

# Harmonious fellowship of sexuality diverse Christians in the Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ

**Author:**Alfred M. Rivombo<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Adult Community and Continuing Education, College of Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Alfred Rivombo,  
rimomam@unisa.ac.za

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The aim of this study was to investigate the challenges and experiences that impact harmonious fellowship among sexuality diverse Christians, and to explore strategies for sustaining such fellowship. It used the stance of Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ (MRCC) regarding the membership of homosexual persons as a case study. The research approach that was applied was qualitative. The researcher started by employing an opportunistic sampling strategy by advertising the research project to the church community and inviting volunteer participants. Because of insufficient responses, the researcher employed opportunistic and snowballing strategies by recruiting a few and requesting them to identify potential participants, resulting in 12 participants. Data were generated through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The researcher used a thematic data analysis method. The researcher adhered to the prescribed protocol to guarantee compliance with study ethics. The findings highlight the significance of self-acceptance and transparent discussion in promoting mutual tolerance and inclusivity among Christians, despite contradictory perspectives on homosexuality. Participants who support full membership for non-heterosexuals without solemnising their marriages hope to allow time for open dialogue. Others advocate for allowing ministers to solemnise such marriages.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This research contributes by focusing on the lived experiences and theological insights of sexuality diverse Christians who continue participating in their faith groups. It presents a cohesive fellowship model amalgamating scripture engagement, scientific understanding and pastoral awareness to promote authentic, theologically informed inclusion by modern perspectives on human sexuality and divine justice.

**Keywords:** conflicting viewpoints; harmonious fellowship; homosexuality; inclusivity; mutual respect; open dialogue; stigma.

## Introduction

At its 11th General Church Assembly (GCA), the Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ (MRCC) resolved that, 'The MRCC does not accept same sex marriages though we do not discriminate against them' (MRCC 2009:29). However, the statement was not explicit about the membership status of people of homosexuality groups in the MRCC. Hence, the church reviewed the 2009 resolution in its 13th GCA. They maintained their standpoint against same-sex marriage, but with some qualifications:

Same sex marriages is not practiced in the church, couples can be accepted but not be solemnised in the church because the church is registered for Conventional marriages, Civil and Customary marriages. (MRCC 2015:47)

The MRCC further advises members who want to enter into same-sex marriage to marry at the Home Affairs offices. In its explanation of the reciprocity of members' entitlement and obligation, the MRCC says: 'The rights to which a member is entitled are dependent on the extent to which the member fulfils the corresponding obligations towards the church' (MRCC 2018:5). Even though solemnity is not included as one of the entitlements of MRCC members (2018:4), the fact that ministers do solemnise marriages of heterosexual members implies that it is an entitlement that is denied to non-heterosexual members.

The implied assumption about the identification of man and woman in Genesis 1:28 (NIV) is non-differentiation of gender and sexuality, meaning that a man or male is automatically a gynephile, and a woman or female is automatically an androphile. A gynephile is a person who is sexually attracted to women. An androphile is a person who is sexually attracted to men (Bailey et al. 2016:65;

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Daae et al. 2020). The narration of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1–29 (NIV) advocates that God did not create homosexuality. Leviticus 18:22 (NIV) and Romans 1:26–27 (NIV) accentuate the condemnation of homosexuality as sinful and against God's design. Contrary to biblical connotations, Bailey et al. (2016), Daae et al. (2020) and Cheong (2024) demonstrate that gender and sexuality do not happen at once at conception. They also argue that the congruence between males being gynephilic and females being androphilic is not absolute.

While it has been possible for most governments and other churches, globally, to talk about legalising or formalising the existence of diverse sexuality to an extent that 175 countries, including South Africa, formally endorsed the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, + other identities (LGBTQI+) community (Flores 2021), some churches, including the MRCC have not been talking about formally endorsing non-heterosexuality basing its stance on the scriptures mentioned in the preceding paragraph. The researcher argues that even when the church is founded on the Bible, as an organisation of living bodies, it considers other elements that constitute a human being, such as biology, which seem to contradict the Bible. To accommodate both extremes, MRCC, fostering a harmonious fellowship of its members with their diverse sexuality, took a neutral stance. However, this neutrality has an element of implicit bias as it still implies that non-heterosexual relationships are not acceptable, subsequently still reducing them to the less privileged group (Meert 2024:4). Meert infers that the feeling of less privilege is, in itself, a prejudice against non-heterosexuals. In contrast, the privileged ones may not see the necessity of discontinuing their negative attitude. This article explores dimensions that stimulate churches to continuously re-evaluate their stance on sexuality in line with Pillay (2022), who advocates for churches to continuously re-evaluate their interpretations of scripture in light of contemporary understandings of human sexuality.

Considering the current situation of MRCC of conditionally accepting non-heterosexual members, this research aims to investigate the challenges and experiences that impact harmonious fellowship among sexuality diverse Christians, and to explore strategies for sustaining such fellowship. The objectives of this study are:

- To investigate challenges that impede harmonious fellowship among sexually diverse Christians.
- To explore experiences that foster harmonious fellowship among sexuality diverse Christians.
- To explore strategies for sustaining harmonious fellowship of Christians with diverse sexualities.

## Theoretical framework

The researcher employed Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT). Social Identity Theory is a social psychological theory introduced by Tajfel (1978), who, together with Turner (Tajfel & Turner 1979), expanded

upon it. Trepte and Loy (2017:1–2) avow that SIT postulates that a group or an organisation to which individuals belong gives them self-concept. They add that SIT aims to explain processes that take place in the human mind and societal circumstances, which influence the relationship between different groupings, particularly those associated with prejudice, bias and discrimination. According to Turner et al. (1987), SCT posits that individuals can shift between different levels of self-categorisation, from personal identity where a person sees oneself as a unique individual, to social identity, thus seeing oneself as a member of a particular social group, and to collective identity where a person sees oneself as part of a larger social category. They avow that the level of collective identity is the most prominent as it is displayed in one's behaviour and attitudes. This theoretical framework is appropriate for this research because it deals with the self-concept and personal identity of a non-heterosexual person as an individual, within the category of non-heterosexuals, and as a member of the congregation at large. It deals with circumstances that strain or those that foster harmonious coexistence of people with diverse sexualities.

## Literature review

### Sexuality

Sexuality refers to an individual's sexual orientation, characterised by romantic or sexual attraction towards individuals, which is an inborn aspect of a person's identity, determined by complex interactions of biological, psychological and environmental factors (Perrotta 2020). It is an inborn identity of persons, which is displayed through their personality. However, Shalahuddin et al. (2023:56) avow that any sexuality other than heterosexuality is a mental disorder that can be cured. Hence, they classify non-heterosexuals as people with a mental disorder.

Bailey et al. (2016:48) distinguish between sexual behaviour, sexual identity, sexual orientation and physiological sexual arousal. They explain that sexual behaviour refers to sexual interactions between persons, while sexual identity refers to self-conception. Bailey et al. (2016:65) use the words 'androphilia' and 'gynephilia', which they claim accurately describe sexuality as sexual attraction and arousal to either the same or opposite sex. Their articulation of sexual orientation as a degree of sexual attraction to either the same or other sex implies that a man can be identified as gay because of the higher degree or level of sexual attraction to a man, while he, consciously or unconsciously, to a lesser degree, has sexual attraction to women. They discuss physiological sexual arousal to show that people can be intimate for other fulfilments with less sexual erotic stimuli.

### Biological perspective on the genesis of sexuality

Bailey et al. (2016:70) suggest that at the moment of conception or when the foetus is conceived, it does not have a defined sexuality. The genital formation happens

during early foetal development, whereby genetic and hormonal factors determine the biological sex. They say that the genital formation stage is followed by sexuality development. The continued secretion of testosterone in the male foetus moulds the mind of the developing male foetus towards male sexual behaviour. It results in a male gynephilia. If the mother's body stops secreting testosterone on the developing male foetus, the foetus develops towards female sexual behaviour. It results in male androphilia. Likewise, the secretion of testosterone on a developing female foetus moulds it towards male sexual behaviour. It results in a female gynephilia. The continued non-secretion of testosterone on a developing female foetus moulds it towards female sexual behaviour, which results in a female androphilia. Daae et al. (2020) provide empirical evidence that biological factors, such as prenatal hormone exposure, may also play a significant role in the development of human sexuality.

Cheong (2024:2) confirms the suggestion of Bailey et al. (2016) and Daae et al. (2020) that the foetus does not have defined sexuality at the moment of conception. He adds that even if the genitals are not yet visible on conception and during the first phase of foetal development, the genitals that develop between 10 and 12 weeks have been determined during the fertilisation of the egg by the sperm, when the 23rd pair of chromosomes join. If the pair is XX, the foetus will develop female genitals, and if the pair is XY, the foetus will develop male genitals. It means that when testosterone begins to be released from around 12-weeks, the male genitalia differentiate into scrotum, penis and testicles. In contrast, in the genetically female foetus, female genitalia develop as a default.

### Psychological and social tenets on sexuality

The sexuality influenced qualities of persons reveal themselves during childhood, long before sexual feelings arise. In non-heterosexual children, it is seen through gender non-conformity, which is when their conduct portrays that of a different sex. For example, it is when a male androphile likes to wear dresses, to have long hair, to play with dolls and to play with girls rather than with fellow boys. Shalahuddin et al. (2023:56) avow that homosexuality is a mental disorder categorised as an evil lust that destroys human life and must be overcome. They insist that homosexuality is a mental disorder because non-heterosexuals are in constant depression, anxiety, and sexual disputes (Shalahuddin et al. 2023:61). Shalahuddin et al. criticise American Psychiatric Association (APA 1996) who were leading the campaigns for gay and lesbians' rights, and to remove homosexuality from the list of ailments that are associated with mental disorder. They argue that although most members of APA are highly acclaimed researchers, they cannot be objective in their research because they are themselves non-heterosexuals. Shalahuddin et al. (2023:57) suggest that people who claim the normality of homosexuality follow Sigmund Freud's excuse, who, after attempting and failing to change a homosexual mother, told her she should not be ashamed

because she is not suffering from an illness, which is degradation. However, she has a variation of sexual function (Freud 1960). They argue that Freud's first attempt and failure cannot be used as a scientific justification. The concern of Shalahuddin et al. is exacerbated by the assumption that the delisting of homosexuality from the mental group would give them (homosexuals) freedom and confidence to spread and recruit heterosexuals into homosexuality. Another problem that Shalahuddin et al. foresee with the delisting of homosexuality from the mental group is that, on top of the current condition that caused the declaration of homosexuality as a mental disorder, another stress of coping with people's perception about them would be added.

Moagi et al. (2021:11–12) counter Shalahuddin et al. (2023) by indicating that non-heterosexuals end up suffering from significant emotional distress and mental health challenges because of the stigmatisation, victimisation and exclusion. Trammell (2015:11) says that depression elicits heightened conduct that can be labelled as a defence mechanism or coping strategies. He recalls one of his interviewees' confessions that he resorted to alcohol and drug abuse, heavy smoking, forced and disloyal heterosexual relations as mechanisms of coping with the depression that is caused by his refusal to accept and live his life as determined by who he is. These coping and defence mechanisms worsen the societal despal and hatred (Doan Van et al. 2019).

Shalahuddin et al. (2023:62) validate their standpoint that sexuality can be changed by citing a member of the very same APA that defends gay rights, Paul (2012:159), who counters the belief that sexuality is inborn and cannot be changed. Paul says that people continuously change in interest, behaviour and sexual identity as they grow, develop and become exposed to unfamiliar environments and experiences. Paul's argument is based on the findings of Mock and Eibach (2012), who, after a research project that lasted for 10 years, discovered that 2% of 2560 participants changed from either heterosexuality to homosexuality or bisexuality and vice versa, but the majority changed towards heterosexuality. Participants' confessions that are highlighted by Trammell (2015:7–8) suggest that, although very slim, sexuality can be changed.

### Religious perspective of various religious formations on homosexuality

Different religious groups have varying perspectives on homosexuality, often influenced by their sacred texts, traditions and interpretations. Islam categorises homosexuality as an evil lust that destroys human life and must be overcome (Shalahuddin et al. 2023:64). Jewish faithful view homosexual acts as prohibited by Jewish law, citing Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13. At the same time, some accept it (Homolka 2020:97–98). Hinduism's traditional texts do not explicitly address homosexual marriage. Vaishnavism considers homosexual acts as contrary to *dharma* [righteousness] but emphasises compassion for all beings, while Shaivism has varying views (Milisci 2023).

Buddhism also, does not have strict teachings on homosexuality, but emphasises the importance of ethical conduct, non-harming, or non-violence (*ahimsa*), compassion and skilful means (Manti 2024:24). Ajei (2022) refutes the notion that homosexuality is un-African, claiming that it has been a persistent characteristic in numerous African communities and beliefs. Olaseni (2024:2) confirms this by noting Nigeria's indigenous vocabulary, demonstrating that varied sexual orientations have been articulated since antiquity. Ambani (2017:24) avows that heterosexuality was encouraged in Africa for reproductive objectives, while homosexuality was covertly permitted for ritualistic purposes such as military expertise, power or wealth.

## Christianity

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that homosexual behaviours are sinful, but it also promotes compassion for people who have same-sex attraction (Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs 2357–2359). Protestant, such as Pentecostal, Charismatic, and African Initiated Churches, have various perspectives on homosexuality, from complete to partial acceptance, praying for repentance to staunch resistance, while some denominations excommunicate non-heterosexuals (Shoemaker 2018).

### Christian views that reject homosexuality

The repudiation of homosexuality is predicated on a particular reading of the Bible, seen as the divine word. Cowan (2013:429) contends that people authored the Bible under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, God is the supreme author of the Bible. Cowan's claim suggests that the authority of the Bible ought not to be questioned. Most Christian faiths condemn homosexuality as a sin, citing scripture. Another reason for the rejection of homosexual relationships is the procreation directive given on the establishment of marriage between husband and wife in Genesis 1:26–27 and Genesis 2:18–24, in which God commands people to leave their parents and be united in one flesh to strengthen their love and give birth to offspring. Natural pregnancy and childbirth do not occur in homosexual marriages.

### Christian perspectives that embrace homosexuality

There are Christians who consider the biological genesis of sexuality, which advocates that homosexuality, just like heterosexuality, is a natural and inborn identity of individuals that they did not choose. Brueggemann (2001:16) believes in the authority of the Bible and acknowledges that all Christians submit to the authority of the Bible as the word of God. However, he expresses that the interpretation differs because it is human, subjective, circumstantial, contextual and disputatious. Hence, Pillay (2022), as commissioned by the South African Council of Churches, Western Cape (SACCWC), published a series of Bible studies that seek to stimulate the review of all the biblical texts that the church uses to judge homosexuals. Pillay's approach may be elicited by her conviction that God is

perfect, therefore, 'mistake' cannot be attributed to God, rather the probability of the mistake may be attributed to people's interpretation, hence she initiated the review and reinterpretation of biblical texts such as Genesis 19:1–26; Leviticus 18:1–30 and 20:7–22; Romans 1:18–32; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:8–11, which are referred to whenever people talk about sexuality. For example, Pillay's review of Genesis 19:4, which is in the pericope that narrates the destruction of Sodom because of sin, is done in conjunction with Genesis 18:16–33 and 19:4–9, and Ezekiel 16:49–50. She ends with a suggestion that there is a possibility that homosexual encounters were not the only offence that elicited God's wrath on Gomorrah. She also alludes that Gomorrah's fate was declared long before men in Gomorrah attempted to rape Lot's visitors. The possibility that is suggested by Pillay (2022) implies that the sin, which is labelled as sodomy, which originated from the word 'Sodom', is not homosexuality only; sodomy may embrace all sinful deeds that were committed in Sodom. Her analysis of Leviticus 18:1–30 and 20:7–22 reveals that these pericopes comprise many laws that restrain sexual encounters by prohibiting the Israelites from sleeping with relatives, persons of the same sex, animals and women who are menstruating. She highlights that these pericopes are concluded by emphasising that all these abominable deeds are equally defiling. However, selective analysts select texts that prohibit homosexuality as the most important verses to be adhered to, more than all others. Consequently, homosexuality is considered to be more terrible than adultery, idolatry and enmity.

Spangenberg (2020:6) contends that the Dutch Reformed Church's literalist and conservative interpretation of the Bible elicited pro-apartheid and homophobic resolutions. Spangenberg's argument highlights the moral and social consequences of the interpretation of the Bible, which may advocate either justice or injustice and may be exclusive or inclusive. While being an Evangelical Reformed Christian who maintains the traditional interpretation of same-sex marriage, Brownson (2013:117) seeks to uncover the moral logic behind biblical texts by challenging both conservatives and progressives to reflect on the word of God contextually. He argues that the modern understanding of sexual orientation was unknown in biblical times. Therefore, ancient texts should be contextualised to recent discoveries and reidentifications of LGBTQI+.

The central discourse around homosexuality in Christian communities often arises from a perceived conflict between specific traditional biblical readings and contemporary scientific discoveries, especially in disciplines such as biology, embryology and human sexuality (Healy 2022). While the Bible teaches that a perfect God created humanity, and science affirms that all sexual orientations, which are divine, arise from natural processes, some biblical texts appear to condemn aspects of that very diversity (Cook 2021). The researcher assumes that both embracers and non-embracers of homosexuality agree that the high secretion of

testosterone to a female gynephile or non-secretion to a male androphile is not God's fault. This assumption relates to the question that Jesus Christ's disciples grappled with in John 9:2 (NIV) until they asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

### The voice of homosexual Christians on homosexuality

Trammell (2015:3) asserts that Christians with homosexuality should actively participate in all levels of the church when their sexuality is debated to counter hostile rhetoric and to correct the wrong perception within ordinary citizens. He argues that it is imperative to give space to persons with homosexuality to articulate their lived experience. However, their stigmatisation, exclusion and scorn coerce them from actively participating because they are already treated as outsiders/sinners who must be talked about or dealt with. Aune (2016) and Yip (1998) in Trammell (2015:4) say non-heterosexual Christians are anxious, fearful and shameful because of the intrinsic denouncement by heterosexual Christian governing bodies and by ordinary members who, even when they extend a hand of acceptance, it is noticeable that it is a mere tolerance. Aune (2016) speculates that this trend of excluding non-heterosexual Christians from this debate is also a disadvantage to the Christian leadership, which remains uninformed about arguments that portray a positive image of non-heterosexuals.

Trammell (2015:7–8) highlights some participants' confessions that show that it is not only the heterosexual Christians who are troubled by homosexuality. Even non-heterosexuals themselves, especially those who do not display physical features of the opposite sex and those who are not disclosing their true sexuality, are perpetually fighting against their environment.

One participant confessed that he was struggling to find a faithful companion. A well-established businessperson and church leader confessed that he is gay but managed to suppress his attraction to men until he got married to a beautiful wife and was blessed with beautiful children. However, he still feels the Bible is a condemnation upon his inner being. Others said that they knew that, just like heterosexuality, homosexuality is God's creation, which is an inborn identity. Their predicament is that God condemns characters that are elicited by that identity. They feel trapped in choosing between either leaving their church and families so that they can disclose their sexuality or continuing to struggle with the suppression of their being. Others say by God's grace they have been delivered from the bondage of homosexual practices into Christianity, but Christianity does not give them the freedom to express themselves.

These confessions confirm the articulation of Bailey et al. (2016:65) that sexual orientation is a degree of sexual attraction to either the same or the other sex. Implying that a male androphile has a higher degree/level of sexual attraction to a man while he, consciously or unconsciously, to a lesser degree, has sexual attraction to women. These confessions also somehow vindicate Spitzer and

Wakefield (1999:406), who say that persons' religious beliefs can enhance transformation in their sexuality.

## Research design and methodology

The research method used in this study is qualitative (Frost et al. 2020:246) to stimulate the narrations and interpretations of participants' lived experiences.

After acquiring an ethical research certificate from his institution and the permission to conduct research from the administrator of MRCC, the researcher embarked on different strategies to select and sample participants. The researcher started by using an opportunistic sampling strategy (Hayfield & Huxley 2015:97), whereby the pending research project was advertised to invite voluntary participation of MRCC ministers and adult members with diverse sexualities. The researcher assessed the response rate after 14 days, which did not provide sufficient numbers from which the maximum variation strategy (Palinkas et al. 2015:535) could be employed. The intended sample was 2 ministers and 12 adults, comprising 6 heterosexuals and 6 non-heterosexuals, males and females equally represented. Because of the failure of the advert to stimulate a satisfactory response, the intended equal representation could not be realised. The researcher then employed a convenience sampling strategy (Emerson 2021:76) to recruit 3 ministers and 2 members, 1 heterosexual and 1 non-heterosexual. The researcher also used a snowball sampling strategy (Emerson 2015:166) to request the recruited adults to assist in identifying more participants with both sexualities and equally represented gender. Table 1 illustrates the participants' profile.

Data were generated through conversational and edifying one-on-one virtual and in-person interview sessions with 12 participants (Palm & Gaum 2021:213). The duration for each interview session was between 60 and 90 min. To ensure credibility, the researcher frequently called participants for clarity-seeking questions, checking the latest developments, especially on current incidents that the participant may have alluded to. After consolidating data, the researcher conducted member checking by letting participants confirm if what was written represented what they said or intended to say (Sparkes 2024). The researcher used the thematic analysis method to repeatedly read data for familiarity, to identify initial and refined codes, to cluster the refined codes into categories, which resulted in themes that produced constructive collaboration between the findings and the objectives of the research (Terry et al. 2017:23).

## Results

Participants' responses, after initial coding, were clustered into 35 refined codes, from which four recurring themes emerged:

- Acceptance and respect.
- Misinformed assumptions and stigma.
- Open dialogue and education.
- Biblical principles and compassion.

**TABLE 1:** Profile of the participants.

Pseudonym	Constituency	Sexuality	Gender	Age group (years)	Level of education	Type of settlement
Wisdom	Church council	Heterosexual	M	60–65	Tertiary	Urban
Tloaelo	Mothers	Heterosexual	F	40–50	Tertiary	Urban
Lucky	Church council	Heterosexual	M	50–60	Tertiary	Urban
Martha	Mothers	Heterosexual	F	40–50	Secondary	Rural
Sello	Youth	Heterosexual	M	20–30	Tertiary	Urban
William	Youth	Non-heterosexual	M	30–40	Tertiary	Urban
Percy	Youth	Non-heterosexual	F	30–40	Secondary	Urban
Patrick	Minister	Heterosexual	M	40–50	Tertiary	Rural
Violet	Youth	Non-heterosexual	F	40–50	Secondary	Urban
Thandi	Mothers	Non-heterosexual	F	40–50	Secondary	Urban
King	Minister	Heterosexual	M	50–60	Tertiary	Rural
Moses	Minister	Heterosexual	M	40–50	Tertiary	Urban

M, male; F, female.

## The significance of acceptance and respect

It is important to note that the GCA mandated this research because of tacit and explicit acceptance that members are destined to coexist with their diversity. This was echoed by all participants who agreed to participate, although some were sceptical, because they acknowledged the coexistence of people with diverse sexuality. For example, the researcher enquired about participants' reactions towards the revelation of the non-heterosexuality of their loved ones. Wisdom, after saying that he was shocked when he first heard about people of the same sex having a love affair, later, as the interview proceeded, said:

'Part of me always says something is wrong with them, but as a Christian, I feel obligated to love them as I love myself.' (Wisdom)

Similar sentiment was expressed:

'I was surprised and disappointed, acknowledging their sexual preference but unable to align with their lifestyle, as it conflicted with my beliefs ... I treat them with kindness, respect, and love, just like I would treat anyone else.' (Sello)

Participating non-heterosexuals also emphasised the significance of self-acceptance and respect. While William initially had a problem accepting himself, Percy was relieved when she discovered herself. They expressed:

'Initially, I was embarrassed and in denial. I came out just before the tertiary. My parents, who discovered my sexuality through a friend who had visited, were shocked. Initially, I felt so embarrassed when people commented negatively. I was helped by my gay friend, who told me to accept myself. One must accept oneself so that people respect and accept oneself. After that, I was never offended anymore.' (William)

'I did not know what I was feeling because society teaches us about men and women. So, I did not think I had to do anything ... I felt liberated and relieved when I finally understood my feelings and who I am.' (Percy)

## The impact of ill-informed assumptions and stigma

The level of knowledge about sexuality determines reciprocal acceptance or indifference between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. Participants suggested that non-heterosexuals are always ready for confrontation because of societal pressure

and discrimination. In response to the question that enquired about the mental state of non-heterosexuals, Tloaelo stated:

'I think that it is unfair to label a person mentally unwell because of being gay or lesbian. Constant depression and anxiety that you are referring to is usually caused by people who provoke them.' (Tloaelo)

Lucky was not happy when the researcher posed a question about a mental disorder. He accused the researcher of creating an impression that non-heterosexuals have mental problems. He protested:

'It is not only unfair to think of people with different sexual orientations as suffering from mental illness, but it is also misplaced. I do not see the correlation between sexual orientation and mental condition ... Any person who would conclude that non-heterosexuals suffer from mental conditions must be examined themselves. Sexual orientation in most cases has to do with genetic composition and is not a result of mental illness ... Non-heterosexuals do not inherently conduct themselves in a specific manner. However, societal pressure and stigma stimulate an arrogant reaction.' (Lucky)

The researcher explained that the notion of disorder was raised in this research because it had been hinted at by different researchers, some of whom were reviewed in this research. The researcher continued to ask if participants had ever heard or witnessed a person changing from non-heterosexuality to heterosexuality, as some authors claim that it is a mental case that can be changed:

'They are not mentally disturbed; they are just different from us.' (Martha)

Regarding the believe if a person can change, one point was that the impact of the changing societal environment can motivate to change:

'Views vary; some adopt homosexuality due to early childhood trauma, while others may have a physiological predisposition to same-sex activity.' (Patrick)

There was also the alert to the community that not all non-heterosexuals are innate. Then, the believe that believing in God and obeying God can lead a person to change.

'I believe non-heterosexuality reflects complex personal, emotional, and spiritual experiences rather than simply a mental

condition. From a Christian perspective, change is possible through faith, prayer, and a relationship with God, as His grace can transform lives. However, this change must be based on personal conviction and a desire to align with God's will, rather than external pressure or judgment. Compassion, understanding, and truth should be our approach to these matters.' (Sello)

### Open dialogue and education to promote inclusivity

Participants' responses to various questions revealed misconceptions and erroneous beliefs around sexuality, necessitating open debate and education. In response to a call for remedial suggestions, Violet suggested an open discussion characterised by mutual respect, understanding and self-correction:

'There should be open discussions characterised by respect and consideration amongst people in their diversity. Heterosexuals need to understand that it is not a matter of choice; it is my origin that chose this life for me. We, as LGBTQI+, must coach each other in pairs or small and larger groups on how we should conduct ourselves and react to different situations in a manner that is acceptable to all.' (Violet)

Sello and Patrick emphasised an open, respectful, and safe environment for dialogue with love. Thandi quoted the scriptures from Matthew 7:1–5; John 8:1–8; Romans 2:1–3, and James 4:11 & 12 that promote a spirit of humility, self-examination and compassion towards others. She said these scriptures encourage members to focus on their shortcomings, show mercy and leave judgement to God.

One participant suggested an action plan according to the SMART-goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound):

'All Organs of the Church must take responsibility for this subject at all levels. The LGBTQIA+ subject should be a standing agenda point in the formal meetings of the Organs of the Church and Organs of Support. The leadership of the church, with the support of organs of governance and support, must organise panel conversations (dialogues) and seminars; must be involved in campaigns against corrective rape and Gender-based violence (GBV); must establish partnerships with civil organisations and stakeholders that are familiar with this subject; and must benchmark with other churches and positively use our SACC membership.' (Moses)

The overwhelming consensus on open dialogue implies that the participants acknowledge the contrasting and complementary views that the entire church community needs to know and talk about to appraise one another and have a general understanding. For example, Violet hinted that her friends and family were happy when she became pregnant, assuming that she had changed from a lesbian to heterosexual, which was because of family and societal pressure. She indicated that her pregnancy and child bearing did not mean that she have changed from a lesbian to a heterosexual. Coincidentally, Wisdom had already talked about this issue of having an affair with a man being a lesbian, to the extent of falling pregnant. Violet also differentiated between gender and sexuality. She suggested that they, as

non-heterosexuals, should avoid unnecessarily complicating the already controversial discussion by debating about uniform and dress code.

Tloaelo highlighted the dilemma, confusion and denial that some parents of non-heterosexual children face. They cause more confusion and depression to their non-heterosexual children. William alluded that many non-heterosexuals are not able to come out because of their positions in selected offices, such as ministers of religion and traditional leaders. However, whenever they get a chance, they do visit their clubs and houses, and more dangerously, they can abuse innocent children.

On the contrary, two participants maintain that the Bible should be the only guide for discussion:

'The church should not conform to societal beliefs that contradict biblical truths. Instead, it should provide guidance, support, and a space for growth, encouraging all members to align their lives with God's Word.' (Sello)

'MRCC should either maintain its stance or allow open expression of concerns based on early church beliefs and genuine scriptural teachings, rather than relying on contemporary research to bypass scriptural texts.' (Patrick)

### Synthesis between biblical principles and compassion

All participants do not dispute either the scriptures or the biological aspects of the genesis of sexuality. They also agree that it is not a matter of choosing between one of the two sources or categorising themselves into groups that support the scripture rather than the biological explanations, or vice versa. They agree that their goal is to look for ways and means of adhering to the scriptures while equally considering the biological and fundamental truths witnessed in human life.

When asked about their feeling when they realised or confirmed that the Bible condemns non-heterosexual marriage, all participants did not dispute the condemnation, some with a few qualifications. Tloaelo expressed her belief that the Bible condemns all sins equally, which is why she embraces all individuals, irrespective of the transgressions denounced by the Bible. She claimed that although some individuals may choose or be influenced to become homosexual, many are inherently homosexual or lesbian from birth:

'When I hear that the Bible condemns non-heterosexual unions, I feel a deep sense of responsibility to uphold God's Word with love and humility. While I respect everyone's right to choose their path, my faith compels me to view relationships through the lens of my belief.' (Sello)

Inner conflict was expressed:

'I had a personal inner conflict, especially as I am a dedicated Christian, to hear that the God that I love and trust so much condemns who I am. I sometimes felt so rejected and became reluctant to pray. It gave me self-doubt. After that inner-conflict, I accepted that I cannot change how I am and learned to accept myself, referring to Galatians 3:28.' (William)

Violet said she did not feel personally targeted by the Bible's condemnation because she loves God and believes that she is his child. She referred to many people who had committed worse deeds but were accepted by the church and even appointed or elected them to positions of influence. She indicated that her love for the word of God inspired her to pursue the profession of a minister of religion.

The researcher then asked participants to air their views on MRCC's stance of giving full membership status to non-heterosexuals but excluding the solemnisation of their marriage. Percy, Thandi and King argued that the full membership must accompany the solemnising of their marriage. They cited inclusion, fair treatment and unconditional love as reasons for acceptance with all privileges and responsibilities that heterosexuals enjoy.

Participant in agreement with Tloaelo, elaborated:

'I am in total agreement with the MRCC's stance to accept the membership of non-heterosexuals partially. On the one hand, this stance recognises the fact that a human being is a special creation of God, both heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals included. Non-heterosexuals, therefore, do not require the permission of heterosexuals to exist. Like all people, the church has a higher calling and responsibility to save all souls entrusted to it by God. On the other hand, my opinion is that non-heterosexuals exist as a result of deviation from biological processes during foetal development.' (Wisdom)

He further cautioned that the church should not move beyond this stance, where they will have to debate about ordaining non-heterosexual ministers.

Sello and Patrick also supported the maintenance of the stance as an act of love and embrace with the hope that one day non-heterosexuals will accept God's word, repent and change through divine intervention.

Violet and William also supported the maintenance of the stance to give a chance to an open dialogue and education, which will eventually lead to unconditional acceptance.

Moses suggested widening the frame of reference beyond the conflicting scriptures and biology:

'The reality is that whether scriptures condemn homosexuality or not, this vulnerable group will never cease to exist. The LGBTQIA+ movement is growing in leaps and bounds, gaining momentum, even taking over (leading) in sectors of government and churches. Under such, the church has to reform. The scriptures must not discriminate. Instead, people should be empowered with hermeneutics to avoid using certain scriptures to attack these groups. There is more to LGBTQIA+ than biblical verses.' (Moses)

## Discussion

The respondents recognised the need to coexist in alignment with the broader societal shift towards inclusivity. Participants demonstrated the significance of first accepting themselves to confidently express themselves to others,

whom they hoped would respond with respect. This aligns with SIT and SCT, which suggest that individuals derive their self-concept from group memberships and that self-acceptance within these groups is crucial for mutual respect and harmonious interactions.

A general sense of the Christian obligation of love is a determination that harmonious fellowship might be possible. This aligns with the broader Christian ethic of love and acceptance, which can help bridge the gap between doctrinal differences and the need for inclusivity as espoused in Colossians 3:14 (NIV).

Misconceptions stimulate stigma and societal pressure against non-heterosexuals, who then retaliate through behaviours that are alleged to confirm the initial perception of mental anomaly. The significance of divergent perspectives on the origin of sexuality and the potential for transformation is seen in the extent of discrimination and stigmatisation. This aligns with the findings of Moagi et al. (2021:11–12), who assert that non-heterosexual individuals endure considerable emotional pain and mental health challenges as a result of stigmatisation, victimisation and exclusion.

Furthermore, love, which ensures acceptance and reciprocal respect, is emphasised as essential for open communication that can progressively eradicate disagreements and misconceptions. This need for mutual respect and open dialogue is supported by SIT and SCT, which emphasise the importance of understanding and respecting diverse identities to foster group cohesion. It is important to note that while the differing viewpoints arise from the Bible and biological evidence, even the Bible itself is subject to contradicting interpretations. While one group cites verses that encourage love and compassion, similarly/conversely, the other group cites verses that condemn homosexuality. Hence, open and respectful dialogue is essential to balance traditional beliefs and contemporary understanding of sexuality. This is the call made by Pillay (2022), namely, the review of all the biblical texts that the church uses to judge homosexuals.

Open dialogue addresses even the hidden challenges that are caused by stigma, such as child molestations, unprovoked outbursts and depression, which may be caused by fear of coming out in the open. While it is essential to foster open and respectful conversation within the church, it is also imperative to involve individuals connected to non-heterosexuals, such as parents, siblings and family members, to cooperate with them to establish a secure atmosphere within the entire family structure. The SIT and SCT emphasise the importance of an individual's role within a group.

All participants acknowledge and honour the authority of the Bible and its denunciation of homosexuality. However, some non-heterosexuals confess that it is in contradiction with the biological outlines and with the love and dedication, creating conflicting perspectives within

individuals. This tension compels open dialogue, enabling different people to search for a middle ground together. This is consistent with Trammell (2015:3), who advocates for active participation of non-heterosexuals in all the spheres of church life where their sexuality might be debated in order to counter hostile rhetoric and to correct wrong perceptions among ordinary members of society.

A statistical survey of the participants presents that 16% of the participants think that MRCC must allow their ministers to solemnise homosexual marriage, 84% of participants maintain that the Church's stance of giving full membership status to non-heterosexuals without solemnising their marriages should be granted, while respectful, open dialogue actively continues. This will foster harmonious fellowship of sexuality diverse Christians in MRCC and other denominations with the same view. Thus, dialogue will enable the church to debate and draw clear guidelines on implementing this stance. Open dialogue is consistent with Pillay's (2022) review. She states that it is defined by discussion or debate that refrains from hastily reaching conclusions or consensus, instead facilitating the creative interchange of diverse, competing and complementary perspectives and views to achieve a tolerable outcome for all participants (Nakamura, Rask & Kojo 2024:54).

## Conclusion

This research identified a harmful cycle of stigma and retaliation that mutually exacerbate each other, fuelled by differences and misconceptions. The church must create a more inclusive environment that aligns with Christian principles and contemporary understandings of human sexuality to address misconceptions and foster mutual understanding. Such an inclusive environment or platform is open and respectful dialogue for all church members, including families and close associates of non-heterosexuals. This open and respectful dialogue will also address the hidden stigma as well as hidden challenges such as child molestations, unprovoked outbursts and depression.

The research further highlighted the Christian obligation of love that all participants confessed as an enabling element for mutual respect and understanding; hence, open and respectful dialogue is possible. The tension created by conflicting perspectives from biblical interpretations and biological discoveries calls for our unwavering attention. Open and polite talks can progressively cultivate an environment of tolerance and conciliatory interpretation of biblical and biological reasons, thereby harmonising old beliefs with modern interpretations of sexuality. Open debate will promote extended creative dialogue on differing and complementary viewpoints. The church can promote this dialogue by assuming a neutral stance.

In conclusion, this research offers a distinctive perspective by focusing on the lived experiences and theological reflections of sexually diverse Christians who remain committed to

their faith communities despite marginalisation. It introduces a harmonious fellowship model integrating scriptural engagement, scientific insight and pastoral sensitivity. It fosters genuine and theologically sound inclusion in light of contemporary understandings of human sexuality and divine justice.

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## Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

## Author's contribution

A.M.R. is the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical considerations

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## Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

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