


'We too are human': Religious experiences of gay and lesbian Christians in Harare

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Research Project Registration:

Project Leader: A.G. van Aarde
Project No: 2334682

Description:

This research is part of the research project, 'Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics', directed by Prof. Dr Andries van Aarde, Post Retirement Professor and Senior Research Fellow in the Dean's Office, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

Dates:

Received: 15 May 2023
Accepted: 22 Sept. 2023
Published: 22 Jan. 2024

How to cite this article:

Chibango, C., 2024, "'We too are human': Religious experiences of gay and lesbian Christians in Harare', *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 80(2), a8990. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.8990>

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The issue of same-sex relationships is complex in Zimbabwe because of the prevailing hostile legal provisions, and cultural and religious beliefs. While it is a criminal offence to practise same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe, the Constitution of Zimbabwe does not tolerate any discrimination against people. The debate on same-sex relationships has been on spotlight in Zimbabwe since 1995 when the late former President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, disparaged same-sex relationships as not only unnatural and un-African, but also unchristian. The practice of same-sex relationships has since remained politicised in Zimbabwe and elsewhere within the African region and those practising it have often been discriminated against by society. This article used a qualitative methodology to explore the religious experiences of Christians in same-sex relationships in Harare, using insights from the notion of ubuntu. Field data were gathered through social media from purposively selected respondents who were living in same-sex relationships. Findings revealed that these people felt discriminated against and unsafe in their own churches. Based on these findings, it is argued that despite their respective views on same-sex relationships, the African church should respect the dignity of the people involved in these relationships, and should also create safe spaces for them.

Contribution: The article promotes sensitivity to the needs of minority groups in the society and encourages the provision of appropriate guidance on how to deal with the phenomenon of same-sex relationships.

Keywords: same-sex relationships; Christianity; human dignity; religion; Ubuntu; Harare.

Definition

Same-sex relationships refer to the attraction between people who are of the same sex. It also refers to various classes of gender identity ranging from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer to Intersex (LGBTQI). Gays (male) and lesbians (female) are persons who practise same sex relations (WebMD 2021). This article shall also refer to people living in same-sex relationships as gays and lesbians.

Introduction

Ever since the former President of Zimbabwe, Robert Gabriel Mugabe denigrated the society of Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) in 1995 (Zhangazha 2015), the subject of same-sex relationships has sharply divided opinions not only in Zimbabwe, but also in Africa at large. Mugabe considered people of same-sex relationships to have been worse than dogs and pigs, and avowed that 'dogs and pigs will never engage in homosexual madness; even insects won't do it' (Zhangazha 2015). He also viewed same-sex relationships as not only un-African but also a neo-colonial attempt by the West to smuggle in Western ideologies (Muparamoto 2021:3). Both the current President of Zimbabwe, Emerson Mnangagwa, and Nelson Chamisa, the leader of the main opposition party have also opposed same-sex relationships (Cable News Network Business 2018; Tshuma 2012), though the latter did not condone the persecution of people who practised it (Tafirenyika 2018). On the legal front, Zimbabwean laws are prohibitive of same-sex relationships, a situation which some scholars and activists consider as inconsistent with international laws on human rights to which it is a signatory. Despite the fact that the *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013* provides that everyone has a right not to be discriminated against because of their nationality, race, sex, gender, among many other grounds (Art 78 No. 3), Article 78 (3) of the Constitution prohibits persons of the same sex from marrying each other (Government of Zimbabwe 2013). Meanwhile, the *Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23] (No. 23/2004)* incriminates sexual intercourse between males (gays) in same-sex relationships

Note: Special Collection: Zimbabwean Scholars in Dialogue, sub-edited by Conrad Chibango (Great Zimbabwe University).

(Government of Zimbabwe 2004). Even though there is no specific legal provision that explicitly considers sex between lesbians as criminal, provisions in Section 77 of the Criminal Law Code on public indecency incriminate sex between lesbians, leading to a fine or 6 months imprisonment (Law Hub 2017). These laws, however, are inconsistent with some international laws on human rights to which Zimbabwe is a signatory (Kingsley n.d.; Manyonganise 2016). Zimbabwe's stance also puts in question its seriousness to fulfilling Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which concerns promotion of gender equality and sensitivity by 2030 (United Nations 2015). There have also been several reports in Zimbabwe indicating that gay and lesbian people have been subjected to persecution and ridicule (GALZ 2018; Human Rights Watch 2003; Littauer 2012; Morgen 2013). The Committee on the Rights of the Child's concluding observations on Zimbabwe expressed concern regarding the escalating levels of discrimination against certain groups of children, including 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex children and children affected or infected by HIV/AIDS' (Human Dignity Trust 2021).

Meanwhile, churches in Zimbabwe have remained divided over the phenomenon of same-sex relationships (Evans & Mawere 2021; Kumalo 2011; Moyo 2011; Mtemeri & Maziti 2015; Murphy 1998). The Catholic Church in Zimbabwe is guided by its universal church teaching which does not recognise same-sex unions. Some church leaders such as Bishop Kunonga of the Anglican Church have shown a negative attitude towards same-sex relationships (Moyo 2011) basing on the narrative that it is both un-African and unchristian. Other church leaders such as Kadenge of the Methodist Church called for tolerance of same-sex relationships (Murphy 1998). The tolerant position by Kadenge resonates with the approach taken by the renowned late Archbishop Desmond Tutu who maintained that the rejection of gays and lesbians by the church was 'nearly the ultimate blasphemy' (Outright 1996). Given the seemingly intolerant environment that people in a same-sex relationship experience, this article explored the experiences of these people in their respective churches. It is at the backdrop of this intolerant environment to same-sex relationships or homophobia that this article explored the religious experiences of Christians in same-sex relationships in Harare, Zimbabwe.

The issue of same-sex relationships has been politicised by several African leaders, even though there has been a gradual shift towards its tolerance (Gwaambuka 2017; Rakhetsi 2021). Furthermore, it has also divided opinions among African academics (Bongmba 2016; Epprecht 2012; Kaunda 2015). Several African leaders have vilified and politicised the issue of same-sex relationships (Gwaambuka 2017; Network Cable News 2014; Rakhetsi 2021). President Jammeh of Gambia, for instance, vowed that he would 'cut off the head' of gays found in Gambia because the practice was 'anti-god, anti-human and satanic' (Tharoor 2015). However, basing on the fact that 22 out of 54 African countries have legalised same-sex relationships and that

about 5 countries have legalised same-sex marriages, Rakhetsi (2021) argued that there has been a gradual shift towards tolerance of same-sex relationships in Africa. There are some African scholars that maintain that same-sex relationships neither have roots in African culture nor African traditional values. In this way, they portray the view that African indigenous religions are essentially intolerant of same-sex relationships or that they are un-African (Epprecht 2015). However, Bongmba (2016) maintains that it is this denigrating and dehumanising of same-sex relationships that has created a climate of intolerance in African societies. Scholarly work appears to confirm this intolerance, as shown in the study by Nkosi and Masson (2017) that fellow-Christians and churches were a very unwelcoming environment to Christians living in same-sex relationships. In his analysis of the Ndembu people and other ethnic groups in Zambia, Kaunda (2015) argued that the claim that same-sex relationships are un-African in Zambia was because of failure to understand the African cultures, some of which did accommodate other forms of sexuality such as same-sex relationships. In this way, he dismissed the view that same-sex relationships are un-African. Based on his findings, Kaunda (2015) suggested that in the African church of Zambia there should be openness to dialogue on the same-sex relationships and appreciation of human dignity and value of the people involved (and not just focus on their morality or wrongness) and promotion of the fullness of life of people living in same-sex marriages (Kaunda 2015:35–37). Despite arguing that the church should uphold biblical injunctions by condemning acts of same-sex relationships, Adejuwon (2020:159) maintained that the church should, at the same time, see the people in same-sexual relationships as a neighbour that needs compassion so that they can be redeemed and transformed.

Literature on same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe sways on religious, cultural and philosophical traditions (Chemhuru 2012; Gunda 2010; Mateveke 2016; Mudavanhu 2010; Mukupe 2004; Togarasei 2009). Togarasei (2009:88) used several biblical texts such as Genesis 19; Judges 19; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:18–32; 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 to conclude that same-sex relationships were both a social ill and immoral. Mukupe upheld the Catholic Church's position that same-sex relationships were unnatural and sinful, but was of the view that ministers of the church should show compassion, love and acceptance towards gay and lesbian people (Mukupe 2004:43). Using examples from indigenous cultural traditions in Zimbabwe, Epprecht (2012) showed that the claim that the issue of same-sex relationships as un-African and foreign was unfounded as there is evidence of its existence prior to the colonial period, although kept under check. In her study of same-sex relationships and religion in contemporary Zimbabwean literature, Mateveke (2016) concluded that Christianity appeared to be basically antagonistic towards same-sex relations while the position of the Shona indigenous religion regarding the same remained uncertain. Scholars such as Gunda (2010) and Mudavanhu (2010) argue for tolerance of same-sex relationships. Gunda

(2010) disputed the view that the biblical texts normally used against same-sex relationships (Gn 19, Lv 18:22 and 20:13, Rm 1:24–26, 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10) should not be taken as universal injunctions but seen as a response ‘to existential circumstances of their time within the parameters of their knowledge at that time’ (Gunda 2010:18). Meanwhile, Mudavanhu (2010) challenged the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe to ‘boldly face up to the related socio-theological challenges if it does not want to live in an imaginary world’ (Mudavanhu 2010:254). For her, there are certain realities that cannot go away and have to be taken as they are and such is the situation with gay and lesbian people. They ‘may not wish to be what they are, they have to be because that is what they are, and therefore, they are’ (Mudavanhu 2010:254). It is on this basis that Mudavanhu challenged the church to get real and ‘get used to it because this is real contemporary challenge that can no longer remain behind social or ecclesiastical doors’ (Mudavanhu 2010:254). For Connor (2011:860), by preferring to remain in their comfort zones, faith-based organisations promoting development in Zimbabwe run the risk of ignoring minorities such as the gay and lesbian people. He argues that if they are to be sensitive to the context in which they operate, these religious organisations ‘must take an explicit stand against homophobia and discrimination’. Other scholars who argue for tolerance of same-sex relationships include Sibanda (2016) and Manyonganise (2016).

Ubuntu

Whereas the discourse of same-sex relationships has often been addressed using western theoretical frameworks such as human rights, this article makes use of the ubuntu notion. The problem of over-relying on Western concepts and terms such as gay, lesbian, queer, transgender, among others, as Chitando and Mateveke (2017) observed, has often endorsed the view that this practice is an import from Western countries. Hence, the attempt by some African scholars (Chitando & Mateveke 2017) to Africanise the discourse on same-sex relationships, so that it has ‘a true African flavour’. The choice of the ubuntu philosophy as a theoretical framework for this study goes beyond merely giving the discourse on same-sex relationships ‘a true African flavour’ but it is about deploying a tried and proven worldview that emanates from Africa and which has also been acceptable in the Christian world (Jarvis 2009). The Catholic Church’s Africa Synod, for instance, upheld ubuntu values as it adopted the African family model and described the church as a family of God (Nnamani 1994). Furthermore, Kgatla (2016) argued that African ubuntu has an affinity with the Bible’s message of justice and mutual caring for one another. This framework has also been suggested for such purposes by Bongmba who suggested that given the divisions on same-sex relationships in Africa, ‘the notion of *Ubuntu* offers a way of rethinking the negative discourses on same-sex relationships in Africa and in the African church’ (Bongmba 2016:15). Ubuntu concept was also employed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, and its

largely positive results are well documented (Arthur, Issifu & Marfo 2015).

Furthermore, the term ubuntu has also been used to refer to an African philosophy of life (Mokgoro 1997). According to Broodryk (2008), it is:

[A] comprehensive ancient African world-view based on the values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative community life in the spirit of family. (p. 17)

Ubuntu is shared by various Bantu speaking people spread across the sub-Saharan Africa. Even though the term is originally Nguni, it also has alternative names in indigenous languages of several other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Ubuntu is best summarised in a Zulu proverb *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* [a person is a person through others] (Mabvura 2020:74). *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* can also mean ‘I am because we are; we are because I am’ (Ramose 1999). Despite the different conceptions scholars have come up with regarding *ubuntu*, there is a clear indication that this notion has become a common way of life, moral thought, and spirituality in sub-Saharan Africa (Oppenheim 2012).

Ubuntu has many aspects and is used according to the befitting situation, although it was mainly used for resolving conflict in Bantu societies. It demands respect for diversity (Eze 2008). According to Magumbate and Nyanguru (2013), ubuntu also stands for respectable ideas and deeds; it is about fairness and justice. Kgatla (2016) presents it as a moral theory on how to be human (on humanness or being human). As such, it is also about relationships. Mungai (2015) observes that the term refers to whatever is good for humanity and that which harms humanity is against ubuntu. A predominant worldview represented by ubuntu is that a person with an ubuntu attitude is the one who is noted to be hospitable, friendly, generous, compassionate and caring for his fellow human beings (Goduka 2000). However, Ng’weshemi (2002:15) notes that ubuntu is not something that one attains by birth but through a continuous process of integration into society.

Methodology

This study deployed a qualitative methodology, given its advantages when the aim is to have an in-depth understanding of the realities concerned (Creswell 2009). Because of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown restrictions on movement in the country during that time (Mavhunga 2021), it was difficult to conduct personal interviews and focus group discussions as had been initially planned. Based on the understanding that social media can be used as a method of conducting academic research (Otieno & Matoke 2014), I found the use of emails and WhatsApp as appropriate and especially because the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions were also a non-permissive environment for face-to-face interviews. Through the assistance of GALZ, an association of LGBTI people in Zimbabwe, Harare-based participants were purposively sampled and following their consent, they attended to a set of open-ended interview questions sent to

their WhatsApp inboxes. In simulation of focus group discussions (Krueger & Casey 2001:23), a WhatsApp chat group for the same participants was created and five participants actively participated in the discussion through the chat text messages. Through this electronic interaction with the participants, I managed to validate some of the data and was able to clarify some of the grey areas. The gathered data were grouped according to the emerging themes and then discussed in the light of the related literature and the ubuntu principles. Permission to carry out this fieldwork was granted by GALZ, the organisation to which the participants belonged. Given the sensitive nature of this subject, the report used pseudo names in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

How gays and lesbians view their churches regarding same-sex relationships

A total of six Harare-based people in same-sex relationships participated in the research. Of the six, three were female and each of these described themselves differently: one was 'queer', another was 'lesbian', and the third considered herself as 'non-binary'. The three male participants all considered themselves as gay. Their description of themselves fitted within the definition of same-sex relationships presented above. The six respondents belonged to various Christian denominations, even though two of them did prefer not to disclose their denomination. Table 1 gives a summary of the profiles of the participants.

The presentation of the results was guided by the questions posed to the participants. Only the themes that emerged from the various questions were the focus of data presentation. Themes included the view of family, impression of how participants were viewed by their fellow-church members, discrimination, among other themes.

Family and same-sex relationships

Participants submitted that while a family was usually understood as a union of love between a man and a woman and that this union was open to children, they also broadened it to include the LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual) community. This implies that families can also exist in same-sex relationships, mostly families with two lesbian female or two gay male parents. According to some participants, family cannot be limited to heterosexual relations only. Same-sex couples can also have children by way of adoption, artificial insemination, surrogacy and co-parenting refers to the responsibility for

TABLE 1: Personal profiles of participants.

Name (Pseudo)	Age	Sex M/F	Gender identity	Social identity	Christian denomination
Catherine	27	F	Non-binary	Student	United Methodist Church
Luckmore	29	M	Gay	Unemployed	Jehovah's Witnesses
Ndangariro	35	F	Lesbian	Employed	undisclosed
Tsitsi	27	F	Queer	Employed	Catholic
Oscar	30	M	Gay	Employed	Undisclosed
Tafadzwa	23	M	Gay	Employed	Celebration Life

raising a child by parents who are not in a romantic relationship with each other. It can be arranged between a lesbian couple and a gay male couple. A gay couple can also raise children through surrogacy and a bisexual man having children with a heterosexual. Besides love and unity, the participants also attached values of mutual respect, protection and communication to the family. The church was also viewed as a particular kind of family in which all members of the church were children of God (Focus Group Discussion [FGD]).

Experiences of gays and lesbians in church communities

None of the participants revealed that they openly disclosed their same-sex orientation but all of them did indicate that eventually, church members came to know their various sexual orientations through either their dressing or their conduct. Generally, the participants had negative experiences in their respective church communities to such an extent that they felt they were no longer part of the church family. They used words such as 'guilty', 'vilified', 'cursed', 'very conflicted', 'out of place' and 'humiliated' to describe their experiences. Words such as 'evil', 'satanic', 'sick' and 'tarnishing church image' were also used to describe them (FGD). In particular, Luckmore (aged 29, male, gay) revealed that he felt cursed and vilified whenever church members and leaders cited scriptures to describe gay and lesbian people as cursed by God. He also harboured feelings of self-hate. Catherine (aged 27, female, non-binary) also felt humiliated by female members of a church guild (*madzimai eruwadzano*) who summoned her to a meeting whose sole agenda was to reprimand her on her dressing. They accused her of tarnishing the image of the church. She since stopped going to her church, the United Methodist Church, although she still believed in God. Tsitsi (aged 27, female, queer) 'felt out of place and uncomfortable' when her peers purposely excluded her from participating in church activities. She stated:

Mostly, if I don't say Hi, they won't talk to me. They plan on certain things but they don't include me. If I say something they don't even consider [*it*] as something that makes [*any*] sense. They make me feel like I don't belong [*to their group*] ... You feel angry, lonely, isolated from others, afraid, depressed and suicidal. (Tsitsi, aged 27, female, queer).

Tafadzwa (aged 23, male, gay) felt 'isolated' and treated by fellow-church members as 'an outcast'. He felt 'judged and humiliated', whenever church members treated him as a sick person. 'They asked me to go and seek professional help as if I had some disease or disorder' Tafadzwa (aged 23, male, gay). Ndangariro (aged 35, female, lesbian) felt 'uncomfortable' whenever her fellow-church members spoke about her sexual orientation. She was infuriated by church members who disclosed her lesbian status for the sole purpose of ridiculing and shaming her in front of the church community. Humiliation was what Luckmore (aged 29, male, gay) also felt when church elders stopped him from attending church meetings. Despite feeling traumatised whenever the pastors preached against same-sex relationships, Oscar (aged 30, male, gay) did not regret his gay identity as he declared that

'that's who I am and this will not change'. Like Oscar, Tsitsi, a Catholic, still felt proud to be a lesbian, despite being shunned by her fellow-church members.

On whether the church is a safe space for same-sex relationships

The participants did not generally consider the church as a safe space for them and this was characterised by their reluctance to openly reveal their statuses to other church members for fear of being ridiculed and negatively judged. Luckmore (aged 29, male, gay) recalled being called for a disciplinary hearing after he was accused of 'acting and dressing like a woman'. Church leaders went on to remove him from the church social media groups. He has since left his original church and joined the Celebration Life Church where he felt accepted as he was. Both Oscar (aged 30, male, gay) and Ndangariro (aged 35, female, lesbian) experienced 'discrimination and stigmatisation' from their fellow-church members. Ndangariro believed she was safe in the church if she did not open up but simply mind her own business. 'All I want is to unite and pray together with my fellow-church members and then go back home' (Ndangariro, aged 35, female, lesbian). The decision of Oscar (aged 30, male, gay) shows that he did not consider the church as a safe place for him. He stated: 'I didn't open up regarding my sexual orientation'. Tsitsi (aged 27, female, queer) had mixed feelings as she believed that those who knew her to be lesbian were hostile to her presence. However, she felt at home because of the fact that 'not everyone knows my sexuality ... some just view me as a tom boy, who likes drumming'.

Reasons for discrimination against gays and lesbians by fellow-church members

Findings revealed that gays and lesbians were discriminated against because of ignorance, prejudice and misinterpretation of biblical texts by other Christians. For Catherine (aged 27, female, non-binary), 'misinterpretation of what the Bible says and the context of the Bible is where people miss it'. In other cases, Christians have their own fixed ideas on same-sex relationships, and then they simply 'extract' verses that support their preferred positions (Luckmore aged 29, male, gay). People were misinformed about same-sex relationships and hence needed to be properly educated about the realities of same-sex relationships (Tafadzwa, aged 23, male, gay; Tsitsi, aged 27, female, queer). People's diverse cultural and religious backgrounds were also considered as ground for discrimination as some of these could, sometimes, lead to prejudice against same-sex relationships (Tsitsi, aged 27, female, queer).

Happy experiences of gay and lesbian Christians in their churches

Some participants cherished happy memories about their churches. Some reported that they were happy whenever they managed to attend church services that ended without denigrating them. In particular, Tsitsi (aged 27, female, queer) was happy to recognise some church members who cared and gave her comfort during tough moments at church. It was an eye-opener when she learnt at church of Pope Francis' acknowledgement of the existence of same-sex families,

among other types of families. For Tafadzwa, despite all the negative experiences he would encounter at church, getting to meet with friendly church members whom he shared his stories was what made Tafadzwa (aged 23, male, gay) to look forward to going to church every Sunday. He viewed that ever since he switched to Celebration Life Church, he had 'managed to make friends who are not judgmental and have respect and tolerance of who I am'.

Creating safe spaces for people in same-sex relationships in church communities

Findings showed that the participants still had hope that they could find home in the church. Of emphasis was the view that the church should be like a family where every child is treated equally – a model or home of love, a place of dialogue, reconciliation, joy and good communication. A family, therefore, was seen as an important way of making the church a safe space for people practising same-sex relationships (FGD). Another view was that the church should equip itself with proper knowledge about same-sex relationships. As Ndangariro (aged 35, female, lesbian) stated, it made a difference if church members made informed comments on same-sex relationships. For her, acquiring proper knowledge about same-sex relationships would lead to acceptance of this diverse human reality. In addition, the church only 'becomes safe for some of us when church members don't talk about same-sex relationships without much knowledge about it and when they stop being homophobic' (Ndangariro, aged 35, female, lesbian). Some urged the church to be tolerant and avoid being judgemental and prejudiced against same-sex relationships, an attitude which the church could only afford if its point of departure was God's love (Catherine, aged 27, female, non-binary; Oscar, aged 30, male, gay). Others believed that the least they would expect from the church was to be treated, first and foremost, as human persons. Luckmore viewed that even if the church were anti-same-sex relationships, it did not mean that 'I should be treated as less human – we too are human' (Luckmore, aged 29, male, gay). Participants also indicated that if the church really cared to meet and listen to gay and lesbian people, it might discover that 'we are not evil after all but loving and caring people' (Oscar, aged 30, male, gay). This aspect of a church that cares is only possible if the church is ready to accept diversity in all its forms, including sexuality (Tafadzwa, aged 23, male, gay). Tsitsi (aged 27, female, queer) wished churches could desist from preaching hate towards gays and lesbians so that this minority group would come to church without fear of their fellow-Christians. She stated: 'I understand when a man of God creates a safe place for us; people will also be able to cohabit'. To gays and lesbians, she advised them not to 'flaunt how gay we are at church, but to make sure we have a good relationship with God. I personally dress accordingly when going to church' (Tsitsi, aged 27, female, queer).

Same-sex relationships and the African Church

A consideration of the issues raised in this article shows that the subject of same-sex relationships is a very

contemporary debate that permeates several societal sectors including politics, religion and culture. It has divided the society into opposing camps and even in churches. While gay and lesbian Christians in this study acknowledged that their churches were generally against same-sex relationships, they still expected to be welcome, treated with respect and without discrimination or prejudice on account of their human dignity. This is a message directed at churches that are known for preaching and upholding human dignity – for man was created in the image of God! (Mukupe 2004). I discuss the concerns raised by participants in this study using the lens of ubuntu, without which the African church loses its proper identity (Jarvis 2009). Based on the findings and insights from the ubuntu principles, I argue that the African Church can help to progressively address the issue of same-sex relationships by creating safe space for all people and by promoting humanness or human dignity.

The church as a safe space

It is a worrying image, for an African church to be described as unsafe. Sadly, findings of this research suggest this to be, largely, an accurate description of the churches that participants go to. The results resonate with the findings of Nkosi and Masson (2017) who observed that Christians living in same-sex relationships viewed the church environment as very unwelcoming to them. As shown in the findings, participants did not feel safe even to simply reveal their status which was negatively viewed. Respect for diversity is an integral part of the ubuntu philosophy (Eze 2008), and this does not entail obliterating the differences but embracing them. For Bongmba (2016), the African hospitality was at stake when African leaders declared readiness to expel same-sex couples from their countries and even eliminate them. The challenge that ushers here, therefore, would be for the African church or Christian communities to find ways of expressing their differences in a way that accommodates everyone, as in the family values of unity, respect and dialogue, as represented by ubuntu and as also reflected by the participants. This view resonates with scholars such as Mukupe (2004) who call for tolerance of same-sex relationships even though they may not be really for it. How can scriptures be interpreted in such a way that everyone in the church still remains home to everyone? It is in the same vein that scholars such as Gunda (2010) and Mudavanhu (2010) considered the need for contemporary hermeneutics which takes into consideration, the existential situation of same-sex relationships. This contemporary hermeneutics and even insights from the African cultures which accommodated diverse forms of sexualities can help inform the dialogue on same-sex relationships that Kaunda (2015) suggested that the African church should engage in. Tsitsi (aged 27, female, queer), a participant of this research, equally challenges the African church when she stated: 'I understand when a man of God creates a safe place for us; people will also be able to cohabit'.

Humanness

The findings in this study are worrying in terms of promoting humanness. Through prejudice, discrimination

and hate speech, participants have been repelled from the church community. The attitudes of other church members discourage gays and lesbians from being part of the community. Ubuntu is also understood as a moral theory on humanness, or on how to be human (Kgatla 2016). The old idiom *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* [a person is a person through others] shows that the process of becoming more humane is a social journey which needs the collaboration of other people. It is about relationships. Thus, existing in community becomes a pre-requisite for becoming human. This is why Ramose stated: 'I am because we are; we are because I am' (Ramose 1999). Furthermore, the dimension highlighted by Mungai (2021) when stating that whatever is good for humanity is ubuntu and that which harms humanity is against ubuntu is also significant to this discussion. The fact that most participants felt isolated, lonely and humiliated serves to demonstrate the extent to which they felt humanness lacking in them. One example of this is that of Tsitsi (aged 27, female, queer) who felt suicidal, a sign that her humanity was harmed. The quest for the participants is best summed up by Luckmore (aged 29, male, gay) when he bemoaned: 'we too are human!' It may seem unreasonable to uphold a scriptural hermeneutic that results in making other people feel less human. Hence, as Mudavanhu (2010) urged, the church should get real and start dealing with the realities of same-sex relationships realistically. A true African church, therefore, would cap this principle of humanness with the teaching on human dignity, whereby both man and woman need to have their dignity respected by the mere fact that they were created in the image of God. As Kaunda (2015) reminds, the need for respecting the dignity of people with the same-sex orientation is not about morality or wrong, but it is the value of their human dignity at stake.

Conclusion

This article explored the religious experiences of gay and lesbian Christians in the context of Zimbabwe's homophobic society. Findings revealed that gay and lesbian Christians generally faced discrimination and did not feel safe in their own churches. Based on these findings, I have argued that the notion of ubuntu and especially that of humanness can go a long way in helping the church to address the issue of same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe. It is on this score that we should expect an African church to embrace diversity while promoting dialogue and human dignity of its members, without discrimination. This article also served as a wake-up call for Christian communities in Zimbabwe to be sensitive to the needs of minority groups and provide appropriate guidance and support, where necessary, by re-reading scriptures in the contemporary context of our societies.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the role played by Michelle Ruhonde of GALZ research desk in facilitating both the processes of acquiring a research clearance with the GALZ organisation and sampling.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

C.C. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the GALZ board and ethics consent was received on 03 September 2021.

Funding information

This research was not funded by any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Publicly available data was cited and where possible, web links were provided. However, data from the respondents has been safely kept by the author.

Disclaimer

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Interviews

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