

Can religious leaders change their attitudes and negative perspectives on LGBTQ+ Kenyans? Our research demonstrated that they can and they did.

This essay presents the results of a study that sought to understand whether training Kenyan religious leaders about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) persons reduced their negative perspectives (stigma) against sexual and gender minorities. The essay also suggests practical pastoral implications from the findings of this study. This is an abridged version of the study. Therefore, we encourage everyone to read the full journal article, which is accessible in the Journal of Sex Research. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00224499.2021.1908942>)

Summary of study findings

The study correlated data points collected before the commencement of the training (pre-test), with similar data collected immediately after the training (post-test), and then data collected 3 – 4 months after the training (follow-up). Comparing pre-test and post-test data showed that acceptance of gender diversity, lesbian and gay men significantly increased, while the attitude towards gender and sexual minorities became more positive.

Additionally, the social distance towards gay men, lesbians, and transgender persons became less. Parallel changes between pre-test and follow-up tests were also significant and insignificant between post-test and follow-up, indicating training impact lasted over time. The magnitude of the intervention was large. From pre-test to post-test, and from pre-test to follow-up, almost all Cohen's d's were above 0.80. The observed changes appear to have been moderated by participants' gender and their religious fundamentalism measures.

The observed gender impact implied more change for men when compared to women. It may be related to the fact that men's initial attitudes were more negative. Consequently, there was more room for change. Participants who scored higher on religious fundamentalism also changed more compared to participants who scored lower.

Our findings confirm that biases against sexual and gender minorities are not static (Mahaffey & Bryan, 2016; Poteat et al., 2017). Consistent with the literature on attitudinal change, educational intervention and training can cause the effective realization of such change (Currier & Carlson, 2009; Dalky, 2012; Gichuru, 2014; Livingston et al., 2012; Bartos et al., 2014). This study also responded to the appeals for research that tests whether effects of attitudinal change interventions persist over time (Corrigan et al., 2015) and expands on the study done by Poteat et al. (2017), demonstrating that the impact of gender and sexual diversity training can be persistent over time.

Furthermore, the findings on the moderating effect of gender and religious fundamentalism showed that the impact of contact with sexual minority persons was greater for persons with stronger sexual prejudice. They resonate with findings from West & Hewstone (2012) and Hodson (2008, 2011), who found that more authoritarian people, who are generally less likely to engage in intergroup contact, but change their attitudes more after such contact.

Important to document is that the training directly connected with the experience world of the religious leaders by incorporating sections of the bible that call for love and non-discrimination. It did not challenge the passages of the bible used to condemn homosexuality. Because of this, it is unlikely that interpretations of these passages would have changed. It suggests then, that stigma against gender and sexual minorities is more driven by prevailing social attitudes and religious fundamentalism and less by biblical prescriptions.

Our study findings suggest the divide between African religious leaders and their counterparts in the Global North on the acceptance of sexual and gender diversity (Sachs, 2009) may be a consequence

of the lack of interaction between African religious leaders and members of the sexual and gender minority community. This lack of interaction results from the continued criminalization of sexual minorities, with the support of religious leaders in Kenya (Mbote et al., 2018), forcing sexual and gender minorities to remain invisible for fear of prosecution.

The study concludes that by limiting the opportunities for interaction between religious leaders and LGBTQ+ persons, the criminalization of sexual minorities is not only detrimental to the freedom and rights of sexual minorities. It also impedes the development of inclusive theological and pastoral practices. Our findings suggest that such interactions are likely to contribute to more inclusive perspectives on gender and sexual diversity and the development of inclusive African theology.

Practical suggestions for LGBTQ+ pastoral responses

There is a wide rift that divides the African Christian religious leaders and LGBTQ+ human rights activists. Two underlying metanarratives seem to dictate how any LGBTQ+ conversation is likely to evolve. For many Christian religious leaders, support for LGBTQ+ rights is seen as an attempt to re-interpret the definition of the institution of marriage. Indeed the Anglican Jerusalem Statement aptly summarizes this position. It states that the *“unchangeable standard of Christian marriage [is] between one man and one woman as the proper place for sexual intimacy and the basis of the family.... [and calls for] a renewed commitment to lifelong fidelity in marriage and abstinence for those who are not married.”*

For LGBTQ+ human rights advocates on the other hand, the conversation for LGBTQ+ people is not about Christian teachings on sexual morality but about their experiences of human rights violations. It includes high levels of physical and verbal violence, widespread discrimination in access to employment, education, housing, health care, financing and other services, legal repression through the criminalization of sexual expression between consenting adults of the same sex, culturally encouraged stigma and discrimination, and Government's failure to enact and implement gender-affirming policies or provide gender reaffirming services for gender minorities. As a result, they have a much higher risk of mental distress, mental health problems, suicidality, and lower social well-being when compared to their non-SGM counterparts. The [“The issue is Violence”](#) report aptly summarizes their concerns. So given this huge gulf in perspective, one can legitimately ask if there is any possibility for securing a reconciliation of the two positions.

Incidentally, this polarity plays out in the much-quoted biblical passage on the woman caught committing adultery (John 8: 1 – 11). For religious leaders, the take-home lesson from this passage is the last sentence *“.....go and **do not sin again.*** For LGBTQ+ people, the emphasis is on how close she was to death by violence and a reflection of the threat of violence that perpetually hangs over the heads of the LGBTQ+ community, like the proverbial sword of Damocles. Yet, Christ sets her free. He does not even condemn her!

The study demonstrated that bias against sexual and gender minorities is not static and consistent with the literature on attitudinal change, educational intervention and training can be effective in realizing such change. We therefore propose the following three pastoral interventions:

1. Loving and compassionate pastoral response

For any pastoral response to be effective, pastoral ministers should recognize and value the humanity of those they seek to evangelize. *“You can catch more flies with a teaspoon of honey than with a drum full of Vinegar”* - is attributed to Saint Francis de Sales (1567 – 1622), the Catholic Bishop of Geneva during the height of protestant reformation. The city of Geneva had become the bastion of Protestantism since 1534 when Calvinism conquered the whole region. Catholics were suppressed by raids, pillages and massacres. Worship was forbidden, churches destroyed, and priests exiled or killed. Yet, Francis De Sales, whose personal motto was, *“He who preaches with love, preaches effectively”*, laboured ceaselessly for reconciliation and the spiritual return to the unity of the faith in his episcopate.

It is said, even the most diehard Calvinists yielded to Francis' gentle and persuasive preaching because he instructed them with love and compassion – secretly at first, but eventually quite openly. De Sale's attitude and approach to pastoral ministry characterized the response of the vast majority of religious leaders to the LGBTQ+ community after the training. After the panel presentation and

question & answer sessions, where there was a human level interaction, it became difficult for the religious leaders and LGBTQ+ participants to view each other through the prisms of dominant stereotypes.

A majority of the religious leaders confessed that it was the first time they had such contact. It explains why over 80% of the religious leaders said the training had changed their perspectives, even though it did not explore the hermeneutics of the passages of the bible widely taken to condemn homosexual people.

Churches need to be “safe-spaces”. A pastor may emphasize “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” ... Neither do I. **Go and sin no more!**” to their LGBTQ+ congregants, but at least, let it be after they have provided a physically, emotionally and psychologically safe space.

2. Severing the link between Christianity and colonialism

For many African theologians defining what is “African” in Christian theology is very much a live issue. They discuss the African adaptation of Christianity, under concepts such as acculturation, enculturation, interculturalization, incarnation, 'africanisation', 'adaptation', and 'indigenisation'. It is a complex historical problem that this article will not attempt to solve. However, scholars agree that the successful implementation of British political authority in Africa aided in the expansion of frontiers of the missionary enterprise.

Curiously, within Kenyan Christian settings, LGBTQ+ issues are discussed as being un-African and un-Christian, yet what could be more un-African and un-Christian, than the criminalization of sexual minorities. A comparison between the former African colonies of the United Kingdom, France and Portugal, demonstrates the patent colonialism of this law. Almost all former British colonies have this law in their penal codes. Many of the former French colonies do not have this law. None of the former Portuguese colonies (Lusophone) countries has this law.

On account of this law, one might question whether a Kenyan Christian is more Christian than a Rwandese or Mozambican Christian since the latter two (among 20 other African countries) do not criminalize their sexual minority citizens? Is the revocation of this law, an issue close to the aspirations of Kenyan sexual minorities, a function of Christianity or colonialism? Many will be surprised to learn that Djibouti, where over 90% of its citizen are Muslim, does not criminalize homosexuality? Who colonized Djibouti?

Can Christianity in Kenya exist independent of a civil law that criminalizes sexual minorities? Can Christians in Kenya advocate for civil law and public policy that provides equality among all Kenyans irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity, without thinking that such equality betrays their love of Christ? As they seek to distinguish between what is genuinely Christian and what is colonial, these are theological questions that our Christian leaders need to reflect on.

3. Theology of grace versus the law: Is there salvation for LGBTQ+ people?

For many Kenyans, religious leaders included, the answer to this question appears to be firm and capitalized, "NO, unless they become cisgender heterosexuals." Some of the findings from our study do provide reflection points that can contribute to theological reflections on grace vis-à-vis the law.

Since the 4-day training did not challenge the bible passages used to condemn homosexuality, it is unlikely that interpretations of these passages would have changed among the religious leaders who participated in the study. From the study, we deduced that prevailing social attitudes drive prejudice against gender and sexual minorities. Less so by biblical prescriptions. It means when social attitudes change, so will the views of religious leaders.

On theological reflection of sections 162, 163 and 165 of the penal code – the civil law used to justify the overt social discrimination of LGBTQ+ Kenyans. We realize that the core issues are already well *litigated* in the bible. Galatians Chapter 3: 1 - 29 is perhaps one of the most dramatic. If St Paul were to address Kenyans, he would have asked us: *“You foolish [Kenyans]! Who has bewitched you? Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by the flesh?”*

Paul would press religious leaders opposed to ongoing efforts by sexual minorities to have this colonial law repealed on why they feel retention of this law is a Christian imperative. How can they

preach the Gospel of Christ on the one hand, and the other, pursue violence (for indeed jailing a person for 14 years is violence and religious appeal to the coercive power of the government) in the name of Christ?

In his book, *“Grace in Practice: A theology for everyday life”*, Anglican theologian, Paul F. M. Zahl observed that Christ saw the inability of the law to provide its fulfilment and provided his death as a victory for people oppressed by the law. In Matthew Chapter 5:17 – 48, Jesus *marks a decisive shift from the Mosaic theocracy to a worldwide new-covenant church with no civil jurisdiction*. Covenantal fulfilment of the law goes beyond the possibility of a government to police because it goes over and above legalist prescriptions. *“You have heard it was said. You shall not commit adultery. But I tell you that, anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

This milieu of grace is beyond civil jurisdiction and demands Christian virtue that goes beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees. *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* Romans Chapter 3: 23 – 24.

In the ongoing decriminalization case (Petition 150 & 234 of 2016), sexual minorities in Kenya believe it is the Kenya Christian Professional Forum (KCPF), striving to retain the law as petitioners, even with the Attorney General as the respondent. Bishops from mainstream Christian churches attended May 24, 2019, ruling at the High Court, robbed in official regalia. So one can rightly conclude that Christians and particularly religious leaders of mainstream churches have come to own this colonial law – presumably as a Christian imperative.

Our study has established, the criminalization of sexual minorities impedes the development of inclusive theological and pastoral practices. Religious leaders who believe in the salvific grace of God must distance themselves from any oppressive colonial-era legal regime that discriminates against Kenyans, particularly those already socially marginalized.

Conclusion & Call to Action: Jesus came to fulfil the law and *“proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”* (Luke Chapter 4: 18 – 19). There are many religious leaders in Kenya as well as ordinary Christians who would like to be consistent and faithful to their commitment of faith and belief in Christ. Many of them realize that the dominant stereotypes (the way Kenyans think) about LGBTQ+ people, and the prejudice (the way Kenyans feel) about them is very much inconsistent with how Christ thought and felt about the marginalized in the society. Many of these Christians also know that discrimination (the way Kenyans act) against LGBTQ+ persons, including legal repression, could not be more anti-Christ. This is because Jesus welcomed all who were rejected in the society, whether they were rejected on account of their sicknesses (Luke 8:48), their profession such as tax collectors (Matthew 9:9 – 13), including dying for all of us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). This is can only be because Jesus placed the Image of God (Genesis 1:27) at the CENTER of what he saw in every one of us. So while some Kenyans justify their negative stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination on account of what they believe LGBTQ+ people do (or do not do), Christians who are faithful to their calling and faith, should deliberately choose to place at the CENTER the image of God as what to focus on when they encounter an LGBTQ+ person. This is the appropriate Christian response towards LGBTQ+ people in our society! Indeed discrimination, by definition is an act of judging, yet Christ himself says, *“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you”* (Matthew 7: 1 – 2). Lastly, recall the story of the ‘clever and self-justifying’ lawyer who wanted to test Jesus and asked Jesus “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” and also asked “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus not only narrated to him the story of the Good Samaritan, but also commanded him to “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10: 25 – 37). **This is our call to action for all genuine followers of Christ in Kenya.**

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