

JOURNEYS OF FAITH

NAVIGATING SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER DIVERSITY

Journeys of Faith tells the stories of members of the LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, Intersex) community and their personal journeys in reconciling their religious or spiritual beliefs with their sexuality. The stories come from those in leadership positions within various religious organisations, ordinary people navigating their faith and identity, as well as religious institutions and organisations that have provided a safe haven for LGBTI members to practise and negotiate their faith. These are stories of a highly personal nature and therefore, as much as possible, are told through the words of those involved.

Although LGBTI rights are protected by South Africa's constitution, many religious leaders declare homosexual relationships to be sinful and unnatural. In *Journeys of Faith* those that share their stories have engaged with these contradictions and judgements and tried to find a place where they are at peace with their faith, sexual orientation and gender identity. In many cases, this has resulted in breaking with some of the more conservative leaders of their faith and coming to an interpretation and understanding of their religion and its dominant texts that accommodates their

LGBTI identity. For most, this is a quest to reconcile an all-loving and accepting God with the religious-backed judgements that are often used against them by their elders and religious leaders.

"Opposing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is a matter of justice. It is also a matter of love. Every human being is precious. We are all – all of us – part of God's family. We all must be allowed to love each other with honour. Yet all over the world, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are persecuted. We treat them as pariahs and push them outside our communities. We make them doubt that they too are children of God. This must be nearly the ultimate blasphemy. We blame them for what they are."Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, *God is Not a Christian*, 2011



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NAVAN GOVENDER

ASSOCIATE LECTURER, WITS SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Navan grew up in a Hindu household in Johannesburg, but now identifies as a 'Hindu atheist'. For Navan, the largely unspoken judgment around homosexuality has come from the Indian cultural community, rather than directly from Hinduism itself.

He works as an academic and lives with his Christian partner of four years. Although his immediate family and friends are accepting of this, extended family tend to talk around the issue of his sexuality, or ignore it completely. The overwhelming feeling for Navan is a silence from the Hindu community on LGBTI issues. "As a teenager dealing with my sexuality, I started rationalising that I don't believe in God, mainly because I don't think that any kind of higher power would put anyone through that kind of internal struggle."

> "There is a silent but deadly monster of conservatism in the Hindu/Indian community ... There's no one who is visibly willing to talk about things like this."



Navan has used symbols from different

religions throughout his life.

th believe

"If there is a God, and I'm meant to believe, I always thought that something would happen that would make me believe. So up until that point ..."

Intellectually atheist, symbolically spiritual



THABISILE MSEZANE

DIRECTOR OF SITHABILE CHILD AND YOUTH CARE CENTRE

LEADER OF THE SACC WOMEN'S GROUP

Thabisile was thrown into a mothering role as a teenager after the death of her parents left her to look after her six brothers. She trained as a teacher and worked with special needs children. After being medically boarded at age 40, she began the Sithabile Child and Youth Care Centre. She served as the vice-president of the South African Council of Churches (SACC).

Still active within the SACC, Thabisile is a coordinator of the Women's Ecumenical Conference in Gauteng. Together with Ekurhuleni church women, she started a women's group that works to educate and support parents of LGBTI children. They help parents to accept the sexual orientation of their children, and also support the families of victims of hate crimes by attending court cases. This group is made up of mothers of both LGBTI and straight children, among them Mally Simelane, mother "Our slogan is 'My child is my child, irrespective of sexual orientation'."

"We want to assure them that they are our children. The abuse and rejection that they experience comes from their own families, their own mothers. That's where church women come in, helping the mothers to understand."

"We are training women and religious leaders in Gauteng in order to empower them

of Banyana Banyana midfielder Eudy Simelane, who was a victim of 'corrective' rape and murder in 2008. It was such acts of violence that brought the group of women together.

so that they understand this issue. Not all of them want the training though ..."

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Members of the SACC Women's Group show their support outside the Ventersdorp Magistrate Court at the case of Disebo Gift Makau on 29 January 2015.

A teacher at heart, a mother to all

te dignity and word

of every human being





STYLIST

Nazmah is transgender. She grew up in a Muslim family on the Cape Flats, a period of her life she describes as mostly happy years, largely due to her positive outlook. When Nazmah was a teenager her mother took her to a doctor who told her: "Your son is a female trapped in a male's body". This resonated with young Nazmah who now finally had the words to describe how she had always felt. At this time she began experimenting with women's clothing and has been living as a woman since the age of 20.

Over time Nazmah's immediate family have come to be largely supportive, although she still experiences hostility from some members of her Muslim community. Despite no longer being actively religious, Nazmah maintains a personal relationship with God. She works as a stylist in Cape Town. "It was never about being attracted to males, it was more about just being a girl."

"I'm not religious but I try to live within the boundaries of my religion, especially when dressing as a female and being a Muslim lady."

"My sexuality doesn't determine my religion. In any religion, when you pray to God it's not about your physical body, it's about being in contact with God, with your

mind and your soul."

"I'm very proud of who I am and how far I have come in spite of what I've been through."





SALLY GROSS

FORMER DOMINICAN FRIAR, INTERSEX ACTIVIST [1953 - 2014]

Sally Gross was born intersex, with a sexual anatomy that didn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. Born to Jewish parents, she was raised as a boy (Selwyn) who later converted to Catholicism and was ordained as a Dominican friar. During this time Gross lived with the inner conflict that she identified as female and eventually underwent medical tests confirming her intersex status and changed her name to Sally.

A lengthy and painful battle with the Catholic Church followed. As a woman, Gross could no longer serve as a priest. Fundamentally, the Church rejected all avenues she proposed for her continued involvement. Despite engaging with other religions, nearing her death, Gross professed to have lost all faith and considered herself an atheist. "Religion looms large in my life-narrative. My Christian commitment and faith died slowly and painfully."

"In and through all of this, I'm Jewish. This is cultural rather than religious."

"At some level I think I'll always see myself as a priest and religious. I hanker for religious life and I hanker for the ministry."

"I was ostracised, stripped of status

With Penuell Maduna and Lindiwe Mabuza at the IDASA meeting in Dakar, Senegal in 1987. Gross was an active member of the ANC.



and even identity, and forbidden to exercise my vocation."

"Since 2000, I've drafted amendments bearing on intersex and these have been lobbied into law."

Challenging contexts, a life of complexity



MSHENGU MUZI TSHABALALA

FOUNDER AND PRESIDING BISHOP – BELIEVERS IN CHRIST

Mshengu Tshabalala serves both as the Archbishop of the Zionist church he established in 1984, *Believers in Christ*, and the Executive President of the Zulu-speaking Zionist sector, *Ikhaya IeZayoni* (Home of the Zion).

Due to his belief that all humans are created equal and should be accepted in his church, Mshengu is undergoing a process of trying to understand sexual orientation and gender identity in its full complexity. Some LGBTI members of his congregation have 'come out' to him and he has started working with their families, a process Mshengu believes cannot be rushed.

"There are members who have opened up to me. They can see that I at least accommodate and try to understand them."

> "LGBTI people need to be seen participating in the church, like all other church members."

> > "The preaching of amaZayoni is negative towards gays and lesbians, because of their background and how they were



taught. This mindset, it is so difficult to 'unteach'."

Journeying towards understanding



KATRIN AUF DER HEYDE

PHYSIOTHERAPIST AND YOGI

From an early age German-born Katrin was drawn to eastern mysticism and practices, and was encouraged by her parents to be creative and explore life. She experienced "a home coming" when she fell in love with a woman for the first time after dating men and being "unconscious" of her sexual orientation. Since then she has identified as a lesbian. Katrin's spiritual journey unfolded through meditation and yoga. After travelling to India, she moved into a yoga centre in Cape Town where she lived and worked for many years.

Katrin now lives on a communal smallholding in the Underberg community at the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains, a setting that complements Katrin's minimalist and self-sufficient lifestyle. Her physiotherapy work is with disabled children. Aligned to Buddhist teachings and practices, she uses meditation as a "The process of making conscious and integrating the realisation that I was a lesbian happened on a number of levels, over many years."

"The acknowledgement of and respect for the diversity of all living beings is integral to Buddhist teachings."

"The emphasis in Buddhist teaching is not on sexual orientation – it is really about our experience as human beings."

reminder to remain mindful of and engaged with life.

Katrin regularly attands retreats at the Buddhist Retreat Centre in Ixopo, KwaZulu-Natal.



Walking for a long time, in a gentle mist



ZEAN NKUNZI NKABINDE

SANGOMA AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Zean Nkunzi Nkabinde was born in Meadowlands Soweto, as a female-bodied twin. His brother came first but was still-born. His parents named him Zandile Beauty and he was raised as a girl. For much of his adult life, Zean lived as a lesbian female.

In Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My life as a Lesbian Sangoma, Zean gives an autobiographical account of this balancing of many identities: sangoma, umZulu, lesbian and human rights activist.

Having always felt like a man inside, four years
ago Zean consulted with his ancestors and was
given permission to transition from a woman to a man.
He has begun the process and now calls himself Zean. He plans
to write a sequel to his book which he wants to call *Living a life*of a man in me.

"When I think about my life I realise that I felt the presence of my ancestors at a young age. They were always with me."

> "This woman gave me an opportunity to find out about my sexuality and I couldn't turn it down. I was 13 and she was 30 when our affair started. It went on for five years."

"My daughter is seven years old now. She

has always called me Baba. So I wanted to look like the man she was calling. I wanted for my child to see that man in me. I am happy about that."

A transgender child of the ancestors



ROWAN SMITH

RETIRED DEAN OF ST GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL, CAPE TOWN

The Reverend Rowan Smith became South Africa's first openly gay Anglican Dean when he came out to his congregation after being appointed as the Dean of St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town in 1998. He held this position until his retirement in 2010. Before coming out publically Rowan spoke privately to then Archbishop Tutu, who responded: "I surmised".

During his tenure, sometimes controversially, Rowan brought LGBTI issues to light within the church, making St George's a place of welcome for all. During his time as Dean, despite being publically gay, Rowan refrained from having a partner and remained celibate, a position that he admits brought with it great loneliness. "In the '70s I started meeting people in Cape Town who were gay and formed close friendships with them. And then I began to explore. But not within the church; it was more a parallel lifestyle."

"The Anglican Church will say they do not discriminate because gay and lesbian people can be ordained. But they can't be in a relationship ... they must remain celibate."



"The church needs to challenge its people. It's sad that the church seems to have lost its prophetic voice."

The St George's Siyahamba Labyrinth is used as a meditation tool by all, regardless of religious persuasion.

Walking the labyrinth, reflecting on life



ECCLESIA DE LANGE

FORMER METHODIST MINISTER AND PROGRAMME

Raised in a charismatic church, Ecclesia later joined the Methodist Church, where she trained and was ordained as a minister. Prior to this she had spent time with the Rhema Church, where she was involved with a support group for 'recovering' LGBTI people, but realised that her sexuality was not something that needed 'fixing'.

In December 2009 she announced to her Windsor Park and Brackenfell congregations that she was marrying her female partner. This led to her suspension and later dismissal as a Methodist minister, same-sex marriage being a divisive issue within the Methodist Church.

Ecclesia has since been fighting to overturn this dismissal and her case is scheduled to be heard by the Constitutional Court. Ecclesia now works for the Faith-based NGO, *Inclusive and* "When I was younger I was unable to differentiate between God and the church. But now I'm very clear: the church is not God."

"When I was exploring my call to the ministry, focusing on my sexual orientation was not the priority. It was only at seminary that I had to face who I am."

"I thought that the church would have more grace with its clergy and be more

Affirming Ministries (IAM), in Cape Town.

serious about journeying with gay members. But the way they dealt with me was quick and punitive."

"It makes much more sense for me to be involved directly with transformation through IAM, but I certainly desire to return to the church, fully accepted as a minister."

Living in truth and freedom

CREDITS

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