on which they see themselves as expert... In this way, sacred scripture can be a powerful weapon in challenging and transforming unequal and unjust structures and practices (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017:20)

Engaging with sacred texts is required to debunk scriptural interpretations that seem to exclude and condemn but also to build interpretations that offer alternative models of engagement. However, this should be a process of participatory engagement, where religious leaders help congregations to engage with their religious texts in love in order to reach points of new understanding together. Otherwise the ‘new’ interpretation can become other-imposed rather than part of the church’s DNA:

“It is not getting everyone in the room and saying you will listen to LGBTIQ theology, it is saying if we can rethink how you interpret Scripture potentially everything will change. How you treat the homeless person will change (white lesbian congregant)

“There is enough in our Scriptures which wants us to interpret responsibly the commandment of loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves that comes to fruition and completion. For me that is the heart of it. In the gospel we see the whole idea of purity systems moving from perfection to compassion... the stories speak for themselves (white male minister)

Engaging Scripture differently and contextually as a tool for transformation with regard to social justice was identified both by ministers as a strategy and by congregants as effective in their own journeys. Being subversive Gospel storytellers goes beyond ‘proof texting’ models and teaches congregations to read their sacred texts critically by themselves and through the lens of the marginalised of the day.

All ministers agreed that while contextual Bible reading of detailed passages was essential, on its own it was not enough and that “you can make the Bible say anything you want it to say.” The church needs to deconstruct the wider narrative of Scripture if it is to learn to tell its stories in life giving ways:

“It is the responsibility of the church to deconstruct such narratives, social construction is about restoring...we have got to be very critical of some of the identities we have been known to embrace that we know do not necessarily work... Some of the stories we tell about ourselves as men no longer pass the test of time, they need to be deconstructed, and we need to really do this together, co-construct and co-create (black male minister)

The transformative power of reading sacred texts in this way, to subvert not bolster dominating power, and to offer a complex picture of the many shades of grey in the human condition had inspired ministers to preach differently and find ways of creating radical belonging through diversity. One minister noted that each story in the Scriptures is about turning the accepted social power dynamics of domination upside-down which then makes it a very powerful tool of transformation. He suggests we must discover the Scriptures through lenses of power and all Scriptures that seem to endorse power over others must be deconstructed, those have to be deconstructed:

“Our text and tradition give us the tools and the possibilities to respond afresh to new challenges of the ever changing reality and insight about the gender spectrum, it is not just black and white, it is grey and how do you deal with the grey area that cannot be classified. Our tradition empowers us to be guided by love and that is not a cheap love, but the ability to allow people all their differences, so they will feel they belong and are not excluded....that is how I read the gospel and to bring people closer so they feel they belong (white male minister)

This model of sacred text engagement was highlighted by multiple congregants as challenging their thinking on LGBTIQ issues and other intersections of power, offering ways to think about God differently, to deconstruct their own use of sacred texts and recognise the danger of literal readings:

“*It is one type of sermon that [leader] preaches, that changed my own thinking. The theology of the church, the scriptures, how he does it, he makes God to be universal...the God of different sexual orientations, not just the God of man or woman, and that makes LGBTIQ people think that we are in the right place and they are being welcomed in that sermon...He preaches trying to bring everyone together in one basket, one thinking. I think that is one of the reasons why lesbians /gays continue coming... they see a different path (black male congregant)*”

One white gay congregant highlighted the importance of being willing to change the traditional liturgy. He notes that, we do not say at the end of the Bible reading ‘this is the word of God,’ but not every word is perfect or dictated by God. He speaks about churches needing to find different ways to interpret the Bible:

“*Our minister said, apply your mind when you are reading the Bible. Ask yourself is this about God's love, I think that has been instilled in us, also love for one another, we accept our brothers and sisters the way that they are (black gay congregant)*”

At the same time, it is important that sacred text engagement is not an exclusive approach. Interviews emphasised the importance of making sexual and gender identity realities ‘real’ to both religious leaders and local congregations to prevent sacred texts merely becoming abstract doctrinal debate. It should be balanced with a focus on the real-life aspects of people’s lived experiences which can happen through embodied storytelling within congregations. Those who heard experiences of LGBTIQ individuals often described a significant shift in their perceptions and a learning curve. LGBTIQ people need to offer their own insights into how to read the text in the light of emerging issues of sexuality. For example, there is no obvious precedent describing trans-people in the Bible – and in it is different to the homosexuality debate – no exact texts – but various stories of eunuchs and cross dressing. It was noted that trans people offer up possibilities of reclaiming gender-subversive moments in sacred texts – e.g. the woman who was a Judge drawing on social themes such as the ‘need to pass,’ the performance involved in looking the part, and the role of transgressive clothing.

All churches studied highlighted the opportunity to meet and get to know LGBTIQ people and hear their stories. Forums such as evening café style panel events opened spaces for embodied on sexuality themes, workshops focused on how to re-read scripture in the light of pre-existing harmful biases and with a diverse group of readers. Finally, some engaged sensitively with LGBTIQ persons within their congregation for them to share their stories and catalyse structural change.

The churches explored were all finding ways to reclaim multiple sources of theology in creative ways, including human experience, seeing both individual experiences and the communal experiences of the local community and congregation as valid revelatory sources of theology as the ‘living people of God’ inspired by a Spirit from below, not merely passive receivers of current church dogma from above:

“*You can work through a theological process with a community but at some point it has to go down to an experiential process that says are we going to let [LGBTIQ] people be in leadership and celebrate that, are we happy to see a couple holding hands, will we be excited when they want to get married...to adopt a child, or are we going to treat them differently (white lesbian minister)*”

Leaders warned that churches who try to sit on the fence on this issue and play both sides by espousing a ‘we love everyone’ will encounter problems and that taking a specific stand on concrete issues is required. This imitates a similar challenge to the churches in 1980s South Africa who were called to take a stand and to avoid the pitfall of a church that refused to take sides and act on the issue of race:

“*Churches who play both sides will create a lot of stuff and it will backfire and boomerang back...if you are in leadership you have to absorb some of the criticism...to make a moral decision, if this is what we believe and stand for, you have to stand by it. We do not fly a flag but if anyone asks me I tell them, if we lose them, I am sorry but we have to take a stand (white female minister)*”

If a theology of embrace is to be consistent, the leadership team need Their theology to be joined up and consistent. This does not mean it has to be uniformly identical and theological diversity remains important but certain shared values need to be held in common if the congregation is not to receive conflicting messages. This can play out in a youth pastor or social worker modelling something different about the church in other spaces of church influence.

Finally, a theology of embrace offers a positive framing based on a celebration of creational diversity, a transformational vision of the future (eschatology) and a relational way of being church (ecclesiology). This gives congregations a prophetic theology to stand on and for with confidence, a theology around which rituals, songs and symbols can build, avoiding a negative framing of disease, sin and abnormality which often frames LGBTIQ debate. It offers a different theological starting point:

“*There are a lot of other ways we can approach this that can make us friends and excited about one another, different as we may be... I wanted to have a conversation that celebrates the goodness of everyone... I had to deconstruct the whole idea of God as punishing evil, and punishing people, why would God be so interested in following us in order to punish us?... for people to really understand the loving nature, the exciting thing about God (black male minister)*”

Figure 5 - Marvin's story - Going beyond a surface welcome

Marvin is a coloured gay man living in a township, the son of a Dutch Reformed minister. He rebelled against the theology of his childhood early on. He points to the dangers of an, "I love you but you are rubbish" approach in his church. He grew up with a strong focus on sin and often felt brainwashed into feeling filthy and despicable. He notes that sin is a 'sticky' concept that can be hard to shake off.

He suggests religion often works best for the person in charge, sharing that "my father saw himself as the man of house, he would use the Bible to browbeat my mother into submission, she also believed it because "the Bible said a woman must always obey her husband. Growing up watching that I made a conscious choice that I love my mother more than a goddamned book. The Bible has human hands all over it, the prayer books etc even more." Marvin points to the danger of a dominant male figure at the centre and suggests the church must encourage critical thinking and responsible freedom. He feels that the sheep-shepherd model of church encourages moral laziness with a danger that the minister is seen as God's infallible anointed one. He calls for a democratic approach and an open, accountable pulpit. He notes the gay church he attends have "showed me more kindness than my family."

He also points out that while increasingly some churches have an 'open door' policy for LGBTIQ people they often do not have open hearts. He notes, "you still get looks at teatime or if you hold hands with your partner – you can't legislate for that." He suggests more churches need to take a concrete stand – are you with us or not? Finally, he highlights that building a safe space within a congregation requires transparency so LGBTIQ persons can know where they stand. He requests, "Don't just hide behind a, 'we love you' sign". He points to one Pentecostal church, which appears welcoming initially but in fact has a clear line which you will encounter if you stand up in the pulpit and say, 'gay is lekker.' In reality, their welcome is only on the surface.



3.4. Leadership

"The fish rots from the head...or not"

Five insights emerged from the interviews that can shape church leadership towards more inclusive congregations; leading from the front, building congregational critical mass, the power of the sacraments, an asset-based approach and ministerial courage to take a stand in the face of resistance.

3.4.1 Lead from the front

This was highlighted as very important on this issue with a recognition that ministerial leadership matters. As one male elder said, "Fish rots from the head, but the opposite is true as well as wise leadership fosters wider understanding and acceptance." However, ministers also need to know that it is not all about them and as one black female congregant said, "ministers come and go, and ministers say this is what we can do in the church as a job, but the community is embracing and embracing". This points to a task for ministers to speak up and open space to nurture champions within the church:

"If you walk into a church is to give a declaration of intent upfront, what is it that you want to do? What is it you want to achieve? (black male minister)"

The importance of consistency between the minister's words and their personal actions was noted as critical with a need to follow through. The example was given that if you promote gender equality in leadership as a theological principle, then the church needs to be serious about making that a reality so "if you say, this is how we do it then that." This builds solidarity in action not words:

"I find the stronger I am, as in there will be no discrimination around me etc. that creates a safe space for people to come forward and be the voice they are. A lot depends on clergy who hold such a crucial space. ... my guarantee with that was, if they kick you out they kick me out. So strong solidarity (white male minister)"

Ministers pointed to the need to be decisive and stand up when needed, and yet also be open to look at things with others. Members said with pride that their ministers held the tension between taking a firm stand for the dignity of each person but also not rejecting others or forcing them to comply:

"The leader is firm in his beliefs but does not force people to comply, that he will discuss and engage but it is not a line in the sand. People can come and even if they are not sure about it they are expected to engage and discuss (black male elder)"

The importance of ministers building trust with their senior leadership team rather than leaving them behind was essential, also by using their board to bring together both young and old in leadership.

Figure 6 - Journeys of vulnerability

One minister shared her own experience of getting divorced and the disciplinary process that ensured for her to continue as a minister. She experienced that sharing this story helped her congregation to make connections to the current experience of LGBTIQ ministers and the need for change:

"I am a divorced woman and when divorce happens there has to be a process that I had to go through with the denomination. If there is a third person you will probably lose your job but if not, then it is probably okay. They had meetings behind closed doors, but I had to continue preaching. But, accepting the Word from a divorced woman...that was hard for some people". She insisted that ministers have to work through these issues earlier on saying "We need to equip theological students before they get into wider ministry. You need to help them work through it."

"Even though they had clashes here or there they trusted him... the support from the older generations is also important, we need young people to be involved but the older people had to create that space to mentor up younger leaders (black male elder)"

Each minister spoke of their own personal journey of change and learning on this issue and that it had required them to be willing to let go of some of the things they had often been taught growing up:

"(There are) a lot of demands if you are a leader on your ability to love and embrace ...to embrace people you were never taught to love or embrace and when you do that you suddenly begin to doubt some of the things your parents taught you, once you receive embrace and love from an unexpected person (black male minister)"

If they were to embrace new learnings, this included developing the ability to 'doubt,' to embrace questions from a new generation, and to listen to often painful lessons from unexpected others. But ministers can also open up space for democratic 'open style' leadership where possible. One female minister noted her experience sitting in counselling sessions with people from the gay community who have a lot of pain. When a safe space is offered, it is like the flood gates opened. She says how much these encounters have helped her. Opening up the pulpit as a safe-space is also a strategy for transformation:

"I remember when it started, the rule in the pulpit.... people understood that this pulpit in our church does not select, it does not say it is a man, or a minister, or it is someone with HIV, or whoever, everyone can lead the service ... I can stand in the pulpit, I am not a minister and I am allowed to say any words without feeling shamed or sorry, so I am myself (black female congregant)"

A strategy employed by one church was to open leadership meetings informally to all those carrying out leadership tasks as a way to enrol 'missing' women and youth over time into leadership. This involved a 'no titles' approach and creating spaces open to anyone at church to come to. One young gay black man notes, "People are given space...to exercise their talents and skills, young or old...male or female". Another church minister pointed to the theological dimensions of this approach, where in church LGBTIQ members, like all other congregants, are part of a priesthood of all believers:

“

Even though I am a pastor and set aside to do this work full-time we believe that everybody can do just about any capacity of church ministry and certainly you are not discriminated on your sexual orientation or gender identity... we like to see a variation of folk in leadership up front, that represent a variety of people... we provide a safe place for LGBT preachers to minister and they may have been rejected or not been allowed to be ordained in their own denominations (white lesbian minister)

”

Figure 7 – Doing church differently

Malusi grew up in a strong Christian family, studied theology and was ordained at 23 and then led his black township church for 28 years. He says, "I was not interested in having church in the way I had always been exposed to. I needed to find ways of doing church beyond the four walls of a building and so I planted myself into a conversation with everybody in the community." Malusi highlights the difference between what a denomination might say and the realities that ministers face in a local, "...as a pastor on the ground you are confronted by people, not theories but issues, it is people that you are dealing with." He shares his own formation experiences;

"Early in my life I was assisted also by ministers, especially a friend who died years ago who was highly respected. He taught me never to ask for permission from the denomination but for forgiveness, so I never really go begging for permission. You write reports and they are thrown out, so why worry. Instead get like-minded people together and do what you enjoy."

His own exposure to the complications of sexuality and gender identity came in a very concrete, pastoral way that resonates up to today. "Early on in my life, I was invited by a family who had just delivered a baby and they were stuck as the baby was born with both genitals and they decided to chop of the male genital and it became a problem as the little girl who grew up to be more of a boy than a girl and was having a serious conflict with their gender identity. I feel I have learnt a lot from my congregation about what they are going through."

He says many churches are still driven by the fear of losing congregants or income and ministers must face this if they are to be a change agent, "when I started with HIV, I would be interviewed publicly and listeners would phone in and ask me questions, some would say, are you really a minister in a church and I would say yes, and someone would say, if you were my minister I would have left that church long ago... I have had many experiences where I would travel with members of my congregation and some congregations would not welcome us."

Malusi is a strong proponent of leading from the front, "declaring your intent, building a support base with older church elders and involving young people in leadership, throwing it open beyond ordained, categories to get wider diversity and operating with an open pulpit". He concludes, "I think I have always been excited about embracing and celebrating difference. What gets me excited is what is not like me, not what is what we have always been made to believe in." His passionate vision of possibility has communicated itself to his congregants who are also now agents of change.



3.4.2 Build critical mass in your church

While strong leaderships that ‘talks front’ was seen as an essential part of change in all the churches engaged, it was also clear that it takes more to create an inclusive congregation. Leaders need to be committed to develop churches as places of teaching and learning and to take the time to mainstream this ethos into all aspects of church ministry – social projects, youth, Sunday school, liturgy, leadership.

This requires an intentional ongoing strategy that involves both existing members and new members and begins from where people actually are, not where you think they should be. Regular participatory workshops that engage the links between religion and sexuality run by those with authority and knowledge need to be open for the whole congregation and not just a few. These become ways to build critical mass and open up topics for discussion, offering rather than imposing alternatives. Opening the space confidentially for those who disagree was seen as essential and a number of practical suggestions were offered as to how this could be structured in a safe way for LGBTIQ persons:

“We did have two or three workshops, when we get questions asked, we call people into a safe space and address it. The last one, we lost one or two families, we had a lady stand up and ask, “what if God really is the one who hates divorced people or gay people?” The moment she said it we saw everyone shift, we forced her to articulate it, the hate. It does not help to be secretive, but you have to be well prepared. The same thing happened about women in ministry, so we took the proof texts and looked at them (white female minister)”

Building critical mass takes time and moves slowly if it is to build sustained progress and not to result in a backlash cycle. But it also requires intentional strategic engagement with wider leadership at the church, youth, parents, those whose families are grappling with the issue and one on one engagement at times with those who are resisting or struggling to offer a safe space for their growth and learning. Where possible involving LGBTIQ people within the church as a key part of this strategy is important, but it should also ensure it is safe and not forced or traumatic.

“It took us around four/five years, to come to a place, because people were worried we were dividing the congregation, but there was enough momentum, enough people said, the leadership and the congregation, we want to be affirming. We would give space to those who disagree, but we want them to allow us to move forwards, that is tricky when you take that decision, it was a majority decision, yet some people probably were not quite sure where they stand. When I came back from the Assembly and presented the decision of the denomination and the rejection of our report, the whole church council said, whatever you do, we don’t care but we are standing firm on this (white male minister)”

As a result of long-term engagement (the ministers in all churches had been there for a long time), they had begun investing in a future when they were no longer there, a situation now faced by one church whose minister has just stepped down. However, his strategy to build congregation wide critical mass was now visible, with one youth congregant highlighting that “...we are a church that is well groomed, well-educated and his teachings, the skills and the foundation that he has laid for us, he knows that it will always be there.”

The value of educating a congregation and its leaders ongoingly was stressed with the role of a minister to learn and update and feed new insights back to the congregation as an important catalyst of change. The need for church leadership team to be educated and to research topics that are relevant to society showed the value of closer links between the academy, church and society.

Finally, the critical importance of building a diverse leadership team that nurtures new talents was stressed. While this included LGBTIQ persons, it also pointed to youth, non-ordained people and wider gender diversity as a way to move away from old style one voice pastor models and to ensure that congregations are seeing gay people, females and youth allowed in the pulpit.

“Appointing to the church board, appointing people to other positions, accepting gay people there has just been a practical way of saying, “you are welcome, we accept you.” The approach of the church is not to make a big thing out of it, “Oh you are gay! Welcome!” No, you are just one of us there is nothing wrong or different with you (white male elder)”

The emphasis on looking at the leadership gifts and talents of all and not at their genitals, sexual preference, gender, or age was seen as an important frame for who is fully included with no exceptions, this enables a balanced leadership where all people can use there gifts.

“We have people with different sexual orientations in our leadership and council.... there is no line drawn, if you are LGBTIQ, as long as you show quality of leadership, and an interest in church.... then we welcome the person and listen to the word of God (black male elder)”

Pastoral counselling and one on one support was identified as another important way to build critical mass of support from below. Ministers talked about the important pastoral role they play with families in their congregation, especially with those either struggling with their sexuality and those surrounding them and grappling with social and moral stigma. This pastoral space was a way to help individuals feel that the church could be a safe space to ask, learn and grow for those of all ages. Confidentiality and non-judgement were important part of this including for those who found the issue difficult. The role of the minister was not to tell congregants the answer but to offer a space for trustful connection to God and to offer access to helpful resources to assist the families.

Youth raised this issue as important for their churches to engage and elders noted that they had a responsibility to engage with youth on this issue, saying that for many youth, “in their context gay and lesbian is a non-issue, they are just part of the community, not they, ‘we’ are a community”. Youth also highlighted the importance of raising these issues in their own church groups:

“*We could talk about anything that was going on in the world and our youth pastor was very open. I do not think in my youth or confirmation group there was anything that could not be said, there were no off topic subjects (lesbian youth congregant)*

”

3.4.3 The power of the sacraments

Ministers hold unique spiritual power in their sacramental role in many denominations. While this has often been used in damaging ways to exclude some people from certain forms of blessing, participation, or approval, it can as a result hold significant power when the sacraments are used visibly and subversively to model public acceptance as one minister noted when asked to baptise the adopted child of a gay couple in secret if she wished as not to cause offence to others:

“*I don’t go anywhere else to baptise, I believe if you do it as a child or a grownup it should be done in the community of faiths, and to minister to the community. That is the whole point...the public witnessing... the sacraments are very important (white female minister)*

”

This ritualistic element also offers a way for acceptance to become liturgical. While some denominations may be more limited than others in their creative use of liturgy, its creative power should not be underestimated, to convey a sense of acceptance not only by people but also by God. It also includes the sacrament of reading the ‘Word’ and a willingness to engage this task subversively and contextually, explored in detail above. This sacramental theme emerged from numerous ministers and members as offering effective ways to reimagine theologically in ways that invited the congregation to be participants and public witnesses. Rituals such as communion, prayers, peace, baptism, confirmation, funerals and weddings provide opportunities for theologies of radical embrace to be made publicly visible. All ministers interviewed were willing to brave the consequences of disobeying their denomination liturgically to remain true to their spiritual calling:

“*My license comes through the institution, so I am not allowed to take marriages for same-sex unions. I profoundly disagree with that, so I do conduct those services, but I do not have the legal mechanism to do it. For me it is not a blessing it is a marriage... the power is not in the legality but the liturgy, I am a theologian not a civil servant. Marriage is an act of discipleship. ...so my primary ordination is to proclaim the gospel and when two people come together and faithfully love one another forever, there are few better examples of the gospel than that and I am told I cannot do it! Liturgy is the work of the people expressing the work of God, that is the work that I am called to (white male minister)*

”

3.4.4 Use an asset-based model

Interviewees spoke of the importance of what one termed an asset-based model, that celebrates the positive, and looks at LGBTIQ people in the light of the gifts that they bring. This approach highlights the importance of framing the change for the congregation in a positive way with a theology that supports that. This need for a positive framing, enabling faith communities to see themselves as part of the solution not just as part of the problem has been documented elsewhere (Le Roux and Bartelink 2017) and constructs a shared identity of which people can feel proud, without feeling the need to exclude others. The model of ‘appreciative inquiry’ and the use of ‘conversations that matter’ were given as examples of effective ways to help other ministers build strong congregations of embrace:

“*We have conversations on how to celebrate what works rather than what does not work. How do we build on what we are strong at rather than talking about deficits? (black male minister)*

”



3.4.5 Be courageous

Ministers interviewed suggested that more pastors may be willing in principle to move forwards on this issue but can fail to act due to pragmatic fears that they will lose their congregants, lose income, be fired, or fracture their churches. This becomes a practical factor holding back change and requires personal bravery from leaders to be nurtured and supported.

“

I think a lot of ministers are not so much concerned about what we believe in terms of ministry of embrace, but they are very concerned about losing an income, and that is a totally different thing. A lot of ministers do not want to crucify themselves at the altar of human sexuality to a point where they lose an income...But it (change) does not come without sacrifices, the fear of being unemployed tomorrow and being kicked out (black male minister)

”

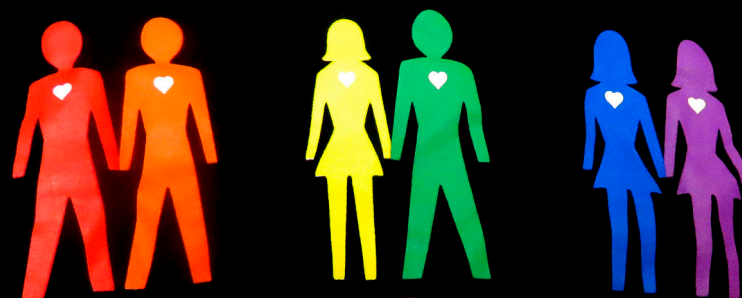
All the leaders in this study articulated strategies that minimised this fall out suggesting that these fears may in fact be overplayed. All highlighted that their stance had gained congregants in the long term and had lost very few. However, wealthy influential members or donors could exert pressure within and it was stressed by one minister in an affluent congregation that it is essential that leaders need to not be manipulated by this fear of losing members and money.

The importance of leaders creating a ‘safe space’ emerged across interviewees with an agreement that congregations needed to be safe spaces, and not just individual ministers. At the same time, this was held in tension with a desire on the part of many LGBTIQ people to fit in and be accepted like anyone else, and for churches not to always have to ‘wave a flag’ and treat them as different. There was often a sense of fear of the personal implications of going public and LGBTIQ people can feel that their church related activities needed to take place in private to avoid negative attention.

Interviews showed that churches keeping quiet were increasingly seen as perpetuating stigma. LGBTIQ persons insisted that ministers and allies needed to be willing to go public and ‘fight for us’ if needed, both within church spaces if discrimination came up but also outside it. In the light of ongoing ‘don’t ask, don’t tell policies’ in many churches, speaking out becomes an act of public witness. It is important that this is done in consultation with LGBTIQ people within the church and does not place them at undue risk, also requiring others to speak out with and for them. The importance of ministers calling people out who are homophobic and resisting pressure to do things in secret was highlighted as perpetuating a damaging church pattern through a history of hiding.

Figure 8 - The journey towards inclusive leadership continues....

Abe is a coloured trans-male in his 40s. He grew up in a traditional denomination and studied theology. When he felt called to be ordained, he went to talk to the theological education body he studied with and to ministers from a range of traditional denominations about his options. He noted “both (ministers) told me, I (as a trans person) would not get past the gatekeepers in the church for ordination,” pointing to a two-year mark where they ‘help you decide’. He also highlighted that most denominations do not even have a trans-policy making his status unclear and vulnerable. Abe is reluctant to be ordained through a ‘gay’ church as he believes it models a flawed ecclesiology, despite the important role he notes it plays for many today, by saying “I do not feel called to work only with LGBTIQ people.” Abe feels that churches urgently needs to understand more about trans-issues to prevent trans from merely standing at the back of a long queue of other sexual and gender identity issues. He notes that Jesus did not say, first deal with the lepers and then move on to the tax collectors. He concludes that “I would love to be ordained as an openly trans person. It’s not going to happen in my lifetime, but it may make it easier for people later on, it will force a position to be taken. It’s still on the cards for me.”



#loveislove

#liefdeisliefde

#uthando/uthando

3.5 Partnerships

“Find like-minded collaborators and walk with them”

Two themes emerged here, the nature of the relationship with IAM but also the need for wider alliances and support from partners, often replacing a lack of denominational support.

3.5.1 Relationship with IAM

IAM’s relationship with all five churches was seen to offer an important support to all the ministers to build their capacity and awareness. Many drew on IAM resources to offer to the congregation and were able to join in solidarity around LGBTIQ events and offer invitations to preach or share stories:

“*Our partnership has strengthened in the last two years around PRIDE...we provide a safe place for LGBT preachers to be able to minister as they may have been rejected or not been allowed to be ordained in their own denominations (white lesbian minister)*

IAM also offers a place of support for lay-champions within the church working on this issue and each congregation had run at least one workshop with IAM; One minister in another church noted that “we state publicly that we have a partnership with IAM and it is also in the pew booklet, to signal that there’s a partnership which has also been confirmed by a church meeting.”

“*About every two years we invite some of them for a workshop, particularly for parents. That has been very helpful. The Bible study materials are also very helpful. People come to us and say, “I am gay” and we are able to help them using IAM material (white female minister)*

However, it was also apparent that there was a lack of institutional visibility of this partnership amongst the wider congregation that may require thinking creatively about how to keep it a living partnership. People might know individuals but not the organisational partnership and new members were rarely exposed in churches to explicit language or messaging about the connection. Another suggestion made was for IAM to pay more attention to trans issues and the need to educate churches on gender identity, often placed at the ‘back of the line’ behind sexual orientation.

3.5.2 Other Partnerships

Ministers talked about building cross-sectoral relationships with gender NGOs and academia as promising avenues of partnership that also required the building of mutual trust. They highlighted that they struggled to find support within denominational structures and often became disconnected:

“*He (minister) is not a great fan of the church courts and meetings, I also attended presbytery meetings and found that they talk rubbish. You will spend hours talking about nothing, and no-one talks about real issues, how do we respond to poverty, or issues of sexuality. So he lost interest in all that so works with other partners around those issues (black church elder)*

However, ministers pointed to partnerships with churches around the world that had provided support to them in ways that the local denomination was often not doing, pointing to the value that had come for them in instead building relationships with individual progressive pastors:

“*I have been really connected with great theologians throughout the world. When I started to respond to HIV ... I got ostracised by the church...but there were lots of people that I could talk to so I did not worry so much about that... you walk your own direction to embrace people that work with you (black church minister)*

Some churches noted a desire to work explicitly across racial boundaries on this issue and to educate each other through embodied fellowship. Concrete relations worked best where congregations invite each other to participate in activities, especially when one has LGBTIQ people openly within it.

Figure 9 - Making the Connections - taking an intersectional approach

A cross cutting theme across interviews was the importance of an intersectional approach in the South African context. Identifying commonalities between LGBTIQ issues and other issues, gender, race and class reinforces a social justice paradigm and helped people to connect their experiences and recognise multiple biases. These raised similar questions about the interpretation of scriptures. A diversity lens by churches avoids a tendency to have a ‘priority’ list (first race then gender, or first gays then trans). It insists on a holistic, comprehensive approach which suggests that if the theological approach is reimagined, everything changes, including attitudes to LGBTIQ persons.

South Africa has a history of church-endorsed colonialism with many still trying to disentangle from centuries of racism within the church. A silo approach to LGBTIQ issues, may unwittingly reinforce a “globalised gayness” (Judge 2017) that only works for liberal white middle class persons – or can even reinforce racism in churches that has not yet been addressed, perpetuating stereotypes of “blackwashing homophobia”. At the same time, South African churches have a unique opportunity to be at the front of an African-centred liberating approach to intersectional oppressions, including sexual orientation, due not only to its progressive Constitution, but also a long history of minority prophetic church struggles around human rights as a socio-political language of concrete protest from below. An intersectional, liberational model goes beyond the western liberalism that LGBTIQ issues are often accused of fostering, to build a relational vision of becoming together. This goes beyond individuals saying ‘I am not homophobic’ to call local churches into action on structures that discriminate as a journey into reflecting creational diversity, solidarity across multiple boundaries, and a united not uniform church that does not just hide behind a ‘we love everyone’ banner.

3.6 Advocacy

“We know you will fight for us”

LGBTIQ members consistently expressed both a desire and a confidence that their minister would “fight for us.” Various types of advocacy were described in the interviews and are categorised into three types, advocacy within the congregation, advocacy to the wider church and mobilising congregants as advocates within wider public spheres of life:

3.6.1 Advocacy within the congregation

Champions were needed on this issue to continue to raise LGBTIQ profile within the church and to offer a platform that can positively challenge everyone to be engaged without making it the criteria for belonging to the church. The need to hold this balance carefully was stressed:

“More can be done to be intentional, there are people who are worried that if we make this too much of a focal point it may alienate people. I remember people saying, we need to take a stronger stand, it is like apartheid and protest. Other who say ‘no, but then what is going to happen, look at other congregations how they split up’. I think that the approach is, we know who we are and we take a clear stand but we don’t want to make this the criteria for belonging (here), you have got to believe that otherwise you are not welcome here. We say, this is where we stand and hope you will be positively challenged by coming here (white male minister)”

This can include continuing to challenge heteronormative practices within the church itself, explore things such as language, God images, bathrooms, solidarity with LGBTIQ days of remembrance and celebration, as an exciting journey to keep moving forwards and not a draining space. But it’s also a positive embodied task, going beyond just talking to acting to build alternative spaces within local congregations, something all the churches interviewed are doing in different ways by offering platforms, advertising marches, opening up for storytelling and embodying welcome:

“Maybe a church would just say, today [name] was just going to share her story, instead of me preaching, or invite someone the congregation knows well to share their story, because that is what people connect to...the person (white lesbian congregant)”

We need to move beyond a passive acceptance, to an active embrace of, and standing with our LGBTIQ siblings. This needs to include pastoral support and capacity building, supporting family members and LGBTIQ persons to emerge out of denialism and embrace themselves.

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, parents trying to come to terms with their kids being gay, or with being trans.” Given the history of the wider churches on this issue there is often significant stigma. Pastors can also speak with credibility to family authority here where one on one confidentiality is key:

“One-on-one conversations offer the confidentiality so that people can open up and share things, it is (often) very embarrassing for elderly people if their son or daughter is gay, it can take a long time for them to share that but actually. That movie by IAM I found very helpful when I gave that to one family. So, the father who was embarrassed about his son being gay found it helpful to watch it at home alone (white male minister)”

3.6.2 Advocacy within wider structures

“Our minister said he was first a human before he was a Presbyterian (black male elder)”

Individual churches and their pastors are also exploring and using their voice in strategic ways that remain aware of the intersections of power they may hold. This can involve walking out of meetings, standing in solidarity with those marginalised, but also taking up positions of power in relation to sexuality committees and refusing to be bullied. Wider support for them in this struggle is key:

“Our minister talks about his position as a white man inside a Methodist church that is predominantly black and what it means to speak about these issues. A lot of people will say “this is not a black issue” and that the black church is not really interested and he said, “I can tell you being a pastor for many years that this is a black issue, an every church issue and what I can accomplish by saying these things is I can put this issue in front of people in a way that black people in the church can’t because the consequences of them revealing their sexuality are so great that they cannot reveal it.” So, he can use his power to make this an issue that benefits people who do not feel free to speak about it (black female congregant)”



“

We have a good relationship with other churches with workshops open to everyone, we would invite the other churches to ask, what is your take? Then we engage as churches on that level, in sexuality and stigma, to say look churches, you need to come and do this. Not by force but by being proactive and educating people... at church level by inviting other churches (gay black member)

”

Advocacy through public witness can be seen in all the ministers' willingness to perform transgressive religious rituals such as gay marriage, and their work to get support from the elders:

“

A good example of our church advocacy in a sense is that our minister even goes and marries couples in other churches where people of the same sex are wed so I think that is one of the things that is an advocacy for the church as he represents the church (black male elder)

”

There is a need for progressive religious voices to be vocal to combat conservative voices and offer an alternative up to denomination but also at local level, calling their peers into courageous leadership: in ways that most ministers suggest will create some trauma but then a domino effect with others:

“

It is going to take courageous leadership from one denomination to say, even though there is push back, we are going to stick to our guns on this... at grassroots level many people are very supportive and once the decision is made there will be the 1.5% who are very anti, insecure and terrified ...but actually the majority would just go with that (white lesbian minister)

”

“

This is not anything goes, there are values and they are counter-cultural and contrast with the values around us and they need to. I need to be the one willing to take the bullet, particularly with the institution, the church can get rid of me, but I will not leave, they will have to go through a process to get rid of me (white male minister)

”

Ministers across a number of denominations have been asking for the same thing for many years, a freedom of conscience request on same sex marriage that recognises the diversity of beliefs on this issue and offers an invitation to genuine conversation. But recently a conservative backlash is in danger of closing that approach down and of now longer wanting to even talk. One male minister said:

“

I would add to the liturgy..., I belong to a denomination that believes in freedom of conscience, ...we would not give the false sense that the entire denomination stands where I stand. Equally clergy of different beliefs would have to use the same words. We would both have to mouth the words. ...trying to honour the truthfulness that we are not standing in the same place

”

Key Avenues for Advocacy

- Publicly contest at every level a 'Don't ask don't tell' church culture or policy
- Challenge the 'double talk' mode of denominations on "yes to orientation, no to practice"
- Encourage other churches to stop sitting on the fence and seeking to play both sides
- Support those facing disconnection in light of denominational decisions and 'keep nagging'
- Consolidate cross denominationally to promote the 'freedom of conscience' request
- Provide support for LGBTIQ people in church leadership roles (especially in paid positions)
- Go beyond calling for inclusion and acceptance only to building up patterns of full belonging
- Push for LGBTIQ experiences to be recognised as a valid source of theological reflection

Ministers suggest that local congregations may actually hold a lot more power than they think to challenge the synods on human rights related issues and that they need to keep pushing:

“

If local congregations challenge their denominations, I think it would become very embarrassing for the denomination. I think they would not want to get into that kind of fight. Our strategy is to remain in the Chair (on human sexuality) and to keep nagging (white male minister)

”



3.6.3 Equipping congregants as advocates

One of the most powerful platforms that ministers have is to the people in their own congregation to become change agents on this issue in their own lives and communities, to encourage them to go outside, advocate and speak up and do the work of justice outside the church - to link what is preached, what we believe and what we go and do. To be proud of what is happening at the church.

Part of this can also be spreading the word that not all churches or Christians are homophobic. Dismantling secular assumptions that force people to choose between their faith and their sexuality can be important and to offer safe faith spaces to those in congregations where they feel unsafe:

“

It would be great if our church could maybe not just be open for people who are queers, but that we can do something to talk to those other churches, you know. To help create more safe spaces and eliminate the fact we are one of the few safe spaces (lesbian youth congregant)

”

Figure 10 - A story of change

Akara grew up in a conservative Pentecostal Christian environment and studied theology. Her story highlights the power of churches engaging theologically, leaders helping congregants on the change journey but also the irreplaceable value of personal relationships and embodied storytelling. She says;

“It’s been a big journey, with a lot of other people in the church worldwide. When I started off learning about God and relationships within the church there was a tremendous amount of homophobia, it was like, God said “no!” Marriage is between one man and one woman. Coming to this church, the minister is vocal on this issue... it is like the next wave of the apartheid question, a big deal. He is always talking about it. Now I have to think about it... and when I engage, it changes me. It has changed the way I am approaching Scripture...giving me a way to think theologically.”

“There are openly gay people at my (traditional) church that I really care about because we worship together, and I have got to know them ... I’ve known plenty of gay people in other churches that said, “I am not going to be gay anymore,” which is very different, they are not in relationships because they have decided that it is sinful and that they can’t be gay. It is a whole different experience for me being in spiritual relationship with people who are openly gay. The lesbian pastor here was studying theology and struggling because the church said, you can’t be gay and be clergy. I had gone through this big thing about can I be a woman in leadership and had all these transitions taking place in my thinking. We got to be such good friends because we could help each other through the call to ministry when you are a person who has been traditionally excluded from it. That relationship really transformed my thinking. I couldn’t have had that kind of transformative thing in my mind and heart unless I knew her and I could not have known her as clergy if she had not been there. These relationships make the difference because I can give the argument and say, theologically, at the end of the day this relationship happened for me because I was in relationship with these people...Church people love to throw verses and argue doctrine. I used to think everything revolve around what the Bible say and that is how we know truth. But now I don’t trust the way we’ve been using the Bible. I feel the real litmus test is what does this do for us in terms of loving and respecting, caring and nurturing one another. That is the pivotal test. My theology was a way of understanding how to do and be the church, now it has changed because of wrestling with this issue and get to a new place...”

Her journey has shown her the increased interconnections between gender, race and LGBTIQ issues. “It is because I have been grappling with these issues and the ways people are being excluded and people are being diminished and dignity is being smashed out...the linchpin for me is you cannot have a theology that says how can you love God who you don’t see when you cannot love your brother who you can see?... we get caught up in all these doctrines, not caring about the people we can see. It comes back to the big issue, race, in this country, but beyond race is this LGBTIQ stuff, we stick to these doctrines that can kill and do violence to people...every time, in a sense we exclude someone from the community of humankind we are spitting in the face of God in the name of God”

Akara argues that engaging theologically is needed to build a critical mass that congregations will accept. She is still on a journey but is in a completely different place than before. She feels there remains a lot of hypocrisy around sex and is looking for a robust theology of sex for all ...saying “I am trying to centre my theology on relationality as a path...sexuality goes to a core component of who we are as humans and so we have got to get this. Increasingly she bears public witness by answering her friends, who ask “so your church has gay people?” with pride and conviction. She is becoming a change agent, “the conversation keeps coming up and I think it is me. This energy I am feeling.”

3.7 Challenges and Opportunities

“Learning to dance with the 'other'”

This section highlights six main challenges noted in the interviews and points to three opportunities on which churches can build. These include six specific tailored tips for capacity building.

3.7.1 Challenges

The first challenge highlighted by all LGBTIQ interviewees was the danger of a church language of shallow welcome (we love you but...) that may not translate into full belonging in practice. The prevalence of a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy in many churches can hide ongoing homophobia and creates high levels of anxiety and fear and a sense of in-authenticity for many LGBTIQ persons:

“**LGBTIQ folk who have been rejected in churches are incredibly afraid of church in general and very suspicious... I recently preached sermons at one...but it was a bit scary to take my congregation there. Though the pastor is supportive, there were folk who were homophobic so not a safe space (white lesbian minister)**”

The question was raised consistently as to what welcome really means. Slippage was noted between minister and congregation with a perceived lack of visibility from the outside that a church was safe. Coming out in a church where its position was ambiguous could be risky for that person:

However, all LGBTIQ people within the five churches in this study said they had experienced full belonging in that church from congregants as well as ministers with an informal code operating around which spaces are safer than others, with one lesbian minister saying “I know safely I can send someone to that church... they can truly be themselves. But I have to be honest that while I know more ministers and leaders who are welcoming, I do not know how safe it would be in terms of congregants”.

A second challenge raised was the increased emergence of independent churches often with theologically untrained pastors as well as many migrants and refugees coming from other parts of Africa. Interviewees from these contexts noted that this reality could at times ‘import’ homophobic attitudes or fear and self-stigma from those other criminalised contexts. This again shows the complex intersections between homophobia and other important marginalisations like xenophobia.

A third challenge was that resisters to change may not always be who you expect. For example some women resisted changing the rules on wearing pants and some gay people in churches remain in denial. It is important to find ways to address this sensitively, and to surface feelings of ‘disgust’ that some interviewees admitted can silently underpin many existing discussions on this topic. Ministers highlighted the ‘backlash’ by those churches or persons who don’t want to take this journey as LGBTIQ persons and issues become more visible and vocal globally. However with the right approach, even emotions of disgust can be seen to change as this story, shared by one young black congregant shows:

Figure 11 From Disgust to Embracing Diversity

Peter is a black male youth in his 20s. He met the minister of church D when he was studying theology. At the time he identified as “an extreme conservative, I was anti-gay...but struggling...that minister spoke about how he blessed a gay marriage and I was like, ‘my goodness, who is this devil.’ But the more I spoke to him the more I opened my mind and thought, wow there is, I did not know there was grace like that”. Peter saw there was a way to understand Bible texts differently and slowly began attending Church D. It provided a space where his questions about the belief that homosexuality is wrong could be explored as a “real breath of fresh air”. His previous church had not allowed musical instruments, piercings or tattoos. “I came to Church D and that all went away and I felt I could be myself, I did not feel judged at all, No-one said “Are you from the devil? What are you doing with piercings.” So I felt I could be myself and for the first time in a long time as I walked with God I felt, this is a different, interesting God, not just an external God, cause God is much deeper that I had experienced. I felt more accepted, less self-conscious than I was in the churches I used to go to where I felt I needed to put on a mask and say the right thing. At Church D, I feel I can be more of a person”.

Peter also pointed to a personal dimension to his journey on this issue saying, “while I am not homosexual, growing up I was confused around being gay, I had feminine features. I still do, people still ask if I am gay. It used to bother me but now but it would not be a problem. I have embraced myself...It used to bother me a lot, I used to hate how soft or feminine I looked. Now I embrace it.... I still get those comments, people still ask, ‘is he gay?’ Yeah, it does not really matter. Especially as a black male, there is so much pride in being straight so I had to crack the wall, I am okay to be gay. I mean, I do sometimes get hit on by men. In the beginning it was a bit, ‘I cannot believe it,’ but now it is flattering. I can talk about it...it is normal, it is not a big deal. It used to be like a big sin, so gross, it was disgusting”.

He noted that “for some strange reason, Christians focus on homosexuality like an obsession. I fell into believing it was a sin from the devil back then”. One of the things that helped Peter was seeing people who were openly LGBTIQ attending church D, “so seeing it embodied in a real person, who is in the church who is gay and seeing that there was a different way of responding...”

Peter points out that now he wants to serve across many interconnected issues of social justice, saying “I don’t just want to focus on one issue, as I used to do when I was a “fundy”, where my focus was fighting against homosexuality and sin...I have started to look at diversity beyond colour. When I was younger diversity only had to do with race but now I have come to realise that diversity comes with character and personality and not just with skin colour....Church D is very diverse...”

“

*If they were having trouble in their church I would tell them switch churches, come to my church. But you can get ** people who say we will now shun you from the church...it could be a huge risk to their personal safety (to come out). I don't know if I could do it (white lesbian congregant)*

”

Fourth, issues of trans and intersex persons are still rarely on the radar with churches unless they have confronted a situation directly. They can be seen as waiting at the back of the line and also face different issues with, for example, trans men often choosing to 'go stealth' while trans women are frequently more visible. They can both face violent rejection especially from cis-gender counterparts:

“

We still expect people to be labelled as male or female...need to get beyond that binary. We need to stand up for the trans community and stop them being forced to make a choice to live a lie, they need to be true to themselves (black female congregant)

”

Fifth, beliefs exist that to engage with this issue as a minister is to sacrifice oneself and risk fracturing the congregation. Fears of losing an income or congregants can hold leaders back and create an aura of fear. However, in reality, all five churches have not experienced this significantly and have even gained members over time. However, issue fatigue in congregants was noted with a possible attitude noted of "I come to church to receive something. We don't want to hear about the hardships of others"

Finally, the language used in church matters both in terms of how people are spoken about and to and in terms of the God language used. This offers an important vehicle for reshaping. Many church traditions still use ancient words and images for God that can be problematic and limiting, reinforcing metaphors of slavery, patriarchy, sacrifice and domination. This takes concrete creativity to reimagine.

3.7.2 Opportunities

The high profile of this issue around the world currently, in media and at wider denominational level offers opportunities to educate both ministers and congregations on this issue and to call them to take a stand. Prominent respected faith leaders across many traditions can add their voices to combat conservative voices. Churches are rethinking their 'ecclesiologies' to speak meaningfully to new generations in the 21st century. They have a long history of adapting to survive and 'outlier' churches such as the five studied here offer hopeful visions from within the African continent of possibilities around doing church differently in relation to LGBTIQ belonging. These are also not confined only to middle class white ministers and congregants, as a black minister from a poor area in the study shows:

“

There are a lot of other ways we can approach this that can make us friends and excited about one another, different as we may be. In terms of the congregation I wanted to have a conversation that celebrates the goodness of everyone, the God who is parent to everyone

”

South Africa has a long, complex story of historical church engagement both in social oppression and in fighting for social justice. This offers intersectional opportunities for churches to situate their LGBTIQ activism within a wider container of social justice and to reclaim this prophetic tradition by drawing on and nurturing new forms of a unique South African 'kairos' theology for change.

Second, the need for a robust sexual ethic more widely was raised, not just seeing LGBTIQ persons in a silo but as crossing other issues of sexuality that churches need to engage. This also needs to form part of an intergenerational communication, where churches shape how many families may talk or not talk about these issues. Ministers note the undeveloped potential of the church here in terms of supporting parents more widely with one noting, "someone can sit in church and be fine about us saying "everyone is welcome" but then speak very differently to their children."

“

People have asked, how do you deal with this with your own child? ...Just helping people find the words to work with their children, we could do a lot more (white female minister)

”

Third, the research informants flagged specific opportunities for capacity building local congregations, described by one interviewee as learning to dance with the 'other'. These included:

- Identify and target sticking issues for people within the congregation and address those. Use an anonymous way of finding out these issues, for example same sex marriage was still raised as a hurdle for some in this study who nevertheless want to learn and understand more
- Capacity build how churches speak about sex, especially intergenerationally, and support churches and parents in dealing with wider questions of singleness, sex outside marriage, divorce, polygamy to develop a robust theology of sex that can also engage its young people.
- Contextual engagement with theology can take people on a shared journey – seeing the church as a place of teaching and learning not of forcing change. For example, a 'covenant' journey together to look at different scriptural arguments on this issue over four weeks
- Intersectional 'quality of life' workshops can deal with bias in its many forms and make connections between different oppressions by linking human rights approaches and the gospel. These need to be experiential, allowing personal engagement on identity and culture.
- Use concrete life experiences and situations within the church to educate congregations and journey forwards through embodied relationships and storytelling. There is a danger that the victim has to be the teacher in ways that can be traumatic so be sensitive.
- Build church to church engagement at local level, first developing fellowship and then sharing lessons, especially with LGBTIQ congregations.

4

Promising Practices towards full belonging



In the light of the detailed reflection across seven themes emerging from the 18 interviews, this section draws together these to highlight ten promising practices that can be taken forwards from the churches to inform future strategies with other churches. It suggests, as did many interviewees, that in their lived experience there are often 'tipping points', and strategies that can push a church congregation forwards and help to catalyse change around LGBTIQ belonging:

- 1. Relationships and storied personal encounters.** These were seen as critical for change in ministers and within families and congregations, opening up spaces for emotional engagement. Real concrete relationships with LGBTIQ people of faith can be catalysts for genuine transformation. These relationships also model a visible symbol of safety for other LGBTIQ persons in congregations who might hide or come out and can then snowball change. Separatist churches for LGBTIQ persons, can be problematic long term unless they safely facilitate rather than negate this engagement.
- 2. Leadership matters.** Ministers that led from the front on this issue, taking a clear stand and modelling an authentic and vulnerable personal journey characterised all five churches studied. At the same time, this was not a dictatorship. Another key part of their role was to listen and learn from members, especially those who were of LGBTIQ orientation, to open the space to take all the congregation on a journey of change together, and over time to build critical mass. This included non-judgemental pastoral support and offering resources to all wrestling with this issue within the congregation. A diversified open leadership platform that includes LGBTIQ persons and youth was recommended to help nurture a congregation as a place of learning and build consensus, not just top down teaching from a one man show. At the same time, there was a need for the early theological formation of church leaders on this issue to be addressed. Making LGBTIQ leadership more visible in local churches is also identified as one way to move from mere inclusion to full belonging.
- 3. Build critical mass around a transformational vision.** The four ministers in traditional congregations had taken time over decades to slowly nurture an ecclesiological vision of what it means to be the church. This provided a container within which LGBTIQ questions were held and explored. Each vision held a tension between being willing to lead from the front in a journey oriented to the future but also opening space for theological dialogue around what it means to be the church. Congregants note that ministers offered time and space for them to go on a journey of change. This involved rethinking the power of the minister, not as a top down dogmatic leader but as a convenor of conversations that matter, a creator of democratic space for transformation, an invitational space of embrace not a commanding model of fear. It takes an evolving 'do no harm' approach to all traditions; religious, cultural and scriptural, enabling a continuity with the past but also an eschatological openness to the future, of who are we becoming together.
- 4. Take an asset-based approach.** All five churches pointed towards the need for a positive framing, an asset-based approach, a stance to stand for with pride and to invite new congregants to wholeheartedly join. This includes an asset-based theological model around creational diversity, celebrating the gifts and talents of LGBTIQ people and their relationships, but also offering a shared vision to the church of what they could become to celebrate what works and build on their strengths. The desire for a theology of accompaniment and celebration on their life journey was highlighted by LGBTIQ persons in particular, not just being seen as a pastoral challenge to be resolved.
- 5. Nurture a holistic theology of embrace.** All five churches went beyond an initial shallow 'welcome' recommended by their denominations to deepen their LGBTIQ engagement in terms of 'full inclusion' and belonging. This was underpinned by a holistic theology that held together the spirituality and material dimensions of life, an open engagement between church and society using the figure of Jesus as a reference point. All five churches had thought through what their theological position was around inclusion, embrace, dignity and belonging on many issues and this was then communicated regularly to the congregation in a way that allowed for dialogue and consistently used scriptural storytelling shaped by an interpretive lens of human dignity.

- 6. Make a church ethos of belonging visible – through language and ritual.** Interviewees pointed to the role of language in opening up a diverse imagination around God images and stories. This offers possibilities for new traditions as visible pointers to theologies of embrace. From the writing on the walls, to the words of rituals, sermons, prayers, songs and sacrament, language matters both for LGBTIQ persons and for changing congregations especially in relation to the religious justification of gender and heteronormativity. Ministers pointed to the public use of religious rituals and the power of sacramental language as offering fruitful spaces of resistance to the old and affirmation of the new, using marriage, baptism and confirmation as opportunities to reinforce creational diversity in relation to sexuality and gender as a public witness to the community. These rituals shape what is celebrated, challenge patterns of hetero-normativity that ministers see as endemic and highlight what is ignored.
- 7. Identify partnerships that work.** Many minority churches face isolation within their denominations, and even discipline, rejection and stigma. LGBTIQ leaders especially can burn out or hide under these stressful conditions. Developing cross-sectoral partnerships and global alliances were strategies that had worked for some. However, there was a lack of sustained cross denominational partnership at local levels and underdeveloped potential for increased visibility of LGBTIQ organisations like IAM within congregations, to offer an ongoing model of accompaniment. Gay churches also need meaningful partnership with other churches to offer their important stories and resources. All these can nurture a movement from below for strategic engagement and coordinated resistance, avoiding mere withdrawal from wider denominational structures.
- 8. Employ an intersectional social justice lens.** Using a wider lens on diversity nurtures belonging more effectively than taking a silo approach to LGBTIQ issues. Congregants noted the need to be united across difference, and a 'no labels' policy but also the importance of being explicit about the intersections and avoiding a blanket 'we just love everyone' clause. This provided a space for LGBTIQ persons to feel welcomed but not to have to stick out, one held together with other intersecting issues of social justice, such as race, class, disability and patriarchy. This tapped into a church identity and history of continuity and confession on other social justice issues, by reclaiming prophetic voices of the past to apply to new issues. It also avoids hierarchy within the LGBTIQ acronym itself.
- 9. Open space of dialogue for stories to be heard.** The value of prioritising LGBTIQ voices emerged from the interviews, by opening space to tell their stories of exclusion and embrace. Other stories emerged of change, from ministers, congregants and initial resistors. These stories offer hope and complexity, make the issue real and invite others to the journey. Faith traditions offer weekly storytelling spaces across the life-cycle through birth, marriage, to death. Storytelling methodologies can enable emotions to surface, drip feed change and draw on the many religious modes of testimony, lament, witness, confession, celebration. There is a need for hidden stories to be surfaced, told safely and witnessed. Churches can build hospitable containers for storytelling across diversity to nurture "radical neighbourism" across boundaries, speaking to belonging and celebration not just inclusion. This requires a multifaceted dialogue within a relational ethic - to listen first to LGBTIQ congregants and offer space for their voices. But also to listen to the stories of those resisting, often expressing emotions of disgust, fear and shame that need time and unpacking. Stories also show the 'progress' cycle longer term, passing from one generation to the next, as these three experiences show:
- “*People have asked, how do you deal with this with your own child? ...Just helping people find the words to work with their children, we could do a lot more (white female minister)*”
- 10. Avoid supporting forms of 'double talk'.** LGBTIQ people point to experiencing church attitudes of half-hearted welcome that suggest "we love you but....". They argue that this supports a damaging 'double talk', where LGBTIQ orientation is accepted but not LGBTIQ embodied practice. Their stories of pain show that this leads to them having to hide aspects of their life from their congregations and they remain aware that they are being 'tolerated' rather than embraced in full. They may initially feel accepted but when they want to get married, become ordained or baptise children they may suddenly cross an invisible line into rejection. Instead a church ethos of radical inclusion refuses surface 'welcome' or mere tolerance by congregants with open doors only. Instead it nurtures full belonging, acceptance, accompaniment and celebration of LGBTIQ persons not only as isolated individuals but in the midst of their loving relationships and with open hearts.



Figure 12 - No single story: Three women, three congregations, three denominations

Nadia, Erin and Carol all shared their diverse stories in this study across three congregations in three mainline denominations and show that there is not one single story of the LGBTIQ experience;

Emma's story: An older generation - Decades of hiding

Emma is now in her late 50s. She was raised Dutch Reformed and is a strong traditional believer but by the time she left school, she said; "I knew I was different, I had my first relationship at 21 but I already mixed with gay friends. I went to church when I was in University at Bloemfontein, but I was called in by the minister while a first-year student as they thought I was mixing with the wrong people. That was quite freaky for me. They thought I was "'okay, so not gay.'"

She hid her sexuality for decades until moving to Cape Town just ten years ago. She did not want to attend a different denomination, "this is what I have known all my life. I will not go to another church just because the DRC does not accept me, I would rather sit back and not say who I am." But she reflected that while she was always going to church she remained in the background. "I never felt like becoming part of the church, I did not want to be 'caught out' and banned from coming."

"I can remember sitting in a church in my twenties, thinking, if they only knew that I was gay, what would they do to me. In other churches...it never felt like it has felt here. The first church I felt accepted in was the church of my childhood and then here. The others, I just felt I was passing through."

After a lifetime of hiding her sexuality, Emma still struggles to come fully out despite the visible presence of other gay people in her church and in its leadership.

"I am not 'out of the closet' in this church... the minister knows who I am and that is important to me. For the first time in my life I can relate to a priest knowing who I am and accepting me. That is a big step! When I came here I could immediately pick up a totally different approach. As children when we went to church we heard, you must not do this, you must not do that, and the message that I received here was acceptance, loving, caring, no matter what and it is perfect... the big swap around for me was moving from fear to love... My family accepted me, my church accepts me and God accepts who I am... but it has been a long journey."

Carol's story: It's just normal, of course God loves me

Carol is 22 and says; "I've attended [my church] for 20 years. At no point has anyone said we are an inclusive church, LGBTIQ friendly, you just knew it was. I knew other people in the congregation who were gay and they were clearly fine... it was a non-issue... people from different countries, refugees, with disabilities, an incredibly diverse church."

Carol feels lucky not to have experienced what she calls "hate about my sexuality." She says, "I cannot imagine what it is like for others who can't say anything, who could literally be kicked out of their families... that was never an issue for me... I never thought, oh God hates me... it was not a question."

She is comfortable to challenge homophobia in her school, community or in churches. She feels more churches must offer a safe space for other LGBTIQ people to come. "a lot of people my age automatically believe if you're a Christian you are homophobic they think it is a fact. People have been shocked when I say that am a Christian, they cannot comprehend that...you can see the cogs working in their brains thinking, that doesn't work... I am gay and Christian, my family is Christian and not homophobic and my church is not homophobic so please do not generalise, it is insulting."

These two stories show diverse experiences, but also the turmoil that hiding can create, as well as the pain and trauma that coming out into a non-inclusive space can create. And finally, they show the healing possibilities of genuine congregations of healing and belonging, intentionally shaped by the ministers. How might Emma's life have been different and her gifts and stories shared more widely in churches over a lifetime if she had been brought up in a church like Carol's?

Nadia's story: Part of the generation that stopped hiding

Nadia is 35. She trained and served in ordained leadership ministry in a Pentecostal denomination for 17 years. She hid her lesbian sexuality. When she came out, her church sent her to compulsory therapy for over two years, insisting that to keep her job she must 'denounce the lifestyle that you are living.' In 2014 she was fired and de commissioned for being in a same sex relationship. She said, "It was ugly, but I decided not to go public. I did not have the fight in me. I saw what others went through and I did not want to go through that. My beloved and I split and I left the church. I could not find any churches where I could be who I was."

Years later and disconnected from church, a lesbian friend who was getting ordained in a gay church asked Nadia to lead the worship. She had put her guitar up for sale, but her friend challenged her and she agreed, "when I walked in there I was half expecting lightning bolts but I felt very welcomed by people. I led a bit of worship then did a solo song by Martin Smith called 'Waiting Here For You' that song hit me... he's not afraid to talk about struggle with God and how he struggles with depression, he has so much soul. I chose that song and felt the Holy Spirit saying this is where I belonged, a place here for you. I started swallowing tears but finished the song, then sat and cried..."

"Afterwards this minister walked past me... I had never met him before. He put his hand on his heart and said, 'I need you' and I was like, 'ha.' He asked me for a coffee the next day and I said I hadn't pursued church... since then. He encouraged me that I had a gift, a talent that was being wasted so invited me to jam with him on Sunday morning, the two of us... I hadn't yet told him I was gay and had 'been retired' from the church but when I did, I have never seen someone more gracious. He said, 'you have been done a great disservice'. He said this is your new family and I have never left, I have played every Sunday since then. In the beginning I was not sure, should I be open? I got back together with my partner. The big shift was me accepting that I was okay, born in love, by love and for love, which is the biggest revelation I have ever had. I do not have to be ashamed. That is why I did not touch my guitar, because every time I did I felt God's presence the most and that made me feel ashamed. The journey from there with the minister and the congregation has been incredible." Nadia now has the strength to push back and help change others perceptions, she even engages with friends from her previous church to share her story and to help them to learn and grow and shared experience where they have been honest enough to ask her saying "I love you but I am still not convinced on the whole, same-sex marriage thing, because of what I have grown up believing so help me understand". She firmly believes that churches need to offer safe spaces for LGBTIQ people to tell their stories, preferably from the pulpit "because that is what people connect to, they do not connect to the theology, they connect to the person... You can theologise all you like but until someone you love is actually in that position you are not going to connect to it." Her only current option for fulfilling her calling is to preach at a gay church. But she says, "I do not want to go to a church that is only for lesbian, gay, bisexual people..."



5

Conclusion



This study aimed to better understand and document ways in which selected local congregations are reimagining LGBTIQ inclusion. Voices in each church, including LGBTIQ voices, who were ‘epistemologically privileged’ in this study, reinforced the possibility of a journey going beyond welcome to a sustained sense of deeper belonging. Intentional leadership from ministers at all churches translated into a theological vision which has led in time to improved concretisation and a safer space where existing LGBTIQ bodies can become visible and new bodies welcomed. While there is no “one right way”, there are possibilities for sharing and building on practices seen to work.

At the heart of the research findings lies an embodied commitment by these five churches to build a positive intersectional theology of embrace, accompaniment, liberation and celebration. This is enabled by and requires an ongoing rereading of the big story of Scripture through a contextual lens using a life affirming hermeneutic. This also shapes other aspects of the church life; its rituals, doctrines, sacraments, songs, prayers and ministries. Its starting point is not the seven terror texts but creational diversity. It requires a transformative church vision embodied by the congregation, inspired and equipped as to where they are heading together. These churches show that it is possible for local churches to begin to intentionally nurture a more diverse celebratory container of God’s ‘family’ within communities that shape each other concretely and challenge harmful social norms.

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. Rather than buying into fears that ‘the church’ may split, congregations can begin from a confession of the current disunity of the church when LGBTIQ Christians have had to create separate churches to feel safe to worship. Hard work needs to be done by all, for a reunification based on trust, freedom and diversity not on uniformity, shame and hiding. This needs to offer a positive container for a healing space that does not negate fear, pain and lament, but enables those difficult stories to be held and told within churches.

The five churches in this study show that there is no excuse not to begin this bottom up journey of prophetic embodied resistance and radical belonging. Local congregations can be places where people rub up against diverse others offering possibilities for relationship. Change can happen sitting in the pew next to somebody, reading the Bible together and building fellowship. Local congregations can be important assets in nurturing sustained change from the bottom up. But it requires holding together various tensions such as the need for visibility on this issue but also the desire by many LGBTIQ persons to be normal and fit in. Leaders will need to take a brave stand but not in a militant way that can mitigate against the needed transformation of many who might initially resist. There is a need to utilise congregational power without falling into new traps of a power that excludes.

Finally, if churches are to move beyond a surface inclusion into a sustained belonging together, they need to begin with an audit of where they currently are at. This study offers some parameters to the participating churches to help them keep moving. However, an evidence base from below is needed across more churches. Some congregations may believe themselves to be more welcoming than they are and sharing lessons of “what works” is one way to help each other move forwards. This requires letting go of a cheap welcome – ‘we love everyone’ and starting the hard process of building diverse belonging. Churches can offer transformational storytelling and relational containers that hold space for change to happen. This study played an important role in opening spaces for LGBTIQ stories to be told safely, to reimagine stories of god, sacred texts, church family, and our relational humanity by telling the stories of a few churches within South Africa who have begun to model this possibility.

Betty suggests:

“It will only take one mainline church denomination to break through to the other side successfully, and others will follow...with baited breath we wait...and pray”

6

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Appendix – Interview Guide – Church Ministers

Below are sample questions to guide interviews with the Church Ministers. A simpler version of the same guide is used with congregants.

Name (optional)..... Age (optional).....

Gender/Sexuality (optional).....

Church you are minister of (length of time here).....

1. ETHOS: How would you describe the ethos of your church around LGBTIQ issues? Possible Probes: Did it exist before you came to the congregation or did you drive it? Have you seen changes on it over your time? How do you seek to embody this ethos in the church's life?
2. THEOLOGY: What specific theology shapes your church decisions/actions around LGBTIQ inclusion? In your view, does it cause dissent and disagreement within the church (give examples) or is there a shared understanding? Possible Probes: Have any people left the church because of this. Is there a structured way that LGBTIQ issues/people are made visible or addressed in its teaching and documents?
3. LEADERSHIP: Are or can LGBTIQ people be involved in any leadership or ministry roles in/at your church? Why/why not? Possible Probe: How are institutional decisions made that involve inclusion/exclusion/visibility of LGBTIQ people e.g. areas such as marriage, communion, membership, leadership, staff, curriculum.
4. PARTNERSHIP: Your church is a partner with Inclusive and Affirming Ministries. What is your understanding of what this partnership means in practice for the church? Possible Probes: Who initiated this partnership? Do you have any other church partnerships that involve LGBTIQ+ issues.
5. DENOMINATION: What is the state of current debates in your specific denomination around LGBTIQ+ issues. What is your opinion on these? Do you see your congregation as taking a different approach and how has this been made visible? Have there been any consequences for you/the church as a result.
6. CHALLENGES/OPPORTUNITIES: Do you feel that more could or should be done at local church level? Possible Probes: Are there exclusionary practices or heteronormative assumptions that still concern you in your own church? What do you see as ongoing challenges, barriers or possibilities for further change on this?
7. ADVOCACY: Do you ever speak out/act or engage as a church leader on LGBTIQ exclusion or violence within your denomination, or in wider society. Do you consider this part of your role as a church minister and if so, why? Do you seek to educate your congregation on this?
8. GOOD PRACTICES: Do you have any suggestions, models or good practices at your church that could be shared with other churches in relation to reimagining LGBTIQ+ engagement in more positive ways? Probe: Any stories around this issue from your church that you want to share.
9. CAPACITY BUILDING: What support/tools do you feel your own congregation and your wider church denomination could benefit from around this issue of reimagining LGBTIQ+ inclusion.