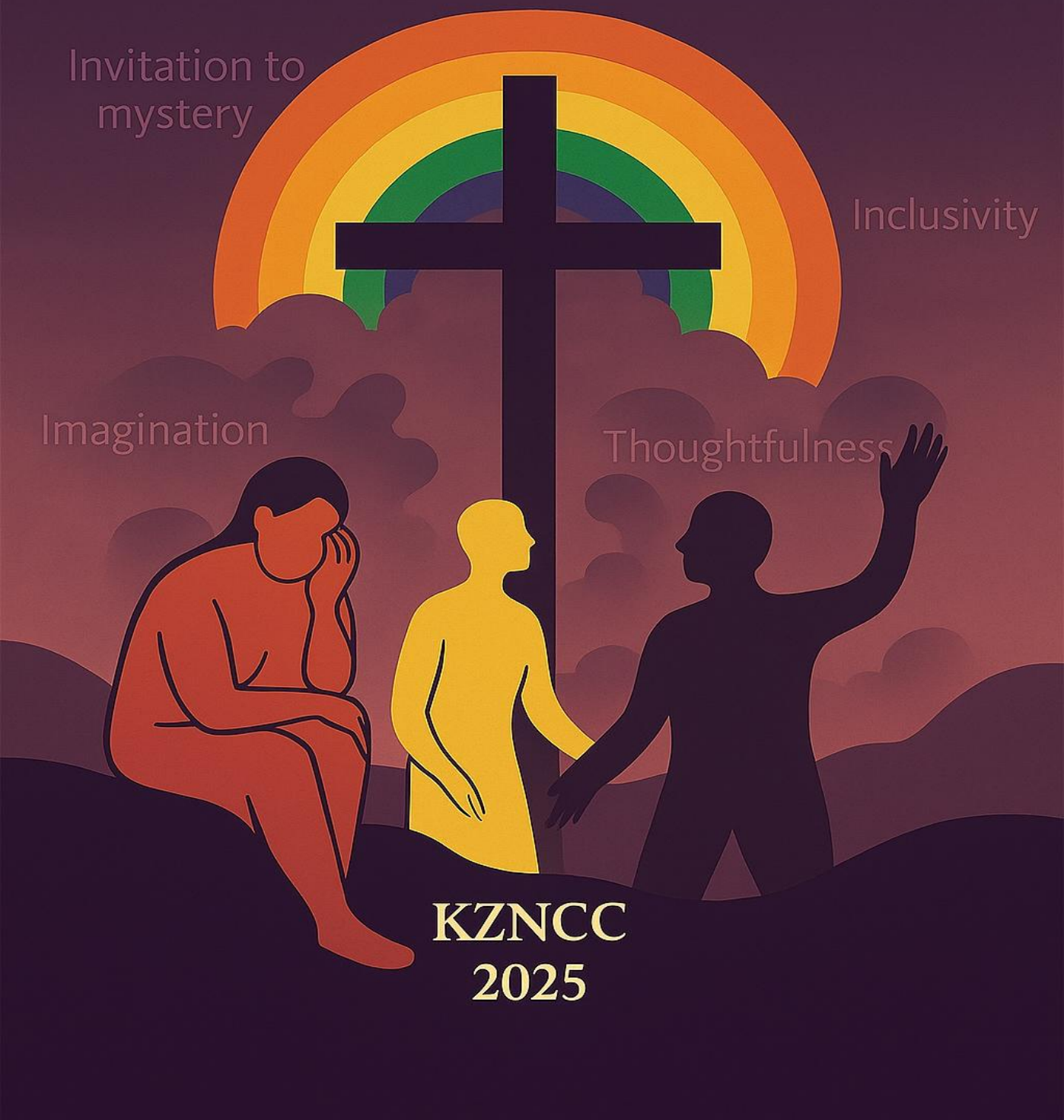
In God We Move and Live

LGBTQIA+ Stories of Homophobia, Welcome and Faith



KZNCC
2025

In God we Move and Live

LGBTQIA+ Stories of Homophobia and Faith

Edited by Douglas Dziva, Philippe Denis, Themba Khanyile and Sbusisiwe Mkhize

Pietermaritzburg
KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council
2025

ISBN 978-1-0370-9530-6 (Print)

Published by the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council
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P.O. Box 2035
Pietermaritzburg 3200
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Cover design: Blessing Dziva
Copy-editing: Karen Buckenham
Layout: Jo Marwick

Printed in South Africa by Pinetown Printers (Pty) Ltd

FOREWORD

For centuries, faith and identity have been deeply intertwined, shaping countless individuals' lives, struggles, and hopes. Yet, for many LGBTQIA+ Christians, the journey of faith has often been met with exclusion, misunderstanding, and even violence. This book is a testament to their resilience, a collection of voices that refuse to be silenced, and a call for inclusion, justice, and love within the church.

Through these personal stories, LGBTQIA+ Christians share their experiences of seeking belonging in faith communities that have historically marginalised them. Their narratives reflect both pain and hope – stories of rejection and reconciliation, of faith that endures despite hardship, and of the courage to claim their rightful place in theological discourse and sacred spaces.

This volume is not merely about storytelling; it serves as an invitation. An invitation for churches, faith leaders, and believers to listen, reflect, and open their hearts to the transformative power of radical inclusion. It calls us to move beyond doctrinal debates and embrace the core tenets of faith – love, grace, and dignity for all.

May these stories serve as a bridge toward understanding, a step toward ending violence and discrimination, and a beacon of hope for those who long for a faith community that welcomes them as they are.

Under the One Body Project, the FOCCISA Health and Gender Justice Network, in partnership with the Global Interfaith Network, KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council, and Uthingo, has been actively working to cultivate meaningful dialogue between LGBTQIA+ people of faith and religious leaders. Our goal is to end discrimination and violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities within faith spaces.

This concise volume is a powerful testament to that mission. It contributes to the broader vision of a world free from violence, where all people, regardless of their identities and diversities, are embraced with dignity, respect, and love.

Shalom!

Dr Lebohang Matela
FOCCISA Health and Gender Justice Network

PREFACE

The KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council (KZNCC) presents this publication as part of its continuing commitment to promoting the dignity of all human beings created in the image of God. Every person, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or social standing, reflects the divine imprint. It is on this theological foundation that the KZNCC undertakes its work of affirming the inherent worth of every human life and to help the church embody God's justice, compassion, and inclusive love.

This book forms part of our broader human rights mission rooted in the values of the South African Constitution, which enshrines equality, freedom, and dignity for all citizens. Among these rights is the legal recognition of same-sex marriages, a significant expression of our nation's commitment to equality before the law. The KZNCC acknowledges that the church has a moral and pastoral responsibility to engage with these realities seeking to understand the issues rather than judging or excluding. It is important to exercise ministry of presence as Christ did with all who sought his presence and mercy.

The reflections and stories contained in these pages call the church to examine itself deeply, and to re-image its theology of care, its prophetic voice, and its pastoral practice in light of the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ people. The writers have written experiences loaded with a mixture of trauma and faith. The book challenges us to ask: What does it mean to be a caring community when members of Christ's body continue to suffer rejection and violence? How do we receive and co-exist with fellow-human beings who are perceived to be socially different from us? How can prophetic theology today defend the dignity of those marginalized by prejudice and misunderstanding? What must pastoral action look like if it is to embody Christ's inclusive love?

Through this publication, the KZNCC extends an invitation to the wider Christian community to join in dialogue, repentance, and renewal. Jesus embraced all, regardless of their background, physical, and mental condition. That is taken up in the last chapter of the book. Our hope is for churches to become true places of refuge where all God's children may find belonging, healing, and peace. We believe that when the church embraces those who have been wounded by exclusion, it becomes more fully the body of Christ whole, compassionate, and alive with God's love.

May this work inform and inspire faith leaders, congregations, and communities to move beyond fear into a deeper understanding of grace and justice, where every person can say with confidence: “In God we move, live, and have our being.

Dr Douglas Dziva
KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council would like to acknowledge the contribution of various people and organisations to the success of this project. First, it extends a sincere word of gratitude to the affected members of the LGBTQIA+ community who opened up and honestly talked about their experiences and vulnerabilities. They have gone beyond the call of duty in allowing KZNCC to publish the stories with their names.

Secondly, the KZNCC gratefully acknowledges the support of its partners, FOCCISA and The Other Foundation, who have come on board when approached for financial assistance. They have not only disbursed funds but have also accompanied us in this journey because of their commitment to transforming the status quo.

Thirdly, the members of the KZNCC Executive Committee deserve to be thanked for investing their time reading through the book and grappling with the theological questions in this context, and affirming the need for the Council of Churches to promote human dignity, human rights and the constitution of the country.

Finally, the contribution of the KZNCC staff members, who, amid other demands related to their work, made time to pursue this project to its conclusion, should be acknowledged. They are Dr Douglas Dziva, Dr Themba Khanyile (Project Leader) and Ms Sibusisiwe Mkhize, as well as Prof Philippe Denis, a part-time staff member. They facilitated workshops, conducted interviews and prepared the manuscript for publication. Without their joint and complementary skill sets, this book would not exist.

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INTRODUCTION

Why a Concern about LGBTQIA+

This book serves three purposes. First, it highlights the plight of members of our society who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. It amplifies the voices of affected individuals through stories collected from interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024. These stories are summarised in a chapter that forms the core section of the book. The acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual = LGBTQIA.

Second, the book highlights the faith of the LGBTQIA+ community. Many hold onto their faith, while some have been disheartened by their painful experiences with Christians both inside and outside the church. Some people assume they are godless. Yet, their stories help to discern God's love beyond the human prejudice they experience. Their faith remains steadfast, as noted in the book we published in 2024, titled *The Indomitable Faith of LGBTQIA+ Community: An Update on the KZNCC Project.* Some individuals who experienced trauma in the church have chosen to abandon the Christian tradition completely.

Third, it calls on priests, pastors, apostles, preachers, and all Christians, to embrace members of the Christian family who identify as LGBTQIA+. They are not aliens from a non-existent planet. We live together in our homes as siblings, children, nephews, nieces, and cousins. They serve our communities as teachers, lawyers, judges, doctors, nurses, civil servants, business people, priests, pastors, and more. This is important because it highlights positives more than negatives. Are they being marginalised for choosing to be different from others whose social identities are shaped by the dominant social norms? They admit that they are lesbian, gay, queer, but they also state that they cannot help being their true selves. No psychologist has found them to be mentally abnormal, although in earlier years, before much was known about the LGBTQIA+ community, psychologists and social workers were assigned to diagnose their 'problem' and 'correct' them. Some also admit that they had to change sex so they could fit into the roles assigned by society.

People may ask why there has been so much concern about the place of the LGBTQIA+ community in the church in recent years. It is different from the concern raised, for example, about the poaching of rhinos or other extinct species. In that case, it is done to protect and preserve the extinct species so that they may increase and continue to enhance the wonder of creation for

ages to come. The concern about the LGBTQIA+ is not about the preservation or expansion of any species. It stems from a pastoral concern about the psychological and physical pain, and in some cases, death, that is imposed on fellow human beings by people who claim to be created in the 'image and likeness' of God. There is no intention to argue about the theological merits of the LGBTQIA+ community in the book. That belongs to a different discourse. The concern of many who have decided to intervene is, 'how do we receive and co-exist with fellow-human beings who are perceived to be socially different from us?'

When we look at how the scriptures portray the mind of Jesus Christ, we should not even be raising the above question. Jesus loved and embraced all those who believed in his message of salvation. He also had such deep compassion for people that it 'moved his entrails'. He is portrayed as a friend of social outcasts, such as the mentally ill, lepers, those accused of adultery, drunkards and gluttons, and ritually unclean women. Interestingly, he did not care about the causes of their different conditions. All he wanted was their wholeness and reintegration into society.

In a different context, Pope Francis, buried at the end of April 2025, observed that some people value animals more than humans. He said that some did not want to have children, but they chose to have an animal or two and treat them better than they would treat humans. That was an apt observation, and it may also be applied to people who are not willing to co-exist with different fellow human beings but have no problems living with animals – not only this, but also giving animals the care they would never give to another human being.

Of great concern about the role of the church regarding the plight of the LGBTQIA+ are allegations about the involvement of church members in acts that traumatise Christians from the LGBTQIA+ background. As the stories of interviewees show, even pastors have been using the pulpit to bash, rather than support the already traumatised. In some cases, they have bashed them out of their congregations, while in others, they have bashed them completely out of the Christian faith. If priests and pastors are indeed the extension of the ministry of Jesus, who are they modelling their ministry after? It cannot be after the ministry of Jesus. This should be the distinguishing point between the church and the broader society where those perceived to be different are persecuted.

We hope this book, which highlights the above issues, will bring some healing to the affected. It will be in the hands of the participants in the programme, pastors, and church members who might need empowerment

with information. It will also provide theological undergirding to the church's response to the need.

The Title of the Book

The choice of this unusual title for the book needs an explanation. It conveys more than just painful experiences. A reader familiar with the New Testament writings will immediately notice that it is based on Acts 17:28. That verse is about Paul's address to the Greek leaders and philosophers who are said to have worshipped idols. Paul's point was that there was only one God, the Creator of everything, and the source of all life. Both sinners and saints belonged to that God. If anyone felt guilty of sin, it is the same God who forgave them if they believed in Him. In invoking these words, Paul was reminding the Greeks of the wisdom of their forefathers, going back about five centuries before the birth of Jesus. He was saying that their wisdom applied equally to those who believed in God through Jesus, not idols, in his day. Jesus had life, and idols do not have flesh and blood.

Beyond the literary context of the verse briefly shared above, we use it in three ways within this book. First, it applies to how the LGBTQIA+ community perceives God. God is viewed as Mother, not Father, as the patriarchal society tends to portray God. Life came from God as it does from a woman's womb; there is nothing untheological about that. The Greek word used for God in the Bible is *Theos*, which, in terms of grammatical classification, falls under the category of 'neuter' words. It is neither male nor female, and the word may therefore be used with the pronouns 'it', 'she', or 'he'. As is known, the choice of pronoun depends on the interpreting community or the reader of the scriptures. Luke, whose community understood God to be 'Father', chose the pronoun 'He' (en auton), while the LGBTQIA+ community prefers the opposite. Therefore, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and all others who choose a different identity from the one they were born with or socialised into, move and live in the same God as everyone else. However, they understand that God to be the mother who gave life to them. There is no other source of life. If they have sinned in any way, they will be judged or forgiven in the same manner as anyone else. All they need to do – and this applies equally to everyone – is believe in God.

The second way in which the verse is used in this book is with reference to the church. This is based on the Greek word *ekklesia,* used for church, or those 'called out'. The gender of the word *ekklesia* is feminine. It is always used with the pronouns 'she' or 'her'. Hence, the church is sometimes referred to as

the 'Bride of Christ'. We, therefore, take the liberty to replace *Theos, in* Acts 17:28, with *Ekklesia* to align it with the LGBTQIA+ perception of God. Instead of reading, 'in Him [God] … move and live and have our being', we read, 'in Her [Church]… move and live and have our being'. Whatever the case may be, the point here is that even the scripture portrays a soft side of the church. This creates an expectation of tenderness, warmth, embrace, and protection. Just as it is with children when they are faced with pain or difficulty and go to their mothers, the church is for the LGBTQIA+ community, that go-to place.

The third way in which the sentence is used is in highlighting the psychological state of the victims of homophobia. Pain or anxiety causes children to run to their mothers for comfort, but adults sometimes curl into a foetal position as if they are in a womb. That gives them the feeling of protection, warmth, and comfort. Of course, a foetus cannot live outside the womb because it draws its life from the mother's body while in the womb. In that curled position, the aggrieved imagine themselves in the womb, and they draw strength from that. This is what the majority of the LGBTQIA+ individuals may be looking for when they turn to the church, the Bride of Christ. In her, they have their being. Without her, there is no life. Hence, they refuse to leave the church or reject their faith. Regrettably, they find the opposite of a mother's attributes because the behaviour of church members is based on patriarchal values, not those of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The stories of persecution by Christians from within, as well as outside the church, are disturbing for that reason. They extinguish the hope of the already marginalised. Christians should be embracing what God has created, but they take the liberty to select what should or should not be embraced. This is a pastoral deficiency.

The Background of the Book

This book has its origins in the project on the LGBTQIA+ community, which was launched during the second half of 2023. Its focus was on Christian homophobia within the church in the KwaZulu-Natal province. There was no official mandate from the church, but there were murmurings and lamentations about the silence of the church at almost every workshop or conference involving community organisations. Participants constantly raised the topic alongside gender-based violence. In addition, there were various media reports on people being killed or forced to flee their home areas because of threats or trauma inflicted on them by gay bashers. The Christian Council (KZNCC)

responded to the expressed need by setting up a project to focus on the issue. It was cognisant of the fact that its intervention would be only one among many that are currently underway in South Africa.

Organisations such as FOCCISA came on board and partnered with the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council. In 2024, the Other Foundation also came on board. The interviews continued in January and February of 2024. A preliminary report, which was presented at a meeting of the church leaders on 29-30 April in Durban, was well received. Church leaders who represented at least ten churches at the meeting committed to supporting the project. On this occasion, some expressed the need for a set of theological and pastoral resources to articulate the church's position on the issue, given that, for the church, it is in relatively recent years that it has begun to deal with this situation with compassion, in a way that embraces and protects the dignity and *imago Dei* of LGTBQIA+

Indeed, the issue is not entirely new in the life of the church. It is a new, old issue, in colloquial language. What makes it look new is that in the past, gays and lesbians were dismissed as homosexuals who had no place in God's kin[g] dom. Their destiny was thought to be the eternal fire of hell. Some preachers and pastors, as it will become clear in the stories, still believe and pursue that view. Today, in the age of more enlightenment in the world and a strong sense of social justice, that theology is being questioned. Countries with progressive policies, for example, South Africa, also make it illegal to discriminate against people based on their sexuality and sexual preferences. We also now know that the issue is not only about homosexuality but is much broader than that. In fact, the acronym LGBTQIA+ ends with an 'A', which stands for 'asexual'. They are not all about sex or debauchery. A safe, non-discriminatory, and non-judgmental way of describing LGTBQIA+ people is to think of them as pursuing a non-restricted, authentic identity. This should change attitudes towards the affected people.

A report is usually the term used for disseminating information of the nature that is contained in the book. However, reports rarely find their way to the public sphere. If such information is in the form of a book, the chances of it being accessible to many people increase. Thus, we have decided on this mode of disseminating the information, in addition to writing a formal report.

Methodological Outline

The stories were collected through interviews with the affected people in various parts of KwaZulu-Natal and, in two cases, in the Western Cape, in South Africa. This way of gathering information and knowledge about people is called 'oral history'. It was decided on because it allows the affected to speak for themselves. Another advantage, in the context of the trauma that LGBTQIA+ individuals are going through, is the therapeutic effect of the method. After talking about their experiences, they find relief, which opens up the process of healing.

The material gathered for the project includes nine transcripts of interviews conducted in January and February 2024 by activists trained and mentored by the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council (KZNCC) in association with the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISA) and the Pietermaritzburg-based Uthingo Network. There is also an autobiographical piece drafted by an LGBTQIA+ activist during one of the training sessions in Pietermaritzburg in March 2024. Part of the documentation are eleven transcripts of interviews of members of an LGBTQIA+ support group that were conducted in isiZulu by a staff member of KZNCC and an LGBTQIA+ activist, on 3 March 2014 at the Ladysmith Municipality Chamber of Commerce. A further six are transcripts of interviews conducted in Mpophomeni (Howick) on 12 December 2024. The LGBTQIA+ people interviewed for this project were told that their stories or part of them might be published and gave consent to this project. There is, finally, a collection of newspaper articles published between February 1993 and July 1995 in *The Natal Witness* which tell the story of Busangokwakhe Dlamini, an LGBTQIA+ activist involved in the current project, when he chose to come out publicly as a gay person while a student at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg. He graduated in 2005 with a thesis on 'Contextual and Theological Factors Influencing Pastoral Counselling with Families of Gays with Specific Reference to South Africa'.

In addition, seven transcripts of interviews or autobiographical texts published by Ntobeko Dlamini, a Methodist minister currently pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, under the title *Unheard Voices. Stories of Queer Methodists in South Africa* (Methodist Publishing House, 2019) were considered. Extracts of two stories of black gay men, included by Katlego Vincent Scheepers, a graduate of the University of Johannesburg, in a book titled *Being Gay is Not All Fabulous. Short Stories of Black South African Gay Men* (University of Johannesburg Press, 2023), were

quoted because they refer to a church experience or a religious belief. Lastly, reference was made to the stories collected from Anglican gay priests, two of whom are no longer in the ministry.

In total, forty transcripts of interviews or autobiographical pieces form the documentary basis of this book. Slightly more than half of the LGBTQIA+ individuals who shared their testimony to the team describe themselves as gay men, and the majority of the others as lesbian women. One identifies explicitly as queer, neither man nor woman, and one as intersex with reconstructive surgery.

The original documents are stored in the KZNCC office and are available on request. All the interviewees signed a release agreement. One or two requested anonymity, and that was granted. The others permitted their names to be disclosed. When the interviews were conducted in isiZulu, the transcripts were compiled in English. Some of the audiotapes are also stored safely at the KZNCC office.

Following consultations with some LGBTQIA+ theologians to solicit support for the publication of a book of LGBTQIA+ life stories and experiences, the decision was made to add a theological reflection to the project, focusing on some aspects that will hopefully contribute towards a more developed theological strategy to combat homophobia.

Structure of the Book

This preliminary section introduces the book, its motivation and background. Chapter 1 provides a brief outline of the legal position on LGBTQIA+ in South Africa, and Chapter 2 discusses the church as a safe space. Chapter 3 presents testimonies from LGBTQIA+ people having experienced homophobia in their family or their church, while Chapter 4 discussing these experiences further. This is followed by a theological reflection on selected aspects of the homophobic experiences in Chapter 5, and a way forward in Chapter 6, arguing for an inclusive pastoral approach. The addenda include information on safe spaces and some feedback on the impact of events initiated by KZNCC on homophobia and LGBTQIA+ from participating churches.

1 CHRISTIAN HOMOPHOBIA AND THE LAW

Under the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the LGBTQIA+ community enjoyed rights like any other citizens of the country. It was later deemed necessary to create new laws that specifically address their plight. The first was the amendment of the Civil Unions Act in 2006, dealing with marriage rights, the second was the Amendment of the Civil Unions Act, compelling marriage counsellors to solemnise same-sex marriages on request, and the third was about the prevention and combating of hate crimes and speech. However, the reception of LGBTQIA+ people in Christian circles, particularly in churches, seems to contravene these laws. This project would not be necessary if it were not so. As stated in the introduction, LGBTQIA+ individuals come to religious sanctuaries in the hope of finding respite from the persecution they experience in the broader society. Yet their treatment in those 'holy' places mirrors what they flee from outside the church. They face what is termed 'homophobia' – the fear and prejudice directed at people who prefer same-sex relationships. This is both unlawful and unethical.

It is important to remember that Christians are primarily citizens of their country, not supernatural beings, and not above the law of the country. As citizens, they are bound by the laws that govern life in their country. Any citizen who acts outside the law, regardless of religious affiliation or otherwise, or who knowingly contravenes the law, is acting criminally. In this light, the relevant pieces of legislation concerning LGBTQIA+ will be outlined below. Secondly, biblical teachings about one's duty toward their neighbour will be examined, as this determines whether the person is acting ethically. In this chapter, the focus is on the former, one's duty toward their neighbour. The question of unethical behaviour will be addressed in the fourth chapter, following an outline of homophobic experiences in chapter 3. Notably, the legal and the ethical do not have the same weight in law. In a democracy, no person can be convicted for behaving unethically, even if their behaviour is socially unacceptable.

The experiences of LGBTQIA+ that have been collected and are reflected upon are not new in this country. LGBTQIA+ individuals have been a part of our society since time immemorial. However, they were driven to become invisible by actions such as exclusion, mockery, prosecution, and persecution. The church, or its members, participated in the above inhumane actions. Hence, they appeared to be absent from the church. Since the passing of the 2006 Civil Union Act, which provided a framework for the protection of gay and lesbian rights, more LGBTQIA+ people have come out into the open, expecting to be recognised, embraced, and protected by society and the church. If they were allowed to be themselves, as in ancient societies, the use of legislation would not be necessary. In this light, the next section begins with a short note on a citizen's civil duties before outlining the legal framework.

Citizens' Civil Duties

Citizens are not only defined by their geographical location, but by other things that make them citizens, such as the commitment to a common purpose or goal. Citizens uphold the constitution that binds them to each other and the locality they share and wish to develop together. Every country expects its citizens to uphold its constitution and the laws emanating from it. Errant members of society do not cease to be citizens; they become delinquents. And if they are proven to be breaking the law, they become criminals.

Conscientious citizens do not have to be policed. They know that the good image of the country depends on the good image projected by its citizens. Everyone does what is expected of them, and collectively, they are expected to act positively. The South African Constitution expresses this specifically in its preamble when it enjoins its citizens to work towards reconciliation and social cohesion. A recent slogan, initiated by President Ramaphosa, to the effect that 'no one should be left behind', reflects the government's commitment to inclusion.

The section below looks at the LGBTQIA+ protective legislation that Christians, like any other citizens, are expected to obey. This is prefaced with a brief outline of the socio-legal context that has prompted the development of the legislation, referred to here as the 'homophobic context'.

The Homophobic Context

The Civil Unions Act passed in 2006 has a double origin. First, it responded to the social and economic situation, dating to the time of apartheid legislation and practice, when homosexuality was outlawed, and society was heavily

indoctrinated against it. Religion was used as a weapon to discourage homosexuality and those who engaged in it were threatened with eternal suffering in hell. Across every colour and culture, if someone was found to be LGBTQIA+, they experienced horrendous consequences from religious groups, society and the law

.In 2002, the now retired judge Kathleen Satchwell (Satchwell vs President of South Africa) challenged the legislation and successfully fought for the protection of the rights of gay partners. The law about benefits was amended in line with the court order. If the law had not been amended, her live-in partner at the time would not have been entitled to her assets and benefits should anything happen to her. The same would have been the case for her if something had happened to her partner.

In the broader society, LGBTQIA+ people had no easy life. They were not able to walk freely, and were always vulnerable to possible verbal or physical abuses. The society was not able to distinguish between gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual. Anybody who looked or expressed themselves strangely was thought to be homosexual and became a laughingstock, as seen in derogatory terms like 'moffie' that is particularly used in the Western Cape. The different categories did not mean much to them. But the South African society has come a very long way. Today, many people know about LGBTQIA+ and they can tell the difference between the different categories even if they are not LGBTQIA+.

The other half of the origin of the Civil Unions Act is the legal situation that was not aligned with the 1996 South African Constitution. LGBTQIA+ people had no separate but equal rights like any other citizens of the country.

In the workplace, there are cases of straight people getting jobs they did not deserve instead of the LGBTQIA+ people who qualified being hired, possibly to spite the LGBTQIA+ people who qualified. That was a way of putting pressure on them to change their sexuality. Apart from this kind of ostracism, they also experienced mockery and exclusion in decision-making. No one barred them openly from making decisions, but they were ignored when they tried to contribute. In law, this is classified as unfair discrimination, and it is outlawed by the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

There were other issues, such as adopting children and becoming parents, or having children through donor sperm and the accompanying insemination process. While even straight couples did not always have it easy with such processes – they involved a lot of tests and time – gay couples struggled even to get attention, let alone be considered on the merits of their cases. The

definitions in the law excluded them, especially male partners, from adopting children. Reverend Michael Worsnip, mentioned later in this book, tells his family's story in detail, albeit with a happy ending, with him and his spouse adopting two boys they nurtured into mature adulthood a few years later.

How did the law respond to the above situations? Lobby and pressure groups for gay and lesbian rights, helped by other social justice groups, have been very effective. Apart from successful court cases, they received sympathy from the public and parliamentarians. The 2006 Act, and subsequent laws, provide support.

The Legal Protective Measures

The government enacted the 2006 Civil Unions Act in response to the above abuses of the LGBTQIA+ people, later augmented with the 2020 amendment. In 2018, the Hate Crimes Bill was introduced. These are outlined in turn below.

The 2006 Act brought South Africa in line with Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden. These countries have not only decriminalised same-sex relationships, but they have also legalised LGBTQIA+ marriages. This gives far greater recognition to the relationship and makes LGBTQIA+ marriages equal to heterosexual marriages. Other African countries that have been giving serious attention to the plight of the LGBTQIA+ community are Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, and the Seychelles. These countries have not given full marriage rights to same-sex couples, but they have legalised same-sex relationships. This simply means that police can no longer arrest people because a man chooses to fall in love with another man, and a woman falls in love with another woman. Those relationships are now protected by law in those countries.

A closer look at the contents of the Civil Unions Act 17 of 2006 reveals the following:

i. It is a voluntary union of two people
ii. The couple must be over 18 years, with legal registration documents
iii. The Act extends to same-sex couples
iv. It gives the same rights to traditional marriages
v. None of the two partners should have concurrent marriages
vi. Equal rights go with equal responsibilities
vii. It solemnises civil unions by way of marriages or civil partnerships
viii. Legal consequences of civil unions and matters incidental thereto

The above terms reflect the normal delimitations that marriage officers are familiar with. While they would have traditionally been going through them in preparation for heterosexual marriages, this situation changed in November 2006. The Act now includes all who qualify under i) and ii) above. They can be from any racial, gender/non-gender, or regional grouping.

The changes further aimed to align the Civil Unions Act 2006 with other sections of the Constitution. These include: Section 9(1), on equality; Section 9(3), against discrimination on any grounds, for individuals or groups; Section 10, on the right to dignity and respect; and Section 15(1), on the right to marry, freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, and opinion. Marriage officers are also empowered by Section 9(2) of the Civil Unions Act to uphold objections to marrying a couple on legal grounds. In all, changes to the Civil Unions Act allow couples to marry, and gives them the same rights as others. It also guarantees the right of equal protection under the law regardless of sexual orientation.

A sharp eye will have observed that the definition is still narrow; it does not cover all the categories covered by the acronym LGBTQIA+. However, the focus is purposely on the issue of 'man and woman' definition of marriage, which is a usual theological point of departure. It is also an anthropological and biological issue. Theology refuses to be informed by these two disciplines. Hence, it keeps on repeating non-convincing arguments. Bills eventually signed into law are scrutinised by experts in different disciplines for their advice. Even those that are sometimes overturned by the courts will have gone through that process, and the President would have been advised against signing. The 2006 Act provided a framework. Several other laws and policies have been generated from that Act that address issues not specifically mentioned in the Act.

While the Act was clearly aimed at creating equality and ending discrimination against people with a different sexual orientation, they continued to be stigmatised. A number of individuals branded homosexuals were killed or raped or insulted in many other ways. Between 2010 and 2018, violent incidents of xenophobia erupted and people were killed because of their ethnicity or nationality. In 2018, a Bill on the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Speech was introduced with the aim to combat intolerance and hate speech, as such actions of persecution usually start with a slanted narrative. The Bill was signed into law in 2023, and affected groups now have recourse to the law.

The signing of the 2018 Bill into law in 2023 was preceded by the signing of an amendment to the 2006 Act. Part of the 2006 Act gave the marriage officer the discretion of declining or agreeing to solemnise the marriage between same sex partners on the grounds of conscience. Taking advantage of this loophole in the Act, many refused to solemnise such marriages, thus defeating the aim of the Act. There was nothing illegal about it, but it was unethical. Another law was then created to address that situation.

Marriage officers, including those in the church, are examined by a magistrate on rules and procedures and the completion of forms, and then pass or fail. The amendment to the Act, which was passed in 2020, compelled the marriage officer to solemnise a marriage if they are asked to do so by the contracting parties. This means that officers who accept the State's appointment and license are required to perform the State's work. The solemnisation of LGBTQIA+ marriages is protected by this law.

The three laws enacted between 2006 and 2023 were aimed at protecting the rights of gays and lesbians, ensuring that they benefit from equality laws, and protecting them against stigmatisation, verbal and physical abuse, and exclusion. It does not matter where any of the above abuses originate; they contravene the law and will be punishable by law if anyone opens a case against the perpetrator.

A Note on the LGBTQIA+ and the Law

LGBTQIA+ individuals have been advocating for their rights since the late 1990s, through the National Coalition of Gay and Lesbian Equality. In 1998, the coalition challenged the Ministers of Justice, Safety and Security, and the Attorney General of the Witwatersrand over unconstitutional pieces of legislation. These included the Sexual Offences Act of 1957, the inclusion of Sodomy in the Criminal Procedure of 1977, and the inclusion of Sodomy as an item in the Schedule of the Security Officers Act of 1987. These laws were enacted during apartheid, based on apartheid's religious ideology. They had to be aligned with the changed times and ideologies.

There was also the case of Kathleen Satchwell and her partner, cited above. Laws about spousal benefits and immigration requirements were amended in favour of the applicants. After that, the 2006 Acts followed, then the 2018 Bill, signed into law in 2023, then the 2020 law, prohibiting the officers from refusing to solemnise a marriage based on their sexual preference. Research shows that these battles are worth fighting for the sake of individuals and society.

Although not listed all the countries with a favourable legal framework are mentioned here, the literature shows that 38 countries now look at LGBTQIA+ individuals in a more positive light than they did before. It also shows that 1.5 billion LGBTQIA+ people have been married, representing about 20% of the world's population. The first recorded marriage of two gay men was in Minnesota in 1971. Studies also show that the financial, psychological, and physical well-being of gay people is enhanced by marriage, and that the children of same-sex marriages benefit. It is important to note that while homosexual unions continue to grow, no harm is done to heterosexual marriages.

Is Christian Homophobia a Crime?

The legal background sketched above provides useful criteria for evaluating whether the treatment of LGBTQIA+ borders on crime or not. It appears that if an LGBTQIA+ individual were to lay a charge against a perpetrator or an institution, with evidence of their treatment, the Equality Court would find the perpetrator or the church as an institution on the wrong side of the law.

The above question highlights that the stories of homophobia presented in the third chapter are not invented. They are founded on teachings that have not been revisited since the adoption of the democratic constitution by parliament in 1996. Now, the law now requires that they be revisited. This is not to say that the church should abandon what it believes in, but it is encouraged to make an ethically and legally compelling case if it is to continue in the way that is reported by the people at the receiving end of such decisions. As long as the church and its members have not done this, they are acting in a manner that may be deemed criminal in law. As far as the gospel is concerned, treatment that displaces love, empathy, and respect for other people's dignity is unethical behaviour.

Some readers may argue that they have never turned away anyone or preached against LGBTQIA+ people. Still, it is often said that it is the silence of those who know what is right that perpetuates what is wrong. In this light, the following chapters look at what is expected of the church by way of protecting vulnerable LGBTQIA+ individuals. One of these is providing safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ people.

2 THE CHURCH AS A PLACE OF REFUGE

The phrase 'church as a place of refuge' has been frequently used in the recent history of the Western church. It appears in discussions about the plight of refugees, victims of gender-based violence, and individuals facing mental health challenges. South Africans encounter it in brief mentions during disasters, such as when people are displaced by floods and fires in some parts of the country. The longest experience of the church as a place of refuge occurred when a group of indigent people and foreign nationals, who had nowhere else to go, were accommodated by the Revd Paul Verryn at the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg (2019-2020). These instances relate to individuals in need who viewed the church as a place that would never reject or disappoint them. Is the church obligated to harbour people fleeing from the hardships of life?

Various aspects of the phrase are examined below to seek an answer to the question posed above. The theology that emerged from it is explored as well as its evolution from a physical concept to a spiritual and philosophical one. The examples mentioned earlier represent expressions of theological views on spaces of refuge. This chapter supports the belief that, for it to be sustainable, Christian participation in efforts to eradicate homophobia must have biblical and theological legitimacy.

For the purposes of this book – to work towards a common pastoral position – this chapter discusses the biblical and theological foundations underpinning the concept of a place of refuge, beginning in the Old Testament where this concept originates.

Refuge Places in the Old Testament

The concept of places of refuge is found in many parts of the Old Testament. It is based on what was believed to be God's command to [biblical] Israel to create [six] Cities of Refuge to shelter individuals who were accused of [accidentally] killing another person. The context was the retributive justice system at the time, that is, 'an eye for an eye' system, in which a person who

took the life of another also had to lose theirs. To break that cycle, the person who was pursued for retribution for the murder was hidden in a City of Refuge. According to one version, they first had to present their case to the elders at the gate and convince them that the killing was accidental (Joshua 20). In another version of the story, they presented themselves to a congregation for a trial, which tested whether their action was accidental or intentional (Numbers 35). It is possible that both processes were followed, starting with the elders who did the preliminary evaluation of the case at the entrance, followed by the trial, at the end of which a final verdict was given.

The details of what happened once they were inside the City of Refuge may not seem important. However, they do matter because they determine whether God was thought to be subverting an accepted system of justice by sheltering a fugitive from justice. The creators of that justice system had claimed to be inspired by God, and it would not make sense for them to say that God was then asking them to abolish it because of its harshness. To God, all bloodshed defiled the land and could not be purified by shedding more innocent blood. Despite this, Numbers 35 recounts that the purpose of placing the murderer in a protected space was to prevent the 'blood avenger' (*goel hadam*) from killing them before they faced a trial. Just as there are witness protection programmes and safe houses for witnesses in our contemporary justice system, it appears that cities of refuge served the same purpose. A difference is that in the contemporary justice system, there is a timeframe for a trial, while in the Old Testament traditions above, there was none. As detailed in Joshua 20, the fugitive remained in the protected environment until the high priest died [presumably the high priest who had admitted them]. In their understanding, the high priest's death effected forgiveness of all wrongs and initiated a new beginning. The murderer could then leave the place of refuge without fear of being pursued by anyone.

Apart from the question raised about God's command regarding the protection of the murderer, there are also questions regarding the community that implemented the *goel hadam* system. Did they exaggerate the practice? Were they unfair in their implementation of the system? In our contemporary daily life, emotions tend to move us to call for reciprocation of the act. Where communities are not patient enough to wait for the legal processes to begin, mob justice often takes over. The appointment of a 'blood avenger' within the deceased's family probably obviated that. If it were such a well-ordered system, why would Yahweh intervene in the way he did? It is possible that their judgment was based on the rules and *mores* of communities rather than

God's plan. There was no objectivity. At the same time, the system lacked a mechanism to protect a trial-awaiting person. The creation of the Cities of Refuge was an alternative for the benefit of the few disadvantaged by the 'blood avenger' (*goel hadam*) system of the time, instead of dismantling or condemning their way of organising their communities in the new environment they had moved into. Their journey, from Egypt to Canaan, was characterised by bloodshed and they claimed that it was sanctioned by Yahweh. Yahweh intervened to protect those who might be disadvantaged by the same system. It is as if Yahweh were saying that judgment should be left to God while believers pursue their calling to love and preserve life. In God's time, everyone will receive their due wages.

The sections below offer reflection on Old Testament passages under two subheadings: the physical city of refuge and the spiritual place of refuge.

The City of Refuge

The concept of a safe place appears in various texts besides the Book of Psalms. In some, it is called a sanctuary, and in others, it is referred to as the city of refuge. The translation in Genesis 4:12-17 renders it as 'sanctuary'. It recounts the first reported murder of a human being in the Bible, where Cain killed his brother Abel. In verses 16 and 17, God promises protection and relocation of Cain to the city of Nod, where he would be safe from anyone who sought to kill him. It is a passage that emphasises God's mercy and forgiveness in the provision of a safe place

Then, in Exodus 21:12-14, Numbers 35:11-15, and Joshua 20:1-9, the creation of sanctuaries or safe cities is recounted during the time of Moses, where it is said that Yahweh instructed Moses to establish the six safe cities. Here, the reader is also introduced to the notion of a 'blood avenger', which is not mentioned in the Genesis passage. Yet it is possible that Cain was fearing not just 'anyone', but the unknown blood avenger. Joshua 20:1-9 introduces the trial that takes place in front of the congregation, which determines whether the slaying was accidental or not.

In Exodus 21:12-14, the place of refuge is mentioned explicitly for the first time. The kind of person who ends up there is also clearly defined. It is the person who strikes another with a 'fatal blow' unintentionally. Verse 13 states that God promises protection to that person in a place of refuge. Bruce Goettsche (2020) explains that the cities of refuge were built in such a way that they were not further than 30km from any direction, three from each side of

the Jordan. In other words, they were meant to always be accessible to those in need of protection.

As mentioned already, Numbers (35:11-15) recounts that the aim of protection in a city of refuge was to ensure that the avengers did not murder the killer before he was brought to trial. It also tells us that the beneficiaries were members of the house of Israel as well as foreigners. The aim was to save further blood-spillage, regardless of which tribe or region the person had come from. It was God's instruction to save a murderer from death, and introduces the idea that a safe place is just that, not a court of law or a judgment house, where guests are selected according to what is perceived to be their good conduct. This point is also relevant to the later discussion on the place of the LGBTQIA+ in the church today.

The Place of Refuge

There is a subtle difference between the terms 'city of refuge' and 'place of refuge', though they both address a similar concept. The difference is that the first refers to a physical space, the city, and the second to any space, literal or imagined – such as spiritual and philosophical spaces that one accesses through imagination.

In the Old Testament books, a shift becomes apparent towards a spiritualising or metaphorising of the concept of refuge cities. In the absence of the physical cities of refuge, the mind imagined a place of safety where the omnipotent God is present. Adonijah, son of King David, uses an altar as a place of refuge (1 Kings 1). In his mind, it is a physical representation of God's presence, a safe place. In Deuteronomy 33:27, God is said to be a place of refuge, sheltering Israel under his arms and driving away Israel's enemies. The nature of the threat was no longer the same as when the refuge cities were created. It was not about an individual murderer running away from an avenger but about a nation that exposed itself to external threats by taking wrong turns. The strength of the Persian, Greek, and Roman armies in their surroundings was so superior that the fledgling nation felt surrounded by huge threats. Their constant prayer for survival was a call on Yahweh to protect them against the threats they had no means to repel. They appealed to the invisible but sure protector. Yahweh was the one who was 'wronged' by the disobedient nation, but the same Yahweh was the one who would guarantee their protection. If their enemies wished to act like the *goel hadam*, they would have to go through the impenetrable Yahweh.

The Book of Psalms was compiled at a different time. It is a different genre from the books thus far cited, but it shows that the psalmist was aware of the concept of a sanctuary or place of refuge. He introduces such poetic language as 'fortress' and 'rock', which would have made sense in his day. For example, Psalm 18.2 refers to the Lord as 'rock', 'fortress', and 'refuge'. It declares God as these things as well as the deliverer and 'horn' of their salvation. If the Psalms were written by King David, the *goel hadam* system was still legal in David's time. Why would he have chosen to give new meaning to the concept? Perhaps the system may not have fully achieved its goals. Or alternatively, it was working so well that he saw it as a model for his spiritual journey. Whatever the case, the new way of talking about protection was transferable to many future generations. There were no such enclaves as had existed before, and there would never be again. But God remained the only Protector people could turn to, even in their personal spaces. Someone once spoke of a 'mobile city of refuge' as opposed to a static city or building. God is our mobile city of refuge.

Another example is Psalm 27:4-5, where the Psalmist speaks about hiding in the Lord's house. The Lord's house, a reference to the temple, was considered to be a safe place before it was attacked and destroyed by the Babylonians. But the psalmist was not only thinking of the physical structure here but of the place where the invisible, spiritual God is present. That is where his refuge and fortress are. Verse 5 strengthens this view, saying that God will … keep him safe in his dwelling. God does not dwell in buildings but where God is. So, the temple in this context, like heaven, may not be a physical space but a holy place where God is present. Psalm 46:1-11 also confirms God as refuge, strength, and fortress. God is the defender of God's people.

Theological Mandate

The term 'theological mandate' here is refers to the spiritual usage of the concept of safe spaces or refuge concerning the plight of the LGBTQIA+.

As shown in examples from the Psalms and Deuteronomy, the *goel hadan* did not have to be a person pursuing a murderer. It was replaceable with any problem that people were struggling with. They trusted that God was their only hope or rock they could turn to and that under God's care and protection, they were safe even from spiritual enemies. The psalmist brought his problems and frustrations before God and then affirmed God's invisibility because of what he knew God had done. That is what the idea of a rock is based on. Usually, humans can deal with physical challenges, even to the point of taking up arms.

Challenges of a spiritual nature are best left to God's guidance and care. Many groups have affirmed the idea of God being their only hope and last resort in situations of helplessness. The *Anawim* is one group that is mentioned often as those who, while materially poor, pinned their hopes on God and the promised Messiah. They gave up fighting on their own and looked up to God. The Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) is thought to be a summary of their hopes, as the birth of Jesus was going to be a release for them from the spiritual place of refuge. Reflecting on the above discussion, recall that the guest of the city of refuge was to stay at the place until the high priest died. That guaranteed forgiveness and a new beginning. No one could pursue them again; instead, they would go back to their properties as part of the restart of history. Using the *Anawim* story in the same way in the Lucan context, Luke has used the announced birth of Jesus as the equivalent of the high priest's death. It would mark a new beginning for the *Anawim* who had found shelter or refuge in God. Now, the pyramid was going to be turned upside down, and those at the top would no longer have power, as seen in the Song of Mary. They would no longer be able to exploit and oppress the poor, it was hoped. Jesus would be the reason for their newfound freedom. It would not take the death of a high priest for them to move out of their spiritual place of refuge, but the birth of a Saviour. At last, they would walk debt-free and freely.

Regarding the LGBTQIA+ community's plight, the pressure that pursues them comes from society and the church. They are pressured based on nothing other than their sexuality, yet their quest is to freely live out their identity. Those who pursue them claim to be defenders of the faith and protectors of the gospel. It is not clear what they mean by gospel, though, because the gospel is supposed to bring good news of safety and protection. The church, which is both the Body of Christ and God's house, is expected to do what Jesus would have done; that is, to embrace and hide them in the body.

In Hebrews 6:16-18, it appears that hope creates the space for refuge. That hope, according to the letter, is in Jesus and what he has promised. Those who are hard done by life are pointed to that hope, to anchor themselves in it, believing that the wishes of their hearts will be fulfilled. This is the same as the psalmist looking up to Yahweh as his rock and place of refuge. It does not refer to a literal place but to a space where the wounded spirit connects with the whole spirit of life. The LGBTQIA+ come to the church to be introduced to that spirit. This raises the question again of whether the church is obligated to serve as a safe place.

Peter DeHaan (2023), in an article published on 21 March 2023, confirms that the church does have an obligation to serve as a safe place. Bruce Goettsche (2020), arguing from the perspective of Joshua 20, confirms that the church is called to provide a safe space, although he laments that this is not always the case, as evident in the behaviour of pastors to be discussed in the last section of this chapter. Goettsche (2020) argues that the church is called to be a place for emotional, physical, and spiritual refuge. It is hope that keeps people going when all else has failed them, and it is the church that sustains that hope. When people are outside the church, that hope sometimes appears to be dim. This is more like the foetus outside the womb we referred to in the introduction. David Michels (2009) justifies an ecclesiastical sanctuary, an idea that is further supported by William Spencer (2022), who tells the story of the significance of the church to the slaves in America. He refers to it as the black church and talks of it as the only place that provided refuge to the slaves who were left to suffer in their struggles and pain.

Does this obligate the church to act?

Pastoral Letters and Pronouncements

In the recent history of the church worldwide, there have been discourses about the position of the church on the LGBTQIA+ issue. Much of the debate has been about keeping the unity of the church. Some people genuinely believe that to be in love with a person of the same sex is the gravest sin a human could ever commit, and the punishment for that is destruction by eternal fire in hell. Others believe that it should not be an issue because there is no sin greater than another. Further, being gay does not equate to sin. These two groups hold on tight to their positions.

It appears from the stories collected from the affected interviewees that the first group has the loudest voice in the church. Many members of the congregations believe what they have been taught and never question it. Instead, they join those who persecute the LGBTQIA+ people in the church. In response, the Roman Catholic Church has issued, through Pope Francis' pastoral letters in recent years, teaching to the effect that the church does not condone homosexuality and will not ordain homosexual priests. However, they should not be persecuted in the church in the same way that gay lay people should not be persecuted anywhere.

The Anglican Church, on the other hand, has had debates for many years on the issue. A pastoral position was adopted by earlier bishops, based on the

consideration that the church cannot deny the existence of people who have a different sexual preference. A short booklet compiled by the late Bishop David Russell for the Synod of Bishops pleaded for the acceptance of gay members of the church on those grounds. However, while accepting the reality, the bishops accepted priests who had a different sexuality, provided they were not engaged in sexual activity. This is as difficult as trying to stop the fish from drinking the water it is swimming in. It might be argued that it is not drinking it, but that the water is assisting it with breathing. The expectation was unrealistic. In the advent of the legalisation of same-sex marriage, the bishops of the same church sat with the question of whether to solemnise or bless such marriages. The marriage license is a state license. It should be illegal to refuse to marry a couple based on their sexual preferences. However, the prayers and blessings were the prerogative of the church. At Home Affairs, there are no blessings or prayers given.

Some bishops developed a liturgy with prayers and blessings to meet the need. Many gay people waited in anticipation at the start of the Provincial Synod of the Anglican Church in 2024. The prayers were turned down, and the acceptance of gay members of the Anglican Church was rejected. Of the arguments shared, none were theological. The least that could be said is that in the absence of theological or biblical grounds, the rejection of anything that would have made the church a place of refuge for the LGBTQIA+ was driven by ignorance and prejudice. This seems to be the position of the Anglican Church currently. However, it claims to have safe spaces for gender-based violence victims and the marginalised because of their sexuality.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa indicates it has an ongoing debate on the matter. It is planning to have safe spaces. Here again, as in the Anglican Church context, safe spaces do not mean much if the mind does not agree with the actions. What motivates for the spaces if the church thinks that LGBTQIA+ is abominable? Is it a case of what Patrick Bond (2004) characterised as 'talking left and walking right?' The next embarrassing discovery for the church would be the stories that reveal a lot of rejection and prosecution from church members. Are they taking the place of a *goel hadam*? What charges are they preferring against the LGBTQIA+?

It is still to be seen what the resolutions and pronouncements of other churches are, particularly those that have been praying for the healing of people living with HIV and the correction of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Safe Spaces in Churches

Safe spaces refer to the church in all its manifestations. If they believe that everything Jesus did, according to John's gospel, mirrored the Father, then it is God's will that LGBTQIA+ should be embraced. Jesus embraced such people who were marginalised by society and the temple. Again, if God is the protector, defender, rock, and refuge of those who are fleeing the persecutors of this world, and if the church is among the persecutors of LGBTQIA+, then the church is positioning itself for God to defend the LGBTQIA+ community against itself.

Some churches and church-related bodies have opened up physical venues for the support of the LGBTQIA+ community. These are safe spaces where they can feel free to be themselves without being judged for their different preferences. It is hoped that the spaces will not turn out to be confinement places for those seen to have a 'problem', but an opening up of every space of the church where people are free to do what other people are allowed to do. When South Africa accepted affirmative action politically during the process leading up to the 1996 constitution, the aim was not to condone laxity but to open up spaces to those who deserved but were not given an opportunity because of their skin colour. May it be so also with those who are barred from participating fully in the life of the local church because of their known sexuality. That is not an erosion of a value system, rather, it might be a correction of the value system held onto for many years.

It is encouraging that the above theological discussion is backed by practical steps taken by Faith Based Organisations working with KZNCC. They cover a wide area in the KwaZulu- Natal province. The list and details appear at the end of this book. Safe spaces are open to every member of the church, regardless of denomination. It is hoped that people will not only use them for personal protection but that they will also, in the process, learn something about themselves and God's way of working.

In addition to the above list, different pastors and ministers have recently sent statements to KZNCC to acknowledge the impact of their training on their congregations. The lessons pastors learnt were transferred to their congregations. They now see a shift in their stances on the LGBTQIA+ issue. Their letters are also found at the back of the book.

Contra- and Counter-Theological Practices

This book would not be necessary if all were well with the LGBTQIA+ in our churches and society. Individuals who are LGBTQIA+ run away from society into what they think is the safe space of the church, only to find that in some cases, it is even worse than outside the church. Their lives are not only made miserable on this side of the world, but they are also told that even in the next world, after death, the 'eternal fire of hell' is awaiting them. Such messages do a disservice to the living God. Barnabas Piper (n.d.), a pastor in the Immanuel Church-Tennessee, introduces his article about church safe spaces thus: 'people join churches expecting a place of love, grace, and safety-a place that looks and feels like the heart of Jesus. Sadly, the reality of sin often messes that up, and people get hurt.' He then goes on to talk about his own hurt in the church in an article titled 'Healing from church hurt: Creating a culture of welcome and refuge.' He asserts that the hurt within the church makes one mistrust the institution meant to help and heal.

His sentiments echo many others, according to the stories summarised in the next chapter. The problem may not be the church as a whole but the local pastors who deal with the people daily at the coal face. They may be introducing a teaching that is contra to that of their church's teaching on the subject. In other instances, they may even be actively countering the advocacy efforts of LGBTQIA+. These are the pastors Goettsche (2020) accuses of failing to uphold Christ's standards.

There appears to be some misalignment in South Africa, where some people tend to hold on to the past instead of allowing the Spirit to bring them to the present. Others take their cue from televangelists from other continents and countries without contextualising such content for their backgrounds and settings. Hence, there are multiple religious and theological languages being spoken. Healthy theological debates, like those grappled with in the past, are lacking, though they could assist us to find each other on issues such as LGBTQIA+ and democracy. The church in South Africa might have to listen anew to what the Spirit might be saying about the LGBTQIA+ issue, rather than continuing on the road of tired theology based on nineteenth-century Victorian ethics. This is static counter-theology. Some stories in the next chapter relate that some pastors/preachers utter almost curse statements from the pulpit.

Contra-theology is like contraband goods, smuggled into the churches through radio, television, and social media platforms. It is usually not a theology that is taught in our local churches, but a brand that appeals through money

and miracles. There is a great deal of regurgitation of scriptural passages, and no attempt to reconstruct their background or understand in the context of the literature they are part of. Regrettably, there is also too much focus on texts that instil guilt rather than those that liberate. The church should be a safe space for all.

3 WHEN THE LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE TELL THEIR STORY

Discovering One's Sexual Orientation

Nobody chooses to be LGBTQIA+. As Nosipho, a woman from Matiwane in the uThukela District who was interviewed for this project, phrased it, she was born that way:

> I learnt to accept myself as I am because I was born in this way. It was not my choice to be a lesbian. I am not ashamed of my sexual orientation. I am currently in a same-sex relationship.

The life stories show that the people who describe themselves today as gay, lesbian, bisexual or intersex gradually discovered their sexual orientation. Often, it is through comments – made out of kindness or in a nasty way – from peers, family members, people in the church or strangers that they realised that they are different from the boys or girls of their age.

In most cases, this process of self-discovery unfolds during the high school years. Sometimes it happens earlier, as Nkosi recounted during an interview conducted in the Uthingo office in Pietermaritzburg:

> I remember playing with my friends outside our primary school. I exhibited feminine traits. I think I was talking with my hands or doing something like that. Then a group of students from a neighbouring high school passed us by. They mentioned that I was gay. The moment I had those words, I became self-conscious and uncomfortable to continue playing, and I felt undesirable. These high school students failed to see me as a young boy having fun. As a result, I also failed to see myself beyond what they considered acceptable and unacceptable.

One day, without realising what he was doing, he told his neighbours that he was gay:

> Having learnt that I was gay because of my feminine traits, I started owning my identity subconsciously. It was not about attractions at

> that point. I honestly did not know that being gay meant that I would be attracted to other guys. So, we were doing manual labour at our neighbour's house. I quickly excused myself because I was gay, so I would not do manual labour. Everyone was surprised, including me, when I responded and said, 'Because I am gay', after being asked why I could not assist. I was surprised because I said those words and that everyone realised their weight. I was reprimanded for uttering those words and asked if I knew what they meant. Of course, I knew what people had been saying about me, but I was scared to repeat it to my neighbour. Later on, somebody told my parents and I was reprimanded by my dad.

For reasons they do not quite understand themselves, some boys are attracted to the clothes, activities and behaviour commonly ascribed to girls. They are comfortable dressing like girls with 'girlish stuff', as Sam, who grew up in Mkuze, put it, and wearing a skirt. 'When I grew up, especially at the teenage stage,' Amahle a man from Ezakheni near Ladysmith explained, 'I was never interested in falling in love with girls. Girls were just my friends and I liked to wear skirts like them, which made me quarrel with my parents.'

In a similar way, there are girls who like wearing jeans and playing soccer with the boys. As they grow, they become aware of that fact that they feel attracted to people of their own sex. They do not know why. It is just a fact.

Asked how she became aware of her sexual orientation, Zamokuhle, a woman from Newcastle, gave this response:

> It is not an easy question that you are asking. My father always bought me clothes which are like those of my brothers. I do not know whether he noticed something in me in terms of my behaviour patterns and my lifestyle. He was not judgemental of LGBTQIA+ people when he watched television. I started to be conscious of myself at high school. I was very good in playing soccer. My teachers were teasing me that my breasts were in a male's body. I enjoyed more playing with boys than girls.

This self-discovery, often prompted by comments made by others, occurs at various ages. For Noluntu, who was interviewed in Durban, it was at the age of nine, and for Nokuthula, a woman from the same region, when she was twelve. Most were teenagers at the time.

As a child, Sinolwazi, a woman born in Northern KwaZulu-Natal who describes herself as queer and prefers to remain in the closet, would rather

play marbles, street cricket or cars with her boy cousins. 'I even preferred dressing up as a boy from as early as pre-school,' she told Ntobeko Dlamini, 'and my mom would let me because I would always wear my cousin's clothes instead of my own.'

In the case of Nokukhanya, a woman from Ezakheni, the process of self-discovery was not too hard because she received the support of her sister:

> I became aware of my sexual orientation when I was a teenager. I was confused by my lifestyle of a boy in the body of a girl. I was helped to know who I am by my sister. When I grew up, I never put myself in boxes like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, etc. I was just me. My sister noticed that my behaviour pattern and my lifestyle were those of a boy. I was playing with boys, but not with girls. I started kissing other girls who were my peers whilst I was a teenager and I was attracted to them, but I did not know who I was by then. My sister told me that she had been observing my behaviour for a long time as I was growing until she arrived at the conclusion that I was not a girl like the others who are heterosexual in their sexual orientation. She told me that I was a 'lesbian'. I did not understand what she was talking about. She explained to me that a lesbian is a woman like me who is attracted to another woman. It was the first time that I heard the word 'lesbian'. I was in denial that I was a lesbian, and not a girl like the other girls who are heterosexual in their orientation.

By contrast, for Nkosi, the self-discovery was a painful experience:

> I remember that one of our neighbours would compare me with my brother. He used words like tomato to describe me as a soft feminine person and potato to describe my brother as a masculine strong guy. These words were demeaning and abusive. They communicated that I was not enough because I was a boy who had feminine traits.

In an interview with the then University of Natal student magazine *Nux*, Dennis Busangokwakhe Dlamini, a candidate for the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church at the time, who subsequently ran a gay and lesbian support group for university students before being ordained in the Episcopal Church of Southern Africa, explained that his coming to terms with his sexual orientation was a gradual process which only came to fruition when he was a postgraduate student on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal:

> I grew up in a rural area. Not knowing the terms or that there were

> such people as homosexuals, I had a close relationship with a boy of my age. This was before I had even started schooling. During my schooling, I again had several close relationships with boys. The first time I came across the term 'homosexual' was when I had entered the monastery. That was when some people felt there was something wrong with my relationships with some of the boys in the boarding establishment that was run by the monastery, since it had a high school. The actual coming to terms with my orientation only occurred in 1991, the second year of my Master's degree. From that time, I knew beyond doubt that I was of a different orientation.

Reactions from Parents and Family Members

Judging from the life stories collected for this project, there are more cases of family members who accept that their son or daughter has a different sexual orientation than the opposite. Often, the first to manifest acceptance is the mother. Usually, it takes more time for the father to accept that his son is gay or his daughter is lesbian.

Nokukhanya, who had received counselling from her sister, also enjoyed the support of her mother and grandmother:

> My grandmother and my mother also called me to discuss my sexual orientation, and helped me to accept myself the way I am. They did not want me to make a mistake of falling pregnant with an intention of proving a point to them and our community that I was a 'real girl', but not a lesbian.

She decided, however, to conceal her sexual orientation to her father, who was living in another house:

> My mother was not staying with my father. I had to hide my sexual orientation when visiting my dad. As I said, my dad was a pastor. I did not want to embarrass him in the church. It was the reason why I decided to leave my dad's church peacefully.

Likewise, Busani received more support from the mother's side than from the father's side of his family, as he shared in an autobiographical piece:

> My family and friends have been supportive of me and the life I am living. Well, obviously not everyone will support you and in my case most of the father's side of the family members never supported me. Another thing, I have always believed that, whether they support

> me or not it, is not like you have a choice and nothing will change. So, you just have to accept. However, I have never felt labelled or discriminated at home or by friends.

Sam's father was also unsupportive:

> At some point it is good to come out; but if you are still depending on your parents, it is not easy. I had to leave home and stay with my uncle. It was only one kilometre away but my mother would not bring me food unless my father was sleeping.

The story of Samukelisiwe, a woman from Watersmeet in the Uthukela District, is similar. Her mother accepted her but her father was angry.

> My parents noticed with greatest concern that I was not behaving like other girls. They did not like to see me playing soccer with my brothers and it was even worse to see me playing with other boys in the neighbourhood or to be found amongst the groups of boys. Beside that they were saying negative things about me in the church. My parents were very suspicious of my behaviour. My mother called me and wanted the truth about my sexual orientation. I had no other option but to tell her the truth about myself. I told her that I was a lesbian and she accepted me as I am, but my dad was very angry with me. The acceptance which I received from my mother gave me courage to live my homosexual life openly in the community.

As time goes on, fathers sometimes become more tolerant, as in the case of Zama, a woman from Ekuvukeni in the uMzinyathi District.

> I did not hide myself from my parents. I told them that I am a lesbian. It was up to them whether or not to continue to love me as their child or to reject me. In my mother's family, they do not have a problem with my sexual orientation. They said that if I wanted to come and visit them with my partner, I am free to do so. My father did not accept that I am in a same-sex relationship. He was having a problem because I am having two children and this relationship is against the norms and values of the society. I am happy now because my father eventually accepted me as I am. Two weeks back, I discussed my sexual orientation with him. I told him that I am happy in my same-sex relationship. My father said that if my partner loves me and makes me happy, he has no objections. He will continue to love me as his child.

It takes time for parents to accept that their child is homosexual. Amahle, for example, was scolded because he remained indoors instead of playing soccer like the other boys. He was told by his parents to stop behaving like girls. Girls were his friends and he liked to wear skirts like them, which made him quarrel with his parents. This, however, did not stop him from accepting himself as he is. 'It is no longer a problem today,' he said, 'if other people do not accept us as LGBTQIA+ people, especially at school or in the church.'

The case of Mlondi, a man from the South Coast, is different. He was raised together with his siblings by an aunt and an uncle. His aunt had strong views on homosexuality:

> She believes there are jobs that are meant for men only. Usually at home they hire people to work outside the house. She thinks that it is where I belong. She thinks I have to do hard work whereas my siblings just rest and do nothing. She does not want me to socialise with girls more than boys.

Interestingly, he reported, it was his pastor who took his defence. His aunt had threatened to chase him from home if he did not change his attitude:

> She does not want to hear anything pertaining to LGBTQIA+ people. At some point, she said I must choose if I want to be gay or straight and if I choose to be gay I must get out of her house.

Stigma does not happen only within families but among neighbours. Nosipho, a woman from Matiwane in Uthukela District, recounted that the Christian parents of her friends were no longer happy to see her playing with their children. They felt, she explained, that her homosexuality would be 'transferred to their children and destroy the moral fibre of the whole society'. She became like a leper.

One of the most unfortunate consequences of the pressures exerted on LGBTQIA+ people by their families is the practice of forced unions and unwanted pregnancies.

The story of Sabelo, a man from Mpophomeni outside Howick, shows that some families, instead of accepting their children as they are, rather force them to make ill-considered decisions when they hear that they are homosexual:

> Both my parents passed on and I grew up with my grandmother. I have six brothers who are older than me. My grandmother hated me because of my sexual orientation. She told me to leave her house at the age of seventeen. I had to stay with another family that was not

> related to me. I had to work like a slave in that family such that I did not focus on my studies. I left the school in Grade 8. It was difficult to live the life of an *isitabane* (gay person) in my family. They know me as an *isitabane* in my family because I am not doing the things that my brothers are doing. I like to do household work like cleaning the house, washing dishes, etc.

Eventually they forced him to marry against his will:

> At the age of nineteen, my family brought me back home as a family member. At the age of twenty, they resolved in our family meeting that I must get married. They found me a beautiful lady and paid a *lobola* for me. I was forced to conform with the norm, and married someone whom I did not love.

Thando, a Methodist minister from Cape Town who spoke to Ntobeko Dlamini, had a similar experience. He too got married against his will:

> I was 27/28 years old when I went to my family to tell them who I am. And the first experience was serious rejection. It was a very painful rejection to the point that I was cut off from my family. My father could not understand how he could give birth to a gay child. It did not make sense to him. I was cut off and I stayed three and a half years away from my family, siblings, my mother. […] This lasted for about three and a half years, after which I had to take a decision on who I am and what I was living for. In 2015, I was already in circuit, and I sat down with my ex-wife. We called off the marriage, got divorced, and after that I lived my life.

During a short born-again phase, Sinolwazi started to date a boy, knowing it would lead nowhere:

> So, I started dating and of course it was a girl. That victory was short lived because my conscience (Christian upbringing) would not let me go against everything I was taught to believe in. In 2007, I had my experience with Christ and as now a born-again Christian my own beliefs would not let me. That is when I decided to be 'straight' and had my first boyfriend. I deliberately abused the poor guy so much because I could not love him and did not want him, but I had a void to fill. I had a minor relapse and dated a girl and prayed for forgiveness.

Thembelani, a man from Mpophomeni, did not experience rejection in his family for being gay. But in his own searching for his identity and

experimenting, he engaged in sexual activity with a woman with whom he could not form a stable union:

> I became aware of my sexual orientation while I was doing Grade 8 and my mother supported me to accept myself as I am. I behave like girls or females and am more attracted to men than women. Whilst I was trying to find myself and experimenting, I slept with a girl, and she got pregnant. I then realised that I had made a mistake because I was not in love with that girl. I am not a bisexual person, but I am a gay person. I like sleeping with males. It was wrong for me to sleep with that girl and I am really regretting what I did to her.

Zama was also confused. She developed a relationship with a boy before she became fully aware of her sexual orientation, and fell pregnant:

> I became aware of my sexual orientation when I was doing Grade 10. I was attracted to girls but not to the boys with whom I was playing. I soon fell in love with a girl. I had very strong feelings for her. Boys were just my friend*s.* I could not fall in love with them. I had relationships with boys before I discovered myself that I was not what I thought I was, that is, girl. I fell pregnant and gave birth to two children.

Reactions from Pastors and other Church Members

All the interviewees had been members of a church at the time they were interviewed, or before. Virtually all reported negative attitudes towards homosexuality in their church. There seems, however, to be a difference in this regard between the mainline churches represented in the sample – the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church – and the Pentecostal and African-initiated churches to which the majority of interviewees belonged. The LGBTQIA+ people who worshipped in mainline churches reported various form of discrimination but no outright homophobia. They noted the disconnect between the official language of the churches, which was inclusive, and their practice, which was not. Members of the other churches tended to experience worse forms of discrimination and exclusion, which amount, in some cases, to severe abuse.

There are degrees of stigma and rejection: it ranges from pressure to accept the church's gender codes to hate speech and physical violence. All interviewees had attended church services as children and young people. Some spoke of a 'family church'. None of them rejected Christianity as such.

What they condemned was the church's refusal to accept them as they were.

Thembelani, who was brought up in the Presbyterian Church and considered himself to be a member of the church, described the ambiguous attitude of his church regarding homosexuality:

> The problem is with the church leaders, especially the elders and pastors. They are divided in our church. Some pastors condemn homosexuality, and others are not condemning it and prefer to be silent on human sexuality issues. However, their silence does not necessarily mean that they are accepting homosexuality in the church. There is stigma and discrimination against homosexual people. When you go to the church as a homosexual person, you expect stigmatising and discriminatory words from the preaching of the elders and pastors. Homosexuality is condemned as a sin. Homosexual people are not regarded as Christians. They will be regarded as Christians only if they change their homosexual lifestyle and act like heterosexual people in the church.

For his part, Nkosi, a Roman Catholic, was not exposed to offensive sermons or attitudes, and this brought him closer to the church:

> I went to a Roman Catholic church and it was a big church. I do not remember any sermon against my sexuality. No one spoke about my feminine traits when I was around. Independently from the silence about my sexuality and my feminine traits, I felt invisible in my church because it was a big one. I did not have friends at the church. My brother and I would come to church and leave immediately when the service ended because my grandparents' place was three minutes away. So, I did not have the opportunity to be part of the church community. This experience brought me closer to the church and to God.

Zamokuhle's judgment on the Roman Catholic Church's attitude about LGBTQIA+ matters at congregational level was more reserved:

> Truly speaking, I would say that the problem is with me because my LGBTQIA+ friends never told me about hate-speeches which are directed to homosexual people who are in the church. I only heard about certain women in the Roman Catholic Church who are complaining about an increasing number of gays and lesbians in the church. I must say that I was partly pushed out the church by those women's nasty comments. They are criticising homosexual people

> and especially the way they dress themselves. They are comparing homosexual people to chickens. There are people in the church who are like me in the Roman Catholic Church. I like the church, but at the same time, I hate the derogatory and homophobic language that is used by some to dehumanise us. I have a problem with wearing a church uniform. I feel like I am naked because I am used to wearing my jeans.

The discrimination Dennis experienced while studying for the priesthood in a Roman Catholic seminary in the 1980s was subtler but equally traumatic. While this occurred a few decades ago and things may happen differently today, the ambiguity remains. The official position of the Roman Catholic Church is that homosexual people deserve pastoral care but that they should abstain from any sexual activity.

A journalist from *The Natal Witnes*s (now *The Witness*) who interviewed Dlamini in 1995 related his experience as follows:

> The vow Dlamini made at the age of seven to become a priest has been thwarted by what he calls 'pastoral excommunication' by the Roman Catholic Church. In his fourth year at St John Vianney Seminary in Pretoria in 1985, he received a letter from the bishop informing him that the diocese thought it unwise for him to continue with his studies in the light of his unsuitability for the vocation. According to Dlamini, this was never explicitly linked with his sexual orientation. It came after a year of recommended consultation with a psychiatrist.

Warren Oxford served as a priest in the Anglican diocese of Natal until his bishop's refusal to accept his sexuality compelled him to leave the ordained ministry. He was in his early twenties, he told to the interviewer, when he realised that he was more inclined towards gay than heterosexual relationships. While the rest of the family understood his situation, his father found it difficult but eventually accepted it. Warren then had a close partner who used to visit him. At one point he was transferred to a new parish in Newcastle. His partner began to spend long periods of time with him in the parish house. Warren shared this with the church wardens and other parish leaders. They accepted it without making value judgments. He then disclosed his sexual orientation to the bishop who had given him his license. The bishop gave his consent on condition that he would not engage in sexual activity. According to Warren, he did not know at that stage that he had a partner who was staying with him. He only insisted on abstention.

Not being prepared to give the bishop the liberty to decide on what should or should not happen in his private life, Warren took the matter up with him on a few occasions. When it became clear that the bishop was not willing to budge, he chose to leave the ordained ministry in the church. His rationale was that the church was practising selective social justice. The bishop who did not approve his sexual status was championing resistance against politically related injustices elsewhere in the SADC region. The problem was that Warren would have to accept his authority since he held his license as a priest from him.

The interviewer also met Michael Worsnip, an Anglican priest known as a political activist in the apartheid years, who came out as a gay person, privately at first, then publicly in the 1990s. He left the ministry during this period. Married to a man, and the father of two children, he has engaged with the issue of church and homosexuality in a number of newspaper articles and reflection papers. In one of them, entitled 'Oil and water: the impossibility of gay and lesbian identity with in the Church', published in a collection of essays in honour of the theologian Albert Nolan (Cluster Publications, 2001), he expressed the view, jointly with Heather Garner, a friend who identified as a lesbian woman, that, all things being considered, gay and lesbian people will never find a place in the church.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa has been pursuing a dialogue on same-sex relationships since 2000, and officially stated in 2001 that it 'seeks to be a community of love rather than rejection'. Several of the LGBTQIA+ people interviewed by Ntobeko Dlamini noted, however, the discrepancy between the official statements of the church and the situation on the ground, especially in rural congregations. The testimonies collected for this project confirm that impression.

Kwanele, a woman from Steadville near Ladysmith, described the situation LGBTQIA+ people were facing in her congregation as difficult. 'Our Methodist Church,' she said, 'does not like homosexual people because they claim that homosexuality is a sin and is against the Bible teaching. It is like there are no homosexual people in the church.'

Asked why she had left the Methodist Church, Ayanda, an LGBTQIA+ woman from the same area, explained that she had been subjected to the humiliating practice of a 'prayer' meant to make her 'straight':

> When I disclosed my sexual orientation to my family, they called our pastor to pray for me. When this pastor was praying for me, he was

> saying: 'Demon out! Demon out! Demon out!' but nothing happened up until today. I do not like to attend our family anymore because the prayer of the pastor, but I still love God in my heart. I was compelled by my family and the pastor to dress like a girl especially when I attend the church services. My uncle stopped supporting my education at Mangosuthu University of Technology whilst I was struggling to get NSFAS funding. In our rural areas, they do not understand and accept same-sex relationships.

The same happened to a woman from Newcastle who chose to remain anonymous. The daughter of a church steward in a Methodist congregation, she was involved in the church choir and the extramural activities organised by the church. This however did not last long:

> Everything was okay until the time where I faced the worst discrimination, the worst prejudice and stigma I could ever possibly find, especially after I had come out to my mother who at the time was a church steward in the church. She was one of the first people to whom I spoke about my lifestyle and my sexual orientation and whom I thought would be more welcoming. She went to the church and told them that she had a problem at home with a child who was telling her that she wanted to date other women. She had never heard of such a thing. And so, she asked the mamas to come here, to my home. She organised an attack on my home to pray that lesbianism would disappear, at a time when I was still identifying myself as a lesbian. It got worse when I decided to let them know that I was actually trans. And that is where everything just changed. It went from a thousand to absolute zero because straight after the whole prayer that had happened, it really made me feel like I was being abused, if that is the correct word to put it. I felt like I was being misunderstood. I felt that the way things were handled was wrong. They were not supposed to be handled in that manner.

Not all is negative, though. Thando, a Xhosa man who did a Bachelor in Theology at the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary in Pietermaritzburg and was ordained to the ministry, found it difficult to tell his family that he was gay but he received support from at least some of his colleagues:

> I have friends in ministry who are comfortable with my sexuality as much as I am, and we support each other academically, spiritually, emotionally and otherwise. I have a number of my colleagues who

> have come to know about my sexuality when I shared it with them. I think the social media has helped to communicate the message further. More and more people have come to know about my sexuality through social media rather than me talking about it.

The Methodist Church, however, is divided, as he told Ntobeko Dlamini. He is treading cautiously:

> Perhaps there is a pushback in the ministers of this district I serve, which I believe is backwardness. Ministers in this district are very homophobic. I have never shared anything about my sexuality, and I would never do it because I would be creating a headache for myself. I have good friends in the ministry who are not just colleagues but good friends, and they are very supportive.

A Methodist minister presented under the code name Agape in Ntobeko Dlamini's book showed the limits of the dialogue on same-sex relationships in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. For her, the spirit of division remained in the church:

> I feel that the same-sex conversation in the Methodist Church is based on how people feel about gay people rather than what the Bible says. I think the church is very binary and very patriarchal and because of the patriarchy we cannot break the homophobia. I know people who sit on the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee and the conversation is the same. It is about knowledge, about whether a man can marry another man. We are so far beyond that point now. We do not even understand humanity and sexuality. Science is showing us that people are born differently inside and outside. The church is concerned about division. They do not want the church to be divided and they are not allowing the scholars who understand to speak and to teach enough.

To conclude this section on the Methodist Church's attitude on LGBTQIA+ matters, consider the story of Emanuel, a Methodist minister who was also interviewed by Ntobeko Dlamini. He found the best and the worst in his congregation:

> I had a society steward in my church – I will not tell you the name – but he was the one person that I had been warned about, and he went all out to have my ministry destroyed. There were meetings, there were other things that took place. Then this society steward started

> working on the other society stewards. We had a meeting where I was called to make an account of things because they were unhappy. I asked them what they were unhappy about and no one would give me an answer. Are you unhappy with my preaching? No. Are you unhappy with my pastoral work? No. Are you unhappy with the things happening in the church? No. They were not unhappy with my work at all. My work was fantastic. I said, then what are you unhappy about? Are you worried about what I may be doing in my bedroom? And one was honest enough to say: Yes. And I said, well firstly it is none of your business. Secondly, at that stage it was extremely hurtful because I was single. I had come through a divorce and I was lonely. I would have loved to have a person to have a sex life with but there was nothing. And I responded that I found it hurtful that married people could pick on a single person who is not in a relationship and have the arrogance to criticise.

But the story did not end there.

> A very interesting thing that happened is that the older ladies of my society got very angry because of what was happening and they decided to start a petition because they knew why I was not getting an invitation. They started the petition at a Sunday service and the same society steward came in and told them it was illegal. He was a connexional leader of the church and he tried to pull his rank. On the Monday, sixty elderly ladies marched to the bishop's office. And they said: We know the reason why he is not being invited. If Emanuel was not doing his job properly we would say: Yes, he should go. But this is an unfair reason. The bishop went back to the society and said that it needed to be re-examined. So, the issue was opened up between the society steward, me and the superintendent. The superintendent did not offer much support to either of us and I was re-invited.

The majority of the Pentecostal and African-initiated churches to which the interviewees belonged, or had belonged, rejected homosexuality outright as a sin. The argument regularly invoked, though never explained, was that it was 'against the Bible'. Homosexuality was equated to immorality. A phrase frequently used by the pastors and elders in their sermons, according to the interviews, was 'Sodom and Gomorrah'. If they did not change their evil behaviour, LGBTQIA+ people would end up in hell.

The interviewees found this language very hurtful, as Nokuthula, who used to attend services at the Alliance Church of Christ (ex-Swedish Alliance Mission), shared in an interview:

> What made it difficult is the fact that, you know, you are coming from a Christian home where the church was very important. We are not allowed not to go to church and that is where we would hear these sermons of Sodom and Gomorrah and how God will burn us all.

Sifiso used to worship at God's Anointing Church in Osizweni (Newcastle). She served as a Sunday school teacher and was a member of the Church Executive. One day, she was instructed by the Board members and the pastors to change her dress, shoes, hairstyle and nails in order to look like a lady. She then left all her positions of the church. The hardest, after that, was to listen to the pastor's sermons:

> It started with them removing me from the Board and then having to be a normal member of the church, meaning I am just sitting inside the church to listen to the Word of God and then I leave. It then escalated to them having to preach about how certain people are getting astray from the Word of God. The sermon would be based on the idea that some people claim to be God's servants and yet live an unholy life. Also, in reference to a verse in the Bible about Gomorrah and Sodom, according to which people living in that era were punished for having sinned, they were saying that homosexual people would burn and that they were no longer in God's favour. In short, people needed to learn how to come back to the ways of God. If not, in the eternal life they would not be accepted and they would live in eternal hell. All that was just one sermon. I remember I left when I heard it. I do not want to lie. I just left on the spot. I just left I left immediately and then I promised myself that I would not go back to the church ever again.

For Salim, a gay man from Stanger, the site of trauma was a session of the Student Christian Movement (SCM) he attended as high school learner at the invitation of the Apostolic Faith Mission. This is how he described his experience:

> My very first day in the prayer session was a bit of nightmare as they noticed that I was gay. All of a sudden, everyone was looking at me. The pastor was not present on that day. As it was my first day, I acted natural because my intention was to pray. The second time I went to

> a prayer session, I would actually say was the most hopeless day of my life. The pastor was there, everyone was there and we were all together for the same thing which was to praise the Lord. The pastor called me outside the prayer venue and he told directly to my ears that it was forbidden by the Lord to have a person that is gay amongst Christians. I then asked him what my gender preference had to do with this religion since we are here to praise the Lord. Did he own the church or this organisation perhaps? He responded: 'I started this organisation and I have the right to choose who I want and I do not want in my church!' The whole incident made me look at the church and at God in a different perspective. It made me ask myself whether all pastors are God-sent people or if all of it is just a joke. For a period of one year, I stopped praying.

We have already shared the story of Ayanda, a Methodist woman from Steadville, who was forced to participate in 'prayer sessions' during which the pastor and other church members tried to 'heal' her from her homosexuality.

Londeka, a woman residing in Mpophomeni, was subjected to such treatment in the charismatic church she attended with her mother. When somebody found out about her sexual orientation, the church leadership sent a 'squad' to the family and set up a 'prayer session':

> I used to go to my mother's congregation. It was a traditional kind of Christian spirituality. All this happened was when I was outed by someone. The squad came to the family to set up a prayer session. If you are familiar with the conversations in those kinds of churches, you will know that it is not just praying over you but it gets very physical. The purpose was that they wanted to find out my sexual orientation, whatever it meant. It was a situation where the ends justify the means, so to speak. Yes, they had to pray that the demon came away. They are affiliated with institutions such as the New Creation Church at some distance from where they are. They have people that they kind of report to or are guided by. They would take me to the next team who were the leaders of this extra congregation.

Responding to Stigma and Discrimination

The LGBTQIA+ people's response to stigma and discrimination in the church varies. Some choose to remain 'invisible', as Nkosi put it in the statement quoted above. They stay, 'in the closet'. Some of them may come out as

LGBTQIA+ people in their family, among their friends and in the community; but in church they remain as discreet as possible. They wear the uniforms attributed to their gender by the church authorities if they have to.

A second group is made of those who refuse to hide their sexual orientation. They own it when asked and they know that some church members know who they are. But they do not make comments, whether these church members adopt a positive or negative attitude. This is another form of silence.

The third option is to leave the church. Both those who have tried to remain invisible but are suddenly exposed to stigma and discrimination and those who are tired of having to deal with nasty comments sometimes end up taking this route.

Some keep quiet against their will. This is what the member of a Methodist church in Newcastle, who chose to remain anonymous, expressed. She used to be active in the church until she realised that nobody would listen to her because of her sexual orientation:

> Even though I attended the meetings that were held in the church, my voice was never heard. Instead, whenever I tried to talk, I was told to keep quiet. You have many problems that you need to deal with, they said. All you have to do is to sit down and listen. At the time, I was still a child. To me it felt that I would be disrespecting my elders if I stood up and walked away, which I wanted to do.

The majority of those who keep quiet do so because there are not prepared to face the verbal attacks of their pastors and the other members of their church. As Ayanda explained, keeping quiet avoids victimisation:

> I prefer to keep quiet than argue with people, to avoid victimisation. I share my problems with LGBTQIA+ people in our support group from where I am drawing my strength.

Thembelani captured well the experience of LGBTQIA+ people in the church. They feel helpless:

> When pastors are attacking homosexual people, we find ourselves helpless and vulnerable. Our coping mechanism is to be quiet in the church, and not argue with our church leaders. We were taught to respect them. There is no support which homosexual people are receiving from the church. We do not have support groups in our community. If you are a homosexual person in our church, you are on your own. No one in the church is prepared to support homosexual

> people because he or she might face consequences. Church members are also afraid to be seen supporting homosexual people. Church members who are committing other sins are forgiven and accepted in our church, but not homosexual people.

The last point in Thembelani's testimony is worth noting. According to him, there are double standards in the church. Major sins such as adultery or corruption are ignored or condoned. All the emphasis is laid on sexual behaviour. Those who to do not conform with the heterosexual norms of the church are deemed to be sinners.

Asked why many LGBTQIA+ people are not prepared to come out, Nokuthula gave his response:

> Yes, that reduces you to unworthy human beings in the eyes of others and that also makes you feel that you are a mistake. Many LGBTQIA+ people are carrying that feeling within themselves. They do not feel loved because they are used to being rejected in their families and they are also rejected within the community. People have internalised that situation. As a person, we need to work on those kinds of things because otherwise, how do you expect people to accept their sexual orientation?

For Ayanda, there was no other option: she had to stay in the closet:

> I have never experienced stigma or rejection in my church because no one knows my sexual orientation status. I am currently in a closet because it is my survival or coping strategy.

In practical terms, for LGBTQIA+ women, remaining in the closet means conforming to the dress code imposed on them by the church leadership. To remain invisible, they have to wear the church uniforms other women were wearing.

As Nokukhanya put it, 'it is difficult to live your life as a homosexual person in the church because there are prescribed dress codes or church uniforms for women and men.' As homosexual people, they did not fit in these categories. 'If I attend the church,' she commented, 'I have to put on my dress like other girls.'

Zama concurred: 'If you are complying to the church dress code, you will be treated like other church members and you will be free from being rejected and stigmatised.'

For Sifiso, a woman who served on the Board of God's Anointing Church in Osizweni near Newcastle, the dress code was a big issue:

> The way I dressed was unacceptable to them since I was part of the Board or the Church Executive. I was representing the church and whatever I did outside the church represented them. So, I started to wear dresses, long hair and appropriate shoes and nails. In short, my dress code had to change completely from what I was having. They kept on calling me to change as I was rather resistant because I did not understand how my dressing affected my ministry. I knew that it did not affect the way I did my job as a Sunday school teacher. I did not teach children anything other than the Word of God during our sessions. I tried to oblige and do as instructed for a few weeks. In the end, I had to choose between being myself or lose my position. After a while, I could not do it anymore and I was instructed to leave the church because I refused to do as told.

Opting out is the solution that many LGBTQIA+ people take in response to stigma and discrimination in the church. They leave their congregation regretfully because they are attached to it. But they have no other choice.

For Kwanele, being in the closet was a stage in a longer journey. In the end, he left the church.

> I experienced the stigma and rejection which was directed to my lesbian sister and her homosexual friends in the church when I was in the closet myself, but I was indirectly affected. The pastor was invoking the Bible to justify his homophobia. I failed to handle the situation, and I just left the church peacefully together with my sister.

Ndumiso, a member of the Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion from Mpophomeni pleaded for the opposite: leaving the church would harm the church itself. It was important to remain. For that he was prepared to compromise. He understood the need to respect the dress code of the church.

> I love this church, and I am not prepared to leave it because of negative attitudes of church leaders toward us as LGBTQIA+ people. The church does not only belong to church leaders but to all church members including Christian LGBTQIA+ people. If LGBTQIA+ people leave the church, the church leaders will continue to think that the church belongs to them only because of the authority they have. The church leaders are misusing their authority if they are

> excluding LGBTQIA+ people as sinners from the church. The church members do not have a problem with LGBTQIA+ people, especially if LGBTQIA+ people respect themselves and the dress code of the church. I do not seek special attention of church members by dressing in my own way. Outside the church, they know me as a gay person since my sexual orientation is not hidden in the community, but in the church, I am just like all other church members.

This attitude is rather rare.

Zamokuhle, a Roman Catholic woman who said she was 'lazy' to go to church, was more upfront:

> The church is not a safe space for people with other sexualities because some church leaders and other church members are judgemental. My friends who attend the church tell me that it is not easy to be a homosexual person in the church. Homophobia, stigma and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ are high. For me, going to church is useless because if you attend the church on a regular basis but die as a homosexual person, they say that you will go to hell.

Amahle, a young man not yet in his twenties, from Ezakheni, agreed:

> By birth and by upbringing I am a member of St John's Church, but I never attended the services of that church because I know that lesbians and gays have no place in it. They are hated by the church leaders and the members of the church. It would be a waste of time to go there and expose myself to such a toxic space.

In response to the question of whether one should stay in the church or leave it, however, he gave a qualified response. For him it depended on the circumstances:

> When I experience stigma and discrimination as a gay man, I fight back or keep quiet depending on the situation. I learnt the hard way that being a homosexual person is a struggle.

To clarify his position, he formulated the following principle: 'Prevention is better than cure'. In other words, leave the church before suffering irreparable harm:

> I strongly believe that prevention is better than cure. I do not want to expose myself to stigma, rejection and discrimination in the church. I am only told by my lesbian and gay friends that their life is difficult

> in the church. Personally, I would not advise lesbians and gays to go to the church because we are not accepted and affirmed.

For Kwanele too, going to church was a waste of time, but that did not stop him from praying to God and knowing that God loved him:

> I am spending my weekends with my friends in the taverns instead of wasting my time attending the Sunday services at the Ethiopian Church. I left this church before the church leaders would reject me. I knew exactly what would happen to me when I disclosed my sexual orientation. I am drinking liquor with my friends on Sundays. I do not like attending the church anymore, but I love God, and I believe in Him. I do pray to my God, and I know that He loves me, my sister and my parents.

Abusive Behaviours

Not all LGBTQIA+ people are badly treated in the church. Some congregations offer them support. This, however, is rather uncommon. For many LGBTQIA+ people, no harm is done as long as they hide their sexual orientation. They have to follow the prescribed dress code in order to remain invisible. But that may not be sufficient. In some instances, homophobia is accompanied by extreme forms of abuse, as in the five cases described here.

The first concerns Busani. As a child, he worshipped in what he described as a family church. He was not like the other boys, but he felt accepted, except perhaps on the father's side of his family. Later on, he moved to another congregation:

> At first, the congregation was very welcoming and loving. I felt accepted and appreciated. That did not last long. After realising the type of life I was living and my sexuality, some members started to discriminate against me. They made offensive remarks and made a point that I knew how much they hated gay guys, that the Word of God was against us queer people, and that I did not belong in the church and possibly in heaven.
>
> It was after I went to a church conference that I decided to leave the church, never to come back. I did not have any privacy at all. During shower time, some participants would purposefully want to share the bathroom with me, just to confirm whatever was in their minds. They would want me to see them naked and be in the same

> room with them and see if I would get an erection or respond to what I was seeing. That was my last day at church. I never went back.

Sam's case shows the contradictions of a church which pushes an anti-LGBTQIA+ agenda to the extreme. A member of the choir in a charismatic church, he had attracted the attention of the senior pastor who had organised 'prayer sessions' for him every Sunday and laid hands on him. After a while, the senior pastor handed over this responsibility to a young colleague by the name of Ishmael, who continued 'praying' for him. One Sunday, the participants stayed on and they ended up spending the night in the venue. Sam asked permission to return home with his siblings. That was when an incident happened:

> On our way home, the junior pastor decided to push ahead my siblings, saying that he wanted to have a talk with me. He started to seduce me, telling me that he had no part in what the other pastor had said about me and that he had feelings for me.

The junior pastor had never said that Sam was a devil worshipper, but he was present when his colleague accused him of being one. After that night he persisted in his attitude:

> He bought things for me to use and called me his friend. He once said: You do not seem to have time to come to me for consultation. I said no. I did not want to talk to him. I would tell him I was fine until he gave up. But he still convinced my mum to keep praying for me.

The third case of abuse involves a woman who describes herself as lesbian and trans and chose to remain anonymous. Her story was mentioned in an earlier section of this chapter. The daughter of a Methodist church steward and a member of the church choir, going to church was second nature for her, as she said. Things started to go wrong when she confided to her mother that she was attracted to women. Her mother asked other women of the church to pray over her in their house. The situation became frantic when she revealed that was transgender. She really felt abused.

Meanwhile, her mother insisted that she should continue to go to church. She could not say no. When she attended meetings and said something, she was never listened to. She was always told to keep quiet. But worse was to come:

> And then, unfortunately, on 26 August 2017, I got raped. I got raped by someone who was a family friend. Our two families knew each

> other and were actually quite close. The elder brother of that family was the person who raped me. And this guy was also part of the church. I could not believe that it was him, a person whom I took as my own elder brother. He took advantage of something he could use as a weapon or whatever the hell he had in mind for what he did. It is hard for me to get into the details of what happened that fateful night or, should I say, horrific night, because even till today I still cannot get over it.

But the story does not end there. The victim found the strength to report the abuse to the church. She went to the circuit's superintendent accompanied by her mother. 'Nothing happened after that,' she reported. 'Nothing was said.' The church leaders remained silent. The fact that the perpetrator lived in a 300 hundred meters' radius from her house made the situation even more painful. They were literally neighbours. She then went to a crisis centre and when the church leaders heard about it, they said that they did not believe that a rape had taken place. She had naively thought that by being honest and coming out of the closet she would receive support. The opposite happened. She still misses the church, she concluded, but at this point she did not feel capable of going back to it.

In his book, Ntobeko Dlamini documented a similar case of abuse. It involved Sinolwazi, whose name has already been mentioned here. Here again, the church – in this case the Methodist Church of South Africa and more specifically the Methodist Students Society (MethSSoc) – was the place of abuse:

> It is funny when people are trying to psycho-analyse you or trying to find reasons why you are queer, that they think you might have been abused as a child or were unloved at home. For me, I am not queer because I was abused, but I have been abused because I am queer. Sadly, a lot of people suffer the same fate. In 2014, while doing my second year, I lived off campus. Pretty [a female university student for whom she had feelings] accompanied me to my off campus residence to get my gym bag. She was more of a butch, so her sexual orientation was more obvious. Later that evening, a gentleman entered my room while I was sleeping. I woke up with him on top of me and my pyjama bottoms off. Sadly, I knew this guy from MethSSoc and he was a Branch Executive Committee member. I still pray and thank God that no harm was done to me that night, but I paid the price with endless nightmares and depression.

This painful incident and other occurrences of homophobia led her to leave the leadership of the Methodist Church:

> The worst part was not being able to share it with my family or to even charge this person because I could not have survived the prejudice and drama that would follow. I went back to self-cutting, a habit I had started when being 'straight'. It was too much for me to handle. For me, depression is real only because homophobia is real.
>
> The church was the worst place to turn to. We had people who preached about how much of a sin it is being gay but who excused the rapists, drunks and thieves as victims of temptations from the devil. I stopped being active in my home circuit Wesley Guild when my cousin asked me, 'How can you be Christian and gay at the same time?' I refused any form of leadership in church as I was made to believe I was unworthy as I might lead people to sin. It took me years to understand what makes one right with God. I have been the chairperson of MethSSoc in my branch and have attended synods where I argued the case of LGBTQIA+ members within the church. I am still dissatisfied with the church's stance on the matter

For lesbian women, the possibility of corrective rape is always present in the background. They live in fear, as Nombulelo explained to Ntobeko Dlamini:

> The common problem for most lesbians in society is violence and corrective rape. You need to always keep your guard up because as much as people seem to understand, they think your genitals are a waste because you sleep with other women. They think they can validate your womanhood by having a man in your life. I have never faced such violence as a result of my sexuality, simply because I do not hide it and I do not flaunt it.

The last case of abusive behaviour in the church involves not sexual but physical violence. It is also documented in Ntobeko Dlamini's book. The protagonist is an ordained Methodist minister known under the code name of Phoebe who described herself as 'queer', adding that she is 'not male or female'. She lived with another woman as a common-law wife. They have an adopted son:

> I think the worst thing that ever happened was in my ordination year. I visited a family in our society who were like trusted friends. She and her husband were close to me. I remember sitting there, telling

> them how I felt and I that I did not think that there was space for me in the church. Some weeks passed and I went to do a pastoral visit to the same home because the husband had gotten ill. But he was hiding in the lounge and he had a shotgun which he was pointing it at me. The domestic saw it and ushered me out the house saying: 'You better leave because the boss wants to kill you.' Later that night, he called me to his house. He had gathered his son, his daughter and his wife. And he sat me down and he said: 'I want to know if you are in love with my wife.' He was basically saying: 'I am going to shoot you because you are turning the church gay and you are bringing all these blacks into the church.' I think there is a sense in which some people think you are promiscuous just because you are different. I phoned the bishop and he gave me two weeks off. But I had to go back and give this man communion.

The Quest for Alternatives

A good number of interviewees remain in the church despite the risk of stigma and discrimination. They try to remain invisible. Others leave their church, with a sense of loss but no regret. For a minority, however, there are alternatives.

The simplest one is a support group. It is not a church as such but a place where LGBTQIA+ people who identify as Christians can meet and share their belief in an inclusive God. This was the case for Nokukhanya, the woman from Ezakheni near Ladysmith who is mentioned in an earlier part of this report. 'We did not receive support from the church,' she said, 'but we form support groups.'

Ayanda, who hails from the same area, also mentioned a support group:

> I prefer to keep quiet than arguing with people to avoid victimisation. I share my problem with LGBTQIA+ people in our support groups where I am drawing my strength.

Zamokuhle, a woman rom Newcastle, gave a similar testimony: her LGBTQIA+ group, she said, is her 'support system'.

Mpophomeni presents another scenario. In this township near Howick there is a church which, without being restricted to LGBTQIA+ people, is known to be open to them.

Sabelo, a double orphan who grew up without the stability of a family and was forced to contract a marriage without love, as noted above, found solace

in the Holy Ban Ethiopian Church, a LGBTQIA+-friendly church established by a woman *sangoma*:

> The lady who was looking after me in the family where I was working was a *sangoma*. She started a church called the Holy Ban Ethiopian Church because her church did not accept her. I became a member of her church after she initiated me as a *sangoma* as well. Later, she ordained me as a bishop. I did not have a problem with being rejected by the church where I grew up. Some church members left our church because they were against my ordination as a homosexual bishop. Others accepted me as I am, and as their bishop.

A Sandile, a gay man from the same township, confirmed that some churches operate as support groups for LGBTQIA+ people:

> There are many LGBTQIA+ people here at Mpophomeni. When they are experiencing problems in their church, they simply form their own churches to support one another. They have their own inclusive churches and their church leaders who do not stigmatise and discriminate against homosexual people. In other words, their churches function as support groups.

A New Understanding of God

Two things appear clearly in the transcripts of interviews and autobiographical pieces. The first is that the LGBTQIA+ people who shared their life stories know who they are. They have come to terms with their sexual orientation. Some came out of the closet, like Dennis, who suffered prejudice in the church where he wanted to be ordained to the priesthood and in the university where he was studying for a degree after he identified himself as a gay person in a newspaper article in the mid-1990s. Others chose to remain invisible in the church, accepting the prescribed dress code or any other obligation in order to avoid stigma and discrimination. In both cases, they are proudly LGBTQIA+.

The second is that even if the interviewees have a problem with the church, they have no problem with God. Their faith appears intact. It is even strengthened. None of them gives credence to the message that homosexuality is a sin. For them, that does not make sense. They are not 'devil worshippers'. Those who have been 'prayed' about and laid hands upon know that this response is outrageous.

On the contrary, they blame the church leaders for looking the other way when members of the congregation commit serious sins and rather concentrate their

attacks on homosexuals. It is a form of hypocrisy. Why should homosexuality be the sin of sins? Do not the Christians who claim to be Christian but steal or kill commit much more serious offences to God?

Some respondents go further and articulate a new form of theology. They state clearly and loudly their belief in God at the very moment they are rejected by ordinary churches because of their sexual orientation. At the centre of this theology is the notion that God's love is inclusive. God does not exclude anybody. As Paul said, 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). He would have added, if he had lived in the 21st century, that there are neither straight nor LGBTQIA+ people.

For Nokuthula, who left the Alliance Church of Christ because she could not face her pastors' homophobia, the problem is not God but the way God is represented.

> I was tired of being presented with a God who punishes people, a God who is not loving. I left the church with that in mind. I did not want anything to do with it. I did not want anything to do with God, but eventually I realised that I can do something about it. I can start looking, not for God who punishes but for God who is loving and kind. It happens that I met a pastor who was running an LGBTQIA+ church. At that time, it was not labelled like that. It was for people who are different and that man helped me to see that the first thing that you need to do is to forgive yourself and think about God with different eyes. That process helped me a lot because I was able to have a moment for myself and say I am going to read the Bible in my own terms and how I understand it. Then I do not have to struggle with myself. So, I went through that process with him for six months because there were so many things that I needed to do. Eventually, I came out of that experience with new ways of embracing that God created me to be different. I read scripture passages like Psalms 139: 'God created me and I am wonderfully made in the image of God' or Jeremiah, chapter 1, verse 4: 'I knew you before you were born.' God knew me and He sent me for help. I will not ever allow anyone to tell me anything else.

Salim not only rejected the representation of God as a gay-hater, he found consolation in him. After an experience of discrimination in a clinic where he was doing an internship, he refused to be led by resentment but rather decided to put his faith in God:

> God gave me a forgiving heart. I am OK now. I just cannot see myself going to that clinic because of the trauma I have. I have learned to love myself despite what anyone is saying, as long as God loves me.

For many, this required a real change of mind. At first, they believed the pastors who said that homosexuality was a sin. Later on, they started questioning this type of theology. They looked for alternatives.

Nkosi is one of those who embarked on this spiritual journey:

> I believed I was born a sinner because of Adam and Eve's sin. I had inherent brokenness and it manifested as deviant sexual orientation. This view helped me because I was also asking why I was gay. However, I did not know that it would be destructive in the long run.

After some time, he questioned the validity of this theology because it implied a denial of his sexual identity:

> The conservative view became destructive because it suggested a rejection of my sexuality. My sexuality was sinful before God and I did not want to do anything sinful in my life because it would destroy my relationship with God. So, it resulted in some kind of hate for myself. It was not deliberate hate, but I hated what made me sinful, that is, my sexual orientation. However, it was not only about hating my sexual orientation. It permeated other things in my life. It caused some disintegration within me.

To resolve this contradiction, he developed a new understanding of God:

> The conservative view caused me to not see any good in myself. This belief was contrary to God's pronouncement in Genesis that the creation of humans was good. I am gifted with different gifts, and I am intelligent. However, I was failing to acknowledge that about my life. The only thing that rang in my mind was how sinful I was. So, nothing could come out of me since I was sinful. Worse, my sexuality reminded me in tangible ways how sinful I was. This idea further contributed to low self-esteem and self-hate.

Like Nkosi, Khangelani, a member of the Holy Apostolic Church in Christ, refused to take the church leaders' discourse at face value. He challenged their way of reading the Bible:

> My judgment is that our pastors and church leaders are not even trained to read the Bible like pastors of other churches. I know

> that they do not like homosexual people because it is what I am experiencing in the church. If our pastors and church leaders knew how to use the Bible to attack homosexual people, they would have done so in their preaching. They are not grounded in reading and using the Bible. They cannot support the hatred which they have for homosexual people with the Bible. They do not preach that God loves homosexual people as well. It is like their God only loves heterosexual people. I really feel bad about it. It is for this reason that I am no longer benefiting anything from our church.

Londeka's testimony is also about the interpretation of the Bible. The homophobic pastors keep saying that homosexuality is condemned in the Bible, he pointed out, but they never go beyond that statement. They do not look at the biblical text. They are not interested in biblical hermeneutics. Here is what he suggests one should do:

> An ideal church would be a church that is inclusive, one that accepts all people and preaches that God is love through all that Jesus Christ went through for us sinners. There is no need to have such divisions. It would also be a church where people are educated about what the biblical text means contextually and a church that understands that, in this day and age, we cannot be living as though it was the times where the Bible itself was written and translated. A lot has changed. In such a church, people would not be hypocrites and the leaders of the church would not only be preaching on scriptural texts without knowing what people are like. Maybe we should have Bible studies where you are reading the text not in the spiritual sense, not to say *Umoya moya,* but look at what the actual words mean, what the Bible says in the original text and in the original language because there is no direct translation from such a language.

Emanuel, the Methodist minister who faced the opposition of the society stewards of his congregation but received the support of sixty lay women, interpreted his experience in spiritual terms. He felt called to the ministry as a gay man, he told Ntobeko Dlamini, but wanted to know why there was so much homophobia in the church. When he came to terms with his sexual orientation after a marriage which ended in divorce, he addressed the following prayer to God:

> Okay, God. If you have created me like this, I will come to terms with it and accept it. But then if you have created me like this, I also

> believe that you have called me. If you have called me, why did you create somebody like me since you cannot use me given that there is no place for me in the church?

Nombulelo, a candidate for the ministry in the Methodist Church at the time of the interview who described herself as a lesbian and underwent reconstructive surgery, shared with Ntobeko Dlamini the following confession of faith:

> My sexuality is not demonic. I was not created by a demon. I was created by God through two loving parents who were straight but gave birth to an intersexed child. I came into a space where the Christian religion and the church say that they only want a man and a woman in relationship. Into that same space, there comes Nombulelo, who is a man and a woman and is still called by God.

Xola, a gay man who grew up in Soweto, expressed his faith in similar terms when Katlego Vincent Scheepers asked him to tell his story:

> God is my home. He is my best friend. He is both my mother and my father, my partner, my boyfriend and my therapist. In a nutshell, he is my everything. He keeps me sane and keeps me going and provides me with a sense of peace that I cannot put into words. Despite what the church says about homosexuality, I think our purpose on earth is more than what people say it is. My one wish for all my people is to look inside themselves and find that God lies within. The Bible even says: 'Greater is he who lives inside of me than the one who lives in the world.' He saves, he heals, he restores, he supports us in all that we do and, most of all, he loves unconditionally.

Olebogeng, the son of a school principal and church leader in a Reformed church in Gauteng who was also interviewed by Katlego Vincent Scheepers, explained that, for him, the solution was to separate God from religion. Yes, he believed in God but not in the way God was represented in the church:

> My family knew from my behaviour that I was gay and so they had no real expectation of me being anything else but gay. In all that chaos of my life, I found religion. It happened during my teenage years. Most children in townships are raised in the church in some way. God for me represented a gateway to all that was good in the world, everything that the world needed. Sundays remain my favourite day of the week. It is when people usually bring out their best selves; well, back in the early 2000s, that is, I do not see it anymore.

It took a while, but I eventually learnt that the church had a lot of issues. There was a hidden culture of hate, lust, greed, lies, and just pure evil masquerading as the holy spirit. I started to realise that religion was being used as a weapon to chastise, discriminate, isolate, and punish those that did not abide by its rules. Reading the history of religion, I have been shocked at how such an institution that had invited so much peace into my life could be responsible for so much damage in the world.

Despite everything, my belief in God remains. Maybe I have found a way of separating God from religion. My belief in God has not stopped anything bad from happening, yet I believe that God is constantly cheering me on, helping me when it is necessary and protecting me at all times. So, I believe even when things were absolutely terrible, and they have been, I always knew they could have been worse.

4 HOMOPHOBIA, TRAUMATISATION AND LGBTQIA+ FAITH

This chapter reflects on the stories of the victims of homophobia presented in the previous chapter. For lack of a better word, the term 'victim' is used. However, they are not victims in the sense of being flattened by their experiences. They live between trauma and hope, fight back where they can, and they have ongoing advocacy programmes, publications, and social events. All these happen in the broader society, where they are often confronted with hostility. In the church, they do not have room to move. They are not even able to organise awareness-raising events that they organise in the broader society. Is this not a contradiction of the biblical mandate discussed in the previous chapter? As will be shown in the following chapter, it seems the church does not know how to relate to them.

This core chapter of the book speaks to the theme of homophobia and trauma. The term 'traumatise' is used because it describes ongoing acts rather than the effect of actions on the recipients. But the chapter also tells of faith and commitment to God, hence 'and LGBTQIA+ faith' is part of the heading. The voices of the affected come through as they tell their stories in their own words. Their words are not always repeated verbatim; rather, summaries are used to aid the flow of the chapter, and abstracts are inserted to illustrate the points emanating from the stories, where necessary. Sub-themes are identified to make the reading easier to follow. These are clustered under two main sections, 'reception in the society' and 'reception in the church'. The interviewees talked about pain in each context. Before examining their stories, the next section addresses a few misconceptions about LGBTQIA+.

Misconceptions about the LGBTQIA+

First, it has to be understood that LGBTQIA+ is an acronym that stands for a concept that is much broader than homosexuality. Homosexuality refers to same sex preference in a relationship, and it invariably implies sexual intimacy. Study after study in recent years has shown that people who prefer a different gender identity to that which was assigned at birth are not only

concerned about this. It is about a self-chosen identity. There does not have to be sex involved, as the last letter of the acronym indicates. It is also not necessarily about same-sex relationships because some of the people who had an intersex identity have decided to have a sex transplant so they could fit into heterosexual roles.

Second, it is fallacious to continue arguing that LGBTQIA+ is a community of homosexuals who practice same-sex intimacy, and that it is a Western thing. On the contrary, it is a human phenomenon: It is found in the heart of Zululand, in the deep areas of the Transkei, in the Western Cape, Gauteng, and everywhere where there are human beings. It is a way of life for some and not for others.

Third, some claim that the Bible has extensive arguments about homosexuality and condemns it as a sin that will lead a person straight to hell. Yet, it appears in less than five places in the Bible, and it is not elaborated in any detail. This does not mean that it was not an issue at the time or in the communities from which the biblical texts have been appropriated. It is just that there is very little information in the Bible to be able to make such definitive statements. If loving is a sin, then many people will go to hell. If sin is the wages of death and homosexuality is one of the sins, all sinners will suffer the same judgment or receive the same wages.

In light of the above comments, the sections below look at the information that has emanated from the interviews.

Reception by Society

Society is not always receptive to tendencies and individuals who do not conform to what it has always known as the 'norm'. It can be suspicious in some cases, while in others, it simply refuses to accept anything new, regardless of whether it would be beneficial. This reaction is understandable for preservation purposes. However, it becomes unjustifiable when rejection occurs before any attempts are made to understand the exact nature of the new development. This is relevant when reflecting on the stories shared by individuals.

Themes from Experiences

There appears to be a pattern followed by the abusers of LGBTQIA+ people, some of whom are within the Christian family and others outside of it. This starts with a denial, followed by attempts to change the person, then ostracism, leading to marginalisation, then exclusion. When individuals are on their own,

they become targets of corrective rapists and/or murderers. Eudy Simelane's case (2008) was the first known corrective rape and murder in South Africa. Many more followed. There is one report on rape in the stories, but we did not get reports on murders in the province.

Incredulity and Denial

There is a link between incredulity (disbelief) and revelation of the individual's LGBTQIA+ status. Parents and communities have long lived under the illusion that homosexuality is a thing of the West or that it was a vice found only in the mines and in prisons where men were lumped together for long periods without partners of the opposite sex. This view was based on their limited understanding of what the LGBTQIA+ community is about. They only conceived of it as men penetrating each other to satisfy the desires of the flesh. In other words, they thought that it was a loveless relationship that was open to promiscuity.

As communities saw women also turning to each other for intimate relationships, they became restless and suspicious of the practice. Some have been heard saying that the 'day of judgement is near' because humans were doing what even animals would not do (they are oblivious to animal psychologists' reports about homosexual behaviour in animals). Women, as did men, committed to each other in genuine love relationships. This made it clear that intimacy was not determined by a sexual urge, but by love. Any mother or father looking forward, at least in an African traditional context, to getting *lobolo* cattle for their daughters or family line preservation from their sons one day, would be unsettled by that.

It is, therefore, not surprising that in the stories shared here, parents are among the last to know about the sexuality of their children. They wrestle with it alone, or, as in one case, share their discovery with a sibling, before involving others. In one story, **Nkosi** tells of how he wrestled in his mind with a comment that was made by fellow learners at school, that he was gay, without sharing it with anyone in his family. It seems it was some time before he could even reveal it to the neighbour when he was asked to perform a manual task. From the time the other boys commented on him behaving like a gay person, he became 'self-conscious', as he says, and acted more like gay people would. He may not have shared it with his family for fear of being reprimanded or even more. As it turned out, he was reprimanded after someone else, not him, told his father.

In contrast to Nkosi's case, **Nokukhanya** handled her confusion differently. She approached her sister to share her inclination towards girls instead of boys. Her lifestyle was that of a boy, as she says, and she preferred to play with boys rather than with girls. But it did not end there. She found herself sexually attracted to girls, and she liked kissing them. This might not mean much to people whose families have a kissing and embracing culture. It looks strange to families and cultures where that is not a norm, and more so for a girl in her teenage stage, which is usually an age of experimentation with sexuality and identity. Nokukhanya herself states that she did not know what she was doing and who she was. It was her sister who diagnosed her behaviour as that of a lesbian. Even that did not mean anything to her. She was following her natural inclination without knowing that it had a psycho-social label.

It is because of cases like Nokukhanya's that some have preferred to undergo a sex change or, as it is known, 'gender affirmation operation'. In some cases, they do this to conform to the expectations of society, according to their socialisation, that sexual penetration is between a male and female or a man and woman. One case of a woman, **Simone**, from Cape Town, interviewed in December 2024, is a good example of this. She transitioned from being a man, or as she prefers to say, a boy, to a woman. She relates in her story that she had to undergo about five painful operations before she successfully settled into the body she identified with from an early age. Before the operation, it felt abnormal to her that she fell in love with a man, romanced as heterosexuals would do, but had no physical erection. As she states in her story, she would feel the man's hard phallus against her leg and be tempted to say that she also has the 'same…down there'. She is now a happy woman who lives with a partner in a heterosexual relationship, following a couple of previous long-lasting relationships. The 'T' in the acronym stands for 'transgender'. This is a term used to describe 'living in one body' while identifying with a different sex or body.

Referring to Nokukhanya's story, the point must be made that if she were in a favourable position financially, she might have followed Simone's example. She loved 'playing boy' to other girls, but she had no means to recreate her sex organs as some women, though few, do. It might not even be what she had in mind. Instead, she followed her sister's counselling and stuck to a lesbian's role. But like Nkosi, she did not reveal her status to her parents until she was confronted by her mother and grandmother. Here again, the father was the last person to know. Her reason was that: 'My mother was not staying with my father. I had to hide my sexual orientation when visiting my dad. As I said,

my dad was a pastor. I did not want to embarrass him in the church. It was the reason why I decided to leave my dad's church peacefully.' It is notable that Nokukhanya found it necessary to censure herself because of the church's teaching about sexuality. There are probably more people like her out there.

A similar case to Nokukhanya's is that of **Samukelisiwe**. She preferred the company of boys and the lifestyle they led. Like boys, she dated girls.

There appears to have been more support from the mothers than fathers, or their families. That is certainly the case in the stories alluded to above. **Busani** claimed that he received a lot of support from his mother's side after his sexuality became known, while his father's family never accepted it or supported him. In **Sam'**s case, he had to consider the fact that he was his parents' dependent. The choices he had were either to continue living his life at home and bear the consequences or move out. He chose the latter, then went to live with his uncle. His mother was sympathetic. She sent him food without his father's knowledge.

In two exceptional cases, LGBTQIA+ individuals experienced hostility from people who would be expected to show motherly care. **Mlondi,** who was raised by his aunt, together with his siblings, was made to work harder than his brothers because of his feminine tendencies. That falls under the category of child abuse in the South African law. In addition to hard work, he was barred from socialising with girls. It was not because of the aunt's ignorance. She was fully aware of what she was doing because, as Mlondi states, she did not want to hear anything about LGBTQIA+ people. After his pastor intervened, she still threatened to evict him from her house if he did not change. As noted elsewhere in this book, people do not realise that in most cases, gay people testify that they were born with that inclination. It is not something they acquired from society. Another person who was evicted from the home, this time by her grandmother, is **Sabelo.** He was only seventeen years old. His grandmother made it clear to him that she 'hated' him, a story discussed further below under unfair corrective measures.

The stories discussed above show both positive and negative reception of LGBTQIA+ individuals in families and their communities. The maternal side of families seems to be more accepting and sympathetic than the paternal side. Even when there was initially resistance, the mothers and grandmothers tended to change with time. The last two cases mentioned above are not commonThere was no outward denial of the phenomenon, but denial is implied in the refusal to accept it.

There are exceptions in the stories told. **Zamokuhle** told the interviewer that her father had an open mind about sexuality. He bought her the same kind of clothes that he bought for her brothers since she was young. She also observed that when he watched reportage about LGBTQIA+ on television, he never made judgmental remarks. So, she was free to play soccer without interference from her parents. **Sinolwazi** had the same experience, from her mother's side. She was allowed to dress up like a boy and play with boys in the street. In another case, **Zama**, a mother of two children, reports a happy ending between her and her father, who initially did not accept that she was involved in a lesbian relationship. At the end of her story, she reports that her father pledged to continue to love her as his child for as long as she was happy in her same-sex relationship.

'Correcting' Individuals

The issue of human sexuality has been so taboo that, going back to Victorian ethics in the nineteenth century, people were reluctant to talk about it openly. It was an even greater disgrace to add homosexuality to the mix. This does not mean that such relationships did not exist; they were being suppressed or covered up, particularly in the West. It is known, for example, that as early as c.8 Before the Birth of Christ (BCE), in the Odyssey, Homer refers to a relationship between a young man and an older, rich man. The claim was that the older was 'developing' the young man. Allusions to it, not discussions, in the scriptures that were written later also confirm its existence and persistence. Dismissing it without discussion deprived the authorities of knowledge that could have helped many generations that followed. That mistake, transmitted through religion and laws, continues with religious people today. Insistence on efforts to correct individuals should be seen in this light.

In South Africa, during the apartheid era, stories were coming out of the army about the ill-treatment of men who were LGBTQIA+. Apart from the country's law that prohibited homosexuality, the army set psychologists and social workers on such individuals, believing that there was some 'psychological damage' to them. Views were expressed about how the breakdown of families and bullying at school and in society affected how individuals turned out. Without going against the science, we now see that it is not primarily the environment (external factors) that makes one LGBTQIA+. Even those who come from stable and peaceful environments have the inclination, which is then facilitated by the environment.

This moves the discussion from prohibition of talking about being gay, to attempts to correct. Amahle, for example, was scolded for wearing girls' skirts and spending much time indoors, 'like girls'. He was constantly told to go outside, like other boys. Sabelo, who had a grandmother who hated him, was forced to get married against his will. He states that after he was ejected from his home at the age of seventeen years, he was fetched by the family two years later and told that they wanted him to get married. At the age of twenty, he says, the family matched him with a beautiful woman and forced him to marry her. That was their way of correcting the homosexual streak in him. It is not clear where the marriage ended and why he continues to identify himself as LGBTQIA+. Sabelo says that it was most unpleasant to live in a home where he was ill-treated and referred to as *isitabane* (isiZulu word for 'gay man' or 'lesbian woman'). He makes it clear that he was forced to get married and live with a person he did not love.

Another reported forced marriage was that of **Thando**. Interestingly, Thando was a Methodist Church minister. He was rejected by a believing and worshipping family. He says that he had experienced rejection and pain for the first time firsthand. It followed his revelation of his sexuality to them. He had to endure the pain for three and a half years on his own. The family had completely cut him off. Fortunately, he had the mind to sit down with his now ex-wife and explain his situation to her. They agreed to go their separate ways to pursue their destinies.

The last case under this sub-heading is that of Sinolwazi. It is an interesting one because correction has not come directly to her but via her 'religious experience'. She claims that she accepted Christ at a religious event and became 'born again'. As part of her 'covenant' with God, she undertook to live a 'straight' life. She shared that she once lapsed back into a lesbian experience before pulling herself right again. In addition, she admits that she abused her boyfriend in the hope that he would break up with her. In Sinolwazi's case, she was self-correcting, although that still did not make her a happy person. In her own words, she was using the boyfriend to 'fill a void' in her life. Her confession about how she misused the boyfriend she was forced to be with for religious reasons rather than love is a confirmation of what others say about being born as they are, not acquiring homosexuality.

Ostracism by Family and Society

Ostracism in its original sense is a banishment of an individual or individuals from their society, based on what society considered their 'deviant' behaviour.

Society would banish them to protect itself against such behaviour. Today, the term is used in the sense of mocking and marginalising a person for looking different or having different preferences from the rest of society. People may ostracise, for example, a person they consider to be quirky. And they tend to ostracise a person they consider to be mentally unstable. This stigmatises the person.

Some of the stories of LGBTQIA+ interviewees show experiences of ostracism. The comment by high school learners, based on Nkosi's way of expressing himself, was a form of ostracism. If the learners were living together and some were constantly pointing out how someone behaved, that person would eventually break down, cry, or leave their circles. Again, the neighbour who described Nkosi as a tomato was mocking him for having feminine traits. That had the effect of ostracism, although he may not have left their company. He acknowledged that it got to him. Nkosi found the words the neighbour used demeaning and abusive.

In a different case, another form of ostracism emerged. **Nosipho** found herself being ostracised by the parents of her friends. They were not happy about her associating with their children. She stressed that they were Christian parents. In her words, they expressed fear that her homosexuality would be 'transferred to their children and destroy the moral fibre of the whole society'. In that way, they stigmatised her and caused her banishment through isolation. On a side note, their understanding of 'moral fibre' here is not clear. Does it refer to the nature of the person of to their behaviour? If the latter, then behaviour has nothing to do with sexuality but with the person. There are straight people who misbehave.

As this sub-heading concludes, recall Sabelo's experience of discomfort and pain because he had to live with the appellation *isitabane.* His saying that it was not pleasant to live in a house where you were called that all the time implies that if he had an alternative, he would have left the house. There was a time in the black townships when a suspect had to flee for his/her life once there was an allegation that they were *impimpis* (police informers). The allegations were not true in all cases. But they would have whipped up enough emotions for the crowds not to listen to any voice of reason. It appears that this tactic by some individuals has been transferred to LGBTQIA+ people in some townships, although the crowds are not involved this time around. It is individuals who seem to be on a hunt for LGBTQIA+ individuals. This is despite the law that protects individuals against harm.

The different ways of correcting a person include making sure the person wears the right clothing, has playmates of the same sex, participates in sports designated to the appropriate gender category, does their hair the correct way, and many more. These are all ways of applying pressure so the gays and lesbians adopt the socially assigned identities. They are not pleasant. They are torturous psychologically, some physically as well. The next section looks at such extreme measures taken.

Corrective Violence, Rape and/or Murder

Corrective violence is the last stage of the corrective efforts. When all the above tactics have failed and the individual has been isolated, they become targets of criminals who are waiting for an opportunity. LGBTQIA+ are safer in their homes than outside. In other words, their life becomes limited after it is made known that they are LGBTQIA+. At places of entertainment, they are targets, and in the streets, they are also potential victims. Publicised cases show that it is usually people whom they know who harm them.

In the stories shared, there is an example of a case of corrective rape against a young woman, perpetrated by a family friend and a member of the church youth group. It was premeditated because those who were behind it thought that after the rape, she would succumb to the pressure and become heterosexual. Instead, it harmed her and left her torn apart, especially because the perpetrator and his family were family friends. She says that she regarded him as her big brother. Trust was not just broken on that day, it was eroded forever. She also expressed suspicion about the circumstances surrounding her rape. For some reason, nobody at the church believed her story, neither did her family. Instead, they defended the perpetrator. Such stories of being disbelieved and silenced are usually reported about the South African Police Service. It is now in the church where the victim has no ear to listen to her story, while the people who are supposed to defend her are more concerned about the reputation of the perpetrator than her well-being.

Reaction from the Victims

The cases presented above may not sound too serious to a person who is aware of very extreme stories. However, any form of rejection is very serious to a person who wants to belong. LGBTQIA+ are community members, born into families who are part of the community. They want to be loved, participate fully in the life of the community, and give as much as they have. Most of them have a lot to give in any case. As Lady Gaga said after the arrest of three men

who were planning to plant commercial explosives among the crowds in her show, targeting LGBTQIA+ people, in March 2025, LGBTQIA+ people have changed the world for the better; they have taught the world kindness.

In the case of these stories, individuals are seen taking stands against their families, giving them a 'take it or leave it choice'. The stand they have taken is saying, 'this is who I am, accept or reject me'. Once they made that stand, parents melted and accepted. After all, it is their children. There is nowhere they can banish them to. Even in the two cases of men who were forced to get married, they went into it protesting, but in the end, they reasoned with their spouses and extricated themselves from an intolerable situation.

Reception in the Church

The stories featured in this section demonstrate how LGBTQIA+ individuals have been received in churches over the years. They were collected before a great deal of work was done by the Christian Council through road shows and workshops. Feedback, as outlined in chapter 2 above, shows that the position of some churches has moved towards the positive, and some ministers/pastors and their congregations are beginning to think differently.

This section on reception in the church is necessary because, as argued in chapter 2, the church is a place of refuge. If it fails to be a place of refuge today, that does not negate its biblical mandate to serve as one. The retelling of individual experiences in the church reveals the failures of those in charge,

This section begins with stories about an individual's self-awareness, demonstrating that, in most cases, people felt that homosexuality came naturally without them knowing about it or being influenced by anyone in that direction. Instead of asking whether there is something mentally wrong with the person, this book asks, 'How do we relate to the image and likeness of God in the person who is being rejected by society?' The stories below are clustered according to the meanings they convey, under appropriate headings.

Themes from Experiences

An Individual's Self-awareness

In the stories of Nkosi and Nokukhanya, they were told by others what their real identities were, whereas they thought they were behaving naturally. Perhaps, with time, they would have made discoveries themselves, because it appears from their stories that they were beginning to feel different from other people. Both were at the points in their life where issues of identity were

beginning to take centre stage. There are also the silent assertors who lived life as they wished, including Samukelisiwe and Zama. They played with boys and dated same-sex partners. When asked, they did not pretend to be unaware of what they were doing. They admitted that they were lesbians. Zama even remembers that she was in Grade Ten when she became aware of her sexuality.

In **Dennis'** story, who grew up in a rural area of KwaZulu-Natal, he was insulated from some of the experiences people in cities go through. Unaware of the jargon used in urban areas, Dennis did not even know that the term homosexual existed, let alone it's meaning. All he knew was that he had a close friendship with a boy he grew up with until his school-going age. After he started attending school, he had several other friendships with boys.

Later, Dennis shared with a student magazine of the then Natal University that he only came across the term 'homosexual' when he entered the monastery to start his training as a Roman Catholic priest. He stated that it was some time later that some of the people he lived with pointed out that there was something unnatural about his relationships with the high school boys in the boarding establishment, which belonged to the monastery. By then he was in the second year of a Master's degree at the university. He then established a gay and lesbian support group for university students on campus. Interestingly, Dennis was not ordained in the Roman Catholic Church but in the Episcopal Church of Southern Africa. According to further newspaper reports, he was disqualified by the Roman Catholic Church.

It may have taken a long time for Dennis to realise that he had a different orientation. While orientation is the word he uses, it can perhaps more accurately be described as an inclination. If he was not aware of it, and he had not been actively involved in sexual activities, then he was not oriented towards that, but was behaving naturally. Several of the interviewees have confirmed they were not even conscious of their gayness, it was just who they were.

A final story in this regard is **Thembelani's**. He shared that he became aware of his sexuality when he was in Grade Eight. It manifested in his being attracted to men and his girlish mannerisms. Despite that, he continued to experiment with life and impregnated a girl. He then realised that he had made a mistake because he was not in love with the person he impregnated. But it was too late – he had already fathered a child despite being gay. A similar thing happened to someone of the opposite sex, Zama, as mentioned above.

This subsection concludes with the observation that all the stories have a thread that seems to compel a person to come back to their given identity. The

affected are not aware of their sexuality at first; others tell them. When the affected are aware of their sexuality but go on to experiment with marriage or heterosexual relationships, in some cases resulting in pregnancy, something brings them back to their original identity.

Confrontation by the Church

Confrontation by the church here refers to questioning, attempts to 'correct' a person, attacks from the pulpit, and ostracism. These all happened to the interviewees in a place meant to be a house of refuge. As indicated in an earlier chapter, not all churches are implicated in the above practices, and neither are all pastors unsympathetic, but the majority of the interviewees shared such alienation. LGBTQIA+ people who worship in so-called mainline churches have reported various subtle forms of discrimination, which amount to a disconnect between the inclusive official language of churches and practice in local congregations. Their stories guide the discussion below.

Questioning and Correcting

A few stories collected during the interviews tell of visits by pastors and prayer groups that attempted to exorcise the 'demon' of homosexuality in people. In one case, **Kwanele** complained about the condemnation of homosexuality as a sin, which contradicts biblical teaching.

In a confrontation with **Ayanda,** the pastor was called in by her parents to pray for her after she had disclosed her sexuality. The pastor conducted an exorcism, shouting: 'Demon out! Demon out!', according to Ayanda. Thereafter, she was so discouraged that she stopped attending church services at that church, although she said she still loves God. Her reaction was aggravated by the insistence of her family and the pastor to change her dress code so that innstead of wearing jeans and other pants, she was told to wear dresses. Regrettably, her uncle also stopped financing her studies at the Mangosuthu University of Technology.

A woman who chose to remain **anonymous** confidentially shared her sexual orientation with her mother. As a society steward, her mother was a leading figure in the church. Her mother took their confidential conversation to the women at the church, apparently stating it as a problem she had at home. The women went to her home to confront and pray for the interviewee. They too were exorcising, even if they were not using the same words used by the pastor in Ayanda's case. For this interviewee, things got worse after she told them that she was not engaged in the lesbianism they were praying against, rather, she

had become a transgender person by then. The woman's daughter had shared her sexuality with her mother in the hope that she would get support since she was still wrestling with where she was in her journey, or whether her journey had begun at all. And she had already moved on to become transgender by the time the prayer group came. The church people, regardless, applied their prayer, without caring to understand the context.

In another case, **Sifiso** was confronted by the Board members and pastors of her church and instructed to change her dress, shoes, hairstyle, and nails so she could 'look like a lady'. That effectively led to her leaving all her positions in the church as she opted to dress as who she was. They stripped her of all positions, from being a Board member to Sunday School teaching. She remained an ordinary member of the congregation of her Pentecostal church. It is not clear whether that demand or the pastor's sermons led to her leaving the church, but it was 'hard to listen to the pastor's sermons' thereafter.

Salim's story is unique. He was told by the pastor to leave the church because he was gay. When he inquired of the pastor whether he owned the church where Salim went to praise God, the pastor told Salim that as the pastor, he started the organisation and he reserved the right to decide who he wanted there. This experience is unique among the stories in this book. There is no subtlety about the views of the pastor. He made them known crudely and openly. The incident nearly caused a crisis of faith for Salim. However, a year later, he regained his faith in God. Interestingly, Salim had fellowship with the congregation a number of times while the pastor was away, without any problem.

The last story in this subsection is **Londeka's.** She was subjected to the same treatment as Sifiso and anonymous. Women of her mother's church descended on her home as a 'prayer squad'. They first wanted to establish her sexuality because someone had told them about her sexual orientation. Their mission was to pray for the 'demon' of homosexuality to come out of her. Londeka also mentions the manhandling she was subjected to as part of the way they pray.

It is interesting that in the cases reported on here, women are said to be the ones calling their prayer groups to deal with their daughters who were lesbians.++ They exerted undue pressure on the young women who had a clear understanding of their identities and had chosen to live accordingly.

Ostracism through Sermons and Other Utterances

There is a thin line between ostracism, marginalisation, and stigmatisation. The difference is in the severity of the actions taken. Above, ostracism is

linked to mocking, and it is argued that when a person is mocked consistently, they choose to excuse themselves from the places where people are mocking them. That is not self-banishment because it is involuntary. The stories here reveal that sermons and utterances by church members have had that effect. In some cases, individuals stopped going to church to remove themselves from what was supposed to be Christian fellowship. Even so, they remained committed to their faith. Others moved out of the congregation and out of the entire Christian tradition, thus giving ostracism its desired outcome. As shown in one story, where ostracism was not going to succeed, the person was told directly to leave.

It all starts with stigmatisation. Thembelani observed that leaders in his church are divided over the issue of LGBTQIA+. Elders and pastors view it differently. Those who are against it have their way, while those who are sympathetic are not audible, and they prefer to be silent. As a result, preaching condemns homosexuality as a sin and homosexual people are not considered to be Christians. Thembelani said that this stigmatisation of homosexuality leads to their discrimination, something that LGBTQIA+ people expect when they go to church. In other words, according to him, they have come to terms with insults and discriminatory practices.

Zamokuhle's experience was in the Roman Catholic Church, not with the priests or preachers a group of women within the church. They constantly complained about the increase in gays and lesbians in the church, the way they were dressed, and called them 'chickens'. Whatever the language of chicken meant, it upset Zamokuhle to the point of her resolving to leave the church. This was in addition to what she called 'nasty comments'.

In the Pentecostal and African-initiated churches, interviewees complained that homosexuality was condemned outright as immorality. They pointed out the lack of biblical support for that kind of language, and related the constant condemning reference to 'Sodom and Gomorrah' or hell, as the destiny of LGBTQIA+. Nokuthula, speaking on behalf of others with the same experience, found the language very hurtful. As a result, they refrained from going to church.

In the case of Warren, who returned the bishop's license and letters and testimonials that confirm him as a priest, he decided to leave when the bishop displayed what Warren considered to be double standards in his handling of social issues. The bishop was championing justice in a socio-political context elsewhere, while he denied justice and love to the marginalised LGBTQIA+ community at his doorstep. He would not accept him living with a male partner

if they had an intimate relationship. This would make it even more difficult if they were planning to get married, which they did in the end. Warren decided to move out of the ordained ministry completely and serve God in a different context. At the time of the interview in 2024, he was happily married to his partner and was successfully leading Hospice in Pietermaritzburg. Before the laws that legalised LGBTQIA+ in South Africa, clergy who came out about their sexuality were allowed to continue as priests in the Anglican Church with one condition, that they were not practising gay men. Ian, a retired priest, was instructed in line with that. He obeyed, although he confessed that he used his discretion when necessary. It is possible that the bishop who handled Warren's case had the same rule in mind.

Michael's church at the time he revealed his sexuality would not accept his ministry as a 'practising' gay priest. The same rule was applied to him as well. He and his wife decided to part ways after talking about his inclination towards being gay. It is not so much the withholding of the priestly license that pains Michael, but the stigmatisation that has also affected the lives of the two boys whom he and his spouse had adopted. They experienced social issues at the schools they attended and at the church as well. Michael and his spouse moved from one area to another to accommodate the situation. Is that self-banishment again or trying to cope with a human-made situation? Michael holds onto his papers that confirm his acceptance into the order of priesthood. He attends church services, but he cannot practice as a priest.

Reaction by the Victims

LGBTQIA+ people are not simply accepting what is happening in the church. They are part of a larger network of LGBTQIA+ in the country, some with international contacts. LGBTQIA+ individuals are members of society who serve in respectable positions such as lawyers, teachers, nurses, priests, pastors, judges, business people, and so on. They are resourceful persons and are serious about advocacy for their cause. Among the people in the group interviewed are those with a tertiary level of education.

Questions were raised in the interviews about the interpretive skills of pastors. The victims themselves saw gaps in the understanding of some texts. They also questioned why pastors would look for texts that are harmful to communal living instead of choosing those that build the body. The victims do not accept texts of doom, they want liberative texts. What they know is that they will not be separated from God, their creator, by the shortcomings of preachers who claim to have an inspiration.

This raises questions about whether the issue of LGBTQIA+ is a theological conundrum or whether it is caused by the prejudice of uninformed pastors and theologians. Issues of static reading of scriptures, prejudice, and ignorance were indirectly surfaced in the responses to the interviews. The following quotation from an interview sums this up thus:

> I feel that the same-sex conversation in the _____ Church is based on how people feel about gay people rather than what the Bible says. I think the church is very binary and very patriarchal, and because of the patriarchy, we cannot break the homophobia. I know people who sit on the Doctrine, Ethics, and Worship Committee, and the conversation is the same. It is about knowledge, about whether a man can marry another man. We are so far beyond that point now. We do not even understand humanity and sexuality. Science is showing us that people are born differently inside and outside. The church is concerned about division. They do not want the church to be divided, and they are not allowing the scholars who understand to speak and teach enough.

This response echoes the sentiments expressed by Heather and Michael in 2001 about the slowness of the church in adjusting its theology in light of scientific evidence and many other discoveries. It makes a mockery of the faith to continue to hold on to antiquated views instead of investing in understanding the new developments for the sake of the future. In an age of questioning young people, theological pronouncements have to be balanced and sound. The critical view shared by an LGBTQIA+ individual in the previous chapter is reiterated:

> I was tired of being presented with a God who punishes people, a God who is not loving. I left the church with that in mind. I did not want anything to do with it. I did not want anything to do with God, but eventually I realised that I could do something about it. I can start looking, not for God who punishes, but for God who is loving and kind. It happened that I met a pastor who was running a LGBTQIA+ church. At that time, it was not labelled like that. It was for people who are different, and that man helped me to see that the first thing that you need to do is to forgive yourself and think about God with different eyes. That process helped me a lot because I was able to have a moment for myself and say I am going to read the Bible in

my terms and how I understand it. Then I do not have to struggle with myself. So, I went through that process with him for six months because there were so many things that I needed to do. Eventually, I came out of that experience with new ways of embracing that God created me to be different. I read scripture passages like Psalms 139: 'God created me, and I am wonderfully made in the image of God' or Jeremiah, chapter 1, verse 4: 'I knew you before you were born.' God knew me and He sent me for help... I will never allow anyone to tell me anything else.

5 ADDRESSING PASTORAL DEFICIENCIES

The stories of the LGBTQIA+ community are not meant to be musings, as one gay theologian calls them, about the experiences of this community. They are known to both lay and clerical members of the church. Perpetrators include both lay and clerical members, and the persecution referred to in the stories occurs both inside the church and in broader society. As the stories indicate, some of the persecution happens openly, while some occurs in private spaces. There are attempts to justify it theologically, despite a lack of biblical support for the persecution of gay individuals or others who identify differently from the conventional profiling system. The contrary is found in the Bible, first, with Jesus standing up for various marginalised groups such as the poor, sick, women, and children. Further, Paul advocates for the Gentiles, women, and children. One might expect a similar response if their contexts were grappling with the place of the LGBTQIA+ community in society, and in their fellowship groups.

The report on LGBTQIA+ personal stories in the previous chapter would not be complete without a theological reflection that engages some of the theological positions of the Christian family in light of the scriptures. This chapter focuses on aspects of scripture that support the pastoral ministry position discussed in this book and the glaring defects in the reception of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Since pastoral ministry involves being the hands, feet, eyes, and heart of Jesus in the world today, it is fitting to start by asking how Jesus himself would have welcomed the LGBTQIA+ community in his fellowship group. Paul, who followed Jesus, offers a slightly different perspective, which will also be briefly considered. This is used as the point of departure, followed by reflections on each of the five themes arising from the reading of the stories. Notably, the different experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community share many similarities.

Jesus, Paul, and Human Sexuality

Jesus was a historical figure who lived among people with complex human characteristics and needs. He was expected to give his views on different issues arising from the human situation. All four gospels refer, respectively, to incidents relating to marriage, infidelity, and drunkenness. Today, a big issue is often made of such matters and they are used as criteria for deciding whether a person is good or bad, or determining whether a person should be an insider or an outsider in the church or society.

It is not clear where Christian ideas on homosexuality come from, besides the Victorian ethics era (19th century), which will be explained in a section below. They do not come from the ministry of Jesus. In all the cases recorded in the gospels, Jesus appears to be consciously steering away from issues of what Roman Catholics refer to as 'cardinal sins' or sins of the flesh. He answers the question about an adulterous wife who ends up with multiple husbands before she dies by saying that she will not be anybody's wife because all will be spirit on the day of resurrection (Matthew 22:27-30). Whatever she, or they, did in the past will be irrelevant because there will no longer be male or female. If it were a person responding to such a question today, the likelihood is that they would first look at why she had so many husbands during her life. This starts from a deficit position, as did the Scribes and Pharisees, to find fault with the other person.

In a different example, Jesus is asked to give a verdict on the case of a woman accused of committing adultery. While there would have been two people involved, in the Jewish context of the time, it was always the woman who had a case to answer. The accusers of the woman, from a Jewish context, had hoped that Jesus would condemn her because they had evidence, and there was no way Jesus was going to avoid that. Calmly and authoritatively, Jesus asked whoever was without sin to cast the first stone at the woman (Joh 8:7-11). He did not try to defend her, deny the offense on her behalf, or explain it away. All he was saying was that there is no sin that is greater than the other. None of those who had brought the woman to him could claim that they had no sin. At the same time, they could not argue that theirs were not as serious as those of an adulterer. After they had failed that test, Jesus let the woman go. It remains unclear whether in the original story, Jesus told the woman to go and sin no more, or whether that was added by the evangelist who used the story for a different purpose.

Any exegete who tries to find a text that condemns homosexuality or similar tendencies in the gospels will have a tough task to find one. Homophobia,

defined as dislike or prejudice against gay people, leads to all manner of actions that can only be described as a negation of the love Jesus has for everyone. There is nothing of that nature in the ministry of Jesus. Instead, gay-friendly theologians use some texts in the gospels to support the view that Jesus was aware of homosexuality and that he did not condemn it in his public ministry. His reference to Eunuchs being born that way, others being made to be like that, for example, is seen as referring to homosexuals (Matthew 19:12). Broadening this view, it can be argued that Jesus avoided being drawn into discussions about such matters because, to him, obstacles in the path to the kingdom were caused by failure to act justly and to treat one another as expected (see Luke 14:13-14, message of Micah 6:8), not by what people did with their bodies.

Such passages prove that Jesus adopted a pastoral approach in every situation. Instead of judging, rejecting, and scolding as a default position, he first made people whole, then warned them to turn their lives around if they were going in the wrong direction. These were the accused who were brought to him or reported to him. The woman he met at the well in John (4:4-20) would have been called promiscuous today (see 4:18), but John does not refer to her in such terms because that is not how the Jesus he knew would have regarded her. Jesus had a cordial conversation with her and led her to the point of her recognising her shortfalls without him condemning her. His intervention on behalf of what would have been regarded as expendables in his society – the poor, beggars, sick, lame, old, and others, according to Luke's Gospel – should be regarded in the same way. Everyone else rejected them, but Jesus embraced them because they were human beings in need of love and other benefits associated with a charitable spirit. These might sound like unrelated examples because they say nothing about sexual activity or sexuality, but that is exactly the point. The acronym LGBTQIA+ makes it clear that this community is not only about sexual intimacy but about an identity that is not accepted in conventional terms. Jesus did not conform to conventional terms but introduced love.

The use of the term homosexual these days may therefore even be narrow.

It is not surprising, when considering the Acts of the Apostles against the above background, that it is silent on sexuality and related matters. The nascent church focused on the aspects that build the body, not on peripheral issues like those discussed in this booklet. There may have been many intimate relationships in the early fellowship groups, but no one was actively seeking them out. The term 'philadelphia'– brotherly love – extended beyond the

brothers and included sisters as well. There is reason to believe that there were intimate relationships among some there.

There is a slightly different situation in the epistles, though. Believers in the diaspora were human like any other humans, and they participated in the pleasures of the flesh like any other. This comes through in the various ways Paul is trying to get them to slow down and focus on the gospel about the risen Christ. The author's interventions ranged from private and personal life to public life, in the church. Given his Jewish background and training in the Torah, he had moments of conservatism. Taking good elements from past experiences is not bad, especially when they were giving a structure to the new entity. It is against this background that Paul's utterances about debauchery must be understood (see Galatians 5:19-23). He aimed to put a ring around Christian fellowship groups to make them distinct from the world around them. They could not focus on the new Way and witness to the world around them while being distracted by the pleasures of the flesh.

Amid such admonitions came various permutations of the verse from Leviticus (18:22). In Romans (1:26-27) and 1 Timothy (1:9-10), it resonates more like a teaching or preaching than an admonition. Members are warned about the outsiders who engage in these actions, and are cautioned not to do so. There are consequences for those who do. Interestingly, homosexuality is always mentioned alongside other behaviours; it does not stand alone. This suggests that it may not have been a problem within those fellowship groups (congregations) but perhaps in the neighbourhood or the historical context that traces back to the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah. In 1 Corinthians (6:9-10), there is a hint that Gentile converts may still have been participating in such acts. After a plea to them not to take their matters to 'pagan' courts, they are reminded that there are still among them men and women who behave in a manner that Paul described as unacceptable to God. The term translated by some as 'unnatural acts' and by others as 'homosexuality' is used in both 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. This might indicate that the statements were made in passing to warn them not to adopt the ways of their neighbours, as their ancestors did upon their arrival in Canaan. For that is how they lost touch with the vision that lured them out of slavery in Egypt. This is one interpretation. Others have made philosophical arguments suggesting it is about the shameful act of a man 'subjecting his authority to another man' by giving him his body in that way. That perspective is said to emerge from a reading against the backdrop of Jewish religion and culture. The other alternative is to dispute the translation of the Greek word 'philadephia' mentioned earlier.

How the pastoral issue is addressed in Paul's epistles and those associated with him is different from the way Jesus addressed it. While Jesus was hands-on, Paul wrote from a distance. He commended where necessary and admonished where he saw fit. There is no direct reference to homosexuality in ten out of thirteen epistles associated with Paul. It is therefore not easy to determine if he had a pastoral plan for it. Rather, turning to statements like, 'in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female' (Galatians 3:28), people must accept each other and not discriminate because of a different background or identity.

Four Pastoral Deficiencies

The oral stories of homophobia victims have been summarised and presented in the previous chapter, highlighting themes arising from the stories. The sections below focus on the pastoral/theological points arising from reflection on the experiences.

An Abnormality, a Demon, or Evil?

The stories that were sampled reflect the same experiences from different churches in the province. The nature of persecution differs from community to community, and in some cases, it is overt while in others, it is subtle. All the stories share some kind of persecution, including violence, insults, imposed prayers, demonisation from the pulpit, attempted exorcisms, or excommunication. In some cases, the subject of LGBTQIA+ is taboo and communities pretend it does not exist. In other communities, there is some support for the affected individuals and sympathy for their families.

Notwithstanding the above mixed reception, the overall impression is one of negativity. This is largely because the most influential people in the church, that is, religious leaders, have displayed a great deal of ambivalence toward LGBTQIA+ persons down through the ages. They handle the issue of LGBTQIA+ communities as if they are dealing with a hot potato (e.g., the Anglican Church Provincial Synod of 2024). Is the church dealing with an evil or an abnormality? This question needs to be reframed, as the church is dealing with neither – it is presented with a 'difference'. If it cannot deal with a difference, it is because it is unable to do so in other areas of its life as well, not because it is faced with a sexuality issue. This is explained further below.

A simple but seldom talked about example in handling the differences manifests in the number of religious groupings that exist. They are not called churches but groupings because most of the smaller ones call themselves by different names, such as 'fellowship' groups. Some broke away from the mother

bodies because they could not handle differences with the leadership. Others were ejected by the mother bodies because their claim to be spirit-inspired, which sometimes causes them to get into a trance, could not be tolerated. Bengt GM Sundkler's (1961), *Bantu Prophets in South Africa,* gives an idea of why this difference could not be tolerated in the 'established' churches. Some within a given denomination receive *charisma*. The leadership of the church decides to give them an ultimatum because they introduce a type of worship that is not in line with high churchmanship. The ultimatum usually presents a choice between changing their ways or leaving to find a group that can accommodate their charismatic gift. Often such individuals go and start their own worship groups. Another example relates to natural difference and gender categories. Living within a patriarchal society and having been brought up in this milieu, people are taught to believe men are superior to women. Accordingly, men suppress women if they do things that men have always thought are reserved for themselves, although women do them differently, sometimes, much better. Men keep women out of the ministry, become rude towards them, and in some cases, become violent towards women. There are many other examples that could be mentioned.

The above examples suggest that the struggle, resistance or inability to handle difference surfaces first before reality sinks in. God created different people, different animal species, and different plant species, but these all were made to complete creation and beautify the world (see Genesis 1:31). Imagine a monotonous world with only one kind of people, one type of animal, one gender, and either short or tall people only. We would not appreciate the wonder of creation as much as we do. It would all be boring. But is it possible to change what God has put in place? No, it is not. That is how it is. The choice then is to embrace those who are different in the way as those who are the same, and to celebrate. Within the human species itself, people are discriminated against because of their skin colour and many want to get rid of darker ones. In some parts of the world, people who live with albinism are seen as an abnormality and are persecuted. In parts of Africa (e.g. Uganda, Malawi), gays and lesbians are thought to be an abomination, and they are persecuted, while churches in some parts of the world (e.g. USA, Africa, UK) are fragmented over different views on the place of LGBTQIA+ in the ministry of Jesus. The list is endless. It is not necessary to agree with the choices the LGBTQIA+ community has made about their lives. At the same time, that does not give anyone a license to brand them as evil in our midst. In the Bible, evil is portrayed as any thought and/or action that seeks to destroy (examples in Proverbs 8.13, Romans 12.91

Thessalonians 5.22, Romans 12.21, Matthew 6.13, and Ephesians 6.12). It is a spirit that bubbles up from within, inspired by the evil one. The Bible warns against association with such. But it also assures us that we need not fear the evil one, for God's children have a stronger spirit than that of the evil one. A longer explanation on the meaning of evil in the Bible will digress from the reflection in this section. The point is to explain that is in dealing with people who may be slightly different in terms of their conduct and life choices, they need not be 'Other-ised', because, like us, they are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26).

Reflecting on the experiences of the holocaust, a French-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, reflected on the pain of being treated as 'the Other', and what Otherness meant in the context of Nazi Germany. He was developing a philosophy out of a concept that was already present in the works of Hegel, Fichte, and a few others. The concept was not intended to be complimentary; instead, it implied that 'Self' was better and 'the Other' had less value. Levinas reflected on how looking in the eyes of a helpless and suffering person affected him. We lose the image and likeness of God when we 'Other-ise' another person. This point is explored below.

The Book of Genesis says in the first creation story (Gen 1:31) that God saw that everything God created was good and perfect. There was no mistake in anything living that God had created. Even after the transgression of Adam and Eve, there is nothing imperfect about God's creation, but God only regrets that those God created 'in our image and likeness' (Gen 6:6) had fallen prey to the evil one and nearly spoilt the beauty of the holy paradise. Hence, God took them out of the place without cancelling or taking back the Godly likeness (Gen 3). That is what is common among all humans. It refers to the inherent good that is in all of us – the good we are born with before the evil one pulls us in a different direction. Physical features may look different, but likeness, the substance in us, carries God's stamp, regardless of which religion one belongs to.

Loving someone who looks the same, with the same reproductive organs, is not motivated by evil but by a way of loving that is different. Such people are not motivated by a spirit that wants to hurt, but by passion, which they would have given to the opposite partner if they wanted to reproduce. In doing so, they may be transgressing social norms and *more*s, but they do not lose the likeness of God, just as everyone else did not lose it.

Following what in theological language is known as the fall of Adam and Eve, God turned what was a negative situation into a positive one by blessing

them with procreation (see Genesis 3:16). First, there was recognition that the human needed company; it was not good for him to be alone (Genesis 2:18-24). Emphasis was not on procreation but on companionship. After the fall, companionship was expanded to include procreation (3:16). It is possible that the devil's interference with God's work aborted natural development and evolution. It is impossible to know how far the companionship of Adam and Eve (Man and Woman) would have gone had the two not succumbed to temptation. At Easter, Christians sing 'Oh! Happy fault…' of Adam and Eve because there is the belief that if it were not for them, humanity would not have had the benefits of Jesus Christ. That again is the church turning what was negative into something positive. Is there going to be a time when the church has a much clearer view of what God might make of the LGBTQIA+ in the world today? To know this, it is necessary to stop judging the situation by worldly standards and wait for God's light and guidance. The situation currently is characterised by push and resistance despite the example set by Jesus in his dealings with everyone he came across. His vocabulary would not have included words like '*isitabane*', which are used by preachers referred to in the oral stories. Such words immediately connote a negative difference.

These are not abnormal but ordinary people who serve the community as doctors, lawyers, judges, priests, teachers, and so on. Could the face of evil be looking like them if the opposite of that is God's image and likeness?

Weaponising Biblical Texts

One of the stories revealed another truth that is seldom talked about. Human sexuality is not about gays and lesbians. All humans are, by nature, sexual. For that matter, everything that has life has sexual tendencies and natural urges. It is because of advanced intellect and social norms that humans practice sexuality differently from other animal species. They have regular partners – some more than one; they do not practice intimate acts in the public eye, and they claim that their relationships are based on love, not sex. Are pastors excluded from this?

The story about a pastor who made advances to a young man says 'no'– because the pastor is also human. Whether he would justify his attempt by claiming that he was testing the young man to see how homosexual relationships work is irrelevant. His behaviour demonstrated that every person has vulnerabilities and feelings. If the pastor's actions were to be condemned, it would be on two grounds: namely, infidelity to his wife and unethical behaviour because he was taking advantage of someone he was supposed

to assist. The gender of the person he was approaching would be irrelevant because we now know that whether it is same-sex attraction or not, sexual activity is possible. In this instance, the pastor occupies a leadership position. If it were an ordinary person, it might not even be noticed.

Who, in reality, is completely innocent? Jesus told the leaders who accused an adulterous woman to cast the first stone if they were clean (John 8:7-8). None did because they knew in their consciences that, away from the public eye, they were engaged in activities they condemned in others. For example, some of the heterosexuals who condemn homosexuality because they understand it to be about intimacy with same-gender partners are themselves engaging in the same practice with their opposite-gender partners. Studies show that about 90% of gay (and lesbian) couples do not engage in sexual penetration, while at least 15% of heterosexual couples practice sex in the same manner that sexually active homosexual couples do. What does society make of this? No one sees what happens in the dark corners of life. Jesus's approach to matters of this nature is more realistic than putting a holy face out in public when something else is happening in private.

Some Christians – pastors and lay people alike – tend to overlook the above. It is always easier for people to see wrong in others than in ourselves. Biblical passages are used to condemn and bash those deemed to be sinners, while at the same time, the condemner is privately enjoying what is condemned in public. There are passages cited all the time without taking their background into account. Such passages are used as weapons against victims of homophobia. The passage in Leviticus, repeated in Romans and 1 Timothy, as already mentioned above, is a favourite for LGBTQIA+ bashers. Strangely, it only occurs once in the Old Testament and there are three permutations of it in the New Testament. This begs the question whether homosexuality was not a common problem or whether it was practised but was never a focus of attention. In South Africa, there is a lot of denial about the existence of homosexuality in African communities. People in leadership positions often talk as if they are genuinely not aware of what is going on in reality. They even advance the argument that homosexual relations are an 'abnormality' that arises out of depravity in jail and the mine compounds, where there is no alternative. This view was held and promoted for many decades. More and more activists, as seen in the stories recorded in this booklet, are now coming out to expose this as denialism. They tell a different story, based on personal experiences. It is possible, then, that conservative cultures in the background of the Bible also denied the practice it regarded as 'deviance'. And the silence

might be stemming from that.

The three Bible passages mentioned above are controversial, although they are among the most straightforward in the Bible. The meaning is straightforward, not ambiguous, thus there is not as much room for interpretation as for other passages. It leaves the interpreter with a choice between identifying with the context in which it was uttered and rejecting it. However, it is important to clearly understand their contexts. The Old Testament passage's background may not be clear, but in the New Testament, background studies indicate that there were homosexual practices in the surrounding Hellenistic environments. Paul, who tried to put a ring around Christians, according to the letters to Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy, invoked the Leviticus passage as a way of urging followers of the Way (term used by Luke in Acts) not to fall into the same temptation. It should be remembered that his message throughout is that those who are part of the Way should always be conscious of being set apart for God's purposes (saints), and that they should therefore refrain from the pleasures of the world. The same passage, applied to two different contexts, has been the subject of much scrutiny in the last three decades or so, especially in the light of the marginalisation of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Passages such as the one about Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-29), like the Leviticus passage, are also used in justifying resistance of the LGBTQIA+ community within society. Here again, as was mentioned above, even heterosexual couples, in marriage, also participate in sexual activity in the same way as do homosexuals who penetrate. If the primary reason for invoking passages such as Leviticus is to prevent sexual activity, it is outdated. The LGBTQIA+ community, as stated before, is not limited to gay men and lesbian women. Therefore, it is not only about sex with same-gender partners. It is about the assertion of suppressed identities of people who are determined to be self-defined. Again, what does society make of this?

Is it balanced to only look at texts that condemn LGBTQIA+, or should there be exploration of the side? What about looking for texts that affirm one's identity? For example, texts such as 'for freedom we have been freed' (Galatians 5:1), and 'image and likeness of God' or 'in Christ, there is no man or woman, neither Jew nor Gentile', which have already been mentioned above. These are neutral but affirming texts. South Africans should know better when it comes to using the Bible as a weapon. It was used against black people, taming them for colonisation. It was used to take land away from people. It was used against political detractors, telling them to separate religion from politics. It was used to tell the people to uncritically obey the state. It was also used to

condemn and threaten with doom anyone who did not conform to prescribed norms and *mores*.

A Unisa theologian once edited a book with the title: *Use and Abuse of the Bible.* The essays in it identify how people use texts in the Bible for their own ends. In fact, in that author's view, people are reading the Bible incorrectly. The book was written at a particular point in history when theologians thought that the text contained one singular meaning. Scholars later concluded that meaning is given by the interpreting community and that it is not stable because each interpreting community sees it through the lenses of its context. The same should apply to different 'fellowship groups'. If a text means one thing to them, they should not universalise it. The guiding principle during colonial days was *subjugation*, and today it should be *emancipation and the common good*. Do LGBTQIA+ people contravene the last two? Put differently, are Christians wanting to subjugate this community of people who prefer to identify themselves differently, in the name of God? These are questions one is left to wrestle with after reading the stories and hearing the voices of pain and/or confusion. The sampled area for this booklet was small, and there are many more serious stories in other parts of the country. Corrective killings and corrective rape is recorded as experiences of people in other parts of the country. Scriptures should never be used as a weapon to suppress such pain by making someone feel guilty for being who they are.

Importantly, some victims feel that preachers need to be trained to read the Bible in a way that does not offend the already marginalised. Scriptures should not be used as weapons trained on vulnerable people. The damage caused by this may be seen in the following extract from Nkosi's story.

> The conservative view caused me not to see any good in myself. This belief was contrary to God's pronouncement in Genesis that the creation of the world and humans was good. I am gifted with different gifts, and I am intelligent. However, I was failing to acknowledge that about my life. The only thing that rang in my mind was how sinful I was. So, nothing could come out of me since I was sinful. Worse, my sexuality reminded me in tangible ways how sinful I was. This idea further contributed to low self-esteem and self-hate.

Nkosi was made to believe that he was suffering because of what is known as original sin:

> I believed I was born a sinner because of Adam and Eve's sin. So, I had inherent brokenness, and it manifested as a deviant sexual

> orientation. This view helped me because I was also asking why I was gay. However, I did not know the view would be destructive in the long run.

That is the kind of damage that should not go on *ad infinitum*.

Exclusion vs God's Kin[g]dom

When continually asking how Jesus would respond in a particular situation, it is not possible to find a passage where he is said to have reacted by excluding anyone. He opened the doors of the Kin[g]dom to everyone who does God's will. That is the criterion he left in the world. It is 'not all those who call me, "Lord, Lord…" but those who do my father's will' (Matthew 7:21). It is not God's will that anyone should be excluded.

John 3:16 reads, 'God so loved the WORLD…, that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life'. Believing in him entails doing the Father's will. The emphasis here is on 'the world', not 'the church'. There was no church at the time of Jesus, although there was by the time John wrote his gospel. He was, therefore, not unaware of the shortcomings of the church and its surrounding world. Yet he broadened the footprint of the kin[g]dom Jesus came to establish. Nothing could be more inclusive. Those who remained outside excluded themselves by not accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour. As far as the stories are concerned, the affected members of the community insisted on keeping their faith in God and doing God's will.

Luke takes the link with one's works or conduct further. He teaches that those [who have been fattened by life in this world (our addition)] will not be able to go through the narrow gate. His point was that people should not expect to have automatic access because of racial affiliation or historical links with Jesus. The 'eye of the needle' primarily tested whether one served God as they should have, that is, directly through worship, then through what they do to fellow human beings (for example, the treatment of Lazarus the beggar by Dives in Luke 16). That, in a world of exclusions, discrimination, and marginalisation, is what Luke was interested in. Note also that for Luke, it was important for the Holy Spirit to descend on everyone on Pentecost day, regardless of their background. It should also be noted that in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 10:15), he includes Peter's vision about different foods, ending with a stern warning, 'do not call what I have created profanity'. That does not only refer to pork but also to different human beings, such as Gentiles. We have already referred to the use of the term *isitabane* above, which implies profanity in the Zulu culture.

Beyond Luke-Acts are Pauline teachings about oneness and inclusivity. The idea is to refute the exclusion of the Gentiles based on their not being circumcised. Both Paul and the author of 1 Peter insinuate that whoever reverts to exclusionary teachings and practices is corrupt, and they are corrupting the vision of the Way. The matter threatened the unity of both the local fellowship groups and the apostolic leadership. Paul reports himself on his confrontation of Peter about the issue of circumcision. If these teachings are taken seriously by the Church, does it understand them fully? Or is it a question of what is portrayed as selective justice in Warren Oxford's story? The church intervenes in situations of political injustice but turns its head away from injustices meted out to the LGBTQIA+ community. It is not fair to apply the policy to one group and not to another. Why are our churches accepting this?

To be fair to the church, it is not all the pastors who denigrate, shame, and threaten LGBTQIA+ people with doom. Many prefer to be silent for fear of exposing their views on the matter, lest they be isolated. Others hide behind church policies that do not recognise same-gender partnerships, or discourage them. Others, still, try to justify their rejection and persecution, and even psychological torture, of gay and lesbian members of the church. In a gathering held in Durban with church leaders not long ago, they as a group pledged support for the LGBTQIA+ community, apparently, on pastoral grounds. Other churches have pastoral guidelines that offer support, on pastoral grounds, but place restrictions on LGBTQIA+ activities and full participation in the church's life. The recent example of the Anglican Church Synod might reflect the mind of the Synod, but not of individual members of the church. There are many different views and practices.

The above conduct amounts to exclusion. It displays an important Self and the opposite, that is, 'the Other'. In other words, the conduct creates the impression that some people are better and worthy, while others do not deserve the oxygen they breathe. That is bad theology, and it has no backing in the life of Jesus or the ministry of the Holy Spirit. To reiterate, the criterion for entry into God's Kingdom is doing God's (the Father's) will, which is based on serving God and loving the neighbour.

A Pastoral-Theological Situation

The situation described above is more a pastoral-theological than a biological one. In discussing the place of LGBTQIA+ in the church and society, the focus should be on their humanness rather than their gender. Their primary theological characteristic is that they are humans, created in the image and

likeness of God, as set out in the Genesis account of creation. A negative theology is the end point when the departure point is one of deficiency. People are not problems to be solved. Neither do they always carry problems for pastors to solve. Most of the time, they want to share in the love and fellowship of the Body of Christ, and in turn, they want to share or pass on the love they have received. Some priests and pastors tend to see their ministry primarily in terms of problem-solving.

In the above stories shared in this booklet, the affected people experienced a mixed reception from parents, society, and the church. Some parents initially accepted them when they discovered that they were gay or lesbian, while others did not until later. The same was the case with church members and members of the broader society. But there seems to be reluctance among pastors and priests, as the number of sympathetic pastors in the stories indicates. Pastors are largely guided by the orthodox teachings of the church, no matter if they belong to the 'missionary' churches or later Pentecostal or African churches. They think that some of the Western value systems that have been imposed on the church and theology are Christian tenets. Hence, they close ranks to defend what is not in line with Christ's teachings. Sexual ethics, for example, reflect the nineteenth century Victorian era, and their response to the need to curb promiscuity in an age of deadly sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhoea and syphilis. Similar restrictions were placed on human movement in our lifetime, the aim being to prevent the spread of COVID-19. That has nothing to do with the Bible, but a great deal to do with practical ways of saving humanity.

The irreversible reality is that there are homosexual people in the church and society. It is not only homosexuals but also people who have changed the sex they were at birth and have become the opposite of that. Some people prefer to dress up and wear makeup like their opposite sex would, while others prefer to have intra-sexual relationships. That is what makes up the LGBTQIA+ community. Pastorally, they cannot be chased away from the church based on the above choices and congenital inclinations. Nor can they be seen as sinners to be corrected. Paul reminds us that 'all have sinned and fallen short of God's grace' (Romans 3:23). There is no one perfect, and there is no sin greater or smaller than the other. The law may make that distinction, but those living in the time of God's grace and love see, or should see, things differently.

A well-known practical theologian, Thomas Groome (1980), asserts that pastoral counselling aims to make whole. Those who are entrusted with the responsibility of pastoring others should always aim to make them whole

rather than break them. One of the ways of ensuring wholeness is to embrace and love all equally. That is the least people expect of a pastor. In him or her, they see God's representative. In fact, in a later publication, Groome (1991) implies that praxis is the best way of preaching. People are drawn to God or driven away because of the actions of religious people. It is heart-breaking to read the stories or listen to recordings of people relating how they have been publicly ridiculed by pastors from the pulpit. The reports make it clear that these are not general sermons aimed at everyone, if the preacher changes the theme or language when they see people they recognise as gay or lesbian. They are pointed at them. It is even more heart-breaking to note that some sit through the sermon, enduring harsh words and stares from other members of the congregation, all because they are already inside the church. It sounds traumatic. They are bearing on their backs the abrasions and weals they sustained from the whips of their brethren.

It is not surprising to see people leaving the church. Some in the stories decided to leave the church. Others decided to continue worshipping but in a different fellowship group that is accepting, while others have resolved to stick it out regardless of what is being said about them and to them. In a case from Cape Town that is not recorded in chapter 3, the respondent decided to turn her back totally on religion because her family, which was Christian, would not accept her transition from being a man to being a woman (physical alignment of reproductive organs with internal feeling and external conduct) but a Muslim family took her in and were more understanding. She chose not to affiliate with any religion, citing a huge hurt and disappointment with religious people. She does admit, though, that if the Muslim family had worked a bit harder to recruit her, she might have consented. What she found attractive about them was the unconditional care and community spirit that lacked in the Christian context. That is a huge indictment. She is not the only one who says that.

Martin Luther would say that God accepts all and uses all because God is not looking at how perfect a person is, but at the person's willingness to be used as a channel of God's grace. Every Christian is called to 'pastor' the other in a way that leads to their wholeness, not to break them simply because they are slightly different from themselves. This is where the imperative role of the church as the custodian of the extension of the ministry of Christ comes in. The place of refuge is spoken of as an imperative because of this mandate. The church can therefore not be the opposite of what it is called to be, instead inflicting pain on the flock that comes to Christ for succour. Where else should they turn to? A group of people has left the church. As Ayanda, a victim of

rape put it, it was sad to leave but she had to. 'It was very difficult for me as a lesbian to continue attending church services, I realised that they do not like me in their church'. Recall the words of another victim, Amahle, who also left the church: 'I strongly believe that prevention is better than cure. I did not want to expose myself to stigma, rejection, and discrimination in the church. I am only told by my lesbian and gay friends that their lives are difficult in the church. Personally, I would not advise lesbians and gays to go to church because we are not accepted and affirmed.'

Call for an Inclusive Theology

A call has been made by at least two of the respondents for an inclusive theology and practice. Nokuthula said:

> I was tired of being *presented with a God who punishes people, a God who is not loving* (our emphasis). I left the church with that in mind. I did not want anything to do with it. I did not want anything to do with God, but eventually, I realised that I can (sic) do something about it. I can start *looking, not for God who punishes but for God who is loving and kind* (emphasis ours).

Another, more direct call was made by Londeka, who accused homophobic pastors of failing to wrestle with the biblical text. Then she suggested: 'Maybe we should have Bible studies where you are reading the text not in the spiritual sense, not to say *Umoya, moya,* but look at what the actual words mean, what the Bible says in the original text and language because there is no direct translation from such a language.' This indicts the church for the biased and toxic interpretation of the scripture.

Inclusivity is the opposite of the situation discussed in the last section above. Inclusivity is usually talked of in terms of religious groupings, where one religion sees itself as the dominant one while it recognises other expressions of the faith as well. Exclusivity has to do with a claim to the monopoly of the truth by one dominant religion. As shown above, it is possible to apply the same categorisations to individuals. In the stories provided in chapter 3 and the reflections on exclusivity, all, including those who are not condemning, seem to lay claim to one monopoly of the truth. The discussion of inclusivity recognises the dominant tenets and place of the Christian faith, but it also pleads for a recognition of the changed and still changing contexts of the faith. Truth has become relative, whether we like it or not.

In the article by Michael Worsnip and Heather Garner, cited in chapter 3, the authors accuse the church in one part of not adapting to the times in which it lives. Conditions change, but the church often remains in the past. Hence, they refer to its theology as a 'flat world theology'. By this, they mean a theology that is based on a prescientific idea that defines the world as flat, with a layer below the earth, called hell (sheol), the earth (world) in the middle, and above the earth, the layer called heaven (sky). Scientists have since discovered that there are no planets called heaven or hell in the physical world. Neither is the world stacked in the way it is described in the Bible, especially in John's Gospel. Instead, the world is spherical like a ball, as we see in the world's globe. However, the church has never updated its pre-scientific era theology, which is based on a faulty understanding of the world. This is not an attempt to make any geographical point, but one about the church's inability to change. How does the church extend the love of Christ to the flock of Christ if its ministry feeds on biblical Israel's retributive approach and exclusivity? Who is relegated to hell and who is 'lifted up' to heaven, in their understanding, is based on the categories of people they create socially. It is, therefore, not surprising that preachers foresee hell for homosexuals who are 'the Other' in the current situation.

The above-cited article by Worsnip and Garner was published in 2001. Twenty-three years later, Michael Worsnip wrote a long story about how he and his partner's relationship was not accepted by the church, leading to him leaving the ordained ministry, and his partner turning his back on religion. Later, when they had adopted two sons, these were discriminated against and made to suffer at school, church, and society. They were excluded because they were black children, adopted by two white men, who happened to be gay. The problem was passed on to the children, leading to them also turn their backs on religion, finding much of what it is about to be 'false'. Michael remained in the faith although his church has consistently refused to return to him his priestly licence. His faith remains intact, despite the above experiences.

None of the stories cited above suggests a new or separate religion or faith from the dominant Christian faith. Nor is one's private but open life a challenge to the dominant culture. They, instead, plead for inclusion. An inclusive theology accepts that while most people accept the church's teaching about a union being between lovers of opposite genders, there is a growing group within the church that demonstrates that love is between people, regardless of gender. That does not take anything away from the dominant teaching of the church. Instead, it enhances it.

Despite the above, it is encouraging that most members of the LGBTQIA+ community have resolved not to allow their experiences to make them turn their backs on the Christian faith. They may be fearful of humans, but they are not fearful of God. They may be angry with humans, but they love God.

The concluding chapter below looks at a way forward that includes what is referred to as a 'pastoral dancing circle'. If the points discussed above point to a deficient and defective pastoral situation, it is a call to the church to urgently rethink its pastoral strategies. The members who think that they can use prayer and exorcism to 'straighten' people they consider to be 'crooked', are causing more spiritual damage than good. So do the preachers who put the fear of hell in people from the pulpit. As the late Klaus Nurnberger used to say, the pulpit is not a place to shoot bullets from. All the shooters achieve, hoping to convert the LGBTQIA+ individuals, is to stigmatise them. They expose them to the congregation and they tell the congregation why they should not associate with them. This does not change the people they hope to win over from the LGBTQIA+ community.

6

THE WAY FORWARD

At this point, it is hoped that the readers have seen and learnt enough about the LGBTQIA+ community to want to assist in alleviating their pain. They are presently like the downtrodden referred to in the passage from Isaiah, which Luke highlights as the foundation of Jesus' ministry (Luke 4:18-20). As another verse from scripture makes clear, 'they that sow in tears shall reap in joy' (Psalm 126:5). However, what happens between sowing and reaping determines whether there will be joy or the opposite in the end. A great deal of work is needed to ensure a pleasing harvest. Things do not just happen on their own. Not working on it may cause the seeds to rot underground instead of germinating. This should also apply to the LGBTQIA+ project. This book concludes by looking at possible pastoral steps that will deliver joy to those who have brought their pain to the attention of KZNCC.

It is acknowledged that the KZNCC project is not a first attempt to address the plight of the LGBTQIA+ community. Several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private voluntary organisations (PVOs) are currently occupied with the same. The government has established legislation between 2005 and 2023 to protect people who identify as LGBTQIA+. Some churches have spoken against any ill-treatment of LGBTQIA+, based on their sexuality. Chapters reflecting the voices of the affected, and the themes that arose from their responses to interview questions, reveal a range of tactics used to intimidate, torture, and undermine LGBTQIA+ individuals. The difference between the above activities and KZNCC's approach is that their voices are followed by theological reflection which recognises their faith and uses that as the entry point in interactions between them and the broader church family.

This final chapter focuses on the steps that should serve as a way forward, looking to the future, not back at the past. That is why the chapter is called a way forward rather than a conclusion. Christians are urged to seek opportunities to embrace one another as members of the Body of Christ, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, social status, or place of origin. This is how the LGBTQIA+ community understands the meaning of 'moving and living in

God', through the church. The pastoral imagery here is 'Sarah's Dancing Circle'. It contrasts with the current competitive imagery of what is known as 'Jacob's ladder'. LGBTQIA+ people are just different, not necessarily bad people. There is no need to compare them to what some in the church may think are better Christians. Below is a brief outline of the KZNCC's vision of an inclusive church, which is the first step toward addressing the homophobic challenge in the church.

KZNCC's Vision of an Inclusive Church

In line with the gospel values, the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and compliance with legislation regarding the protection of LGBTQIA+ rights, KZNCC, which has been working with churches and also with LGBTQIA+ individuals, has been reflecting on the idea of a model church for the present times. The church, which is envisaged by the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council (KZNCC) in partnership with the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISA), is inclusive. The underlying assumption is that an inclusive church is an 'oasis' of abundant life, peace, justice, and a beacon of hope for the marginalised sexual minority groups, the LGBTQIA+ people (Khanyile, 2021). This is a direct response to the homophobic experiences of LGBTQIA+ people, which suggests that the church is not a place of refuge and solace for LGBTQIA+ people but of exclusion.

What KZNCC and FOCCISA envision is a return to what the church was originally called to be, that is, the eyes, hands, and feet of Jesus Christ in the world. In other words, the church is to take the baton from where Jesus left off. Jesus did all the above, and the nascent church, according to the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2-4; 10:9-16), set out to do exactly what Jesus did. While this is not a new calling, some have not taken heed of it, or they have been selective in doing so, taking their mandates from the worldly surroundings rather than the guidance of the Spirit. God's Spirit is not confined to biblical times; it is at work in different situations today. Jesus, the chief pastor, as opposed to the chief priest, inaugurated the kind of pastoral approach that is expected of his followers. As he had said, the Spirit, Counsellor (John 14:26), would guide after his time on earth.

An inclusive church is a pastorally open church. It accepts and involves everyone, is driven by love rather than hurt, and does not distinguish between straight and queer members of the church. In Khumalo's (2011) words, it consciously replaces the '*us'* and '*them'* attitude with '*us'* and '*us'*, recognising

that the menace of stigma and discrimination is self-defeating. Khumalo (2011) believes God's call in the church is for everyone to 'sit at a round table as equal members of the body of Christ'. Such a church proclaims the gospel, or the good news, that points to hope and abundant life in Jesus Christ amid the pain and hopelessness of people of other sexualities. That is how people are drawn closer to God. Jesus demonstrated the same.

Church leaders are therefore called to emulate this. They are responsible for ensuring that churches are safe spaces for all people and proclaiming that Jesus is amongst the vulnerable and marginalised members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The following are suggested pillars of an inclusive pastoral church:

1. Unconditional love of God (*Agape in the Greek language)*
2. Respect for Human Dignity, as all people are created in the *image of God* (Genesis 1:27).
3. Being the prophetic voice for the voiceless marginalised groups like LGBTIQA+ people, and standing in solidarity with them.
4. Inclusion: Not only welcoming LGBTQIA+ people, but also affirming them in the Christian Faith Community.
5. Justice: Advocacy of LGBTQIA+ people's Basic Human Rights, and supporting them to access justice, which is promised in the Bible and the South African Constitution.
6. Total eradication of stigma and discrimination in the church.
7. Acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people as they are, without trying to change them with religious narrative therapies.

The KZNCC believes that a church that is steered along the above principles will serve as a beacon of hope for LGBTQIA+ people. They need to hear the assurance: 'You are no longer foreigners and strangers in the Household of God, but fellow citizens with God's people of His household…' (Ephesians 2:19-21). Below, the above vision is strengthened with two well-known, contrasting imageries.

Sarah's Dancing Circle vs Jacob's Ladder

The vision of KZNCC and FOCCISA is a hopeful way of ending this book. Besides compliance with the country's legislation and projecting an alternative pastoral strategy, it also responds to the call of the interviewees for an alternative church environment and an alternative way of reading the scriptures. Here, the idea is strengthened further with the imagery of Sarah's Dancing Circle, and the Genesis 28 imagery of Jacob's Ladder, which is usually used to discourage

unhealthy competition.

Bernhard Wosien's concept of a dancing circle has been used in a model called 'Sarah's Dancing Circle' to address inequality, individualism, and discrimination. In a dancing circle, all look at each other in the eye because they are at the same eye level. They are interdependent because they depend on each other's cooperation to make the circle move and celebrate. After all, in a dancing circle, there is no time to 'other-ise' anyone. (The concept of 'Other' is explained elsewhere in this book, and what it means to 'other-ise' another person.) Another analogy to demonstrate this is the meal table where everyone sits around, at the same eye level, converses, shares bread, and passes salt, water, etc, to each other. This is not only done to show good table manners, but is also an expression of respect for each other, love for each other, and solidarity with one another. Remember that sharing a meal is a ritual with a deep spiritual significance. People do not do so with enemies or people they despise. That is why in traditional communities, family members were encouraged to make peace with one another before partaking in the meal. This is taken more seriously in some cultures than in others. Jesus may have disclosed his mistrust of Judas during a meal for the same reason.

In Sarah's Dancing Circle, the principle is that one does not lock arms and dance with the other person unless there is a positive bond between them. The circle is predicated on harmony, cooperation, and movement. These come with mutual respect, equality, commitment to a common purpose, and embrace. The circle does not move where there is discord and no coordinated round movement.

The same principle is evident at the Last Supper. There was no tall or short person, no good or bad person. They were in 'Sarah's Dancing Circle', reclining to ensure equality and the same eye level, instead of having tall people obscuring the view of shorter ones. These were men from different backgrounds, but that did not make any difference. Jesus knew that one of them was going to betray him. But at the table, they were all included. None was turned away. In the middle of the meal, Jesus could no longer continue his mistrust of Judas without disclosing it. Judas did not contest it or try to make amends. Instead, he excluded himself. That was the only moment of discord. The rest was normal talk and dancing among friends, even as Jesus rebuked Peter for discouraging him from going through the suffering. Judas left because he realised that he was the only murderer among the genuine and innocent members of the team. Is the LGBTQIA+ community a threat to the lives of Christians? Does it in any way betray Jesus Christ?

It is inconceivable that people who celebrate the Eucharist (thanksgiving ceremony) are the ones who turn away others who want to be part of Christ's Body. He laid it down for all who believe in him, even for the condemned man on the cross who scolded the other for mocking Jesus. Before he departed this world, he said that every time the Eucharist is celebrated, the sharing of bread by all and the drinking of wine should be done in remembrance of him. Is that celebration complete or proper if it excludes the marginalised, whose inclusion Jesus died fighting for?

Matthew Fox contrasts Sarah's Dancing Circle with the proverbial Jacob's Ladder, where individuals elevate themselves above others, often climbing on top of others, to get to the top. The story in Genesis 28:12 tells of Jacob's dream where he was ascending a ladder that 'went up to heaven'. He did not get to heaven but woke up with a sore hip instead, an injury he blamed on God's angel. Interpreters see this as symbolising Jacob's view that he was chosen and elevated above others. That is why it makes a good metaphor for people who see themselves as the chosen, above others. There are plenty of such people inside the church and in the broader society. For various reasons, such as remaining powerful, commanding respect, or being viewed as holy and/or God's chosen ones, they elevate themselves. They look down on others even in the church because they assume that they are better Christians. Their attitude gets harder in response to LGBTQIA+ individuals. This leaves no room for pastoral care. Some pastors seem to ignore the plight of LGBTQIA+ not because they do not see or feel for them, but because they first think of the powerful who employ them in the church. These are the people who are on Jacob's Ladder and want to create more and more of those in the church.

This does not fit in with the mission of Jesus, yet such attitudes remain in churches, marginalising others. But that is not what happens in churches. They, instead, are the ones who marginalise others.

A Pastoral Dancing Circle

Based on the above discussion, it is possible to establish a Pastoral Dancing Circle. The Eucharist (Communion) and its background, as Khumalo (2015) observes, are a given starting-point. It is a ritual that should be approached with reverence and awe, which means that participants should take their spiritual preparation for it seriously. Amends must be made if someone has offended a fellow participant, before approaching the Eucharistic feast. And no one has any right to prevent another from participating in the Eucharist. This is not foreign to Africa. Some African cultures take that practice seriously.

Some may see the Eucharist as a symbol of a spiritual communion among Christians all over the world, and with the risen Christ. Others only see it as a 'sacrament', meaning that it is an outward sign of what happens internally. Different people have different ideas of what happens inside a communicant. But there is one thing all have in common: 'we who are many are one body', because we participate in the meal that recalls the events of the night before Jesus was betrayed. It is precisely for this reason that it should be approached with reverence and awe. Participants should humble themselves before God by making peace with their neighbour.

If the union with Jesus and one another in the way discussed above is a preparation for entry into God's Kin[g]dom, as discussed in the last chapter, who has the key to that Kin[g]dom? Some may claim that Peter was 'given the keys' and that the priests ordained through an apostolic succession that goes back to Peter, then Jesus, are inheritors of that key. That argument is problematic too because Paul told Peter 'to his face' (Galatians 2:11) that he was abusing that authority by seeking to exclude the Gentiles because of their refusal to circumcise. This suggests that there is no source of authority in the Bible to suggest an exclusion of people because of their being different.

The affected people, the LGBTQIA+ people interviewed for this booklet, are not content with theory and preaching. They also want action, that is, practical steps towards renewing the mandate of the local church. Mention was already made of safe spaces being created by some congregations. It is assumed that opening church buildings and creating support groups in churches is upheld by a change in the congregation's theological outlook. The current reality is different from what the situation was in the past. In the past, most churches never wanted to hear anything about the LGBTQIA+. This was partly due to ignorance about who the LGBTQIA+ people are and partly due to an exclusivist and fundamentalist theology, a way of doing theology that does not apply the mind to the text and its background but takes it as a blueprint for life. If there is some shift in this regard by some congregations, there might be a more deliberate movement towards a pastorally open approach by many other congregations.

There were about ten response forms with positive feedback from the churches. Presumably, there are more out there who have started doing work within their congregations. As has already been said, it is not the intention of this book to force churches to change their views on homosexuality, but on how they handle people with a different sexuality. This booklet is making a pastoral appeal: Treat everyone equally and handle the issue of LGBTQIA+

people in the same way Christ might have handled it. There is no record of Jesus condemning homosexuality in the gospels. While this is not evidence that he did or did not condemn it, we do know that there were homosexual practices in his day. It might be that he handled the issue differently, as opposed to destroying the individuals. That is what this book is appealing for. Seminars and workshops, or prayer groups involving LGBTQIA+ people, might be another step to make them feel welcome. The message of such small gestures is that the church is aware that they are different, but that does not mean they cannot benefit from God's mercies. And as a reminder, the acronym LGBTQIA+ stands for a group and identity that is broader than same-sex partners who practise intimate sex.

The above suggestions are meant to set things in motion, and are part of the dance. But the real dancing in the circle, arm in arm, should also happen. Fund-raising events in congregations take different forms. A dance with music is usually one of those forms. What stops the church from organising one of those with mixed sexualities? When decision-making bodies are elected, what prevents congregations from electing competent and diligent people, regardless of their sexuality? If a pastor is like a shepherd, then they must treat the entire flock in the same way. According to Moyo (2015), a pastor is 'a shepherd and has a care concern about the flock who are church members, without discriminating against them according to their sexual orientation status'. No one will feel left out, and no one will be aggrieved.

A final point in this regard is that the dance Master/Conductor is the pastor. Nothing can happen in a congregation without it being steered by him/her. Moyo reminds us that a pastor is called to give to the society unconditional love and the goodness of God and constantly keeps alive the knowledge of the presence of God in the society through teaching and acts of *unconditional love*, compassion and mercy (Moyo 2015:5). The work of the shepherd/pastor should be to *lead, guide, feed, heal, sustain, reconcile, nurture, liberate, empower and protect* the sheep within their earthly context (Moyo 2015:5).

At the heart of the church's mandate, as the body of Christ, is a task of offering pastoral care to all people, in their brokenness and the difficulties that they are facing in their lives. For the church to be a safe space for LGBTIQA+ people, it requires that pastors as leaders create a climate of acceptance. Pastors in this safe space are called to help LGBTIQA+ people to overcome whatever anger, ill will, and negative feelings that may be eating them at their souls. God's grace is sufficient for all of us (2 Corinthians 12:9).

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ADDENDA

Support Structures

Support structures function as safe spaces by providing an environment of trust, confidentiality and non-judgment where individuals can communicate freely without fear of discrimination, criticism or harm. Key elements include establishing clear ground rules, fostering inclusion and respect, ensuring emotional and psychological safety and promoting active listening and empathy. When these components are in place, individuals can experience increased self-esteem, a greater sense of belonging and reduced feelings of isolation.

UMGUNGUNDLOVU

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Department of Social Development		208 Hoosen Haffejee Street	033 395 9701
SAPS		101 Alexandra Road	033 845 2451

AMAJUBA

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NNPL	Jabulisile Mdlalose		067 121 1405
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SAPS		76 Allen Street	034 314 6156

UGU

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SAPS		46 Main Road, Fairview Empangeni	035 901 5803

LGTBQIA+ people who grew up in a church, pray God and want to lead a Christian life often experience stigma and discrimination in their church environment. The responses of the church leaders vary. Some publicly humiliate LGTBQIA+ people among their peers and pretend to 'correct' their sexual orientation. This book is based on the oral testimonies of about forty LGTBQIA+ people on their experience at home, among neighbours and in the church in KwaZulu-Natal and other parts of South Africa. It discusses the legal, biblical, theological and pastoral aspects of the churches' responses to LGTBQIA+ and pleads for more inclusive forms of theology and practice.

"*In God We Move and Live* presents a challenge for the church to reflect, critically engage and review her stance on issues of sexuality from a scripture-based yet non-discriminatory perspective of positive sexualities and inclusivity." – *Nkosinathi Myaka, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa.*

"This book offers a pragmatic and analytical approach to the lived and embodied reality of the LGBT community that offers a conspectus of the challenges of homophobia, heteropatriarchy and stigmatization which is expressed through hate crimes and 'corrective rapes' against the LGBT community." – *Sithembiso Zwane, Director of the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, University of KwaZulu-Natal.*

"*In God We Move and Live* challenges churches to dismantle exclusion and embrace radical inclusion that will transform the church into a safe and affirming space where LGBTQIA+ people can practice their faith without the fear of being discriminated against." – *Brian Sibeko-Ngidi, UThingo Director.*

"This volume is a noble attempt by the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council to provide resources of empowering the ecumenical community in its attempt to live and practice the gospel of inclusivity." –*Simangaliso Kumalo, Professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal*

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ISBN 978-1-0370-9530-6

In God We Move and Live
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