

Full Length Research Paper

Queer spirituality of black lesbians in Bloemfontein, South Africa

Luvuyo Ntombana^{1*}, Nombulelo Towa² and Nobubele Phuza¹

¹Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Humanities, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa.

²Centre for Gender and Africa Studies, University of the Free State, South Africa.

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Research on lesbian women and their sexuality has increased since the adoption of a democratic constitution in South Africa. Yet a large part of the research has focused more on the prevalence of rape on Black lesbians in South African townships, while a substantial amount focused more on the lived experiences of Christian gays. The available body of work above has been taken into consideration and, therefore, this paper documents how Black lesbians construct their spiritual identities. This exploration involves an examination of how the research participants manage to integrate their spiritual/religious identities with their different sexual orientation. For this enquiry, a qualitative research approach was used, and phenomenology was identified as the best approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants who identify themselves as Christian, and who also self-identify as lesbian.

Key words: Christianity, sexuality, spirituality, lesbian, identity, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

INTRODUCTION

In 2017 an interesting development took place in one of the big and well-known South African Charismatic Churches, the Grace Bible Church in Soweto (TshisaLIVE1, 2017). This Church is currently under the leadership of Pastor Musa Sono and it is one of the Churches that are attended by several South African celebrities and wealthy Black South Africans. On Sunday, 22 June 2017, Pastor Heward-Mills, a popular Ghanaian pastor, was invited as a guest speaker at Grace Bible Church. The sermon was titled “why your soul is important?” and it was based on the book of Luke 16: 24. According to Somizi Mhlongo, in the middle of his sermon, Pastor Heward-Mills, said “[y]ou don’t find two male dogs or two male lions or two male impalas... two male cats, even lizards, two male elephants. There is

nothing like that in nature. It is unnatural” (Davis, 2017). Just after the sermon and during the offering, Somizi Mhlongo stormed out of the church service reportedly feeling offended by the statement. Somizi is a popular South African celebrity who lives openly as a gay. After the service, Somizi posted a video on twitter where he expressed his great disappointment at the interpretation of the Bible by the preacher. In the video Somizi accused the preacher of being homophobic by positioning same sex relationships as unnatural and therefore unholy. This matter caused great media furore and, receiving mixed commentary on social media. Some people were blaming Somizi as a disobedient Christian who does not want to repent, while others argued that the incident demonstrates that the church is still one of the most intolerant institutions towards sexual minorities. If one applies their mind to Somizi’s issue, it was obviously not an easy decision to leave the Church after feeling judged by the preacher who, in this case, supposedly spoke on

¹ TshisaLive: South African online entertainment and celebrity news hub. You may follow the story on the following link: <https://www.timeslive.co.za/tshisa-live/tshisa-live/2017-02-06-im-tired-of-the-church-using-the-bible-to-be-homophobic-says-somizi-mhlongo/>

behalf of God. Even after his experience, Somizi still insisted that he will attend his Church and that he would not be discouraged by homophobic preachers. Somizi's dilemma is just one example of the many individuals that experienced a bias against LGBTQI Christians in Church. At least in this case, Somizi is a well-resourced individual who is known very well for being unbothered by people's opinions of him. Somizi's reaction gave an impetus for deeper discussions about the intersecting, stigmatised, and multiple identities of lesbian and gay individuals within religious institutions.

According to Woodell et al. (2015), lesbians and gays who identify themselves as Christian are caught between the conflicting views that are related to church culture, church theology, and their sexual identities. Church cultures differ with some churches being more conservative than others, regarding lifestyle choices and how church members represent themselves. Equally, church theologies are inconsistent regarding how to approach same sex relationships. In some churches it is viewed as a possession of sorts, a transgression from which one should repent or the message that God loves us all is used to recruit LGBTQI members into salvation. As Somizi's case suggests, one's self-identified sexual preference and identity may conflict with prevailing church culture and theology. One would also assume that the tension between church culture, theology and sexual identities would result in fewer openly LGBTQI individuals in churches, but alas, more and more LGBTQI individuals openly support and still attend their churches. Notwithstanding that, many churches are viewed as "hotbeds of homophobia". Over the years, many biblical interpretations have come forth, with some perceiving homosexuality as a choice and therefore a sin (Peppler, 2006: 42-43; Cameron-Ellis, 1999: 17). Contrarily, others are arguing that all human beings are created by God, in his image, and having a different sexual orientation is also a purpose from God (Stronski and Remafedi, 1999: 155). Further, there is also a feminist approach to the discussion who rejects male privilege, which remains a fundamental Christian principle where men dominate women in both the private and public sphere (Wiegman, 2008: 42). While taking note of that, this paper is not a theology enquiry to examine the various doctrinal positions on LGBTQI communities. Yet this paper does present the emic perspectives of lesbians in relation to their spirituality, given the homophobic Christian context that they find themselves in. This paper takes more interest in queer spirituality as a reason why sexual minorities, with a common mind and need, are able to find God and their spirituality in the midst of homophobic calamities. This work recognizes the fact that most research on queer practices has focused mainly on queer

men, with women's issues rarely explored or merely being discussed alongside those of men (Varner, 2004: 79). Therefore, this paper examines queer spiritualities with a specific focus on Black South African lesbians who either affiliate or detach themselves from any Christian denomination. The focus here is more on the question of how Black Christian lesbians in contemporary South Africa negotiate their sexual and their spirituality identities.

South Africa and LGBTQI community

It is a known fact that, in the past in South Africa, having a different sexual orientation was regarded as taboo and, as a result, the LGBTQI individuals were treated as criminals from 1948-98 (Thompson, 1990). According to the United Nations report of 2015, many African countries still have many cases of open condemnation of same sex relationships. Much has been documented about the discrimination and violence that are targeted at sexual minorities and particularly Black lesbians (Abaver and Cishe, 2018; De Waal, 2011; Judge, 2017). Ironically, in the early years of democracy, South Africa had one of the highest number of incidents of rape in the world, and (Gqola, 2015; Matebeni, 2011) "corrective rape" emerged as a specific form of sexual violence regarding Black lesbian women. Incidents of homophobic-driven attacks increased in the early post-apartheid dispensation, with Black lesbians being the victims of rape, violence, and even murder. This is still the reality of many Black lesbians today.

The South African constitution states that no one may be discriminated against based on race, gender, sex, culture, sexual orientation, or religion, among others. South Africa is the first African country to include a sexual orientation clause in its constitution (Bill of Rights, Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). This clause was the first step to legalising other sexual orientations in South Africa. Through the constitution, all discrimination is outlawed, with sexual orientation mentioned specifically and same-sex marriage legalized. This, along with the continued activism from the LGBTQI community and allies, facilitated the public visibility of LGBTQI citizens and their social inclusion. Recently, the LGBTQI community is becoming more visible within communities and they are no longer mute about their rights as members of the community. Sexual minorities have become more active in public spaces, which contribute to building a more inclusive South African society. Despite the country's liberal constitution and the change of mind-set in terms of the general societal perception around the LGBTQI community, the religious

*Corresponding author. E-mail: Luvuyo.Ntombana2@mandela.ac.za.

communities, including Christian churches, seem to be taking longer to accept the law prescriptions regarding the acceptance of different sexual orientations and sexual preferences. Except for Church leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who has spoken out against the discrimination of sexual minorities in the Christian church, most Church leaders have been silent or negative on the matter. LGBTQI individuals are often only welcome in churches if they remain silent about their sexuality or if they agree to change their sexual orientation. Many organisations and social institutions have advocated for gay rights and have supported movements surrounding the LGBTQI society, yet religious institutions have been rather reluctant and unsupportive (Besen and Zicklin, 2007: 250). LGBTQI individuals have experienced different struggles that resulted from the position of Christianity (Subhi et al., 2011). Traditionally, mainstream Christian denominations still condemn different sexual orientation and view it as a sinful act (Montoya, 2000: 155). As already noted, Somizi's case is just one of the many experiences that LGBTQI people go through in their churches. In the past, it was easy for the church to reject the LGBTQI community, but the onset of the South African legislation that protects sexual minorities means that churches must rethink their stance regarding their LGBTQI members.

Queer theory and spirituality

The Queer theory is hard to clearly define as it is an evolving body of work that draws and builds on the existing theories of identity and power (Watson, 2005: 69). This theory has its origins in lesbian and gay studies and Teresa de Lauretis first promoted it during the 1990s (Jagose, 2009: 157). According to Katherine Harris (2005: 1), even though Queer emerged from gay and lesbian studies, the two are not synonymous. The Queer theory goes beyond simply exploring the aspects of gay and lesbian studies, it touches on those ignored assumptions of gender, sexual orientation, and relationships (Meyer, 2007: 15). The theory does not restrict itself to individuals who identify themselves as LGBTQI, but instead accommodates everyone in a marginalised position (Giffney, 2004: 73). The Queer theory challenges the notion of defined identity categories and it refutes the norms that create the gender binaries of acceptable and non-acceptable sexualities (Meyer, 2007: 15). Queer theorists therefore reject the "idea of sexuality as an essentialist category determined by biology or any standards of morality and truth" (Harris, 2005, 1). Within the Queer Theory, there is no standardized set of norms but rather a preference for flexible and developing norms that different people may fit into (Harris, 2005: 1). Therefore, the Queer Theory aims to disrupt the binaries that were created to construct the society in a certain way, with the hope of destroying the differences and

dismantling any inequality (Schippert, 2005: 90). The constant differentiation of masculinity and femininity also indicates the performative aspects of gender, which then makes the work on gender performativity by Butler (1993), an important contribution to this study.

Butler (1993: 21) argues that gender is performative and that it is constructed through a repetition of acts. By using the concept of drag, Butler views sexuality as something that is acted out on, something that is not essentially true but expressed as a reality. For Butler, "[g]ender performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted" (1993: 22). What is meant by this, is that gender is not just a given, we must perform it. One can argue that Christianity reinforces femininity with their set standards on female presentation (for example, acting pious and submissive and wearing dresses). Lesbians do not necessarily conform to these standards and they therefore become outsiders and susceptible to discrimination by those who regard them as sinners or rebels. They clearly do not conform to the heteronormative standards and therefore their experience of the church/religion can impact negatively on both their spiritual and sexual identity, which seems to be incompatible. The refusal of gender and sexuality as fluid makes heterosexuality a "constant" and acceptable sexual attraction because of the binary that is created with the participation of the feminine and masculine aspects (Butler, 1993: 22). Butler's work challenges the rigid binaries that are socially constructed and this makes her contributions to this study, relevant and valuable. According to Tongprateep (2000: 197), spirituality is part of the human experience that cannot be scientifically proven and, therefore, it can easily be deemed as an unimportant aspect of life. Conversely, Manning (2012: 2) argues that spirituality is the ability to find meaning in life, while responding to that meaning and establishing a relationship with God/other. Spirituality can be understood as an experience that will be narrated by the Black lesbian women that are currently under study and the meaning attached to those experiences will be interpreted.

Religion and spirituality play an important part in most peoples' lives, including those who identify as queer (Garcia et al., 2008: 412). Although religion and spirituality have come to assume different meanings for different people, research indicates that both aspects influence the individuals' sense of meaning and provide a source of social support (Hill et al., 2000: 52). Religion is understood to be a system of organized practices, beliefs, and rituals, and spirituality is about a personal connection to the sacred (Schlehofer et al., 2008: 412). Religion is also viewed as hierarchical, supportive of male supremacy, heteronormative, and as a gender-normative institution. Even though religion and spirituality are sometimes separated, the spiritual experiences that people have, are mostly encountered within religious spaces and practices (Schlehofer et al., 2008: 412).

These experiences not only manifest through an interaction with God or religion but may also be experienced through worship or other forms of interactions, both within and outside the church (Pretorius, 2008: 148). The current study is interested in these spiritual experiences and it furthermore aims to explore the other forms of spirituality that the participants practice outside their Christian denominations.

People have reported positive outcomes from participating in religious activities and being part of a religious doctrine. Yet qualitative studies (Schuck and Liddle, 2001; Murr, 2013) suggest that most LGBTQI individuals have reported negative feelings and experiences (shame, guilt, isolation and rejection) from being part of a religious doctrine. Due to this negative feedback, the spiritual experiences of LGBTQI individuals may be restricted and they may seek other ways of engaging in spiritual activities. For example, in the South African context, LGBTQI individuals may also resort to other forms of spiritualities, which include, but are not limited to, the spiritual veneration of ancestors (Stobie, 2011: 159). These other forms of spirituality that are not religiously bound sit outside the scope of this research.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was utilized for this study. This study was explorative in nature and was intended to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, reasons, and opinions of the research participants, within their natural setting. This study followed a non-probability snowball sampling method. Non-probability sampling tends to focus on a smaller sample and is less interested in making statistical inferences, but instead aims to examine a real-life phenomenon (Taherdoost, 2016: 22). This approach also made it easy for the potential participants to participate as the referral is from a trusted source. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and face-to-face interviews. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the University of the Free State and all university protocols were adhered to during the process of this study. All participants were provided information regarding the research study. The participants were also required to sign a consent form and it was explained that they could withdraw from the study at any time, should they feel that their rights were not being respected. The participants were also assured that their identities would be kept anonymous.

FINDINGS

Brief participants' background

Mpho

Mpho is a 27-year-old female who grew up at Empangeni, in Kwazulu-Natal. Mpho grew up in a Christian family that was a part of the Roman Catholic Church. Mpho became aware of her sexual orientation at the age of 14 while doing Grade 9. At that age, she did not know much about being attracted to the same gender and this resulted in her feeling guilty. Having been raised

and indoctrinated into a Christian family, she felt guilty of even thinking about her feelings at the time. She attends Church and preachers do preach homophobic sermons, but she does not allow that to in her way and she does not mind people judging her. She believes that if she is right with God, the rest does not matter.

Kimberly

Kimberly is 27 years old and she grew up as a very reserved person. Kimberly grew up in the Anglican Church. She spoke up strongly against the Anglican Church and it appeared as if she no longer takes religion seriously. She still prays and believes that she is a strong Christian even though she no longer attends Church.

Anele

Anele is a 20 year old who identifies herself as a butch lesbian. She suspected herself of being a lesbian in Grade 8, even though she was not sure what this meant for her future. She realized that she was attracted to women and she often complemented them. She often wore and felt more comfortable in men's clothes. She was raised in a Roman Catholic Church. At church, she was one of the priest's favourites and she was often the one who would carry the offering basket among the church members and she would then take it to the priest after the offering. One day she went to church wearing pants and the priest said to her, "If you still love serving God with facilitating offering, you need to start wearing skirts or dresses". She still goes to Church and in the beginning; it was hard to listen to the homophobic sermons and judgmental attitudes of the Church people. Yet she cares more about God than people.

Gift

Gift is a 21 year old woman and she identifies herself as a butch lesbian. She identifies herself as a born Christian who dedicated her life to Jesus Christ as her Lord. Her parents are also born Christians from the Apostolic Faith Mission. She grew up attending the Apostolic Faith Mission, but then became Catholic when she went to a Catholic school. Gift accepted her sexual orientation when she was in high school, in grade 9. As time went by, the word lesbian started making sense to her and, as a result, she started to think seriously about it and its implication for her and for her spiritual life as well as what people and the Church people will say once they know about her sexual orientation. Now she attends Church and she even visits other Churches. Sometimes she gets discouraged from hearing the homophobic comments and sermons, but she does not allow that to get the better

of her.

Thato

Thato is 20 years old and she is from Limpopo. Thato said that it was in 2014, at the age of 15, that she experienced her first crush on a woman. At first it was an awkward feeling for her, considering that she was highly active in Church ever since Sunday school. With a sense of conviction, Thato said:

Look with no one telling you, not even the Church people or the priest. The moment you lust after another woman you are the first person to feel guilty, not because you know the Bible says but it feels abnormal and uncomfortable and that is exactly how it felt for me. We grow up knowing that boys lust after girls and not same gender wanting each other and that is fact.

People looked at Thato as just another “tomboy” and did not necessary associate her with being a lesbian. As time went by, she heard that some Church girls were gossiping about her, and they suspected that she was a lesbian. She does not remember ever coming out to tell people that she is lesbian and only some people who currently know that she is dating another woman, know that she is lesbian. She no longer goes to Church but she prays, and she believes that her spirituality is intact. In fact, she believes that she is better off without the Church people. The Church was the only place where she felt judged and since she does not go to church, she is more at peace and she feels that God is always closer to her.

Puleng

Puleng is 20 years and she grew up in one of the Bloemfontein Townships. Puleng accepted her sexual orientation at 13 years old. Just like Thato, Puleng was perceived as just another tomboy who would grow up and start dating men. At some point, she also felt that people were correct. Puleng never felt discriminated against in her township because there were other girls who were lesbian, and it seemed as if most people were okay with her lifestyle. The only time she felt judged was in Church when the preachers mentioned homosexuality as one of the sins that God detested. At the time, she felt like the preacher knew about her and that the sermon was directed at her. Puleng does not go Church anymore; instead she prays with her friends and sometimes even have bible studies with other lesbians. She believes that God created her to be what she is, and she will not allow “naïve Church people” to judge her, therefore, she does not go to church. She believes that her spiritual life is better off than for her to be grieved by homophobic sermons at Church.

The interview process as therapy

The interviews were conducted by Nombulelo Towa, who was also a young woman and a student at the university of the Free State that the time. For reason, all participants enjoyed the interviews and they all noted that this was the first time that someone asked about their lives, choices, identities, and more especially, their spirituality. They seem to have enjoyed the opportunity to have someone listen to what they had to say. Also, they cherished the opportunity to openly speak out about their sexuality without the fear of intimidation. Moreover, the line of questioning and the questions that were asked made them reflect on their personal lives. One of the participants, Mpho, mentioned that the study unlocked a lot of things within her as she stated “I have been battling with many things especially when it comes to spirituality and religion; this process made me see things in a different light and it has created an opportunity for me to actually think about tackling things in a different manner”. In addition, it became clear that the participants became aware of certain discriminatory habits within Christianity due to their sexuality. While a historical conflict between religion and homosexuality was evident, other concerns were raised regarding the lived reality of the research participants. Kimberly said, “This has been very therapeutic for me, I have never been given an opportunity to speak my mind and my experience so openly.” This seems to have been a safe and therapeutic experience for the participants who seem to have seen this as an opportunity to contribute in the meaning making process of sexuality and spirituality.

Childhood background and Christianity

For some reason, all the participants were raised in orthodox and conservative Christian families. For example, the 27 year old Mpho was raised in the Roman Catholic Church, Kimberly was raised at the Anglican Church and Gift was raised at the Faith Mission Church, which is a Pentecostal Church. Some of them even attended Christian schools and the reason they gave for attending such schools is that their parents believed that Christian schools would teach them Christian values. Some of their parents were convinced that Christian Schools performed better academically than other schools. Also, all of the participants attended children’s school from an early age and, while they were teenagers, they were forced to go to Church by their parents. The participants’ spiritual background shows a strong influence from Christianity. The fact that all of them were raised by Christian families, with Christian values, is a perfect example of almost every Black South African youth, until the youths decide on their Religion or Church, habits and principles for themselves. Their background elucidates that when they realised their sexual

orientation, they did not only feel that they were going against the social norms, but also that they were going against the spiritual convictions that they were introduced to by their parents. For example, Thato said that, "In Christian School, they taught us about men and women, Adam and Eve and homosexuality was introduced as a sin that God hated more than other sins. Therefore, when I realised my attraction to women, I felt guilty and I felt like I was sinning against God". Mpho stated that she knew nothing about homosexuality as she was only exposed to heterosexuality. For most of the participants, it was not easy to accept their sexual orientation and some even tried to deny it.

Homophobic church beliefs and homophobic sermons

Participants said that the church perceives homosexuality as either spirit possession or mental illness. Mpho said that, sometimes at the Church youth services, the youths, more especially males, would start a discussion around whether homosexuality is sin or not and they would further request the youth pastor to lead the discussion. In general, participants felt that Church practices and sermons were designed to judge homosexual people and Church members were also negative towards lesbians. The participants were scared of coming out to their church peers about their sexual orientation, because they knew that the Church perceived homosexuality as sin. Mpho said that she confided in someone she trusted from her Church, about her sexual orientation, and the person said that she needed to tell the Pastor so that he could exorcise the demon. The person that Mpho confided in went on to tell other Church people and, as a result, she was treated like an outsider at some point.

To some extent, Thato felt safe about her sexual orientation at the Catholic school, mainly because it was a girl's school, and no one would have suspected that she was lesbian. Thato said, "At the Christian school I was more comfortable because it was a boarding school and there were other lesbian girls." Kimberly mentions that, when women appear or resemble some form of masculinity by the way they dress, that becomes a problem for the church. The church considers the women's masculine expression as misrepresenting the sex you were born with. Issues of masculine dominance are important in understanding gender discrimination, exclusion, and violence against women. Not only that, the Church member needed to know one's sexual orientation, but also they were negative to women or girls who wore men's clothes, including trousers that are perceived to be for men. Mpho said, "because I prefer to wear a certain kind of clothes I am perceived to be a lesbian; fortunately I am a lesbian and I wonder what would have happened if I was not a lesbian." Anele concurred with Mpho by saying, "This other time I went to

Church wearing pants. I am responsible for collecting money from the congregants. I took the money to the priest and he was like "if you still want to do this, wear dresses or skirts". The contributions that were made by Kimberly, Mpho, and Anele indicate that masculine lesbians are a threat to men because their appearance and behaviour are regarded as divergent from a normative understanding of gender and sexual orientation.

Mpho further said that she chooses where to sit at church and she avoids sitting next to certain people, otherwise she will not enjoy the church service. Kimberly said that one of the reasons she stopped attending church is because, whenever the pastor preached badly about homosexuality, those who were aware of her sexual orientation would look at her. She further said that she thinks some look at her with a judgmental attitude, while others, more especially the youths, looked at her out of concern. "Of course we do not go around telling people in church that we are lesbians, one a few people from the area where we live know then they tell other who then created church gossip out of it", said Thato, who also no longer goes to church. All participants have been offended more than once by their pastors' sermons, which they felt were homophobic.

Separating one's relationship with God from the institutional church

Some participants like Kimberly, Thato and Puleng no longer attend church. They individually took this decision after experiencing various forms of emotional abuse and discrimination. Some of their experiences have already been noted. Kimberly said that after her pastor's wife confronted her about being a lesbian while accusing her of influencing other girls, she decided to stop going to church. "I did not want to be seen as the devil and so I stopped attending church and that does not mean I hate God; I still have a relationship with God." Thato said that she prays a lot and her relationship with God is stronger. The participants who stopped going to church did not see this as a deterrence from their relationship with God and for being spiritual. Gift said, "It was not God who judged us, it is the homophobic preachers and judgmental Christians". These participants argued that the decision to not go to church does not mean they are now far from God, in fact they are now a lot closer to God as they do not have to hear homophobic and judgmental sermons. They all felt that hearing judgmental sermons and being among people who kept on judging them, was detrimental to their spiritual lives and, therefore, they decided to stay and pray from home. The participants still regarded themselves as committed Christians with close a relationship with God. The idea is that their spiritual lives are not based on the Church as an institution, but rather on their relationship with God, which is still intact.

The participants noted that the strong network system of lesbian girls kept them spiritually strong and during their meetings they would have a braai as well as discussions, bible studies, and prayer. Such meetings are used as an affirmation of their sexual orientation as well as the build-up of their spiritual lives.

Staying at church no matter what

For Anele, Mpho, and Gift, staying at home and not going to church was not an option. This group was resolute that they would still go to Church no matter what, “unless they chase me away, I am not going anywhere”, said Mpho. “After taking a break, I went back to Church and told myself that they would have to accept me as I am,” said Anele. Some participants were even used to homophobic sermons while others were used to being called names. Mpho said, “My biggest fear was accepting that I was lesbian and coming out to my parents about it, now that it happened there is nothing scaring more than that”. Gift said, “the fear of being judged is nothing compared to coming out as a lesbian, for years I struggle with who I am now I cannot let Church people judge me” There seems to be an agreement among the participants that overcoming the stigma of being lesbian was the biggest fear to overcome. The first fear came with accepting themselves and second was being accepted by their families and friends. It was no longer a major issue for them to be accepted or rejected by the church, given that they have already overcome the worst fears in their lives. Even though the participants were no longer as active in their participation within the church gatherings as in the past, they were still consistent in their attendance. Some of those from outside Bloemfontein, like Mpho from KZN, stopped attending their home churches, but they were motivated after attending the Campus Church in Bloemfontein and, as a result, when they arrived back home they went back to attending church. At the campus church, which is predominantly attended by university students, they met other lesbians who are older and more experienced than them. Their interaction with other peers at Campus Church made them realise that God is not angry at them and that it is simply how the Church interprets the Bible and, in turn, judges them. Mpho said, “...we have been created by God and if God did not want us to be lesbians he would not have created us, in fact some of us fought against being lesbian for a long time”.

How did they maintain their spiritual lives?

The participants are praying people, whether at church or at home, even those who have stopped going to Church were individuals that prayed. For them, their spiritual lives did not depend on Church attendance, but rather their relationship with God. Those that were still attending

church adopted an attitude like Somizi Mhlongo, and stated that they were at Church to worship God. Anele laughed and said, “I see some church people have decided to make my business theirs, I don’t care because they are making things difficult for themselves, I am cool and I am at peace with God”. In addition to what Anele was saying, Mpho said “... they will go to hell while judging us, I wish they could focus on themselves”. Their attitude towards other’s perceptions seems to be a coping mechanism and they all seem to be strong when it comes to the knowledge and acceptance of God’s unconditional love. The participants had their own spiritual meetings where they pray and read the bible together. They also read other books and listen to recordings that spoke about being a lesbian and a Christian. For instance, Anele said, “at some point I felt guilty for being a lesbian until I attended one of our discussions which were led by Nozipho and it made me accept myself the way I am”. Chilling, having drinks and chatting as a group also seem to have been one of their methods to spiritually discharge. They spend hours chatting and advising each other on different matters and, as a result after such meeting, they each felt better and realized that they are not alone.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the lived experiences of lesbians in relation to faith and spirituality. While there are slight variations, the participants embodied a queer Christian identity, which was widely accepted by some of their family members and in the communities that they came from. The study also revealed stories of painful and isolating experiences when sexual identities are negotiated with religious identities. This was, in part, the impact of the homonegativity that were experienced by the participants in the churches that they were members of. In addition, the participants’ communities seemed to have high amounts of religious activity that were bound to influence them in significant ways. As we have previously shown, the Christian community regards same-sex relationships as unnatural. Although the LGBTQI community has been granted protection in the constitution, it has been rather difficult for the church community to accept the participants as equal members of the church. Consequently, some members decided to stop going to Church, while some still attend.

For many of the participants, the church continued to symbolize a place of refuge and it was a major part of their upbringing. Yet the church now occupied a complicated position in their lives. Their religious institutions, particularly the Christian churches in this case, were still struggling with ‘the issue’ of same-sex relationships and, as a result, were still responding in homophobic, micro aggressive and judgmental ways. Nonetheless, the church’s hostility towards the

participants did not deter them from praying and being spiritual. This persistence underscores the significance of spirituality in the lives of the participants and provides the impetus to employ strategies to overcome any perceived conflict between their Christian and sexual identities. An important strategy that was used by the participants was to re-negotiate their Christian identity rather than their sexuality. Most of them are able to separate their relationship with God from the church itself. This could be associated with the belief that their relationship with God remains stable, while their relationship with the church has been negatively affected because of the discrimination they experienced. For the participants, no identity had to be accepted or rejected, and they recognized the intersectionality of who they are. It should be mentioned that those participants who were still attending Church, were no longer participating in church activities like they used to do, but being in church still benefited their spirituality.

To be clear, the object of this reflection is not to belittle the value of church culture and church theology, but while searching for spiritual and religious support, the participants have found solace outside of the official church structure. This study suggests that the LGBTQI people of faith might have gone through a process of being a part of religious denominations, to being more spiritual individuals who are involved in spiritual practices outside of the church. One could argue that their challenges re-directed their commitment and made them even more spiritual than denomination conscious. During the current pandemic of COVID-19, communities are being forced to confront deeply ethical and arguably religious questions. Also, the lockdown regulations in South Africa made things worse for the religious communities; for more than three months religious gatherings of any kind were prohibited. The response to the fear and disorientation caused by COVID-19 has (re)directed people to spirituality and faith. It is heard in messages from employees that encourage people to pray or to seek strength, hope, and a sense of comfort in God. As Shedadi and Partington (2020) suggest, COVID-19 has reminded people of the fragility of life. Sadly, this is also the reality that Black lesbian women in South African know only too well (Matebeni, 2018). Perhaps at this time, as a country, as a world, we understand a small piece of the strategies that are documented in this study. It is an opportunity to understand how participants of the study routinely engage with spirituality in solace and in this isolated manner. Church goers are engaged in a more intimate relation with their spirituality. The privacy of online and the ability to consume sermons, gospel music, and different interpretations of the bible are results of the pandemic. These lessons can be learned from queer spirituality, as it is espoused by the participants in this study as a re-conceptualised spirituality that exists outside of the church building and outside of religious indoctrination. For survival and as coping mechanism

participants of this study embrace a kind of spiritual wholeness which is fluid balanced. This is a kind of spirituality that does not discriminate against one's sexuality, gender, age or even church association.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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ⁱ Gqola and Matebeni have contested the use of the term "corrective rape" and argued that the term makes 'curative' rape something exceptional or that there is a 'normal' rape (Gqola). Matebeni argues that the term adds an element of blame on the victim, as if the crime was warranted to discipline her for behaving in an unwanted manner. (see Gqola, P., 2015, Rape a South African Nightmare). See Matebeni, Z., 2011. Exploring Black sexualities and identities in Johannesburg. Phd thesis (WITS)