

The shortcomings of organised religion for LGBTIQ people's wellness

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By Chiedza Chagutah

In the past decade, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTIQ) people have made significant legal and political gains in South Africa, including the freedom to marry.

LGBTIQ people across South Africa seem to lack clear recourse and redress when they are fired, evicted, or refused service because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Association of Religion Data Archives (relying on World Christian Trends) estimated in 2010 that 82.0% of South Africans identified as Christian, 7.1% identified with indigenous religions. South Africa is a country which is mainly defined as Christian but other religions including Islam, indigenous religion are amongst the most prominent beliefs in South Africa, subscribing to their tenets in a community of faith is at the helm of what constitutes wholeness for many individuals in society.

Sexuality and religion are both core to individual identity, but they are also the subject of profound disagreements among people of goodwill. In essence, the best way forward is to give people the widest possible space to live out their identities without having to fear for the loss of their livelihoods or the ministries that give hope to so many of our country's most vulnerable citizens.

A 2012 Win-Gallup International Religiosity and Atheism poll indicated that the number of South Africans who consider themselves religious decreased from 83% of the population in 2005 to 64% of the population in 2012. However, an Ipsos Mori Poll of 2017 showed that 88% declare that religion was an important part of their lives.

Faith and the idea of connection with a Higher Being is closely linked with one's perception of their life's purpose and also how one makes sense of both joy and sorrow. Feeling rejected by fellow human beings is very hurtful. A study by [Love Not Hate](#) which found that 44% of those surveyed in their study said they had experienced discrimination, while 41% said they knew someone murdered owing to their gender identity or sexual orientation. Being rejected by society leaves a bitter taste in one's mind, however the thought that one may have been rejected by God is even more horrendous.

Worship can contribute a significant part to a sense of fulfilment as one taps into the spiritual realm and feels at peace with their Maker. The fact that churches in particular, do not acknowledge individuals who have embraced alternative sexuality, is a huge challenge to many South Africans who are part of the LGBTIQ community owing to their sexuality. In some orthodox and Pentecostal churches, LGBTIQ people are excluded from participating in regular Christian rituals such as the partaking in Holy Communion which is held in high regard by the church.

Freedom of religion, as well as non-discrimination, is a significant rights issue in this country, and churches have a part to play.

Society needs to accept the LGBTIQ society and allow these individuals the right to belong to the community of faith without being prejudiced. In recent years, there has been an increase in reported hate crimes towards homosexuals which is paradoxical as there has also been as

increase in acceptance of LGBTIQ community demonstrated by a show of political will to end homophobic violence.

The moment institutions of faith demonstrate acceptance, society will make headway in addressing challenges such as stigma, homophobic violence (particularly corrective rape of lesbian women) among this key population.

With this background to organised religion in mind, it is clear why it is important for faith-based advocacy interventions be taken up in churches and other faith-based institutions.

A church is a place of worship and every member is allowed to worship with no judgement despite one's sexual orientation. The church should be a platform where one is able to open up on sexual orientation and any fears they may have. The Christian faith in particular strongly condemns judging and prejudicing other individuals and therefore it's important for that to be clear. For any individual, acceptance and freedom of expression of one's sexual orientation leads to higher self-esteem

Sadly, scriptural text is often interpreted in ways that can lead to some people being excluded. Discrimination remains amongst some of the greatest challenges that LGBTIQ people face, particularly from immediate family. Formal religious establishments such as churches, mosques, temples and so on tend to uphold heterosexuality as 'normal' or the only way to be.

A twin tragedy has been that organisations advocating for the rights of LGBTI people often underestimate the influence that faith-based institutions, especially churches have in how ordinary people's ideologies are shaped and who can be accepted by society.

It is high time and high regard that society looks at the LGBTIQ community as part of society as a whole. It is unnecessary to further drive them away from religious systems central to who they are because of their sexuality and sexual orientation. This repeals exemption laws (Chapter 2 of the constitution included) which spell out non-discrimination to those who would discriminate based on their gender, sexual orientation, religious or moral beliefs.

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