

# A Discussion Paper on Critical Issues, Actors, Initiatives and Opportunities

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To be cited as:

Judge, M. (2019). *Keeping the Faith: Working at the Crossroads of Religion and Sexual & Gender Rights. A Discussion Paper on Critical Issues, Actors, Initiatives and Opportunities*. Cape Town: Heinrich Boell Foundation.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Thanks to Paula Assubuji for her leadership and Claudia Lopes for her support. Special appreciation also goes to those interviewed for this discussion paper, and in particular to Charlene van der Walt, Laurie Gaum, Pharie Sefali, Muhsin Hendricks, Zanele Makombe, Ecclesia de Lange and Tebogo Klaas for their insightful inputs.



# BACKGROUND

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*Keeping the Faith: Working at the Crossroads of Religion and Sexual and Gender Rights* is a project of the Cape Town office of the Heinrich Boell Foundation (HBF)<sup>1</sup> that seeks to explore and support faith as a site for strengthening human rights and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people. Faith is a powerful shaper of identity and meaning that influences social norms, values, ethics and behaviour. On the one hand, faith does violence to those who do not conform to heteropatriarchal gender and sexual prescriptions. On the other, faith has the potential to advance struggles for sexual and gender rights and justice. Many LGBTIQ people seek to “keep their faith”, namely to claim their right to religious belief and expression even though their churches, mosques or synagogues might not recognise them nor uphold and respect their human rights. Others leave their religious communities as a result of the prejudice, discrimination and exclusion they confront. At the same time, there are faith leaders and institutions embarking on processes of change, towards more inclusive and affirming values and practices, frequently driven by LGBTIQ people. With these paradoxes of faith in mind, the project seeks to challenge normative discourses, values and behaviours – across a range of faith contexts – that legitimise and promote discrimination, prejudice and hatred against LGBTIQ people. In doing so, it aims to support existing and new initiatives that strengthen sexual and gender rights and counter marginalisation and violence.

This discussion paper will assist HBF in taking forward its strategy in support of activism at the intersection of institutionalised religion and sexual and gender rights in the period 2019–2021. The paper provides a snapshot of current issues, initiatives and central actors in the field; offers a conceptual framework to advance sexual and gender rights; and proffers some strategies to inform future project activities.

The research and information-gathering that is the basis of this paper comprises:

- a desktop analysis of literature, reports, research and resource materials relevant to the topic
- one-on-one interviews with ten key actors working at the intersection of religion and sexual and gender rights to identify
  - dynamics, issues and challenges in the local context
  - key players advancing the work in South Africa
  - critical issues to be tackled.

See Appendix 1 for the list of interviewees and the interview schedule. Melanie Judge undertook the research, analysis and drafting of this discussion paper.

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<sup>1</sup> *Keeping the Faith* is jointly conceptualised and implemented with Melanie Judge, a feminist and queer activist and scholar, and adjunct associate professor at the University of Cape Town.



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# FAITH IN CONTEXT

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*“Like the waves, a moment before they dissolve back into the deep, biblical texts have been delivered to readers and believers as stable, coherent narratives at work in the service of the norm. Yet, the essence of the wave is the ocean; from the chaos comes (the appearance of) creation, then it folds (or crashes) once again into the chaos. We are not dealing here simply with queer interpretation of the Bible; the Bible is always already queer.”<sup>2</sup>*

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All institutionalised religions have a tendency to pit religious identity against homosexuality. The simple formulation of this is the idea that you can't be Muslim *and* gay, Jewish *and* lesbian, or transgender *and* Christian, communicating the idea that a “true” religious identity is incongruent with being an LGBTIQ person. A consequence of this is that the institutions, structures and modus operandi of organised faiths tend to exclude non-heteronormative gender and sexual identities and expressions, and are frequently unwelcoming and unsafe spaces. Moreover, the fear of being ostracised or of facing direct expulsion and other forms of discrimination work against coming out and make it difficult to organise politically on sexual and gender rights within religious communities. These realities are enabled by religious discourses that denigrate and deny LGBTIQ people, casting them (out) as deviants, sinners and lesser humans. Such discourses have a significant influence on wider social norms, values and practices. By labelling homosexuality as “sin”, “abomination” and “demonic” – justified through selective readings of sacred texts – religious discrimination against LGBTIQ people becomes legitimised. The reconciliation of one's faith identity with one's sexual or gender identity is frequently in tension in religious contexts that remain largely hostile to those with non-conforming sexualities and genders.

Institutionalised religion plays a primary role in the policing and control of sex, sexuality and gender. This role relates to how one is obligated to be, act and appear as a sexual and gendered person according to socially prescribed norms that are patriarchal, heteronormative and cisgendered. These prescriptions determine the conditions under which it is acceptable to have sex, to procreate, and to form families and communities. They in turn inform the roles, power and authority that one is allowed to hold within a religious community or structure, based on strict gender hierarchies that favour men over women and straights over queers. The extent of the voice, affirmation and inclusion accorded an individual within a community of faith is also determined by these gender regulations. And when someone doesn't conform, the consequences can take the form of discrimination, stigma, rejection, and even physical or sexual violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Hornsby, T.J. and Stone, K., *Already queer: A preface*, In *Bible trouble: Queer reading at the boundaries of biblical scholarship*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2011, p.xiii.

The church in southern Africa has been described as both an “antagonist and ally” on matters of sexual and gender diversity.<sup>3</sup> Its dominant approach is to isolate specific passages of scripture from their broader meaning and context, and to present these as eternal truths that rely on scriptural interpretations that are ahistorical, prejudiced, moralistic and highly prescriptive.<sup>4</sup> Navigating queer identity within Islam has been met by “blatant rejection from orthodox Muslim communities, [which] has led many queer Muslims to negotiate this dilemma between sexuality and spirituality through assuming dual identities, drugs and alcohol abuse, irresponsible sexual behaviour, apostasy and even suicide”.<sup>5</sup> Both the Christian Bible and the Quran invite varied interpretations; however, this has been systematically discouraged and disregarded.

Turning to traditional spiritual practices in South Africa, traditional healers (sangomas) are key figures in African communities who are called upon by the ancestors to provide physical, emotional and spiritual healing. Yet “LGBTQI sangomas are often considered strange and out of line with African ancestral beliefs”<sup>6</sup> and seen as a “disgrace that is testing the ancestors”.<sup>7</sup> Mainstream sangoma practices view gayness as a “demon” and children are taken to sangomas to “cure” them of this. Such practices are widespread, despite evidence that, throughout history, homosexuality has been a “consistent and logical feature of African societies and belief systems”.<sup>8</sup> As in the religious rites of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, sangoma ceremonies are highly gendered, with masculine and feminine genders having to fulfil mutually exclusive roles.

Against the backdrop of South Africa’s constitutional prohibition of discrimination and principle of equality, discrimination at the hands of religious institutions has been challenged in courts of law.<sup>9</sup> In balancing the right to religious freedom with the right to equality in respect of same-sex sexualities, the case law is, however, “still in development and without consensus”.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, the Constitutional Court has recognised that people who subscribe to the same faith can manifest their personal faith in individual and diverse ways: “[C]ourts should not involve themselves in determining the objective centrality of practices, as this would require them to substitute their judgment of the meaning of a practice for that of the person before them and often to take sides in bitter internal disputes.”<sup>11</sup> Expediently, the “religious freedom defense has been prioritized by religious conservative sectors to face feminists and LGBTI agendas. The right to religious freedom is introduced as the other side of SRR [sexual and reproductive rights] and SOGI [sexual orientation and gender identity] rights, establishing an incompatibility

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<sup>3</sup> *Silent no longer: Narratives of engagement between LGBTI groups and the churches in southern Africa*, The Other Foundation, 2017, p.27.

<sup>4</sup> *Covering sexual and gender minorities and religion in sub-Saharan Africa: A reporting guide for journalists*, Heinrich Boell Foundation, pp.52-53.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.54.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.54.

<sup>7</sup> Interview.

<sup>8</sup> Murray, S. O., & Roscoe, W., *Boy-wives and female husbands: Studies in African homosexualities*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1998. For more on African histories of homosexuality, see <https://76crimes.com/2014/01/30/21-varieties-of-traditional-african-homosexuality/>

<sup>9</sup> See *Gaum and Others v Dutch Reformed Church* (concerning the Dutch Reformed Church's position on same-sex relationships); *De Lange v Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and Another* (concerning the firing of a lesbian minister for marrying her partner); and *Strydom v Nederduitse Gereformeerde Gemeente Moreleta Park* (concerning the firing of a gay organ player).

<sup>10</sup> *Drawing the line: Tackling tensions between religious freedom and equality*, International Network of Civil Liberties Organizations, 2015, p.21.

<sup>11</sup> MEC for Education: KwaZulu-Natal and Others v Pillay (CCT 51/06) [2007] ZACC 21 at para. 87. Available at <http://www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZACC/2007/21.html>

between them and obliging states and human rights organizations to choose one or the other set of rights".<sup>12</sup>

***“What ultimately matters is whether manifestations of religious freedom cause harm to others.”<sup>13</sup>***

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It is indisputable that the exclusion, stigmatisation and marginalisation of LGBTIQ people in the name of faith causes significant harm. In a case recently won in the Pretoria High Court, the applicants, a group of queer ministers, argued that the struggle for queer recognition in the church is a struggle for the right to religious freedom itself.<sup>14</sup> They assert that the denial of queer recognition violates religious freedom in that church leaders “have imposed their religious beliefs on others, manifesting their own beliefs in a manner which not only disqualifies the latter from exercising their self-same religious rights – but also simultaneously infringing other constitutionally-entrenched rights, inter alia the rights to equality and dignity”.<sup>15</sup>

The arena of marriage is highly contested in religious institutions at a time when same-sex couples are increasingly asserting the right for their relationships to be equally recognised. Moreover, same-sex couples have also struggled to exercise their right to civil marriage equality because of religion. More specifically, Section 6 the Civil Union Act 17 of 2006 allows for civil marriage officers in the employ of the Department of Home Affairs to refuse to conclude same-sex unions on the basis of conscience (frequently attributed to religion).<sup>16</sup>

***“...the persecution of people because of their sexual orientation...is every bit as unjust as that crime against humanity, apartheid.”<sup>17</sup>***

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Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu’s statement above can be taken further to say that the “persecution” of which he speaks has its origins in the crime of which he speaks, since “[c]olonial regimes [of which apartheid is one] routinely manipulated ideas about sexuality in order to maintain unjust power relations”.<sup>18</sup> LGBTIQ people face multiple and intersecting discriminations linked to sex and gender status as well as race and class locations, rendering black LGBTIQ people, historically, particularly vulnerable to violent exclusion.

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<sup>12</sup> *Religious conservatism on the global stage: Threats and challenges for LGBTI rights*, Global Philanthropy Project, 2018, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Drawing the line*, p.49.

<sup>14</sup> See *Gaum and Others v Dutch Reformed Church*.

<sup>15</sup> Judge, M., *Queer rights battle is a fight for the right to religious belief*, 2018, 10 September. Available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-10-09-00-queer-rights-battle-is-a-fight-for-the-right-to-religious-belief>. Also see <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-03-08-high-court-scraps-dutch-reformed-church-decision-against-same-sex-marriages/>

<sup>16</sup> Some 37 percent of marriage officers object to concluding same-sex civil unions or marriages (See *The interaction between the right to equality and freedom of religion in South Africa: Exploring the constitutionality of Section 6 of the Civil Union Act 17 of 2006*, Legal Resources Centre, 2017). An amendment to the Civil Union Act is currently in proposal in the national legislature in the form of a private member bill, the purpose of which is to repeal Section 6 of the Act.

<sup>17</sup> Tutu, D., All are God’s children: On including gays and lesbians in the church and society, *Huffington Post*, 2011, June 11. Available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/desmond-tutu/religion-homosexuality\\_b\\_874804.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/desmond-tutu/religion-homosexuality_b_874804.html)

<sup>18</sup> Hill Collins, P., *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender and the new racism*, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 87.

The linking of sex and sexuality with silence, shame and criminality has its origin in colonialism and Victorian Christianity. The narrative of “homosexuality as sin” was introduced into Africa by Victorian missionaries who used the Bible to advance colonial rule. Control over African bodies (including sex and sexuality) was central to apartheid and colonial governance. This is most strongly evidenced in penal codes introduced by colonising powers to regulate African sexualities, which included the criminalisation of homosexuality. The result is the denial of traditions of sexual diversity in favour of sexual and gender regimes that served colonial interests. The imposition of a narrative of the singular, heterosexual African identity was central to this and included the erasure of pre-colonial forms of sexual diversity.<sup>19</sup> These histories have greatly impacted contemporary attitudes towards sexuality in South Africa and elsewhere on the African continent.

It’s argued that, whilst the World Council of Churches and Christian councils of churches in the West largely hold progressive views on homosexuality, the majority of African church councils are opposed to it.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, 96 percent of sub-Saharan African Evangelical leaders reject same-sex sexualities.<sup>21</sup>

The upsurge of homophobia in various African countries in the last decade has been linked to the concerted efforts of U.S. conservative evangelicals to “recruit a significant number of prominent African religious leaders to a campaign seeking to restrict the human rights of LGBT people... As a direct result of this campaign, homophobia is on the rise in Africa – from increased incidents of violence to antigay legislation that carries the death penalty”.<sup>22</sup> These religious conservatives have directly attacked the bodily autonomy, dignity and integrity of African women and African LGBTI people. This has been described as part of the US “cultural wars”, in which “Africans have become a kind of ‘collateral damage’”.<sup>23</sup> Attempting to undermine human-rights gains back in the U.S., these conservatives misrepresent “mainline denominations’ commitments to human rights as imperialistic attempts to manipulate Africans into accepting homosexuality” so as to legitimise their own ideological positions.<sup>24</sup> They frame homosexuality as both a global and a local threat requiring a transnational anti-SOGI strategy.<sup>25</sup>

***“The ruling of the South African Constitutional Court [in 1998] removed the statute that criminalised same-sex intimacy [and] [i]n so doing, it presented the Church with both a gift and challenge. This decision gifts us with an impetus, a resource that focuses our attention, spiritually and pastorally.”<sup>26</sup>***

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<sup>19</sup> Epprecht, M., *Heterosexual Africa? The history of an idea from the age of exploration to the age of AIDS*, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Kaoma, K., Contesting religion: African religious leaders in sexual politics, In *Christianity, globalisation, and protective homophobia*, 2018, p.57.

<sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center, *Global Survey of Evangelical Protestant Leaders*, 2011, June 22, p.30. <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2011/06/Global-Survey-of-Evan.-Prot.-Leaders.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Kaoma, K., *Globalising the culture wars: US conservatives, African churches and homophobia*, Political Research Associates, 2009, p.3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>25</sup> Peñas Defago, M.A., Morán Faúndes, J.M., Vaggione, J.M., *Religious conservatism on the global stage: Threats and challenges for LGBTI rights*, Global Philanthropy Project, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Weeder, M., Awakening to freedom: A global South perspective, In *Intimate conviction: Examining the church and anti-sodomy laws across the commonwealth*, Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2018, p.72.

Frequently presented as an obstacle to LGBTIQ rights, religion can also “gift” the opportunity to foster acceptance and understanding. The Anglican Church’s journey in dealing with same-sex sexualities in South Africa, for example, called the church to “become alert to what feminist theologians refer to as ‘texts of terror’, [namely] those sections of the sacred text that, for example, depict sexual violence inflicted on women, without any critique”.<sup>27</sup>

In the context of Islam’s sacred texts, “[t]he acknowledgement of sex provides liberal and progressive African Islamic leaders, clerics and activists a positive resource for a forward movement on matters of sexuality. It also means that they can enrich the received religions by introducing more realistic, vibrant and passionate traditions from indigenous African cultures”.<sup>28</sup> Recognising the complexities of human sexuality offers an entry point into conversations on sexual diversity. This requires “expand[ing] our sex knowledge about the ambiguities and positive messages from cultures, religions, literature and science”.<sup>29</sup>

***“Faith communities are or should be at the coal face of engagement with humanity in all its diversity.”<sup>30</sup>***

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African theology has contradictory elements that include the breaking of normative taboos through more “inclusive concepts of African identity and African Christianity”.<sup>31</sup> This is particularly important because, “historically, the process of proselytisation subverted, overthrew and demonised African traditional religions (ATR), which formed an integral part of African sexual culture”.<sup>32</sup> Conversely, African cultural tradition can also be read as viewing same-sex sexuality “as a sign of a respected ancestral spirit rather than a demon possession”.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the values of Ubuntu counter religious dogma against LGBTIQ rights.<sup>34</sup>

By “unmasking the colonial silence, African Christians can adequately address various issues associated with human sexuality while celebrating the sacredness of sexual diversity”.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the challenge is then that “we must not only take back the Word, we must take back our African contexts/realities”.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.73.

<sup>28</sup> Amadiume, I., Sexuality, African religio-cultural traditions and modernity: Expanding the lens, p.7. Available at <http://www.arsrc.org/downloads/features/amadiume.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.9.

<sup>30</sup> Mokgethi-Heath, J.P., Can faith communities really ignore sexuality? In *What's faith got to do with it? A global multi-faith discussion on HIV responses*, INERELA, 2012, p.78.

<sup>31</sup> Klinken, A., Gunda, M.R., Taking up the cudgels against gay rights? Trends and trajectories in African Christian theologies on homosexuality, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 59:1, 2012, pp.114–138.

<sup>32</sup> Tamale, S., Exploring the contours of African sexualities: Religion, law and power. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 2014, 14 (1), p.152.

<sup>33</sup> Kaoma, K., *Colonising African values: How the US Christian right is transforming sexual politics in Africa*, Political Research Associates, 2012, p. vii.

<sup>34</sup> Epprecht, M., *Sexuality and social justice in Africa: Rethinking homophobia and forging resistance*, 2013.; Tamale, S., Exploring the contours of African sexualities: Religion, law and power. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 2014, 14 (1), pp.150–177.

<sup>35</sup> Kaoma, K., Unmasking the colonial silence: Sexuality in Africa in the post colonial context, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 155 (July 2016 Special Issue), pp.49–69.

<sup>36</sup> *When faith does violence: Re-imagining engagement between churches and LGBTI groups on homophobia in Africa*, The Other Foundation, 2017, p.20.



# SNAPSHOT OF THE FIELD: BARRIERS, ACTORS AND INITIATIVES

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## 3.1 Barriers to Sexual and Gender Diversity

Those interviewed for this paper identified a range of barriers impacting the extent to which sexual and gender diversity and rights are taken up progressively within faith contexts. Below are some of the primary reasons why LGBTIQ people face such intense pushback in institutions of religion and faith.

- They are seen to pose a threat to male and masculine dominance, placing pressure on these gender hierarchies of domination to be reformed.
- They are understood to defy historical power structures (which are predominantly male, and, in some cases, white), forcing a renegotiation of social relations.
- The advancement of the rights, position and participation of women has shifted religious tradition. LGBTIQ rights are seen as linked to this, and thus a threat to dominant gender and sexual norms and roles.
- The foundational dualism that disconnects body from spirit and shapes dominant theological worldviews renders the realm of the sexual an area of stigma and taboo.
- Pervasive myths associated with sex and sexuality, and an absence of an informed language to talk about these issues, contribute to their silencing.
- There is a dearth of understanding and know-how about what it means to adopt a religious narrative and practice of inclusivity.
- There are severe limits to heteropatriarchal interpretations of sacred texts and traditions, and these close down the space for alternative views on sexual and gender diversity.

Other obstructions that impede the advancement of sexual and gender rights are discussed below.

### *Patriarchal and Heteronormative Underpinnings*

Most leaders of organised faiths hold true to patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies through which they gain and maintain their privilege and protection. These ideologies are given credence by the sacred texts, resulting in hierarchies in which men predominate across leadership structures. The “Abrahamic faith traditions are embedded in a patriarchal matrix” that is tied to gendered notions of “the good life”, “family”, and to how to be a “proper” man or

woman. This is a normative social order that gay, lesbian and transgender persons are perceived to threaten.<sup>37</sup>

## *Managing Diversity*

There are few systems and procedures to facilitate the management of diversity within formal religious structures. This is coupled with a lack of interventions to equip both clergy and lay people to deal with diversity and related conflicts, particularly in contexts with burgeoning queer communities and expanding space for diverse gender and sexual expressions. One person described how, for religious leaders, there is “the fear of entering a terrain which is new for many”<sup>38</sup>, prohibiting them from being proactive on matters of sexuality and gender. This is compounded by religious leaders’ “failure to interact with real lived experience and to enter the space of discernment”, denying that “God is still at work” there.<sup>39</sup> For example, accepting a child who is gay is viewed as contradictory to accepting the ways of the church. Similarly, the pulpit is used to reject homosexuality even when pastors themselves have to confront its existence in the context of pastoral care.<sup>40</sup>

## *Culture Contested*

All cultures intersect with faith traditions in one form or another. Culture and religion are, as one interviewee put it, the “terrible twins” of prejudice against LGBTIQ people.<sup>41</sup> The challenge queerness poses to both is seen as “going against everything we know as true, and therefore as fiddling with the fundamentals”. The “unholy trinity” of culture, religion and gender construction promotes and sustains gender violence.<sup>42</sup> The co-working of patriarchal cultural and religious ideas – in which women and LGBTIQ people are subordinated – normalises discrimination on the basis of sex, sexuality and gender. There is also a fear of challenging this status quo, lest it result in rejection and isolation.

## *Limits of Language*

The lexicon for sexual and gender diversity is largely shaped by the Western idiom and so it is expediently dismissed as “foreign” to Africa. The lack of vernacular terms to speak of the LGBTIQ experience reinforces the idea that people are “going against the ancestors”. The limited vocabulary on sex is linked to the dualism (i.e. the body/spirit split) at the core of Judeo-Christian traditions, which disconnects religious beliefs from “who we are” (i.e. from social identity).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Interview.

<sup>38</sup> Interview.

<sup>39</sup> Interview.

<sup>40</sup> Interview.

<sup>41</sup> Interview.

<sup>42</sup> Nadar, S., Searching the dungeons beneath our religious discourses: The case of violence against women and the “unholy trinity”, *Agenda*, 2005, 19(66), pp.16–22.

<sup>43</sup> Interview.

The (sexual) body is impure and sinful, and control over it is a mark of morality.<sup>44</sup> Such preconceived religious views preclude people from engaging with the connection between religious texts and sexuality beyond the narrow frame of homosexuality.<sup>45</sup>

## *Fundamentalist Interpretations*

The sacred texts (be that the Bible, Torah or Quran) permeate everyday understandings of sexual and gendered embodiment. Fundamentalist interpretations<sup>46</sup> of these texts rely on gender essentialisms – through, for example, the story of creation – that entrench and naturalise the binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine and homosexuality/heterosexuality. Challenges to these gender constructs are often depicted as anti-religion.<sup>47</sup>

## *The Prosperity Gospel*

There is a steady shift towards the privatisation of religion through an emphasis on personal experience, wealth and prosperity. Particularly in Africa, the swing towards Pentecostalism and its “prosperity gospel”<sup>48</sup> turns on the promise of wealth accumulation as “the answer” the church provides. In contexts of poverty and deprivation, this (false) promise of faith is attractive to many.<sup>49</sup> Given current anxieties about dwindling church membership, of youth in particular, the Charismatic model is seen as a success in drawing both numbers and resources to religious institutions. Growing in popularity and influence, these churches stand in direct contrast to other traditions that approach religious communion as deeply concerned with, and rooted in, justice and diversity.

## *Theological Doctrine*

“There are so many people who want to be kind, but the information they have is about the condemnation of homosexuality.”<sup>50</sup> Doctrines of theology are a key barrier to sexual and gender diversity. There is a lack of theological resources to engage with issues of diversity in an open and progressive manner. Inadequate theological education inhibits the capacity of trained clergy to deal with sex and sexuality and so they are ill-equipped for crucial arenas of human identity and interaction. Added to this is a resistance to contextual bible readings that have the capacity to empower people with more relevant responses to key features of contemporary life. The content and form of liturgical practice is also highly gendered and thus closes the space for non-heteropatriarchal alternatives. Yet, “liturgy forms ideas and is a space in which innovation is

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<sup>44</sup> Interview.

<sup>45</sup> Interview.

<sup>46</sup> Interview.

<sup>47</sup> Interview.

<sup>48</sup> This is also described as “the claim that simple faith in Jesus Christ will bring wealth and well-being” (Kaoma, K., *Colonising African values: How the US Christian Right is transforming sexual politics in Africa*, Political Research Associates, 2012, p.vii).

<sup>49</sup> Interview.

<sup>50</sup> Interview.

a possibility” to approach God beyond its patriarchal, masculinist form.<sup>51</sup> In this way, liturgy can become a sphere of participation rather than indoctrination<sup>52</sup> and “an instrument to activate congregations to be sensitive to issues of inclusion”.<sup>53</sup>

## *Ideas of Family*

Restrictive notions of “family” and “families of faith” tend not to recognise divergent and non-conforming family formations. Increasingly, family-centred ministries that uphold these constrained notions of the family are being promoted to attract new members. One opinion is that such religious ideas “destruct families instead of building them” as they deny the realities of how families are constituted.

## *Leadership Hierarchies*

Congregational leaders hold the power to deny access to queer communities and to gatekeep possibilities for inclusion. At the same time, these leaders are dependent on salaries, largely drawn from the communities they serve, and this influences their teachings – which tend towards overly literal interpretations that are perceived to placate these communities. Because their positions are linked to the dominant culture of the communities they serve, there is an anxiety about “what will be left of the church?” if such issues are tackled, demonstrating an inability and/or resistance to imagining the church anew. As many at the top of religious hierarchies are men, there is the idea that “dominance should belong to a male and that we should protect him at all cost”. Read literally, the sacred texts endorse this. Those who hold power in religious institutions tend to define the church, yet what is meant by “church” and who constitutes that church is seldom challenged. Faith leaders harbour fears (linked to a perceived loss of power and position) about openly engaging with SOGI issues.

## *(Not) Dealing with SOGI-related Discrimination*

Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is, for the most part, not actively dealt with in faith settings. The tendency is to adopt a “don't ask, don't tell” approach. This maintains a climate in which many LGBTIQ people remain closeted. The inability to call out the role of religion in perpetrating violence and hatred is a barrier to dealing openly and directly with SOGI-related discriminations when they do occur. Instead, hate speech is often defended by drawing on problematic interpretations of constitutional protections for religious belief and association.

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<sup>51</sup> Interview.

<sup>52</sup> Interview.

<sup>53</sup> Interview. Also see West, G., Deploying indecent literary and socio-historical detail for change: Genesis 2:18–24 as a resource for choice of sexual partner, In *Change agents in contexts near and far: Teaching gender, health and theology in Africa and beyond*.

## 3.2 Actors and Strategies in the Field

### *Some Local Dynamics*

SOGI issues have become part of discussions on theology and doctrinal practice across all mainline churches in southern Africa.<sup>54</sup> However, as one interviewee put it, there is “deep patchiness” in the extent to which issues of sexual and gender diversity are dealt with positively and productively in the organised faith sector.<sup>55</sup> Orthodox theological interpretations, grounded in patriarchal worldviews, are held in common across faith groups. The more advances made towards women’s equal rights in a faith tradition, the more possibility there is for the recognition of sexual and gender diversity.

There has been significant progress in some mainline churches (such as the Dutch Reformed, Methodist and Anglican Churches), whereas in others the issue remains shrouded in silence (such as the Catholic, Evangelical and African Independent Churches). One influencing factor is the extent to which a religious grouping draws on a western discourse of sexuality, which is linked to whether it is part of a global denomination where such issues are more visibly and vocally contested. Whilst some mainstream denominations in South Africa have adopted statements of inclusion, there are contradictions between these positions and church practice on the ground.<sup>56</sup>

LGBTIQ faith leaders are frequently *not* called up to serve, and so they reach a glass ceiling in leadership structures. At the level of institutional leadership, there is a tendency for support to LGBTIQ people to take a more individualised, rather than systematic, form – if present at all. Driven by leadership, a few denominations have set up internal structures to engage with issues of sexuality, including a gender desk in the Methodist Church and human sexuality committees in both the Presbyterian and Anglican Churches.<sup>57</sup>

One interviewee referred to the “Christo-normativity” of the field that favours an emphasis on Christian faith communities, with less attention given to Muslim, Jewish, and African traditional religions. In respect of the latter, sangoma practices, an African traditional belief system, are largely sidelined within a prevailing Christian-centric approach. A groundbreaking local initiative is underway to organise and build capacity and support for LGBT sangomas.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, the many formations within African Independent Churches make it difficult to work with this sector in a coordinated fashion, beyond isolated engagements.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Interview.

<sup>55</sup> Interview.

<sup>56</sup> For example, the Dutch Reform Church’s “Season of Human Dignity” initiative established grounding values for how the church was to approach human sexuality; however, this was directly undermined by the 2016 General Synod decision against same-sex marriage – which was more recently overturned by a court of law (see <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-03-08-high-court-scraps-dutch-reformed-church-decision-against-same-sex-marriages/>). In a regional synod in the Diocese of Saldanha Bay, the Anglican Church decided to allow for the blessing of same-sex marriages in a landslide victory of 104–4.

<sup>57</sup> The scope and impact of these structures are beyond the purview of the research but such an inquiry might offer valuable insights into their limits and opportunities.

<sup>58</sup> There is a group challenging this notion by addressing the intersection of Christian and sangoma identities, and creating a safe space for LGBTI sangomas to talk about sexuality and educate others. Here the emphasis is on holding these two belief systems alongside one another, recognising both African ancestral histories and those of the Church.

<sup>59</sup> Interview.

In the Jewish faith, there isn't currently a dedicated organisation in South Africa dealing with LGBTIQ rights.<sup>60</sup> There is more space in the Jewish Reform community than in Orthodox structures, which tend to hold very conservative views on gender and sexual rights. The South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD)<sup>61</sup>, a member of the national Hate Crimes Working Group<sup>62</sup>, is a supporter of anti-hate crimes legislation that includes hate crimes against LGBTIQ people. However, their unequivocal support for the State of Israel and its Zionist policies means they hold a selective view on social justice. This is a limitation for queer Jewish activists, particularly those who denounce Israeli pinkwashing.<sup>63</sup>

Whilst there is a range of sects within the practice of Islam in South Africa, the common belief that queers should be executed differs only in the style of that execution.<sup>64</sup> Local Muslim leaders are drawing on pronouncements that are more than a thousand years old to justify this position. There are also hadith<sup>65</sup> that are mobilised to promote homophobia and that describe "faith as unchangeable", thus working against alternative, progressive Islamic paradigms. Against this backdrop, LGBTIQ organising in the Muslim community is extremely difficult and there are only a handful of progressive imams. Muslim queer activism has been prompted to approach Islam to engage with sexual and gender diversity, in the context of modern society, from the vantage point of Islamic values of compassion and inclusivity. The radical prospect is for queers to envisage and enact new forms of Islam from the very margins into which they have been cast. This includes queer Muslims redefining Islam and its practices to enable their inclusion.

Recent years have also seen shifts in this regard. However, the process has been a slow one.<sup>66</sup> Given the silence on the issue in public, much of the damage of homophobic exclusion takes place in the private sphere of Muslim communities.

## ***Key Actors***

There is a small number of registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who work exclusively in the arena of SOGI issues in faith communities, such as Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), Global Interfaith Network for People of all Sexes, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (GIN-SSOGIE), and Al-Fitrah. Other organisations that are concerned with LGBTI rights and human rights more broadly run targeted programmes of relevance to the

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<sup>60</sup> The now-defunct Jewish Outlook was formed in 2005 in the wake of the South African tour of the film "Trembling before G-d", which tackles homosexuality in the Orthodox community. The group offered a support network and social environment for Jewish LGBTI people and their political representation within the mainstream South African Jewish community.

<sup>61</sup> The SAJBD identifies itself as the umbrella representative body of the mainstream South African Jewish community.

<sup>62</sup> The Hate Crimes Working Group is a multi-sectoral network of civil society organisations set up to spearhead advocacy and reform initiatives pertaining to hate crimes in South Africa and the region.

<sup>63</sup> Pinkwashing is used to describe how the State of Israel uses its promotion of LGBT rights, through state policy, to downplay or deflect from its human rights abuses against Palestinians. Also see Skora, S., *Pride with prejudice: Exposing A Wider Bridge's right-wing funding*. Available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b572cf60dbda33f837c0ae1/t/5c72f3b19b747a1582c318b4/1551037363459/Pride+With+Prejudice.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> Interview.

<sup>65</sup> Hadith are reports of the sayings or actions of the Prophet Muhammad that shape contemporary practices of Islam.

<sup>66</sup> For example, the Claremont Mosque has spoken out actively against homophobia (Interview).

topic of this inquiry, including Accountability International (AI), International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA), and The Other Foundation.

Some higher education institutions have specific programmes dealing with sexual and gender diversity and faith (e.g. Stellenbosch University, the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of the Western Cape).

See Appendix 2 for a list of organisations working in the field and Appendix 3 for selected resource materials relevant to the topic.

## *Central Strategies*

Central strategies of those working in the field include (but are not limited to):

- *storytelling* – as a means to locate theological work within the lived experience of LGBTIQ Christians
- *utilising multiple frames* – to explore and affirm SOGI, including through theology, human rights and health frameworks
- *offering a language of engagement* – through contextual interpretation of sacred texts and terminologies of LGBTIQ identities and oppressions
- *collaborative partnerships* – across academic and activist spheres, bringing together the study of theology with contemporary realities through transformative pedagogies
- *research* – to grow bodies of knowledge on African genders and sexualities and their histories
- *advocacy* – including law reform (both civil and religious law) and lobbying denominational decision-making structures and processes
- *psychosocial support services* – for LGBTIQ people within communities of faith
- *leadership development* – to spur and support queer religious activism and shape LGBTIQ-affirming traditional healing practices
- *training and public education* – on human rights, faith and sexuality, gender equality, etc.
- *litigation* – court challenges against SOGI-related discrimination in religious institutions<sup>67</sup>
- *developing models and approaches* – on, for example, inclusive ministering and transformative pedagogies.

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<sup>67</sup> This includes a number of high-profile court cases, including *Gaum and Others v Dutch Reformed Church*, which challenges the church's regressive move in respect of same-sex relations (see <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2018-08-21-dutch-reformed-church-to-defend-decision-on-gay-clerics/>); *De Lange v Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and Another*, contesting the church's dismissal of a lesbian minister for marrying her same-sex partner (see <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/lesbian-pastor-vs-church-1519820>); and the Equality Court hate speech case against Bishop Joshua Maponga, a Seventh Day Adventist preacher (see <https://www.mambaonline.com/2018/11/13/high-profile-cleric-to-face-equality-court-over-gay-hate-speech/>). Some people hold the opinion that such court cases have the potential to polarise and harden positions within the church as well as to strengthen the hands of conservative lobby groups.

Despite the small number of organisations dedicated to working at the intersection of faith and sexual and gender rights, there is a vast range of interventions underway that focus on, amongst others:

- pastoral guidelines (IAM, the Other Foundation, Ujamaa Centre)
- inclusive liturgy (IAM, Queers Without Borders)<sup>68</sup>
- best practices for working with clergy (IAM)
- dialogues with faith leadership (IAM, GIN-SSOGIE)<sup>69</sup>
- Contextual Bible reading (IAM, Ujamaa Centre)
- support for parents and families (IAM)
- advocacy (GIN-SSOGIE, IAM)
- queer storytelling/oral histories (GIN-SSOGIE, Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA))<sup>70</sup>
- church media and journalists (The Other Foundation)
- transformative pedagogies<sup>71</sup> (IAM, Stellenbosch University<sup>72</sup>, University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of the Western Cape)
- dialogues on LGBTI rights in faith communities (IAM, Ubom'bam Luvuyo Traditional Healers Forum)
- regional meetings on faith, sexuality and gender diversity in the African context (GALA, IAM, The Other Foundation, GIN-SSOGIE, Sonke Gender Justice)
- African traditional religion and traditional healers (Gay and Lesbian Network, Ubom'bam Luvuyo Traditional Healers Forum)
- research on inclusive faith communities (Stellenbosch University, The Other Foundation, IAM)
- development of resource materials, toolkits and guides (See Appendix 3 for a listing).

There are also a number of formal study curricula in higher education institutions, such as the Masters in Gender, Health and Theology at Stellenbosch University, and similar degree programmes at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of the Western Cape.<sup>73</sup> These programmes include a growing body of research on sexual diversity in faith contexts. Offering both theoretical and practical resources, they produce graduates equipped with tools to engage with sexuality and gender in faith communities. Reflecting on the work of such

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<sup>68</sup> One example is the implementation of inclusive liturgy-writing workshops at the ecumenical level, undertaken by Queers Without Borders to ignite thinking on how to practically shift towards inclusive, relevant and appropriate liturgy that focuses on vulnerable communities (LGBTIQ, disabled, sex workers, etc.).

<sup>69</sup> In 2018, GIN-SSOGIE convened human rights defenders, scholars, researchers, and religious leaders from diverse family backgrounds and traditions, including African traditional religions, Islam and Christianity, for its first dialogue on Family and Traditional Values, resulting in the Johannesburg Declaration (see <http://www.gin-ssogie.org/johannesburg-declaration/>)

<sup>70</sup> *Seeking Sanctuary* is a project of GALA in partnership with the African Centre for Migration and Society that documents the work of the LGBTIQ ministry at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church and will produce a publication of these stories.

<sup>71</sup> See forthcoming special edition of the *African Journal of Gender and Religion*, entitled "Advancing theory and methods in gender and religion" and co-edited by Prof. Sarojini Nadar and Dr Fatima Seedat, which has a theme on queer identity and religion.

<sup>72</sup> For reflections on the content and implementation of a sexual diversity programme with theology students, see Boonzaaier M., Co-creating transformative spaces through dialogue: Inclusive and Affirming Ministries' partnership with the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, In *Change agents in contexts near and far: Teaching gender, health and theology in Africa and beyond*; and Gunda, M.R., *2015 Report on methodology, challenges & opportunities in the work of Inclusive & Affirming Ministries 2009-2014*.

<sup>73</sup> Some of these courses are funded by the Church of Sweden.

transformative pedagogies, “the uncomfortable pedagogical space” is seen to be key: “If we succeed in encouraging students to draw on the reality of their own experience of discomfort, and to be bold enough to nudge others towards discomfort and to muster the courage to engage in difficult conversations because it seems as if comfort keeps us isolated, safe, separated and protected and subsequently it may precisely be discomfort, however painful, that is imperative for change”.<sup>74</sup>

Intersectional strategies are particularly important in light of the historical connections between SOGI rights and women’s rights<sup>75</sup>, and with other social injustices (such as racism) that LGBTIQ people confront. Whilst intersectional approaches to LGBTIQ-rights work in the faith sector appear to be more prevalent now than in the past<sup>76</sup>, there have been critiques of promoting LGBTIQ inclusion in the Christian faith without adopting a transformative approach.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Van der Walt, C., Having difficult conversations: Engaging film as a reflective surface to encourage dynamic intersectional encounters, In *Change agents in contexts near and far: Teaching gender, health and theology in Africa and beyond*, Stellenbosch, Sun Press, forthcoming, p. 201.

<sup>75</sup> See the links between struggles for abortion rights and LGBTI rights in Uganda as a case in point in *Religious conservatism on the global stage: Threats and challenges for LGBTI rights*, Global Philanthropy Project, 2018, pp.35–36.

<sup>76</sup> *Creating dialogue on LGBTI rights within faith communities in southern and Eastern Africa: Final evaluation IAM LGBTI project*, HSRC, 2018.

<sup>77</sup> “Failure [of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church, an LGBTI church in Cape Town] to link issues such as poverty, racism and sexism which prevail in the South African context to the matters which they are dealing with” in Reygan, F. & Potgieter, C., Disruptive or merely alternative? A case study of a South African gay church, *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*, 2011, Vol 17(2), p.25.



# PRIORITIES

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Discussions with interviewees yielded a number of priority areas for future activism and organisational programming. These are themed below.

## 4.1 Challenging Foundational Frames

Developing tools and capacities for inclusive language is necessary for creating faith contexts that are more facilitating of sexual and gender diversity. This requires a shift in the discourse of faith to enable norms and ideas related to rights, equality, justice and dignity to find more space. This requires challenging the foundational frames of religious thought and belief. Sexuality is a relatively “new site of struggle and the ‘old’ theologies do not fit – because they are founded on heteropatriarchy”<sup>78</sup> and, as such, “traditional normative theologies of sexuality have traumatised queer Christians”<sup>79</sup>. As one interviewee put it, “gender equality is the first biggest hurdle and sexuality is secondary to that.” Here, feminist thinking and politics in activist discourses are key in the struggle for LGBTIQ people, in light of the interconnections between gender and sexual oppressions within organised religion. A slightly contrary position is held by another activist who indicates that the link between feminism and queer struggles “was a romantic idea – [as] the needs of feminists are different from the needs of queers”<sup>80</sup>. In challenging foundational frames, the emphasis is on reimagining outdated, decontextualised, heteropatriarchal approaches in favour of affirming and inclusive ones.

## 4.2 Engaging Faith Leadership Through an Examination of Power

It takes years to build credibility and foster access to work directly with faith leaders. It is also a long and enduring process to accompany and strategically support these leaders as they shift along the spectrum from less to more embracing. Here, an approach based on dialogue is favoured over one based on debate. This involves working through the lens of power by getting people into the room; acknowledging how religious power operates (i.e. the benefits of holding particular beliefs); and recognising how certain voices and positions are silenced through language and/as power.<sup>81</sup> The distinction between faith *leaders* and faith *leadership* is important to recognise the multiple forms of leadership in play that can either reinforce oppression or to be agents of freedom.

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<sup>78</sup> *When faith does violence: Re-imagining engagement between churches and LGBTI groups on homophobia in Africa*, The Other Foundation, 2017, p.9.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>80</sup> Interview.

<sup>81</sup> This is IAM's methodology.

## 4.3 Centring Dialogue

Dialogue (as opposed to polarising debates), in which LGBTIQ experiences are at the centre, are core to the paradigm shifts required. Developing conversational spaces is enhanced by the lived experiences of LGBTIQ people at the hands of faith as a means to develop empathy and openness to change. Councils of churches are entry points for enabling such conversations, as are organisations working more generally on faith from a rights/justice perspective.

## 4.4 Providing Alternative Theological Training and Resources

Those training to be faith leaders require exposure to contextually-based understandings of faith doctrines and their socio-historical implications.<sup>82</sup> Much like liberation theology, the approach is to interpret theology in ways that are conducive to contemporary contexts. This means refusing certain texts if their interpretations are fundamentally unjust. One interviewee expressed this as the act of “saying no to the verse”, as was done by the Prophet Muhammad. There is also a call to “meet a minimal pastoral threshold”<sup>83</sup> in the face of homophobia. The emphasis should be on transformative pedagogies and theological education with a thematic focus on sexuality and gender so as to foster a network of well-equipped individuals. Institutions of training (such as seminaries) and an interdisciplinary approach are key to this, as is creating space for emerging leaders to find their feet in the terrain and be supported by an expanding collective of activism in the religious sphere.

## 4.5 Expanding Expertise

There is both opportunity and desire to expand the cohort of specialists in the field who are grounded in both theology and activism, as the two are indispensable to the work. This requires skills to deal with the particularities of the religious sector and the ability to speak its language whilst at the same time challenging its dominant paradigms. Additional tools are needed to support clergy to “wrestle with the doctrine”<sup>84</sup> in ways that open up alternatives to those that sow bigotry and hatred.

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<sup>82</sup> IAM argues for readings that understand the cultural contexts in which the Bible's authors lived, how specific verses fit into larger passages within the Bible's overall message, and how verses can be read within contemporary contexts.

<sup>83</sup> *When faith does violence: Re-imagining engagement between churches and LGBTI groups on homophobia in Africa*, The Other Foundation, 2017, p.31.

<sup>84</sup> Interview.

## 4.6 Decolonising Political Education

Civic and political education is necessary for LGBTIQ activists operating in faith communities, including exposure to wider social struggles (for example, around land access). This will further locate queer rights within the broader terrain of social justice and grow involvement in the other injustices that LGBTIQ people face and which play out in religious and traditional spaces. Here, a decolonising perspective is important in developing alternative faith practices to tackle the effects of colonialism and apartheid on social institutions, including that of religion. As one interviewee says of African traditional belief systems, “we all have to believe in something but that shouldn’t come at the cost of losing some of who you are”.

## 4.7 Articulating Queer Experiences

Orthodox beliefs on sex and sexuality can be challenged by bringing in the lived experiences of LGBTIQ people and women, frequently overlooked in traditional models of faith leadership training. Transformative work on gender and sexuality requires the presence of LGBTIQ people, in that “diversity requires real diverse bodies”<sup>85</sup>. Capturing experiences of inclusion and exclusion supports advocacy and the shifting of mindsets. Stories of how families navigate acceptance, despite religious restrictions, are important, as are queer role models to spur other faith activists.

## 4.8 Lobbying for Law and Policy Change

All organised religions have an interest in how life is governed and the rules and regulations around which social and cultural life is organised. For this reason, LGBTIQ activism in the sphere of religious life must necessarily concern itself with how conditions of life are shaped by law and policy (both inside and outside of religious structures). This includes policies on gender and sexual relations, health, traditional practices, social development, and violence and abuse, amongst others. Important here is lobbying for progressive shifts in religious and civil laws and policies, supported by LGBTIQ movement building.

## 4.9 Widening Collaborations

*Interfaith:* LGBTIQ people inhabit coexisting yet disconnected or contradictory belief systems. For example, narratives that underpin the general justification of homophobia (such as Sodom and Gomorrah) come from specific narratives. As one person puts it, “Christianity made people see sangomas as barbaric.” This calls for work across queer faith groups to create closer collaboration in the development of shared counter-narratives.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.7

*Local and national:* With a specific focus on the thematic area of sexual and gender diversity, both local and national gatherings are needed to bring together role players from across NGOs, academic settings, and faith structures who share common interests so as to strengthen these networks. This might include solidarity forums to provide support and care for those in the field.

*Regional:* Whilst there have been a number of regional convenings in recent years, there is a need for more spaces that focus on the intersection of faith and sexuality in the African context.<sup>86</sup> One initiative currently envisaged is the establishment of an interfaith consortium aimed at promoting and protecting the human rights and dignity of LGBTIQ people in southern Africa.<sup>87</sup>

*Global South:* Linkages amongst organisations operating in the Global South could be enhanced to share context-specific best practices on doing work in postcolonial contexts.

## 4.10 Attracting Funding

In respect of funding support, interviewees stressed the need for:

- core support to sustain organisations and initiatives, as the change agenda has a long time horizon
- support for the continuity of interventions where building relationships over time is key to achieving longer-term change outcomes
- funders to grasp the significance of the work
- better ways to monitor and evaluate impact
- a support fund for LGBTIQ clergy to mitigate the risks of SOGI-related activism.

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<sup>86</sup> These include: Regional dialogues with religious leaders and faith communities in South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland (2016, GALA); Homophobia and the churches in Africa: A dialogue (2016, The Other Foundation); Growing Solidarity Convening (2018, Global Philanthropy Project); Pan-African gathering (2015, Institute of Development Studies/Sonke Gender Justice/Wits Centre for Diversity Studies); Interfaith dialogue on family and traditional values (2018, GIN-SSOGIE: see the Johannesburg Declaration at <http://www.gin-ssogie.org/johannesburg-declaration/>).

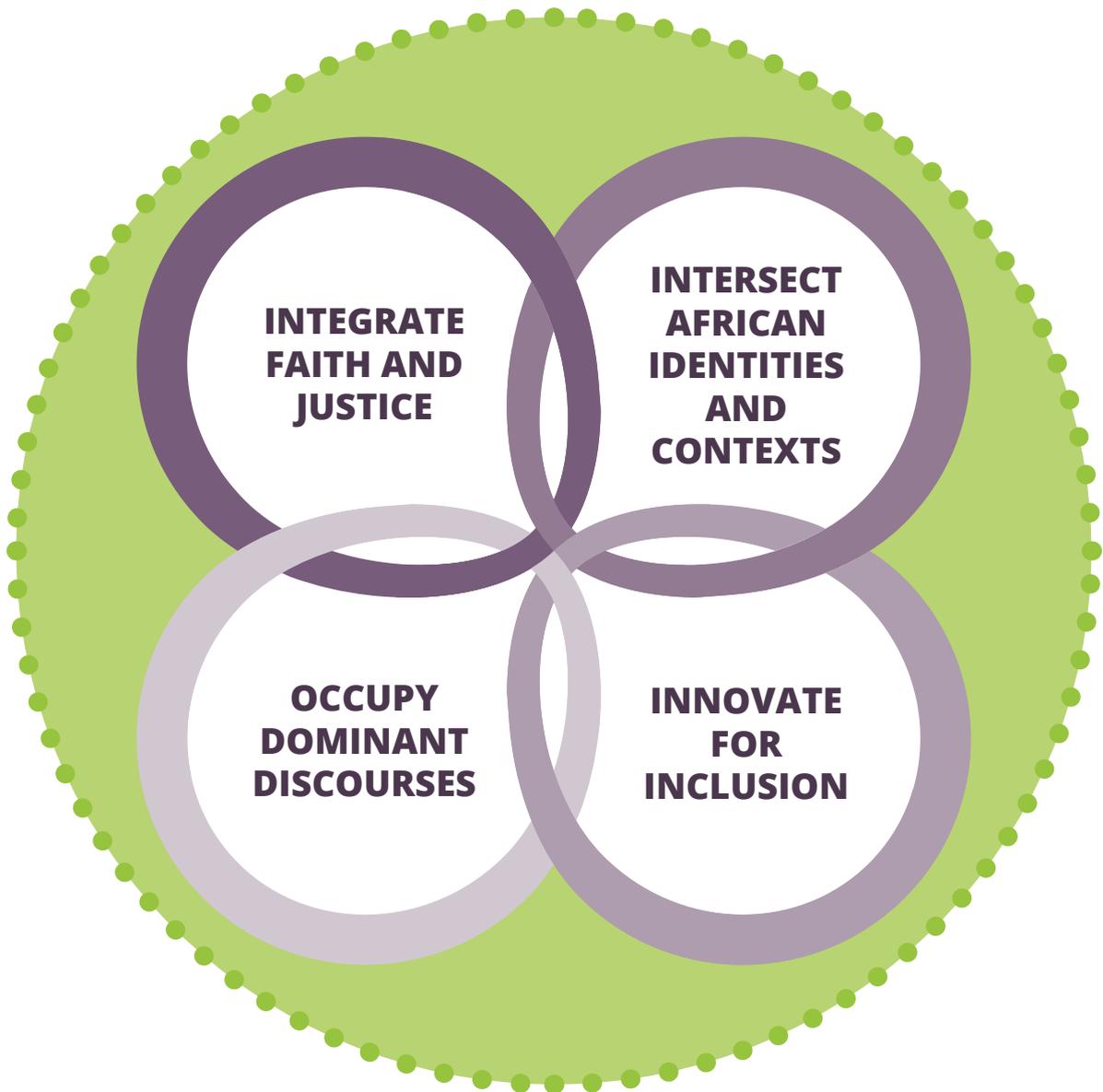
<sup>87</sup> This is an initiative of the Church of Sweden, GIN-SSOGIE, IAM, INERELA+ and Ubumbano ACT Alliance.



# CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

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A conceptual framework to guide strategies at the intersection of faith and sexual and gender rights comprises four pillars – integrate, intersect, occupy and innovate.



## 5.1 Integrate Faith and Justice

This pillar focuses on approaching faith traditions, beliefs, institutions, roles and practices as integrally linked to power. As a form of power, faith is implicated in systems of injustice that are the result of oppressive inequalities related to race, gender, class and sexuality, among others. By viewing faith through the lens of justice, and gender justice in particular, the multiple and overlapping discriminations facing LGBTIQ people and women are tackled together. This also recognises that the racial oppression of colonialism and apartheid have shaped cultures of faith in South Africa, and that understanding and addressing these dynamics are thus key to challenging current religious power arrangements and perceptions.

## 5.2 Intersect African Identities and Contexts

This pillar draws attention to the centrality of African sexual and gender histories and experiences in contemporary faith contexts. It involves queering African faiths, and bringing traditional faith practices into closer conversation with Abrahamic traditions through historical and contextual understandings of African sexual cultures and identities.

## 5.3 Occupy Dominant Discourses

This pillar stresses the importance of LGBTIQ people being at the centre of the public discourse on issues of faith that directly affect them, in particular those discourses that denigrate, denounce and demean their rights and experiences. Here, the emphasis is on the development and centrality of LGBTIQ-affirming social justice discourses, together with movement building, within, across and outside of communities of faith.

## 5.4 Innovate for Inclusion

This pillar calls for the promotion of practices of inclusion – in the reading of sacred texts, in the doing of ritual, and in liturgy, structures, systems, leadership and practices. It stresses the need for exemplars, role models and tools to demonstrate what radical and transformative gender and sexual inclusion looks like in real terms.

## *What follows are some approaches for how these four pillars could be actioned.*



- Frame the project of sexual and gender rights as a collective one that concerns power, injustice and inequality.
- Expand reach by working with allied organisations that have leverage with wider faith structures working on issues of justice.<sup>88</sup>
- Strengthen the linkages between those working in the field and the larger social justice sector, and increase the latter's interest in faith as a site of struggle.
- Support theological training and resource development to grow the pool of skilled and networked people (including clergy) to take issues up at a community level. This includes establishing minimum standards for the regulation of pastoral care.
- Facilitate spaces for informed, values-driven dialogues, particularly with and amongst faith leaders.
- Mobilise across ecumenical lines and extend alliances against right-wing evangelicals and around common national and regional agendas.
- Hold sustained conversations with faith leader allies who support social justice, with a view to growing their solidarity and support for sexual and gender rights.
- Promote a focus on justice as a counterpoint to the pitting of rights in notions that the right to practice a particular religion competes with the right to equality.
- Strengthen strategic collaborations and advocacy – both formal and informal – within and across faith communities
  - at the denominational level: Grow pressure groups and queer movement building to influence decision-making processes (in synods, councils and assemblies).
  - at the ecumenical level: Support existing queer thinktanks and promote the establishment of loose networks that bring key players together to better coordinate efforts and identify entry points for strategic, collaborative efforts.
  - hold convenings focused on regional policy advocacy through, for example, the establishment of an interfaith consortium or network.

<sup>88</sup> One such organisation is the Ubumbano ACT Alliance, which has a vast network of alliance partners, all working with faith constituencies and operating at community level (in the southern African region) as well as nationally and globally.



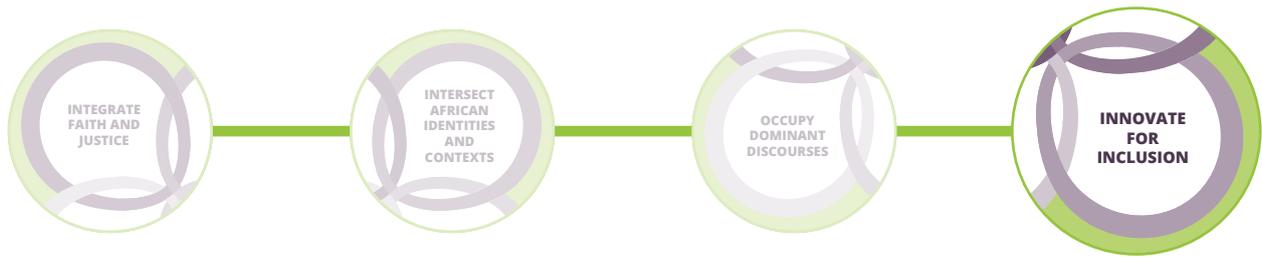
- Explore the intersection of Abrahamic faiths and African traditional religions, and promote the decolonisation of faith practices.
- Strengthen the interconnections of the church and African traditional practices as co-existing forms of belief, identity and belonging.
- Bridge theory and activist spaces through, for example, a summer school of religious activism and growing the cohort of African queer leaders in faith communities and structures.
- Support contextual readings of sacred texts in ways that consider their origins, authorship and implications for contemporary African societies and lives.
- Upskill faith leadership to be able to embody and practice inclusion, equality and non-discrimination in context-appropriate ways.
- Build messages and narratives about the rediscovering of queer African sexualities as a decolonial act.
- Challenge the racialisation and blackwashing of homophobia.<sup>89</sup>
- Draw on black theology and its grounding in African tradition as the basis for theologising values and principles that can inform an inclusive liberation theology.

<sup>89</sup> Blackwashing homophobia refers to the racist representation of blackness as the source of violent homophobia and, by extension, the naturalisation of African culture as homophobic (Judge, M., *Blackwashing homophobia: Violence and the politics of gender, sexuality and race*, Routledge, Oxon, 2018).



- Confront key myths, including that there is one “true” reading of holy texts and that queerness is anathema to Africa history, sexuality and culture.
- Support African activists and scholars to embody counternarratives through, for example, documentation and research on queer vulnerability and resistance in faith communities.
- Centre those who are marginalised and oppressed as the location from which alternative, transformative discourses and practices are emerging.
- Amplify the voice and visibility of the field through increased strategic communication efforts.
- Work with individual LGBTIQ people to assist them to integrate their sexuality and spirituality, including psychosocial support and activist building.
- Broaden conversations on human sexuality to include a focus on straight sexualities.
- Expose and confront homophobia/transphobia using legal instruments, together with community mobilisation.
- Support anchor organisations to enable better longer-term infrastructures for leadership development.
- Grow the number of dedicated activists, and issue-specific expertise, through targeted support to anchor organisations and queer religious activists.
- Build connections between theological and human rights discourses; academic and activist approaches; denominational and ecumenical efforts; country-specific and regional programmes; and Abrahamic, African and other traditional belief systems and practices.<sup>90</sup>
- Strengthen educative spaces on human sexuality that draw on theoretical concepts (such as heteronormativity and intersectionality) and lived experience, and grow a faith-appropriate lexicon to advance communication about SOGI.
- Forge closer links between LGBTIQ organisations and faith institutions to increase proximity to queer realities as a means to challenge discrimination and violence “in the name of religion” by exposing its real social effects.

<sup>90</sup> For example, the resonances between traditional healing/shamanic practices, such as doekoem in Muslim culture and African sangoma practices.



- Identify champion churches that model affirming and inclusive practices.
- Support the imaginative (re)use of faith language, concepts and rituals in liberating ways, e.g. the Eucharist as a form of radical inclusion.
- Showcase the ways in which LGBTIQ people embody the possibility for more just and equitable modalities of faith. This includes the centrality of queer oral histories that highlight resistances within communities of faith.
- Enable and promote inclusive liturgical practices through, for example, inclusive liturgy writing workshops; guidelines on how to practice inclusion as a faith leader; and best practices of inclusion.
- Promote an intersectoral SOGI visibility campaign (e.g. a sticker or slogan that, when seen in a place of worship, signifies that the space affirms diversity).
- Grow the body of knowledge on the intersection of faith and gender and sexual diversity through targeted research.
- Track and document promising practices in the field with a focus on changing liturgical practices; developing models of inclusive leadership; drawing lessons from intra- and interfaith lobbying initiatives; creating educative spaces for dialogue; and showcasing experiences of LGBTIQ vulnerability and resistance within faith contexts.

# APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEWEES AND QUESTIONS

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## *Interviewees*

1. Laurie Gaum, gay minister in the Dutch Reform Church and co-convenor of Queers Without Borders
2. Ecclesia de Lange, lesbian minister and executive director of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries
3. Pharie Sefali, lesbian activist and coordinator of the Ubom'bam Luvuyo Traditional Healers Forum in Cape Town
4. Jacqui Benson, member of Temple Israel Jewish congregation
5. Charlene van der Walt, associate professor at the School of Religion, Philosophy & Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal
6. Muhsin Hendricks, queer imam and former founder-director of Al-Fitrah
7. Sarojini Nadar, professor of religion and theology and director of the Desmond Tutu Centre for Spirituality and Society, University of the Western Cape
8. Zanele Makombe, gender coordinator of Ubumbano ACT Alliance
9. Toni Kruger-Ayebazibwe, executive director of the Global Interfaith Network for People of All Sexes, Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions
10. Teboho Klaas, religion programme officer at The Other Foundation

## *Guiding Questions*

1. What are the key challenges facing communities of faith in respect of sexual and gender diversity?
2. What makes issues of sexual and gender rights a site of such intense contestation and resistance?
3. What are the main obstacles to creating more inclusive faith communities?
  - a. Faith leaders?
  - b. Liturgy?
  - c. Practices?
4. How is SOGI-related discrimination being dealt with in your religious institution/ or in the institutions with which you work?
5. What are the key initiatives underway that deal with sexual and gender rights and diversity?
6. Who are the key players in the field?
  - a. Activist organisations?
  - b. Academics?
  - c. Allied structures/individuals?

7. What resources materials are currently available to advance sexual and gender diversity in faith setting?
8. What programmes and interventions are needed?
  - a. Leadership level?
  - b. Policy level?
  - c. Community level?
9. What do you think funders should be prioritising in this area of activism?
10. What are the big issues that should be tackled and how?
11. Are there any reports, materials and literature I should look at?

# APPENDIX 2 – ACTORS

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Below is a listing of some of the key organisations and individuals working at the intersection of faith and LGBTIQ issues in South Africa.

## *Non-governmental and Community-based Organisations*

- *Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM)*. In existence since 1995, IAM works as a catalyst for transformation and greater acceptance and inclusion of LGBTI people within faith communities.
- *The Other Foundation*. An African trust that advances equality and freedom in southern Africa, with a particular focus on sexual orientation and gender identity.
- *Global Interfaith Network for People of all Sexes, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (GIN-SSOGIE)*. A membership-based network operating globally and with a specific regional focus on sub-Saharan Africa.
- *Al-Fitrah Foundation (aka The Inner Circle)*. Founded in 1996, the organisation empowers and raises consciousness around gender and sexual diversity within the local, national and international Muslim community.
- *Ubom'bam Luvuyo Traditional Healers Forum in Cape Town*. A loose support group and network of queer sangomas.
- *Queers Without Borders*. A social media pressure group, soon to be registered as an NPO and currently under the auspices of the Moral Leadership Unit at the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch.

## *Higher Education Structures*

- School of Religion Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal
- Ujamaa Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal
- Desmond Tutu Chair of Ecumenical Theology and Social Transformation in Africa, University of the Western Cape
- Gender Unit at the Beyers Naudé Centre, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University
- Unit for Religion and Development Research, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University

## ***Some Organisations with Projects on Sexual and Gender Diversity and Faith:***

- Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA)
- Gay and Lesbian Network (GLN)
- Accountability International (AI)
- Centre for Christian Spirituality
- International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA+)
- Genderlinks
- Ubumbano ACT Alliance
- Save the Children
- Pan Africa ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association)
- Sonke Gender Justice

Religious organisations that are actively pursuing an anti-abortion and anti-LGBTI agenda in South Africa through coordinated lobbying, litigation and/or communication efforts include the Alliance Defending the Autonomy of Churches in South Africa; the Family Policy Institute; the South African Council for the Protection and Promotion of Religious Rights and Freedoms; and Freedom of Religion South Africa. Reactionary LGBT groupings, such as Victory Ministries in KwaZulu-Natal, have also emerged.

# APPENDIX 3 – SELECTED RESOURCE MATERIALS<sup>91</sup>

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## **Books**

Bartlett, Andre. 2017. *Weerlose weerstand: Die gaydebat in die NG Kerk*. Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis.

Khumalo, Siya. 2018. *You have to be gay to know God*. Cape Town: Kwela.

Tulleken, Lorraine and Mokgethi-Heath, JP (eds). 2017. *Behold, I make all things new: What do the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam really say in regard to human sexuality?* GIN-SSOGIE and Church of Sweden. <http://www.gin-ssogie.org/behold-i-make-all-things-new/>

Van der Walt, Charlene, Claassens, Juliana, and Olojede, Funlola O. (eds). Forthcoming. *Change agents in contexts near and far: Teaching gender, health and theology in Africa and beyond*. Stellenbosch: Sun Media.

## **Booklets**

Available from Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), Cape Town, at <http://iam.org.za/publications/>

- *Journey with God: Focusing on sexuality and spirituality*
- *Reading together: A Bible study method*
- *Slavery, homosexuality and women: Texts in context* (David Russell/IAM)
- *The Bible and homosexuality* (David Russell/IAM)

## **Toolkits and Guides**

*Covering sexual and gender minorities and religion in sub-Saharan Africa: A reporting guide for journalists*. 2017. Brian Pellot; Religion News Foundation and Heinrich Boell Foundation Southern Africa. [https://za.boell.org/sites/default/files/print\\_final\\_4\\_web\\_1.pdf](https://za.boell.org/sites/default/files/print_final_4_web_1.pdf)

*Created in God's image: A gender transformation toolkit for women and men in churches (Revised)*. 2014. Daniela Gennrich; Norwegian Church Aid/ACT Alliance. <https://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/en/how-we-work/gender-based-violence-and-reproductive-health/gender-transformation-toolkit/>

*Faith, gender and sexuality: A toolkit*. 2016. Institute of Development Studies, Sonke Gender Justice and Wits Centre for Diversity Studies. <https://genderjustice.org.za/faith-gender-sexuality-toolkit/>

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<sup>91</sup> Also see footnotes of this report for additional academic literature.

*Hearts set on pilgrimage: Preparing LGBTI people of faith to participate in dialogue with religious leaders (Version 2)*. 2018. Positive Vibes, GIN, FRI. [http://www.gin-ssogie.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HSOP-v2.0\\_sample.pdf](http://www.gin-ssogie.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HSOP-v2.0_sample.pdf)

*Pastoral care manual: LGBTIQA+ people in the life and work of faith communities in Africa*. Forthcoming. Ujamaa Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

## **Key Reports**

*Drawing the line: Tackling tensions between religious freedom and equality*. September 2015. International Network of Civil Liberties Organisations. <https://www.aclu.org/report/drawing-line>

*First African Dialogue on Sexuality and Christian Faith*. Hosted by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) in partnership with The Rainbow Project (TRP) of Namibia, 2–5 November 2009, Stellenbosch. Press statement available at <http://www.cabsa.org.za/content/press-statement-1st-african-dialogue-sexuality-and-christian-faith-06112009>

Kaoma, Kapyra. 2009. *Globalising the culture wars: US conservatives, African churches and homophobia*. Political Research Associates. <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2009/12/01/globalizing-the-culture-wars-u-s-conservatives-african-churches-homophobia/>

Kaoma, Kapyra. 2012. *Colonising African values: How the US Christian right is transforming sexual politics in Africa*. Political Research Associates. <https://www.politicalresearch.org/resources/reports/full-reports/colonizing-african-values/>

Palm, Selina. 2019. *From exclusion to embrace: Re-imagining LGBTIQ belonging in South African church congregations*. Unit for Religion and Development Research, Stellenbosch University. <http://blogs.sun.ac.za/urdr/new-lgbtiq-report-from-exclusion-to-embrace/>

*Religion and sexuality: A report on faith-based responses to children's comprehensive sexuality education and information*. INERELA/Save the Children, 2017. [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/documents/religion\\_sexuality.pdf](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/documents/religion_sexuality.pdf)

*Silent no longer: Narratives of engagement between LGBTI groups and churches in southern Africa*. The Other Foundation, 2017. <http://theotherfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Silent-No-Longer.pdf>

*South Africa LGBTI: Landscape analysis of political, economic & social conditions*. Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, 2015. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/astraea.production/app/asset/uploads/2016/04/Astraea.SouthAfrica.PRINT3.pdf>

*The Evil of Patriarchy In Church, Society and Politics: A Consultation*. Hosted by IAM, in partnership with the Department of Religion and Theology of the University of the Western Cape and the Centre for Christian Spirituality, 5–6 March 2009, Stellenbosch. [http://iam.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Evil-Of-Patriarchy-Report\\_cover.pdf](http://iam.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Evil-Of-Patriarchy-Report_cover.pdf)

*The Role of the Churches in the Context of Violence on Marginalised Groups such as LGBTI People: Proceedings from the Meeting of Heads of Churches and General Secretaries of the Fellowship of Christian Councils in East and Southern Africa (FOCCISA)*, 29 August–1 September 2016, Johannesburg. <https://norgeskristnerad.no/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Full-papers-One-Body-FINAL.pdf>

*Traditional Leaders and Healers Conference: Postcolonial Amnesia, the Construction of Homosexuality as UnAfrican*. Hosted by the Gay and Lesbian Network, 27–29 June 2018, Pietermaritzburg. <https://gaylesbian.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Traditional-Dialogue-Report-2018-compressed.pdf>

## **Discussion/Briefing Papers**

Legal Resources Centre and Free Gender, 2018. *The interaction between the right to equality and freedom of religion in South Africa: Exploring the constitutionality of Section 6 of the Civil Union Act 17 of 2006*. [http://lrc.org.za/art\\_external/pdf/2018%20LRC%20Civil%20Unions%20Advocacy%20Report.pdf](http://lrc.org.za/art_external/pdf/2018%20LRC%20Civil%20Unions%20Advocacy%20Report.pdf)

Meer, T., Lunau, M., Oberth, G., Daskilewicz, K., and Müller, A. 2017). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex human rights in Southern Africa: A contemporary literature review 2012–2016*. Johannesburg: HIVOS. [https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11427/28329/Hivos2016\\_Final\\_report\\_lowres.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11427/28329/Hivos2016_Final_report_lowres.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

Mokgethi-Heath, J.P. 2012. Can faith communities really ignore sexuality? In *What's faith got to do with it? A global multi-faith discussion on HIV responses*. INERELA. <http://inerela.org/resources/whats-faith-got-to-do-with-it/>

## **Some Journal Articles**

Kaoma, Kapya. 2016a. The Vatican Anti-Gender Theory and Sexual Politics: An African Response. *Religion and Gender* 6(2), 282–292. [https://www.academia.edu/32757078/The\\_Vatican\\_Anti-Gender\\_Theory\\_and\\_Sexual\\_Politics\\_An\\_African\\_Response](https://www.academia.edu/32757078/The_Vatican_Anti-Gender_Theory_and_Sexual_Politics_An_African_Response)

Kaoma, Kapya. 2016b. Unmasking the Colonial Silence: Sexuality in Africa in the Post Colonial Context. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 155 (July, Special Issue), 49–69. [https://www.academia.edu/30577326/Unmasking\\_the\\_Colonial\\_Silence\\_Sexuality\\_in\\_Africa\\_in\\_the\\_Post-Colonial\\_Context](https://www.academia.edu/30577326/Unmasking_the_Colonial_Silence_Sexuality_in_Africa_in_the_Post-Colonial_Context)

Reygan, Finn. 2016. “Love the sinner, not the sin?” Sexual and gender diversity in faith communities. *HTS: Theological Studies* 72(1), 1–5. <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/download/3471/8489>

Tamale, Sylvia. 2014. Exploring the contours of African sexualities: Religion, law and power. *African Human Rights Law Journal* 14(1), 150–77. [http://www.ahrj.up.ac.za/images/ahrj/2014/Chapter%20Tamale\\_2014.pdf](http://www.ahrj.up.ac.za/images/ahrj/2014/Chapter%20Tamale_2014.pdf)

West, G., Van der Walt, C., Kaoma, K.J. 2016. When faith does violence: Reimagining engagement between churches and LGBTI groups on homophobia in Africa. *HTS Theological Studies* 72(1), 1–8. [https://www.academia.edu/30177015/When\\_faith\\_does\\_violence\\_reimagining\\_engagement\\_between\\_churches\\_and\\_LGBTI\\_groups\\_on\\_homophobia\\_in\\_Africa](https://www.academia.edu/30177015/When_faith_does_violence_reimagining_engagement_between_churches_and_LGBTI_groups_on_homophobia_in_Africa)

## ***Selected Media Articles***

*“Heretic” pastor is suspended.* <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-10-12-00-heretic-pastor-is-suspended>

*A queer thing is going on in southern Africa's churches.* <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-12-07-00-a-queer-thing-is-going-on-in-southern-africas-churches>

*Court rules that religion cannot be used as a defence for anti-gay hate speech.* <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/court-rules-religion-cannot-be-used-defence-anti-gay-hate-speech/>

*Faith and sexuality exposed.* <https://mg.co.za/article/2014-09-04-faith-and-sexuality-exposed>

*High Court scraps Dutch Reformed Church decision against same-sex marriages.* <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-03-08-high-court-scraps-dutch-reformed-church-decision-against-same-sex-marriages/>

*Homosexuality is not un-African.* <https://www.boell.de/en/2015/03/20/homosexuality-is-not-un-african>

*Love is love: LGBT community calls for acceptance in legal battle.* <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/love-is-love-lgbt-community-calls-for-acceptance-in-legal-battle-16672035>

*Moral responsibility for Omotoso lies with the churches.* <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/moral-responsibility-for-omotoso-lies-with-the-churches-20181026>

*Queer Muslims find solace and solidarity at South Africa retreat.* <https://religionnews.com/2016/10/25/queer-muslims-find-solace-and-solidarity-at-south-africa-retreat/>

*Queer rights battle is a fight for the right to religious belief.* <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-10-09-00-queer-rights-battle-is-a-fight-for-the-right-to-religious-belief>

*Sexuality meets spirituality.* <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/sexuality-meets-spirituality-20181008>



*Keeping the Faith: Working at the Crossroads of Religion and Sexual and Gender Rights* is a project of the Cape Town office of the Heinrich Boell Foundation that seeks to explore and support faith as a site for strengthening human rights and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people. On the one hand, faith does violence to those who do not conform to heteropatriarchal gender and sexual prescriptions. On the other, faith has the potential to advance struggles for sexual and gender rights and justice. Many LGBTIQ people seek to “keep their faith”, namely to claim their right to religious belief and expression even though their churches, mosques or synagogues might not recognise them nor uphold and respect their human rights. Others leave their religious communities as a result of the prejudice, discrimination and exclusion they confront. With these paradoxes of faith in mind, the project seeks to challenge normative discourses, values and behaviours – across a range of faith contexts – that legitimise and promote discrimination, prejudice and hatred against LGBTIQ people. In doing so, it aims to support existing and new initiatives that strengthen sexual and gender rights and counter marginalisation and violence. This discussion paper provides a snapshot of current issues, initiatives and central actors in the field; offers a conceptual framework to advance sexual and gender rights; and proffers some strategies to inform future work.

