

Disruptive or Merely Alternative? A Case Study of a South African Gay Church

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to engage with how a South African church through its discursive practices, continues to live out the conviction set out in Germond and de Gruchy's 1997 book "Aliens in the Household of God" that homosexuals are indeed not aliens in the household of God. The first part of the article briefly overviews the legal construction of homosexuality in South Africa during the 20th century and challenges the claim that homosexuality is "un-African". The latter positioning will foreground our case study of the South African Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church (GHMCC), which has its origins abroad and is attended by gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) congregants. The study provides a discursive analysis of the online written materials of GHMCC and the dominant discourses which emerged out of this analysis were: *Liberation and equality discourse*; *Discourse of natural and normal: disrupting gender?*; *Discourse challenging conservative Christian hegemony*; *Discourse of heteropatriarchal Christian sex*; *Missing feminist discourses: tensions and silences*; and *Discourse of religious colonialism*. Silent and less dominant discourses regarding race, gender and homophobia in relation to identity and religion are explored and interpreted within a feminist social constructionist paradigm. Concluding remarks talk to further research and to the danger of the (GHMCC) continued silence on issues such as poverty, racism and sexism within South African society.

Introduction

The present study is a discursive analysis of the ideology and practices of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church (GHMCC) in Cape Town, South Africa. The church is constructed as a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT³)-affirming church and is affiliated with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches

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³ The acronyms LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender); LGBTI (I for Intersex); and LGBTIQ (Q for queer are commonly used (queer refers to identities and practices existing beyond the binaried norms of homosexual and heterosexual, see Judith Butler for detailed information). For the purpose of consistency we employ the acronym LGBT throughout the present study and this is also the term used in the GHMCC online texts.

(UFMCC) which was founded in the United States in the 1960's by a gay man and now has churches around the globe. It is often referred to as a 'gay church' both by its members and by members of mainstream churches. The main aim of this article is to undertake an analysis and examination of the discourses of the UFMCC, and specifically that of its 'offspring', the GFMCC in relation to its interpretation of the Bible's position on homosexuality. Given that many traditional or mainstream churches have an anti-homosexuality position, the UFMCC stance is often contrasted with the traditional views. In conducting our analysis, we pose key research questions (as set out in the section on methods). Before presenting the findings of the study, we engage with the position of South African mainstream churches on homosexuality and persons who identify themselves as gay or lesbian.⁴

South African Church Practices: Race, Gender and Sexuality

Before engaging with the discursive practices of GHMCC it is important to situate the practices of the church at large in South Africa, particularly in relation to race, gender and sexuality. It is well documented that the cornerstone of the apartheid philosophy was upheld, endorsed and implemented by the Dutch Reformed Church whose members and ministers were also members of the South African Nationalist Party. Nobel prize winner Archbishop Tutu has condemned in no uncertain terms the negative stance which churches have taken in relation to gay and lesbian individuals. He states that: "I have found the position of the church illogical, irrational and frankly un-Christian, totally untenable."⁵ He also challenges the position of his own church – the Anglican church – on homosexuality because while the church does not condemn homosexuals, it condemns "homosexual activity." He argues that sexual activity is part of being human and contributes to people being more like God intended them to be. He radically and insightfully stated in 1997 that: "...if the church, after the victory of apartheid, is looking for a worthy moral crusade, then this is it: the fight against homophobia and heterosexism."⁶ In contemporary South Africa, fourteen years after Desmond Tutu made these statements, his own church has not changed its official stance on "homosexual activity" and there is an increase in the number of persons, including Black people and women,

⁴ We use the terms gay and lesbian to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people more broadly.

⁵ D. Tutu, "Foreword," in *Aliens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. de Gruchy (Cape Town/Johannesburg: David Philip, 1997).

⁶ Tutu, "Foreword," in *Aliens in the household of God* 1997

who have joined conservative anti-gay, anti-feminist charismatic churches.^{7 8} These churches' anti-gay and anti-feminist stance is based on their interpretation of the Bible in relation to homosexuality and women's roles in society. As Potgieter and Nadar have pointed out there is a worrying relationship between persons who hold important powerful positions in South African decision making institutions and their quite public association with churches which have a very strong anti-gay stance.⁹

Both in South Africa and across the African continent, one of the main arenas in which homophobia is played out most vociferously is in religious discourse and, despite advances in the legal construction of homosexuality in South Africa, homophobia continues to pervade religious life. More than a decade ago Germond and de Gruchy¹⁰ challenged the heterosexism and homophobia that still persists in South African churches and challenged the religious discourse that homosexuality is sinful. They also argued that the sin lies not in homosexuality itself but in the exclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual people from church life.

Nadar¹¹, in discussing the teaching of gender and religion to university students, points out that in contemporary South Africa these students generally receive their theologies from televangelists rather than from rigorous theological reading and reflection. Nadar¹² views the teaching of feminist biblical studies, which is supportive of a pro- homosexuality stance, as crucial especially given globalisation and fundamentalism which not surprisingly underpins a conservative biblical interpretation of the role of women. In this sense the authority of the Bible has taken on a particularly strong role in women's lives in recent decades with the rise of neo-Pentecostalism and 'globalisation leading churches that previously did not ascribe to the tenet of the inerrancy and infallibility of scripture to espouse 'biblical values'.¹³ Phiri and Nadar's¹⁴ research with

⁷ S. Nadar, "Changing the world: The task of feminist biblical scholars," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 25 no.2 (2009),137-143.

⁸ S. Nadar and C. Potgieter, "Liberated through submission? The Worthy Woman's conference as a case study of formenism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 26 no.2 (2010),141-151.

⁹ Academic Perspective – "Will he leave his church at the door?" Sunday Tribune. 11th September 2011.

¹⁰ P. Germond and S. de Gruchy, *Aliens in the household of God: Homosexuality and Christian faith in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997).

¹¹ S. Nadar, "Changing the world: The task of feminist biblical scholars," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 25 no.2 (2009),137-143.

¹² Nadar, *Changing the world*, 137-143.

¹³ Nadar, *Changing the world*: 137-143, 141.

religious women who experience gender-based violence also indicates that critical introspection is required when it comes to putting religious beliefs into practice, otherwise religion holds the potential to become dangerous on both a public and personal level. Nadar and Potgieter¹⁵ have challenged what they have labeled *formenism*, which is a liberation through submission discourse promulgated by persons such as the South African female 'video' evangelist, Gretha Widd. Widd's message supports the inherent superiority of men and constructs homosexuality as a sin in the eyes of God. Ackermann¹⁶ has also argued that feminist theologies contribute to progressive social change because, as critical theologies of liberation, they have developed systemic analyses that include the experiences of women and marginalised people in a constructive and transformative manner. Through the identification of misogynist and homophobic attitudes within Christian traditions and biblical passages and through the use of new approaches to reading source documents, feminist scholarship has become central to hermeneutic debate. Such critical theologies of liberation have then contributed to the growing availability worldwide – despite the simultaneous growth of fundamentalism – of churches opposed to homophobic and heterosexist thinking. Deane Stuart¹⁷ remarks that previously Christians who were identified as gay or lesbian had to remain in the closet within the church or alternatively exit the closet and the church. Churches such as the GHMCC thus provide a space where members are out of the closet but not out of the Christian church.

Method

The present study is a discursive analysis of the online materials of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church (GHMCC) in Zonnebloem (District 6), Cape Town, South Africa. There are two other MCC churches in South Africa which are listed as being linked to them but we chose the Good Hope Church as it was started in 1983 and is thus the oldest and also the 'main' church. The other two are the Hope and Unity MCC in Johannesburg and the Glorious Light MCC in Pretoria. We

¹⁴ I.A. Phiri and S. Nadar, "The personal is political: Faith and religion in a public university," *Acta Theologica*, 14 (2011), 81-94.

¹⁵ Phiri and, Nadar, *The personal is political*, 81-94

¹⁶ D. M. Ackermann, "Forward from the margins: Feminist theologies for life," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99 (1997), 63-67.

¹⁷ D. Stuart, "The challenge of the churches to gays and lesbians" in *Allens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 178-187.

accessed the online materials at GHMCC's website.¹⁸ GHMCC in Cape Town is affiliated with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) which was founded by Rev. Troy Perry in California in 1968, after having lost his position as a Pentecostal minister for being gay. UFMCC has expanded over the decades to include over 300 churches in different countries around the globe. It has also grown to cater for heterosexual as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer-identified members. UFMCC members tend to come from a wide array of Christian and non-Christian religious backgrounds. Like its 'parent' church, GHMCC offers the rites of: ordination; matrimony; funerals; laying on of hands; and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion.

The online materials of GHMCC include: information on the history of the church; its vision; mission; statement of faith; sacraments; rites; ministry; human rights protocol; constitution; Sunday worship; groups; community kitchen; resources; resources on gender diversity and same-sex marriage; and an online Bible search portal. The GHMCC homepage is organised into seven main sections: *Home*; *About Us*; *Ministry*; *News*; *Resources*; *Spirituality*; and *Contact Us*. In each section there are a number of further subheadings under which materials are presented online as well as several links to other websites. The GHMCC website is well designed, clear and easy to navigate. The slogan *Would Jesus Discriminate?* dominates the homepage and there is a picture of Archbishop Desmond Tutu with a link to a video message from him. We printed this material from the website and conducted an analysis of the materials.

Aims

Key questions which the article asks are:

1. To what extent does the GHMCC challenge and resist the dominant traditional church discourse on homosexuality?
2. To what extent does the GHMCC challenge dominant discourses on gender roles?
3. To what extent does the discourse of the GHMCC locate its 'message' within the broader South African challenges of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia?
4. Has the church constructed its understanding of homosexuality within a social constructionist or essentialist paradigm?

¹⁸ <http://www.goodhopemcc.org> Accessed 1st August 2011.

Analysis

Our analysis involved searching for recurring themes, listing them in different files and identifying sentences and words that seemed to construct a particular message in relation to what our core aims were. We also searched for contradictory messages as well as for messages or social phenomena which were silent in relation to the South African context. Following Billig¹⁹, Strebel²⁰ and Potgieter²¹, as discourse analysts we built up an understanding of the topic before starting to analyse and understand the web based texts of GHMCC. Our analysis was thus also informed by extensive prior reading, theoretically informed ideas and previous academic and advocacy work in the area of 'homosexuality'. Underpinning our analysis is a feminist social constructionist paradigm which is employed to deconstruct notions of race, gender and homophobia in terms of identity and religion, while we situated the GHMCC texts in the wider context of post-apartheid South Africa. Following the principles of discursive analysis, we analysed the extant GHMCC texts, which were accessed online. We explored the wider ideology that was communicated through the GHMCC texts as well as the ways in which the data pointed to the political, social and historical context in which they were developed. We looked at the ways in which the GHMCC texts were based on other sources as well as the means by which power and influence was wielded through the texts. We interrogated whose reality was being portrayed through the texts as well as the people, objects and processes presented and defined in the text. We were particularly attentive to potential absences and contradictions in the texts as well as to views that may have been excluded/ silenced and which we would have expected to emerge based on our understanding of the literature and context. We were also mindful of possible alternative interpretations of the texts. In keeping with the principles of discourse analysis, we do not claim to have discovered the 'truth' of the texts in question or to have developed the only possible interpretation of these texts.

Results

We initially identified twelve broad recurring as well as atypical discursive patterns or themes. We then conducted a further stage of

¹⁹ M. Billig, "Methodology and scholarship in understanding ideological explanation," in *Analysing everyday explanation: a casebook of methods*, ed. C. Antaki (London: Sage Press, 1988), 199-215.

²⁰ A. Strebel, "Women and AIDS: a study of issues in the prevention of HIV infection" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1993).

²¹ C. Potgieter, "Black, South African, lesbian: Discourses of invisible lives" (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Western Cape, 1997).

analysis to determine whether we could merge some of the themes. The themes as engaged with in this article reflect the merged themes in relation to our research questions and the following is a discussion of these discourses.

Liberation and equality discourse

The dominant discourse of liberation and equality indicates that GHMCC locates itself within a broad framework of international human rights and foregrounds their association as Christians with a pro-homosexuality discourse. On the website the section of text, entitled *Human Rights Protocol* presents the philosophy of GHMCC which states:

We are called as Christians to:

- stand in solidarity with those who are marginalized and oppressed,
- be partners in working for change,
- be witnesses who call attention to Human Rights abuses,
- be a voice in the international community for justice,
- lift up new generations of remarkable, far-reaching spiritual activists,
- build on hope and create our future

The ideologies of liberation with which GHMCC aligns itself through its texts include those of the international human rights struggle; the international LGBT rights movement; the civil rights movement in the USA; and the LGBT rights movement in South Africa. Interestingly, GHMCC associates itself with the civil rights movement in the USA and links itself to Nobel prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu in relation to his stance on the Bible and homosexuality. The church, which established its first congregation in South Africa in 1983 during the height of the oppressive regime, does not have a public history as an ally of anti-apartheid movements, such as the United Democratic Front. The latter organisation was launched in 1983 and was led by Allan Boesak, the well-known priest and anti-apartheid activist. The current video on the website makes a link between the oppression of Black people by the apartheid regime and the discrimination of persons who identify themselves as gay. A theology of liberation, redolent of Stuart²²,

²² E. Stuart, *Lesbian and gay theologies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

Goss²³ and Boesak²⁴ is presented as a keystone of GHMCC teaching that calls on members to be 'spiritual activists' in the global fight for justice. Our analysis indicated that the GHMCC posted a message of support to the victims of the Tsunami in Japan but there was no visible response to natural disasters in Africa, such as the current drought on many parts of the continent, or even natural disasters in South Africa.

Rather, GHMCC texts function as a form of liberatory praxis, encouraging congregants to mobilize for progressive social change in relation to issues which affect the lives of members of the LGBTI community. For example, it carries slogans from activist organisations such as the Triangle Project whose slogan is: *Challenging homophobia. Appreciating sexual diversity*. The Triangle Project is also listed in the section entitled *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage* where the text reads: *Make your voice heard, loud and queer! and Gay Mass Action Required!*

The call to mobilisation is also evident in the *Gallery* section of the website, which has photographs of Gay Pride marches. The church forms strategic alliances with other organizations too. It is a member of the Joint Working Group (JWG), an activist grouping which challenges any form of discrimination against the LGBTI population. The group's members are activist organizations in South Africa such as Behind the Mask; the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre; the Forum for the Empowerment of Women; Gender Dynamix; and the Triangle Project. GHMCC points out the similarity between and unacceptability of the apartheid regime's 'separate but equal philosophy' as regards race and the civil partnerships (not 'full marriage') status in relation to same-sex marriages in South Africa.

In *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage, Gays and Lesbians now 'separate but equal'* the text employs legal opinion to reject the proposed separate institution of civil partnerships:

Gay men and lesbians still experience tremendous oppression, marginalisation and vilification in our society. Some are still raped, assaulted or killed because of their sexual orientation. In this context, the creation of apartheid-style, separate civil partnerships for same-sex couples merely confirms that the state does not consider their relationships worthy of equal concern and respect...In short, a doctrine of "separate but equal" was deeply humiliating and insulting

²³ R. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus acted up* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002).

²⁴ A. A. Boesak, "Theological reflections on empire," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 65 no.1 (2009), 645-651.

when applied to black South Africans. It remains humiliating and insulting (and now also unconstitutional) when applied to homosexuals.

We are of the opinion that apartheid was far more than humiliating and insulting like the injustices experienced by gays and lesbians. It is interesting that GHMCC did not declare apartheid a heresy, unlike some of the mainstream churches. The mainstream churches or individuals associated with these churches – except for individuals like Tutu, De Gruchy, Germond – were vocal on issues of race and silent on the issue of homosexuality. Conversely it appears as if GMHCC has been fairly silent in the context of South Africa on issues of race and vocal on issues of same-sex relationships.

In rejecting the exclusion of sections of society from meaningful participation both in society and in religious life, GHMCC texts construct a form of inclusive religious worship premised on the ideals of equality, dignity and freedom. GHMCC's fundamental and dominant discourse – similar to Germond and De Gruchy²⁵ – is that LGBT people are not 'aliens in the household of God'. This dominant discourse is exemplified by the lead banner on the homepage: *Would Jesus discriminate? Explore the 21st century question.*

Overall there is a dominant discourse in GHMCC texts that indicates the influence of the wider societal context. However, it is predominantly focussed on issues related to the LGBT community. In this sense, GHMCC texts make frequent appeals to constitutionality in support of the church's agenda of inclusivity and diversity. For example, in the section *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage, Call to Action: Same Sex Marriages* the text, sourced from an information sheet prepared by OUT LGBT Well-being in Pretoria, reads:

The arguments in favour of the inclusion of gay people within marriage are thus supported by the foundational values of our constitutional democracy. Throughout the Constitution reference is made to a society based on equality, human dignity and freedom. This state has the obligation to respect, promote and fulfil all of the rights within our Bill of Rights that realise these values.

Discourse challenging conservative Christian hegemony

Just as feminist theologians such as Daly²⁶, Radford Reuther²⁷, Nadar²⁸ and Ackerman²⁹ have challenged dominant patriarchal religious

²⁵ Boesak, "Theological reflections on empire", 2009.

²⁶ M. Daly, *The church and the second sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

discourse, so too do GHMCC texts function as a challenge to the hegemony of conservative and homophobic Christian churches. In so doing the texts reject the notion of a monolithic, homogenous, global Christianity. For example in *Resources, Same-Sex Marriage, Statement on Same Sex Marriages* the text reads:

Good Hope MCC is aware of various religious groups objecting to homosexuality from their interpretation of the Bible; however these interpretations or dogma only hold true within their own denomination and these groups do not speak for all Christians per se.

GHMCC texts point out the use of biblical passages against gay people and argue for the error of such interpretations. For example, in *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible*, the text reads:

Sadly, divine scripture, including the Bible, is often used as a weapon to bash LGBT persons from the pulpit, in our families and in our communities. It is important to remember that such hurtful doctrines are not a reflection of The Christ – or the way God calls the church to be – these are products of fallible and imperfect human beings who guide these churches.

GHMCC texts – and the sources from which they are drawn – reinterpret the biblical passages often used to promulgate religious homophobia. Thus, the stories of Sodom and Gomorah and Leviticus are revisited and the stories of Jonathan and David and of Ruth and Naomi are presented as same-sex love stories. In *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible, HIV/AIDS: Is it God's Judgement?* the text reinterprets scripture:

There are a few passages in the Bible that have been said to condemn homosexual acts. Currently there is much debate about these passages. Some Christians believe these passages condemn all homosexual behaviour. But a growing number of Bible experts are convinced these passages condemn only certain sexual acts that are idolatrous or abusive. For example, many Bible scholars believe that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), condemns rape, not homosexuality. Rape is a violent act and irrelevant to loving same-sex relationships. Other passages in the Bible, such as Ezekiel 16: 49-50, identify the sin of these cities as injustice and idolatry.... Jesus said nothing to condemn homosexuality, but he said a great deal about faith, hope and love.

²⁷ R. Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the divine feminine: a Western religious history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

²⁸ Ruether, *Goddesses and the divine feminine*, 2006.

²⁹ D. M. Ackermann, "Forward from the margins: Feminist theologies for life," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99 (1997), 63-67.

In a manner not dissimilar to other gay 'progressive, non-homophobic' Christians in South Africa, such as De Gruchy,³⁰ the text also articulates the core of GHMCC hermeneutics by emphasising the importance of context and of correct translation from the Greek or Hebrew. For example, in *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible, Spirituality and Sexuality* the text reads:

In order for us to understand scripture, we need to understand the context of the writings – reading what came before and after the story/parable/chapter/verses in question. A verse or a word cannot be understood in isolation, but must be seen as a whole in terms of the Bible's overall message of salvation and love for all.

In developing a lesbian and gay exegesis, GHMCC texts construct a dominant theme in the reconfiguration of the religious as secular. For example, GHMCC strategically redefines marriage in secular, not religious, terms: *Same Sex Marriage is not and should not be a religious debate, it is a question of equality and human rights.*

In so doing, the text attempts to wrestle the institution of marriage, and its attendant rights, from traditional Christian discourse. The text also appeals to constitutionality to defend and support the rights of minorities in the face of 'traditional Christian values' and to reconfigure the discourse:

The Legislature in this country should listen carefully to the ruling of the Constitutional Court and incorporate the inclusion of same-sex couples into the current Marriage Act instead of looking for alternatives to create "2nd class marriages" in order to justify "traditional Christian values".

GHMCC texts often employ a lens which makes comparisons between homophobia, racism and sexism and to evidence the ways in which biblical exegesis changes and develops over time. Given that much of the information was sourced from the USA, reference is frequently made to the historical use of the Bible to justify slavery. The Bible was used in South Africa to justify various forms of oppression including homosexuality and in this instance again, no dominant theme emerged which located the text within the struggles of South Africa. Rather, when the South African context is mentioned, it has the feel of being an 'add on'. Thus the text claims that the Bible was historically employed to

³⁰ S. De Gruchy, "Human being in Christ: resources for an inclusive anthropology," in *Aliens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 233-269.

'prove' the superiority of whites and continues to be used to assert the immorality and inferiority of gay people.

Nevertheless the text does highlight similarities between the various civil rights struggles and, in the section entitled *Spirituality, Sexuality and Bible, Spirituality and Sexuality* which was written by a former pastor at GHMCC and head of the Triangle Project, it reads:

The struggle of LGBT persons is a Human Rights struggle in the same vein as the struggle of people of colour, women facing gender discrimination within the church, slavery and exploitation of children through abuse and neglect; the church needs to reflect and revisit the HARD FACT that many people are still being kept away from Christ's table of forgiveness based on their sexuality.

Here again there is reference to gender and race struggles in relation to the struggles of the LGBT population, but this remains limited to life within the church.

Discourse of natural and normal: disrupting gender?

GHMCC texts portray a particular version of the normal, legitimate, moral and natural. This vision includes: the normalcy of LGBT identities and experience; the legitimacy of same-sex relations and same-sex marriage; the morality of same-sex desire and love; and the naturalness of gender diversity. In terms of the latter, the section entitled *Gender Diversity* asserts the complexity of gender expression and highlights the damaging effects of transphobia on the lives of sexual and gendered minorities:

Simply male or female? Sometimes it's not as easy as that: gender variations are more common than [sic] most people suspect, because many people hide their true nature out of fear for their safety and security.

GHMCC texts challenge binaried gender norms by informing the reader about transgender existence and terminology, by focusing on the biblical figure of the eunuch and by reference to the modern figure of the drag queen. While GHMCC texts focus more on transgender issues than on (biological, non-trans) women's issues, they disrupt formenism (Nadar and Potgieter³¹) and indicate the ways in which GHMCC members who are women – or who identify as female – reject patriarchal scripture and ritual. GHMCC texts educate on correct terminology in the area of transgender life and under the *Resources, Gender Diversity* there is a *Trans-Glossary*. Here the text engages with

³¹ B. Dlamini, "Homosexuality in the African context," *Agenda*, (2006), 67.

the differences between sex and gender and takes a constructionist perspective that contrasts with essentialist notions of sexual orientation pervading much of the text elsewhere:

Gender is the set of socially constructed norms associated with a given birth sex i.e. masculinity or femininity. Gender may be considered as a sense of one's own maleness or femaleness.

A wide range of terms and acronyms are presented, such as *Gender Identity*, *Gender Role*, *Gonadal*, *Intersex*, *MTF (Male to Female)*, *TG*, *TS*, *Trans* and *Transitioning* and the notion of gender performativity pervading the text mirrors the work of queer theorists such as Butler³². Perhaps explain performativity?

Discourse of religious colonialism

The South African context is noticeable for its absence from much of the text. In the *Resources*, *Same-Sex Marriage* section there is frequent mention of the Joint Working Group, South African jurisprudence and LGBT activist groups and in the *Resources*, *Gallery* section there are photographs of events such as Cape Town Pride. However, much of the text is of North American origin and has a generic and non-local quality to it. Indeed something that is not articulated by the text, and that might have been expected to be stated, is the potentially colonialist nature of the diffusion of MCC churches around the globe. Despite the history of missionaries in Africa, the use of religion as an instrument of colonialism and the role of contemporary evangelical American churches in fostering homophobic foment in some African countries, there is no mention of the implications for GHMCC in this regard. Nevertheless, just as Dlamini³³ pointed to the introduction of homophobia into African societies by means of white, Christian morality, the gay-affirming teachings of an American church could be viewed – particularly by a homophobic audience – as another attempt by North Americans and Europeans to tell African peoples what to think and believe.

While the colonialist risk is not explicitly articulated in GHMCC's texts, it is referred to tangentially in UFMCC's *Human Rights Protocol* concerning the founding (or 'planting') of new churches:

What are our base line standards?

- to only go where we are invited

³² J. Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³³ Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 1990.

- to assume we have a lot to learn
- to listen to our hosts
- to forge partnerships
- to respond when requested
- to be flexible to the realities and differences in establishing churches internationally

Despite UFMCC's awareness of the importance of cultural sensitivity when founding new churches abroad, there is a discourse pervading the texts that suggests that UFMCC has taken on, as a supposedly liberated western LGBT organisation, the mission of liberating LGBT people in apparently less progressive countries. While the text articulates an awareness of local contexts there is a contradictory discourse in which the organisation waits for 'windows of opportunity' in which to 'plant' new churches around the globe:

Criteria for Potential Success:

- Need to consider, potential for impact for the LGBT community, history of Christian Church in the region, political stability of country, nature and severity of the treatment of LGBT community, windows of opportunity

UFMCC's expansionist project would seem to be addressed to an American audience of MCC members intending to set up MCC churches abroad and functions as a sort of step-by-step guide to church founding globally. Steyn and van Zyl,³⁴ Potgieter,³⁵ and Reddy³⁶ have written on the silencing of indigenous southern African meanings by the westocentric colonising project.

Discourse of heteropatriarchal Christian sex

GHMCC texts construct a form of same-sex relationality heavily reliant on heteronormative, Christian, sexual values. Despite professions of queerness and a focus on sexuality and spirituality, there is very little mention of the sexual act or sex in GHMCC texts and no mention of

³⁴ Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 1990.

³⁵ Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 1990.

³⁶ V. Reddy, "Queer marriage: Sexualising citizenship and the development of freedoms in South Africa," in *The prize and the price. Shaping sexualities in South Africa*, ed. M. Steyn and M. van Zyl (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009), 345.

non-normative sexual practices such as polyamory³⁷. However, there is a strong argument made against promiscuity and in favour of monogamous, life-long, same-sex marriage. While the text situates GHMCC in the context of the South African and international LGBT rights movement, many of the sexual practices and freedoms characteristic of these movements have not been engaged with and literally excised from the texts. The church ascribes to a Christian sexual ethics, similar to the dominant heterosexual paradigm, applied to lesbian and gay relationships. In this sense the texts no longer use the acronym LGBT but instead refer to lesbian and gay people. We interpret this as a dominant discourse which is more comfortable with the term 'homosexual' when referring to gay or lesbian persons living in suburbia. While the others who form part of the LBGTI discourse are not excluded, the sub-text seems to tacitly provide greater acceptance to gay and lesbian persons.

The excision and silencing of varied sexual practices is evident in the section entitled *Spirituality, Would Jesus Discriminate?* The text is sourced from a book entitled *The Children are Free* written by an American UFMCC pastor. The text presents the story of Tyler as an example of moral rectitude and proper sexual behaviour:

...when [Tyler] finally acknowledged his attraction to men during his fourth year of college, it was not during a search for unbounded sexual pleasure or in the context of pagan worship rituals. It was during a night of intense prayer when he was questioning whether he should try to pursue a relationship with a female friend. During that time of prayer, Tyler was strongly impressed that he needed instead to deal with his innate attraction to men...for the next several years, he continued to remain celibate as he wrestled with Scripture and with his church's teachings, trying to find out how he should live as a gay man. He tried always to live a life free of covetousness, malice, envy, strife, and pride. And, even when Tyler came to the conclusion that Scripture affirmed him as an innately gay individual, his respect for the teaching of his parents [Christian missionaries] and his love of God convinced him to remain a virgin until meeting his spouse, Rob.

Here a hedonistic sexuality – 'unbounded' and 'pagan' in nature – is contrasted with the moral, Christian sexual reserve of the confused gay man. Sexuality outside the context of (life-long, monogamous) marriage is associated with pride, covetousness and malice, refuge from which is found in sexual repression and in virginity. The text articulates a

³⁷ Polyamory is the practice of engaging in more than one intimate relationship at a time with the awareness and approval of all partners. Polyamory is different from polygamy, which is the practice of having more than one spouse.

traditional, Christian sexual ethics strongly grounded in essentialist discourse – ‘an innately gay individual’ – and most often of North American origin. In so doing, the text negates the practice of non-normative sexualities. Corbett³⁸ argues that Christianity has historically been nervous of erotic love and has attempted to neutralise it. The discourse which emerged from our analysis is that the church is similarly wary of erotic love which falls outside the boundaries of normative, western, monogamous relationships. They are silent on a practice such as polygamy, both from a feminist or a cultural perspective.

Nevertheless this conservative sexual ethic is contradicted by other more sex-positive discourses in GHMCC texts, such as in the story of Miss Davina Regina. In *Resources, Gender Diversity, Miss Davina: The Ethiopian and Philip* (Acts 8) the text reads:

Now Miss Davina Regina was no fool, in fact she hadn't got to where she was without having a fair bit of common-sense and a good deal of business acumen, and good looks as well. She was well known for striking a hard bargain and being a fierce negotiator. She was also well known for her fondness of young attractive men. She was taken with Philip the moment she saw him. So with her most charming and winsome smile she said to Philip: "Well, how can I understand unless someone explains it to me? Why don't you get in and tell me, honey?"

The sensuality and flirtatiousness of Miss Davina contrasts with the anodyne and tortured figure of the confused and repressed Christian gay man recounted in the previous story. In this way competing discourses in the text reflect the diversity of sexual ethical positions espoused by GHMCC. Nevertheless, while the texts both reinscribe a traditional Christian sexual ethic and challenge homophobic Christian mores, the full panoply of sexual expression in LGBT communities in South Africa and globally, as explored in Steyn and van Zyl³⁹, remains largely absent here.

Missing feminist discourses: tensions and silences

One of the most surprising absences and silences in GHMCC online texts is the lack of a strong, feminist voice in relation to both homosexuality and religion. Gender is predominantly understood to refer to transgenderism which is often focused on male-to-female transgenderism, such as the figure of the eunuch and the drag queen (as opposed to the drag king). Consequently there is little focus on the

³⁸ I Corbett, "Homosexuality in the traditions of the church," in *Allens in the household of God*, ed. P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1997), 162-172.

³⁹ Corbett, "Homosexuality in the traditions of the church" 162-172.

issues facing the 'normative biological' woman. We are not negating the importance of GHMCC supporting all categories of 'woman' but the focus seems to be on 'the exotic other'. Reference is made to a number of female priests and several of the authors of the online texts are women, but there is a silence in terms of a radical western feminist theological perspective and an African feminist perspective and interpretation also appears conspicuously absent. The female priests appear not to have challenged images of a patriarchal god or to present discourses which could be labelled feminist. In addition, stories of lesbian desire are also overshadowed by a primary focus on gay male experience and when such stories are presented – such as that of Ruth and Naomi – they at times seem tokenistic. Although the ideology of the church aims to challenge sexism and homophobia, it also tacitly endorses these both through the erasure of non-normative sexual practices and through the absence of radical, feminist theologies. Also absent from GHMCC texts are any African or South African terms relating to transgender identities. Here the text promulgates a particularly westocentric understanding of gender and sexuality and ignores the long history of gender variance in African societies, including the figure of the *isangoma* (Epprecht⁴⁰, Dlamini⁴¹).

There is in addition an ongoing tension in GHMCC texts between essentialist and constructionist understandings of sexuality, sexual orientation and gender. In contrast with constructionist interpretations of gender, the texts develop an essentialist perspective on sexuality. For example, in *Resources, Sexuality and Bible, Spirituality and Sexuality* the text asserts that: *...faith or religion is a personal choice, unlike one's sexuality which is part of who you are and is not a choice*. The texts construct a white, gay male identity onto the biblical figure of the eunuch and employ an essentialist understanding of gender and homosexuality in interpreting eunuchs and modern gay men as being 'born that way': *Jesus said some are born gay. (Mathew 19:10-12)* Here Jesus refers to "eunuchs who have been so from birth." This terminology ("born eunuchs") was used in the ancient world to refer to homosexual men. *Jesus indicates that being a "born eunuch" is a gift from God.*

Concluding Remarks

⁴⁰ M. Epprecht, *The history of a dissident sexuality in Southern Africa* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 21.

⁴¹ Epprecht, *The history of a dissident sexuality in Southern Africa*, 21.

This article's intention is to raise debate in relation to the role of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church in South Africa regarding issues concerning gay and lesbian people sixteen years after the first democratic election. We have thus deliberately chosen to not make any "cast in stone" or definitive conclusions. Nevertheless Corbett⁴² in commenting on the response of the church to homosexuality remarked that it is imperative that churches respond not only for justice to be entrenched for the homosexual community but for the sake of the church itself. We would extend his concern and add that it is important that a church such as the GHMCC continue to provide a space for the LGBTI community. However, for it to grow and more importantly be relevant to the community it serves it has to have 'more voice' on issues where they have been silent. The obvious silences as has emerged from our analysis are not talking to feminist concerns and the failure to link issues such as poverty, racism and sexism which prevail in the South African context to the matters which they are dealing with.

GHMCC no doubt provides an important space and the fact that this church actively engages with organisations which have similar agendas is a positive finding which has emerged. The church is located in a contested space (District Six, from where a community was forcibly removed) and the website makes no mention of this. GHMCC is also silent on their broader politico-geographical location in the city and indeed the country, which has impacted on the identities and lived lives of the people within the metropole where they are based.

This article represents the first stage in our critical engagement with the discourse of the church and it is our intention to interview and engage with leaders and members of the church for the purpose of conducting future research.

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⁴² Epprecht, *The history of a dissident sexuality in Southern Africa*, 21.

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