

“I am not gay says a gay Christian.” A qualitative study on beliefs and prejudices of Christians towards homosexuality in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *Homosexuality has been an issue of debate among different religions and Christianity was not spared. The purpose of the study was to assess beliefs and prejudices of Christians towards homosexuality in Zimbabwe. A qualitative design was employed where ten church ministers from the mainline churches were interviewed. The results of the study indicated that homosexuality was seen as an abomination and a sin in the Christian World. Homosexuality was seen as immoral and unnatural hence must be condemned. It was viewed as against the biblical teaching. Church ministers advocated for discussions on homosexuality among church members in order to alleviate the misunderstanding and prejudices that go along with homosexuality.*

Key words: *Homosexuality, beliefs, prejudice, heterosexual, Christianity*

I. Introduction

“Once in a lifetime of a world system, when contradictions, secular trends, and cyclical rhythms combine in such a way that the system can no longer reproduce itself, a world system ends and is replaced by another (Wallerstein 2000 in Jaja 2012). Apparently the world is experiencing some dynamism in many facets of life. The world has become a global village and brings different cultures together. Homosexuality has taken centre stage where controversies rise on whether to embrace it or to denounce it in different cultural groups in a global village. This paper sought to establish Christian’s theological explanation of homosexuality and also to assess their beliefs on homosexuality. Debate over the issue of homosexuality and religion has been quite topical especially in the western countries (Bangwayo-Skeete 2012, Cates 2007, Hodge 2005, Smith 2000). According to Parker et al. (1998), people deny the existence of homosexuality but there have been suggestions that homosexuality is underreported because of the high stigma associated with it in most African societies (National Research Council 1996). It is conspicuously clear that homosexuality issues have been minimized to save faces (Giles 2002, Cates 2002). In Germany, Henrich Himmler tried to minimize the presence of homosexuality among his army. Having prior identified the traces of homosexual activities, he was quoted as saying, “the problem of homosexuality is almost solved.” As if homosexuality was something that people learned, he thought by intimidating his soldiers by death he would reduce the activities. According to Moulton and Adams-Price (1997), for about 20% of males, a strong antipathy toward homosexuality may be defensive in the Freudian sense. This implies that even some of the people who denounce homosexuality are homosexuals themselves. These people by claiming that they hate homosexuality may be unconscious trying to deny their homosexuality statuses (Moulton & Adams-Price 1999). In support Woodford (2012) states that pro-gay religious leaders who belong to denominations that consider homosexuality a sin may be hesitant to publicly share their views, but they may do so privately with trusted individuals. The above scenarios have prompted the researcher to investigate issues to do with homosexuality starting with Christianity versus homosexuality.

Masango (2002) defined homosexuality as the orientation of sexual need, desire, or responsiveness towards other persons of the same gender. A person need not have sexual relations in order to fit the definition, the mere longing to have a sexual association with a person of the same sex is sufficient to be established in this definition (Iiyayambwa 2012). In other words one can be homosexual by just having the desire to or attracted to a person of the same sex without even expressing it. Most African cultures are against homosexuality (Obasola 2013). The cause of homosexuality is not yet clear as different schools of thought come up with different explanations. Some schools advocate that homosexuality is something that people learned (James 2004, Manning 2002) and others claim that homosexuality is biological (Blanchard & Ellis 2001, Green 2000, Mustanski et al.2002). Mustanski et al. (2002) claim that hormones play a pivotal role on sex orientation. Such schools base their arguments on neurohormonal theory (Ellis & Enies 1987) which states that homosexuality is caused by atypical sex hormone levels in utero with concomitant sex- atypical neural differentiation. The theory states that having several older brothers may increase the effects of genes that influence sexual orientation thereby producing changes in hormone activities in the brain. This is in line with Blanchard (2008) who asserts that among all the children born to a woman, the later born males are more likely to be homosexuals than are the earlier born males (Blanchard 2008). Homosexual men have more older brothers on average than heterosexual men (Cantor 2012). If the causes of homosexuality are biological surely one cannot blame someone for

something that he has no control over. But if it is something that is learned one can as well unlearn it (James 2005). In the Roman-Dutch common law a large number of sexual acts between adults, whether between men or between a man and a woman, were criminal, if not directed towards procreation (Jivan 2007). This implies that any sexual relationship that does not end up with child bearing was viewed as illegal or immoral. This was a matter of legality which is not the essence of this paper although it might affect religious beliefs as some of the religious beliefs are guided by the law.

Studies have also shown that homosexuality is a behaviour that is learnt. According to Spitzer (2003), homosexuality behaviour in both sexes has been unlearned through the therapist. Diamond (2003) supported the notion that homosexuality can be unlearned when he purports that a substantial proportion of young women who had previously espoused lesbian/bisexual identity relinquished it.

These conflicting schools might be the source of confusion which might cause hostility towards homosexuality as those who feel homosexuality is something that is learnt give room for unlearning. Most religions believe homosexuality is not biological. According to Hodge (2005), orthodox believers (Christians) who are also referred to as conservatives because they conserve and live by their understanding of transcendent truth do believe that homosexuality is wrong and against the word of God. According to Smith (2000), Christianity is used as proxy to represent a family of underrepresented spiritual traditions. Christianity in the United States of America is divided into three categories (Catholics, mainline churches and evangelistic churches) (Woodford 2012, Smith 2002,). These groups after adding apostolic sects also dominate in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. This paper only looked at the mainline churches in Zimbabwe also known as Protestants. Americans from Protestant denominations have tended to be less supportive of same-sex marriage than have those who are Catholic or non-Protestant (Jones 2010). Christian denominations still regard homosexuality as sinful (Richards & Bergin, 2000). Rates of support of homosexuality among black Protestants were lower than those among white mainline Protestants, and rates among white evangelical Protestants were lower still (Woodford 2012). Pewforum (2010) report found that an overwhelming majority of respondents in their study in the Western countries disapproved of homosexuality. Thus, individuals who are more concerned with preserving traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity would tend to exhibit intolerance for homosexuality (Bangwayo-Skeete 2011). This study was paramount as most of the previous studies were done in the western countries. The intolerance towards homosexuality is as expected given the overwhelming number of Africans who consider homosexuality to be an abomination in the African tradition (Pewforum, 2010).

Many Christians feel they must engage gay and lesbian issues to maintain their basic human rights (Hodge 2005, Smith 2000). All human beings have inherent dignity and worth because they reflect the image of God, gay men and lesbians are no more and no less animated by human turpitude than others (Smith 2000). Anglican bishops at their Lambeth conference in 1998 although they did not condone homosexual activities, they condemned irrational fear of homosexuals and affirms that gay men and lesbians are loved by God. The conference also condemned the use of derogative statements towards homosexuals (Smith 2000). At their annual conference 2013 at Hillside Teachers' College, the Presiding Bishop (Reverend A Ndlumbi) and the Lay President (Mrs S Ncube) of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe alluded to homosexuality as a challenge in the church.

According to Obasola (2013), there are three views on homosexuality. The first one is the "Non – Acceptance view" which totally rejects the homosexual lifestyle and considers it sinful. Advocates of this view consider the homosexual behaviour as depraved – a form of sexual deviation that is contrary to nature and societal values. The homosexual lifestyle is unnatural and socially unacceptable. The second view is "Qualified – Acceptance View". This is a form of accommodating view which sees homosexuality as not altogether incompatible with social values. It is considered as a post fall aberration rather than post fall distortion of human sexuality. They argue that homosexual condition/orientation is a non ideal condition of human sexuality (just as poor eye sight, asthma or allergies). It is conceded that God did not create homosexuality just as He did not create loneliness or disabilities. The third view is "Full – Acceptance View." This view asserts that homosexuality is fully compatible with nature and societal norms. Proponents of this argument see homosexuality as part of the pre fall natural order. They maintain that homosexuality is neither a distortion of human sexuality nor an aberration. Rather, homosexuality is an immutable sexual orientation given or created by God as a gift to some people just as heterosexuality. Church ministers play a pivotal role in churches and hence the need to investigate how they understand homosexuality issues.

II. Methodology

Participants were drawn from ministers of the protestant churches in Zimbabwe who were chosen through a purposive sampling technique. Ministers who were willing to participate were used in the study. Qualitative research method was appropriate for the study since the researcher needed participants to give details through the interviews. Open ended questions were used to gather the data. Prior arrangements were made with those whom the researcher had identified. Ten participants were interviewed in the study. The

researcher informed the participants on why they were participating in the research and how the data was going to be handled. He also assured participants of confidentiality since the participants were participating on their own behalf and not on behalf of their churches.

III. Results and Discussions

Church ministers were asked how they viewed homosexuality. The researcher noted that all the participants were worried about homosexuality in the church and considered it foreign. This is in contrast with Jones (2006) who echoed that homosexuality is not a marginal fad of Western culture. Like the Sodomites who pounded on Lot's door millennia ago, the modern gay movement gathers at the doors of our churches and academies, demanding entrance and full recognition. Apparently homosexuality may be given different labels but it is reality be in the Western countries or in Africa. It is really a challenge that needs to be dealt with. Most of the participants were negative about homosexuality although they appreciated its presence in the church. They all agreed that homosexuality is something that people learn especially the youth through the internet. The following are some of the responses from church ministers across the country:

- *Our culture as Africans does not condone homosexuality. Those who practiced homosexuality were punished by death or banishment. It is a foreign culture.*
- *Homosexuality is an emotive subject, and has never received objective attention. I see homosexuality as something very real and threatening but something that the church is ready to tackle.*
- *Homosexuality needs to be understood, not to be dealt with biases and emotions. Whilst I don't believe in it giving it a platform is the way forward as it would clear some of the problems that church members might have.*
- *Homosexuality is an abomination it is not acceptable by any standards. Those who do it are grossly abnormal.*

The above responses indicated how homosexuality is really an issue that is raising different reactions where some are flexible and somehow accommodating yet others are quite emotional. This was expected as stated by Obasola (2013) who viewed people as being antagonistic with some accommodating and others reject. Hassert (2007) blamed the conflict among churches or church members as caused to a greater extent by the American Episcopalians who have used their international relationships and alliances as leverage within the international religious alliance. Church ministers in Africa are a mixed bag where some come from foreign land and yet others are Africans. This may create antagonism as they view some of these issues from different cultural backgrounds. There are church ministers who are not hostile to homosexuals as evidenced by the above responses. Such observations confirm Hodge (2005) assertion that Christians must engage gay and lesbians issues to maintain their basic human rights.

The participants agreed that church members might be practicing homosexuality. One minister noted the case of the former President of Zimbabwe Canaan Banana who was also a church minister who was found guilty of practising sodomy in the courts of laws and served a sentence. If a minister of that matter was convicted, it was quite possible that church members could also practice homosexuality. According to the information gathered through interviews, cases were raised in the church of people who practiced homosexuality. Ministers had names of church members who were said to be practising homosexuality although there was no evidence to that effect. No church member has come out and declared his/her homosexuality status. This in line with Ressler and Hodge (2003) who purported that many traditional Christians have been silenced due to the ridicule they experience from colleagues for expressing minority views. Apparently the environment is not conducive for Christians who are not heterosexual to come out. African Christians consider homosexuality an abomination (Pewforum, 2010).

Homosexuality was labelled as the work of the devil and needed spiritual healing. It was also referred to as a sin as quoted from one participant who said, "*Christians should not practice homosexuality as this would defile them.*" Most Churches were against homosexuality although they have no clear policies as alluded to by one senior church minister who said, "The church has not deliberately taken a position about homosexuality, but it is generally regarded as sin and therefore stands condemned." In other words the condemnation of homosexuality in many African Protestant churches is not supported in their Church Deeds and Standing Orders. Another minister had this to say about their church's position on homosexuality, "The church is guided by what the bible says in this case the church does not condone it and those who do it need deliverance."

On how the church could help members who came out as practising same sex, church ministers had this to say:

- *The challenge at the moment is that very few if any would like to come up in the open and show the world that they are gay or lesbian. There is a lot of stigma around homosexuality and dealing with it remains a challenge as it remains a syndicate that non members can not break into.*

- *They need not be castigated or victimized. Whilst we may not condone homosexuality these people need equal amount of respect, love and there is a need for us to listen to their experiences and challenges if we are to provide meaningful assistance.*
- *I will take them through counselling and awareness programmes.*
- *They must go through the same discipline as any other church members who would have digressed from the standing orders and against the Bible. They should not be given a preferential treatment as this would encourage church members to practice homosexuality.*

All the above reactions sought to change the person from homosexuality to heterosexual. In other words these people have chosen to live that way and therefore have the potential to change through interventions. However, this is in contrast with Holland (2006) who stated that Homosexuality is as natural as heterosexuality, it just happens to occur less frequently. It is not an undesirable condition except for its social stigma, which is the result of misguided or hateful homophobic. All the participants agreed that discussing homosexuality at church would generate particular interest and give an opportunity for homosexuals themselves to be heard even when they have not disclosed their sexuality. It was alleged that once it becomes a subject of public debate like HIV, it follows that there are people who would come public about it, once guarantee protection from being excommunicated by the church. This is in line with Cates (2007) who states that the environment plays an essential role in homosexual identity development, serving at any age as a continuum from encouragement to discouragement of self-acceptance. Knowing a gay or lesbian person (intergroup contact) leads to improved attitudes and reduced prejudice and bias toward gay and lesbian people (Herek 1997, Herek and Capitano 1996). In other words by discussing homosexual issues people might gain an understanding of what it means to be gay and as a result might help in behaviour change. Given the multidimensional nature of sexual prejudice, it could be the case that intergroup contact decreases sexual prejudice because it is related to the type of social knowledge individuals bring to bear on their judgments regarding homosexuality and the treatment of gay and lesbian people (Heinze & Horn 2009). *By coming out that would help churches to come up with strategies to help and stop the disease.* Most of those interviewed felt that homosexuality is a sin and those church members who practice homosexuality need to be treated like any other sinners in the church. One minister went further to say "The church is not an assembly of perfect people but of sinners requiring God's mercy and grace. Those who practice homosexuality should be shown love and compassion as they are like any other people who sin in the church." Another minister said, "Teaching was the answer to those who practice same sex." Generally homosexuality is considered a sin and members should be closely shepherded so that they can be cleansed of the demon through counselling, prayers and studying the bible verses. In other words people can be transformed into new creatures. In contrast Holland (2008) sees homosexuality as an inborn nature not an illness, not a choice, and not subject to change by an act of the will, psychological therapy, or religious experience. Someone is considered homosexual from conception to death.

On what the bible teaches about homosexuality, most of the participants quoted Genesis as their first port of call where Sodom was destroyed because of extreme wickedness where people were practising sodomy. Their argument was that God destroyed the city because of homosexuality. Many other biblical verses that are against homosexuality were also quoted. Genesis 2 was also cited by a number of the participants. In Genesis 2 after God had created Adam He felt that it was not good that man lives alone and created Eve to be his partner. To the participants it indicated the approval of heterosexual. The creation of a man and a woman enabled them to have the children. This is consistent with Block (2003) who advocates that within the context of marriage, sexual activity between husband and wife is purposeful, noble, sacred and necessary for the well-being of the family. Homosexuality, premarital and extramarital sexual relations, and bestiality are deemed abhorrent violations of the ethical and ritual order (Block 2003).

IV. Limitations of the study

The sample was too small to generalize the results. Some of the churches were represented by just one person so one person cannot represent thousands of other church members. Since the study focused only on mainline churches the results can not represent all Christians in Zimbabwe.

V. Conclusions

Protestant Christians in Zimbabwe viewed homosexuality as taboo, a sin, a disease and unnatural. Homosexuality is considered foreign and was as a result of globalization. The study revealed that homosexuality was seen as against procreation which was seen as the purpose of marriage in the African context. Church ministers were advocating for change among homosexuals through counselling, prayers and Bible studies. African culture does not condone homosexuality so are African Christians. The study also revealed that homosexuality was seen as an issue for discussion among Christians so as to find lasting solution to

homosexuals. Those who practice homosexuality should be treated the same as those who would have digressed from the word of God.

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