

# Christian Faith and Sexual Orientation in the Context of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe

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## **Abstract**

Nowadays insightful information about the causes, meaning, prevention and management of HIV and AIDS is available. Statistics show new infections especially in areas not penetrated by the church because of different perceptions about sexuality. As such, not much literature exists about the church queer studies and theology in the context of HIV and AIDS. Discourses about sexual orientation in the church have triggered complex debate. The tension includes the inclusion of homosexuals within worship, as well as their identity and space in the worship experience. As such, this raises questions about the compatibility of Christian faith, rituals, and practices. The demise of families, shifting identities of marriages, including marrying and ordaining gays, human rights and religious freedom are fundamentals in this article. Somewhat, there is relegation of the lesbians, bisexuals, and gays, while it is a contributor to issues of HIV and AIDS. Thus, this article seeks to understand the extent to which the Pentecostal faith, practices, and rituals can dialogue with homosexuals in the context of HIV and AIDS. This article utilizes Queer theology, and data collection is through in-depth interviews and sermonic discourse analysis. This article concludes that reaching out to lesbigays in Pentecostalism create space for the church to mitigate the widespread of HIV and AIDS. This article constructively contributes to the understanding of HIV and AIDS, sex, and sexuality in Africa.

**Keywords:** Christian faith, sexual orientation, homosexuals, HIV and AIDS, lesbigays.

## **Introduction**

The response of African Pentecostalism, particularly in Zimbabwe, towards people living with HIV and AIDS is fraught with contradictions. The paradox of increased cases of new HIV and AIDS infections despite the widespread dissemination of information, HIV management, Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) is a cause for concern in Zimbabwe, Southern Africa and beyond. In fact, within the religious landscape in Zimbabwe, there remains some dark space such as the interplay between HIV and AIDS, sexual orientation and Christian faith. Somewhat, the religious leaders are reluctant to address and provide their position because of various perceptions about sexuality, especially homosexuality. At the same time, the role of religious actors in defining, shaping and prescribing meaning to the attitude towards sexuality in the context of HIV and AIDS is critical. However, in the light of postmodernism, globalization, polarization and religious secularization, homosexuality and bisexual sex have become a central issue in the spread of HIV and AIDS. While embracing this, not only are HIV and AIDS slowly finding acceptance within the Christian faith, but narratives about homosexuals have triggered a complex debate within the church. The term 'homosexuals' refers to a person who is emotionally and physically attracted to some members of the same gender. Some people consider the term outdated and clinical; this article prefers the words lesbians, bisexuals or gays (lesbigays) instead. Though, the discussion about HIV and AIDS epidemic has spun four decades now; there is a continual increase in new infection cases and Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) defaults. As such, further studies regarding the role of lesbians would be worthwhile in understanding the HIV and AIDS, sex and sexuality in Africa.

To date, literature about HIV and AIDS and religion in Zimbabwe have had a steady increase from 2005 to about 2013, after which period it seems to be on the decline. Facts indicate that infections of HIV and AIDS have not stopped and its impact is still vivid in Zimbabwean communities. Recently, there is not much notable stigma about HIV and AIDS; this status quo does not qualify to say people are keen to come to the open about it. It is not clear why there is a decline in the literature, but possible factor may include but not limited to the fact that the subject of HIV and AIDS is perhaps becoming uninteresting. Scholars such as Chitando (2007), Manyonganise (2008), Biri (2011) and Machingura (2013) have shown an increased interest

in the trajectories of HIV and AIDS within the religious landscape in Zimbabwe. On the other hand, the materials available about homosexuality in Zimbabwe focus on the politics and the theology of homosexuality (Gunda, 2010, Van Klinken and Gunda, 2012). So far, there are not many works about the role of homosexuality and theology in the context of HIV and AIDS pandemic, the gap this article is filling. It is important to keep in mind that the word 'church' is both fluid and complex. As a consequence of this underlying knowledge, this article focuses mainly on the Pentecostal faith in Zimbabwe. Pentecostalism is a brand of Christianity with particular emphasis on gifts of the spirit based on the book of Acts, and much emphasis is on ecstatic experience (Musoni, 2013). In this wider framework, discussing HIV and AIDS, especially focusing on homosexuality, presents a double tragedy to the Pentecostalism, which is both impressive and worrisome. As such, it is vital to draw attention to the fact that religious people view both those with HIV and homosexuals with suspicion within their religious landscape. The biggest challenge is to understand the extent to which the Pentecostal faith, practices, and rituals can dialogue with lesbians in the context of HIV and AIDS.

### **Theoretical Perspective and Methodology**

The queer theology theory was utilized as a theoretical framework for this study. Queer theology is premised on the supposition that gender non-conformity, lesbians, and gays desire are part of human history including the Bible (Cheng, 2011). Such a theory was necessary to understand the extent to which the Pentecostal faith, practices, and rituals can dialogue with lesbians in the context of HIV and AIDS. In other words, since Pentecostals believe in heterosexuals relationships queer theology helped in deconstructing boundaries of sexual orientation. Simply put, it assisted in exhibiting Pentecostal norms and ethos which limits the space of lesbians. Therefore, queer theology helped with the possibility of bringing new insights and understanding to forms of sexual orientation. However, one major limitation of applying queer theology to Pentecostalism was how can one access and speak freely about 'sexual orientation' which usually is construed as private and personal.

Data collection were done through interviews and sermon analysis. The total number of interviews conducted were fifteen from the Apostolic

Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM). Togarasei (2016) asserts that the AFM is the mother of all Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe with the largest following. The motherhood has necessitated the choice for it to represent other Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe. Five members were Pentecostal clergy including AFM National Executive members, five laities composed of three elders and deacons, and five ordinary church members. Purposive sampling was used for these interviews, a technique in which the researcher uses own judgment to choose the population (Patton 1990). Twenty-four sermons were analyzed from three AFM National Conferences including the deliverance sessions I attended. Pieterse (2016) argues that sermons enable spiritual self-fashioning aimed at combating the effects of discrimination and marginalization routinely experienced by (gay) members. The content of sermons has remained largely overlooked in dominant anthropological accounts of Pentecostalism (Ilana van Wyk 2014, 28,234). Data analysis involved a comparison of the reviewed literature with the findings for possible links and differences.

### **Working Definitions of Homosexuality, HIV, and AIDS**

Scholars have long debated about the definition of homosexuality, and its meaning is perceived and enacted differently in societies. Neuliep (2012, 121) maintains that minority groups or subcultures like lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people (LGBT) are notoriously difficult to define and are politically contested. One study by Klinken (2016) observes that there is a representation of homosexuality as a foreign and western imposition. In Africa, there is the politicization of homosexuality, and this has attracted both the public and political actors (Awondo 2010). For example, Sallar (2011) argues that about fifty percent of African countries have laws that either prohibit, imprison, fine or sentences lesbigays to death. In Zimbabwe, the penalty is one-year imprisonment plus a fine if homosexuality is proven (Sallar 2011). According to Croucher (2002), the Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe is on record saying homosexuality were “worse than dogs and pigs” and should have no rights at all. However, in the West, homosexuality is now considered a natural biological and, therefore, constitution right. What is at critical is the compatibility of the Pentecostal faith, beliefs, and practices in the context of HIV, AIDS, and homosexuality. Bisexuality means an individual who sleeps with both males and females, not necessarily having two genitals.

When a person is born with two sexual organs, they remove one in a medical operation. Taken together, these results of definitions suggest that there are varied ways of understanding homosexuality depending on the orientation of the individual. Further studies, which take other variables that affect lesbians into account, will need to be undertaken. HIV is known as (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) a virus which attacks the immune system. Both the virus and the infection it causes are HIV. Both the virus and the syndrome are often referred to together as HIV and AIDS.

### **Pentecostalism and HIV and AIDS**

It is critical to understand the relationship between three elements in this article namely, Pentecostalism, HIV and AIDS and lesbians. Thus, the continuum between Pentecostalism and HIV and AIDS is critical as it creates space for situating the impact of lesbians in the context of HIV and AIDS. Recently, credit goes to Pentecostalism for teaching about HIV and AIDS. In AFM during the conference, seminars, pre-marital counseling the subject of HIV and AIDS is topical. Slowly there is a paradigm shift in Christian theology about HIV and AIDS that views the causes of HIV and AIDS as not solely demonic influences which need the prescription of exorcism. The dialogue about the Church and HIV and AIDS brings to the surface the issues of sex and sexuality. The debate about HIV and AIDS has gained new prominence with many arguing that statistics for new infections and ART defaulting are alarming and the number of AIDS-related deaths continues to grow. There is a widespread acceptance of the use of Antiretroviral, Therapy though it has had resistance. The Pentecostal hermeneutics The conceptual notion embedded in gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of healing is problematic when it comes to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Rather, the over-emphasis of divine healing by Pentecostal movements and the African Indigenous Churches have brooded Antiretroviral Therapy defaulting candidates. There is an ambiguous relationship between divine healing and the Antiretroviral Therapy whereby the former advocate for the use of faith, declaring and chanting healing while the latter advocate for consistency of use of ART, check-up and administration of medication. Despite a few cases and testimonies, it is a fact that the church has not managed to heal HIV and AIDS. The church has to accept and indeed swallow a bitter pill, which not all infected people will be treated and should

not be guilty about that reality. A plausible approach would be for the church to pray and thank for the management and development of children being born without HIV from infected parents. As such, recent trends in the Christian faith have led to a proliferation of a doctrine that encompasses the use of condoms, artificial inseminations and testimonies of divine healings of HIV and AIDS.

However, much emphasis about the transmission of HIV and AIDS has focused on the heterosexuals than the lesbians. The challenge in the Pentecostal church in addressing HIV and AIDS is the fact the primary transmitter of HIV and AIDS is unprotected sex (Sakala 2016). This article argues that new infections about HIV and AIDS are amongst the key population groups such as lesbians and bisexuals, which are not reachable by the Pentecostals in contestation on different forms of sexualities. Such a groups are critical in the context of HIV and AIDS. Surveys conducted show that Sub-Saharan Africa has high percentages of HIV infection among lesbians (Smith 2009; Luhrmann, 2012; 13–14). In light of this, understanding the relationship of Pentecostals and lesbians is critical in the context of HIV and AIDS. Hence, creating space for lesbians in Pentecostalism does not only benefit them spiritual, but it opens a window for engaging with thematic issues. Since the Pentecostals have begun accepting and teaching people with HIV and AIDS, it is easier for this knowledge to extend to lesbians.

## **Discussions**

The following section is a discussion of how the Pentecostal faith, practices, and rituals can dialogue with lesbians. The Secretary General of AFM argues that the greatest challenge in Pentecostal faith is the existence of ethical issues that are not directly addressed by the Bible. Notable examples are that there are inferences to cases which include masturbation, oral sex, euthanasia, and abortion. Further, each clergy then attempts to bring logical meaning to these issues. In such instances, queer theology is a helpful tool for AFM clergy and leaders to use for understanding the place of lesbians in the space of worship. In the light of the above, one Evangelist (a clergy who focuses on soul winning) opine that the AFM should get off from high pedestals and make efforts to reach out to lesbians. Otherwise, most of the time the church merely reacts to the sexuality challenge, instead of being proactive. For instance, if a believer has a child who becomes a lesbian the Pentecostalism must have a

Christocentric position on how to deal with the matter. What does the born again experience do to the matters of lesbians? Marshall (2009) explains that the born again experience of Pentecostalism constitutes the dimension of subjective that find through the possible of actions.

The information from sermons analysis shows that there are prominent Scriptures used for the discourse of lesbians in the AFM. The most familiar New Testament passages such as Romans 1<sup>24,25,26,27</sup>, 1 Corinthians 5<sup>11,13</sup>, 6<sup>9-11</sup>, 2 Corinthians 2<sup>6-8</sup> and Old Testament books such as Deuteronomy 13<sup>17-18</sup>. It is clear that when the preachers evoke such texts, the humanists, human rights and other liberals are fighting a losing battle to liberate lesbians. Such Scriptures does not give room for second thinking about lesbians as part of humanity but just dismisses them. The reading of such texts presupposes that there is no debate to talk about on homosexuality in the Pentecostalism. Is it no wonder then, in the Pentecostal churches, that one hardly sees the attendance repentance of people with sex-related challenges? The Pentecostal churches never seek to foster genuine friendships and associations. The church gleefully awaits an impending judgment on them, for God to prove them right after all, but that is not how love works. In the AFM there is no application of queer theology which may foster new insights about sexual orientation. Thus, for a long time, the believers have skirted around the tough questions that life throws at the Pentecostalism, such as HIV and AIDS and homosexuality, almost to the extent and risk of sounding impractical. Pentecostals have a challenge of judging; just because one is not a homosexual does not mean they are good. The biggest problem in the relationship between lesbians and the Christian faith today is whether one is supposed to redefine theology, the Bible or the lesbians. For example, evidence from sermons analyzed shows that there is much emphasis on the Sodom and Gomorrah account when it comes to issues to do with lesbians. The Pentecostal clergy preaches and warns about the dangers of homosexuality. They paint a picture of a hailstorm, brim storm and fire falling just like the Biblical account. Simply put, the message is that lesbians are heading for a destruction and are not part of the people who profess the Christian faith. Repentance is the prescription for one to evade this eternal condemnation and destruction. Perhaps above is the reason why the lesbians galvanize into mass movements and even try to formulate a theology which may liberate them. Lesbians in the wider society are advocating for their human rights and are coming out publicly.

One Executive member of the AFM argues that the most challenging

issue about lesbians is they destroy the fundamentals of marriage. Also, the Bible do not only condemn lesbians but destroys the future of progeny. Christian faith tradition holds that procreative sex is legitimate (Hilderbrandt, 2015). Quoting the story of creation, one AFM Pastor reiterate that God hates lesbians. In fact, in creation He did not create ‘Adam and Steve’ but created ‘Adam and Eve,’ showing that man should marry a woman. According to Reimer (2011), homosexuality opposes traditional family value. There is an insatiable quest in Pentecostalism to control sexual orientation, marriage, and marital unions. In fact, Pentecostals believe that a ‘good wife/husband’ comes from God. The appeal of Pentecostalism lies in the ways in which its doctrines, rituals, and practices allow adherents to domesticate and demystify modernity in a context of marginalization shaped by globalization and neoliberal capitalist encroachment across the world (Pietersen 2016, 5). In African countries, there is criminalization and demonization of the same sex practices (Ndjio 2013, 126). As such, the demise of families, shifting identities of marriages, including solemnizing gay marriages is detrimental to the Christian faith. The Christian faith tends to defend the sanctity of marriage from a theological position. Marriage is only between man and woman according to Genesis 1:26-28. There is a need to explore the implications of health and social paradigms like HIV and AIDS. Thus, the adherence of Christian faith dismisses that those feelings claimed by lesbians of being trapped in woman/men’s body is the devil’s trap and does not come from God.

On the issues of how other faith-based organizations is treating lesbians, one AFM Elder (laity) showed despondent why the other churches are ordaining gays into leaderships. It is clear that different faith-based organizations do not have a consistent stance on the Scriptural position on the sexuality issues. Such contestation goes beyond to not loving the lesbians, accepting them or to creating space for them in worship. In some cases, lesbians serve on church boards as elders and deacons, including marrying and ordaining gays to leadership. While other churches lesbians are still not welcome and face hostility. For example, in a recent incident, a man pulled a gun and shot and killed 9 and injured 53 gays.<sup>1</sup> The fundamental challenges between the church and lesbians base on the sanctity of their practices within Christian faith, rituals, and myths. Two AFM church members shared the same

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<sup>1</sup> Incident happened in Orlando USA. [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/14/orlando-gunman-was-a-regular-at-lgbt-nightclub-pulse-before](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/14/orlando-gunman-was-a-regular-at-lgbt-nightclub-pulse-before).



view that homosexuality is a spiritual disease that needs healing and treatment. Jurgen (2010) proposes that homosexual orientation is a disorder and to be a homosexual act is sinful and destructive. On the other hand, Spina (2016) holds that homosexuality is an individual choice or a condition brought by abuse or neglect rather than a biological orientation. The Pentecostal's response to lesbians seems to lack the expected biblical response to all humanity regardless of their condition; which is to love, accept and embrace. According to (Meyer 2004, 464), Pentecostal practice serves as the 'symbolic resistance of the marginalized'. In the Pentecostal faith, it is easy to fire bullets of 'biblical verses' from a distance, making people guiltier without practically guiding them on how to come out of their challenges. The AFM clergy classifies lesbians as 'worse sinners' than adulterers, gossipers, fornicators, drug addicts and drunkards.

One AFM clergy argues that lesbians simply needs deliverance from spirits coming from the pit of hell which binds them. Comaroff (2009, 17–38), sustains that Pentecostalism enjoys the semi-paradigmatic status, allows believers to domesticate, demystify modernity in the context of marginalization shaped by globalization. Hence, what Comaroff proposed makes believers and religious leaders in Pentecostalism manipulate the marginalized like the lesbians. A notable example is that the practice of spiritual warfare turns to be a way of dodging around issues which need serious engagement, it is not possible to pray away HIV and AIDS and homosexuality. As a result, a question posed to the church; is the church not a place of refuge for the wounded and a place for rehabilitation and change through spiritual guidance and even life coaching? Typical Pentecostal adherence promoted to 'bind,' 'loose' and 'cast out.' Such attitude is likely to happen when one declares to be lesbians or a known lesbians walks into the church. Such a behavior defies the Christian ethos of love; the underlying struggle is how one can love a neighbor who is a lesbian without condemning them? There is a need for believers to overcome their fears about the lesbians and learn to interact with them in daily activities to reach them and understand their challenges. The current attitude of the Pentecostals towards lesbians indirectly promotes the spread of HIV and AIDS without them coming into the open. Instead, believers must attempt to understand what lesbians are going through and their upbringing before dealing with their condition.

According to the AFM Deacon (laity), the church has labeled those who are exercising these sexual preferences sinners that need salvation. In

Pentecostalism, this creates the impression that the lesbians are candidates that need help. On the flipside of this notion, in Pentecostalism, the existence of lesbians within its ranks is treated as taboo and foreign to their morality. Such an understanding shows that a thin line exists between obeying biblical teachings, condemning evil and biblical warnings about judging others. According to the 'African Postcolony' (Mbembe, 2001; 93), the proliferation of religious movements has brought ambiguous sites where new systems, new languages and new authorities to negotiate. Utilizing Mbembe's category of thought, it is high time that Pentecostals increase promotion to engage with the major thematic issues like HIV and AIDS bedeviling their believers holistically, especially in marginalized groups. Thus, understanding the causes of homosexuality and bisexuality from both medical and theological perspectives is critical. It all started with the Sex Revolution of the 1940s the lesbians started agitating for recognition, and they demand their marriages be recognized. As early as 1928, the genital rights of children and adolescents were in place. The Pentecostals subscribe to the social gospel, which entails proclaiming the gospel for the salvation of humankind. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this commitment must buttress with the social gospel, which includes the impact of HIV and AIDS to everyone especially the lesbians. This article argues that HIV and AIDS are more prevalent amongst lesbians hence the need for the church to look at this group as the highest risk group.

One interviewee explains that the church should remain the church and not dilute the gospel with issues of lesbians. Pentecostals have a fear of being swallowed by movements like liberalism and secularism, at the same time the state is secular and enacts laws which affect Pentecostalism such as the Rights of lesbians. The emergence and emphasis of Human Rights have made people have freedom of action (to marry or not to), to have children (or not to), to choose sexual orientation (lesbian, bisexuals, gays). Now some of the state rules on matters of religion and at times accommodate lesbians the church feels it cannot help it. There is a barrier in that lesbians are stigmatized, excluded and discouraged from coming out in the open. An AFM member argues that there is not a particular way to identify the lesbians in the church, but only to be suspicious of who they are, through dressing and behavior. So, basing identification of lesbians on dressing and behavior is a possible stumbling block in a culturally changing world. Nowadays, it has become common that men and women are dressing in similar clothes and design, both putting on make-up and having same hair styles. It is that clear a distinct

lesbigays identities are hard to sustain in a rapidly shifting world, cultures, goods and people are on the move.

However, what remains univocal is that the Pentecostals do not accept lesbigays. One AFM member argues that lesbigays are hardly allowed in Pentecostals, it is a reality that if we become very sensational about matters, people do not come out. Further, the AFM must not only deny or stigmatize lesbigays but admit that there have challenges and attempt to design programs that help them out. Both Pentecostal faith and indigenous culture have treated the subject of sex and sexuality as sacred, private and taboo for open discussion. There is a Shona proverb *kufukura hapwa* (open up their armpits in public) concerning issues about sexuality. There is no conversation in most Christian homes about sex, the conservation needed at an early age of life. Besides, even if people want to come out in the open, especially the lesbigays, they are afraid of stigmatization and excommunication by the church. To make matters worse, discourses about lesbigays and bisexuals in the church has prompted complicated discussion. Consequently, the debate mostly becomes preachy, hardly making strategic conversation.

## **Conclusion**

The main problem addressed in this article was to understand the extent to which the Pentecostal faith, practices, and rituals can dialogue with lesbigays in the context of HIV and AIDS. This article has argued that there is not much discourse about the impact of sexual orientation on HIV and AIDS within the church. In African Pentecostalism, there remain areas such as lesbigays, which are not exhausted because religious actors shun these areas as a result of their differing persuasions and interpretation of the Bible. In Zimbabwe and Southern Africa, much emphasis about the spread of HIV and AIDS has been on heterosexual sex, leaving lesbigays sex, as the major contributor to the spread of HIV and AIDS. Though HIV and AIDS have slowly found space in the church, the beliefs, practices, and myths in Pentecostalism sustain Antiviral Therapy defaulting due to the ambiguous relationship between divine healing and medical therapy. The findings in this article suggest several courses of action for the interplay between the church, HIV and AIDS and lesbigays. However, continued efforts are still needed to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS and the church to be more accessible to lesbigays. Therefore, there must

be a plan for the long-term care of lesbians in the church. The content of the church's message is correct, but the methods used are sometimes incompassionate to lesbians.

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