

MAINSTREAM CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDES, PRACTICES, AND INCLUSION OF GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream Christian churches are long-established and institutionally recognised denominations that have played a significant role in shaping religious beliefs and practices in South Africa. These include the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian churches. This study critically examines the attitudes, practices, and approaches of these churches towards lesbian and gay communities within the context of South Africa's constitutional commitment to equality and non-discrimination. A qualitative research approach, guided by a case study design, was employed to explore the perspectives and experiences of church leaders and congregants. Data were collected through focus group discussions and document analysis. The findings indicate that mainstream Christian churches continue to grapple with the challenges posed by sexual diversity, particularly regarding the recognition and blessing of same-sex marriages, the participation of lesbian and gay individuals in church leadership and worship, and the acceptance of diverse gender expression. These issues reflect the broader tension between adherence to traditional theological doctrines and the demands of an inclusive constitutional democracy. The study concludes that mainstream Christian churches remain engaged in an ongoing process of negotiating the balance between preserving doctrinal integrity and responding to evolving societal expectations for inclusion and equal treatment of lesbian and gay communities.

Keywords: Mainstream Christian churches; sexual diversity; lesbian and gay communities; same-sex marriage; church leadership; gender expression; constitutional equality; South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Sexual diversity has become one of the most contested issues in contemporary Christianity, particularly in relation to the inclusion of lesbian and gay individuals in church life. As many societies increasingly affirm principles of equality, human rights, and non-discrimination, Christian churches are faced with the challenge of responding to evolving understandings of sexuality while maintaining fidelity to their theological doctrines and traditions. In South Africa, the Constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation, yet lesbian and gay individuals continue to experience varying degrees of exclusion within certain religious contexts. As such, responses of mainstream Christian churches to sexual diversity carry significant implications for both religious participation and broader processes of social inclusion. A key tension confronting these churches lies in the reconciliation of traditional biblical interpretations with contemporary expectations of inclusivity. Ongoing debates surrounding same-sex marriage, access to church leadership, and the participation of lesbian and gay individuals in congregational life continue to generate theological reflection, institutional debate, and, in some cases, internal division within denominations. As Dreyer (2007) notes, churches are increasingly compelled to engage critically with questions of sexuality and human dignity within shifting social and cultural contexts.

Against this background, this study critically examines the attitudes, practices, and approaches of mainstream Christian churches towards lesbian and gay communities in contemporary South Africa. It investigates how these churches navigate the tension between preserving theological traditions and responding to constitutional and societal calls for greater inclusion within a democratic society.

Problem Statement

Mainstream Christian churches in South Africa are increasingly challenged by the need to respond to sexual diversity within a constitutional framework that upholds equality and non-discrimination based on sexual orientation. Despite these legal and social commitments to inclusion, many denominations continue to rely on traditional biblical interpretations and doctrinal positions that often result in the exclusion or limited participation of lesbian and gay individuals in church life. This tension has created ongoing debates within churches regarding same-sex marriage, leadership roles, and participation in worship activities. The central problem this study addresses is how mainstream Christian churches negotiate the conflict between maintaining established theological traditions and responding to evolving societal expectations of inclusion, dignity, and human rights for lesbian and gay communities in contemporary South Africa.

Queer Theory

Queer Theory is a critical framework that interrogates fixed categories of sexuality and gender, arguing that identities such as “heterosexual” and “homosexual” are socially constructed rather than natural or fixed. It is strongly associated with scholars such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who collectively demonstrate how power, language, and social institutions shape understandings of sexuality. Butler (1990) introduces the idea of gender performativity, explaining that gender and sexual identities are produced through repeated social performances rather than existing as innate traits. Foucault (1978) emphasises the role of discourse and institutional power in regulating sexuality by defining what is considered normal or deviant, while Sedgwick (1990) highlights how Western culture is structured around a dominant heterosexual/homosexual binary that marginalises non-heteronormative identities. In relation to mainstream Christian churches, Queer Theory provides a lens for analysing how doctrinal teachings, biblical interpretations, and institutional practices may reinforce heteronormativity and contribute to the exclusion of lesbian and gay individuals from full participation in church life.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between mainstream Christian churches and sexual diversity has been widely explored in theological, sociological, and human rights scholarship, particularly regarding the inclusion or exclusion of lesbian and gay individuals. Globally, Christianity has played a major role in shaping moral understandings of sexuality, often privileging heterosexual norms grounded in traditional biblical interpretation (Boswell, 1980; Brown, 2006). Conservative theological readings of texts such as Leviticus 18:22 and Romans 1:26–27 have frequently been used to justify opposition to same-sex relationships (Grenz, 1998). However, revisionist scholars argue that these texts must be read within their historical and cultural contexts and do not directly address contemporary understandings of sexual orientation (Brownson, 2013; Helminiak, 2000). Research further shows significant diversity in how mainstream Christian denominations respond to sexual diversity. The Roman Catholic Church maintains a distinction between homosexual orientation and behaviour while upholding traditional doctrine on marriage, whereas some Protestant denominations have adopted more inclusive practices such as blessing same-sex unions and ordaining LGBTQ+ clergy (Nicolson, 2012). This variation reflects broader institutional and doctrinal diversity within global Christianity.

In the South African context, despite constitutional protections for sexual orientation, many mainstream churches continue to resist full inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals, often drawing on theological and cultural arguments (Reddy, 2010; Msibi, 2011). This creates a tension between legal equality and religious practice, where LGBTQ+ Christians frequently experience exclusion from leadership roles and full participation in worship. African Christian contexts are also shaped by cultural understandings of family and gender that often reinforce heteronormative expectations (West, 2010). Overall, the literature indicates that mainstream Christian churches are situated within an ongoing tension between maintaining doctrinal traditions and responding to contemporary human rights frameworks, particularly in contexts such as South Africa, where constitutional inclusion contrasts with persistent religious conservatism.

3. RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate for exploring complex social and theological issues such as attitudes, practices, and inclusion of lesbian and gay communities within mainstream Christian churches. A qualitative design allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, experiences, and interpretations held by participants within their religious and social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study design was employed to critically examine selected mainstream Christian churches in South Africa, including the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Methodist Church, Lutheran Church, and Presbyterian Church. The case study design enabled the researcher to investigate institutional practices and doctrinal positions in their real-life context while capturing the complexity of church responses to sexual diversity.

Study Site and Sampling

The study was conducted in Mankweng Township, Limpopo Province, South Africa, within the broader context of South African mainstream Christian churches. South Africa provides a particularly relevant setting for this research because its constitutional framework protects individuals against discrimination based on sexual orientation. At the same time, many religious institutions continue to grapple with theological, cultural, and social debates regarding the inclusion of lesbian and gay members. This tension between constitutional rights and religious doctrine makes mainstream churches an appropriate context for examining perceptions and practices relating to sexual diversity.

The target population comprised church leaders, including clergy and administrative officials, as well as lay members from three purposively selected mainstream Christian churches in Mankweng Township. The study site was considered appropriate because of its proximity to the University of Limpopo, whose diverse student population actively participates in local church activities. The university environment also provides greater exposure to constitutional values, human rights discourse, and issues of diversity, creating a context in which participants are more likely to engage openly and critically with matters relating to sexual orientation.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants who possessed relevant knowledge, experience, or direct involvement in church discussions and decision-making concerning sexuality, biblical interpretation, and church governance. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research because it enables researchers to select information-rich participants who can provide detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation rather than seeking statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach ensured that the data collected reflected informed perspectives based on participants' lived experiences and roles within their respective churches.

Before data collection, ethical procedures were strictly observed. Participants received comprehensive information regarding the purpose, objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and possible risks of the study. They were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any adverse consequences. Confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy were guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms and secure handling of research data. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews commenced, ensuring that participation was based on a clear understanding of the study and in accordance with established ethical principles of respect for persons, autonomy, and informed decision-making (Manandhar & Joshi, 2020).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using **thematic analysis**. This involved coding the data, identifying recurring patterns, and organizing them into key themes such as attitudes toward sexual diversity, Church teachings and doctrinal interpretations, Inclusion and exclusion practices, Same-sex marriage debates, Gender expression, and leadership participation. This method enabled a systematic interpretation of both spoken and written data in relation to the research objectives.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Sexual Orientation as an Innate Characteristic: A Case Study

The findings from this case study indicate that participants perceive sexual orientation as an inherent aspect of an individual's identity rather than a matter of personal choice. Participants reported that many lesbian and gay individuals exhibit gender-nonconforming behaviours from an early age. For example, some girls may prefer activities, clothing, and social interactions traditionally associated with boys, while some boys may display interests and behaviours commonly associated with girls. Family members often observe these characteristics during childhood and adolescence. Participants further noted that as these individuals mature, they frequently develop romantic and emotional attractions toward members of the same sex. This observation aligns with the view that sexual orientation is a natural dimension of human diversity rather than a consciously chosen lifestyle. According to the American Psychological Association (2021), sexual orientation is not something that individuals voluntarily choose, but rather a complex aspect of human identity influenced by a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors.

The participants, therefore, questioned the fairness of judging, condemning, or attempting to change individuals based on their sexual orientation. They argued that lesbian and gay individuals should be allowed to live authentically without being subjected to discrimination, exclusion, or social pressure. This perspective is supported by Herek (2010), who contends that scientific research has consistently challenged the notion that homosexuality is a personal choice or psychological deficit, emphasizing instead that sexual orientation represents a normal variation of human sexuality.

The findings suggest that greater understanding and acceptance of sexual diversity may contribute to reducing stigma and promoting social inclusion. Participants expressed admiration for individuals who openly identify as lesbian or gay despite facing societal, cultural, and religious pressures. Such views highlight the importance of recognizing human dignity, respecting individual identities, and fostering inclusive communities that embrace diversity.

Same-Sex Marriage: A Case Study

Same-sex marriage continues to be one of the most debated issues at the intersection of religion, law, and human rights. While some societies have moved toward legal recognition and protection of same-sex unions, many religious institutions remain deeply divided on the matter. This tension is particularly evident within mainstream Christian traditions, where doctrinal teachings often shape responses to contemporary understandings of marriage and sexuality. In this context, the issue becomes not only legal and social but also profoundly theological and pastoral.

The findings reveal that same-sex marriage remains a highly contested issue within both religious and societal contexts. While several countries continue to prohibit same-sex unions, some imposing severe legal penalties, South Africa stands out as one of the few African countries that legally recognizes same-sex marriage through constitutional protections of equality and human rights. Despite its legal status, same-sex marriage remains controversial within many mainstream Christian churches, which continue to uphold traditional teachings on marriage as a union exclusively between a man and a woman.

Participants noted that opposition to same-sex marriage within mainstream Christian denominations is often grounded in biblical interpretations. Scriptures such as Genesis 2:24, Leviticus 18:22, and Leviticus 20:13 are frequently cited as theological foundations for rejecting same-sex unions. These passages have historically informed church doctrines and policies concerning sexuality and marriage. According to Loader (2013), many Christian denominations interpret these biblical texts as affirming heterosexual marriage as the normative model established by God, thereby shaping ecclesiastical resistance to same-sex marriage.

The case study further revealed that tensions surrounding same-sex marriage can create divisions within church communities. One participant recounted the experience of a lesbian woman who had been raised in the church and remained an active and committed member throughout her life. Upon deciding to marry her same-sex partner, she sought a formal blessing from her church. However, church leadership declined the

request on doctrinal grounds. This decision generated significant disagreement among congregants. While some members supported the church's adherence to its theological principles, others viewed the refusal as exclusionary and inconsistent with Christian values of love, compassion, and inclusion.

These differing perspectives ultimately led to conflict within the congregation and contributed to a division among members. Such findings reflect broader debates within global Christianity regarding the relationship between religious doctrine, pastoral care, and the inclusion of sexual minorities. As Nadar and Van Klinken (2018) observe, many churches in Africa continue to grapple with balancing traditional theological convictions with contemporary human rights discourses, often resulting in tensions that affect church unity and social cohesion. The findings therefore demonstrate that same-sex marriage remains one of the most challenging issues confronting mainstream Christian churches in the contemporary era.

Leadership Roles: A Case Study

Like the bus driven by a woman, which most men will not board, the church led by a lesbian or gay individual will chase the entire congregation. Some say change is painful, and it is so difficult for some to accept change. There is nothing wrong with a gay or lesbian individual being a preacher, a church elder, or a leader.

One participant described a thought-provoking scenario concerning leadership within the church. Imagine a congregation that has been searching for a new church elder for several months. After a rigorous selection process, the members identify a candidate who is highly respected, spiritually mature, knowledgeable in Scripture, actively involved in community outreach, and widely recognized for exemplary Christian conduct. However, shortly before the appointment is finalized, it becomes known that the candidate identifies as gay. Almost immediately, divisions emerge within the congregation. Some members insist that the candidate's sexual orientation disqualifies them from church leadership. In contrast, others argue that leadership should be evaluated based on spiritual gifts, character, commitment, and service rather than sexual orientation. The findings suggest that resistance to lesbian and gay individuals occupying leadership positions is often rooted in long-standing religious and cultural perceptions rather than an assessment of leadership competence. Participants noted that many congregants fear that appointing a gay or lesbian leader may conflict with established church teachings and potentially discourage some members from remaining in the congregation. However, others maintained that effective church leadership should be measured by an individual's ability to serve, guide, and inspire the faith community.

This perspective is supported by Cadge, Olson, and Wildeman (2008), who found that debates surrounding the inclusion of gay and lesbian individuals in church leadership frequently reflect broader struggles within religious institutions over authority, interpretation of scripture, and social change. The findings, therefore, reveal that the issue of leadership roles for lesbian and gay individuals remains a significant challenge for many mainstream Christian churches as they navigate tensions between traditional doctrine and contemporary understandings of inclusion and equality.

Participation in Worship Activities (Case Study)

Most mainstream churches cannot accept gays and lesbians to provide benediction, holy communion, and pray, and cannot offer burial rites to bury members of the church who have passed on. They consider gays and lesbians not to have a stake in the holy trinity. I think the minds of most such churches must be turned because gays and lesbians are human beings and were created in the image of God as well.

One participant described a scenario during a highly anticipated Easter Vigil service in a prominent mainstream church. The congregation had gathered for one of the most sacred events in the Christian calendar, during which various members were assigned key roles, including reading Scripture, leading prayers, serving at the altar, and delivering the Easter message. Among those selected was a young church deacon who had served faithfully for years and was widely respected for his dedication and spiritual maturity. However, it later emerged within church leadership circles that he identified as gay and was in a same-sex relationship.

This revelation sparked an emergency consultation among church elders moments before the service began. Some leaders argued that allowing him to perform visible worship roles during such a significant service would undermine the church's doctrinal stance on marriage and sexuality, potentially causing confusion among congregants. Others, however, insisted that his long-standing service, moral conduct, and spiritual commitment qualified him to continue participating fully in worship activities, emphasising that exclusion based on sexual orientation contradicted the inclusive message of the Gospel.

As tensions escalated, the decision was made to reassign his role, quietly removing him from leading prayers at the altar. The change did not go unnoticed by the congregation, leading to visible discomfort, whispered conversations, and emotional distress among some members who perceived the action as unjust and inconsistent with Christian compassion.

The findings indicate that participation in worship activities is not only a matter of liturgical function but also a symbolic representation of belonging, authority, and spiritual recognition within the church community. According to Jennings (2003), Christian understandings of sexuality and ecclesial participation are deeply shaped by historical interpretations of scripture and evolving theological debates, often resulting in contested boundaries of inclusion within worship spaces. This case highlights how decisions about participation in worship can become flashpoints for broader tensions between doctrine, identity, and lived religious experience in contemporary churches.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings across the case studies on sexual orientation, same-sex marriage, leadership roles, and participation in worship activities within mainstream Christian churches, several key recommendations emerge. These recommendations aim to promote theological reflection, pastoral sensitivity, and social cohesion while acknowledging the ongoing doctrinal tensions that exist within many faith communities.

Firstly, mainstream Christian churches are encouraged to develop inclusive theological engagement that allows for open and respectful dialogue on sexuality and faith. Rather than relying solely on traditional interpretations of scripture, church leadership should create structured forums, such as theological workshops, synods, and Bible study platforms, where diverse perspectives on sexual diversity can be critically examined. Such engagement may assist congregations in moving beyond polarized positions and foster a more informed understanding of contemporary human sexuality. As theological scholarship has shown, interpretations of biblical texts have evolved, often reflecting changing social and cultural contexts (Boswell, 1980).

Secondly, churches should strengthen pastoral care systems to support LGBTQ+ members without discrimination or exclusion. This includes ensuring that lesbian and gay congregants have equal access to counselling, spiritual guidance, and participation in church life. Pastoral care should emphasize dignity, compassion, and the recognition of all individuals as bearers of the *imago Dei* (image of God). Churches may benefit from training clergy and lay leaders in inclusive pastoral practices that reduce stigma and promote emotional and spiritual well-being.

Thirdly, it is recommended that churches reconsider rigid exclusionary practices regarding participation in worship activities and leadership roles. Decisions concerning ordination, liturgical participation, and leadership appointment should prioritize demonstrated spiritual maturity, ethical conduct, commitment to service, and theological competence rather than sexual orientation alone. This approach would help ensure that worship spaces reflect the inclusive and reconciliatory message of the Gospel while maintaining doctrinal integrity.

Fourthly, in relation to same-sex marriage, churches are encouraged to engage in contextual theological reflection that considers both scripture and contemporary human rights frameworks. While doctrinal positions may differ across denominations, churches can still adopt pastoral approaches that avoid humiliation, rejection, or exclusion of same-sex couples. Constructive engagement may include blessing

services of commitment where doctrinal restrictions on marriage exist, as a means of balancing tradition with pastoral sensitivity.

Finally, mainstream churches need to prioritize unity and social cohesion in the face of diversity. The findings show that exclusionary practices often lead to internal conflict, congregational divisions, and emotional harm. Churches are therefore encouraged to adopt conflict-resolution strategies, including mediation and dialogue-based approaches, to address disagreements on sexuality in ways that preserve community integrity. Recognizing diversity within the body of Christ may enable churches to remain relevant, compassionate, and mission-driven in a rapidly changing social context.

Overall, these recommendations call for a balanced approach that respects doctrinal traditions while advancing inclusion, dignity, and justice for LGBTQ+ individuals within Christian communities.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that issues surrounding sexual orientation, same-sex marriage, leadership roles, and participation in worship activities remain highly complex and deeply contested within mainstream Christian churches. While many churches continue to uphold traditional doctrinal interpretations that emphasise heterosexual norms in marriage, leadership, and worship participation, the lived experiences of lesbian and gay congregants reveal increasing tensions between doctrine, pastoral care, and contemporary understandings of human rights and inclusion. The case studies further highlight that exclusionary practices often contribute to emotional distress, internal conflict, and even congregational division, while inclusive perspectives emphasise dignity, equality, and the belief that all individuals are created in the image of God. Ultimately, the study concludes that mainstream churches are at a critical point of theological and social reflection, where engagement with sexual diversity is necessary not only for maintaining relevance in a changing society but also for fostering unity, compassion, and justice within faith communities.

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