Nokuthula was born in Soweto and comes from a charismatic Christian background. When her church found out about her sexuality, she was victimised by the pastor and other church members. Instead of showing support after she was gang-raped, the church claimed that she was being punished for her ‘evil ways’. Nokuthula then found a spiritual home at the LGBTI-affirming Hope & Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) where she served as a pastor for 12 years. She has recently started a church in Soweto, the House of Prayer and Worship MCC.

“\n\nI started having a burning need to work for God … It felt good to preach and bring hope to those who have lost hope. I stopped worrying about my sexuality; I had found a way to somehow make the two work together, and I was at peace.”

“When my church found out about my sexuality, I was hounded in such a way that I thought God did not exist … They said it was an abomination, evil.”

“I remember when I was ordained into the HUMCC, my grandmother said: ‘I accept you. You cannot be anything else. Just be yourself’.”

REVEREND NOKUTHULA DHLANDHLA
PASTOR FOR METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES

The HUMCC was established in 1994 by Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso, with its first home in rented rooms above The Skyline bar in Hillbrow. For 18 years it served as a spiritual home to those seeking guidance in reconciling their sexual identity with their relationships with God. After Thandekiso’s death in 1997, leadership of the church was taken over by Reverend Nokuthula Dhladhlia and Reverend Paul Mokgethi-Heath.

“For me Church is not about sexuality, it’s about everybody coming together and worshiping God and feeling at home.” Reverend Mokgethi-Heath

“When I first went to the HUMCC I was overwhelmed, meeting a gay priest and being around so many gay people … But then I heard Reverend Thandekiso preach about how God made us all unique and special.” Reverend Dhladhlia

“I felt that because of the role that I play in the church … members needed to know about my status. I knew that by coming out I would also be helping others in the same situation.” Reverend Mokgethi-Heath on revealing his HIV+ status

THE HOPE & UNITY METROPOLITAN CHURCH
(HUMCC) 1994-2012

Choosing loving families, cultivating visionary leaders
“My work with migrants led me to hear about the struggles of LGBTI people in their community – first being rejected at home and then by the refugee community in South Africa.”

Father Russell Pollitt is the current Director of the Jesuit Institute of South Africa and served as the parish priest for seven years at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. During this time, an LGBTI support group was established at Holy Trinity. Members were actively welcomed into the life of the church and the group continues to meet fortnightly.

Father Russell Pollitt blessing a leader of the LGBTI group at a prayer service before the 2012 Pride March.

“LGBTI is a very contentious and divisive issue in the Catholic Church. You put yourself on the line by speaking out about certain issues. For the most part it’s not addressed. There’s just silence around it.”

Tino*, originally from Zimbabwe, came to Johannesburg in 2010. He doesn’t have a full-time job and struggles to make ends meet, but has found a spiritual refuge at Holy Trinity. Tino first joined the LGBTI group that meets at Holy Trinity and has since adopted Catholicism in favour of the Pentecostal tradition in which he grew up.

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*Tino* is not his real name.

“It was just a feeling inside me, waiting to come out. But with the situation back home, it was difficult; there was no one to talk to about these things.”

“I grew up in a religious family and attended a Pentecostal church which is totally against homosexuality – they saw it as the work of the devil.”

“I don’t have any problem serving God because of my sexuality. He created me this way. I’m His son and I serve Him.”

“The Holy Trinity group showed me that I could connect the Bible, my sexuality and my relationship with God.”
Muhsin Hendricks grew up in a traditional Muslim family, the grandson of an imam. After pursuing Islamic studies in Pakistan, he married and got a part-time teaching job while also serving as an assistant imam.

At 29 Muhsin got divorced and came out as openly gay. He was asked to leave the mosque where he worked and worshipped, and continued to have a tense relationship with the local Muslim community.

Muhsin’s own struggles with his sexuality and religion made him realize there must be others going through similar experiences, and led him to establish The Inner Circle (TIC).

“The Inner Circle (TIC) is a Cape Town-based support organisation for LGBTI Muslims, with beginnings as far back as 1996.

Starting out as an informal study circle in Muhsin’s house, TIC has since grown into a public service provider with various programmes aimed at reconciling faith and sexuality amongst queer Muslims. TIC members range in age from 16 to 70, falling across the LGBTI spectrum.

Muhsin is also certified as a marriage officer allowing him to perform traditional Muslim weddings as well as Civil Unions.

“TIC is a Human Rights Organisation working within an Islamic framework to give psycho-spiritual and social support to Muslims who are marginalised based on sexual orientation and gender identity.”

“The Quran is a book for all times and it should be studied in its context in order for it to become relevant to our times. We believe in interpreting the Quran in a way that brings healing and mercy to people rather than guilt and shame.”

“We do not believe that the Quran is discriminatory or that it condemns sexual diversity, but rather that the Quran embraces sexual diversity and instructs its adherents to act sexually within a framework of faithfulness, justice, self-restraint and God consciousness.”

IMAM MUHSIN HENDRICKS
FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF THE INNER CIRCLE (TIC)

“When I reached puberty, my first attraction was to a boy in my class. At that point, I knew I was in trouble. My grandfather was an imam too and used to preach about those people that will go to hell.”

“Is it good Muslim practice to disregard someone who is different from the mainstream simply because they do not fit in with our interpretation of Islam?”

“They always say Islam is against homosexuality and that is how they silence you. Muslims are still suffering between loyalty to their faith and loyalty to their children who are gay.”

Breaking barriers, building communities
David worships primarily at Beit Emanuel in Parktown, Johannesburg. Growing up in a Modern Orthodox Jewish household, he struggled to come to terms with his sexuality, religion and culture. He is the founder of the LGBTI group Jewish OUTlook, serves as the international chair of Limmud – an organisation dedicated to Jewish learning – and participated in the successful bid to have same-sex unions legalised in South Africa.

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“I started feeling I didn’t have a place in the Orthodox Jewish community because of my sexuality and other reasons. It’s quite difficult to be openly gay and remain an Orthodox Jew in the full sense.”

“One of the hardest things in my life was telling my parents I was gay, but we were able to work through it, to the point of complete acceptance.”

“I didn’t want to choose between being Jewish and being gay; they’re both central parts of my life.”

Lael worships at both Temple Israel in Hillbrow and Beit Emanuel in Parktown. She grew up in a liberal, middle-class Jewish family in Johannesburg. She lives with her wife and two adopted daughters.

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“Progressive or Reform Judaism is a liberal branch of Judaism that breaks with the more traditional and rigid teachings of Orthodox Judaism. Principles of the Progressive movement include informed choice, gender equality, social justice and an acceptance that Judaism will continue to evolve and change.”

The first Progressive synagogue in South Africa, Temple Israel in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, opened its doors in 1936. Soon after, the congregation established a school in Alexandra township and continued to support it throughout the apartheid years.

The Progressive Jewish community in South Africa welcomes LGBTI people, and Progressive rabbis conduct same-sex marriage ceremonies.

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“On a welcoming road towards new ways of being
“I came from Mandeni where it was a shame to be a lesbian or to have same-sex attractions because it was considered abnormal. I did not disclose early; I kept quiet until I was exhausted with hiding.”

“I struggle to come out at home. After I told my mother she prayed for three months and went on a fast. I could tell she was hurting. Now my mother is a recruiter – she sees a queer person anywhere and tells them about us, that she has children like them who have a church.”

“My son attends church with us. He loves us and understands queerness.”

“As the mother of the church, MaGatsheni has to find time first for her church duties: to help the congregation, read scriptures and spend solid time with God while I am working.”

Together in marriage, together in church