

# **Called and Queer**

**Exploring the lived experiences of queer clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa**

Megan Robertson

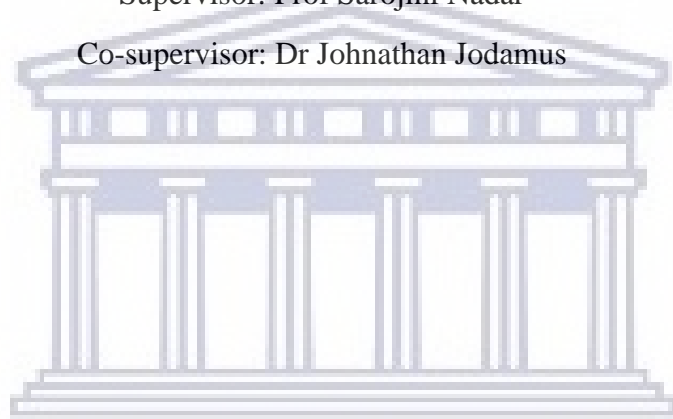
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## ABSTRACT

In South Africa anti-queer attitudes are propped up by religious moral claims and by strong assertions that queer sexualities are un-African and a secular Western import. This study contributes to the growing body of literature which challenge these claims, and at the same time interrupts scholarly trends in the field of religion and sexuality which either characterises institutional religion as singularly oppressive or homogenises queer Christians as inherently subversive. In this thesis, I explored the lived experiences of six queer clergy (one of whom was discontinued) in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), in order to understand the complex relationship between institutional power and the ordinary lived realities of clergy. The study focuses particularly on the MCSA as it is statistically the largest mainline Protestant denomination in South Africa and holds significant positions of power and influence on national, interdenominational and political platforms, not least of all because it has fostered an institutional identity as the ‘church of Mandela.’ Further, situated within a continental and national context where anti-queer attitudes are politicised through cultural and religious discourses, I have argued that the MCSA also serves as a case study which represents the ways in which institutionalised religion continues to be co-constitutive of social systems and hierarchies.

Through a queer sociological ethnographic methodology the study produced narratives and experiences which are performative, fluid, intersectional and embodied. The study provides insight into the ways in which transformation in religious institutions can be queered through an analysis of how queer clergy negotiate a politics of belonging. Further, this study broadens queer rights research and activism by focusing not only on the issue of same-sex marriage but on various experiences of the domestic and erotic. It is hoped, that the ordinariness of the clergy experiences documented in this study will inspire further research that contains more informed and nuanced understandings of the politics of the institutional Church, the body, identity and queer rights debates.


**Key Terms:** Queer clergy, Methodist, Institutional culture, sexuality, gender, Christianity

## DECLARATION

I declare that *Called and Queer: Exploring the lived experiences of queer clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa* is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

***Megan Robertson***

***18 November 2019***

Signed: 



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*THIS THESIS IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF ARTHUR GORDON*

*From now on presents will be wrapped less perfectly. Our shoes will probably never be quite as clean as you would have liked. No one will be wearing a vest, a shirt, and a jersey under the sweltering heat of summer and the drum beats will never sound quite the same.*



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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study explores the lived experiences of queer clergy in relation to the institutional cultures of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). In this introductory chapter I aim to provide background and motivation for the focus of my study by situating it within the context of ongoing political, academic and public debates at the intersections of religion and sexuality in Africa and South Africa. I also focus more particularly on what it means to do this research in the context of an institutionalised religious denomination such as the MCSA. Further, I do some theoretical and conceptual clearing, especially with regards to my use of the contested notion of “queer” throughout this dissertation.

### 1. Religion and sexuality in South Africa

Scholarly and public discourses have historically positioned Africa as conservatively religious, culturally traditional and irredeemably queer-phobic. Widespread anti-queer attitudes in Africa have been associated with discourses which frame queer sexualities as un-African and as secular, Western imports which go against inherent, God-ordained African heterosexuality (van Klinken, 2015; van Klinken & Gunda, 2012). These views have been supported and sustained partly by those outside of Africa, most notably right-wing American Roman Catholics, Mormons and evangelicals, who gain ideological and social power through the proliferation of conservative theologies which demonises homosexuality (Kaoma, 2012; 2018). In addition, scholars have demonstrated the ways in which leaders and public figures in Africa continue to bolster this religious rhetoric to gain political support and to maintain patriarchal systems (Msibi, 2011). These cultural and religious discourses have been proliferated by the media which has sensationalised prominent figures who align themselves with these ideologies. Notable examples include, Ugandan pastor Martin Ssempe who became infamous for his remarks that gay men eat human faeces as part of their sexual activities<sup>1</sup>, Zimbabwe leader Robert Mugabe who in 2015 told the 70<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly “We are not gays”<sup>2</sup> (Euronews, 2015), and the then deputy president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma who in 2006 addressed a crowd of supporters and promulgated the idea that same-sex marriages were “a disgrace to the nation and to God” (Seale, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth theoretical discussion on this case see van Klinken & Zebracki, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> A rhetoric which the current President, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has continued.

Narrow framings of Africa and sexuality have been contested in recent years by notable scholars such as Thabo Msibi (2011: 69) who argues that homophobia rather than homosexuality can be understood as the Western imposition which has been introduced to Africa through colonialism. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando's (2016) edited volumes, "Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa" and "Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa", have also made significant contributions in nuancing discourses which perpetuate ideas of Africa as an inherently homophobic continent. In both these volumes the editors suggest that research can continue to disrupt these myths by contextualising these discourses within the varied national and localised political economies and religious landscapes in different parts of Africa. They further argue that more nuanced analysis is needed of the politics of different religious traditions which also account for the subversive and transformative discourses and acts which are produced by those with whom the research engages (van Klinken & Chitando, 2016: 12).

While the work of undoing myths about Africa and the calls to conceptualise writing about the continent to be more nuanced and contextual is important, South Africa continues to be understood as an outlier in this debate. This is because, in comparison to other African countries, South Africa has been progressive in its laws regarding sexual orientation. It was the first country in the world to enshrine protection for its citizens on the basis of sexual orientation and the fifth country to legalise same-sex unions (Isaack, 2003). In the religious sphere South Africa has made less headway but still continues to be praised for some hard-won battles. The most recent case in which the Dutch Reformed Church was forced by the courts to overturn a 2016 decision which denied individual congregations the ability to bless same-sex unions, is a case in point (Venter, 2019). South Africa cannot, however, be excluded from the ideological debates which continue to frame Africa in relation to homophobia and queer-phobia.

Despite its progressive constitution and battles won in law the debate on same-sex relationships and queer rights more broadly continues. This reality is evident in a survey of attitudes towards homosexuality and gender non-conformity in South Africa by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) released in 2015. The report indicates that 450,000 South Africans have physically harmed women who dress and behave like men in public and 240,000 have physically harmed men who dressed and behaved like women in the prior twelve months of the release of the report. Further, approximately 700,000 South Africans verbally abused (shouted at or teased) gender non-conforming people (HSRC, 2015). These harmful expressions have been linked through statistics and research to widely held conservative moral

beliefs about individual sexual activity and gender roles which are connected to underlying religious beliefs (HSRC, 2015; Vincent & Howell, 2014). In the HSRC survey, for example, three quarters (76 percent) of the respondents agreed with the statement “God’s laws about abortion, pornography and marriage must be strictly followed before it is too late”, with one in three people voicing “very strong” support. A very similar pattern of responses was recorded for the statement “women should obey their husbands”, demonstrating the continuing strength of patriarchal norms and values in South Africa (HSRC, 2015). As Msibi (2011: 61) states, “unlike other African countries, where expressions of homophobia are institutionally, socially, and individually permitted and endorsed through the law, homophobia in South Africa operates in violation of the law” – nevertheless, it does happen. The politics of sexuality in South Africa, while somewhat different to other African countries, is still deeply infused with popular religious and cultural discourses that result in violent actions as well as more subtle means of marginalization.

This dissertation forms part of a scholarly debate which has urged the contestation of the myth of a queer-phobic, religiously backward continent. While I recognise in this study the realities of violence and marginalisation that people continue to experience because of their sexuality, I am at the same time cognisant of the work they do to transform these realities. Further, I position South African realities within discourses on Africa while also recognising the context specific nature of people’s experiences within a more legally permissive country. In addition, as a heterosexual woman of colour doing research with participants who identify as queer, I am mindful to not wish away participants experiences of marginalisation and violence as they present them to me. I hold this in tension with the proliferation of research which caricatures black queer women particularly in Africa as down-trodden, poor, abused and violated (Bennet & Reddy, 2015: 15; Matebeni, 2014). Zethu Matebeni (2014) in her essay, “How NOT to Write About Queer South Africa”, argues that narratives of white lesbians, transgender people and non-sensationalist scenes of domestic life are often left out of literature and scholarship on queer South Africa. By arguing this Matebeni is not saying that the violence and oppression experienced by black queer South Africans should be left out of scholarship altogether but, rather, she is calling for more nuanced and complex narratives to be produced about queer subjects. Based on the political landscape in which this study is located, I make no false attempts at being neutral. While I cannot promise to include all the varied experiences Matebeni identifies as neglected, I aim to produce research which is mindful of this tension and which does not present essentialised versions of queer South Africa.

Informed by the politics of producing queer narratives and experiences in the context of Africa and South Africa, I aim to contribute to thinking about the politics of religion and sexuality in ways which are conscious of the contextuality, complexity and nuance of the violence, transformation and mundanity of the narratives and experience I encounter.

## **2. From the ‘Church of Mandela’ to the ‘Church of Ecclesia’: Background to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and the “same-sex debate”**

In a continental and national context, where religion infused with culture is used as the backdrop against which many declare their opposition to non-conforming sexual orientations and gender identities, the church<sup>3</sup> becomes an important institution in framing and transforming this debate. The MCSA is a particularly interesting contextual site through which to explore the contestation of religion and sexuality. The MCSA has successfully built a political and moral identity through its involvement in opposing apartheid. I have encapsulated this identity by referring to the MCSA as ‘the Church of Mandela’. Dion Forster (2014) explores in his paper, “Mandela and the Methodists: Faith, Fallacy and Fact” how the MCSA continues to benefit from its attachment to Nelson Mandela as it legitimises its links to state power and moral authority. ‘The Church of Mandela’ not only indicates that Mandela was a member of the MCSA but that the denomination has taken on its associations with Mandela and other social justice advocates as an institutional identity; an identity which continues to support the denomination’s image as a relevant role player in politics and public morality. Debates on same-sex marriage and sexuality are therefore not only theologically contentious but threatens to poke holes in the legitimacy of the image on which the denomination thrives. The highly publicised case of Reverend Ecclesia De Lange who was excommunicated from the denomination especially highlighted the limits of the denomination’s social justice agenda. In this section I explore how the MCSA has struggled to navigate between its identities as ‘the Church of Mandela’ and ‘the Church of Ecclesia’. I should note here that while I speak about the MCSA as a homogenous denomination, its history and identity is profoundly shaped by diverse South African narratives, leadership and experiences. All the participants in this study are South African and the denomination’s policies largely speak to South African realities. Considering that homosexuality is still criminalised in other countries such as Eswatini

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this study I use lowercase “church” to refer to a broader idea of the Christian church and capitalised “Church” to refer to the specific denomination of the MCSA.

(previously Swaziland), Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia which form part of the MCSA<sup>4</sup>, my dissertation focuses on a South African centric conceptualisation of the denomination.

The injustices of apartheid dominated the MCSA's agenda for much of its recent history and has significantly shaped the ways in which the denomination operates, its institutional identity and its power. In the 1980s and early 1990s the growing opposition to systems of apartheid put pressure on church leadership to begin taking firmer and more vocal positions in resistance to the social injustices of the time (Madise, 2014: 117). One way in which the MCSA responded to this was through its involvement in the South African Council of Churches (SACC), an ecumenical structure which during apartheid was determined to provide a "prophetic"<sup>5</sup> voice, and which became a significant platform through which the denomination gained political influence and constructed its social justice identity (Benjamin, 2015). Reverend Peter Storey, the President of the MCSA in 1984 also served as the President of the SACC which solidified the MCSA as an institutional religious leader in combating racial inequality (Benjamin, 2015: 9). In many ways the MCSA's present-day identity continues to be co-constitutive of the SACC's understanding of the prophetic responsibility of the Church as "...uphold[ing] a living consciousness of the values of the rule of God, and, incarnational in identifying with the sinful society of which it is an integral part" (SACC, 2015: 2). While the SACC has become arguably less prominent and influential in recent years, in 2019 the MCSA's Presiding Bishop (a term which since replaced the office of the President) still occupies the position of President of the SACC, thus solidifying the idea that the MCSA continues to hold its value and identity as a relevant and prophetic church. In responding to a deeply divisive society at the time, the MCSA also developed an agenda of encouraging unity. This emphasis on unity reflects a resolution made in the minutes of the 1958 Conference<sup>6</sup> of the MCSA (1985: 76) which stated,

The Conference declares its conviction that it is the will of God for the Methodist Church that it should be one and undivided, trusting to the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition, and that this be the general basis of our missionary policy.

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<sup>4</sup> The MCSA was founded and expanded via missionaries beginning in South Africa in the Northern Cape but later stretching to its neighbouring countries of Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique and Botswana. After gaining independence from the British Methodist Church and founding the MCSA in 1962, all these colonised countries form part of the "Connexion", an institutional term used to refer to the entire denomination (Madise, 2014: 117).

<sup>5</sup> "Prophetic" is a term which the SACC still employs to refer to a critical stance against any injustice (see Göranson, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Conference is the gathering of representatives from various regional districts in the denomination and functions as the governing body which makes decisions on policy and doctrine.

Since then, this statement has continually been used to reflect the Church's position on numerous social issues deemed divisive.

Further evidence of the Church's history as a struggle institution can be seen in the structures and offices of the church which developed closer to the end of apartheid. With its roots in a Conference debate in 1991 the, "Journey to a New Land Programme" aimed to consider how the MCSA would begin to respond to a changing country, one which in the eyes of many at the time would need healing and reconstruction in its fledgling democracy. As part of this shift, the MCSA's internal structures were reworked to reflect a racially diverse and bottom-up leadership approach which was more aligned with the democratic governance envisioned for the country (Madise, 2005: 123 - 124). Therefore, while societies (the institutional term for individual congregations) were previously divided into racial circuits (the institutional term for a grouping of congregations), they were changed to be based on geographic areas which meant that white societies which were located in the centre of towns were now operating administratively with black societies on the outskirts<sup>7</sup> (Madise, 2005: 93). Further, positions such as that of Lay Leader was created at Connexional level (the national structure of the MCSA comprised of all its Districts) and later at District level (a grouping of a number of circuits within a geographic region) which made space for lay influences in policy and doctrinal matters. The "Journey to a New Land" programme also eventually developed into what remains the four mission imperatives which are meant to guide the MCSA namely, 1) Evangelism and Church Growth, 2) Spirituality, 3) Justice and Service and 4) Human and Economic Development and Empowerment (Bentley, 2014: 5). Thus, "mission" for the MCSA does not fall into the narrow idea of evangelism but rather a broader idea fostering social change, transformation and healing within the country (Madise, 2014: 124).

A focus on social justice, unity and transformation through mission has continued to shape the MCSA's current identity. The MCSA, however, has also been critiqued for failing to live up to the identity it has created for itself. In Keith Benjamin's (2015) analysis of the MCSA's conceptualisation of "mission" he argues that its mission activities during the transition period from apartheid to democracy were more often outwardly directed and continued to be shaped by colonial ideas of mission as something done to others. Mokhele Madise (2014) also delivers

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<sup>7</sup> This was generally the way in which apartheid spatial planning designated race groups. White groups were located at the centre of urban spaces while people of colour were moved to the outskirts and further away from economic opportunities.

critique as he traces the contributions of five male leaders who were active in framing the MCSA's anti-apartheid agenda namely, Simon Gqubule, Khoza Mgojo, Ernest Baartmen (also known as "The Black Moses"), Stanley Mogoba and Mvume Dandala. Under the leadership of these historical figureheads, Madise (2014) pinpoints significant moments in each of the leadership of these men to demonstrate how the MCSA responded to the racial injustices at the time. Madise (2014), however, is nuanced in his writing as he argues that the MCSA was not always clear in its rejection of racial inequality and that a few key leadership figures do not accurately represent the broader opinions of the denomination. Additionally, I argue that literature on the MCSA has successfully silenced and obscured leaders, policies and actions which were active in producing and supporting apartheid racism as well as the contributions of black women to its activism.

More recently, the Church has been involved in scandals which has begun to delegitimise its ability to claim to be 'the Church of Mandela' with a strong social justice agenda. Despite the 2019 election of the MCSA's first ever woman, the election of Reverend Purity Malinga as Presiding Bishop (the highest office in the denomination), this celebration was shrouded by an earlier case in the same year involving one of its male ministers. Reverend Vukile Mehana made derogatory remarks about Reverend Nompithizelo Sibhidla, a woman Methodist minister by referring to her "big breasts" and by equating her act of robing (a symbolic act of granting membership to men who were to join the Young Men's Guild, a men's organisation in the MCSA), to fondling men's chests (see Nadar & Maluleke, 2019). The MCSA suspended Reverend Mehana but has thus far failed to do much more. The Church seems to have one foot in its romanticised past as it continues to revive rhetoric which harks back to its struggle credentials while at the same time struggling to take a step forward in adequately shaping a place for itself and identity which is relevant for contemporary issues especially those concerning gender and sexuality. Arguably the MCSA's most notable public failing in this regard has been its inability to adequately respond and transform in relation to the social injustices experienced by its queer members.

In relation to decisions and questions around sexualities which are constructed as non-normative, the debate termed "the same-sex debate" in the MCSA has been a long standing one. In 2001 at the MCSA Conference, the Church communicated that it seeks to be a "community of love rather than rejection". At the conference in 2003, the church was asked to engage on the topic of same-sex relationships using a discussion guide which offered six key principles for constructive debate namely, 1) seek the truth of Christ in the spirit of Christ, 2)

seek to move beyond ‘corners of conviction’, 3) seek first to understand, and then to be understood, 4) seek to see the human face of this issue, 5) seek to become well-informed, and 6) seek to celebrate the gift of diversity (MCSA, 2003). The debate which this discussion guide facilitated demonstrated perhaps what the MCSA had already known, that there are widely divergent beliefs held within the church<sup>8</sup>. This prompted Conference in 2005 to commit the MCSA “...to an ongoing journey of discovering what it means to be part of a church which embraces many different and even opposing views on this issue” (MCSA, 2006: 75), and to affirm that the entire Church is “enriched and strengthened by the differing views and perspectives of its members” (MCSA, 2006:76). The Connexional Executive of 2006 directed that until Conference has pronounced on the matter, “the MCSA continues to recognise marriage as only between a man and a woman, and urged ministers to refrain from officiating at same-sex unions” (MCSA, 2007: 50).

Between 2007 and 2014, Conference continually urged clergy to not officiate any same-sex unions but to offer pastoral counsel to “homosexual people”. It also continued to encourage Methodists to read the bible-study material, “In Search of Grace and Truth: Christian Conversations on Same-sex Relationships”<sup>9</sup> (Attwell, Alistoun & Scholtz, 2010) and to propose concrete suggestions “as to how the divergence of conviction within the church on this issue can be exercised in ways that will preserve the integrity and unity of the church” (MCSA, 2014: 215). As evident in the MCSA’s debate, the issue of homosexuality and same-sex marriage has the potential to divide, something which goes against the denomination’s integral call for unity, and has raised the question of how a denomination remains unified when there exists a variety of difference in beliefs and understandings. The MCSA has been strongly critiqued by theologians in the denomination on its ambiguous stance. Theologians such as Ndikho Mtshiselwa (2010a: 771) argues that by making a statement which suggests the acceptance of different interpretations of Scripture, the church ignores the fact that there are irresponsible interpretations and approaches to Scripture. In addition, he argues that the

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<sup>8</sup> Both views have been supported by theologians as is evidenced by the unpublished presentations delivered at a meeting of the Doctrinal, Ethics and Worship Committee (a doctrinal and policy working group of the MCSA) in 2006. In these presentations Dave Morgan and Roger Alistoun present arguments in opposition to queer sexuality while Sijadu Nkomonde, Greg Andrews and Faan Myburgh argue for queer sexualities to be accepted and fully included in the church. Available: <https://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/> [Accessed 18 November 2019].

<sup>9</sup> This book was written for the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and provided various reflective essays and questions which were designed to help individuals and groups discuss their divergent positions on same-sex relationships.



MCSA's position seems to close off the doors of possibility for reaching a common consensus understanding through responsible interpretations of Scripture (Mtshiselwa, 2010; 2010a). However, perhaps the most scathing critique of the MCSA's ambiguous position can be found in the experience of Reverend Ecclesia de Lange.

In February 2010, Reverend Ecclesia de Lange, was excommunicated from the MCSA after declaring to her congregation her intention to marry her same-sex partner (Kotze & de Lange, 2011). Ecclesia<sup>10</sup> participated in this study and in our first interview described how she, along with a group of fellow clergy supporters, began her much publicised case against the MCSA. One Sunday in December 2009 she announced to her congregation that she would be getting married to her partner. At the same time as Ecclesia was making her announcement, one of the ministers who formed part of her clergy support group met with her supervisory minister at the time and explained to him what she would be doing. The supervisory minister laid a charge against Ecclesia and she was suspended the following Thursday.

Ecclesia went on to face two internal disciplinary hearings where she was found guilty of breaking the laws and disciplines of the MCSA. She sought arbitration with the Church but to her this seemed futile. She then took her case to High Court of the Western Cape, then to the Supreme Court in Bloemfontein and finally to the Constitutional Court in 2015. The court found in favour of the Church and Ecclesia was instructed to complete the arbitration in which she was initially engaged, which she did in 2017. Again the advocate found in favour of the Church. In September 2017 she submitted an appeal to the Labour and Equality Court but later withdrew the case due to the immense personal sacrifice this would and had already demanded from her, including the loss of her job and the dissolution of her first marriage<sup>11</sup>.

Ecclesia's case created a precedent for the consequences of wanting to be in a same-sex marriage in the Church. Not only did the Church exclude Ecclesia, it also sent a message about the very real consequences attached to being a queer woman in the MCSA. Thus far, the debate in the denomination has not seemed to engage this embodied critique seriously. The MCSA

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<sup>10</sup> Ecclesia is a participant in this study and has opted to use her real name. While anonymity is the standard required by research ethics, the feminist and queer framing of my research also requires an acknowledgement of participants' agency within the study; this includes the agency to choose how they are represented in research. Ecclesia was provided with a summary of the quotes used in this study as well as extracts in the dissertation where I reference her for approval before the submission of this dissertation.

<sup>11</sup> This account of Ecclesia's case has been reconstructed based on my interview with her in September 2018 at the University of the Western Cape. A more detailed account of De Lange's story can be found on the blog website of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries [Available: <https://iam.org.za/ecclesias-journey/>].

thus finds itself wrestling with its contradictory identity as both a Church of justice and transformation and as one in which experiences of exclusion, as experienced by Ecclesia, are also a reality. It is precisely this contradiction which first brought me to this study.

Being raised Methodist shaped a considerable part of my identity and worldview. The congregation which I grew up in not only shaped my belief systems but perhaps more significantly it was a place to which I felt I belonged. As a teenager and young adult I became more involved in the broader provincial and national structures of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), and I often experienced these spaces as patriarchal, racially segregated and hierarchical. I was also deeply involved in the Church at the time when Ecclesia was excommunicated from the Church. Therefore, for me, the Church and religion became both a place of significant belonging as well as a space for a great deal of injustice. These experiences led me to question how others negotiate these competing experiences.

Noting the politicised terrain of the MCSA in which debates about religion and sexuality take place, I remain unconvinced that intercultural Bible readings (van der Walt: 2016), more transformative theologies or creating more space for dialogues as suggested by scholars in the MCSA (Mtshiselwa, 2010; 2010a; Khuzwayo, 2011) are enough to address matters in such a highly politicised and context-specific terrain. Even if we find Biblically more transformative readings of Scripture which convincingly converts clergy within a denomination to become more theologically accepting, the threat of a loss of political and moral clout and division in the Church continues to influence how this translates into praxis. I therefore want to position this study as a contribution to the work of scholars who have focused on theologies and doctrines as approaches to matters of queer sexuality specifically in South African denominations. In order to do so, in the next section, I conceptualise ‘church’ sociologically and situate clergy as key members in shaping the institutional church culture.

### **3. Church as a social institution and clergy positionalities**

Apart from being a statistically and politically important site, the MCSA is also an important theoretical concept in my research; not so much because of its specificity as a denomination but rather because of its representation as an institutional religious denomination. Inspired by the early works of theologians such as Gibson Winter (1967), sociologists and ecclesiologists have studied the church as an organization or institution which is goal-oriented, bureaucratic and power laden entity. Often this has been interrogated at the level of national denominations

and has been understood through engaging with doctrine, decision-making and policy (Wuthnow, 1994; Dudley, 1998; Ammerman, 2006: 356). These studies Harold Hegstad (2013: 2) would argue reflect the “invisible church” – an ideological way of hoping to be church rather than a reflection of the realities of what (“the real” or “visible”) church is. While I disagree with the strict distinction Hegstad makes between an invisible and visible church, I do want to argue that in studies which explore the intersection of religion and sexuality, more attention should be given to the ways in which the invisible informs the visible and vice versa. Therefore, in this study, I work with understandings of the church as a social institution which interacts with and impacts upon other social institutions, social groups and individuals’ lives. Thus, the MCSA as a religious organization is an important site for constructing social, denominational and individual identities (Somers 1994: 619). The Church carries with it certain theological, doctrinal and Biblical ideologies which are infused with systems of power within which individuals live and interact. This relationship between the theologically invisible church and the sociologically visible church can be productively explored using the conceptual lens of institutional culture.

I conceptualise “institutional culture” as the taken-for-granted norms, values and practices which continue, in unacknowledged ways, to reflect, and reinforce certain normative ways of being. Jonathan Jansen (2004: 122), in conceptualising the term in the context of Higher Education, describes it as “the way we do things around here”. This is captured in the texts, symbols and interactions of the institution and embodied in the lived realities of its members. Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (2001: 11) argue that, ‘selves’ are “actively produced in the context of the local culture of the groups with which a person participates, assuming these groups are actively constituting themselves as well.” In this understanding there is a dialectical relationship between the production of individual and institutional identities. In other words, the productions of institutional cultures are implicated in the production of “institutional selves” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001: 11). A theoretical understanding of how the self is co-constructed within institutions helps me look at queer experiences and intersecting identities in relation to the institutional church.

In this study I have also chosen to write about ‘cultures’ rather than culture as I work with the understanding that the contextual dynamics of different individual congregations and different organisations within the church operate with varied and different cultural practices, symbols, structures and even interpretations of doctrine. While I cannot claim to be able to theoretically surmise all the variations of the MCSA’s institutional cultures, I can explore the various

attributes of those cultures which are implicated in my participant's experiences and the commonalities and differences which create, sustain and challenge different versions of what it means to be Methodist.

I have chosen in this study to focus specifically on queer clergy rather than laity arguing that their religious and denominational identity, as well as their livelihoods, are uniquely and intimately tied to and affected by the church and its institutional cultures. This is evident in the way Ecclesia describes her experience with the MCSA. Research has also shown that clergy are bastions of denominations' practices, policies and cultures (Linneman, 2003) and through their everyday practices (inside and outside the church domain) they actively participate in shaping gendered and sexual attitudes and practices (Kennedy & Whitlock, 1997; Gerow, 2010: 18). However, at the same time queer clergy are not fixed in their proximity to power as they also often occupy marginal positions in the church. Thus, this study aims to de-homogenise the experiences of queer clergy and to interrogate various systems of power as they interact with people's lives.

#### **4. Using “queer” to talk about my participants and my research**

Always use the acronym LGBT in your writing. It sounds nice and it shows that you are inclusive. Do not spend much time explaining why you use LGBT. To help the reader, replace LGBT with gay. In later texts, put the word queer in the title. Like gay, queer does the same work, but sounds better. Don't worry that most South Africans do not use the word queer, they will all soon catch onto it. Your tone is very much about human rights and so it doesn't matter which word you use – all these are inclusive and they talk about one group of people (Matebeni, 2014: 61).

The extract above is taken from Matebeni's critical essay, “How NOT to Write about Queer South Africa”, in which she makes use of tongue-in-cheek reprimands to critique the glib and superficial use of “LGBT” and “queer” in literature on queer South Africa. Her critique demands that I clarify, conceptualise and nuance my choice and use of queer throughout this dissertation.

In my research I have chosen to use the term queer to describe non-normative sexualities and gender non-conforming people. As with terms such as homosexuality, LGBTI+, gay and lesbian, it developed out of a particular history situated largely in America. It was reclaimed from its derogatory past to secure political identities and embolden social movements as well as to push what was gay and lesbian studies to be more inclusive (Gamson, 1995; Wilcox, 2014). Since then, queer has been developed as a conceptual term. By using it to refer to

participants' identities in this study, I am able to recognise the fluidity of identities and to encompass a range of gendered and sexuality performances. Although non-normative sexualities and genders have been shown to be universal, they are conceptualised and termed differently in various socio-cultural contexts (Lewin & Leap, 2002; Boellstorff, 2005). The term queer therefore allows me to explore a wide variety of sexual identities without compelling anyone to fit into certain essentialist categories (Stella, 2010: 213). However, I remain mindful of Matebeni's cautioning and have not completely avoided using other terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, gender non-conforming or otherwise. Following research by Linda Garber (2003) I will use these terms to reflect participants' own terminology and usage and to speak to the material realities which shape and intersect with some of these categories. At times this has also meant using no terms at all and in my findings, I try to explicate the agency implicated within the non-naming of sexuality. This same theoretical and political stance informs the ways in which I discuss other identity categories such as race and gender. My hope is that this strategy conveys participants' own use of language and terminology to convey their experiences as they construct and deconstruct, identify and dis-identify with certain identities.

Queer, however, is more than just a reference to identity but also affects the way in which queer is reinscribed through writing and reproduced in particular ways especially in relation to queer Africa and South Africa (as discussed previously). Therefore, I am mindful of the colonial implications of using the word queer to talk about my participants and to theorise around their experiences. It demands recognition of the critique delivered by Matebeni regarding how, especially black lesbian women in Africa are often represented in scholarship. The question of whether the queer subjects included in this research are oppressed, agentive, struggling, negotiating, transforming is not merely a matter of objective analysis but a political positioning of this thesis within the larger discourse. My use of queer does not denote the absence of subjectivity but rather constantly refers to it by nuancing participants' experiences and considering them multiple-identity issues. Participants' queerness is significant but certainly not everything in this research. I therefore use the term responsibly, complexly, and, at times, playfully.

## **5. Grappling with binaries through queer lived religion**

The major theme running throughout this dissertation is the continuous grappling with various binaries. I struggle between binaries of oppression-transformation, structure-agency,

researcher-researched, insider-outsider, and material-constructed. In this sense there are few better positioned theories than queer theory to help me navigate these tensions, multiplicities and contradictions. I use theoretical and methodological tools which lean into the disruption that queer theories and thinking allows, in order to explore the role of religion in the politicisation of queer identity.

In this dissertation I wanted to make use of theoretical frameworks which enabled me to account for the lived experiences of my participants in thoroughly queer ways but which also allowed me to theorise their relationship with institutional religion. This required me to engage with a framework which accounted for both the influence of structure on people's lives as well as the possibilities of agency that were implicated in those contexts. Through my research I encountered Line Nyhagen's work (2019; forthcoming) and how she grappled with theories which allowed her to engage both with structure and agency to explore religious women's experiences. For both Nyhagen and my work, theories of lived religion prove helpful in finding this middle ground. In addition, in reading lived religion I found that, in many ways, these theories were suggesting for religious identity what queer theory was for gender-sex identities. Therefore, conceptualising lived religion as a queer theory enables me in this study to account for both the gender- sex and religious identities of participants in ways which are more nuanced than either a structural or agentic approach alone could be.

A queer lived religion approach suggests that identities are constructed and performed relationally. This challenges universalistic ideas of identity categories in which abstract ideas of identity become subsumed under one term and equated with a common experience. It also accounts for the ways in which identities are fluid rather than biologically inherent and thus should not be interpreted as essences which explains the ways in which people think and act. Meanings are attached to certain bodies and performances, some of these become constructed as the norm, while others become defined as "Other" or queer. What is normative and what is subversive becomes framed by systems of power, such as patriarchy and heteronormativity (which assumes heterosexuality as normative) and these shape and police social relations (Butler, 1988; Plummer, 2001)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> This understanding has been influential in shaping understandings of how identities are policed in everyday experiences. In Raewyn Connell's (1987) separate and joint work with James Messerschmidt (2005) for example, they coined and furthered the terms hegemonic masculinities and emphasised femininities, to describe dominant and idealised ways of "being" and acting as men and women.

At the same time a queer lived religion lens enables me to explore the material realities which are consequences of certain identities. Thus, while acknowledging the fluidity of identities, possibilities for construction and reconstruction are not unbounded but are influenced by the institutional and social contexts which in itself are shaped by constructed identities. By exploring these co-constitutive material realities I can produce insights into pervasive societal power systems. Intersectionality adds to the complexity of this understanding of power as it accounts for how different systems of power interact to form a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2000: 18). Inequalities are seen as not merely a list of additions but as multiply constitutive, complex and complicated and implicated in intersecting ways in hierarchies of power. Therefore, in my study I interrogate how systems of power such as patriarchy, race hierarchies, and heteronormativity are experienced, reproduced and resisted in the everyday experiences of participants (Taylor, 2010).

Last, in order to grapple with the binary of structure and agency in a queer way the work of Saba Mahmood (2006) has been essential. Mahmood’s (2006) work suggests that agency should be uncoupled from taken-for-granted notions of resistance. Instead of deciding what the agency of my participants would look like and simply searching for evidence, Mahmood’s work directed me to challenge my own perceptions of activism, allyship, resistance and complicity. This allowed me to explore what agency looked like for the participants in this study in relation to their positions both as bastions and troublemakers of normative ideas of identity, belonging, race, gender, sexuality and family.

## **6. Methodological framing**

When embarking on my research, I faced two questions. One, what would it mean to do research with queer participants and two, what would it mean for *me* to do this research. These were important questions particularly because the field of religious studies has been critiqued for its general neglect of discussions and theorisations of method (Stausberg and Engler, 2011). Thanks in large part to the work of feminist and queer scholars, autobiography, lived experience and narrative are increasingly recognised as critical sites of empirical work for the study of religion (Nadar, 2014; van Klinken, 2018; 2019). However, to a large extent, scholarship focused on the lived experiences of queer people in religion and theology have not engaged significantly with methodological frameworks of producing queer narrative and lived experience. For example, Adrian Coyle and Deborah Rafalin (2000), Melissa Wilcox (2002), Andrew Yip (2004), William Jeffries, Brian Dodge and Theo Sandfort (2008), and Yvette

Taylor and Ria Snowden (2014), amongst others, all make use of qualitative interviews to produce the narratives of their participants. However, this literature lacks significant theorisation and reflection on, for example, the ways in which interviews were conducted, how researchers interacted with participants, or a conceptualisation of positionality. It seems then that research on queer lived experiences is often deemed queer (enough) if the participants and concepts used in the study are queer. The process of doing research however, is rarely theorised as queer. This is similar to characterising any research which focuses on women as feminist.

In this sense, scholars of religion and sexuality lag behind the broader social sciences which have begun to queer the ways in which the researcher, the researched, and the context of the field co-produce data which serves as illustrative of lived experience. The methodological dearth in this area of scholarship has meant that while scholars have demonstrated that for example negotiation and transformation can happen (in other words that religion and queerness can be negotiated and reconciled) it has failed to interrogate the contextual, cultural and systemic realities under which it can happen and to what extent. This field of studies is then left with limited and often repetitive scholarship which provides us with a vague idea that some queer Christians can reconcile their religious and sexual identities and transform their contexts, in some places, some of the time.

In this dissertation I explore what it might mean to develop a queer methodology in studies of religion and sexuality and also what studying religion and sexuality in queer ways could mean for the development of queer methodology. By theorising my experiences of doing week-long interviews and observations with six queer clergy in the MCSA, I illustrate how these considerations can be used to understand the queerness of my own methodology which falls into the realm of what Alison Rooke (2010) has termed a “queer sociological ethnographic perspective”.

## **7. Research questions**

The research questions which guided this dissertation were:

- a) What are the lived experiences of queer clergy in the MCSA?
- b) What are the institutional cultures and politics of the MCSA?
- c) Why do the institutional cultures and politics of the MCSA and the lived experiences of queer clergy co-constitute each other in the ways that they do?



## 8. Chapter outline

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the thread which runs throughout this dissertation is one of queering binaries. This can be traced in the following chapters.

In chapter one I have situated my study within broader discussions of religion and sexuality in South Africa and motivated for a focus on the MCSA and the lives of queer clergy.

In chapter two the binary I engage is that of oppression and transformation. I provide an overview of literature which has aligned itself with public discourses of oppression, as well as those which have demonstrated possibilities of transformation and argue that research which nuances that binary might be developed through a focus on lived experiences which also incorporates a critical gender-sex lens. In this chapter I also explore the ways in which scholars have framed queer clergy largely as spectacles of marginalisation and the space this leaves for further critical study. Last, I explore how scholars within the MCSA have framed the same-sex debate as well as the inclusion of women clergy in the church and the limitations but also possibilities this grants for further research on the denomination.

In chapter three I am centrally concerned with the binary of structure and agency. This is a well-debated theoretical tension in feminist research and I bring this same struggle to queer research. In this chapter I bring the theoretical framing of lived religion into conversation with queer theories. I discuss how this not only helpfully allows me to queer the structure-agency binary in my study but also enables me to explore gender, sex and religious identities as performed, intersectional, relational and embodied. I also draw on the work of Saba Mahmood (2006) in order to disrupt hegemonic conceptualisations of agency as resistance in order to make space for 'queerer' agencies within my own study.

In chapter four I address the general neglect of discussions and theorisations of method in studies on queer Christian's lived experiences by engaging critically with three binaries namely; performative-material, researcher-researched, and insider-outsider. In this chapter I explore how these theoretical binaries can be queered through using a queer sociological ethnographic framework. In this way, I argue, I am able to produce data which is reflective of the contextualised and complex narratives and experiences of the participants. This chapter also explains the praxis of my methodological framework which includes critical reflections on my use of snowball sampling, interviews, observations, and narrative and ethnographic data analysis. Further, in order to draw the reader into the social worlds of the participants in this study, this chapter also provides a narrative introduction to participants.

Chapters five, six and seven are comprised of my findings and present nuanced insights into the politics and institutional cultures which shape the experiences of participants and the institution of the MCSA. In these chapters I bring theory and literature to bear on participants' narratives and experiences in order to explore the politics in which their experiences are embedded. Through my analysis of the data I divided participants' narratives and experiences broadly into three themes namely, 1) becoming Methodist, 2) becoming clergy, and 3) becoming domestic and erotic.

Finally, in chapter eight I discuss some of the limitations of my study. I conclude by extrapolating from the dissertation the various contributions my study makes to producing lived experience, queering religion, conceptualising clerical identities and sexuality, and to expanding understandings of agency and activism. Further, I incorporate reflections on the space this study leaves for further research.



## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this chapter is to theorize how queer identities and Christianity are constructed in existing literature. I specifically engage with literature focused on the intersections of queer sexualities and Christianity, queer clergy, and Methodism in South Africa. First, I discuss how the theological and sociological scholarship on Christianity and queer sexuality has developed along three lines of argument which I have characterised as “opposition”, “negotiation” and “transformation”. Second, I discuss literature which focuses more specifically on clergy and queer sexuality. Last, I discuss how scholars have engaged with what has been termed “the same-sex debate” in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). I also look at the literature which has explored women clergy’s experiences of the MCSA and how the denominational culture has been conceptualised within these studies.

### **1. Broad trends within scholarship on queer sexuality and Christianity**

#### **1.1. Opposition**

Theologians who rely on conservative or restrictive theological arguments place Biblical Scripture as firmly opposed to homosexuality<sup>13</sup> (Hays, 1996; Gagnon, 2001; Dailey, 2004; Lockard 2008). These scholars use Biblical Scripture to frame homosexuality as sinful. They interpret these Scriptures literally and these interpretations are seen as fixed and authoritative while interpretations which deviate from Scripture are considered deviant themselves. Anna-Marie Lockard (2008: 163), for example argues that “revisionist gay interpretation of key texts does not conform to sound hermeneutical principles”.

Some theological interpretations rest on essentialised ideas of identity and separates homosexual behaviour from homosexual identity in their analysis. Therefore, homosexual acts (namely same-sex sexual relations) are interpreted as a sin and feelings of desire or attraction to the same sex are interpreted as afflictions. Scholars such as Robert Gagnon (2001) and Lockard (2008) draw on these interpretations to respond to homosexuality not through outright condemnation and exclusion but rather through a pastoral call for clergy to counsel homosexuals – often with the aim of converting them ‘back’ to heterosexuality. These interpretations hark back to the 1940s and 1950s where homosexuality was characterised as a

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<sup>13</sup> I use the term homosexuality as little of this scholarship engages with intersex, transgender or other sexual identities.

medical or psychological sickness to be cured. This negatively characterizes Christians who identify as queer as in need of saving whilst excluding possibilities that Christians identifying as queer may be actively contributing members of the church or the religion. Heterosexuals are thus placed in the role of saviour and queer individuals in the role of sinner – creating a problematic hierarchical theology of the concepts of ‘sin’ and ‘saved’. With a few exceptions, not many theologians seem set on maintaining this use of Scripture, with more conceding that there are various interpretations of ‘shooter texts’<sup>14</sup> such as Leviticus 18:22. Although this scholarship is no longer pervasive in academia, these theological arguments remain popular amongst conservative religious leaders and are still widely evident in sermons and church policies. For example, in South Africa, Angus Buchan, the founder of one of the largest Christian gatherings of men in South Africa, The Mighty Men’s Conference, continues to draw large crowds while proliferating harmful messages that women should submit to their husbands (see Nadar, 2009) and that homosexuality can be prayed away (Davis, 2017). However, in academic literature it is more common to find that research in the fields of psychology and sociology perpetuate the view that there is an irreconcilable contradiction between queer sexuality and church.

In André Grace and Kristopher Wells’ (2005) sociological examination of the Catholic Church and schools in Canada, they seem to conclude that the institutional church should have no role in governing the lives of queer students in state schools. The authors cite arguments which position the church as an outdated, traditional institution which goes against a modern democratic state’s interest for equality. For example, “[t]he judiciary has internalized much of ‘traditional’ religious dogma in this area and has tended to give precedence to conservative religious interests over the interests of equality of sexual orientation, especially when young people are involved” (MacDougall, 2000: 99-100). The title of Grace and Wells’ (2005) article, “Queer Rights v. Institutional Church Rights in Canadian Public Education”, demonstrates clearly the expanded argument of the article, namely, that the rights of queer people and the institutional church are opposing forces which will inevitably result in a winner and a loser. In recognising the politics around religious pluralism, I am inclined to agree with Grace and

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Germond (1997: 193) explains shooter texts: “For countless gay and lesbian people the Bible had brought death, not life. Many speak of the Bible as a ‘six-gun’, a pistol loaded with six texts (Genesis 19:1-29; Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11) that are used as bullets – Bible bullets – to kill lesbian and gay people in a contest about whether they can be full members of the community of faith.”

Wells' overall argument, however, they leave no room for interrogating the role that religion may play in schools for queer people who still regard Christianity as integral to their worldview.

Pikria Meladze and Jac Brown (2015) argue along a similar trajectory. They use the lens of Cognitive Dissonance Theory to argue that there is an inherent conflict between gay men who are Christians. They conclude that the views of Christianity, Islam and Judaism on homosexuality cause an "incongruent identity" which results in feelings of shame and internalized homonegativity (a negative attitude towards their own sexual orientation) for the gay men in their study. The only way the gay men in their study seem to be able to find congruency is either through leaving their religion or denying their sexuality.

### *Queer Christianity: Oxymoron?*

The scholars which I have discussed above share a common conclusion that religious belief and practices particularly, within the context of church and a queer sexuality inherently stand in contradiction to one another. This echoes the conclusions of feminist theologians such as Mary Daly (1973), who have argued that the church is irredeemably patriarchal and heteronormative. These conclusions seem to offer little hope for queer Christians who cannot be 'respectable' Christians and be queer, nor can they be 'good queers' and be religious. As Elizabeth Stuart (1997: 13) reasons in her book "Religion is a Queer Thing: A Guide to the Christian Faith for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered People", "queer Christians find themselves caught as it were between the devil and the rainbow, aliens in both lands".

Scholarly work concluding with the irreconcilable contradiction is not only ideologically restrictive for Christians who are queer, but is also theoretically and conceptually narrow. These arguments seem to rest on an assumption that religious beliefs or practices are static. This is refuted when taking into consideration the changing views and practices of various churches and faith traditions in history regarding topics such as women's inclusion as clergy, remarriage of divorcees, and abortion (Brewer, 2003). Further, these scholars make little reference to how religion, sexuality and other identities intersect and interact with each other in different spatial and temporal contexts. The literature discussed above therefore fails to consider how individuals experience their religious and sexual identities in their everyday lived realities.

I will now turn toward another trajectory of scholarship which *does* work with more nuanced understandings of religious and sexual identities as variable, co-constitutive and intersecting and which begins to question how queer Christians experience, and negotiate these identities.

## **1.2. Negotiation**

A more popular argument in scholarship on Christianity and queer sexuality suggests that those who identify as Christian and queer find ways of negotiating these identities. Although these scholars still seem to conclude that there is a contradiction between queerness and Christianity, they do provide evidence that there are strategies and means by which people navigate this contradiction. Below I characterise these strategies into compartmentalization, forming/joining queer affirming communities, and personalising faith.

### ***Compartmentalization***

Eric Rodriguez and Suzanne Oullette (2000) describe their participants' temporary denial of either their sexuality or religiosity as compartmentalization. This involves de-emphasizing one of their identities in the 'contradictory' context. For example, when attending a religious institution, participants would de-emphasize their "gay identity" and, when attending a gay festival, the religious one. Similarly, Rusi Jaspal and Marco Cinnirella (2010), who researched gay Muslims living in the United Kingdom, illustrate how their participants choose to separate their 'homosexual acts' which they engaged in (and which they viewed as wrong) from definitions of 'who they are'. These acts were viewed as something which they could not control either because they were born with this "disease" or because they blame mainstream 'Western' culture for influencing their actions (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010: 83). Jaspal and Cinnirella's (2010) work shows how queer religious people work within the framework of conservative or restrictive theological arguments to separate their actions from their identity in order to negotiate and make sense of the contradiction.

### ***Forming/Joining New religious communities***

Another strategy of negotiation which scholars have identified involves joining or building new religious spaces and communities that subscribe to theological interpretations which are affirming of queer sexualities. Scott Thumma (1991: 334) examines, for instance, the case of the "gay evangelical" identity where new religious communities are formed by melting

together an evangelical Christian culture in a queer context. Melissa Wilcox (2012) studied lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women's spirituality and its connections, or lack thereof, to religious organizations. Wilcox found that all participants who identified as spiritual had some communal way to practice their spirituality in non-traditional ways, for example with "alternative religions such as Unitarian Universalism and Religious Science" (2012: 644). Similarly, in South Africa, Cheryl Potgieter and Finn Reygan (2011) found that through the establishment of the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church in District Six in Cape Town, a space was created where LGBT Christians could find an affirming place of worship. The development of these queer affirming religious spaces are often reactions to more 'traditional' religious systems which are seen as irredeemably heteronormative (Midden, 2016).

### ***Personalising faith***

The last strategy of negotiation prioritises personal experiences of faith over institutional religion and religious authority structures. Andrew Yip's (2003; 2003a) work focuses on the experiences of queer religious people in the United Kingdom and points to a postmodern move where queer Christians prefer individual spirituality rather than communal religiosity. This means a move away from rigid doctrines, rituals and practices in a community of religious people, to a personal, internal connection with the divine or spiritual which is not arbitrated by an institution. This trend, Yip (2003) argues can be attributed to the irredeemably patriarchal, undemocratic and exclusive church which is resistant to change.

### ***Negotiating queer Christianity?***

While the models presented above do provide helpful insights into the ways people navigate their sexuality and religion in various contexts, scholars have noted that these negotiations necessarily involve a negative trade-off. Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) for example, critique the idea of a separation of identities as the only way of being queer and Christian. They question how appropriate these strategies are if religion is experienced as an integral part of a person's life narrative and as a lens through which meaning is attached to their lived experiences. Potgieter and Reygan (2011), also critique the idea that an LGBT affirming church is necessarily a more liberative space if it only serves to liberate and speak to issues pertaining to queer Christians. In their article, they criticise the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church for not engaging in issues of poverty, racism and sexism, especially in light of the

church's geographic location on a sight of forced removals during apartheid South Africa. Further, these models also tacitly reproduce essentialised ideas about gender-sex identity as something which is real, desirable and necessary to an ideological idea of personhood. These critiques point to the limits of negotiating strategies and to the possibilities of more nuanced queer research.

### **1.3. Transformation**

The literature discussed thus far seems to work from the base assumption that religious identity and queer sexuality are experienced and can be theorised as inherently incongruent, binary identities. Some theologians and religious studies scholars draw on queer theology, as propounded by Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003; 2005) and queer theory as proposed by Judith Butler (1988; 1990), to contest this assumption and suggest that these supposedly incongruent identities need not only be negotiated but can be reconciled through a queer theology and religiosity. Queer scholarship questions the assumed heterosexuality which frames theologies and argues for the potential of “dissident, marginalized epistemologies in thinking God” in transforming essentialist and binary ways in which Christianity and church is understood and practiced (Althaus-Reid, 2005: 271). In this literature review I have limited the scope to focus, not so much on the detailed arguments which queer theology has made, but rather on how scholars have drawn on queer theology to analyse sexual and religious identities in researching Southern Africa. I argue that this area of study has been fruitful in developing understandings of how the seemingly competing identities of religion and sexuality are in fact often reconciled.

#### ***Queer Theology and Religion in Southern Africa***

Some theologians researching in Southern Africa have maintained the argument that homosexuality and Christianity are irreconcilable contradictions through drawing on inculturation theology. Inculturation theology can be characterized as “a type of Christianity that (re)values African cultural and religious traditions positively (though critically) and seeks to incorporate them in expressions of the Christian faith that are authentically African” (van Klinken and Gunda, 2012: 117). Those who use this theological leaning uncritically however, have argued that queer sexualities are Western imports and that in order to be “truly Christian and authentically African” homosexuality cannot be tolerated (van Klinken & Gunda, 2012: 132). In this section of the literature review I specifically focus on queer theology in Southern Africa and discuss how theologians and religious studies scholars have refuted this myth and



have reconceptualised Africa as a sight of possibility for queer theology through a queering of theological concepts.

Religion and sexuality scholars such as Thabo Msibi (2011), Adriaan van Klinken (2011; 2015; 2016), Masiwa Gunda (van Klinken & Gunda, 2012), Lilly Phiri (2016) and Ezra Chitando and Tapiwa Mapuranaga (2016) have done considerable work in nuancing the argument espoused by some churches that queer sexuality and Africanness are somehow essentially opposed. These scholars have also significantly contributed to examining the possibility of (and indeed developing) an African queer theology in praxis. Van Klinken (2015) in his article, “‘Queer Love in a ‘Christian Nation’: Zambian Gay Men Negotiating Sexual and Religious Identities”, demonstrates how the participants in his study do not simply negotiate around queer-phobic religious institutions and messages, but rather reconcile their sexuality and religious faith through struggling with the church, the church leadership and themselves to create new understandings of what it means to be Christian and queer. Van Klinken (2015) argues that queer Christians, such as the Zambian men in his study, have agency and resist discourses which frame them as evil and sinful by subscribing to and asserting more universal understandings of love (in relationships with others and God). In this way queer Christians are able to co-produce theological understandings with their religious leaders and their church through various resistance strategies. Similarly, Phiri’s (2016) doctoral dissertation on the identity constructions of gay Zambian men engages with the agentive power of her participants as they produce queer theological knowledge. The Masters dissertation by Them bani Chamane (2017) focusing on the coming out experiences of gay Zulu Christians document comparable strategies of agency and resilience. Gerald West, Charlene van der Walt and Kapya John Kaoma (2016) suggest that theological processes which are shaped by the inclusion of queer people and their lived experiences is essential to the development of queer African theology. Further, the authors argue that the Bible should remain central as a “site of struggle” in African contexts for more queer affirming religious spaces (West, van der Walt, Kaoma: 2016: 3). Similarly, Hanzline Davids and Chris Jones (2018) place Biblical interpretation and particularly a theology of radical inclusion and body theology as the central focus of the development of queer African theology. The scholars cited above demonstrate the ways in which interpretations of Scripture (informed by lived experiences) can be produced which challenges the taken-for-granted hetero-patriarchal readings of sacred texts which many churches hold onto. They also refute notions that ‘sinner’ (individual) and ‘sin’ (queer sexuality/love) can be separated. For the participants in van Klinken, Phiri, and Chamane’s

studies, their sexuality and their Christianity are integral identities (along with multiple others) which frame their experiences and the meaning-making of those experiences. Queer theology thus provides an understanding of how queer Christians in Africa are co-producing a transformative, subversive theology.

Queer theological reflection and insight into Christianity in Africa has thus far provided a nuanced understanding of how queer Christians are co-producing a transformative, subversive theology in praxis. In this way, the scholars above helpfully illustrate Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood's (2007: 303) argument that queer theology is more than reflection and theory but is "Christian praxis, which aims to re-think alternative and radical ways of transformation in our present world so shaken by the contradictions of globalization". The work of theologians and religious studies scholars has made significant headway in framing Africa as a prime sight for exploring how a transformative queer religiosity may take shape and they have challenged the mythical arguments claiming queer sexuality to be "un-African" as well as "un-Christian". They have also illustrated the importance of paying attention to the complexities of the construction, deconstruction and intersection of identities. Through exploring lived experiences, research has been able to uncover agency in the forms of resistance and disruption, thereby foregrounding possibilities of a queer theology.

Thus far, however, theologians and religious studies scholars working on Southern Africa have not significantly engaged with the ways in which queer theologies emerging from lived experience may affect or be affected by the structural power of churches or other religious institutions. To take on Linn Marie Tonstad's (2015) argument however, it seems that scholars have sometimes tended to "a gloriously queer future of inclusivity and radical boundary crossing" and have neglected opportunities to explore the politics and complexities of how this inclusivity may come about. This is most notable in the lack of research which engages critically with the church as an important political institution with its own hetero-patriarchal systems, cultures of power and politics. What is missing then in the scholarship is the development of a queer theology which questions the structures of the church and presents understandings of "...love in practice, that is, friendship, solidarity, and the political strategies and organization of the social structures necessary to foster a theological praxis of love in action" (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood, 2007: 303).

### *Theorising Lived Experience and Systems of Power*

There is little sociological research available in South Africa which brings together an analysis of lived experience of queer Christians with institutionalised systems of power in churches and denominations. Internationally however, there have been significant contributions; below I discuss the work of four scholars who, through theorising lived experience in the context of the institutional church, begin to question how queer Christians are able to challenge normative systems of power which marginalise and exclude them.

In the field of sociology, Andrew Yip (2003), argues that central to understanding the lack of inclusivity and progress in debates around queer sexuality in the church a conceptualisation of the church as a sociological institution. He characterises the main function of the church as being a moral compass. Especially in times of social change the church has interpreted its role not in responding to the social change but to finding a theological “truth” (Yip, 2003: 60). Yip (2003: 60) thus views the church as resistant to change, a characteristic which he argues becomes more prominent in institutionalised churches with centralized power structures and embedded ideologies. Yip also argues that the Church’s common strategy to include queer people into the church by bringing “them back to the fold” only serves to broaden the gap between peoples lived experiences and the Church’s structures, policies and mission (Yip, 2003: 61). He sees the possibility of movement in the debate through the development of more broadly defined understandings of sexuality in which it is not narrowly defined by sexual acts alone but also based on the notions of “relationality, mutuality, commitment, risk and trust” (Yip, 2003: 63). Yip argues that the church (in reference specifically to the European context in which his work can be located), needs to move forward on this debate as people lose confidence in the institution. In order to do so, he argues, churches should not rely on a theology which uses Scripture and tradition to inform understandings of human sexuality, rather, they should engage from lived experience to help understand Scripture and tradition. In this way, he argues, church cultures of secrecy, hierarchical social relations and paternalism can be critiqued and dismantled.

Jodi O’Brien’s ethnographic work which details how “Wrestling the Angel of Contradiction” (2004) between queer and Christian identities gives rise to a particular expression of queer Christianity is an important contribution to scholarship on queer religiosity. O’Brien’s (2004: 194) work shows how queer Christians are able to turn the popular rhetoric of conservative/restrictive theology of ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’, which usually frames the

sinner as the queer individual and the sin as queer love, on its head. Queer Christians in O'Brien's study, frames the sinner as the church and the sin as the institutional arrogance of filtering love. O'Brien (2004) makes the argument that some queer Christians seem to understand embodying and living the apparent contradiction between their faith and sexuality as their *raison d'être*. In other words, queer Christians see it as part of their reason for being – a God directed calling – to create transformed, more inclusive understandings and expressions of Christianity. She argues that queer religiosity can be explored at various co-constitutive levels of queer Christian identities and practices namely, individual, community (such as in Christian congregations), and in ideological discourses (such as theological and doctrinal). However, O'Brien (2004) pinpoints that only through understanding Christian experience can the contradiction which exists be explored. O'Brien's work demonstrates how through studying the lived experiences of queer Christians as they intersect with church structures and ideological discourses, can provide an escape from the space between Stuart's (1997) devil and rainbow analogy.

In Tiffany Steinwert's (2009), work on homosexuality and the United Methodist Church, she argues that alongside theology, the ecclesiological identity and polity of the church needs to be interrogated (2009: vii). Mark Jordan in "The Silence of Sodom" (2000) makes a similar claim about the Catholic Church and argues that in order to challenge the restrictive stance of the church, scholars need to engage with not only the theology and official policies or doctrines of the church, but also the clerical culture, rituals and traditions – essentially the institutional church culture. While Steinwert (2009) focuses on analysing the policies and engaging with policy-makers and Jordan (2000) works with the understanding that church policies and doctrines are embedded in lived experience, they both maintain the argument that an understanding of the lives of queer members of the church must be made visible and audible, (and I add responsibly and rigorously theorised) in order to understand how church doctrines are experienced and resisted, and where there are possibilities for transformation. These scholars point to the need to devote empirical attention to ecclesiology and churches institutional cultures.

Based on the above literature, it is clear that ecclesiological and sociological studies of queer Christian experiences shed some light on the possibilities and usefulness of developing queer theologies and religiosities - especially in the context of institutionalised religion. Thus, there seems then to be space to explore the intersection of lived experience and church ecclesiology or institutional church culture within South African contexts. In addition, it appears that a

gender lens on religion needs to be further developed in a way which explores gender and sex identities as constructed and performed and as intersecting with others. In this way more nuanced, fluid lived experiences can be understood and used as a point from which to understand the possibilities and limitations of queer theologies and religiosities.

## **2. Queer Clergy**

In this section I review the scholarship focusing on queer clergy. Much of the scholarship on queer clergy is motivated by seeking answers to the question, ‘Why stay and work in a religion and/or denomination that regards your sexual orientation as evil or sinful?’ The conclusions to this, echo those of the more general research focused on people who identify as queer and Christian. That is that clergy either negotiate around their religious identification and sexual orientation or that they understand the process of transforming certain theological understandings and practices within Christianity and the church (such as love, marriage, sin and ordination) to be part of their calling. For example, Leland Spencer (2015: 121 - 122) describes how the ‘coming out’ narratives of a queer bishop and Rabbi mirror Christian conversion narratives and how the concept of sin is focused on the ‘closet’ as it represents hiding the fact that you are “made in the image of God”. These conclusions have been reached largely through narrative work on queer clergy experiences. Below, I map out the trajectory that this narrative research has followed as it has moved from descriptive narrative work towards more critical narrative enquiry which begins to theorise clerical and denominational identities in relation to queer sexuality.

### **2.1. Centring queer clergy voices: Descriptive narrative scholarship on queer clergy**

The early works of James Wolf (1989), on gay Roman Catholic priests, and Dann Hazel (1999), on gay and lesbian clergy from various North American churches devote large portions of their books to biographical and autobiographical reflections on how queer clergy negotiate their identities. It also focusses on those who choose to remain fully within their denomination and who seek to transform the theological understandings and practices which marginalise them. Often these stories centre around clergy persons’ journeys towards ordination and/or on narratives of ‘coming out’. The narratives of queer clergy in this body of work are often characterised as challenging and traumatic. Psychological studies by Ben Fletcher (1990) and later Stephan Kappler, Kristin Hancock and Thomas Plante (2013) highlight this as they use

questionnaires to demonstrate how institutional tension and interpersonal conflict caused increased stress and negative psychological well-being amongst queer clergy.

In their book, “Aliens in the household of God: Homosexuality and the Christian faith in South Africa”, Paul Germond and Steve De Gruchy (1997) working in the context of South Africa devote more than half of their book to self-authored chapters by queer Christians and clergy detailing how they ‘discovered’ and navigated their sexuality, spirituality and calling in the context of the church. Some of the clergy members within these earlier writings stayed within the denomination in which they were raised or to which they were ordained, while others moved or created new more queer affirming churches. Privileging lived experiences in this way was especially important in South Africa at the time when the book was published in 1997, almost a decade before same-sex unions were legalised via the civil union act in South Africa.

This (auto)biographical-type of descriptive narrative work provides detailed accounts of the lived experiences of queer clergy and was very clearly aimed at initiating a dialogue between queer clergy and the church. The centring of queer clergy narratives is important in the contexts of the institutional church, where pervasive and entrenched silence has had detrimental effects on the lives of queer clergy. The value of moving queer experiences from the margins to the centre should not be underestimated as it highlights how the silencing and anonymity of queer clergy has stagnated any theological or policy movement. However, as Sarojini Nadar (2014:19), points out, “when presence (‘women in research’) becomes a replacement for perspective (critical feminism), then potentially radical spaces...can simply become what bell hooks calls commodity and spectacle – embracing and promoting a descriptive rather than an analytical approach”. Earlier work on queer clergy thus seems to tread too far on the side of commodity and spectacle. Even works such as Wolf’s, and Germond and de Gruchy’s, base their important analytical and theoretical offerings which challenge the heteronormative church on survey data and interpretations of Biblical text and theological concepts, while the in-depth narratives in their books are left to stand apart as spectacles of marginalisation, unaccompanied by rigorous theoretical engagement.

## **2.2. Theorising clerical and denominational identity: Critical narrative scholarship on queer clergy**

Scholarship focusing on the lived experiences of queer clergy has since moved beyond simply making narratives visible but toward theorising these narratives as valid sources of knowledge

production. This trajectory of scholarship, though still seeking to answer the question, ‘Why stay and work in a religion and/or denomination that regards your sexual orientation as evil or sinful?’, also begins to conceptualise denominational identity and develop deeper understandings of ‘full-inclusion’ through ordination.

Brian Gerow (2010) in his Master’s dissertation, “The Pulpit at the End of the Rainbow: How Queer Clergy Enter Into and Maintain Religious Occupations” looks at the narratives of the ‘coming out’ experiences of twelve, white, queer clergy in Portland, Oregon. Excepting one, these clergy are all part of queer affirming churches. Gerow (2010) finds a variety of reasons for why these clergy chose to be ordained and chose to come out. He concludes, similarly to scholars who focus on queer Christian experiences, that these clergy have strong spiritual and personal connections to their religion and congregations and focus on the positive experiences of religion as a motivation to remain even after experiencing rejection and marginalisation. The one minister belonging to a non-affirming church chose to stay in order to bring about transformation. Thus, although he looks at ‘coming out’ in relation to clergy members’ time of ordination, Gerow’s study still lacks critical engagement with his participants’ role as clergy. Although he draws briefly on Peter Callero’s theory of Role as Resource (1994) (cited in Gerow, 2010: 18) to do some conceptual work around the role of clergy - it does not feature strongly in any analysis of the narratives of his participants.

Richard Holmen (2013), in his book, “Queer clergy: A History of Gay and Lesbian Ministry in American Protestantism” provides a comprehensive look at how queer clergy in America have been rejected, tolerated and in some cases granted full inclusion. Full inclusion he argues necessarily requires the right to be ordained. The extract below exemplifies Holmen’s (2013: 13) reasoning,

LGBT ordination is about much more than individuals invited into the pulpit; their presence proclaims a word of affirmation and acceptance to an entire community in a bold, clear voice. If gays and lesbians are welcome in the pulpit, if gays and lesbians can be both guest and host, then and only then is the entire LGBT community fully included in the life of the church. Gays and lesbians in the pulpit are the visible proof of full inclusion; anything short of that betrays a lesser welcome.

Holmen (2013) places the roles of queer clergy into broader conversations of queer liberation and argues that historically, clergies’ resistance to discrimination through their being ordained and through performing same-sex covenant ceremonies is what has and what can bring about

change. This historical take on the narratives of queer clergy, places them at the centre of change towards a transformative, affirming church and society.

Michael Keenan writes about the narratives of gay Anglican clergy in England (2008). Like earlier scholars, Keenan (2008: 169) asserts that the narratives of “sexually active gay clergy” have been excluded from Anglican debate. Even though the Church has “...called for times of study, reflection, or listening”, the listening has never involved the voices of queer clergy. Keenan attempts to bring their narratives into the discussion but goes further in his analysis by bringing these narratives into conversation with the scholarship on negotiation and transformation strategies discussed earlier in this chapter. Keenan argues that both negotiation and transformation (which he refers to as innovation) are evident and necessary in his participants’ experiences. For Keenan’s (2008: 177) participants’ innovations around, theological ideas and Christian practices “remain firmly connected to the traditional, with tradition remaining as important an aspect of their belief system as their personal innovation”. Keenan argues that tradition is in relationship with innovation in three ways. First, the narratives of queer clergy indicate that they experience the church as an institutional home, a place of comfort where they not only experience a sense of belonging but where they are able to come to a place of acceptance which they did not find in secular spaces (Keenan, 2008: 177). Second, traditional theologies are also tied to innovative understandings (or what others may describe as queer theologies) of their sexualities. For example, his participants used the understandings of sex as a spiritual act (a traditional understanding) as a base from which to “innovate” that sex with the same-sex or multiple partners can also be seen as acceptable and indeed spiritual (Keenan, 2008: 178). Last, traditional theological understandings facilitate their own acceptance of their sexualities. For example, by applying a creationist theology, Keenan’s participants reason that, because God created them, their sexuality is an essential part of who they are and thus they must accept (or resign themselves) to be who God made them (Keenan, 2008: 178 -179).

Drawing on Leslie Baxter’s (1990) discussion of the dialectics at play in personal relationships, Keenan (2008: 179) concludes that,

...In undertaking such negotiations, the individual must not move too far from either side of the dialectic. Moving too far away from tradition endangers the individual’s connection to Christianity; moving too far away from innovation threatens the individual’s connection to gay identity. The need for negotiation is therefore constant, as the constraining nature of traditional belief also allows access to meaning.



Keenan (2008: 177) seems to suggest that certain ties to tradition are important not only in terms of maintaining “personal stories of self” but in terms of maintaining an identity attached to religious belief which scholarship on queer religiosities and theologies often overlooks. He is able to analyse these nuances because the narratives of clergy have an “[emphasised]...connection to organisational Christianity” (Keenan, 2008:171). Thus, unlike studies focusing on lay people, Keenan is able to engage rigorously with questions of denominational identity, institutional culture and tradition. Keenan’s analysis provides important nuance to scholarship around queer theologies and queer religiosities as pathways to “a gloriously queer future”. I now turn my attention to scholarship on the MCSA specifically in order to explore whether and how denominational identity, church culture and practice have been studied within the Church.

### **3. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa**

#### **3.1. The same-sex debate**

Beginning in 2003, Methodist theologians have presented various theological understandings on homosexuality to the Doctrine, Ethics and Liturgy Committee (DEWCOM) in order to begin discussions around what has been termed “the same-sex debate” in the MCSA. The five contributions used various interpretations of Scripture to make arguments against (Dave Morgan and Ray Alistoun) and for the acceptance of same-sex relationships (Greg Andrews, and Sjadu Nkomonde)<sup>15</sup>. However, these discussions did not translate into rigorous academic studies being conducted on the matter. As mentioned in chapter one, in 2009, Reverend Ecclesia de Lange, an ordained Methodist minister, publicly declared her intention to marry her same sex partner. For this she was eventually excommunicated from the MCSA. This case brought public attention to the ambiguous stance of the MCSA toward queer people and it is only around this time that more academic engagement on the matter begins to emerge. In this section I discuss what this engagement has entailed.

Ndikho Mtshiselwa (2010) produced the first significant piece of academic engagement on the topic post-de Lange. Mtshiselwa’s Master’s dissertation and subsequent article (2010a)

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<sup>15</sup> These were not published academic works but formed the base from which later contributions engaged in the debate.

analyses the MCSA's interpretations of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. He does this by offering a critique of the five DEWCOM contributions mentioned as well as DEWCOM's discussion document on same-sex relationships, in which the Wesley Quadrilateral is used as an approach to discussing homosexuality. Mtshiselwa brings this into conversation with Xhosa receptions of homosexuality as well as analysis of the Leviticus texts through an African hermeneutical lens. Mtshiselwa (2010: 133) critiques the MCSA discussions and African rejection of homosexuality based on conservative exegesis of texts and inculturation theologies as supporting underlying motives of "holiness and sound morals as well as the issue and / or concern for family orderliness..." (Mtshiselwa, 2010: 133). Mtshiselwa concludes that consensus cannot be reached through Scripture alone but rather that to journey beyond the stalemate, areas of consensus and contestation especially between Methodist interpretations of Scripture and cultural understandings of sexuality must be identified and debates should proceed from there.

Sifiso Khuzwayo (2011) seems to take a similar position. He is not advocating for a solution to the debate, in fact, he argues that because there are complex debates on the authority of Scripture, theologians do not have enough information to make any decision. He argues that the issue which threatens to break "ecclesiastical communities" in the MCSA is not the issue of homosexuality, but the church's lack of response (Khuzwayo, 2011: 38). He thus suggests that the way forward involves the MCSA admitting that they do not have sufficient information (Khuzwayo, 2011: 38). He further argues that systematic and "true liturgy" should inform the way forward and that "this can only be done if we resist the temptation of just standing our own ground and shift to a place where we can be found by Christ and helped to find each other" (Khuzwayo, 2011: 39). He borrows the term Dihliz/Threshold, from Ghazali a Muslim philosopher as conceptualised by Ebrahim Moosa (2005), to argue that the Church needs to proceed from a place where all relevant viewpoints are given due recognition (Khuzwayo, 2011: 34).

Raymond Kumalo (2011), another theologian from the Methodist church examines how the MCSA's missional response to apartheid (and its stance on various social justice matters thereafter) of being a "one and undivided"<sup>16</sup> church and remains valid when placed in the

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<sup>16</sup> This statement reflects a resolution made in the 1958 Conference of the MCSA and was framed in opposition to apartheid's policies of segregation. Since then, this statement has continually been used to reflect the Church's position on numerous social issues deemed divisive.

context of the same-sex debate. Kumalo (2011: 187) explores how culture, theology and politics factor in to the division between those for and those against homosexuality and particularly same-sex marriage. In terms of culture, he resorts to essentialist ideas of race to argue narrowly that, “the influence of culture on the issue of same-sex marriage can be seen by the demographics of those who support and those who oppose it, with white people dominating the former group and black people dominating the latter” (Kumalo, 2011: 186). He argues similarly to Mthiselwa and Khuzwayo that Scripture is inconclusive, and that the interpretive frame theologians use can be employed to interpret it in a variety of ways. Last, on the matter of politics he seems to conclude that the government is more prophetic than the church but that politics and the church indeed disagree on the issue of homosexuality but also diverge in that the one will not rule over the other. Echoing the scholars discussed previously, Kumalo (2011: 189) offers nothing new theoretically on the matter but emphasises that the MCSA needs to remain “one and undivided”<sup>17</sup>, specifically emphasising this as the responsibility of leadership (read clergy), and that in order to move the discussion forward the church should: 1) confess their sins and repent for inflicting suffering on gays and lesbians, 2) talk more openly about human sexuality and draw from social sciences, biology and philosophy as well as the Wesleyan quadrilateral, and 3) to conscientise and educate its members.

Wessel Bentley (2012) traces the debate in the MCSA but more specifically around how it engages with same-sex marriage. In conclusion Bentley also seems to only be able to recommend steps to moving the discussion further. First, Bentley (2012: 8) suggests that Christian identity should be the foremost identity in discussions on same-sex marriage and argues, “when we find consensus in people’s primary location of identity, it creates a common ground from which a mutually accepted theology can be built”. Second, he proposes drafting “a church confession which proposes first of all the Christian principles of diversity, dignity, humanity and justice” (Bentley, 2012: 8).

The only published academic works which seem to urge for more substantial change from the MCSA has been written as a praxis piece by Judith Kotze and Ecclesia de Lange (2011) as they theorize the model de Lange put into practice to engage the MCSA and to promote transformation. The authors trace how de Lange’s strategy of engaging the MCSA is a practical

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<sup>17</sup> See footnote 16.

example of the Wheel of Catalyst Change strategy which employs a circular loop of “empowerment, opening minds, opening hearts and opening doors” (Kotze & de Lange, 2011: 204). Without retelling the process here, this article does highlight the impact that clergy can have on debates around sexuality in the church. The article also emphasises the agency of clergy to ‘empower’ themselves.

The scholars above focus on critically engaging ecclesiological and missional ideas of what the church should be and critique them in relation to an examination of Biblical Scripture or more general concepts of social justice. They provide a necessary critique of the MCSA’s ambivalence, however, they also all seem to err on the side of caution. None of the contributions to the debate in the MCSA have gone beyond arguing for the principles which should guide the debate. Further, none have come to the point of suggesting or exploring a queer theology or religiosity as other scholars such as O’Brien (2004) and Keenan (2008), and van Klinken (2015) have done for church contexts and denominations in other countries. Perhaps this cautionary stance lies in Kumalo (2011: 176) and Bentley’s (2012: 7) claims that the church should not rush if its aim is to “maintain unity”. As Fulata Moyo and Sarojini Nadar (2012: 236) point out concerns with “unity of the church” remain one of the biggest hindrances to gender justice. They note: “...the issue of justice gets sacrificed on the altar of unity, or dare we say “peace.” So, to maintain peace between particular denominations, or to secure unity, we “dumb-down” issues of justice – particularly gender justice.” Further, the emphasis in the scholarship on maintaining unity can be attributed to the fact that all those writing on this topic in the MCSA, are themselves Methodist clergy or leaders – and perhaps this reflects underlying motivations that their own investments in the church structure and belief systems should continue unruptured. In this case, it seems that as long as the MCSA’s goal remains to maintain unity, movement towards inclusivity and affirmation will remain slow.

### **3.2. Methodist ecclesiology and women ministers**

Significant contributions to exploring Methodist ecclesiology in South Africa have been made through scholarship on the experiences of women ministers in the church. The topic of the inclusion of women clergy in the MCSA has been well theorised and this scholarship has become especially popular in the last three years, sparked by the 2016 celebration of forty years of women’s ordination in the Church. In this next section I review the literature on women clergy in the MCSA to reflect upon how the Church has been theorized as an institution within the realm of ecclesiology.

Jenny Sprong (2011) in her PhD dissertation explored how and why the MCSA continues to marginalise and exclude women despite its mission to be a church of healing and transformation and its gender policy to prevent marginalization and exclusion. Informed by long-standing works by feminist theologians who critique patriarchal and hierarchical ecclesiologies (such as Letty Russell, Mercy Oduyoye, Natalie Watson, and Sarojini Nadar), Sprong critiques ideas of hospitality and inclusivity in the Church's structures. She does so through an analysis of the MCSA's source doctrinal documents, liturgies and hymns. She also includes in her analysis the stories of five Methodist women clergy. Her analysis of these women's stories includes some attention to how gender intersects with other identities such as blindness, singleness, and race. Sprong's (2011: 180) study highlights the phenomenon that despite changing policies to include women clergy, the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family model around which the church is structured continues to exclude those same women. For example, she identifies the church's male-dominated language in liturgies and hymns, the failure to practice equal representation at every important level of church leadership, the unjust stationing of women ministers and the absence of a budget for gender justice work as some of the ecclesiological factors which continue to marginalise women. Taking this into consideration Sprong (2011: 62) calls for "a complete paradigm shift – in people's mindsets – and a complete change of people's behaviour". She concludes, as other leading feminist theologians and religious scholars have, by asking 'What are the alternatives to clericalism?' (Ruether, 1983) and 'How can women be church and participate fully?' (Phiri & Nadar, 2005).

Methodist theologians in recent work provide further examples of how women are excluded from the MCSA. Kumalo (2016: 182) critiques the Church for patriarchal practices such as ,

...[women] being excluded from the physical pulpit, which is reserved for ordained ministers or probationers who are male; the persistent assignment of menial or 'gender-suitable' roles in meetings and workshops, such as taking minutes or making tea; being ignored when speaking into a meeting of clergy; and being excluded from consideration for certain stations where patriarchy is very strongly entrenched.

He further names the ways in which sexual harassment is dealt with as a problem since the disciplinary panels are still largely made up of men (Kumalo, 2016: 182). Kumalo, like Sprong, draws attention to the pervasive patriarchal culture of the church. He argues that even in spaces which seemingly welcome women, they remain excluded because men share common life experiences and commonalities such as "having attended the same school, or university, enjoying the same sport or supporting the same team, sharing a common cultural tradition, and having a common view of women as inferior" (Kumalo, 2016: 184). Kumalo encourages the

Church to review their structures, systems and beliefs that continue to stifle the growth of women leaders.

Phemelo Marumo (2016) also writes about women in ministry in the MCSA. Marumo reflects on various Biblical Scriptures to critique the church's treatment of women and to illustrate the positive contributions women made to Jesus' ministry as examples of the role women could play in the church (Marumo, 2016: 61-63). Marumo's approach to remedying the situation includes, theological ideas which encourage the inclusion of women (the priesthood of all believers) and which discourage the exclusion of women (declaring the segregation and marginalisation of women a sin). Marumo (2016: 68) also suggests training male ministers "to respect their female counterparts and seeing them as partners in God's vine (sic) not competitors" and empowering women for leadership positions as possible solutions.

Luvuyo Sifo (2016) similarly explores the ordination of women in the MCSA and how within structures and constitutions in the church women are marginalised. Sifo specifically focuses on the organisation of the Young Men's Guild (YMG), a men's organization in the Church. His article critiques the constitution of the YMG, in so far as it does not make provision for women ministers to preside over the business of the organisation while male ministers are granted the ability to oversee all organisations including women ministries. Obusitswe Tiroyabone-A-Sedupelela (2017) makes a similar analysis of the need for reform of the YMG. He also concurs with Kumalo's argument by referring to the church as a "boy's club" which he argues operates according to a patronage system whereby female ministers need "male ordained ministers to welcome her into the boys' club, orientate her into the boys' club and prepare the people for her to minister to" (Tiroyabone-A-Sedupelela, 2017: 6).

The scholarship discussed above has brought about strong critiques that although the church has equal policies and laws about welcoming women into its fold, certain practices, policies, hymns, and liturgy still have patriarchal roots and continue to serve to exclude women from taking up equal leadership positions and serving equally as men do. Sprong's work specifically urges a deeper questioning about inclusive clericalism and the ecclesiological practices of the church - questions which have perhaps not yet been given enough attention in queer research on the church. It is disappointing to note that scholarship which came after Sprong do not follow on this trajectory to examine these questions. In fact, the only suggestions later scholars provide towards possibilities of change are general suggestions of empowering women (Kumalo, 2016), revising policies and constitutions (Kumalo, 2016; Sifo, 2016) and for men to

give up their power (Tiroyabone-A-Sedupelela, 2017) – all of which are driven by invoking theological understandings of welcome and inclusion as part of the mission of the Church. The strategies towards change for which they grasp are limited by the essentialist frame through which they explain some of the ways in which women are excluded. Marumo (2016: 68; 69), for example, says that women should not be excluded from the Church because they “will bring forth a feminine element, rare in men – warmth and comfort to the broken” and that they will have a “pastoral approach to congregation and community – drawing out the latent capacity of women being considerate as mothers”.

Despite its limitations, the ecclesiological scholarship on the MCSA remains important to note. While highlighting the need for more change in policies, doctrines, laws and liturgy, this work goes further to suggest that even though policy has changed, attitudes, beliefs and practices remain entrenched in the church. As Tiroyabone-A-Sedupelela (2017: 4) explains, “the seed for ordination has been planted”, referring to policies and doctrines, “but the soil has not been made ready”, referring to the institutional culture of the church. There is therefore space for nuance in the ecclesiological scholarship on the MCSA which brings together a critique of essentialised identities, an exploration of lived experience and a critique of the institutional church.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Based on the review of the literature above, I have identified three significant gaps in the scholarship. First, in scholarship on religion and sexuality, queer Christian experiences have received little attention within the context of institutional religious denominations or congregations. When it has been contextualised in this way, the politics and cultures of church have received scant theoretical attention. Second, while scholarship on queer clergy has provided important insights into the politics of ordination and ‘coming out’ within institutional Christianity, it seems that an interrogation of clerical identity as a meaningful religious identity which intersects with gender and sex is lacking. Further, while clergy are written about as queer, gay or lesbian, studies have seemed to ignore the lives of clergy outside of their role as religious functionaries. Thus, narratives which are commonly found in queer studies which refer to the domestic, erotic and embodied lives of participants are silent when clergy are implicated. It seems then that there exist possibilities for scholarship which critically considers the intersections of both religious and sex or gender identities. Third, in literature on the MCSA there is still a lacuna in the field of sexuality which goes beyond framing conditions for debate

on same-sex marriage. Apart from this, space also exists for ecclesiological and sociological enquiry around issues of institutional transformation.

In this study, I address these gaps by exploring how queer clergy lives are embedded in the institutional cultures and politics of the MCSA. I also address both the religious and gender-sex identities of clergy and discuss nuanced narratives of their everyday lives. In addition, I situate these narratives in ways which illuminate the cultures and politics of the MCSA and which broadens discourses of transformation and inclusion in the Church. In order to do this, the queer lived religion approach employed in this study provides an important theoretical framework.





### **CHAPTER 3: A QUEER LIVED RELIGION APPROACH TO EXPLORING RELIGION AND SEXUALITY**

In early presentations of my dissertation I was challenged by peers on the seemingly multiple and divergent foci of my study namely, the lived experiences of queer clergy and the institution of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). This critique is reflective of the binary ways which scholars of religion, gender and sexuality have tended to employ theoretical paradigms in research with religious women or religious queer people. The binary is characterised by theoretical approaches which either emphasise *structure* and the oppressive ways which institutionalised religion and religious movements exercise power in the lives of gendered and sexed subjects, or emphasise *agency* often through illustrating how people resist and subvert harmful religious discourses and practices. Scholars have critiqued this binary and suggested that a more productive middle ground exists for studying religion, gender and sexuality (Valocchi, 2005; Avishai, 2008; van Klinken, 2019: 190; Nyhagen, forthcoming).

In the chapter which follows, I critique structure-agency theoretical binaries in the field of religion and queer sexuality. Drawing from Line Nyhagen's (forthcoming) suggestion that lived religion, intersectionality and different understandings of agency are helpful theoretical tools to engage the structure-agency binary, I go on to discuss how I conceptualise these in relation to queer theories. I argue that lived religion is a useful theoretical lens to trouble the structure-agency binary as it echoes many of the epistemological positions expounded by queer theory. I weave into this discussion an argument for lived religion's usefulness specifically for studying institutionalised religion and clergy – ironically, areas of study which have been widely critiqued by this theoretical tradition. Finally, drawing on the work of Saba Mahmood (2004; 2006), I explore how understandings of agency which are uncoupled from resistance and transformation are helpful in furthering the scholarship which has thus far dominated conversations of queering religion and Christianity.

#### **1. Structure-agency binary in theories of gender, sexuality and religion<sup>18</sup>**

Scholarship on Christianity and queer sexuality has commonly been motivated by questions of whether and how queer people navigate their religious and gender-sex identities. These

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<sup>18</sup> While referring to religion broadly here, the literature which I draw on largely focuses on Christianity. I therefore use "Christianity" rather than "religion" throughout the rest of this chapter.

questions have been approached through two dominant theoretical paradigms namely, a structural approach and an agentic approach. Below I give an overview of how each paradigm has been used in this area of study and what limitations accompany either approach.

Nyhagen (forthcoming) characterises theoretical approaches which focus on religion as an external force operating to exclude or limit the lives of women as a structural determinist approach to religion and gender. She goes on to argue that in feminist research this approach has focused on a critique of “male-led institutions, male-dominated traditions and male-authored texts” (Nyhagen, forthcoming, no pagination). Nyhagen (2017; 2019) reasons that this has framed institutions as irredeemably patriarchal, in some cases to the extent where possibilities of women’s agency are denied and the role of religion in people’s everyday lives are ignored. A similar analysis can be made of structural approaches to religion and sexuality which have critiqued the widespread heteronormativity in religious institutions, traditions and texts. For example, Siobhan Garrigan (2009) in her article, “Queer Worship”, explores how the act of worship remains heteronormative. She concludes that everything from the way people are expected to dress, to where they are expected to sit, to who serves in leadership roles, to how God is addressed (including what words are used) in prayers, is shaped by a heteronormative church culture. As discussed in the literature review chapter, some scholars have used this structural approach to suggest that an irreconcilable contradiction exists between religious and sexual identities and that these can be negotiated by forming or joining new religious communities or personalising their faith. Andrew Yip (2003: 223) for example, in his work on gay, lesbian, bisexual Christians in the United Kingdom argues that in this societal moment “the self plays a far greater role than church authority as the basis of respondents’ Christian faith”. This not only neglects to account for the roles that religious communities, including traditional religious institutions may play in people’s everyday lives but also denies possibilities that people can exercise their agency within the bounds of these religious spaces. While this scholarship demonstrates the pervasive structural power implicated in constructions of narrative and identity, it sometimes frames power in ways which actively nullifies any possibility of the role of agency in creating change.

Due to the political entanglement of queer scholarship with subversion and resistance, in recent years agentic approaches which challenge oppressive religious structures have dominated the literature on religion and sexuality far more than structural approaches. Scholars have foregrounded the lived experiences, identity constructions and individual agencies of queer

Christians and developed a transformative scholarship which explores the ways Christians resist and subvert text, traditions and “thinking God” (Althaus-Reid, 2005: 271). While these agentive approaches to religion and sexuality have been helpful and hopeful for understanding the ways in which structural power can be challenged and resisted, they have also relied on limited and sometimes essentialist views of queer Christians. The predominant view of queer Christians in this scholarship suggests that ‘queer’ is a homogenous group, all seemingly driven by similar motivations to resist and subvert institutionalised religion. For example, in the oft cited work of Jodi O’Brien, “Wrestling the Angel of Contradiction: Queer Christian Identities” (2004), lesbian and gay Christians are shown to construct a queer Christian identity which is inherently linked to struggle and resistance. The coupling of agency with resistance, negotiation, transformation and change suggests that one cannot be queer and Christian without performing a particular type of queer identity – one which is inherently tied to a form of activism. Agentive scholarship on queer clergy has therefore emphasised, perhaps unconsciously, that the only way one can be queer and ‘called’ is by understanding ones ‘calling’ through the lens of subversion. Therefore, while scholars of religion and sexuality have commonly been motivated to explore how religious and gender-sex identities are negotiated/transformed/reconciled the theoretical framings created by a structure-agency binary have limited understandings of the variety of ways this is and is not possible.

The structure-agency binary evident in literature on religion and queer sexuality has limited scholars’ ability to engage both with institutionalised religion and individual agency. This is partly because the theoretical binary is reliant on certain normative, essentialist and homogenous positions. In order to make claims either of structural oppression or for the need for subversion, scholars have relied on understandings of ‘self’ as fixed and “partly autonomous from the power structures that construct the self” (Valocchi, 2005: 755). In other words, both arguments rely on the assumption that there is a core or essential self which has the ability to reflect and interact with power in ways which are completely divorced from that power (Foucault, 1997: 167). This has meant a general neglect of an exploration and troubling of notions of queer ‘complicity’<sup>19</sup> and queer silences inside and outside religious institutions. For example, little is said in research about those who stay in denominations and indeed protect more traditional and institutionalised versions of Christianity. Saba Mahmood’s (2006) critique

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<sup>19</sup> The notion of complicity will be troubled further in the section titled “A Queer(er) Understanding of Agency” in this chapter.

that a tension between feminist political and analytical projects have created an ideal feminist scholarship which necessitates that scholarship takes a position in relation to the subordination of women extends to queer research in religion which deems scholarship to be ‘not queer enough’ unless it takes a position on the oppression of queer people. Just as Mahmood critiques this idealised feminist scholarship, I want to argue that a queer approach to researching religion and sexuality requires a troubling of dominant and idealised queer discourses, especially those which function to create new binaries and essentialisms. This binary is particularly problematic when considered in relation to the background which I framed in chapter one in which I position my research as politicised in its attempts to nuance and contextualise queer experiences in South Africa.

This calls for a queer troubling of the binary and a more dialectical approach to understanding structure and agency. In the field of religion and gender, Nyhagen (forthcoming) has suggested that troubling this binary lies in working from the theoretical position of *doing* religion and gender by combining critical realism, lived religion and intersectionality. Drawing from this suggestion, in the discussion which follows I explore how queer lived religion, intersectionality and Mahmood’s model of agency is helpful for understanding religion and sexuality which considers a more fluid understanding of the role of structure and different forms of agency.

## **2. Lived religion is a queer thing<sup>20</sup>**

A popular theoretical approach which allows scholars to account for a dialectical relationship between structure and agency is ‘lived religion’<sup>21</sup>. Lived religion is a sociological approach to the study of religion which foregrounds the experiences of “ordinary” people in “everyday” life while at the same time accounting for the structural aspects of religion they may engage with (McGuire, 2008: 12). Lived religion is particularly appropriate as a theoretical framing for research on religion and queer sexuality. In fact, in many ways lived religion is a queer thing, not only because it troubles the binary mapped out previously between structure and agency, but also because of its conceptualisation of religious identities as performative, fluid,

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<sup>20</sup> I am inspired here by Elizabeth Stuart’s (1997) book title, “Religion is a Queer thing”.

<sup>21</sup> This tradition is often attached to Meredith B. McGuire’s (2008) book titled “Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life”. While she popularised the term and engaged in creating coherence in aid of forming a theoretical orientation, she acknowledges that scholars such as Robert Orsi (2003) and Nancy Ammerman (2007) as well as a range of feminist religious scholars had previously developed similar arguments.

embodied and intersectional. In this section I will explore how I understand religious, gender and sex identities through these lenses.

## 2.1. Queering the structure-agency binary

Lived religion developed as a critique of “upper body” studies of religion which predominantly focuses on religious institutions and leaders (McGuire, 2008: 12 see also Orsi, 2003; Ammerman, 2007; Neitz, 2011). This is because upper body research often relies on a structural approach to religion and thus tends to assume that religion can be fully understood through examining sacred texts, systems of beliefs and religious practices. Lived religion refutes this by adopting a poststructuralist epistemology and arguing that individuals do not simply repeat and re-enact the prescribed beliefs and behaviours as taught by institutionalised religions, rather, they actively shape religion in the subtlety of the everyday (Larrimore, 2015; Nyhagen, 2017). The argument of lived religion is that “human action may be affected by social causes without being fully determined by them” (Elder-Vass, 2010: 87). Further, lived religion troubles the binary of sacred and profane by arguing that religion should not only be understood as something which exists in the invisible realm of thought and belief, but as manifest in the behaviour and meaning making of people’s lives, even in seemingly secular contexts (Ammerman, 2003).

Meredith McGuire’s (2008) conceptualisation of lived religion and her critique of upper body studies could be interpreted as encouraging a move away from studying institutionalised forms of religion, clergy and decision-making bodies<sup>22</sup> and, therefore, one might argue it is counter-intuitive to use as a lens through which to study both clergy and a religious institution as I intend to do. However, it is important to note that lived religion is not a wholly individualised, agentive approach. In fact, claiming that religion can and should only be understood by researching lay people outside of the institutionalised church overlooks the multiple ways in which religion is social and influenced by shared meanings, experiences and understandings (Orsi, 2003; Ammerman, 2003; McGuire, 2008: 213). Further, while lived religion has often been used to argue for the importance of the inclusion of “ordinary” and “everyday lives” to explore more richly the lives of religious people and religious meaning (McGuire, 2008: 12); I

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<sup>22</sup> For example, McGuire (2008: 213) argues, “Although studies of religious organizations and movements are still relevant, they cannot capture the quality of people’s everyday religious lives. As messy as these lives may be in practice, individuals’ lived religions are what really matters to them”.

do not agree that this should be interpreted to conceptualise clergy or religious leaders as the binary opposite of ordinary. McGuire (2008: 12) continuously reinforces this false assumption in her discussion on lived religion as she conceptualises religious leaders as “official spokespersons” of religion who somehow have less creativity and authenticity to their religious meaning making. I do not wish to excuse or ignore the fact that religious leaders have historically been the centre of religious meaning making and have often been at the forefront of driving a narrow and oppressive doctrine in relation to women and queer people. However, this in itself does not preclude the idea that religious leaders too have ordinary and everyday lives and experiences. If ordinary and everyday experiences and practices shape and are shaped by religious meaning, then surely religious leaders are not exempt from this? In fact, clergy and other religious leaders seem ideal candidates for studying lived religion in ways which disrupt the structure-agency binary as they are at once embedded in institutional religion as well as creative, fluid individuals with ordinary lives. This is perhaps even more evident in the lives of ‘marginal clergy’ such as the queer clergy in my study who simultaneously occupy positions of “power, privilege, and status...legitimated by the religious traditions that are socially defined as authentic” (McGuire, 2008: 190), as well as positions which may challenge the very legitimation of these traditions. Therefore, while a lived religion approach does not exclude an examination of clergy and institutionalised religion, it does require a dialectical, queer approach to studying these phenomena.

A dialectical approach to religion involves accounting for the active and reflexive ways in which people can shape, negotiate and change their religious beliefs and practices as well as the contextual factors and relations of power that inhibit or enable different forms of agency (Foucault, 1980; 119; 1997: 167; Nyhagen, forthcoming). While doctrine and theology are an important part of how religious communities and its members shape their institutional identities, as with religious texts these are interpreted and mediated. Individuals thus create their own boundaries and live their religion differently even within those boundaries of religious identity. This means that religious institutions should not be understood as static entities which exist outside of its members; rather, both individual members and the institution can be understood as co-constituting the other. In this sense, lived religious practice is fluid even in institutionalised and “upper body” spaces of religion. Individuals’ lived religious practice may be closely linked with the teachings and practices of an official religion however, the power and meaning of institutional forms of religion in individuals’ lives must be studied empirically and should not be taken as given (McGuire, 2008: 5). This dialectical

understanding allows for varied expressions and practices of religion even amongst those who are of the same religion, denomination or local religious community (McGuire, 2008: 4). This understanding then presumes that by understanding my participants' experiences of religion in their everyday lives, I might be able to explore how their institutional affiliation to the MCSA affects them but also how their everyday lives affect the MCSA. Therefore, studying religion as lived allows for a more queer, contradictory and manifold understanding of religion.

## **2.2. Deconstructive approaches to identities in queer lived religion**

Lived religion theorizes religion as a “mode of conduct and being, a performance of identity” (Avishai, 2008: 413). This echoes the deconstructive approach to identities taken by queer theorists, most notably Judith Butler (1990), who collapses the gender-sex distinction and argues that both are performed and are in a never completed process of being made and remade. This renders an authentic or ‘core’ religious or sexual identity impossible. Theoretically deconstructing identities as belonging to fixed categories does not however wish away identity categories altogether, rather, it frames them as “permanently unfixed, open sites of becoming” (Hutchins, 2006: 134). Butler (1993: 308) says she is “permanently troubled by identity categories, consider[s] them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and understand[s] them, even promote[s] them as sites of necessary trouble”. Theories of lived religion and queer theories, I argue, share three significant epistemological components in understanding religious and sexual identity which I discuss below as: performativity, relationality and intersectionality.

### ***Performativity***

A performative understanding of identity critiques the idea that a fixed or essential subject position exists. In this sense there is no intrinsic nature which can be used to explain why and how people behave and reason in the ways they do. In fact, as Hutchins (2006: 125) argues, “the ‘subject’ falls to pieces, the ‘subject’ becomes subjectivity, a shifting, fully contextualised, nonunified perspective inseparably related to its world”. Butler (1990; 1993; 1993a) has used this to argue that gender and sex are not something which people are born with but, rather, something people become through repetitive performances. Thus, it is only because these performances are continually repeated that people are perceived to behave in biologically predetermined ways.

A queer understanding of identities as performative, however, does not (as it is often assumed) necessarily preclude understanding performativity as detached from the rules, resources and

regulations of social institutions. In his analysis of queer theoretical approaches Stephen Valocchi (2005: 766) points out, “the enactment of identities is an accomplishment or performance, but these identities are also constrained by an array of institutional forces that contribute to the power of heteronormativity”. Therefore, while the discursive and behavioural norms of institutions can be performed in constrained and prescribed ways, it can also be done in unpredictable ways. I will discuss how this unpredictability gives space for agency later in this chapter, but for now it is important to note that while queer theory suggests that gender and sex identities are performative it does not imagine that the possibilities of performativity are unproblematically unbound from structure. Rather, they are constrained and motivated by the contextual and structural materialities in which they are implicated.

While Butler uses the idea of performativity to disrupt notions of a fixed gender or sexed subject, lived religion has adopted similar deconstructive notions of religious identity. The following statement from McGuire (2008: 210) illustrates this aptly:

At the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary, or even necessarily coherent. Rather, each person’s religious practices and the stories they use to make sense of their lives are continually adapting, expanding or receding, and ever changing.

This performative understanding of religious identity allows for more nuanced and messy ways of exploring how individuals make meaning of their religious belonging – whether to a tradition or, as in the case of this study, a particular denomination.

Integral to performative approaches to understanding identity, whether gender, sex or religious, is an understanding of discourse. While performativity in lived religion has often been used to refer to particular religious rituals or sacred acts, queer ideas of discourse are also applicable to understanding religious identity. Applying queer lenses, discourse is not merely used to describe a reality ‘out there’, rather it creates the very realities it claims to describe (Foucault, 1972: 49; Fairclough, 2003: 204). In Andrea Mayr’s (2008: 8) words “language represents and contributes to the (re)production of social reality”. For example, ‘queer’ or ‘Methodist’ is invoked in particular ways not only to represent a person or object which naturally exists but to create particular meaning around the behaviours, bodies, and power attached to those identities. Nancy Ammerman (2003: 216) posits, “When I say I am a Baptist, you recognize that as a religious identity (with more or less accurate expectations about how Baptists behave) simply because of the implied connection to religious institutions and traditions I am invoking”. An overt reference to being Baptist only carries meaning because of the practices and traditions



that come to represent that identity. By overtly invoking the term Baptist, Ammerman refers to a set of practices and traditions, but it also be used to create the identity by referring to particular meanings, actions, and practices as Baptist. It should be noted here that I do not argue that discourse is all there is, but I do assign it an important role in shaping the ways which my participants construct and reconstruct their identities and narratives by invoking and reshaping ideas of what it means to be queer, clergy, Methodist and Christian (Mayr, 2008: 5).

### ***Relationality***

To build on the idea of performativity I turn to a discussion of relationality. This implies that one can only refer to and understand a particular identity construction in relation to what it is not (Alliaume, 2006). Karen Alliaume (2006: 105) argues that for an identity to exist it requires the “repudiation and refusal of alternative identities”. For example, the idea of heterosexuality cannot exist without the rejection of an alternative namely, homosexuality. Relationality also elaborates on the understanding of discourse previously discussed. In order to make use of language to refer to a particular identity there has to be a shared understanding of what this refers to as well as what it is not. Using the previous example of Ammerman, in order to refer to yourself as Baptist there has to be shared acknowledgment that this refers to a particular Christian denomination which is separate and different from being for example Catholic or Methodist. The same can be said of the identity categories of women and men or of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Understood relationally, boundary making becomes an important part of identity construction.

It is through relational and institutional practices that identity boundaries are created and regulated. Social relations in particular contexts create and sustain boundaries of what it means to be man, woman, queer, and heterosexual. Further, these boundaries are not innocent but implicated in the way power and privilege is afforded to those who leave the coherence of a particular identity intact. These ideas have birthed a plethora of work in policing gender, sex and sexuality (Butler, 1990; Plummer, 2001; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009) but can also be used to further understand how religious identities are created, policed, controlled and regulated by institutionalised religion.

### ***Intersectionality***

In the previous chapter I characterised scholarship which concludes that religious (specifically Christian) and queer identities are incongruent and irreconcilable as oppositional. This scholarship, I argue, relies on the two assumptions, first, that there exists a core, essential self

which is disrupted by two identities which seemingly do not fit and second, that we can understand how people negotiate these inconsistencies by focusing on these singular categories of experiences. Ammerman (2003: 211) argues (as have many black feminist and queer researchers before her)<sup>23</sup> that by reducing ourselves, and indeed those with whom we produce research, to a single identity category of race, sex, gender or class we neglect to account for the myriad of intersectional identities and systems of power through which identity and experience is shaped. In other words, by looking only at how sex and religious identities are negotiated, scholars have at times neglected to account for the varied ways which race, age, class, ethnicity or other social identities nuance these negotiations. Ammerman (2003: 211) goes on to acknowledge that people do search for congruence by re-enacting and resisting the boundaries of certain societal norms but at the same time recognises that people are also deeply affected and influenced by the structural constraints of their context. Therefore, I agree with Ammerman's (2003: 211) suggestion that, "what we need is a way to talk about who we are and how we behave without reducing ourselves either to a single determining structural essence or to complete chaotic indeterminacy". Intersectionality is integral to this project.

Intersectionality adds to the complexity of understanding identity construction and negotiation but it does not exclude the idea that these constructions and negotiations are affected by structural or institutionalised power. It requires scholars to challenge universal understandings of (in the case of this study) religious, gendered and sexual relations of power. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000: 18: 23) argues, intersectional work should account for the different systems of power as they interact to form a "matrix of domination". This is a seemingly overwhelming task for any one scholar, and indeed it is not my intention to promise that I will account for every possible intersection of power and identity in analysing the lived experiences of the participants in this study. An intersectional lens, however, does mean that religious and sexual identity categories become understood as subjects of exploration rather than as taken-for-granted, known, homogenous entities. It also becomes integral to a queer, lived religion approach which resists developing conclusions that reproduce either essential, core selves or selves beholden to structural forces.

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<sup>23</sup> Most notably Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) who coined the term 'intersectionality' and queer scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Cathy Cohen (1997) who have furthered this now popular theoretical tool.

### 2.3. Queer lived religion as embodied and material

Embodiment is often placed in opposition to the deconstructive and performative approaches to identity. However, it is important to note as Christina Hutchins (2006) explains, a deconstructive lens is opportunistically taken up by those who would benefit from a disregard of the material importance of identity categories for material life to make arguments that wish away these categories. Hutchins (2006: 139) uses the example of a man whom she describes as, “comfortably liv[ing] the hegemonic norm of compulsory heterosexuality” in a church meeting she attended who responded to her explanation of identity categories as fluid and unstable by saying, “Yes, these categories are, after all, just categories. We are, after all, all human together. We are all one in Christ”. She argues that because he more easily fit into normative moulds, it benefited him to use fluidity to obscure difference in ways which left his normativity and power unchallenged. It is, therefore, important to consider that, because social relations of power are implicated in the construction of identities, they have also shaped material realities. By casually dismissing the validity of material realities one runs the risk of erasing important ways in which people tell their narratives and make sense of their lived realities.

In this study I draw on the work of scholars who have argued that neither lived religion nor queer deconstructionism should exclude the materiality of identities. Alliaume (2006: 98) argues that Butler’s theories are not dismissive of material reality. Rather, she argues, Butler’s theory of citationality acknowledges the material body but emphasises the constructed nature of this materiality as it is produced through the repetitive ways in which norms of gender and sex are cited and re-cited and thus gives meaning to a seemingly stable material body and reality which the process itself has produced. These repeated citations create the illusion of an authentic identity or core self which Butler (1993a: 15) refers to as “sedimentation”.

While Butler focuses in particular on the production of the sexed body as one such material reality, McGuire uses a similar understanding to make sense of the materiality of religion. Lived religion helpfully queers the binary between the spiritual or religious and material as evident in McGuire’s (2008: 97) discussion of lived religion,

Spirituality fully involves people’s material bodies, not just their minds and spirits. The key connection here is not ideas about the body, or simply moral control of the body and its impulses. Rather spirituality is closely linked with material human bodies – and not just bodies in the abstract.

McGuire (2008: 101) argues that by excluding the embodiment of religion, religious belief becomes invisible and relevant only to the invisible thoughts of the believer. She further explores the idea that lived religion is integrally linked to the idea of religion manifesting in practice. For McGuire (2008: 118) lived religion is based on daily life and repeated everyday practices which people use to “remember, share, enact, adapt, and create” narratives which manifest religious meaning in material realities. Lived religion, therefore, not only focuses on people’s narratives or stories, but it also allows for analysis of how these play out in practice in everyday life.

It is important to note that Butler (1993: 226 - 227) argues that these repetitive acts are not ungoverned but are shaped (although not wholly constituted) by socially and relationally defined norms. Bringing this idea into conversation with McGuire (2008: 160) I argue that religion has circumscribed the boundaries which define gender and sex and the accompanying appropriate embodied behaviour and practice. By analysing “body practices”, as McGuire (2008: 182) refers to them, this study can explore the ways in which bodies matter but also how they “fail” to matter as abject bodies which are not recognized in the defined norms (Butler, 1993a: 15). Alliaume (2006: 105) demonstrates that this can be especially useful for understanding the ways in which women and queer bodies are rendered abject when they are excluded as candidates for ordination.

In arguing that lived religion is a queer thing I have demonstrated that to *do* religion, in many ways, is to *do* gender and sex. This theoretical lens allows me to explore the ways in which my participants’ experiences are grounded in the sedimentation of their identities as well as how systems of power interact with these identities in multiple and fluid ways. It also accounts for the ways in which participants shift and subvert the identity categories by using performances, various terms, or no terms at all related to sexual identity, gender, religion and race to explore their experiences.

### **3. A queer(er) understanding of agency**

The idea of queer and queering as subversive, transgressive and resistant seems deeply entangled with queer Christians and Christianity. Queer theorists have sought to account for the agency of queer people in Christianity, and other religions, by exploring the ways they resist and subvert dominant heteronormative and patriarchal understandings of gender, sex, love, relationships and God. Most recently van Klinken (2019) has released “Kenyan, Queer,

Christian”, a text which explores various queer “arts of resistance” in Kenya. This work highlights the ways in which religion and queer sexuality can be in productive tension in ways which trouble harmful normativities. However, although van Klinken (2019) begins his book by introducing political and religious agency as visible in everyday, ordinary actions such as a meeting of an economic empowerment group for gay men; he mainly highlights more public, or at least semi-public, forms of resistance through the four case studies he discusses (van Klinken, 2019: 189 - 190). While the ability of his participants to publicly resist shows the ways in which agency and resistance are dialogically produced with structure and power, it perpetuates the conceptualisation of queer agency as primarily about subversion and resistance. In studies on queer Christians in institutionalised religion it is precisely this concept of agency which has driven narratives which “thingify” (Hicks, 2011: 3) queer people by suggesting that the only reasons they remain in institutionalised religion is either because they seek to transform it or because they are so disempowered that they become passively complicit in their own oppression. This is illustrated by an extract from the introduction to “Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms” (Talvacchia, Pettinger, and Larrimore, 2015). Mark Larrimore (2015: 4) introduces the experiences of queer Christians as follows:

Queer Christians experience their lives as sacred work—a work at whose heart is a kind of disrupting clarifying transforming play. “Queerness” is not an identity but a playing with identity and identities in the great and small moments and relationships of actual lives. And yet at the heart of these queer Christian lives we find what might at first seem a paradox: people *committed* (sic) to living in unsettled and unsettling ways. Queer Christians do not just transgress against the forms of an oppressive and heteronormative Christianity, but find specific Christian practices themselves—sometimes the most orthodox!—to be forms of and for transgression.

In this paragraph Larrimore simultaneously makes essentialist arguments about queer Christians and disrupts it. The assumption Larrimore perpetuates is that by being queer and Christian, one automatically experiences their life as “sacred” and “disrupting”. This not only homogenises queer Christians’ experiences but suggests that there is something inherently resistant about a queer Christian’s life and that sexual identity becomes the main identity marker of that life. However, Larrimore also hints at the fact that even orthodox or normative practices (and I would add lived experiences) may be transgressive too. McGuire (2008: 98) makes a similar point when arguing that agency can be found when exploring the ways people use “religion-prescribed practices in ways completely unforeseen by the official religion”. While this moves us towards considering that transgression may be found in seemingly ordinary practices, there is room for more in-depth theoretical work around what is meant by

agency in queer studies. Therefore, while I acknowledge that part of my participants' experiences involves subverting and expanding relational and kinship possibilities in publicly resistant ways; I also account for the more nuanced reasons for them belonging to the MCSA than either resistance or complicity arguments allows. In order to do this, I draw on Saba Mahmood's (2006) understanding of agency as a queer(er) frame through which to analyse the nuanced everyday experiences of queer clergy as well as understandings of institutionalised religion.

Mahmood (2006: 186) asks a critical question for my own work in understanding queer clergies lived experience in relation to the power of the institutional culture of the MCSA:

If we recognize that the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is also profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions, then the question arises: how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?.

Mahmood questions the integrity of working from an assumption that resistance is an innate, universal need. Looking at queer research, this seems to be a taken-for-granted assumption from which many queer scholars proceed. This frame pays little attention to the cultural and institutional contexts that shape 'compliance' and further, does not account for why certain normative ways of being in institutions are enacted and at times even protected by those who are seemingly excluded from those norms. A frame which equates queer agency to resistance is, for example, inadequate for exploring the various and complex ways the queer participants in this study navigate, experience, or disregard the politics of the same-sex marriage debate in the institutional context of the MCSA<sup>24</sup>. Nor does it consider how various contexts and intersecting identities shape what resistance and subversion might mean for different people. In order to do this, I required a broader conceptualisation of agency. By drawing and expanding on the work of Butler, Mahmood (2006) suggests two ways which help me to analyse agency which is uncoupled from resistance. First, Mahmood (2006) argues that the subject position should not be understood to be outside of structural norms and that agency is not always the disruption of these norms. Second, Mahmood (2006: 191) disrupts the notion that scholarship can proceed from an already determined understanding of what agency is. She argues that, instead, scholarship should discover and analyse different "modalities of agency" through the

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<sup>24</sup> An overview of this debate is provided in the introductory chapter of this dissertation.

multiple ways people inhabit norms. In what follows I expand upon both these points and demonstrate how Mahmood provides a broader paradigm of agency.

Mahmood is informed by Butler's location of agency which adds to the understanding of a dialectical approach to structure and agency as previously discussed in this chapter. Mahmood (2006: 190) locates agency within, rather than outside structures of power and argues that, "...there is no possibility of 'undoing' social norms that is independent of the 'doing' of norms; agency resides, therefore, within this productive reiterability". It is important to point out that in the previous discussion on embodiment, religion and sexuality have a material reality because of repetitive citations rather than repetitive replicas of previous moments. The difference is important as citationality implies that there are variations between repetitions precisely because, as explored previously in this chapter, they are created relationally and contextually. Therefore, agency can be understood not as "chaotic indeterminacy" as Ammerman warns (2003: 211), but rather as the recitation of norms, performed in non-prescribed ways and influenced by the intersectional identities and plural positionalities which people inhabit.

While recognising this aspect of Butler's theory Mahmood (2006: 191) critiques Butler for primarily developing the concept of agency in contexts where norms are disrupted and resignified. Mahmood (2006: 191) argues that, "[n]orms are not only consolidated and/or subverted...but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways". By using the case study of Muslim women who were part of the piety movement in Egypt and the norm of modesty, Mahmood (2006) argues that agency can be expressed in behaviour that reproduces dominant norms, such as a cultivation of modesty and shyness. This is because agency can be understood not only as resistance but as "lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated" (Mahmood, 2006: 192). This more nuanced understanding of agency is also illustrated in Ilana van Wyk's (2014) book "A Church of Strangers: The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa". Van Wyk (2014) argues that while the Universal Church's restrictions on the amount of socialising which is allowed to take place between members could be deemed a product of oppressive institutional power, members themselves find meaning in them and inform these practices as well. In other words, they are not merely oppressed by the norms, but inhabit them.

Mahmood's second point is that scholars should not assume we know what agency will look like in research. Mahmood (2006: 186) argues that what constitutes agency is affected by the

historical and cultural contexts in which it takes place. Therefore, in a globally politicised context where speaking out and coming out have become normative models of resistance, acts of silence and discretion are easily construed as passivity or complicity. Van Klinken (2015: 954) illustrates this point in his work on Zambian gay men who, in some cases, were marginalised by queer activists when they resisted speaking out publicly. In order to understand the meanings of agency within varied contexts, research should explore and analyse that which enables and constricts “specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity” (Mahmood, 2006: 186). Therefore, rather than assuming what agency looks like, in this research I explore, through the everyday narratives and experiences of queer clergy, what constitutes these acts in specific contexts and why they are shaped in this way.

Mahmood’s work transcends the normative models of research on sexuality and religion which simply speak back to structure. Agency is therefore uncoupled from discourses of resistance and can be used to more broadly understand people’s capacity for action within the historically specific relations and contexts which produces it. This theorisation of the concept allows me to explore particular forms of investments and modalities of agency. Ammerman (2003: 224) would argue that this allows for the production of narratives which are “neither a fixed set of institutional symbols nor an utterly chaotic experience in which selves and situations are redefined by divine fiat. It is at once both structured and emergent”. To use the earlier example of same-sex marriage in the MCSA, in the absence of a theory of agency unattached to resistance, I might understand some of my participants’ desire to be married simply as them being subjected to Christian norms of monogamy and fidelity. A broader understanding of agency enables me to explore what else lies in the investment in the concept of marriage besides the compulsory heterosexual contract. By doing this I recognise as Mahmood (2004: 195) does “that to ask a different set of questions about this practice is to lay oneself open to the charge that one is indifferent to women’s [and queer] oppression”. However, I argue that these lenses do not restrict or dismiss the activism attached to queer theories but rather broadens the range of experiences which can inform this activism. I am able to ask different questions about queer experiences of religion by exploring what else Christianity, Methodism, ministry, calling, doctrine and marriage might signify besides oppression or fertile ground for subversion.



#### 4. Conclusion

The intersection of Christianity and queerness have met at the scholarly tropes of either oppression or resistance. These tropes have been driven by theoretical emphases on either structure or agency, to the neglect of a dialectical consideration of the two. This has in large part resulted in a convincing yet homogenised caricature of the transformative queer Christian; one who remains within institutionalised religion and whose *raison d'être* is to transform and queer traditional Christian traditions. By using the lens of lived religion, queer theory and a conceptualisation of agency uncoupled from resistance, I critique and nuance this caricature. In this dissertation I explore identity as a fluid and innovative performativity in which the subject always exists in relation to and as a result of “becoming” (Butler, 1990). This process of becoming is shaped by the agency of the subject which exists in relation to the contextual norms they inhabit.



## **CHAPTER 4: A QUEER SOCIOLOGICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the theories and praxis which produce the data used in this research project. I begin by describing the ethnographic research design of the study including my use of snowball sampling, interviews and observations. I then draw on the broader scholarship in social science which has theorised queer methodologies to discuss how a queer sociological ethnographic perspective was useful in exploring lived experience in relation to the institution of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). I then go on to discuss how I coded and analysed my data and how I have represented this data as findings. Furthermore, I elaborate on the methodological limitations and ethical considerations of this project. In this chapter I also provide a narrative introduction to the research participants, an approach, I argue, which is more aligned with queer understandings of identity than a static demographic overview. Finally, I discuss how the findings of this study have been organised and represented.

### **1. Research design**

The queer lived religion framing discussed in the previous chapter suggests I can best explore the dialectical relationship between institutional religion and individual agency through empirical, qualitative research grounded in everyday, ordinary, embodied and lived experiences of queer clergy in the MCSA. To this end I have drawn on ethnographic and queer sociological methods and theories. While conventional interpretations of the tradition of ethnography suggests that this methodology requires a sustained length of time in the field (Feterman, 1998), I have drawn on scholars (Rooke, 2010), who have queered this tradition and interpreted ethnography instead as an ontological and epistemological framing. In this sense ethnography is not predicated on a set of techniques, procedures and time frames and therefore, even a set of interviews could be interpreted as ethnographic should it adopt the necessary “intellectual effort” that can produce thick description (Rooke, 2010: 3). In this section I discuss the ways in which I theoretically and practically made use of an ethnographic framing to produce the lived experiences of my participants.

#### **1.1. A queer sociological ethnographic perspective**

Thanks in large part to the work of black feminist and queer scholars, autobiography, lived experience and narrative are increasingly recognised as critical sites of empirical work for the

study of religion (Collins, 2000; Hoel, 2013; Nadar, 2014; van Klinken, 2018; van Klinken, 2019). As discussed in the previous chapter, scholars who have explored the narratives and lived experiences of queer Christians have often sought to position these in relation to heteronormative religious institutions in order to produce queer theologies or queer possibilities of being church. Broadly, feminist sociological and ethnographic perspectives have proven to be useful for this purpose. Most illustrative of this is Jodi O'Brien's (2000) in-depth and sophisticated exploration of queer Christian experiences in the United States. My research is indebted to this work and in this chapter, I discuss how I used an ethnographic approach. However, given my commitment to exploring a variety of modalities of agency, as well as being conscious of my positionality as a heterosexual woman of colour (however fluid this may be) I have also sought to employ and develop a methodological framework which engages with the question of what it means to *produce* queer narrative and lived experience.

A queer sociological ethnographic perspective as proposed by Alison Rooke (2010) is useful as a perspective which pays attention to the dialectical relationship between structure and varied agencies as well as a consideration of the performativity and materiality of lived experience of both the researcher and the research participants. Rooke (2010) makes queer and post-structuralist theories of knowledge production central to her methodological discussion of a queer sociological ethnographic perspective. Below I frame Rooke's methodological paradigm by discussing three theoretical considerations namely, 1) performativity and materiality 2) co-Production and kinship, and 3) allyship and activism. While my discussion is based on Rooke's proposal it is not a replica of what she suggests and I draw on other queer and feminist theorists as well as examples from this study to broaden the discussion.

### ***Performativity and Materiality***

By drawing on the works of feminist and queer scholars in my theoretical framework chapter I demonstrate how gender, sexuality and religion can be understood through the discursive and embodied practices of people. Identities can, therefore, be understood as constructed and performative rather than absolute, fixed and inherent. To queer identity is to understand it as a perpetual process of "becoming" (Butler, 1990). At the same time however, this does not negate the material contexts which produce and are produced by these constructions. A queer methodology therefore challenges researchers to navigate the tension between the fluid, performativity of identity and the materiality and embodiment of experiences and narratives.

In Rooke's (2010: 27) queer sociological ethnographic perspective, she recognises the importance of acknowledging the discursive formulations of identities as well as the "daily realities and practices that have real consequences". Adopting this understanding of discourse and identity in the field meant that in interviews I avoided introducing the concepts of gender, sexuality and race by asking questions directly related to these topics. As Kira Erwin (2012) shows, participants are more likely to monitor their responses when directly asked about an identity category such as race or gender. Rather, in research encounters, I paid attention to how and why participants themselves invoked certain identity categories and I then asked further questions which encouraged participants to reflect on why race, gender or sexuality was significant in the ways that it was in their narratives. This also meant, in research encounters, paying attention to the ways in which participants used discourse to identify, disidentify, negotiate and reconstruct particular identities. Further, I paid attention to the context in which these discourses were constructed and the agentic ways participants employed it. This includes the various uses of language to refer to their gender and sex identities which included words and phrases such as queer, lesbian, gay, "woman but not really", feminine, masculine or no terms at all. In this way I avoided prompting participants to think and construct certain identity categories as essentialised qualities which could be used to explain how and why they think and behave in the ways they do.

At the same time, in the research and writing up process I was conscious of recognising the investments that participants attach to their identities as well as the material realities which confine and shape identity performances (Richardson, McLaughlin & Casey, 2006; Marinucci, 2010). This was particularly important for this study where the institution of the MCSA was not approached merely as a site of study, but was in itself a concept to be explored. Therefore, I interpreted research encounters as ethnographic encounters and paid attention not only to what was being said but how it was being said, the context that enabled it to be said, and the "queer silences" which were produced (in other words what could or would not be said) (Browne and Nash, 2010: 19).

### ***Co-production and Kinship***

A queer sociological ethnographic approach challenges conventional ideas of researcher-researched relationships. This is by no means a new challenge as feminist scholarship has extensively critiqued the normative power laden research encounter where the researcher is framed as the expert mining for data and the researched is the subject from which the data is

extracted. Destabilizing this hierarchal relationship means understanding research as a subjective process of producing knowledge rather than as an objective representation of a reality 'out there' (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986; 1987; Davis, 2008; Inckle, 2010; Hoel, 2013). I argue that this feminist idea becomes queer when this lens of subjectivity is combined with a consciousness of the fluidity of research participants' identities as well as our own.

A queer methodology necessarily means queering the relationship between the researcher and the researched by subverting the norms which often govern these interactions and relationships. One way of doing this is to grapple with the complexity of relationships developed in research encounters. Jamie Heckert (2010: 53) posits that there is an "intimacy of gathering stories" and "of crafting new ones". In order to engage in this intimate process, to subvert and negotiate around the fluid performances of our identities, and to co-produce the narratives with my participants – I engaged in what Mathias Detamore (2010: 168) refers to as "kinship making". My experience with Lebo, a young black woman minister working and living in a small town in the Eastern Cape, and her family illustrates how I experienced and developed this intimacy.

Upon meeting Lebo I thought that we had quite a bit in common. We are of similar ages, are both women of colour and had met briefly at a church event years ago. Based on this I presumed that forming a connection would be quick and easy. However, it was not. We first met during my fieldwork when she fetched me from my accommodation on a Sunday morning so that I could attend the two church services which she would be leading in a small town a few kilometres from where she lived. I got in the car, she was sitting in the front passenger seat, a woman was driving (who I would later come to learn was her girlfriend) and a little boy (her son) sat with me in the backseat. I greeted them enthusiastically. The driver and the boy said nothing. Lebo greeted softly. They seemed wary of me. At that moment I felt that, by virtue of being heterosexual, I was automatically untrustworthy. Looking at it retrospectively, perhaps it was obvious that I was not to be trusted so easily – I was unceremoniously arriving in their lives for the week and what brought me there was their queerness.

The next day Lebo and I sat down for an interview. We spoke about her childhood, family life, schooling, church life, friendships, her decision to become a minister and her experiences with the church. The dynamics between us seemed to ease up a bit. I accompanied her throughout the week on her pastoral visits and clerical duties. A lot of our initial conversations happened in the car and after the first day of pastoral visits she invited me to finish our interview from the previous day at her partner's house. A similar pattern followed throughout the week and I

found Lebo, her partner, and even her son becoming more familiar and comfortable around with me. I ended up being invited to join them for a family movie night and a trip to the beach. While preparing supper together one day Lebo told me that she was happy having me there, it felt as though someone saw her not as a minister but just as Lebo. By the time I left I felt a genuine connection to Lebo, a feeling akin to friendship. This was not something I had expected to experience but it became the case for each of my participants, even the ones whom I found more difficult to connect with. These relationships took some time but it did not develop naturally, I had to reveal myself in the research.

The idea of kinship making captures, more fully than the idea of rapport, the relationship I built with Lebo. This was not a natural process, but, something which needed continuous reflection and negotiation to develop. Rooke (2001: 32) argues that in order to develop these intimate relationships a level of emotional competence is necessary as well as the ability to express genuine interest and care. This was an unexpectedly exhausting task as one of the inputs from my research diary reflects:

Getting back from the [church leaders] meeting tonight, I feel tired. It is a weird sort of emotional tired – but there is nothing to be emotional about. Is it a stress of longing for home? I video call Ernest [my husband], the line is not good and I am too tired and frustrated to pursue [the call]. I think that, I have time in the morning; I should switch off for now (Field notes, February 2019).

My fatigue I realise is part of the active emotional labour required to ensure that my participants felt heard, that I was paying attention and that I recognised the multiplicity of their experiences (Rooke, 2010: 32). In interview encounters I was continuously mindful of my reactions and moderated my interest in their sexuality to be on par with my interest in all their other everyday experiences of church politics, parenting, and office dramatics. While I am sure that sometimes I did not succeed, I did not want stories of their sexual orientation to become a spectacle in the research (Nadar, 2014: 19) – this too required emotional consciousness.

Developing a connection with my participants also involved a degree of vulnerability in revealing my identities and experiences. Judith Butler (2004: 19) makes this point when she says, “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something”. At times this was something which I resisted as I initially downplayed my own deep connections to being Methodist in my fieldwork out of fear that this would limit what participants told me. The first interview which I conducted as part of this study with Bradley, a white minister living in the Western Cape whom I had never met before. I was hesitant at

first to outrightly reveal to him that I was Methodist out of fear that he might assume I was acting as a representative of the Church and thus monitor his responses. When I did reveal that I was Methodist it was by casually using the word “we” to refer to Methodism – thus attaching myself to the Church. Bradley immediately picked up on this in the interview if I was Methodist, which I confirmed. Instead of being withdrawing as I had feared, he immediately began to reveal more about his experiences of the Church. The shared connection of being Methodist opened up space to talk and criticise the institution more readily than perhaps would have been done with someone who was perceived as an outsider. This is because (as I will discuss in more detail in chapter five), participants themselves were deeply invested in the MCSA as a ‘home’ and were eager to protect its homeliness from outsider critique.

Part of being undone also involved acknowledging that the field could, in many ways, be an erotic space (Rooke, 2010; van Klinken, 2019: 95 - 97). Rooke (2010: 33) argues that there is a silence in academia around the erotic field: “Sexuality continues to be the dirty secret kept in the epistemological closet of research ethics, and will remain so as long as the erotic equation in fieldwork is ‘written out’, rather than ‘written up’”. I would have perhaps remained silent too but my interactions with participants continually dragged my gender and sexuality into the encounter even as I internally resisted. For example, when being introduced to Bradley’s secretary I realised that I had briefly dated her son a few years previously. We later met up with a local minister who I also knew through having dated her son. I revealed this to Bradley after he wondered how I knew these women. Later in the week when arriving to meet with another minister he jokingly, and to my embarrassment asked, “should I ask if you dated his son too?”. Furthermore, my husband who had previously been quite involved in the church and was known by many of my participants, was also continually brought into conversations and participants would often ask me about his involvement in the MCSA, our relationship dynamics (keeping my surname after marriage was of particular interest) as well as our relationship with the church. Perhaps the most uncomfortable experience was one I had with Anele.

I met Anele one morning at his office as we had done throughout the week. On this day a group of older women had gathered at the church for worship and breakfast. We went around to meet them and after greeting them warmly and making a few jokes, Anele unexpectedly introduced me as his fiancé. Anele had previously told me that only a few close friends knew that he was gay – the knowledge of this as well as the women’s excited congratulations rendered me silent. The ruse continued slightly longer than I was comfortable with and to the women’s visible disappointment he eventually confessed that he was joking and that I was a friend doing

research on ministers. Anele was the last participant I met with and up until this point I had not been made obviously aware of my identity as a heterosexual woman. Partly, I was uncomfortable because my body and sexuality was brought into the research space in ways that I had not imagined and had also not consented to. Up until this point I had drifted into a bubble of believing I was an academic researcher – although I was reminded of my humanity and personal connection to the institution in my previous research encounters, I had never really been positioned as a sexual subject. This is perhaps because I had felt a sense of distance from my own sexuality because the participants who were interested in women were all in monogamous, long-term romantic relationships and those who were interested in men, I believed, had no interest in me as a sexual subject. I realise that in some ways this granted me a sense of safety in my position as researcher. However, in this moment with Anele I was becoming heterosexual and becoming woman. In this encounter I had to admit that in order to co-produce knowledge I could not render my own gender and sexuality invisible. My awareness of this at the time allowed me to ask Anele questions around why he told the women at his church that I was his fiancé. In probing this Anele told me that the fabrication was convincing because when congregants asked him previously about his romantic relationships or lack thereof, he would respond by saying he had a girlfriend in Cape Town. This led to conversations around the pressure particular congregants place on young clergy men to be married and the status marriage would afford him in the church. It also encouraged me to reflect on my overall analysis of the data produced in this project and to incorporate a criticality of myself as a gendered and sexed subject where appropriate in the finding's chapters.

By reflecting on the above examples of being undone by my participants, I recognise that it was in part due to my embodied subject positions as Methodist, woman, black, and heterosexual that participants were willing to disclose their life experience and self-understandings to me. At other times, however, it was my inability to fully embody Blackness, queerness and masculinity as well as my willingness to at times fail at being Methodist, combined with an eagerness to learn and a hesitancy to show judgement that allowed them to divulge particular information to me. Further, the research context of kinship allowed me not only to gather stories and experiences but it enabled me to extend my questioning to “why?” questions. Through this line of questioning I encouraged participants not only to describe their experience but to theorise and analyse them in relation to the culture of the institution. This again subverts the idea that participants only tell their stories while researchers alone attach theory and meaning to those narratives.



### *Allyship and Activism*

As a heterosexual ally (with all its problematics) incorporating activism in my research was not only ideologically important but ethically required. I want to discuss three ways in which I tried to become an ally/activist in my research.

First, becoming an ally/activist involved troubling the insider-outsider binary assumption from which to approach my research (Browne and Nash, 2010: 20). A queer understanding of positionality goes beyond discussing the benefits of being an insider or outsider in research and recognises that the nature of insider-outsider relationships is as unstable and shifting as our identity performances (Browne, and Nash, 2010: 19). Catherine Nash (2010: 137 - 141) explains that, while difference in, for example, ethnicity or race may frame the researcher as an outsider at one time, a common gendered experience (or other shared histories and experiences) may shift their positionality to that of insider at another. The fluid positionality of the researcher can thus change over the course of the research process and even throughout the course of a single interview. Therefore, my position as insider (for example being Methodist), outsider (for example being heterosexual), powerful and powerless depended on the context of my research encounters. I noticed this in my interviews with black<sup>25</sup> participants. When talking about black Methodist ways of worshipping it was clear that these participants assumed I was not familiar with the way things were done. In these instances they would describe activities or experiences to me in more detail and use phrases like “in our culture” to position me outside of the “our” to which they referred. However, at other times when they spoke more generally about Methodism, they would rely on taken-for-granted jargon and skim over the complexities of the Church’s procedures.

In troubling the binary of insider-outsider in my research I do not want to dismiss a critical consideration of my distance to power at different moments in the research. Therefore, the second point in becoming an ally/activist is that some degree of accountability needs to be

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<sup>25</sup> While I acknowledge race as a constructed concept, informed by my theoretical framings of intersectionality, materiality and embodiment, I also recognize that race has had material consequences in South Africa as well as globally. Therefore, while colonial and apartheid constructed racial categories are contested, they are also terms which people identify with and which reflect the material inequalities and power relations people produce and negotiate in their daily lived realities. I have therefore made use of the racial category “black” here and elsewhere in this dissertation to reflect participants’ material experiences as well as to explore the ways in which participants related to me - someone who identifies and who others may categorize as “coloured”. Coloured was an apartheid racial category used to classify people who were racially mixed or ambiguous but is now a contested term and fluid identity which people negotiate in various, complex ways.

filtered into research through always being conscious of issues of power implicated in my positionality (Stella, 2010: 224). This requires what Amina Mama (2011: 14) refers to as an “ethic of solidarity”, one which makes demands on reflexivity as an active, continuous process. My research diary was central to how I employed reflexivity as an active process. I committed to being a brutally honest journalist of my own thoughts, feelings and perceptions and I recorded how I felt and whether I had any preconceived ideas of my research participants before each initial meeting. After research encounters I answered questions such as: How am I feeling and why? Did anything surprise me about this encounter? Did anything stand out for me? What were the dynamics amongst those that were in the research encounter, including myself? Were there any similarities or differences between this encounter and others – and why? This allowed me to reflect on and analyse the ways in which positionalities were being negotiated in research encounters.

Third, becoming a queer ally/activist did not necessarily involve trying to diagnose and transform my participants, rather it recognised and theorised the agencies taking place in everyday life and the transformations my participants were enacting (Heckert, 2010: 43). In wanting to be an ally/activist in my research, and based on the hopeful literature on the transformative potential of queer Christians and theology for the church, before entering the field I found myself imagining that, if not all, then most participants would be bastions of queer rights in the Church. Reflecting on some of my preconceived ideas of participants, it does seem that I romanticised their seemingly marginalised status in the church. To be perfectly honest, I think I imagined that they would preach better, be more just, and more empathetic to everyone’s rights and freedoms. This was of course not always the case. I therefore had to navigate my own need to be transformative and activist with what seemed like some of my participants’ ‘complicity’<sup>26</sup> in the oppressive systems I was seeking to queer and question. A part of negotiating this tension involved reflecting on my own inclination to police the ways in which my participants performed ‘queer’ and thus challenging the theoretical lens of agency as linked to a particular performance of queer subversion. My research experience with Kagiso confronted me with this realisation.

Kagiso is a black gay minister who was working in a small town in the Free State and who heads up a committee in the MCSA which is working towards transformation on issues of

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<sup>26</sup> A notion which I troubled in the previous chapter and will continue to challenge in the findings.

same-sex marriage for lay and clergy. However, Kagiso's experiences inside and outside the Church, to a large extent, did not seem to be characterised by a theme of exclusion or marginalisation. In fact, he was able to navigate his way out of situations in the Church which would otherwise have resulted in a suspension or a discontinuation. Kagiso celebrated what he called a "*dominant*"<sup>27</sup> performance of masculinity which was in line with normative assumptions around men being stronger, being the breadwinner and making more decisions in relationships. He referred to more feminine gay men as "*bottoms*" and "*boys*" and explained that he would only date or engage in sex with "*bottoms*" who were also laity so as to maintain his "*dominant*" position as masculine and clergy in the relationship. He displayed, in my opinion, little empathy for his lesbian colleague, Lebo, who was, in his view, purposefully placed in a small town so she would not make trouble. Kagiso holds a few prominent leadership positions in the MCSA and it seems as though he navigates the politics of the church with ease. The patriarchy and heteronormativity weaved into the structures of the church, to a large extent, did not marginalise Kagiso – in fact, it supported him.

I challenged Kagiso in my questioning to reflect on why he was able to navigate the church so easily as opposed to some of his other queer colleagues. He concluded that it was because he knew the laws of the Church and operated inside of it. I would then catch myself from becoming 'the queer police' by demanding a more transformative conclusion and would redirect my questioning. While I think a queer methodology does involve questioning participants in ways which allow them to think through experiences in ways different to what they would normally do in everyday conversation, I also ran the risk of trying to impose certain ideas of queerness onto Kagiso's experience. This awareness has inspired the focus of chapter seven in this dissertation as I explore different ways of understanding agency, resistance and transformation through exploring the silence of participants.

By reflecting on becoming an ally/activist I do not mean to be self-indulgent nor is it part of a search for affirmation. Rather, I write about it because I think it is part of theorising methodology and reflecting on queer politics. A lengthy but apt quote by Saba Mahmood (2006: 208-209) is reflective of this:

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<sup>27</sup> In-text quotations from participants have been italicised in order to distinguish it from quotations in literature.

In the course of conducting fieldwork with this movement, I came to recognize that politically responsible scholarship entails not simply being faithful to the desires and aspirations of “my informants” and urging my audience to “understand and respect” the diversity of desires that characterizes our world today. Nor is it enough to reveal the assumptions of my own or my fellow scholars’ biases and (in)tolerances. As someone who has come to believe, along with a number of other feminists, that the political project of feminism is not predetermined but needs to be continually negotiated within specific contexts...then I think we need to rethink, with far more humility than we are accustomed to, what feminist politics really means.

While Mahmood situates her argument in feminist politics, it has encouraged me in this dissertation to ask similar questions and queer the queer politics in research. This has required me to situate myself firmly in the research not only as a heterosexual ‘outsider’ but as a woman of colour with deep as well as flimsy ties to being Methodist and Christian. It is through writing myself into the research process and reflecting on this in my findings that I can produce knowledge which subverts taken for granted assumptions and which serves a broader idea of a queer politic.

## 1.2. Sampling

When first embarking on my research I met with one of the District bishops in the MCSA in order to inquire into the process of obtaining institutional permission from the church. While he seemed interested in my topic he was also sceptical that I would find anyone who wanted to participate in my research because of what he interpreted as a culture of silence around acknowledging queer sexualities in the Church. I however, perhaps ignorantly remained confident that I already knew one openly queer minister through a committee we both briefly worked on together. I knew that she had publicly declared to the MCSA that she was “called and queer”<sup>28</sup> and I was certain she would participate and then connect me to other queer people in typical snowball sampling fashion. I emailed her shortly after receiving institutional permission and ethical clearance. She replied by way of apology and said that she would not be able to participate. I was perhaps too certain that her openness would equate to participation and her unwillingness to participate in itself disrupted any assumptions I had around being ‘out’ and queer<sup>29</sup>. She was not the only one who would not participate in my research. Through

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<sup>28</sup> This was the phrase relayed to me by others who had heard her declare so on public church platforms. It is also the inspiration behind the title of my dissertation and while I cannot name her here, I have personally expressed to her my gratitude for the use of the phrase.

<sup>29</sup> An analysis of being “out” or “not out” can be found in the chapter on boundary queering in this dissertation.

the participants who did agree to be part of my study I came to know about a group who they called the ‘Clergy Queens’ or simply ‘the Queens’. I learned that this was a group of older white men, and a few older white women whose queerness was an open secret in the Church. That is to say that everyone seemed to know that they were gay, lesbian or queer although they had never stated this publicly. I asked each of my participants if they knew anyone in this group – they all did – and if they could connect me with a Clergy Queen. While some of my participants tried to initiate a connection, their attempts were unsuccessful. When I asked my participants why they thought the Clergy Queens would not participate, they reasoned that it was because they “*didn’t want to rock the boat*”. While the narratives and experiences of those who could or would not be part of the study are somewhat silent in this dissertation, the silences too reveal something about their experiences of the Church culture. In chapter seven I analyse how silence and not wanting to “*rock the boat*” also become agentic acts.

Those who did participate in my research were sampled by the successful use of snowball sampling. Through the connection of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), an NGO working in the area of religion and sexuality in South Africa, I was able to connect with two participants, Sam and Ecclesia. The minister who initially declined to participate in this study eventually connected me with her friend, Lebo. Sam connected me with Bradley and Lebo connected me to Kagiso and Anele. By the time I met with Anele, I had run out of time and resources to pursue any new connections. While I cannot claim to explore every expression of queer within every context possible in the MCSA; it was clear that snowball sampling was the only way I could have found any participants for my study. Further, by doing in-depth ethnographic work, the dearth of data allows for a critical exploration of queer clergies’ varied experiences of the MCSA and the meaning it has for understanding the intersection of religion and sexuality.

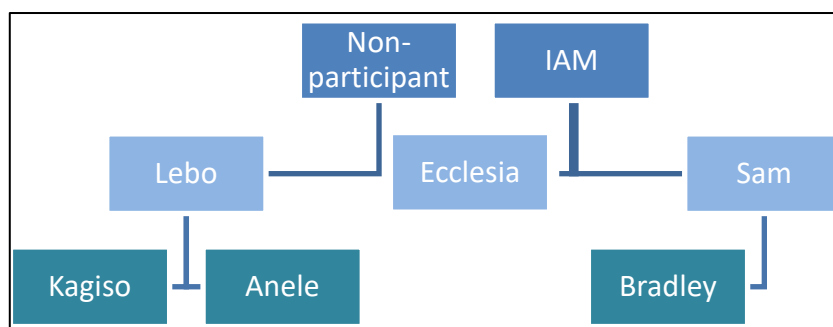


Figure 1: Snowball Sampling of Participants

### **1.3. Methods of data production**

My first point of contact with potential participants was either through email, phone call or phone messaging. I would explain that the purpose of my study was to explore how clergy, who self-identify as queer, experience the MCSA and that our mutual contact thought that they may be interested and willing to participate. I rarely had to qualify the term queer but sometimes used it in conjunction with LGBTI+ to explain that anyone identifying across a range of sexualities and non-binary genders could participate. Once we had agreed upon dates, I spent seven to eight days with my participants accompanying them in their daily routines and everyday activities. Most of my participants lived some distance from where I was based. I would therefore arrive in their area on a Saturday and attend their church services on the Sunday. In these first two days I tried to arrange an initial meeting with participants so that I could clarify any questions they might have and to set the tone for the week by being informal, making jokes and establishing an initial rapport. I would then accompany my participants for the week, often meeting them every day at their manse or the office and then accompanying them on their activities for that day. My time with each participant varied depending on their schedule and availability. I made use of three methods during these research encounters namely, interviews, observations and the use of a research diary.

#### ***Interviews***

Interviews with participants were a combination of devoted semi-structured life history interviews and more informal conversation snippets which happened while driving, shopping, sharing a meal or sitting in the office. While Kagiso, Bradley, Ecclesia and Lebo were able to devote a significant amount of time throughout the week to the life history interviews, others such as Sam and Anele, rarely had a chance to sit down for a formal interview and therefore the life history was stitched together through a series of conversations.

In interviews and conversations participants were asked about their childhood, their time in seminary, their vocation, their family life or relationships and their experiences of the MCSA. In follow-up interviews participants were asked to speak about their experiences of and with the MCSA. In interviews I continuously encouraged participants to provide examples and stories to illustrate their experiences. This broad approach to interviewing allowed participants to raise themes which were important to them and to co-produce knowledge in the interview along with me. Broad questions also allowed me to explore various unanticipated possibilities

of intersectional identities which shaped their experiences. Towards the end of my time with participants I would check how they had experienced the research and whether there was anything they wanted to tell me which we had not yet spoken about or if they had any concerns or questions. Sam's response illustrates the atmosphere I tried to create around my research.

Sam: ... I think what surprised me about how, it's been very natural, very organic so how things like just emerge in organic conversation, rather than sitting down with a structured piece of questions that you then methodically work through. I honestly think you get quite I suppose different types of answers to that.

The "*different types of answers*" speak to the strength of ethnographic research and interviewing and the ways in which it is able to produce and explore ordinary, lived experiences. All participants seemed to have enjoyed the process. Kagiso compared it to an interview he had done the previous week which was in the form of a questionnaire and said that the process of this research had felt much more personal and meaningful.

### ***Observations***

While interviews provided important insight into the meaning making of participants, it is important to note that interviews alone would not have been sufficiently queer enough to produce lived experience. Kath Browne and Catherine Nash (2010: 1) query this by asking, if we understand people as "fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming, how can we gather 'data' from those tenuous and fleeting subjects using the standard methods of data collection such as interviews or questionnaires?". Interviews are temporary, fixed in time and do not in themselves convey the destabilised position of both researcher and researched. Therefore, in addition to interviews, I also observed and participated in participants' daily lives throughout my week with them.

I asked participants to allow me to be part of their lives as far as they were comfortable with for the week. It became clear early on in the research process that participants were hesitant to have me accompany them to meetings or sit in their office, not out of fear of compromising their confidentiality or for other ethical reasons but rather because they felt I might find it boring and mundane. I quickly learnt to emphasise in my first meeting with participants that they need not manufacture a week for me but that I was also interested in the routine and mundane. I spent as much time with participants as they allowed and mostly involved spending time with them in the office, accompanying them during their pastoral work or attending

meetings. With some participants I was able to attend at least one church service, however, with others I was able to attend up to five during the course of the week. At times I was invited into the more personal everyday spaces of my participants which included family suppers, school runs and movie nights. This allowed me to understand how the boundaries between institutionalised religion and family or personal life were permeable and also the ways in which participants tried to separate the two. However, with some participants my ability to observe was limited. For example, Ecclesia was no longer working as a minister in the MCSA and therefore I only conducted two semi-structured interviews with her. My observations with Kagiso were also limited because he seemed to assume that I wanted to spend the majority of my time conducting interviews with him. Despite my emphasis on simply observing his everyday life, and much to my disappointment, he “*cleared his diary*” for the week and I amassed a total of eight hours of audio recording from our interviews. However, I did manage to accompany him to a few church meetings and church services.

### ***Research diary***

Throughout my study I kept a research diary which I used to make notes about the research process and to reflect on my time spent with participants. In the diary I documented my observations and recorded the dynamics of different encounters as well as how I experienced different spatial contexts which included the smells, sounds and objects present in the space. I also used the diary to reflect on my positionality and to record my thoughts and feelings about the research process and what I was encountering. My research diary also enabled me to reflect on similarities and differences between interview encounters and to identify key topics which required further follow up. In this way I was able to conduct ongoing preliminary analysis which has allowed me to conduct in-depth fieldwork and produce a richer theorisation of my methodology.

## **2. Making sense of the data**

### **2.1 Transcription of voice recordings**

Most interviews and conversations in my study were audio-recorded. Those which could not be recorded were documented in as much details as possible in my research diary. A hired transcriptionist and I transcribed all audio recordings verbatim. The key below (adapted from Vengenai, 2017: vi) was used by myself and the transcriber so that the transcriptions would be



consistent in format. In order to further ensure consistency, I listened to audio recordings again while reading the transcriptions to ensure that all pauses, laughter and language were recorded correctly. I also added notes to transcriptions of memories of particular dynamics which occurred in interviews for example, someone entering the room or a phone call interrupting the conversation. Recording contextual dynamics was important for the ethnographic nature of my research as it allowed me to consider whether shifts in the interview contexts influenced the conversation. Emotion and laughter were equally important as it illustrated the tone and the significance of humour and silence as it related to different topics or moments of conversation.

### Key to interview transcripts

#### Symbol in transcript

Comment [ ]

(1)

(Laughter)

[**Megan:** Comment]

[...]

*Italics*

#### Meaning

Words in square brackets are what the researcher adds to clarify a participant's comment

Pauses are in seconds and are represented by a number in brackets, e.g. one second (1) two seconds (2) etc. to indicate the length of the pause.

Laughter, emotional tone, and non-verbal expressions are noted in brackets.

When participants and I are speaking at the same time, what each one says is put in brackets and appears in the same line.

Conversation has not been quoted in full and certain portions have been omitted

Emphasis by the researcher; or used when colloquial language or jargon is used. When appropriate this followed by the English translation in brackets.

## 2.2 Coding

I used Atlas TI to code data from my transcribed interviews, as well as my typed research diary. Due to the exploratory nature of my data I initially used inductive coding to organise my data. This resulted in the generation of fifty two different codes and, because I was interested in the dialectic nature of my participants' experiences – in other words how their personal/individual experiences and the institution of the MCSA interacted, there seemed to be countless ways in which I could group these codes into themes. I therefore turned to deductive coding which meant that I organised my data according to predetermined themes which reflected the everyday, ordinary experiences of my participants' lives. These themes were 1) marriage,

relationships and families, 2) vocation and calling, and 3) sex and sexuality. These broad themes allowed me to see patterns emerging in the way participants spoke, experienced and embodied the everydayness of their life as it was entangled in the MCSA and religion more broadly. I was then able to filter the inductively generated codes into the broader themes which became the findings chapters of this dissertation.

### **3. Ethics and methodological limitations**

I received institutional permission from the MCSA to conduct my research with the institution. A letter of information and an informed consent form was drawn up and was provided to participants prior to conducting any interviews or observations. Before any interview began I explained the informed consent forms verbally and discussed any questions or concerns they had. Once informed consent forms were collected, they were stored separately to other data in my home in order to maintain the confidentiality of participants. All audio-recorded interviews and transcriptions are also stored in password protected folders on a digital cloud storage platform.

All participants were informed, verbally and through the informed consent form, that their participation was voluntary and that they were able to withdraw their participation from the research at any point in the process without incurring any negative consequences. I also communicated verbally and via the consent forms that connections between participants and responses would be kept confidential and anonymous by assigning pseudonyms. Participants were sent their narrative introductions as well as the extracts which were used in this dissertation for their approval. This allowed participants to ascertain whether they were comfortable with the level of anonymity provided in the research. Pseudonyms and extracts were removed or modified as and when participants requested. Through this process of continuous transparency I established that because I was a participant observer and people had seen me share spaces with participants during my fieldwork, any information regarding dates and geography would be too revealing of my participants' identities. Therefore, in order to maintain anonymity, I have opted to omit date and place references for interview extracts. Keeping open lines of communication with participants also enabled me to build on the principles of co-production, allyship and activism which I advocate for in my research design. It allowed my participants to be actively involved in the writing up process and provided a means of queering the traditional researcher-researched dynamic. This can be evidenced by Sam's response after we had communicated via email on how I would use some of her extracts.

She ended her response by saying, “*Thank you for getting in contact with about the research. I find that helpful - like I’m not some bizarre oddity that is on display for the academy, (like the circuses and fairs of old)*”.

Through the various data production strategies presented in this chapter I have sought to weave an ethics of accountability, caring and reflexivity throughout the production and analysis of my data. The queer sociological ethnographic framing used in my research has provided me with a robust combination of co-production, kinship, allyship and activism which, as I have shown, enabled me to develop and employ ethical practices which incorporated a consciousness of my positionality and the fluid power relations between myself and participants. That being said, I also recognise that my ability to co-produce this data has limits. The co-production of knowledge did not stretch as far as the process of writing up. In the production of this dissertation there is a clear power distinction in that I use a theoretical lens to impose analysis on my participants’ narratives and experiences. This is of course required in the production of knowledge and queering the writing process would no doubt demand different criteria for the assessment and production of a doctoral dissertation which would certainly present its own difficulties and limitations.

#### **4. Introduction to participants**

In this section I introduce those who participated in this study. Informed by queer understandings of identity this overview is not one which provides a static snapshot of demographic or biographical information, rather, I have chosen to introduce each participant narratively. The purpose of this is to draw the reader into the social world of the clergy and to allow the reader to engage the extractions of narratives and experiences in later chapters with some sense of familiarity with those whose lives these excerpts represent. At this point I do not offer much in the way of an analysis of these narratives but present them as overviews of participants’ life narratives. These presentations are sometimes inconsistent, fluid and incomplete – as they should be. I have provided an overview of participants’ childhood, their historical relationship with religion and church and their current vocation and family life. The narratives of participants are not equal in length and specificity; this is influenced by the amount of detail participants provided but also by the degree of anonymity participants have requested. All narratives have been approved and co-produced with participants and pseudonyms have been used apart from in the case of Ecclesia who has requested that her real name be used.

#### 4.1. Ecclesia

Ecclesia spent the majority of her childhood growing up between KwaZulu-Natal and Johannesburg. Her parents got divorced when she was quite young and her father died when she was a teenager. Ecclesia described her mother as an alcoholic with whom she continued to have a difficult relationship. In remembering her childhood Ecclesia spoke a lot about the ways in which she had to take responsibility for her younger siblings when she was quite young herself; this included financial and household responsibilities. She reasoned that this early exposure to parental responsibility was why she rebelled in her twenties and has resisted having her own children. In high school she was academically strong and played a variety of sports. She described this space as a white Afrikaans space, one in which she found belonging and popularity and having attended a Model C<sup>30</sup> school during the apartheid era it was a racially segregated space.

Ecclesia described herself as being raised apostolic charismatic in the Apostolic Faith Mission Church. However, because they moved so often while she was growing up there was not a specific church congregation which she regarded as her family's church or her 'home' church. This was unlike any of my other participants who all grew up belonging to Methodist Churches and who had generations of previous family members who were Methodist. Ecclesia's grandparents from her father's side had a significant influence on her religious life. She spoke about how when they visited her grandparents as teenagers they were made to sit around the dining table and engage in bible study and prayer. Ecclesia described this as a "*strong enforcement of belief*".

Speaking about her "*sexual orientation*" as "*lesbian*", Ecclesia said that she knew from a young age that she was attracted to girls. As a teenager and young adult, she had dated boys but at the age of twenty-one she was introduced to a group of friends and was particularly attracted to a specific woman. She then decided to break up with her boyfriend at the time. She told him that she was attracted to a woman and he responded by saying in Afrikaans, "*meng jou met die semels, dan vreet die varke jou op*", in English this translates to "mix with the barley and the pigs will eat you". In Afrikaans this phrase is interpreted as a Biblically inspired judgement of

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<sup>30</sup> "Model C" refers to the apartheid governance structure of whites-only schools and is still a commonly used term to refer to majority white or previously whites-only schools.

queer sexuality. This religious judgement is something Ecclesia struggled with throughout her journey into the ministry.

Initially after breaking up with her boyfriend Ecclesia entered into a stage which she described as her more rebellious years. This rebellion was linked to her rejection of institutionalised religion which lasted until she experienced what she described as an “*encounter with God*”. Ecclesia says, “...when I was in my early 20s I had an encounter, what I explain as an encounter with God. And I recommitted”. Her encounter with God occurred during an outing in nature with friends while she was sitting on a rock near the water and sensed God speak to her. Ecclesia explains how she felt at that moment, “And I remember being very emotional and crying. And yes. I suppose I was also searching at that stage for not only purpose, but also, I was a little bit like a leaf in the wind. Finding, wanting direction. Yes, and believing that this is God. [That’s] how I interpreted it”. In order to recommit and be acceptable to God she “*tried to conform and live the celibate life for a number of years*”. This also involved her joining a group which claimed to convert queer people to heterosexuality. Ecclesia was so involved that she even visited the United States of America to speak on behalf of the group. This recommitment to God also involved her accepting her calling to ministry. Ecclesia experienced this as follows, “*in that original experience...there was the sense that God is calling me to, the terminology was used [to]plant churches. You know, God is calling me to extend the kingdom of God*”.

In response to this calling Ecclesia tried first to become a pastor in the church to which she belonged at the time. However, her pastor advised her that she could only pursue her calling once she had a husband who would “*be the head*”. She then “*stumbled*” upon the Methodist Church, a denomination which did ordain women. She joined the Church and later entered into the process of being a minister in the MCSA. She described to me that finding this Methodist Church was also “*find[ing] amazing treasures of theology, grace and love*”. Later, upon entering seminary Ecclesia “*encountered different perspectives on interpreting Scripture with regards to sexual ethics*”. It was during this time that she engaged in what she described as an experimental relationship to see if God would “*leave her*” while she dated a woman. She described the experience as follows, “*It’s not a good place to be at. It’s not a healing space. It’s not a life-giving space. And out of that relationship I came to the conclusion that it was okay. God was okay with me. And I was okay with God. And...also there are alternative Scriptures on this particular subject. And there’s so much more to learn. You know it’s not the end of my learning experience*”. Seminary, however, was not a space of complete acceptance

and openness. On her ordination weekend a good friend of hers “outed” Ecclesia to her group leader. Ecclesia explains that she was called into a meeting with the group leader, “*So she [the group leader] said to me she’s just heard that I’m you know homosexual or a lesbian. And she said is it true? And I said yes. And then she moved the conversation from that to her own daughter that was a lesbian. And that her husband had trouble accepting this. And she spoke about her own family for a long while. And then she moved back to me. And she said well its fine you’re getting ordained tomorrow. Just keep your head down. And that was the end of the conversation*”.

Ecclesia was a minister for nine years before publicly declaring her intention to marry her same-sex partner and after which she was excommunicated by the Church<sup>31</sup>. When I met Ecclesia, she had since divorced and remarried and was currently heading an NGO working on the intersections of religion and sexuality. Due to the lengthy court battle which ensued after her excommunication from the MCSA, Ecclesia became a relatively well-known figure amongst Methodists and to others who had seen her case in the media. In addition, in this dissertation I have used data from an interview between Ecclesia and I (with her permission) which we conducted in the presence of a third-year undergraduate ethics class at the University of the Western Cape in 2018 as part of a module titled “Moral Discourses of Gender and Sexuality”. Therefore, due to the publicised nature of her narrative Ecclesia deemed it unnecessary to maintain her anonymity through a pseudonym. However, other measures have been employed in order to maintain Ecclesia’s informed consent through the research process. This included gaining permission to use this introduction and particular extracts from our conversations.

#### **4.2. Bradley**

Bradley grew up in Durban with his mother, father and younger brother. His father passed away a few months before I met with him. He described his childhood as “*challenging*”. His mother has schizophrenia and his father was an alcoholic. He had a closer relationship with his mother and continued to be seen as his mother’s “*favourite*” by his brother. This was partly because he

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<sup>31</sup> For a more detailed description of this case see chapter one in this dissertation.

said he could speak to his mother more easily than his brother could. Bradley did ballet and tap in school and described church rather than school as a place of belonging.

Speaking about his religious life Bradley said his family was “*not a particularly church going family*” and that he found the Methodist Church “*accidentally*” whilst accompanying a friend to a confirmation class. He described his faith journey as taking off “*quite quickly*” after that first “*experience of Jesus at confirmation*”. He quickly became involved in the youth group and the local Church. Bradley described this Methodist Church as “*Rhema*<sup>32</sup> *in disguise*”, referring to the charismatic worship style of the Church as well as the literal way in which the Bible was seen to be interpreted. He also described the Church as “*very white and English*”. While Bradley described his childhood context as “*white*” and described encounters where he acknowledged his white privilege especially in relation to being able to speak about queer sexuality in the Church, he also disidentified with the racial classification of whiteness as an identity marker. He distanced himself particularly from the whiteness as performed by his brother’s friends, he explained, “*I don’t perceive myself as very white (laughing) that sounds odd but actually I struggle with whiteness in the sense that I, I come from that, I had all the privilege of it, but it’s not me and it’s not my life anymore.*”

Bradley initially pursued a nursing degree but he had also previously “*felt a sense of call into ministry*”. While attending a youth leadership training programme he saw an opportunity to enter into the ministry and cancelled his nursing degree and registered to be a youth worker. The training programme collapsed shortly thereafter and he then registered to study theology at a South African university. Soon after beginning his theological studies Bradley became the pastoral assistant at his Church and three years later he candidated for the ministry. During this time of studying and working in the church Bradley began dating a girl from his youth group and shortly before candidating they were married. Bradley spoke about this marriage in relation to his evangelical church: “*... We had both grown up in that evangelical place and sort of (uhm) I don’t know if I look back at it I don’t know how it happened but we ended up getting together...and when I candidated it was sort of like the right thing to do to sort of, let’s get married you know and we were good friends and I spoke to her about some of my questions around my sexuality and stuff but at that stage it was kind of just ‘oh, you know, this just needs to be pushed aside’, so (uhm) my early part of my ministry I was married but the marriage*

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<sup>32</sup> Rhema Bible Church is a popular independent charismatic, neo-Pentecostal church in South Africa.

*wasn't a particularly happy one because I never felt comfortable in that space, I suppose we got married for the wrong reasons, she was looking for security (uhm) and I was the nice guy you know who would go shopping..."*

Upon candidating and entering into the ordination process required by the MCSA, Bradley became exposed to a broader representation of Methodism which included black Methodist ways of worship and more critical readings of Scripture. Bradley described this experience to me: *"At that time...the church that I had known then wasn't really the church that I came to know after candidating and leaving that small bubble that I was in in my local society."* Bradley served in two congregations before leaving the Church. During his time at his second congregation he got divorced and also *"came out"*. Bradley described himself as queer and gay at different times during our interviews. Later he left the Church after a local preacher stood up one Sunday when Bradley was leading the service and *"said he's resigning because he refuses to share the pulpit with somebody who's living an ungodly life..."*. Having left the Church Bradley worked as a social worker in an old age home. He remained *"in good standing"* with the Church meaning that he maintained his status as a member of the MCSA and continued to attend important meetings in the life of the Church. He soon realised that he wanted to be back in the Church. Bradley described to me the way in which he decided to navigate this return, *"...if God called me way back then knowing I was gay, I've tried to be straight, that didn't work, I've tried to be gay and not a minister and this isn't working for me so maybe the ultimate conclusion is that God actually wants me in the church as me (laughs) so I've tried the two other ways and both didn't work out for me, so let's give it another try and I thought let me do it this way, in a new way."* This *"new way"* meant that when Bradley asked the Church for permission to re-enter the ministry he also told them that he would do so as a gay man who would be living with his partner. The Church accepted him regardless. When I met Bradley, he was working in the Western Cape in his first congregation since re-entering the ministry.

#### **4.3. Lebo**

Lebo grew up with her mother in the Western Cape as her father and step father passed away when she was young. Her *"gran"*, her maternal grandmother, was a constant presence in her life and provided the *"emotional support"* which she did not experience with her mother who she described as *"strict"* and *"over-bearing"*. Her mother's strict nature meant that there were limited places where Lebo was permitted to go as a child namely, her school, to visit her



grandmother and to church. Lebo described herself as a reserved child who struggled with her body image, although she more readily embraced who she was during her high school years.

Lebo grew up in a Methodist church to which her mother also belonged. Her mother was affiliated to the Women's Manyano, a uniformed women's organisation in the MCSA to which mostly black African women belong. As a child Lebo also belonged to the Wesley Guild, a mostly black youth movement in the church. I describe these organisations racially because like the rest of South African society, the Methodist church is still largely structured according to the racial segregation and hierarchy imposed during apartheid<sup>33</sup>. Lebo said that she knew she wanted to be a minister since she was fifteen years old. She described this as her conversion moment,

Lebo: I remember (2) hearing a sermon and it was Easter...I can't remember clearly the Scripture...but I remember him [the minister at the time preaching about, looking for the living among the dead, it was resurrection and I remember him telling a story about, it was an illustration of a deaf women who had been alone for most of her life, because when people look at her, all they see is her disability, and so she never had a boyfriend or a companion and she was lonely, she just went about her life by herself. And then this guy from out of town comes and, when he looks at her he does not see her disability but he sees a woman and he's taken by this woman and so they get into a relationship...and now [the minister] says, because this woman is deaf, the only thing that she could tell people was that she had found someone, so it does not matter what you are asking her but her response is, "I have found someone". And he was saying, the risen Christ is like that with us, it does not matter, what comes with who we are, the only thing that God knows is that that one sheep that's missing, is now found and it's, it's God rejoicing. And I think that was the point, for me, made me understand God's love not just for me, but all of God's children. And that was my conversion with me.

Lebo went to seminary straight out of high school. It was during her time at seminary that Lebo said she began to acknowledge and explore her sexuality.

Whilst in seminary she shared a flat with a friend. They spent most of their time together and attended the same classes. During that time, they were both dating other women but neither

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<sup>33</sup> I discuss this more analytically in relation to participants' experiences in the chapter to follow.

knew that the other was dating someone of the same sex. Lebo describes how they came to learn about each other's sexuality.

Lebo: Kagiso and Anele came to visit us, and we always knew because we came from the same district. The four of us. So Kagiso and Anele were kind of known in the district, like they were gay and they were together [Megan: Oh, so they were partners?] They weren't, they were just friends, but because they were both gay, people assumed that they were together. So, we have this conversation and we ask them, so what happened, and they tell these stories of all the wild things they did in the District and why they assume they were together and so they asked us, "Are you guys together?" And we kind of look at each other, "No (in a sheepish tone), why would you say that?"...And so the conversation came from that. When we were alone, I was like "Dude, I'm just going to tell you so, and she was like ya, me too". And that was basically it.

Later Lebo and her flat mate dated during seminary and for a short while after. Lebo said that she "*came out*" to her mother in an "unhealthy way" which resulted in them not speaking for some time. However, this relationship had improved by the time I had met her.

Her journey to candidate as a minister was not a smooth one. The process of becoming a candidate minister during Lebo's time at seminary involved her having to pass a screening in which a committee assessed her academic understanding of theology and her calling<sup>34</sup>. During her first screening the committee rejected her as they felt she was too young to become a candidate minister. This led to her becoming angry at the Church and identifying as atheist even while continuing her studies at seminary. Then in her second year of seminary Lebo was suspended for a year because her and her flat mate had hosted a gathering with alcohol in their flat - something which was against the regulations of the seminary. The suspension meant that she could not attend screening for another year which delayed her journey to ordination further.

When I met her, she was a probationer working in the Eastern Cape and in her second to last year before she would become an ordained minister. She also had a son whom she had adopted and was dating a woman from her church who had two daughters of her own. My time spent with her was often in her partner's house along with other members of the family.

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<sup>34</sup> More detail will be given on this process in chapter six.

#### 4.4. Sam

Sam grew up in Durban in a relatively upmarket part of what was an apartheid constructed Indian township. She lived with her father, mother, her younger sister and brother and her paternal grandparents. Her grandfather however died when she was still young. Her home environment was not an easy one and she described her parents' relationship as violent and abusive towards each other. While she was close with her brother who is autistic and who she enjoyed playing games with, she described herself and her sister as opposites: "*She liked making towns and cities and I liked making warships.*" Sam did experience close relationships with a group of friends in her neighbourhood - relationships which she continued to enjoy as loving and affirming. She described herself and her group of friends as "*nerds*" who enjoyed watching sci-fi and playing board games.

Sam's religious upbringing was significantly informed by the influence of her grandparents. Her father's side were Methodists, her grandfather was a preacher who she remembered as a "*very good storyteller*" and growing up she would often attend the Methodist church with her grandmother. During school holidays she would visit her maternal grandmother who was equally devoted to religion but who was Catholic. She therefore grew up with a knowledge and familiarity of both denominations.

Sam spoke in great detail about her gendered and racial identity – more so than most of my other participants. This was partly because her mixed racial background and her sexuality and gender expression was something which she continuously needed to navigate through her childhood and into her young adulthood. According to the apartheid racial classification system, Sam's mother was classified "*Other coloured*" and her dad "*Indian.*" Sam did not use specific terms to identify herself racially but spoke about the joking way her family referred to her and other lighter skinned members of the family as "*spooks*" which translates from Afrikaans to mean ghosts. She also spoke about the way Christianity influenced her parents' and particularly her father's negotiation of race. Her anglicised name was reflective of her father's instruction that "*you're an Indian, but you're not like them*". Sam explained that "*... in the mainline church space, the Methodist, Anglican, Catholic space, you were Indian but you weren't like them. They were barbarians. You were cultured*". This meant that they were punished if they "*spoke Indian*" (referring to particular pronunciations of English words) and they were not allowed to wear typically Indian clothing such as sarees or Punjabis.

After school Sam registered for an agricultural engineering degree. However, during her last year of high school and first year of university she wanted to change her field of study, she explains: *“I really went through this thing where I really [wanted] whatever I do with my life to have meaning...I didn’t think that being an engineer or whatever was meaningful”*. She soon left engineering and pursued a theology degree while working for a local Christian NGO. She went to her first formation phase into ministry when she was twenty-two. Sam experienced this time partly as a violent and disturbing one. There was a group of fellow men who were ministerial candidates in her programme who continuously sexually harassed and verbally abused her as well as other women candidates. When she addressed this with the leadership of the formation programme they responded by saying *“you have to learn how to manage it and deal with it yourself”*. Sam experienced numerous instances of sexual abuse and violence by other men in the church, many of them clergy themselves. Violence and being violated was something which was particularly experienced by lesbian or queer women clergy participants and was not something which the men in my study spoke to me about.

While Sam used the discursive identifiers of lesbian, queer and woman at different times in our conversations she also vacillated between terms to describe different ‘stages’ of her life. She used the term *“gay”* when she spoke about her sexuality during her time in the formation period of becoming a minister which reflected how she was *“questioning”* of her sexuality at the time. At other times she disidentified with the category of woman: *“...even the term women, I can’t really own it, like I...get grouped into the group because I’ve got boobs and a vagina but I can’t really own it, as a, as a proper thing for me”*.

Since her ordination Sam had been very involved in various international and local committees in the Church and was well-respected because of her intellect. When I met her, she was working in a congregation in KwaZulu-Natal and was married to her covenant partner<sup>35</sup> together with whom she had a young son.

#### **4.5. Kagiso**

Kagiso was raised in the Eastern Cape by his two grandmothers whom he described as coming from two different backgrounds. While the one was educated and conservative, the other had

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<sup>35</sup> I discuss this in more detail in chapter seven.

little formal schooling and he described her lovingly as “*flamboyant*”. Kagiso was one of five children and because his parents had him at a young age and whilst they were not married, he grew up calling his father “*Bhuti*” meaning brother and his mother “*Sisi*” meaning sister, a term which he continued to use to refer to her. Kagiso was one of the first black students to receive a bursary to attend a particularly esteemed formerly white high school in the Eastern Cape. However, after experiencing extreme racism he eventually left to attend what he experienced as a more diverse and welcoming school. Kagiso mentioned that he was a member of the junior city council, head boy in high school and a prominent youth leader in the Methodist Church. His leadership skills were character traits which others in his childhood seemed to value and which he seemed to value in himself. He also described himself as being a nerd and as feminine when he was a teenager: “*I was a gentleman. I’ve slightly become something else (laughter), life teaches you differently. I was (2) I was not a very outspoken child. I was your typical nerd. And I’ve always been in touch with my feminine side... I was more fashionable than most of my friends who, even though I played rugby at high school but I had a clear fashion sense, you know I loved good things, I loved good tastes whereas boys would just be roughed up, and you know (uhm)...I know for a fact that at that time, I had already known that there was an inclination towards other, or people of the same sex, but it was (3) unthinkable*”.

Kagiso worked in the private sector in Cape Town for a number of years after school. It was during this time that he became more accepting of his sexuality. After having dated another man for some time, he decided to tell his family about his sexuality and his partner. He described the experience to me as follows,

Kagiso: ...So I get there, my dad is obviously sitting as the head of the house, so it’s my mom and myself. And I cannot remember the words verbatim but I remember [I] said (uh) “Look I want to come share with you that I’m living a happy life in Cape Town, I’ve come to a place where I’ve accepted who I have become and I choose to be with whomever I want to fall in love with.” ...I never said gay, I tried to use as much (3) acceptable words, you know to try and lead them towards the thing that I am bringing and it’s a big thing on the table. And I never said gay. And I think I spoke for a good twenty minutes and my dad said, “Before you continue I want to ask you one question, I hear you use the word choice a lot in your fumbings (3)...Are you saying to me that whatever you are bringing here, you are born with it or was it a choice that you picked up in Cape Town?” Now because I know how my dad thinks I wanted to respond in a way that he would meet me half way, so my response was, “I don’t know if you can be born the way that I am born, I have no knowledge of it I must still go and

find out but I do know that one thing over the years, I've begun to understand that I'm not as you would think that I am, that I am not abnormal, I'm very normal, but I am different to what would be seen as norm. But I've come to accept it and I choose therefore to live as the Kagiso that I am." And his next line was (3), "If you said to me you were born with it at least I'll be able to blame your mother, if you then say to me it is a choice I want you to go back to where you come from and unchoice your choice. Up until that choice is unchoiced I choose that you will not be part of this family."

For a number of years Kagiso was not able to be in contact with his family, including the "flamboyant" grandmother and sisters whom he had been close with and who had accepted his sexuality warmly. It was during this time away from his family however that he also began to explore his calling to ministry which he received while attending a Methodist World Council gathering in 2002. He eventually pursued his calling in 2010. This delay he explained was because he enjoyed the luxurious lifestyle that he could afford with his current salary and was reluctant to trade it in for a minister's salary. However, in order to pursue a life in ministry Kagiso felt that he wanted his family to support him. This led to his decision to return to his parents and to eventually marry an ex-girlfriend of his. They later divorced during his time in seminary.

When I met Kagiso he was working in the Free State and was in his second to last year of probation with the expectation to be ordained the following year. Kagiso is a confident man who was quite formal in his dress and mannerisms. When I met him, he had taken a break from his most recent relationship.

#### **4.6. Anele**

Anele was raised in the Western Cape and grew up with his mother, father, two older sisters and two younger brothers. He spoke fondly of his parents' relationship with each other and told me that they called each other "*friend*" as a term of endearment. In school Anele was relatively popular and described himself as part of the 'cool guys' who dressed fashionably and were popular with girls. However, Anele often shied away from girls.

Anele was “*open*” but “*not open*” about his sexuality<sup>36</sup>. This meant that Anele never used a term to describe his sexuality and often left his narrative open ended as illustrated in this extract:

Megan: Okay. And you said to get girls? [Asking about why the friendship group at school was so interested in dressing fashionably]

Anele: Yes.

Megan: Was that kind of the point?

Anele: Yes. When you are at that age you know especially if you think you’re not sure.

Megan: Okay.

Anele: Of what is really happening. You think you know. The friends...

Megan: Yes.

Anele: You cannot even share this with them you know. And you like you just want to...cover all these thing and, yes.

Megan: So did you feel that already at that age that you weren’t sure?

Anele: Yes.

Megan: And I’m assuming you’re saying?

Anele: Yes.

Megan: I’m filling in the blanks for myself. But are you saying like you weren’t sure if you liked girls or boys?

Anele: Yes.

Megan: Okay.

Anele: I was very soft from a very young age.

Megan: When you mean soft, what do you mean by soft?

Anele: Girlish.<sup>37</sup>

When he was in high school Anele had his first kiss with a boy who he described as “*my first love*” but which at the time he experienced as an incident which made him feel “sick”. It also led to him wanting to do “*research*” on his sexuality. This involved him speaking to a group of openly queer men in his neighbourhood who told him about how men sleep with other men. He said that he struggled to accept his attraction to men at first and was especially concerned

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<sup>36</sup> This has led me to explore in this dissertation his experience in relation to literature which has problematized the notion of “coming out” in relation to the politics of marriage so prevalent in the current institutional discourse of the MCSA.

<sup>37</sup> I explore participants’ connotations of gay and feminine in chapter six.

with how this would be perceived publicly. He said, “[I knew that] this is me. But because of family, because of church, because of the society you know, school, the friends I had at the time. The ‘me’ that I just discovered now, cannot...exist. That ‘me’ will be buried somewhere”. He then dated a woman for six years by whom he later had a daughter. However, they broke up later after an incident where his then girlfriend accused him of being gay. When I met Anele he said that he had not told his family about his sexuality but that he thought they all knew anyway: “They see the people I’m with. They see you know my friends and stuff. And there was just before I went to seminary there was this other person I was dating. Who was very obvious you know (laughing)”.

Similarly, to Bradley and Ecclesia, Anele stumbled upon the Methodist Church one Sunday when he and his group of school friends were making their way between churches “looking for girls”. They happened upon the Methodist Church to which his father belonged and remained there because of the lively presence of the Wesley Guild in the church. He attended the church for the next few weeks and eventually joined and became an active member of the Wesley Guild himself. Anele described this as a place of belonging and church became a place where he served in multiple capacities, however, he explained that he felt that he could never do enough in church.

After school Anele worked in various NGOs and private sector companies. Eventually the minister of his church approached him and asked him if he wanted to serve communion, he excitedly agreed. The minister then explained that the only way he could do so and the only way he would feel like he was doing enough in church was by becoming an ordained minister. He took some convincing but eventually paid for himself to go to seminary where he soon realised that this was the capacity in which he wanted to work in the church. When I met Anele he was living in Gauteng with his daughter and was in his second last year before becoming an ordained minister.

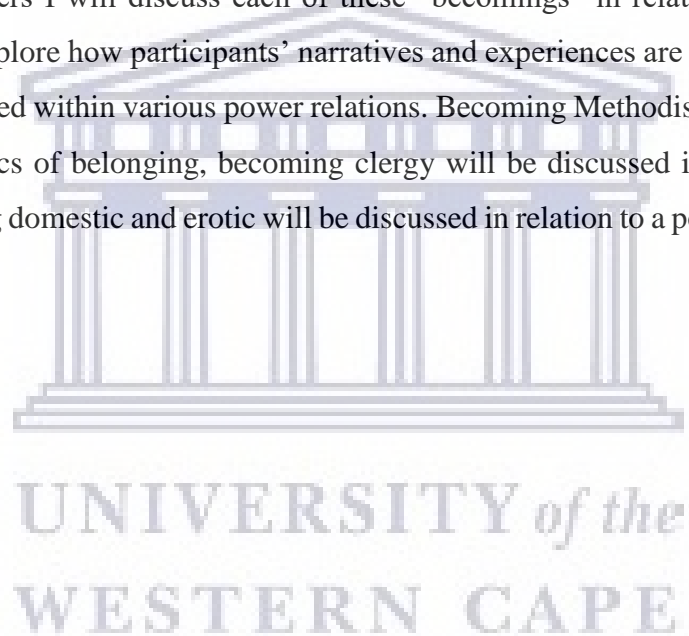
## **5. Analysis and representation of findings**

I analysed my data using narrative and ethnographic tools which enabled me to interrogate the relationships and actions which are implicated in the ways participants construct, deconstruct and make meaning of their experiences (Ammerman, 2003). The queer sociological ethnographic approach to my research also meant that while I paid attention to the ways participants produced particular subjectivities through discourse and embodied acts I was also



able to acknowledge how these subjectivities are lived in relation to systems of power and institutions which inhabit their social world.

Through my analysis I found that I could divide participants' narratives and experiences broadly into three strands of experience namely, 1) becoming Methodist, 2) becoming clergy, and 3) becoming domestic and erotic. Of course, these are not easily separated nor are any of these static or overarching identities which singularly or combined define any of the participants experiences in full. I recognise this through my use of Butler's (1990) queer idea of "becoming" which continues to work with the notion that these identities are fluid and multiple. However, the usefulness of grouping the findings in this way is that it opens up for discussion an interrogation of how these identities relate to power in various ways. Therefore, in the findings chapters I will discuss each of these "becomings" in relation to a particular politics in order to explore how participants' narratives and experiences are altered, embodied, navigated and inhabited within various power relations. Becoming Methodist will be discussed in relation to a politics of belonging, becoming clergy will be discussed in relation to body politics and becoming domestic and erotic will be discussed in relation to a politics of marriage.



## CHAPTER 5: BECOMING METHODIST AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING

In many ways the scholarship which has developed around religion and sexuality has been centrally concerned with the politics of queer belonging. As discussed in the literature review, scholars have been motivated to explore how those who are queer and Christian are able to form, navigate and transform religious communities in various ways. As the scholarship on Christianity has moved away from considering queer Christianity an impossibility, it has moved closer to the conclusion that in order for queer Christians to belong to a church or religious community some sort of radical transformative theological work needs to take place first. Therefore, in this chapter the reader may expect to encounter narratives of resistance and subversion, in order for the participants of this study to make the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) a place of belonging. However, participants' narratives and experiences indicated a more prevalent theme, one in which they seemed to *already* belong in the MCSA. This was most overtly expressed when I asked participants whether they would leave the MCSA because of its restrictive rules on same-sex marriage. Bradley, for example, replied, "...the Methodist church is my home, I can't really explain it...it's my home. Why should I leave my home?". While a sense of disenchantment<sup>38</sup> with the MCSA was indeed part of their experiences, all participants to some extent experienced this same feeling of being "at home" in the MCSA. In order to make sense of this thematic finding I have brought it into conversation with metaphors more commonly found in studies of boundaries, borders, migration and citizenship in order to conceptualise a politics of belonging in the MCSA.

Metaphors, Thomas Tweed (2006: 52) argues, are not simply creative ways in which to describe realities but are used to inscribe particular theoretical commitments to help make sense of phenomena. In his theory of religion Tweed is ultimately searching for a metaphor which describes religion in ways which signals movement. Tweed (2006: 59) settles on the use of the gerunds, "dwelling", "homemaking" and "crossing" to illustrate the active politicised processes of what he sees as a primary concern of religion namely, "finding a place and moving across space". For Tweed (2006: 75) religions, "prescribe social locations: you are this and you belong here. You are in this clan, and you are an uncle. You are a member of this caste. You are a slave, and the gods approve. You are Tibetan, Israeli, or Cuban". This means, as Thomas Tweed (2006: 75; 82) argues, that belonging is not a natural, sedentary process but an active

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<sup>38</sup> A term borrowed from Lionel Thaver (2006: 19) who conceptualized a disenchantment with "home" in order to theorize institutional culture in Higher Education Institutions in South Africa.

politicised one which constructs both the ‘home’ and those who live there. The acts which allow for dwelling is what Tweed (2006: 82) calls homemaking, “clusters of dwelling practices”, which transform spaces and “allow people to inhabit the worlds they construct”. Similarly, in her book, “The Politics of Belonging”, Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) argues that belonging is not a natural sedentary state of being but, rather, an active contestation of boundary making. The politics of belonging for Yuval-Davis (2011) is defined by the norms and power relations which govern who belongs, who struggles to belong and who is excluded from belonging based on social location, identity, and social values.

The metaphors and theories of dwelling and belonging described above align with the queer lived religion framing of this study which seeks to resist essentialism and static notions of experience and identity. Using these theories I conceptualise religious belonging as the active, fluid political contestation of space. I recognise here that queer religious belonging has previously been helpfully theorized using borderland theories in order to explore the plurality of experiences and the various degrees of inclusion and exclusion queer people experience in relation to religion. For example, Lilly Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (2018) use theoretical traditions attached to borders and borderlands to talk about the ways in which queer Zambians choose to remain within or navigate out of the material national borders of Zambia. However, while Tweed (2006) and other borderland and boundary theories might be helpful in making sense of material space in the context of nationalism and migration, I want to use these theoretical ideas to conceptualise how participants in this study used and contested the metaphor of ‘home’ and what this says about the contestation of the symbolic space of the MCSA and its institutional and identity borders of belonging.

In this chapter I focus on two of Tweed’s concepts namely, “dwelling” and “homemaking” to discuss the ways in which participants were able to access and shape power through their experiences of *belonging* rather than through identity negotiation or public resistance. This chapter is not simply a discussion about participants’ feelings about the Church, but, by exploring the ways in which participants constructed and deconstructed the MCSA and their identifications and disidentifications with being Methodist, I explore the ways in which power is located in particular identities and social values that subsequently determines who belongs and who does not.

## 1. Growing up Methodist and inherited dwelling

As Tweed (2006: 82) posits, belonging is easily assumed to be a passive process which naturalises the ways in which some people seem to simply belong in particular spaces. This discourse of ‘naturalised belonging’, I argue, obscures the power relations which shape belonging and, in this way, essentialises those who belong as rightful owners of the space. In this research participants often relied on a naturalised discourse of inheritance to take ownership of the MCSA as home.

Kagiso had grown up in his local Methodist Church. His father had been Methodist and for him it seemed obvious that he would become a member of the same denomination. In one of our first interviews he recalled his childhood history with the Methodist Church with nostalgia,

Kagiso: So, by virtue that my dad was Methodist, I also was born into that space. So, I became Methodist. I was very fortunate. I went through Sunday School. I was baptised in the Methodist Church...I went through what you call the Boy’s and Girl’s Brigade in the church.

For many of the participants it seemed that family history was especially important to their adherence to the MCSA. Kagiso, along with Anele, Lebo, and Sam all shared a common inherited dwelling by virtue of being “*born into*” Methodism. They all had childhood memories of attending church with a close family member, making friends in church and becoming actively involved in various church organizations. Part of the ways in which they make the MCSA their home then is through their association to a childhood connection to the denomination. The experience of inherited dwelling not only connects participants to other Methodists with a shared experience of being “*born into*” Methodism but legitimises their belonging by enabling them to trace the inheritance of the space to an ancestral lineage. This was especially the case when the lineage included people who occupied positions of power or esteem within a local Methodist Church congregation. For example, Sam’s lineage was solidified by her grandparents. Her grandmother was a regular church goer and her grandfather was a “*very well-known preacher*<sup>39</sup>” whose “*legend*” she recalls was constantly retold to her.

This naturalisation of belonging is also evident in Lebo’s response as to why she chose to be ordained in the MCSA and not a different denomination,

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<sup>39</sup> A local preacher in the MCSA is a lay person who has gone through an accreditation process and has been granted the authority to conduct Sunday worship services within their local circuit (MCSA, 2016: 146 – 152).

Megan: And, and you thought the Methodist Church is where you will go [to be ordained]?

Lebo: I grew up in the Methodist Church so that was the obvious option for me.

Megan: Why obvious?

Lebo: Because I didn't know anything else.

In the above extract, Lebo's use of the word "*obvious*" demonstrates the taken-for-granted way in which she understands her belonging in the MCSA. In fact, it seems that even being asked why it was an obvious choice is taken as a superfluous line of questioning. This was often the case in my interactions with Lebo, partly because she knew that I too was a member of the MCSA and was at some stage deeply involved in its structures which she often presumed meant that I would simply know and understand her relationship with the institution. For example, during another interaction when I asked her to elaborate on one of the Church organisation's procedures she responded by saying, "*Weren't you in the Methodist Youth Unit?*". In order to avoid making easy assumptions about why participants reasoned the ways that they did I tried to ask probing questions such as, "*Why obvious?*", in order to allow participants to explore with me their motivations and experiences. Yet, Lebo's taken-for-granted assumption that I would understand why it was obvious that she was Methodist demonstrates how 'growing up Methodist' becomes itself a characteristic of Methodism. This is further illustrated by Bradley's description of Methodism,

Bradley: ...Methodism is all about family and community and belonging (uhm) because I think most Methodists I speak to have fond memories of their Sunday school days, of belonging to their church (uhm) a place where they grew up and they knew all the aunties and I think that's the beautiful part.

Despite not having experienced strong links between the Methodist Church and his own family, Bradley traces a common shared experience of inherited dwelling as a predominant construction attached to Methodism. Therefore, as much as stories of growing up Methodist may seem to connote a passivity to participants' belonging and dwelling, the ways in which participants constructed family histories and constructed often romanticised narratives of growing up Methodist makes this an active form of discursive homemaking. Bradley illustrates this by actively constructing inherited dwelling – not so much as a part of his own experience – but rather as an integral part of how others belong and dwell in the institution. By citing these inherited belongings and through characterising the idea of growing up Methodist as intrinsically linked to becoming Methodist, participants were able to engage in homemaking

which situated them within the symbolic space of the MCSA and oriented them within their family heritage.

## 2. Koinonia and Ecclesiological dwelling

While in the previous section participants were able to dwell in the MCSA because of familial ties, here I discuss how participants' experiences of the Church as a safe space transformed the sacred space of church denomination into the domestic image of koinonia. Conventionally koinonia is understood in theological scholarship as the communal existence between God and humankind. Koinonia has thus been significant as a conceptual support for models of ecumenical theology as well as in understandings of the communal and unified relationship between God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit (Kariatlis, 2012: 53 – 54; Heim, 2004). In ecclesiology on the other hand, it has provided a framework for the role of a unified and socially cohesive church which requires Christians to be in communion with each other and with God (Kariatlis, 2012). In South Africa this ecclesiological interpretation of koinonia has also filtered into the social space and underlies the (now highly contested) reconciliation agenda of various actors in post-apartheid South Africa (Breed & Semanya, 2015). In the narratives of participant's, experiences of communal Christianity within the MCSA emerged as a significant theme. This theme was constructed by participants not so much in theological ways (as a communal relationship between themselves and God) but in more ecclesiological and sociological ways (a communal relationship between themselves and other Christians). I have thus moved away from the theological conceptualisations of koinonia by instead using the concept of ecclesiological dwelling.

Bradley came across the Methodist Church as a teenager when he agreed to accompany a nervous friend to his confirmation<sup>40</sup> class. In our first interview I asked whether Bradley experienced the Methodist Church as a place where he felt he belonged, he responded by comparing it to his experiences of high school.

Bradley: I felt, I suppose (1), I suppose what had caught me was that I *did* feel like I belonged...I suppose it gave me a home, and a place that I was okay in because [in] high school...I was different (uhm) I didn't like the things that other boys did, so high school was quite hard because my friends were all girls. I didn't really fit in in high school. I couldn't relate to the things that

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<sup>40</sup> Confirmation in the Methodist Church is one process of attaining full membership in the church (MCSA, 2016: 27).

other guys related to and I sensed that I was different and I sensed that I liked boys and at that stage in high school that was just like a no-no, you know. Gosh, I was even more of an outcast there but here's this church space, they like me, and I'm okay here and I have friends here...I'm always going to be this personality but in the church it's okay to be this personality and not like sports and what not because there's this other stuff that we're all about (uhm), it's just the being gay thing isn't going to belong anywhere.

Megan: And by other stuff you mean the Christian stuff?

Bradley: The Christian stuff, yeah, so as long as you were into the Christian stuff and like (uhm) involved in the church activities, you belonged, you were okay, you had a place, yeah.

In relation to his high school where a hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) associated with playing sports and being friends with other boys was celebrated, the celebrated norm that Bradley experienced in the church had less to do with the way he performed his gender and sexuality and more to do with the way he performed his religion. As a teenager and young adult Bradley's ability to perform his identity well as a Christian by doing "Christian stuff", allowed him to dwell in his local Methodist congregation. The acts of dwelling which Bradley engaged in were acts of religion, which did not seem to demand as much of a 'legitimate' gender and sex performance as his school.

Anele had a similar experience to Bradley's, where the church became a space where gender identity and sexual orientation mattered less than with his friendship group. In response to being asked about why he felt like he belonged in the church as a teenager Anele responded,

Anele: ...before Wesley Guild I never had, I was never in a space where you just sit around with people who are in the same age group as you, that you just share. Even though I would not share what was really inside me. But they would ask a question, "How is it with yourself?", you know. And you'd just talk...

Megan: So, it's different to your friendship group?

Anele: Yes.

Megan: Because you could actually speak about something?

Anele: It was a different space. There with my friends it was about girls and girls. And then after girls, it's girls. You know.

Megan: Okay, I hear you.

Anele: But here we would play. We would worship. We would do all these things. The things young people do...And I found it very helpful. It helped me to grow.

In the extract above, Anele distinguishes the church and more specifically the Wesley Guild, a youth organisation in the MCSA, as a space which provided him the opportunity to belong

outside of the heteronormative pressure he experienced in his friendship circle to speak about and interact with girls in sexual and romantic ways. Anele also speaks about the ways in which ‘home’ helped him to grow. It is not only Anele which finds and makes his home in the MCSA and more particularly in the Wesley Guild, but the Wesley Guild also shapes and changes Anele. In this way acts of dwelling and homemaking can also be understood as co-constitutive with those making home and the space of home being in a never completed process of change.

Ecclesia also experienced the Methodist church as a safe space in that she was able to become an ordained minister in the denomination, something which she was denied in her previous church.

Ecclesia: Well now you must remember at that stage my focus was really embracing my core. And so, I stumbled on the Methodist church. In that stumbling I learned that women can be ordained. So, I’m excited. This is most probably where I need to be. Even though coming from charismatic into a Methodist church is very [different]. And so I submerged myself into this new kind of denomination...

In the extract above Ecclesia speaks about “*embracing [her] core*”. At this stage she is referring to her faith and her belief that she was called to be a minister or, as she put it, “*to plant churches*”. The MCSA became a safer space for her at this point in her narrative, one where she could pursue her calling. When I interviewed Ecclesia, it was almost ten years since she had been excommunicated from the MCSA<sup>41</sup> yet, despite a lengthy and unsuccessful court battle with the denomination I found that Ecclesia rarely spoke dismissively or disparagingly about the Church. She tempered her judgement of the Church in a way which I did not expect and on occasions when she did critique it, she would often qualify this by saying “*I’m sure it is different now*”. It seemed to me that Ecclesia’s experience of the MCSA as once being a place of relative safety and ‘home’ continued to influence her interpretation and interaction with the Church, despite having been violently excluded from it.

Participants therefore, constructed a sense of belonging through their ecclesiological dwelling. This was not necessarily because they were driven to negotiate between their gender-sex and religious identities but, rather, because their experiences were influenced by multiple, intersecting identities and their sexuality was not necessarily always the filter through which they made sense of their religious identity and experiences.

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<sup>41</sup> See chapter one for a full discussion of Ecclesia’s case.



Bradley: ...my sexuality was sort of less down on the list of things that was really haunting me at that stage [his youth], and I'd found acceptance and love in this place [the Church] and I had experienced something of the fact that God is alive and God is real and there is this thing that's greater than me and somehow that made me feel okay in life.

Bradley, Anele and Ecclesia's experiences of being accepted on the basis of their Christianity can be considered in relation to the "grassroots queer theologies" of "shared humanity" and "universal love" developed by Zambian gay men in Adriaan van Klinken's study (2015: 958). My participants too were able to construct theological discourses of God's universal love and acceptance which stood in contrast to the 'secular' world of school and friendship circles. Participants' narratives also echo that of the queer Anglican clergy in Michael Keenan's study who experienced the church as an institutional home, a place of comfort where they not only experienced a sense of belonging but where they are able to come to a place of acceptance which they did not find in other spaces (Keenan, 2008: 177). However, the theologies and experiences described in this existing literature are presented as having developed in opposition to predominant homophobic discourses and in *spite* of participants' experience of exclusion and discrimination in overtly homophobic contexts governed by heteronormative theologies. In this study however, for Bradley, Anele and Ecclesia, understandings of God as universally "alive", "real", accepting and loving developed *because* of their experiences of the MCSA as accepting, welcoming and safe.

The sacred space of the MCSA was experienced in ways where gender and sex performances seem to matter less and where the experience of ecclesiological dwelling was prominent. This is reminiscent of Adriaan van Klinken's (2019: 158 - 161) assessment of the queer affirming Cosmopolitan Affirming Church which he argues functions as a Christian community and alternative family for queer Christians in Nairobi in Kenya. This idea of Christian community connects with Yuval-Davis's (2011: 14) argument that a feeling of being 'at home' is an emotional attachment partly relating to a space being experienced as safe. Therefore, participants' experiences of the MCSA as a Christian home provides flesh to a common theological argument of *koinonia* made by advocates for queer inclusivity. This also partly supports the MCSA's own statement made in 2001 in that it seeks to be a "community of love rather than rejection".

Significantly however, it should be noted that the safety experienced by participants was a negotiated, complex safety which had its limitations. In both Bradley and Anele's accounts for example there are elements of maintaining secrecy around their sexuality. Anele said, "*I would*

*not share what was really inside of me*” and Bradley acknowledges that “*the being gay thing isn’t going to belong anywhere*”. Ecclesia’s experience with the Church also demonstrates that ‘home’ is not always safe. The ecclesiological dwelling then which participants’ narratives are pointing to indicates the nominal safety and community created through the construction of a Christian family or community. These findings also indicate that ‘home’ is a matter of choice and participants choose the safest home to live in, even if that home is not the best fit in every regard. Their safety is not unconditional but limited by their abilities to abide by the Christian norms and perform Christianity well. While this was at times preferable to having to perform gender or sex well, it still demonstrates the ways in which ‘home’ is a contested space. Thus, while the MCSA’s stance of being a “community of love rather than rejection” paints a homely picture of the denomination, it obscures how risky and uncomfortable this homeliness becomes for those who are queer.

### **3. The prophetic church and dwelling in values of social justice**

My second interview with Lebo took place a day after the first in which she described her belonging to the MCSA as an “*obvious*” choice. In Lebo’s first explanation as to why she became a minister in the MCSA, she naturalised her belonging, however, the next day in our follow up interview she critiqued this as the only valid form of dwelling and expanded on her reasoning,

Lebo: [Sigh] I thought yesterday, when, when we finished with our meeting, I ask [why] my confirmation candidates [want to be Methodist]. And they say, “I grew up in the Methodist Church, I was born into it”. And I always feel like that’s not an adequate answer, but that’s the answer I gave you yesterday and that was funny [Megan laughs]. But I believe in the healing and transformation of all God’s people, I believe in the values and in the mission statements and in the visions, that the Methodist church stands for...

Thus far, participants’ experiences of dwelling in the MCSA has been confined to their experiences of growing up in their local church. However, the ability to dwell in the Church is not restricted to a particular physical space but spanned the symbolic space of Methodism. This was partly because of the connections made through shared experiences, but, underlying this was the shared values which was constructed in relation to Methodism. In what follows I discuss how participants perpetuate and reconstitute the MCSA’s identity as a prophetic

church<sup>42</sup> wherein those who value and portray an outward performance of social justice and mission belong.

The identity of the MCSA as a prophetic church driven by social justice is a celebrated institutional identity. Even Lebo's inclination to correct herself and elaborate on the value of the MCSA demonstrates her investment in the institution and its missional identity. This identity is deeply attached to the Church's history. The Black Methodist Consultation for example, remains significant as a church-based black consciousness movement which responded to racist apartheid systems that excluded and marginalised black leadership and theology in the Church (Mtshiselwa, 2015: 3). This identity is further bolstered by the MCSA's link to being the 'the Church of Mandela' (as discussed in chapter one) and its continued close relationship to the current political ruling party, the African National Congress (Forster, 2014). In my research I found that this historical institutional identity was reified and continued to be constructed in the ways in which celebrated stories were told and re-told in informal spaces in the Church.

Megan: And the stories that you're talking about, like where, I mean you say it's not written, like how do you know [about it?]

Sam: Because that's what you get told. So like if you sit around with some of the bishops or with some of the Superintendents...they'll tell you the story about James Gribble and this is what James Gribble did for me, or did to me, or Peter Storey or whatever and, you know (2) it's the stories that get told in...not formal spaces...like you know, the car rides to places...And I think those kinds of stories, because they're not written, they're lived stories so they always (2), they don't get analysed as much because they're also quite romanticised stories about like what the Church was in its past and they talk about it in its golden age.

In the extract above Sam describes the non-institutionalised ways in which anecdotes and living legends are informally passed down between ministers. It is through celebrating recent historical clerical figures such as Reverend Peter Storey and Reverend James Gribble, both known for their apartheid activism credentials, that an identity of social justice is attached to Methodism and specifically to Methodist ministers. In discussing the quotes with Sam she expanded and explained that, in her experience, very few of the informally told stories are about women and when they are about women leaders or clergy, they are often condemnatory rather

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<sup>42</sup> The concept of a prophetic church is commonly used to refer to South African churches' roles in relation to social justice and moral issues. The South African Council of Churches refers to the responsibility of the church to "...uphold a living consciousness of the values of the rule of God, and, incarnational in identifying with the sinful society of which it is an integral part" (South African Council of Churches, 2015: 2).

than celebratory. The celebrated social justice heroes are characters which carry the institution's idealized versions of being. They personify values and characteristics which become embodied in human (male) form. They therefore serve as examples of how to perform an ideal Methodism. Sam thus emphasises Nancy Ammerman's (2003: 219) argument that it is through "telling the stories, practicing the rituals, and celebrating the heroes" that certain denominational and institutional identities are produced and sustained while others are rendered invisible and queer. Sam's analysis that these informal stories are never engaged in scholarship in the same ways as doctrines, theologies and biographies is exemplified in the lacuna in the literature on churches' informal institutional cultures. Yet, it is these informal and often romanticised stories which have influence in communicating the lived character of the institution and which, in many ways, excludes Sam from embodying the institutionally celebrated ideal of a social activist, male minister who comfortably dwells at home<sup>43</sup>.

While the stories participants were told about the church, and the institutional identity it constructed, often functioned to exclude women ministers in particular, I found nevertheless that, as Mahmood (2006) suggests, participants (including Sam) are able to engage in homemaking through acts which embodied the values of the institution. They are, therefore, not outside of the norms of the institution but constituted by it. This was most notable through participants' reverence for the concept of 'mission'. In informal conversations, participants would emphasise to me that they had a passion for "*doing mission*" or would lament about their congregation's reluctance to be involved in mission. In one conversation between Lebo and her partner they admonished another local white congregation for not being proper Methodists because they "*didn't even do mission*". On various occasions I asked participants for clarification regarding what they meant by 'mission', which they would respond to by providing examples and often showing me the most recent mission activity, their congregation was involved in. Lebo for example, took great pride in showing me the vegetable garden her congregation had begun on their church grounds with the aim of feeding local members of the community. Sam on the other hand took me to visit a local preschool which was founded and continues to be governed by the influence of the congregation in which she worked. The value of mission, then, is not something abstract for participants but rather something which they

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<sup>43</sup> I continue to discuss the politics of embodying this ideal Methodist minister in chapter six.

actively participate in constructing, often in embodied and material ways which are deeply tied to their identities as Methodist.

One discursive strategy, that was employed by some participants, to define a Methodist church as a missional church was through framing it in relation to other denominations such as the Anglican Church. Lebo does this in the extract below where she continues to elaborate on the reasons she belongs to the MCSA.

Lebo:... And, I don't know, we don't go 'gaga' over the Presiding Bishop. But have you seen how Anglican's go 'gaga' over their Archbishop.

Megan: As in like it's a...

Lebo: Ya, you are God's deputy.

Megan: So you don't feel like there's a hierarchy [in the Methodist Church]? Do you feel like there's a hierarchy?

Lebo: There is. There totally is. But, it doesn't take anything away from the discipling that is happening in the Methodist Church. Ya.

In the extract above Lebo distances Methodism from ideas of hierarchy by arguing that Methodists do not revere their bishops and leaders in the ways that Anglicans do. When I ask whether she means to say that in comparison there is no such hierarchy in the MCSA, she argues that there is but that it does not get in the way of "*discipling*", a term she uses to refer to the Church's business of creating followers of Jesus. In this way Lebo maintains the MCSA's identity boundaries by obscuring the MCSA's lack of social justice and equality. She does this despite the fact that as a queer member of the clergy, Lebo is continually policed and silenced based on her identity as a young, black, lesbian woman in the Church<sup>44</sup>. By obscuring the MCSA's inability to live up to an ideal of its own creation, as a prophetic church for all people, Lebo is able to continue to dwell in her identity as Methodist. In this way her identity as Methodist is attached to mission and justice and thus connects her to all others who fall within these constructed boundaries. The creation of this boundary, however, does more than construct Lebo's individual experience of belonging but simultaneously constructs the identity of the MCSA which in itself is reconstituted through Lebo's identity performance and discourse of Methodism.

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<sup>44</sup> The informal, everyday and embodied ways this is done is explored in more depth in the chapter to follow.

These findings illustrate how co-constitutive individual and Methodist institutional identity is. As McGuire (2008a: 37) states,

A direct relationship exists between a community of believers and the strength of its shared meaning system. The unity of the group is expressed and enhanced by its shared meanings. The group's meaning system, in turn, depends on the group as its social base for its continued existence and importance. The idea of the "church" (i.e., community of believers) is not merely an organizational feature of religions but expresses a fundamental link between the meaning system and the community that holds it.

The MCSA presents itself as a church of justice and mission, and this is embodied and reconstituted in the ways in which participants performed their Methodism and attributed characters and characteristics to the idea of Methodism. Foucauldian (1972) understandings of discourse are helpful in making sense of participants' positions within this identity. Institutions such as the church are able to shape and create a coherent identity through the use of language. In the MCSA's case it uses language and stories to construct institutional identities of mission and justice. Members of the institutions, those with whom they interact as well as those who fall outside the boundaries of belonging, are continuously constructed and reconstructed through this discourse (Mayr, 2008). The participants in this study find belonging through participation in the discourse of the group. While this allows particular people to interpret ideas of justice and mission in ways which enable them to dwell in the values of the MCSA, the normative discourse of social justice also allows the Church to hold onto its public persona as a prophetic church. A persona which, as Dion Forster (2014) argues, allows the Church to gain credibility through its attachment to state power and moral authority. It is not unusual in South Africa for people to continue to gain power and prominence based on the struggle credentials which they garnered during the apartheid struggle and, so too, it seems the MCSA through its celebrated stories and traditions, continues to gain legitimacy and authority through members' investment in constructing its identity as an institutional struggle veteran.

#### **4. Performing race as homemaking**

In the context of South Africa, where institutions including the MCSA remain divided and affected by South Africa's history of racial segregation and discrimination, race evidently featured strongly in participants' narratives and experiences. During my time in the field I rarely experienced church contexts which were racially diverse. Often participants either worked in a black congregation (attended exclusively or predominantly by black members) or a white congregation (attended exclusively or predominantly by white members). Sometimes

a single church building was shared by various race groups, however, they remained distinctly separate. For example, Sam's church was attended by white, black, coloured and Indian<sup>45</sup> members, however, they were materially separated into different mono-racial congregations. This was most evident to me one Sunday morning when I observed three distinct worship services, held at different times and in different ways. The first service began at seven in the morning and was attended by approximately fifteen older white women and men. They sang hymns contained in the Methodist hymn book accompanied by a pianist. The liturgy took the form of what I once heard referred to as a 'hymn sandwich', referring to the way in which each prayer or item of the Methodist liturgy is wedged between two hymns. The second service started at nine and was the largest service of the day and was attended by younger black and white families. The atmosphere of the service was more relaxed and a portion of the service was devoted to a performance by the children of the church. Sam too enthusiastically participated as a drummer and actor in this performance. The third service of the day began at eleven and was attended by black men wearing black suits and women wearing red and white uniforms – an indication of the women's and men's organisations to which they belonged. The service was conducted entirely in Zulu apart from the sermon which Sam preached in English. The hymns were sung in Xhosa and Zulu and the pianist who had played at the previous two services was now replaced by the beating of foam pillows which provided a means of percussion. This division and differentiation in worship styles was not unfamiliar to me and is certainly not alien to many others who have become accustomed to the variations of Methodist worship distinguished clearly along racial lines.

The significance of seemingly unproblematic racial dynamics and segregation, which I illustrate through a description of a Sunday morning in Sam's church, can easily be dismissed or even celebrated as a reflection of South Africa's cultural diversity. However, this obscures the inequalities and material violence's which colonial and apartheid history has implicated in this diversity. Participants sometimes easily overlooked the problematics of race as a marker of worship style, values and spirituality in the everyday lives of their congregations and in fact,

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<sup>45</sup> I acknowledge that these race categories are constructed and contested and ideally, I would only use apartheid race categories as terms which people themselves identified with however, gathering this data is beyond the scope of this project. Therefore, in order to open up a discussion about race power relations as it operates in the MCSA I will cautiously use these race categories to refer to the demographic makeup of participants' congregations – often relying on the ways participants themselves spoke about the race dynamics in their congregations to do so.

perpetuated these difference. Illustrative of this is a conversation I had with Sam which emerged after she described to me how a white Methodist woman spoke to her earlier that day about feeling excluded from the MCSA because of the culture of blackness in the Church. When I asked what she thought caused these feelings she explained,

Sam: ...there is a different spirituality in the Church [there's a] black spirituality and there's a Westernised spirituality and, the spirituality of the black church is the gathering of the large community, like the communal (uh) high mountain top moments. So that's why things like conventions are so important in the life of the Methodist church. So if you're in any organisation within the church, so any uniformed organisation, so Manyano members...

Megan: Which is mostly black?

Sam: Not mostly black, pretty much black ya. Those moments of communal gathering...And the, the holding on to the, the theological (uh) liturgical work from like 1830, the Umbedesho weMinicwa<sup>46</sup>, the old books, the singing of the old hymns, the, the singing of...what they call the Siyakudumisa and the Ndiyakholwa<sup>47</sup>...So all of that stuff. And it's very embodied and it's really (2) important and incredibly creative but that has been celebrated a lot in our church culture, like the worship culture. Our institutional culture. So even if, if you gather for an institutional thing, so you have Conference [which] will operate in a very old, old school [way] (4) like hierarchical top down kind of conversational kind of way. So the only way you can talk in Conference is when you have brought a resolution or you're talking to a resolution or you're raising a notice of motion or doing those things, and those things are very institutional. Whereas, when you're doing business stuff, when you're having a brainstorming meeting, there's far more organic spaces that are less structured, you know. The church still operates like that in its functionality, but in its worship it holds onto what lots of the Manyano are producing...the songs that are sung, the hymns that are sung, the liturgies that are drawn, all connect to the stuff and then white people feel alienated in that space.

In the extract above Sam distinguishes white Methodism as adopting a Westernised spirituality characterised for her by being informal, organic and individualistic. A point she emphasised in a separate interview saying, "...then you have like these insular minority white societies that don't, that are affluent but...don't give a damn about anybody else around them". On the other hand, black Methodism is characterised by an attachment to tradition and to the communal. This should not be glanced over as seemingly inconsequential race or cultural differences in worship. This is because it is not only that these worship styles are distinctive but that it is hierarchically positioned. In the above extract Sam explains that the performance of black Methodism is the more celebrated cultural expression of Methodism and one which pervades the broader institutional culture of the Church. This is evidenced by Sam's experience of black

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<sup>46</sup> This is the Xhosa term for the Apostles Creed.

<sup>47</sup> These are popular Xhosa hymns.



Methodism as the predominant frame for the expressions of worship and styles of decision-making in the Church (in the format of resolutions and notices of motion), and which holds power within prominent organisations such as the Women's Manyano<sup>48</sup>. Ammerman (2006: 363) compared the communal gatherings of decision-making bodies in the Baptist Church in America to a family reunion. In many ways this metaphor describes the function of these Methodist gatherings and it is therefore significant that the institutional identity being celebrated in these contexts are ones which values the collective and not the individual. Being connected to the collective is an important part of being Methodist as it maintains the notion of community which is linked to its ability to function as a large body and to influence national platforms and political bodies. Significantly however, while Sam did not identify as black<sup>49</sup>, she constructs a sense of belonging in the MCSA by embracing black performances of Methodism. For example, she was able to conduct the eleven o' clock, a predominantly Zulu service in her church and easily participated in the traditional Xhosa and Zulu liturgies and hymns. She also understands and navigates the everyday institutional cultures of the broader Church and serves on various decision-making and working committees at both District and Connexional levels.

Participants also attached themselves to black Methodism, in interviews, by critiquing white versions of Methodism for its individualism and lack of connection to the institutionally celebrated black versions of Methodism. Bradley, for example, critiqued his childhood church for being "*Rhema*<sup>50</sup> in disguise", due to its "*evangelical*" reading of Scripture and charismatic forms of worship.

Bradley: ...It was one of those churches that was kind of you know, you do find those Methodist churches that say Methodist on the outside but are like Rhema in disguise. As I say it was different to the Methodist church I [came to know later] (uhm) so it had had a long history back in the days of the charismatic movement, it was one of those Methodist churches that was known as like, you know, very much a part of the charismatic movement.

Similarly, Kagiso reasoned that if he upset his white Methodist congregants they could "*easily move*" from one church to another, something which he experienced not long before we met.

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<sup>48</sup> A uniformed women's organization in the MCSA with a predominantly black membership.

<sup>49</sup> Although sometimes she claimed a politically black identity.

<sup>50</sup> See footnote 32.

However, in his experience, this was less of an option for “*traditional*” black congregants who were invested in the denominationalism of the MCSA.

Kagiso: ... In a white or English predominant context you find that denominationalism...is not a big thing.

Megan: (Uhm) What do you mean by denominationalism?

Kagiso: Denominationalism, I mean those who have a greater sense of owning their denomination.

Megan: You mean belong to a bigger body?

Kagiso: Yes. For example, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is a denomination

Megan: Ya, ya.

Kagiso: Again, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa for example. And you find within the predominantly white or English spaces, denominationalism is not a big thing. If a white person or a black person who comes into this church, which is a Methodist Church but is a predominantly white or an English space, and they disagree with me, they can easily move from this church to [another].

It should be said here that participants used race categories in more fluid ways than is at first evident. This fluidity is evident in the extract above where Kagiso adds “English” as a descriptor of white spaces. Kagiso tended to describe the congregation in which he worked as “*white*” and preferring “*modern*” ways of worship and, while historically it had an exclusively white membership, the majority of the members who participated in the church at the time of my fieldwork spoke Sotho and would likely identify as black. The whiteness or English-ness which Kagiso used to refer to his congregation therefore relates more to their style of worship as well as their lack of commitment and knowledge of the broader denomination. The fluidity of race is also evident in Bradley and Sam’s narratives above which, while not identifying themselves as black, reflect their own identifications and affinities for black Methodism.

The fluid discourse and performance of race functioned as a means of “homemaking” for participants. In this way they were not only celebrating the forms of worship and values of community attached to black Methodism but they created clear boundaries which distinguished white performances of Methodism as less legitimate. The construction of the boundary of denominationalism was a form of homemaking for participants and was essential for maintaining a source of belonging and collective history, culture and stories. Therefore, by relying on discourse and practices which seemed to essentialise race differences participants

were able to establish boundaries of belonging which allowed them to access and maintain a sense of dwelling.

While performances of black Methodism were celebrated in important institutional spaces, participants did not completely disregard white Methodism. Black participants such as Anele, Kagiso and Lebo often adapted their styles of worship and their demeanour to be less liturgically strict and more informal in order to access belonging and power in the local white congregations in which they served. For example, while Anele described his history of involvement in the broader Church as more aligned with black Methodism, the local congregation in which he served at our time of meeting was largely made up of white congregants. On the Sunday which I observed Anele, he conducted the church service in a relaxed intimate fashion, often engaging in conversation with congregants who in turn made jokes and responded with comments from the pews even while he delivered his sermon. This relaxed service stood in stark contrast to the formality of liturgy and the distant position of the minister which often characterised the black Methodism I observed in my fieldwork. Anele's ability to perform both a black and white Methodism in different contexts enabled him not only to dwell within the MCSA but to claim legitimacy as a leader of his congregation.

While particular performances of Methodism in different racial contexts allowed participants to legitimate their dwelling in various contexts, participants also made themselves at home in Methodism by disidentifying with particular constructions of blackness associated with being queerphobic which jeopardised the legitimacy of their black methodism. Kagiso for example, distanced himself from notions of traditional black Methodist's as inherently homophobic.

Kagiso: It is my observation that within the white church there is more, if not all of the white ministers are pro or queer. And I use queer because queer would define those who are queer now, not as only those who are gay, but those who believe and stand and fight for the rights of the gay and lesbian. I am [yet] to meet a white minister who has openly spoken against gay and lesbian rights.

Megan: Okay.

Kagiso: And I'm not saying that they don't exist. But the majority are very open minded. And are free to be part of the gay and lesbian world if ever there is such. And then within the black church. My observation is there are strong ministers who have strong masculinities. There are strong ministers who have very weak masculinity. And those ministers who have proven to have stronger masculinities and are bold in pronouncements and proclamations have loosely and openly stood up to say we are of the plight of the minority who is gay and lesbian ministers. We stand with them.

In this extract Kagiso reinscribes essentialist discourses that African, black people are inherently more homophobic than white people. However, Kagiso also uses a subversive idea of “strong” masculinity to disidentify his performance of black Methodism from this homophobic trope. Instead of equating strong masculinity to performances of hegemonic masculinity associated with, for example, physical strength, Kagiso associates strong masculinity with the term “queer”, which he uses not to describe sexual identity but rather to refer to anyone who affirms the rights of gay and lesbian ministers. Kagiso thus constructs a version of black masculinity in which strength is measured by one’s affiliation with the Methodist value of social justice while weak masculinity is associated with those who speak against gay and lesbian rights. Thus, not only does Kagiso identify himself as a strong, black man but at the same time distances himself from equating that identity in stereotypical ways to queer-phobia.

The experiences of black queer Christians in scholarship is often characterised by themes of violence, exclusion and rejection (Matebeni, 2014). In the context of my participants’ experiences however, while race was often a divisive construct, it was also a construct through which participants were able to access belonging in the denomination. This demonstrates Mignon Moore’s (2011: 22) argument, that by performing one aspect of identity in ways which access belonging and acceptance, one can “compensate” for other marginalising identities. Therefore, participants were able to move from the margins to the centre through performing Methodism in appropriate racialised ways despite their sexuality. Furthermore, in many ways, their experiences of race in the MCSA queers rhetoric which constructs essentialised black, queer subjects as always marginalised and white and straight as the centre.

## **5. Home as a place of disenchantment**

One of the more expected findings in my research was that participants felt a sense of disillusionment and marginalisation in the MCSA. Scholars have shown over and over again the ways in which religious traditions and institutions continue to exclude those who identify as queer and women through the systemic and invisibilised heteronormativities and patriarchies. Similarly, participants in this study often experienced covert forms of marginalisation and policing because of their sexuality within the institutionalised space of the MCSA. While I elaborate on these experiences in relation to the sexualisation and the policing

of bodies in the next chapter, it is important to note here that participants rarely perceived themselves as fully excluded or alienated by the MCSA<sup>51</sup>.

Significantly, I found that participants more commonly expressed feelings of disenchantment with the MCSA in relation to the perceived failure of the MCSA to live up to its own institutional identity as ‘home’.

Kagiso: There are things I don’t like about my church. Things such as human prejudices, things such as processes of electing leadership, corruption. All of those things make me want to cry when I think about my church. How it treats women ministers in this church, how we have always been privileged as male ministers over female ministers. How the church continues to this day to put white ministers, male or white, on a pedestal [rather] than your typical black minister. Those are hurtful parts of our church. A church that proclaims to be one and undivided. We are still divided and racial, sometimes even on tribal lines. So, those are very painful things about the church.

Kagiso’s disenchantment with the MCSA in the above extract rests not so much on his own personal experiences of exclusion based on his sexuality but, rather, is informed by the betrayal of what the MCSA claims to be namely, “one and undivided”<sup>52</sup>. In fact, in this extract Kagiso names numerous factors which he attributes to causing division in the MCSA such as race, tribalism, corruption, and gender yet he makes no mention of sexuality or sexual orientation. Bradley on the other hand does mention the MCSA’s policies on same-sex marriage as something which he dislikes about the institution, however, like Kagiso, Bradley does not communicate a personal disjuncture between his own sexuality and his place in the MCSA but, rather, he seems disenchanted by the fact that the MCSA does not live up to its statements of being a diverse church.

Bradley: I’d love the Methodist church to keep its diversity but I would love it to fully allow that diversity to be, if that makes sense. I think sometimes you know, in terms of the sexuality issue we’ve made a statement to say we’re a diverse church, we think differently but the reality is, that we allow one end of the spectrum to live out their beliefs and not the other. And I think fully embracing our diversity says we don’t all have to think alike, which means we don’t all have to be alike. (Uhm) I would like us to keep our diversity...and I think we have a trend more and more towards uniformity and I think that’s a loss for us.

Megan: And for that change to happen what do you think needs to happen?

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<sup>51</sup> A notable exception to this was Sam but I discuss this in relation to body politics in the chapter which follows.

<sup>52</sup> See footnote 16.

Bradley: ... I would love the leadership of our Church to (1) take a more, caring active role (1) on the LGBT issue, listening to us, taking us seriously and advocating for us (uhm) ...I think the Church has become politicised to the point where, I think we lose the essence of who we are and there's a disconnect between what's happening on the ground in the hearts and lives of average Methodist people in societies and the structures of our Church, I think more and more they're becoming disconnected from each other.

In the extract above Bradley laments that the MCSA, in which he includes himself through the use of "we", loses the essence of who it is as an institution. Thus far we have seen that Bradley as well as other participants experience the MCSA as a place of safety, acceptance, justice and mission. Its 'essence' is one of being an ecclesiological community and a prophetic church and it is the betrayal of this promise of Methodism that is so disenchanting for Kagiso and Bradley. Therefore, while the literature of queer religious belonging has thus far positioned religious institutions either as spaces of alienation or alternatively of (limited) belonging, I argue that these characterisations are constitutive of the other and it is precisely the intimacy of belonging and dwelling in the MCSA which shapes participants' disenchantment. It is also the safety attached to the experience of dwelling 'at home' that provides the space to express critique, anger and disappointment with home (Yuval-Davis, 2011a: 4).

While participants were disenchanted with the MCSA, rarely were they motivated to abandon the Church all together. Rather, I found that on these occasions participants used creative theologies to motivate them to stay and to maintain the image of a diverse and accepting Methodism which they had come to dwell in. Kagiso for example, constructed God as imperfect to explain the imperfection of the MCSA and used this as a platform to "fight" for justice.

Kagiso: Just because the church has a few flaws... and I still believe in a God that has few flaws, I don't think God is perfect, but I still love him. I don't love God less because God is less perfect, so I can't love this Church any less just because it is less perfect. I cannot even love this Church less because it is still struggling with accepting issues around the theology of marriage...Because, for me, justice and its plight or its fight might mean I'd probably die with the Church still struggling with this issue of marriage amongst homosexuals and I am not closed to that, I am not blind to it.

Lebo's strategy was to use a theology which separated God, the institutional Church and God's people in order to argue that it was never God who excluded her. This separation also allows her, as illustrated in the extract below, to remove institutional blame for her experiences of marginalisation. In this way she is able to remain loyal to the Church.

Lebo: But, I don't remember a time until last night<sup>53</sup> where I intentionally thought maybe I should leave the church.

Megan: Never?

Lebo: And even last night, was not a, "I want to leave the Church" but it was (1), "I am hurting because of the Church". Then it quickly came to me that I'm not hurting because of the institution at this point, I'm hurting because of the people. And so, I still feel called, deeply called to the Church and I feel I have not fulfilled that to completion.

Unlike other scholars who have argued that creative theologies are used by queer Christians in subversive resistant ways in order to queer church, the theologies used by Kagiso and Lebo attempt to preserve and sustain particular iterations of Methodism. Therefore, I am not arguing that participants were not engaged in the work of transformation but rather that their transformative actions took the form of active homemaking rather than active resistance. I would thus hesitate to call Kagiso and Lebo's theologies "grassroots queer theologies" as found in van Klinken's work (2015) or even "queer religiosities" as in O'Brien's study (2004). This is because while 'queer' in van Klinken and O'Brien's work referred to participants' subversion of normative theologies and religiosities, the participants in my study seemed to be motivated to maintain what was presented and what they experienced as normative theologies and religiosities in the MCSA.

## **6. Conclusion: From negotiation and transformation to dwelling**

In this chapter I have explored the ways in which participants' political projects of belonging are expressed in ordinary narratives and everyday experiences and through which they constructed their social locations, values and identities in various ways in relation to becoming Methodist (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 3). It is the everyday, taken for granted experiences and acts of participants which transform the sacred space of church into the domestic image of a "home" for them. I discuss here how these experiences contribute to the existing literature on queer religious belonging.

As discussed in the literature review, some scholars have explored the ways which queer Christians are able to navigate spaces for themselves within religious contexts. Studies such as

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<sup>53</sup> Lebo had a meeting the previous night with her supervisor in which she was confronted with an accusation by one of her congregants. In order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality I cannot reveal more about this experience here.

van Klinken's (2015) research with Zambian Christian gay men and more recently on various artistic expressions of resistance in Kenya (van Klinken, 2019) demonstrates how queer Christians in Africa find a sense of belonging even within contexts which are generally perceived as conservatively Christian and homophobic. However, while van Klinken's work is important in theorising the ways people negotiate belonging through resistance to heteronormativity, this framing proves inadequate to explain my participants' experiences which seem neither to be entirely ones of resistance nor of oppression.

Through my analysis I found that Tweed's (2006) notions of dwelling and homemaking reflect (more aptly than negotiation or resistance) the politics participants in this study engaged in. This dwelling emerges partly because participants' experiences are not only shaped by their religious and sex identities but also by their race, family history, Christian identity and clerical identity. While Tweed (2006) uses the metaphoric language of dwelling to illustrate how the sacred is evident in domestic spaces, this discourse has also proved useful for describing how sacred spaces function as domestic, familial and intimate. The common use of "*home*" to describe their relationship within the MCSA, demonstrates the emotional attachment and ownership participants allocated to the symbolic space of the Church. This is expressed not only in the sense that it is a space in which they are able to worship and work, but it also carries a deeply emotional sense of belonging, one which plays a significant role in the way they identify themselves and construct their life narratives. By dwelling in the MCSA, I argue that participants demonstrate that it is not only through subverting and resisting the norms that queer Christians actively work to belong to a denomination or Christian community, but it is also through inhabiting particular norms (Mahmood, 2004).

This finding also suggests a troubling of the ways in which "queer" has become synonymous with ideas of the Other or "alien". This synonymity is most notably reflected in Paul Germond and Steve De Gruchy's (1997) book "Aliens in the Household of God", a title which reflected the narratives of queer clergy who experienced exclusion from places they once held as their spiritual home. While I in no way wish to diminish queer experiences of marginalisation and exclusion in the church, placing the marker of "alien" ascribed to queer Christians seems to situate them firmly outside of the boundaries of belonging. This characterisation in literature of queer experiences has often been enough to assume rather than a point of necessary investigation. However, participants' experiences of dwelling and homemaking in this study demonstrate that their relationships with the boundaries of institutional belonging are more



fluid than often depicted in scholarship. While they sometimes inhabit spaces outside of those boundaries, at times they also travel across the border to dwell 'at home' in the MCSA and at other times still, they occupy spaces on the border where they construct ways of belonging which excludes possibilities of being Methodist in other ways.

Last, in this chapter I have aimed to further Tweed's original concepts of dwelling and homemaking by using them in a context which does not refer to geographical and national borders. As Tweed (2006: 52) himself warns, metaphors carry with them implications which, if used uncritically, may have negative consequences, and while it often highlights particular aspects of a phenomenon it sometimes runs the risk of obscuring others. Despite Tweed using these metaphors to refer to experiences of migrants, at a glance 'dwelling' and 'homemaking' can still evoke images of 'homeliness' in which the middle-class are in the business of moving into new homes, unpacking, decorating and cleaning in order to make a new space more comfortable for them to dwell in. However, participants' narratives in this study, as well as in Tweed's original work, are much more complex and demonstrated that homemaking often required surviving in less than ideal spaces. Participants' narratives indicate that the safety they experienced at home was marginal and required not only negotiation of their own identities but of the very idea of what home and safety looks like. The homemaking of my participants therefore evokes a less positive image, one much more akin to those who cannot afford to choose a home and therefore, make those spaces which are available and most open to them as comfortable as it can be. Instead of decorating, participants are in the business of fixing leaky pipes and making sure the roof does not collapse<sup>54</sup>. However, it is still 'home' and therefore the nominal and limited safety and belonging it does provide is something they continue to protect.

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<sup>54</sup> I am indebted to Caroline Starkey for inspiring the idea of this extended metaphor through her comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

## CHAPTER 6: BECOMING CLERGY AND BODY POLITICS

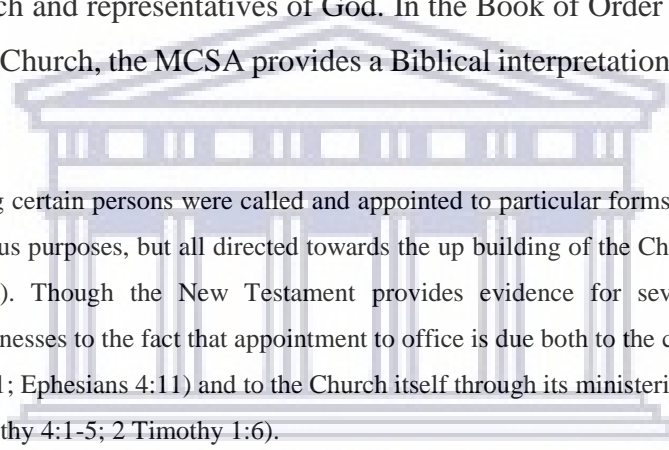
In the theoretical framing of this dissertation, I drew on Meredith McGuire (2008: 182) to argue that an analysis of “body practices” and the ways in which bodies matter or fail to matter (in a Butlerian sense) in the context of institutionalised religion provides a productive lens through which to explore institutional norms around gender and sex. Mariecke van den Berg, Kathrine van den Bogert and Anne-Marie Korte in their editorial for the journal, *Religion & Gender* (2017: 181) support this argument by pointing out that it is mainly in the context of institutionalised religion where body politics informed by gender, sex and race norms and ideologies are constructed and policed. Thus far, feminist scholars have adopted these lenses to critique the ways in which religious communities exclude women in varying degrees from functioning as clergy within the church. For example, Jenny Sprong (2011) and Cheryl Dibeela (2010) have studied the Methodist and Congregational denominations in South Africa respectively and have demonstrated how masculine conceptualisations and patriarchal theologies around clericalism operates to delegitimise the ways clergy women embody and perform their duties and identities as clergy. Yet, within this group of scholars there are also those who have demonstrated how women clergy have subverted this through embodied practices. For example, Elizabeth Getman (2014) shows how clergy mothers subvert traditional patriarchal clerical spaces. The potential of understanding the constrictions of gender and sex norms as well as the potential for subverting those norms by focusing on embodied experience has been taken seriously by studies focused on woman clergy, however, the scholarship on queer clergy is yet to do the same.

By bringing the queer body into conversation with the clerical body I address two gaps which I identify in literature on queer Christians and clergy. First, when the queer body is written about in relation to religion it often becomes the abject body, the marginalised body, and the violated body (Matebeni, 2011) or more recently the appalling body (Marchal, 2019). This is especially the case when that body is also black and a woman (Matebeni, 2018; Lake, 2014). When this violated body is considered in relation to religion it is often the object of either religious oppression or religious salvation and healing, rather than a body which experiences and shapes religion. Second, when clerical identity and sexuality is spoken about in more agentive and transformative ways, the body is often absent (Keenan, 2008). In this sense queer identity and possibilities of queer inclusivity in religion become understood only through experiences, feelings and thoughts while the material body is rendered silent. These trends

construct the queer religious body either as too sexual to be spoken about as religious or too religious for embodied sexuality to also be considered a significant part of identity and meaning making. The aim of this chapter is to address this lacuna in the field and to explore how queer religious bodies are implicated in possibilities and impossibilities of being clergy and queer in the space of institutionalised religion. In this chapter I do this by discussing the ways in which participants experienced, enacted and challenged different and queer embodied performances of clericalism in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA).

## 1. Reverended bodies

The MCSA works with the theological understanding that clergy are “called” and set apart to be leaders of the church and representatives of God. In the Book of Order (MCSA, 2016: 20), the constitution of the Church, the MCSA provides a Biblical interpretation of the idea of being “called”.



From the beginning certain persons were called and appointed to particular forms of ministry, of various kinds and for various purposes, but all directed towards the up building of the Church (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 5:11-16). Though the New Testament provides evidence for several possible lines of development, it witnesses to the fact that appointment to office is due both to the call and gift of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Ephesians 4:11) and to the Church itself through its ministerial representatives (Acts 6:6; 14:23; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; 2 Timothy 1:6).

The idea of being called seems to imply that those who are called by God to be ministers have been both born with and divinely gifted the appropriate abilities to perform and embody that role. The idea of being called serves to grant clergy the status and legitimacy of being God-ordained and reinforces the idea that ministers are fundamentally set apart for their task. This institutional and theologically guided discourse was one which was reproduced by participants in this study. For example, in the extract below, Bradley is talking to me about his decision to be reinstated as a minister of the MCSA after he had left the Church to study social work for a few years. His decision to leave was motivated by homophobia which he had experienced from some of his lay leaders at the time.

Bradley: ...I've done what I needed to do, I wanted to study social work and I suppose part of that also [is that] I wanted to have something else behind me because I'd learnt the Church is precarious and I suppose I also needed to kind of prove my worth...and social work was great for that because, without the [clerical] collar I still got to be me and I realised I've got skills, there's something I have to offer (uhm) and so I think I was in a space where I could be prepared to go back [to the Church] and I suppose I'd always longed to go back in. There was a part of me

that *is*<sup>55</sup> a minister, it is just who I am. And then I was able to join the dots and say well if God called me way back then knowing I was gay, I've tried to be straight, that didn't work, I've tried to be gay and not a minister and this isn't working for me so maybe the ultimate conclusion is that God actually wants me in the Church as me (laughs). So I've tried the two other ways and both didn't work out for me, so let's give it another try and I thought let me do it this way, in a new way.

In Bradley's narrative of returning to the MCSA, it seems as though his identity as a minister is as inherent to him as his sexuality – both of which he understands as shaping his calling. This example can be compared to the narratives found in Jodi O'Brien's (2004) study in which queer Christians concluded that because they were born queer they had a God directed calling to create more affirming understandings and expressions of Christianity. Discourses which naturalise sexuality by arguing that people are born queer, has been shown to be a politically beneficial vantage point from which to argue against religiously informed homophobia (Epstein, 1994; van Klinken, 2015: 957 - 958). Similarly, by naturalising his calling, Bradley bestows an authenticity and legitimacy on himself as a minister. Bradley's discursive strategy demonstrates the ways in which participants were implicated in constructing particular versions of clericalism in ways which allowed them to become clergy. In addition to these discursive strategies, I found that participants often relied on embodied performances to further construct and reconstruct versions of being a minister in ways which allow them to occupy a place of power as a divinely appointed leader.

Lebo: Reverend Mbiti<sup>56</sup> used to say, if a probationer addresses themselves as Reverend, you would ask, "Who Reverended you?" [laughs].

In the above extract Lebo is telling me about a minister who light-heartedly reprimanded probationers for using the title Reverend to refer to themselves before they had officially been ordained by the MCSA. While Lebo explained that the title of Reverend is granted to probationers even before ordination in the MCSA, the reprimand refers more to the everyday ways in which probationers occupy or are prevented from occupying positions of power normally granted to a fully ordained minister. In this section I want to use the idea of being "reverended" as a way of referring to how clergy bodies and their constitutive relationship to power were embodied by participants. In my observations I noticed that there were various embodied performances which accompanied a "reverended" body and which participants put

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<sup>55</sup> His emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> A pseudonym has been used.

on differently in various contexts in order to inhabit power and claim a certain level of legitimacy around their identities as clergy. The use of this neologism enables me to distinguish between embodied performances related to more official ministerial acts such as administering communion and performing baptisms and the mannerisms, characteristics and personas participants came to embody and perform both inside and outside the presumed sacred boundaries of church and church work. Two particular portrayals of a “reverended” body were prominent amongst participants which I have characterised as the Reverent Body and the Charismatic Body.

The Reverent Body is best illustrated by my observations of Anele. I first met Anele on a Monday morning in his office at the church where he worked. He was dressed formally in a shirt, well-fitted blazer and formal pants. He greeted me with a formal handshake and we sat opposite each other on two couches. I felt anxious about meeting him as it had been difficult to get him to pin down dates to meet, which I interpreted as a hesitancy to participate in the research and I wanted to put him at ease by meeting him informally to talk about what his participation entailed. When Anele spoke it was in a soft, quiet tone, almost inaudible at times for the voice recorder. He sat in an upright posture and made barely any movements. Towards the end of the short meeting I asked him whether he was normally this quiet so that I could establish whether this was his demeanour or if he was in fact uncomfortable continuing with his participation in the research. Anele responded by saying “*I’m trying to be ministerial*”. His interpretation of my research was that I wanted to observe a minister, therefore, when first meeting me he performed the role of the Reverent Body. I tried to dismiss the notion that he would need to ‘be’ a minister with me by making it clear that he could go about his work and his week as he normally would. As he became more familiar with my presence throughout the week, his performances of ‘being’ a minister began to vary influenced by the context we were in. For example, with the youth he was more informal, easy-going and humorous. This did not mean that his original attempt at being ministerial was in some way less authentic than other performances I had observed but, rather, it subtly communicated how various contexts demanded different clerical performances. The research encounter at first, he assumed, required the more formal aspects of what is normative for a minister to embody – calm, reserved, holy. An embodied performance which I observed he often used in the presence of his older white congregants in order to maintain his legitimacy as a reverended body. This was not unique to Anele and certainly not an expectation he imposed on himself; rather the Reverent

Body was one which all participants knew they needed to perform at certain times in order to embody being a minister.

The second type of revered body which was common for my participants to perform was the Charismatic Body. The ability to be able to preach and speak confidently, passionately and with charisma lent an added legitimacy to the performance of participants' clericalism. On the first Sunday I met Kagiso he preached first at what he would later describe to me as a white or English congregation (as I discussed in the previous chapter). Very few of the congregants were white but he associated the way in which they worship with white Methodism characterised, in part, by its liturgical brevity. This service lasted for about an hour, and Kagiso delivered a short fifteen-minute sermon in a conversational and calm tone. After the service we drove to his next service. Once we arrived at the church, he went to his car boot and put on a cassock, a red belt, and a big wooden cross – by doing this he embodied the Reverent Body that I had seen my other participants embody during pastoral care visits and which Anele performed for our first meeting. This service was longer than the first and lasted approximately three hours. The service was conducted in Sotho and Xhosa but from the few key words I could pick up in the sermon (and after checking with Kagiso later) it seemed he was preaching on the same topic as he had done in the previous service. However, his preaching style had changed dramatically. In this service Kagiso became extremely animated and increasingly impassioned as he preached his thirty-minute sermon. The cheering and affirmations from the congregation seemed to be in sync with the raising of Kagiso's voice. Kagiso's energy seemed heightened by the translator who was assigned to translate his Xhosa sermon into Sotho. The translator seemed not only to translate his words but his actions. When Kagiso moved from the podium to the front of the altar, the translator followed him down, copying his arm waves and body movements. As Kagiso's energy grew, items of regalia flew off, first the belt and later the cross was knocked off the chain as he slammed down on the altar. At one point even the glasses he was wearing were knocked off his face. The discarding of the regalia seemed to me to be a stripping of the Reverent Body which was now replaced by the Charismatic Body. The ability to be a charismatic orator was important for specific contexts. It stood in stark contrast to the Reverent Body but was indeed necessary to gain legitimacy as a passionate minister, a good preacher and as someone who allowed the Holy Spirit to work.

The revered body is thus produced through the performativities of clergy, the responses of the congregation to a particularly impassioned sermon, and through the legitimacy and power

which good performance provides. The answer then to the question of “Who reverended you?”, might then be for all my participants “I did, in the ways I embody the Reverent and Charismatic body.” However, while participants were able to access power through their ability to perform the reverended bodies, it should be noted that because of the gender and sex norms attached to what a reverended body is, particular bodies were policed and limited in their abilities to portray these ‘authentic’ clerical performances.

Perhaps the most formal process whereby the clergy body is policed is through the candidating procedure of the MCSA. Candidating is a term used within the institutional discourse of the MCSA to refer to the series of trainings, tests and processes monitored by various committees in order to become an ordained minister. While the process of becoming an ordained minister had varied somewhat for different participants depending on the year in which they candidated, one of the key moments in all participants’ narratives was that of “screening”.

Megan: If you don’t mind going back to that actual screening, can you just describe, obviously I’ve never been and seen what it is, like what happens, where do you sit, who says what? What do you have to do and be?

Lebo: It’s a panel of people (uh) clergy, psychologists and...

Megan: Everyone has a psychologist on their panel?

Lebo: Yes. At that time there was representatives from the seminary as well. And so there are two interviews, there’s an interview for readiness and there’s an interview for theology [Megan: Okay]. The readiness panel, is a panel that looks into...who you are in here (points to her chest) like, “what’s your walk with Jesus?”. And if they’re satisfied with your walk with Jesus, then “why do you feel called to the ministry?”. If they understand that, there are different ministries in the Methodist church, so “why specifically do you feel called to word and sacrament, to be a presbyter?”. Because you could be a deacon, which is also a minister, but word and service, so you don’t handle the sacraments, and so they listen for those three things.

The screening panels as described above monitor potential candidates’ theological aptitude as well as whether their narratives provide evidence that they are called to preaching and to administering the sacraments, which in the MCSA is defined as baptism and communion. This is presented by the Church as a process which enables potential candidates to discern whether or not God had indeed called them to be an ordained minister. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to critically discuss the theological justifications of this procedure, based on my participants’ experiences I argue that screening serves a particular sociological function in the institution. This is evident in participants’ narratives of failing screenings as well as in their

experiences of having to monitor their behaviour in order to be considered to be a favourable candidate.

At Lebo's first attempt at screening she was denied the process of candidating for the ministry as she was told that she was too young. Unfortunately, the screening process happens only once a year and before she could attempt her second screening she was suspended from seminary for having had alcohol in her room. It was evident that participants and especially women were all warned about the dangers of being considered a troublesome and disruptive body. In fact, when asking about participants' experiences of candidating, all three women in this study shared that at some point they were told by a superior or mentor to "*keep their head down*" or not to "*cause trouble*". These warnings speak to the non-institutionalised ways in which participants were policed in order to be accepted as candidate ministers.

The policing of participants' age, behaviour and sexuality is evidence that the MCSA's normative ideals of a clergy person are not based only on the idea of a God-ordained calling but also on ideals of how a clergy person should look and act. The process of screening and candidature is, therefore, not simply a theologically supported process of discerning and confirming an existing God-ordained calling, but rather functions as an initiation ritual which familiarises candidates with the cultural norms of the institution and places them firmly within its social hierarchy. In this way the MCSA shares a common ritual with schools, colleges, universities and militaries in that in order to belong and succeed in these institutions, entrants must function within the normative social structures or else they suffer the consequences of being denied access or, if they are allowed access, are subsequently marginalised or disregarded (Bell, 1997: 40; Robertson, 2015). These consequences are clear in Lebo's experience.

In exploring the idea of the revered body, I found that the ways in which participants are required to become clergy and perform their identity as clergy is not inherent and ordained, but constructed and policed by the normative ideals communicated through the processes of the Church, both in formal and informal ways. Participants' experiences of being constructed and reconstructed as ministers in the MCSA demonstrates the limitations of the essentialism attached to discourses of calling. While these discourses to some extent do function to attach a legitimacy to their identity as clergy which pushes back against the illegitimacy a queer sexuality might impose on this identity, it continues to produce and perpetuate particular normative expectations of how queer clergy ought to look and act. Therefore, once again, queer



Christians are pushed to the margins. This finding becomes even more prominent when these experiences are also filtered through a gender framing.

## **2. Gendered bodies**

In this section I look at how seemingly ‘butch lesbians’ and ‘femme queens’ are conceptualised as rebellious and non-conforming as clerical bodies and how they are policed in the MCSA. The terms ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ have been examined as historical constructs often associated with lesbian or transgender identities which continue to find expression in current meaning making systems (Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004). Butch has been used to refer to and construct queer women who dress and act in more traditionally masculine ways, while femme is more commonly used in relation to gender performances, dress codes and behaviours typically associated with femininity (Smith, 2016: 1). While it is beyond the scope of this study to detail the scholarly debate regarding whether these terms are essentialist or feminist, it is clear that they are contested terms (see Smith, 1989; Gibson & Meem, 2002). It is important to note that the terms ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ are not reflective of how participants identified themselves in the study. Rather, I have used these terms to reflect the gender assumptions, cultures and politics which the MCSA seems to impose upon queer clergy in policing ways. By using these terms I argue that queer clergy in the MCSA who do not conform to traditional ways of being feminine or masculine are framed as problematically gender non-conforming.

### **2.1. Policing butch lesbians**

I did not enter the field with the expectation that participants’ clothing would be especially significant for my research, however, for both Sam and Lebo, I found that clothing and “*presenting*” were especially significant in framing their everyday experiences. This became clear to me through their narratives and based on my observations.

Lebo’s everyday attire consists of All-Star<sup>57</sup> sneakers, shorts or torn jeans, a golf shirt and a flat peak cap. When performing in her capacity as minister she would pair her sneakers with a

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<sup>57</sup> A popular brand of sneakers.

clerical shirt and a collar and long formal pants. In interviews with Lebo, she emphasised that many of her negative experiences in the Church involved the policing of her clothing.

Lebo: And that was kind of something that, the superintendent said to me the first time I got there [in Swaziland]. I was wearing pants, my head was not covered and I was ready. And he said to me, and I appreciate the gracious way in which he said [it], he said he won't dictate to me what to wear, that's not his job, but as someone that has been with the Swazi people for a long time, and understands the culture and the dynamics within that, he feels, people would walk with me better, if in my appearance I show them that I'm willing to meet them half way, because that's how they would see me meeting them half way. But if I am to go in there wearing pants, and my head not covered, it would then say to them that I am who I am, I come with this sense of authority and to hell with them and it wouldn't have helped them. And I compromised, but it was difficult for me, it was very difficult.

Megan: Was it just that that you felt like you had to change?

Lebo: Yes. But that for me, it made me feel like I was not being true to who I am. Because I'm not that type of person. That was just a very, very hard thing that I had to do in terms of adapting to meet the people where they are. But then when I got out of there, I kind of had a conversation with myself, that in order for me to be able to minister to people effectively, I need to first be true to who I am, and then I need to become a person who can stand for my values, because it just, it just wasn't a way of dressing, but it was a way of patriarchy saying, this is how you become a respectable woman. And, if I then allowed that, the women that come after me, the young girls, how do they learn to say no to patriarchy? How do they learn to say, "I am a woman, but I am not the kind of woman that raised you, I am a different woman and I fly this way, I'm a different butterfly, so don't expect me to be who raised you in order to be a fitting woman in your eyes"? And so once I had that conversation with myself and I came here, I said we would just have to have a conversation with the people because I'm not going to do it again. I can't.

This happened to Lebo at her first station<sup>58</sup> in Swaziland and at the time Lebo tried to conform to the gendered expectations of her style of dress in order to gain cooperation and favour with her church members. Lebo explained to me that she was expected to wear a skirt and cover her head – even outside of the boundaries of church. This was not something expected of all women in this context but specifically of her as a woman minister. Therefore, her body as a clerical body was gendered differently to lay women bodies. For Lebo this was an unsettling experience and one which influenced the ways in which she currently presented herself.

Megan: And are there any other, I mean we spoke in the car now about the expectation of you being the church. Basically you have to hold the space of doing anything spiritual in a way (uhm) but is there anything else, other expectations that you found is placed on you [in this congregation]?

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<sup>58</sup> "Station" is an institutional term used to refer to the congregation to which a minister has been appointed.

Lebo: Like, hair too, uhm, most of my shoes are All-Stars, that's all I wear really, I'm sure I have one other pair that's ya, like I wear those all the time every day and if people see me in town, I'm wearing my All-Stars and I'm wearing shorts, or I'm wearing All-Stars and I'm wearing my torn denim jeans and [if] somebody else says hello Reverend, [Others are] like, "What? You said who?" And I think, there's a disconnect for people that even though a person is clergy, they [are] still a person. It's like, I'm twenty-six, and that's not going to change because I'm a minister. I want to experience my life as I would if I wasn't in the Church. And, there is a code of ethics that I live by, but that does not mean I must suffocate myself. And if I'm somehow now all stuck up and stuffy and [if] there's a twenty-six-year-old who wants to come to church but [they look at me] and [I] look like a Gogo<sup>59</sup> [then they won't want to come to church]. So [they will think] in order to join them I must look like that – it's not appealing. So (1) I think I can somehow appear to some demographics as not holy, because I'm not who they expect me to be, but to another demographic, it can be like, "I can do this Jesus thing. Look at her, she's getting her Jesus on and she's not stuck up at all", you see?

In the extract above Lebo resists ideas that she needs to present herself in the normative ways associated with the revered body in order to be perceived as a minister. While she acknowledges that the way she presents herself may diminish her status as "holy" and clerical, she also re-interprets her current style of dress as a strength which she can use to attract young people and to portray a more relaxed, accessible version of Jesus.

Sam often wore flip flops, golf shirts and as she jokingly put it, had a "passion for cargo shorts". Sam would change into seemingly more "suitable" ministerial wear when preaching or performing other clerical duties but often maintained a relaxed approach even with her more formal attire. Sam, like Lebo, also described multiple experiences in which she felt pressure to dress and present herself not only in acceptable ways as a minister but also in more normatively "feminine" ways.

Sam: ...[My supervisor at the time was] like "No I don't want you like lounging around looking like you rolled out the couch", and I'm like "That's how I look", right. [She says], "Look better". So then I was like okay (uh) so I started wearing like skirts and shirts, you know. So whenever you would see me at a district meeting, you know, any official business, that's what I'd wear, skirts and a shirt. Like long skirts, you know those shirts that they have a K-way that look like they should belong with cargo pants but they're not, they're just like a little bit tailored, so, ya. Also standard lesbian attire (laughter).

In different interviews Sam described that her style of dress also affected the ways in which she was assessed (institutionally termed, as being 'on trial') when she was a lay preacher hoping to candidate for the ministry.

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<sup>59</sup> Gogo is a vernacular term from grandmother.

*Extract 1:*

Sam: So early on that was the kind of thing, so that I toed the line but I could never toe the line well enough, like I always seemed to miss the mark and it became like a constant criticism. Like, her preaching's fine, but [her] body language sucks (uhm), [she] doesn't dress properly, has no decorum...and so a lot of the time I felt like people, they didn't put my mind on trial or my sense of call on trial, they put my body on trial and me on trial. You know, they couldn't see it as integrated whole.

*Extract 2:*

Sam: ...But there was always problems with the way I dress, always. So even as a local preacher I was told, "You can't dress like this", "You're too sloppy", "You're too boyish", "Be decent". So I would give them my interpretation of what decent is and it was never good enough...

In the extracts above a discourse of 'neatness' is continually invoked in relation to Sam's body and presentation. She is at different times described as sloppy, having no decorum and as if she "rolled out the couch". Rather than these reflecting Sam's neatness these statements seem to tacitly allude to the "boyish" way in which she presents herself. In this way performances of gender which do not perpetuate normative bodies as normatively feminine or masculine are policed through subtle reprimands and more formal procedures of assessment. In fact, in Sam's experience of being on trial, rather than assessing her preaching ability or her calling, the evaluator assessed her body. In this sense gender appropriate dress codes are the unofficial uniform of clergy in the MCSA.

I argue that Sam and Lebo's experiences provides a critique of the recent institutional discourse of transformation which has been celebrated by the institution. In May 2019, the MCSA elected, Reverend Purity Malinga as Presiding Bishop - the highest office in the denomination. She is the first woman in over 200 years of the Church's existence and over forty years of the ordination of women in the denomination to hold this position. In a public letter the MCSA celebrated its transformative inclusivity of women,

Having endured the cross and discrimination of patriarchy for over 200 years, women of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa have finally broken through the stained-glass ceiling by the election of the first Presiding Bishop who is a woman (MCSA, 2019).

The underlying sentiment in this statement suggests that through the appointment of Reverend Malinga, the institution has finally 'achieved' gender equality and inclusion. Yet, Sam and Lebo's experiences of being policed illustrate the subtler, taken-for-granted ways in which the informal culture of the Church marginalises particular types of women, most notably those who embody disruptions to heteronormative ideas of gender. By policing the dress of Lebo and Sam, the informal culture and rules of the Church reinforce the idea that when the institution

includes women, they limit this inclusion to mean women who perform their gender in normative and essentialised ways which maintains binary ideas of gender complementarity. Mimi Schippers (2007: 95) terms these undesirable performances of femininity, “pariah femininities” to reflect the ways in which these performances are not only inferior but are disruptive of the very relationship between masculinity and femininity. Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983: 201) illustrated this same point almost thirty years ago when she argued that,

Women in ministry, like all women trying to function in public roles under male rules, find themselves in a double bind. They are allowed success only by being better than men at the games of masculinity, while at the same time they are rebuked for having lost their femininity. In such a system it is not possible for women to be equal, but only to survive in a token and marginal way at tremendous physical and psychological cost.

It is these subtle forms of marginalisation as imposed by the unofficial gender uniform of the MCSA that continue to remain hidden when research focuses only on doctrinal policies and theological teachings and that continues to be excluded or deemed inconsequential in broad transformation rhetoric.

Although Sam and Lebo’s bodies and clothing choices are policed, I would also argue that their decision to continue to dress in the ways which they felt most comfortable are also embodied forms of resistance to binary ideas of gender and gendered ideas of clericalism. While they had both at some stage tried to conform to the unofficial uniform imposed on women’s bodies by the MCSA, when I met them they resisted these restrictions. For example, Lebo reinterprets her dress in a positive light when she says she is more likely to attract young people. While Sam, in her retelling of the ways in which her body was assessed while she was on trial, argues that the assessor failed to see her body as part of an “*integrated whole*” and in so doing, she frames her body and the ways in which she chooses to present herself as integral to her calling and her adeptness at preaching. By dressing in ways traditionally associated with masculinity, Lebo and Sam threaten the normative persona of clergy and the ways in which women are marginally permitted to occupy that persona – not in the same ways as men but differently - softer. In her research Getman (2014: 98-99) positions the masculine persona of clergy as something negative which women are able to soften. She argues that when women do adopt a harder masculine persona of clericalism they somehow betray their inherent femininity. Using a queer lens I argue that there is no inherent way to be feminine or masculine clergy, rather, the more celebrated forms of clericalism such as the revered body previously discussed is framed around patriarchal and heteronormative understandings of gender which grants

seemingly masculine performances more power. By putting on their ‘butch’ clothing Sam and Lebo are not betraying their femininity but are occupying the persona of clericalism in ways which were not ordained for them. Therefore, dressing in the ways that they want despite institutional pressure to modify the way they embody their clerical identity become acts of “redress” (Crawley, 2008: 208).

## 2.2. Policing femme queens<sup>60</sup>

This policing of gender performance was not only confined to the experiences of women clergy in my study but was something which Bradley also experienced. Bradley would often describe himself as “*obviously*” queer which he expressed through phrases such as, “*Hellen Keller from a helicopter could see I’m as queer as Christmas*”. He attributed this obviousness to what he deemed feminine behaviour and mannerisms. While Bradley’s clothing choices are not policed in the ways that Sam and Lebo experience, he had often been told, particularly by other queer clergy men, to monitor his behaviour so as to not seem to be obviously feminine.

Megan: And you were saying like there’s a legitimacy to looking masculine and being masculine, in a masculine body right? Doing masculinity well in a way [Bradley: Yes]. And have you found yourself maybe playing into either?

Bradley: Oh, ya, every day.

Megan: Oh really?

Bradley: Every day I have to watch out how I talk (1) I have to watch how I move my hands. Every day I check my give away comments. So (1) going into my congregation, is (1) for me (2), I have to be careful what my safe spaces are to really just be myself...

Unlike the gender policing Sam and Lebo experience from the institution and other clergy, Bradley polices his own gender expression. This is influenced by the fact that he is not open to all the members of his congregation about his sexuality, partly in order to avoid “*rocking the boat*” and potentially causing division and upset amongst his congregation.

Another form of policing imposed upon femme men was through the discourses of other queer men.

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<sup>60</sup> The term queen is used to invoke participants’ use of terms and phrases such as “drag” and “queer as Christmas” in order to equate an “obvious” gay identity with femme performances of gender.

Anele: ... But I am now at a point where, or in this space where, I am not worried if you know, you know. If you don't know, you don't. Why do I need to shout to people about it? It's like straight people they don't go out and shout, "Hey! I'm straight!"

Megan: I'm straight! (Laughter)

Anele: And so when you're a drag queen to me it's like you're doing it for people. That is how I feel about it. (Uhm) I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it. But, I don't see why.

It is important to note that when Anele speaks about "*drag*" he is not speaking about the cross-dressing performances associated with drag queens, rather, he used the term throughout our interactions to refer to men who perform their sexuality in what he construes as typically feminine ways. At other times in our interviews Anele referred to these femme performances as "*soft*" or as the desire to wear dresses. I found that the undesirability of femininity motivated Anele to disidentify with particular types of homosexuality where being gay is associated with femininity.

While femininity is therefore policed in various ways it is not only done in opposition to masculinity but, as Bradley explained, is also done to access power. In the extract below Bradley as well as Sam (by virtue of Bradley's citation of her) become not only participants in the study but co-producers of knowledge as they make meaning of these gender performances.

Bradley: Sam helped me to understand this because she does it with race and gender, and then it extends to LGBT people, because she thinks about the vulgarity of the local, using Foucault and saying just like the local, who dresses like the coloniser, who talks like the coloniser, therefore he's given some form of legitimacy, but the local who embodies their own culture is seen as vulgar. The same with women, you know the women who wears the heels, and the perfumes, and defers at the right times, gets a certain amount of legitimacy, the girl who doesn't, you know, abide by the rules is seen as vulgar and mouthy. And I've come to realise I think, and this is particularly big in the Church I think, what the Church struggles with as well, is really also the gender stuff. So, the gay man who looks like a straight man, who you know, who talks like a man, who dresses like a man, who is very masculine, in a way gets a certain amount of legitimacy when they present and when they talk (uhm) [but I don't] when I'm wearing my poncho and I'm, you know, clearly not someone who comes across very masculine all the time.

Bradley and Sam use Foucauldian theory (1977) to make meaning of the ways in which they legitimately claim clerical identity and power by performing in normatively masculine or feminine ways. Therefore, not only are Sam, Lebo, and Bradley's experiences of being policed reflective of the heteronormative culture of the MCSA, but, their ability to put up the required gender performances to maintain their clerical legitimacy mocks and subverts the very gender norms they cite. This is because just like the drag queens in Judith Butler's (1990) work, participants' ability to perform their gender appropriately in contexts which they deem fit

reveals the constructed nature of gender as well as the absurdity of policing the ways in which clergy present themselves and indeed live their gendered and sexual lives (Alliaume, 2006: 95; 103). However, it should also be noted that Bradley has significantly more scope to enact his agency and to choose when and where particular performances are more beneficial than others. It is significant that Bradley rather than Lebo or Sam could do this as it suggests that gender and sex cannot be understood as separate categories of identity to be discussed in different policies and doctrines – but rather they are co-constitutive of each other and of the norms which are produced within the MCSA.

### **3. Sexualised bodies: Desired and violated**

While it is common in literature to discuss the ways in which queer bodies are sexualised, it is far less common to discuss this in relation to clerical bodies. When it has been explored, scholars have generally done so in relation to male clergy as perpetrators of sexual abuse (McCall, 2002; Shupe, 2007; Garland & Argueta, 2010). In my study participants spoke about their experiences of being sexualised, however, the experiences between men and women were remarkably different. While men spoke about the ways in which they were sexually desired because of their status as clergy, women spoke to me about the ways in which their bodies were sexually violated as queer clergy.

Kagiso, for example, spoke to me about the how, especially within black Methodism, ministers were perceived as desirable bodies.

Kagiso: We have gatherings that we have once a year.

Megan: Who has gatherings?

Kagiso: Young people in the church, particularly the Wes...

Megan: Wesley Guild

Kagiso: That is where there is a greater influx of young men who are owning up to their sexualities. And because they are denominational, they want to be with Umfundisi<sup>61</sup>. If you are with Reverend Kagiso, for instance, you've made it in life.

Megan: Is it similar to what you were saying about the young women who want to be like the minister's wife?

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<sup>61</sup> The Xhosa word for minister.



Kagiso: Ya, yes. The same kind. They exalt the minister. They even want to be the minister's girlfriend or boyfriend.

Megan: Oh.

Kagiso: Remember, it's associated with status. They elevate you and this is the exact opposite in a predominantly white or English church.

Megan: What's that?

Kagiso: The veneration of the minister. In a predominantly white church, the minister is just one of us, set apart to minister, given the gifts and rights to minister. In the black church, you are the deputy Jesus.

Anele also spoke about the ways in which it seemed to him that some women in the church would be in relationships with ministers even if they knew they were gay because of the status attached to the desirable clergy body.

Anele: And still you know. There are girls who, for example Trevor<sup>62</sup>, he was married to this girl. And the girl knew. Trevor called her aside and he told her, "Look this is what is happening in my life". And the girl said, "You know we'll try (uhm) let's just do it". I think she was hoping for a miracle or something.

Megan: Yeah.

Anele: You know. They had two years [and then decided that] no this is not working.

Megan: Yeah.

Anele: So there are girls who would do it just because I'm the minister. [To] get them status. [as] the minister's wife and you know all the benefits and stuff. And the recognition.

Both Anele and Kagiso locate the status granted to ministers' wives or in being with a minister within a black Methodist context. As discussed in chapter five, the MCSA operates differently among different racially segregated parts of the Church. The black Methodist framing as Kagiso puts it is "*denominational*" – as is framed by participants as more invested in nationally and regionally organised women's, men's and youth organisations and more social capital and status is granted to those who operate in higher offices within these organisations. Therefore, the status which Kagiso and Anele allude to is the office which a minister's wife receives in black Methodist congregations, namely that of the presidency of the Women's Manyano<sup>63</sup>, the

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<sup>62</sup> A pseudonym has been used here.

<sup>63</sup> A separate debate around the particular role of the Women's Manyano can be found in the literature in which scholars take different positions on how to frame the organisation. While some argue that it is a patriarchal organisation in women's clothing (Oduyoye, 2009; Dibeela, 2011) others argue that it functions to

largest women's organisation in the MCSA to which mostly black women belong. This is deemed a prestigious office and, as I observed in one of Kagiso's church services, the president along with her executive are granted special seats within the church – a material sign of the status she has acquired.

While the findings above suggest that black male bodies in particular are desired, women experienced being sexualised in more violent ways. Sam for example, had previously experienced numerous cases of violence perpetrated by male clergy and male lay people on her body. In the extract below she speaks about a particularly harrowing incident which occurred while she was a student minister.

Sam: The Monday or Tuesday, so like the Tuesday morning was always communion day right and then you were on a roster and so, on your day you were hosting communion. So the one day we're [standing] around in a circle and the communion is served and I'm standing next to some of this group of boys, guys, young men, men and they consecrate the elements and it's time to pass the peace, so (1) we all like hug each other because it's like a normal thing, you hug or whatever. This dude picks me up and he has an erection, like a hard on and he pulls my bits to his bits basically like pulls me into him and picks me up and holds me there and whispers in my ear with very hot sticky breath, that I can still feel, "I almost have you open now" (2) and then puts me down. [He then] turns around to his friends and they all giggle and high five (2) and you're standing there and like this has happened in front of everybody but no one acknowledges it's like no one knows. And this was the whole year, incidents like this would happen.

Research focusing on the experiences of black lesbian women in South Africa argue that while homophobic violence is generally high, black lesbians are particularly vulnerable to violence and in particular 'corrective rape'<sup>64</sup> because of the potential their sexual identity holds to destabilise the patriarchal gender order and its heteronormative practices (Lake, 2014). Sam's embodiment of 'woman' which is not "girly" or "pretty" poses a particular threat to male privilege. Thus, instead of receiving a sacrament of peace through communion, her body becomes a sexualised site for a violently patriarchal act of imposed dominance and gender 'correction'. The institutional celebration of the inclusion of women in leadership in the MCSA, rings hollow when placed in relation to Sam's experiences. It is important to note that Sam was the only participant who, by the end of our time together, could not motivate why she

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enable women to access belonging and power in ways which they would otherwise be excluded from (Holness, 1997; Haddad, 2002; Sprong, 2011).

<sup>64</sup> A contested term which is used to refer to the raping of women to 'correct' them to heterosexuality (Lake, 2014).

was still a member of the MCSA. Sam felt increasingly alienated by the institution and was the only participant that could not explain why she stayed in the institution.

Sam: ...Why do I just stick around for little sparks? Why are crumbs okay for me, that's a constant thing that I ask myself. And then as I grew into my own sense of being, my own self and become more at peace with it, the more I realise that this person that's Sam that I love, and it's taken a long time to learn how to love this person, actually doesn't fit in with what the institution wants out of humanity (laughs).

Megan: Which is what?

Sam: Which is what? Straight, male (2) black male (1) but straight male.

I asked Sam how she knew the Church did not want her. She stated that it was the Church's hierarchy which seemed to value black, male bodies who performed their clericalism in heteronormative ways. The continuous violation of her body throughout her time as a minister no doubt makes it clear that, within the bounds of the MCSA, her body is rendered an abject object removed from her abilities and calling.

#### **4. Conclusion: The inclusion of the body into institutional inclusion rhetoric**

Through a discussion of body politics in the MCSA I have explored the ways in which bodies matter and fail to matter in the MCSA. By investigating how religion is lived in and through bodies, I argue, I have explored the ways in which normative bodies are produced in the MCSA but also the creative ways in which these norms are inhabited and resisted and what this might mean for the politics of queering religion.

By taking cognisance of the queer clerical body, I have resisted essentialising the experiences of those who are often deemed either to be marginalised as queer or as unshakeably powerful as clergy (Dube, 2010: 145). Instead, this chapter has explored the ways in which clerical bodies are produced and policed in the MCSA. By exploring the idea of revered bodies I have disrupted the notion that to be clergy is merely a divine matter of sacred calling. Rather, it is an intensely political project in which a clerical body is produced through every day taken-for-granted discourses, procedures and processes which shape normative ideals of what it means to embody being a minister. By understanding these norms and inhabiting them in different contexts, queer clergy who may otherwise be deemed Other and marginalised, are able to occupy a space of power, influence and legitimacy as an embodied representative of God.

In addition this chapter has demonstrated that, while the body is an important site of individual identity construction and deconstruction, it is also complexly related to the social (McGuire, 1990: 284). As Constance Furey (2012: 7) states, “The body is never merely blood, flesh and bones, but physical body is intrinsic to the social body, how it is imagined, structured and negotiated socially”. Thus, how bodies are produced, policed and inhabited speaks to the gender and sex ideologies of the MCSA. The body imagined by the Church as worthy of ordination is one which is modest, neat and tidy and appropriately gendered. Anything outside of those boundaries is policed through formal procedures, hushed warnings and violence. It is significant also to consider which bodies experienced the policing and, in particular, the more violent expressions thereof. The fact that queer women of colour were the ones to experience the most violent forms of policing demonstrates how the intersectionality of identities functions to expel those bodies which are most threatening of the normative values that maintain the existent power hierarchy. These bodies fail to matter even when they do their best to appropriate and conform to the institutional norms. By exploring the ways in which different clerical bodies were policed, I have illuminated some of the taken-for-granted, everyday institutional norms around gender and sex. This takes seriously the theoretical lens employed in this dissertation which aims to analyse performativity of identities not merely as limitlessly fluid and changing but as also interacting with structure.

Finally, this chapter has also illustrated the ways in which revered bodies and gendered and sexualised bodies of clergy are not in binary opposition to one another but that these performances are relational and co-constitutive of the other. A revered body cannot exist without the failure and policing of other bodies. This is important when considered in light of the Church’s politics on women clergy. It is clear that the patriarchal and heteronormative culture and value system of the MCSA has remained relatively intact despite policy changes which are inclusive of women clergy and even when women clergy have entered the highest offices of leadership. This is because the kind of woman that has been ‘allowed’ entry is the women who can and must comply with the normative and binary ideas of gender on which the institution relies. The participants’ narratives and experiences in this study suggest that inclusion and institutional transformation rhetoric must consider the diverse and sometimes competing ways of ‘being’ in the institution. This is important in considering the way forward for the inclusion of queer clergy. This is not a separate matter to the inclusion of women clergy, rather, it signifies how vacuous the inclusion rhetoric and policies have been thus far. More

optimistically, it also provides an opportunity to reshape the ways in which institutional transformation is understood and allows for a broader praxis of inclusivity.

The way bodies are viewed, what we do with our bodies, and who has the power to decide both, are intensely political. In fact, in terms of the contemporary struggle to leave behind entrenched patterns of domination and violence, they are key political issues. The gender and sex construction and abjection of queer bodies in the MCSA may be helpfully analysed as a case study illuminating both exclusion of, and resistance by, queer people in other institutions and communities.



## CHAPTER 7: BECOMING DOMESTIC AND EROTIC AND THE POLITICS OF MARRIAGE

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) has positioned itself in a seemingly non-divisive space of ambivalence, a position favoured by many mainline churches in South Africa (Robertson, Nadar & Jodamus: 2018). In other words, while the MCSA has declared that it will not reject anyone on the basis of their sexuality, it has also refused to condone same-sex marriage. This was made clear in 2009 when Ecclesia de Lange was excommunicated from the Church for declaring her intention to marry her same-sex partner<sup>65</sup>. The MCSA suggests that this ambivalence is due to an absence of denominational consensus on a theology of marriage. In the Book of Order (MCSA, 2016: 228) on the issue of same-sex marriage it states,

We re-affirm that the MCSA is not yet ready to apply for its ministers to officiate at same-sex unions because there is still a need for further conversation in relation to the theology of marriage, the exercise of conscience, pastoral implications and the perceived marginalisation of people in same-sex relationships. Conference directs ministers to facilitate a conducive environment for the church to listen to the silent voices.

Scholars have worked with a similar assumption and thus there exists a preponderance of theological literature on the matter (Mtshiselwa, 2010; 2010a; Kumalo, 2011; Khuzwayo, 2011; Bentley, 2012). Yet, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, theology interacts with politics. Therefore, in order to understand the possibilities and perhaps limitations that a theology of marriage might produce, in this chapter I want to explore how the politics of marriage and families in the MCSA operates through the experiences of queer clergy.

In public discourse and academia the debate in queer marriage politics has centred around the broadening of legal marriage rights to include same-sex marriages and, some might argue, for a legally broader definition of family (Harvey, 2015: 103). Jennifer Harvey (2015) has characterised this debate into two central arguments namely, assimilation and subversion. On the one hand, theorists and activists adopting an assimilation stance argue that issues of marriage equality fail to disrupt or trouble the powerful history of marriage as a heteropatriarchal institution (Duggan, 2003; Queen, 2008). In addition, marriage equality activism is seen as a single-issue and thus obscures the numerous social injustices experienced by a plurality of queer lives (Weber, 2015: 1148). This critique is valid and one which could

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<sup>65</sup> Refer to chapter one for a full explanation of the case.

be directed at the MCSA. The Church thus far has framed its conversations and policies as the “same-sex debate” which has been singularly focused on same-sex marriage for clergy and lay people. This then excludes, amongst others, issues such as adoption, inclusive gender language and queer interpretation of Scripture. On the other side of the debate of queer marriage politics, those who ascribe to the subversion argument suggest that there is in fact nothing more subversive than same-sex marriage as it challenges the very notions of gender complementarity and gender roles in family contexts and thus subverts the idea of heteronormative ideals of marriage (see Sistig, 2011; Sistig and Nadar 2011).

Harvey (2015: 109) however, rejects views which are situated firmly on either side of the assimilationist-subversion debate. She argues, as I have previously done in this dissertation, that binaries exist in the abstract and, rather than being a helpful framework for understanding marriage politics, it ignores the varied motivations, ethical dilemmas and realities around which people construct a multiplicity of marriage and family forms. Harvey (2015: 110) suggests moving the debate in scholarship away from exploring whether queer families and specifically same-sex marriage are either assimilationist or subversive. Rather, she argues, research should focus on exploring the various familial and kinship realities of queer lives and how it is situated within institutional and discursive contexts. The political project then should be to explore the possibilities these varied queer families and kinships pose for troubling normative powers of race, class, gender and sexual orientation.

In this chapter I provide a descriptive analysis of the nuanced and varied ways in which participants inhabit family and kinship, domestic and erotic spaces in the Methodist Church and what these experiences mean for queering marriage politics. In order to explicate this I have characterised participants’ experiences and narratives into three framings: matrimonies, promiscuities and silences.

### **1. Matrimonies<sup>66</sup>**

Amongst my participants a key theme that arose in their experiences of the MCSA, was the hierarchy of married families it created through processes such as stationing. Stationing is the

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<sup>66</sup> I have borrowed the concept of “matrimonies” from Talvacchia, K. Pettinger, M. & Larrimore, M (2015: 65) who motivate that it at allows for distance from religious, hetero and homonormative discourses which are

process used to allocate ministers to serve in a particular congregation for a set number of years. The details of the various steps involved in stationing are too lengthy to restate here in its entirety but the decision as to which congregation a minister would be allocated is essentially influenced by three bodies: first, a particular congregation and its respective circuits<sup>67</sup> can choose to invite a minister to work<sup>68</sup> in the congregation, second, the district<sup>69</sup> has a committee which oversees the stationing of ministers and, third, Conference<sup>70</sup> is the ultimate decision-making body in the church and has power to confirm and alter all stationing decisions (MCSA, 2016: 78-79). While the process seems to be controlled through regulated decision-making bodies, it is far from an objective one and it is often subject to the influence of the ideologies and personal preferences of those in power such as district bishops, influential ministers and even individual lay leaders. This is evident in the ways in which my participants experienced that senior male married ministers were granted more desirable stations.

Kagiso: But then you come to the context of church, you have gone through the rite of passage of circumcision, and you have received and accepted yourself as a man, yet you don't go through the rite of passage of marriage, in terms of marrying a woman, in terms of the narrative that is suitable for the heteronormative. But if I was to marry my partner today, I doubt a majority of my family, I mean now the extended family, would attend that 'cause for them that is not understood in the African context. But if I was to go and marry a woman I don't even love...

Megan: That's fine?

Kagiso: ... all of them would be here. And all of them would contribute to the marriage. So that's why I believe in my view that one, many of our African brothers who enter into the ministry get married to women. Two, it's the one I alluded to – the process of stationing within the MCSA, unfortunately puts the African minister at a backdrop in the sense that many of those who invite a minister to labour in the circuit, would invite ministers on the premise that either on seniority or that they are family men. And by family man, they would not recognize my partner and two adopted children as a family. But the husband who has three extramarital kids and is married to a woman and they have one child in the marriage, that would still be family. So, the church itself is even stationing... when I talk about the church, I'm not talking MCO<sup>71</sup> here. I'm not talking bishops; I'm talking the system. It favours an African male minister who is married and seen to be with a wife and they have children. Then the system would favour them. In other words, circuit

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embedded in the term "marriage" or even "unions". In addition, the pluralization of the term alludes to the multiple meanings and forms the marriages have and continue to take.

<sup>67</sup> The institutional term for a grouping of congregations

<sup>68</sup> The discourse in institutional uses the term "labour" to refer to a minister's service or work in a congregation.

<sup>69</sup> A grouping of a number of circuits within a geographic region.

<sup>70</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>71</sup> The MCO stands for the Methodist Connexional Office and is made up of the executive of the denomination which includes various executive offices and units including the Presiding Bishop and the General Secretary.



stewards and those who participate in the process of inviting ministers, would focus on such ministers. And you'd find if you are younger and you are unmarried, you'd probably be more attractive towards your Afrikaans and Coloured areas or towards the smaller white or English churches. But the older you grow, you become less attractive to those spaces and even more less attractive to the African space because you are older, you are unmarried and this might be saying something about you.

Kagiso describes marriage as a rite of passage which not only grants ministers, like him, acceptance amongst his family but also makes them a more desirable candidate for specific congregations in the MCSA. This is partly because, as previous research has shown, a minister's wife is viewed as an asset to the church as they operate as an unpaid volunteer (Morgan & Morgan, 1980; Malony and Hunt, 1991). This is especially the case in black Methodist contexts which tend to provide more financial security for ministers. In these contexts, the Women's Manyano, with their financial and social influence, greatly affect the choice of which ministers are invited to their congregation. Further, because of the makeup of the constitution of the Manyano, only a minister's wife can act as president of the organisation. Scholars such as Cheryl Dibeela (2011) and Jenny Sprong (2011) have argued that the Manyano continue to uphold traditional, patriarchal ideas of family. This is what Harvey (2015: 108) terms "familialist ideologies", which refers to particular ideas of family which are celebrated and produce hegemonic, virile masculinities and subservient femininities. In addition, while the Manyano do not solely influence the stationing decisions of the Church, their impact on processes such as this continues to reproduce hetero-patriarchal exclusive norms. Thus, Kagiso experiences that single, young black men, particularly those who are queer are unlikely to have many opportunities to work in financially strong churches. In the context of stationing procedures such as these, it becomes pertinent to not only include theological interpretations, doctrines and liturgy in the conversation of the "same-sex debate" but to also consider the everyday ways in which exclusive ideologies of the family are produced.

By exploring the indirect effects of procedures such as stationing, we can begin to understand the embeddedness of heteronormativity in the MCSA. In many ways then, the possibility of queer families not only questions the doctrines, procedures and liturgies around marriage but demand institutional attention to the entire culture of the institution. This is evident for example in the case of Sam who, despite the MCSA's prohibition of same-sex marriage, regarded herself

as being married to her covenant partner<sup>72</sup>. And while she was not allowed to be married legally and to remain in the church, Sam and her covenant partner did have a celebration which resembled a traditional marriage ceremony and in which they had made a covenant of commitment to each other. They had also since adopted a son together. During my time with them I shared suppers with them as a family, witnessed them trying to get their son to bed on time, picking him up from school, preventing him from eating too many sweet treats and generally spending time together with family and friends. Sam and her covenant partner occupied the space of matrimony in much the same way as is normalised for heterosexual couples. They simply were ‘being’ family and being kin. In binary arguments of the debate around the politics of queer marriage the everydayness of their matrimony may seem assimilationist at times. Yet, within a context where it is still not doctrinally ordained to be legal, claiming to be married and living the mundanity of family life, is in itself disruptive of the MCSA’s norms. A bishop’s violent reaction to Sam in 2018 is illustrative of how subversive this matrimony proved to heteronormative power. Her account begins after the unnamed bishop called her into his office during a regional event.

Sam: ...And he’s like okay, “so when I first got to know you, you were, you were pretty, you were a girl”...And I was like but what’s wrong with me, I mean like I look pretty, you know, now, I think. He’s like, “no no you are still beautiful”... So he started asking more questions, “So are you satisfied? I mean like you dated a guy?” So then he also [asks] “Did the rape turn you this way?”...“So I want to know, you dated before, what happened? Did you have sex?” (3) So I’m like floored, I’m like “No, but it’s none of your business really”... Then he starts asking me basically about, “So am I married?” I’m like “Yes, I am...but you won’t call it that”. I said, “Not according to the definitions of, you know, like what you hold as marriage but my definition, yes, I am”, you know. “For your definitions I would call it a covenant of friendship...For your definition like it’s not a civil union, it’s not a marriage it’s a covenanted, monogamous friendship”...And he’s like, “So do you have sex?” And I’m like “Yes, I swing from chandeliers. Like yes, I do”. [And I ask] “Do you have sex?” He’s like [imitates him coughing]...no I’m not here to talk about that. [He continues asking] “Are you satisfied? Do you not need to be penetrated?”

The bishop in the extract above continued to interrogate Sam for fifteen minutes. This was the same bishop who had convened the Church’s disciplinary commission that arbitrated her case of rape which he references; a process that was deeply traumatic for Sam and ultimately exonerated the rapist. Sam’s matrimony while simply an act of being family, is thrust into the space of politics by its perception as a subversive act. Through the bishop’s pathologizing of

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<sup>72</sup> This is Sam’s preferred term.

Sam's sexuality, as well as his invocation of heteropatriarchal ideas of penetration, the bishop undermines and resists Sam's marriage and indeed her sexuality as legitimate. Subversion is, therefore, not necessarily an act consciously chosen by participants and literature which celebrates same-sex marriage as subversion in itself often neglects to account for how unwanted and sometimes disempowering this politicisation can be. When Sam's sexuality and marriage was brought up for scrutiny and discussion, it takes place in a context framed by the unequal power relations implicated in gender relations and in the MCSA's hierarchy. Thus, far from being experienced as an opportunity for transformation, it is violent, violating and demeaning.

While Sam's matrimony demonstrates how inhabiting the norms of marriage in both queer and normative ways is subversive of the institutional culture of the MCSA which celebrates traditional forms of marriage, I also want to take on Stephen Hicks' (2011: 217) warning that, to present queer family as "essentially conservative, essentially radical, essentially egalitarian, essentially challenging of gender norms, essentially...anything" is to objectify such families. It would, therefore, not be fair to describe Sam's matrimony as essentially subversive. Indeed, as she described it to me, her love, respect and commitment to her covenant partner were overwhelmingly provided as reasons for wanting to be in a committed matrimony. Further, while I position Sam's matrimony or covenant partnership in an overtly politicised way, in my observations of Sam most of her relationship was occupied by the mundanity of domesticity. Indeed, the same can be said of Bradley and Lebo who were in relationships at the time of my research. For the majority of my observations I noted, for example, squabbles between partners about who put empty milk cartons back in the fridge, the chore of running errands, looking after children, making food and doing other household activities. I do not want to fetishize these domestic scenes as they would unlikely be significant if my study were focused on heterosexual relationships, however, it is important to include this here because as Zethu Matebeni (2014) points out, ordinary scenes of domesticity, love and relationship are often left out of the politicised conversation of same-sex marriage. I agree that these scenes should not be left out and argue that simply recognising that the realities of matrimonies in queer relationships can be mundanely domestic could arguably be subversive in a politicised debate. In this case the personal is indeed political and even the most ordinary of domestic scenes should be included in this.

This being said, participants who wanted to be married were motivated by a variety of reasons other than subversion or even love and relationship. Lebo for example, expressed her desire to be married so that she can continue to motivate the value of the Church to her son.

Lebo: I'd like to get married and have a family...I think that's the most crucial thing for me, ya. And not only for me but for my son. Because now he's going to grow up in the Church and he sees me working tirelessly for the Church and he sees me committed to this Church...but [it] says we can never be a family, it's wrong for us to be a family.

Bradley, on the other hand, is more critical of the limits of fighting for same-sex marriage. In some of our conversations, he argued that marriage as an institution is shaped by a heteronormative history of women as property, and thus it is problematic to impose that framework, undisturbed onto the lives of queer people. However, in tension with this, he also desired for his partner to be recognised and supported by the Church in the same way that spouses of clergy in heterosexual relationships are,

Bradley: It's the little things, and I know they're little things, and so you can overlook them, so your anniversaries all get acknowledged, ours doesn't (uhm) you know those are the things; to say, your wife is on your medical aid, my partner is not, so ya.

Megan: So actual financial implications?

Bradley: (Uhm) and there are big ones. Not being able to enter a civil union has implications, it means if Tim<sup>73</sup> [his partner] goes to hospital I have to prove that I'm his next of kin. I don't have a paper that tells me that.

The exclusion of Bradley's partner from his life was a significant part of him feeling as though his sexuality was being erased in the Church. Broad theological statements of welcoming, such as those promulgated by the Church, means little for the legal and financial realities of Bradley and his partner. What Lebo and Bradley seem to communicate in the above extracts is a request for what Harvey (2015: 113) conceptualises as "legitimacy". Harvey (2015: 113) argues that this desire for legitimacy is not a matter of queer families asking to be included into the existing norm surrounding the notion of a "good family" rather, she argues, that requests for legitimacy demands a broader understanding of what a "good family" is. Insisting on this legitimacy troubles normative gender binaries.

By looking at the different motivations and constructions of marriage for queer clergy in the MCSA we are able to ask different questions about the place of marriage in contemporary queer

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<sup>73</sup> A pseudonym has been used.

politics and how these fit into a broader intersectional queer politics which goes beyond only marriage rights. For example, my participants' experiences and struggles brings into consideration issues of health rights, leave considerations and the provision of financial and social support for queer clergy families. It also brings into question the embeddedness of heteronormative familialist ideologies in institutional procedures and policies which are seemingly unrelated to marriage theologies, such as the stationing procedures of the MCSA. Further, I argue that participants' marriages were neither essentially assimilationist or subversive. However, their experiences do demonstrate that their desires to be married are not indifferent to the problematics that heteronormative marriage imposes, nor are they seeking to subvert all questionable norms around marriage, for example, monogamy – rather they inhabit certain norms and live their kinship. This then brings into question whether a theology or even a politics of marriage is adequate in understanding the possibilities of queer inclusivity in the Church. I can further trouble this idea by looking at the ways clergy do not occupy marriage and relationships. In the next two sections I will explore the ways certain participants do not share motivations and desires to be married or even to be monogamous and how these challenges conceptualisations of the politics of queer marriage and queer rights more generally.

## 2. Promiscuities

Kagiso: There is a tale of a man who's about to die. And so he gathers his sons and says my children you know me, I've been very active in the ministry. And a lot of people here from different churches, if I die they're going to come here and they're going to have evening prayers. If the Presbyterians come here and pray, please my children hide all my cigarettes and cigars in the studies. If the Anglicans come here please hide all the alcohol in the house. For that is how Anglicans are viewed. They drink a lot. And then he says if the Methodists come, please go and hide your mother (laughs). So [this] already tell[s] you that there is a general perception about Methodist people. That they're very promiscuous and they're socialites.

Kagiso related the above joke to me to describe the 'promiscuities' associated with the MCSA. Almost in contradiction to the value of matrimony which the church upholds through its practices, procedures and everyday institutional culture, Kagiso's anecdote paints a picture of a different church – one in which promiscuities are commonplace.

Before continuing I should clarify here my use of the term 'promiscuities'. Promiscuities are commonly associated negatively with discursive projects that pathologize and demonize queer people and particularly queer men. However, Kathleen Talvacchi, Michael Pettinger and Mark Larrimore (2015) and Elijah Nealy (2015) argue that the term can be reclaimed in much the

same way as the term ‘queer’ has been, and can be productive in queering understandings of love and hospitality. Nealy (2015), for example, argues that promiscuity can be reclaimed to speak about promiscuous love which he equates to meaning an overflow of love. For Nealy (2015: 166) “promiscuity is about indiscriminately mixing and mingling and making the connections between all kinds of people and things”. He positions the concept of ‘promiscuity’ as being more helpful than “marriage’s exclusionary myth of equality” (Nealy, 2015: 164). For Nealy this also means being promiscuous with his financial privilege which he illustrates by using an autobiographical example of his ability to adopt and love a twenty-year-old man as his son. While I agree that possibilities of reclaiming promiscuities as a productive term exist in the context of limited debates around same-sex marriage, I do find limitations in the ways in which the authors in Talvacchi, Pettinger and Larrimore’s book go about the business of doing this. Nealy (2015), most notably, seems to want to reclaim the idea of promiscuity but he does so by completely removing the erotic connotations of the term. He talks about promiscuous loving and promiscuous hospitality but makes no mention of promiscuous sex. In this chapter, I argue that if we are to reclaim a term such as promiscuity then its erotic connotations must not be wished away but fully explored in order to understand what this term might help us comprehend about the politics of marriage, kinship and sex.

Unlike Nealy (2015) my participants made no attempts to hide the erotic activities which they attached to what Kagiso termed the promiscuous culture of the MCSA.

Kagiso: If you go to those conventions, it’s scary to say and almost unbelievable that we admit to this truth. There are women who go to the Women’s Manyano convention. And who leave their husbands for five or six days. And when they get there they engage in sexual intercourse with men who are married with other women in the YMG. You go to the Wesley Guild who were in Thaba Nchu last year and you know. There was in fact one bishop...was chatting. And I laugh at it now but it was not funny then. He was talking to another group and I happen to be with that group. And he says yes, I know if you guys had gone to Thaba Nchu, you would know exactly what I’m talking about. There was a feast in Thaba Nchu...There was a feast in Thaba Nchu. There were men f’ing<sup>74</sup> other men, women f’ing other women. It was just a ‘f’ feast. And we were laughing at it. But again it shows you where we are in terms of how we act.

What Kagiso is explaining to me in this extract is something which all participants were familiar with. There seemed to be a normalised and somewhat accepted idea that Methodist gatherings were also erotic spaces. Even though Kagiso at times admonishes the ease with

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<sup>74</sup> Instead of using the word “fuck” Kagiso shortened it by saying f’ing.

which it is accepted in the Church, the prevalence of promiscuity was hardly ever presented to me by Kagiso or other participants as a ‘dirty secret’. Rather, it was told as a well-known and accepted fact and something which people at various levels of leadership openly acknowledged. This sub-culture was prevalent in the MCSA and a particular discourse which makes use of choral metaphors to communicate about other men at denominational events has been developed around it. For example, Kagiso explained that they referred to “bottoms” or “boys” (more feminine men who are assumed to prefer to be penetrated in sexual acts) as sopranos and “tops” (more masculine men who are assumed to prefer to penetrate) as altos. In this way the language normally used in church spaces is appropriated and used in more promiscuous ways. According to Malory Nye (2004: 49) “sub-cultures do not simply exist in themselves, but are articulations of resistance to the prevailing dominant culture”. Within the promiscuous culture of the institution Kagiso was not frowned upon for having multiple partners or for having sex with men at Church events but, rather, he became part of a sub-culture in the institution which promoted this. The general acceptance of this subculture disrupts normative ideas of what it means to be Church. In fact, it is subversive because it highlights the inadequacies and hypocrisies of a religious institution which claims its power through producing norms of marriage and monogamy.

While subversive in some ways, Kagiso’s narrative of the culture of promiscuity in the Church also points to the patriarchal power relations which are perpetuated even within this seemingly subversive, queer space. Kagiso for example maintained a strict delimitation of who he would sleep with and who he would not, a narrative which I alluded to in the methodology chapter of this dissertation.

Kagiso: You’d find also that within the clergy, those who are ministers and would date other males, would always come out as being the dominant one in the relationship. So, if you know the gay language of the top and the bottom?

Megan: You can educate me.

Kagiso: Loosely speaking, top one would be in heterosexual language would be the male and the one who’s in the bottom, the receiver, in heterosexual language, the female

Megan: Okay.

Kagiso: In terms of sexual positions, that is. Not necessarily in terms of their physique.

Megan: Okay.

Kagiso: You get those who are bottom, who are butch male who would be in a relationship with a top who is very feminine. So, the outlook and physical would determine in terms of physical positions.

Megan: Oh, okay.

Kagiso: Generally, from my experience and I'm speaking from an experience of the fair amount of the Church, of those who are ministers in the Church and homosexually inclined would be top. And therefore, they are more inclined to date or to have sexual relations with the younger bottom so that we, and I am saying "we" because I'm one of them, so that we remain dominant. And the majority of those who are bottom, tend to socialize outside the church because even if they were to choose to be with younger men, at least it is without the safe space of the church where they still have to maintain discipline. Remember, I am top and if my partner is Methodist, they remain younger and I am dominant. At least I can still maintain the discipline there.

Megan: Okay.

Kagiso: But if I am bottom and still want to have a younger partner, I'd rather have a younger partner outside. Remember, in terms of the heterosexual language, he becomes dominant in terms of how we relate sexually so I'd rather, if I am to be bottom, they're from outside of the church.

The patriarchal norms in the relationships or sexual encounters which Kagiso describes are maintained not only through how he performs and embodies particular identities but also how he chooses who to be promiscuous with. Further, in Kagiso's narratives it also seems that it is predominantly black male heterosexual promiscuity that is more openly accepted within the MCSA.

Megan: Okay. And do you think the promiscuity that does happen, like the bishop was saying the f fest. Is it seen as a more male thing to do? Even though he said there was woman with woman. Is it seen as more men?

Kagiso: Well it's surprising that when we talk promiscuity in the Church, we don't talk about heterosexual promiscuity. We don't talk. That's a subject. In fact the Church would rather lambaste alcoholics and gays.

Megan: Okay.

Kagiso: (Uhm) because it is almost acceptable for a minister who is married and has a family, who is heterosexual to have six or ten mistresses. A few in the circuit where he is serving. A few where his friend is a minister.

Megan: (Laughing).

Kagiso: And a few where his other friend is a minister. So that when he visits, he sleeps with the other one and then, it's almost natural. It's almost acceptable that heterosexual ministers must cheat. There's a Xhosa saying that loosely translated is 'the axe must be sharpened outside'.

Megan: And is this black, white coloured men?



Kagiso: I cannot speak on the side of white ministers. But those white ministers whom I've served with and my observation of white ministers, promiscuity is not as rife as in the black context. We're coming from a context of polygamous marriages. We come from a context of society which says women must understand that your men would cheat a couple of times. Before he actually really settles down. We grow up knowing if a man cheats, hey he's the man.

Significantly in talking about promiscuity, none of my participants spoke about women sleeping with women at denominational gatherings. I was trying to tease this out in my question in the extract above when I asked, "Is it seen as a more male thing to do?" yet Kagiso assumed that when I asked about women I was talking about heterosexual relationships. Possibilities of promiscuity between women are therefore silenced in this extract. The ways in which Kagiso speaks to me about the erotic space of the MCSA is almost as if Matebeni (2014: 61) has whispered into Kagiso's ear before he answers me, "Do not be bothered to [talk] about lesbians who love each other, or the sex they have, no one is interested in that" and instead of interpreting it as a facetious warning, he concedes.

While the MCSA prides itself on an identity of the Church of Mandela, which caricatures the Church as a morally respectful, traditional, African church it holds in tension what seems to be a reputation of it being a sexually promiscuous space. While in some ways this promiscuity reaffirms the celebration of patriarchal masculine sexual prowess and obscures the eroticism of the queer woman, it also seems (almost by accident) to open up a space for the acceptance of broader sexual expression for example male-to-male sex and sex outside of marriage. Building on the arguments of Mark Larrimore (2015), I posit that an analysis of promiscuities exposes the false contradiction between matrimony and promiscuities. The self-proclaimed promiscuity of some of my participants and the larger male promiscuous culture attached with being Methodist in some ways subverts the debate around same-sex marriage in the Church and opens up space to talk about a broader theology and reality of the domestic and the erotic in the MCSA.

However, again, I want to resist binary conclusions which assert that promiscuity is essentially subversive. As I have already explored, queer marriage is neither essentially assimilationist nor subversive and therefore promiscuity should be treated similarly. Hence, a discussion on promiscuities also opens up space for a more critical analysis of why queer promiscuity is deemed more harmful to matrimony than heterosexual promiscuity – and I would argue that, based on participants' experiences, it becomes harmful when it reproduces the very power relations present in heteronormative norms of marriage which it claims to contradict. In

addition, conversations around promiscuity (in partnership with matrimony) has its limitations as it excludes the single and the celibate who continue to be regarded as anomalies and are completely obscured in current institutional debates.

### 3. Silences and imagined celibacies

As described previously in this dissertation, in 2010 Ecclesia de Lange was excommunicated from the MCSA for declaring to her congregation her intention to marry her same sex partner which was followed by a much-publicised legal case between herself and the MCSA. Along with her personal wish to exercise her constitutional rights to be married to her partner, Ecclesia admitted in our interviews that she was also motivated by an activist intention to move the Church from what was and what remains an ambivalent and vague stance on the matter of same-sex marriage. Public declarations of ‘coming out’ and fighting the church in legal battles often becomes emblematic of what is considered queer activism. At the time of writing this dissertation for example, the most celebrated victory for queer Christians in the media in South Africa is the courts’ overturning of the Dutch Reformed Church’s 2016 decision to no longer recognise or condone same-sex marriages in the Church<sup>75</sup>. In this section I want to queer the way in which scholarship chooses to disproportionately focus on activism which is loud, visible and publicly resistant. I do this by shifting my attention to the silence of my participants and exploring the ways in which through silence, they trouble the adequacy of a framework of a politics of marriage.

Megan: So are you quite publicly, do you talk publicly at like synods and conferences that you are for [same-sex marriage]?

Anele: Yes

Megan: You’re fine with that?

Anele: I’m fine with that. And uh...

Megan: You don’t feel like you talking out might mean coming out?

Anele: Look I don’t have a (3) I, don’t think I am in the closet.

Megan: Ya.

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<sup>75</sup> This reneged on a decision the Church had taken in 2015 to allow individual congregations within the denomination to each make its own decision as to whether to condone or oppose it.

Anele: But I am not out. I'm not sure if that makes sense? I am not in the closet, I am not out.

Megan: Okay.

Anele: I am fine with people knowing, I don't care also how they feel about it, it's my life. But (4) but I'm not that guy who will stand and say like, "I am gay". You know, you don't do that. If your conscience is clear you can do it [but] it's not enough. It's like you are saying if you don't want [me then] just tell them to go somewhere else.

In the extract above, while Anele claims that he does speak out about issues of same-sex marriage on public Church platforms, he does not do so by declaring his own queer sexuality. The normative frame of activism as visible public resistance obscures the agency and subversion of those, such as Anele, who choose to remain relatively silent about their own sexuality. This is obscured not only by the media attention fixated on these public forms of resistance but also by the stigmatisation and pressure placed on queer people by other queer people and allies; a sentiment which Ecclesia perpetuated.

Ecclesia: But there are most definitely gay ministers that you can see. But is not open and will deny it in your face. But there are stories behind the scene that you know that they are gay.

Megan: Okay.

Ecclesia: So there's this enormous secrecy. And again it is because of fear that they would not want to expose themselves in this particular way. So yes. Since I left the church many more gay clergy has come out. Which I've never met or you know I've just heard about.

While Ecclesia is perhaps accurate in assuming that fear sometimes plays a role in people's silence about their sexuality it also neglects to account for what Adriaan van Klinken (2015: 954) has identified as an African resistance to Western forms of activism by refusing to speak out. By drawing on the work of Marc Epprecht (2004: 37), van Klinken (2015: 954) acknowledges that the proliferation of Western forms of activism has placed a strain on, what he argues, is a precolonial African "culture of discretion" which allowed a permissibility around homosexuality precisely because of the silence surrounding it. He argues that the globalization and politicization of LGBTI identities puts pressure on sexual minorities in Africa to "speak out" which, instead of fostering the type of protest and pride activism common in Western and European context, rather repositions them as marginal to resistance and sometimes frames them as passive and complicit agents of heteronormativity (van Klinken, 2015: 954). This type of discourse and pressure is evident in participants' common experience of a meeting they had attended with some allies within the MCSA a few years prior to this research. This meeting was recalled by four of my participants but Bradley describes most explicitly the discomfort he felt in that meeting.

Bradley: It was very much a case of, at that stage Ecclesia was facing the court case and, you know, they were talking about the Lutheran church in America and how (uhm) the [straight allies argued that the] only way to fight this is for all the gay clergy in relationships to get married and to defy the Church and [the Church] can't afford the lawsuits and that kind of thing. And I was kind of like, "How can you stand there telling us what we need to do?", (uhm) (3) you know. And "You're going to have to count the cost". And I'm like, "Well actually don't talk to me about the cost, you weren't the one who sat with your parents to tell them you were gay, you have no idea what the cost has been for us, so don't (3) you're only an ally, sit and listen, don't try and dominate the conversation" And so I think that was the struggle there...we felt we were, well a few of us were wanting to dominate the conversation and we just wanted to actually tell our stories, be listened to.

Shannon Weber (2015: 1152) interprets Michael Cobb's work "Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled" as arguing that same-sex marriage has largely "taken up all the air around queer activism". These statements emerge out of a context which Cobb (2012: 8) describes as "a world slavishly devoted to the supremacy of the couple," which legal marriage as an institution undoubtedly upholds. The centrality of the same-sex marriage debate imagines celibacies for those who remain silent – a politics which problematically produces discourses such as those demonstrated by the allies in the above extract. Therefore, rather than taking on Ecclesia's conclusion that those who remain silent are fearful, it seems that silence could also be interpreted as an agentive act which pushes back on narratives often driven by those with access to more power and with less to lose. In this sense, Anele's characterisation of himself as "*not in the closet*" but "*not out*" makes sense when being out is equated to activist discourses of "speaking out". While I do not wish to deny that there were moments of silence out of fear in Anele's narrative, by and large, his silence seemed selective and he demonstrated agency in the ways in which he chose to be silent in different contexts. Through his chosen silence, Anele in many ways continues to inhabit the norms of Church and, thereby, enables himself to access power and particular spaces which perhaps he would otherwise be excluded from. By placing Anele's silence in relation to Ecclesia's public act of coming out – I argue that these are equally subversive acts which challenge the heteronormative institutional church cultures of the MCSA.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990: 3) in her influential work "The Epistemology of the Closet", argues that there is a false binary which exists between "what one says and what one does not say". Acts of coming out or speaking out, however, reify that binary with speaking being deemed active while silence is rendered passive. In challenging this binary Sedgwick (1990: 3) argues that silence is indeed a "speech act" which has been incorrectly rendered marginal because it has been affiliated with being in the closet and thus equated to a betraying or

concealing of a more authentic identity. Butler (1993: 309) also questions this assumption when she asks, “What is it that is ‘out’, made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as a lesbian? What is it that is now known, anything?”. I would elaborate on this questioning in Anele’s case to ask, to whom should he come out - his family, colleagues, or congregation? And if he did what would that mean to the debate in the Church? I am unconvinced that this act of coming out and speaking out are intimately linked, or that public resistance is somehow more transgressive and subversive than his silence, especially in contexts where debates revolve around marriage equality – an erotic and domestic arrangement which Anele told me he had no desire to pursue.

My critique of the centrality of marriage equality as an all-encompassing marker of queer rights is that it obscures and renders silent the experiences of those who are not monogamously partnered, who do not want to be married or are not yet married. In many ways it also conditions society to only consider the realities of those who are openly gay or lesbian and imposes the idea that to ‘come out’ is a necessary act in obtaining equal rights. The silence of Anele is often not spoken about in queer politics in the Church because it seems as though he is not denied anything. This is precisely what Anele’s silence disrupts – the assumption that marriage rights are queer rights and that one can only fight for inclusivity when one is loudly involved in activism or when wanting to be married.

#### **4. Conclusion: From a politics of marriage to a politics of the domestic and erotic**

The idea of family was not something which I set out to explore when I first started my research. Because of the Church’s rule against marriage I had not anticipated the multiple ways in which family would be lived by participants and how this would impact on their lived experience of the MCSA. This is perhaps because the scholarship which does exist, and which explores the lives of queer clergy, is often narrowly focused on specific individualised narratives of coming out or being ordained in the Church (Gerow, 2010; Holmen, 2013; Spencer, 2015). The ethnographic approach of my research therefore queers the binary of religious work life and secular home life as much of the time I spent with participants was often also spent with their families or in a space where family and work were indistinguishable.

By exploring the lives of participants and their families and sexual relationships, in this chapter I have aimed to discuss the erotic not as something vile and hidden but as valid expressions of kinship which are equally important in contributing to nuanced and complex understandings

of the freedoms which are limited not only by the denial of same-sex marriage rights but also by the narrowly demarcated freedom constructed in the debates which that very denial inspires. I have also framed the erotic notion of promiscuity as it currently exists in the MSCA as potentially subversive as it demonstrates avenues for broader conceptualisations of the domestic and erotic. This chapter has explored how these give rise to various sub-cultures or cliques in the church and how these reflect and challenge power differences. However, I suggest this with caution as I have also shown the continued patriarchy and heteronormativity evident in those spaces. Last, I have also aimed to disrupt the idea that more inclusive and transformed spaces in religion are dependent solely on those who speak out in order to fight for rights. Rather, I argue that the role of transformative scholarship should be to seek out different modalities of agency, even those which are silent and ‘in the closet’, and the potential that they have for expanding understandings of what needs to change and how it ought to change.

The MCSA is, in many ways, a microcosm of the society in which it is embedded. It is clear that the national consequences of the legalisation of marriage has not granted radical freedom to many queer people in South Africa, most notably black lesbians who continue to experience violence and are continuously oppressed and silenced. Therefore, what is not clear is whether granting marriage to queer people in the Church and especially queer clergy would mean more freedom for those who occupy domestic and erotic spaces outside of heteronormative understandings of marriage. This becomes even more unclear when considered within the politics of the Church culture which, as explored in the previous three chapters, still marginalises the domestic and erotic experiences most notably of women and silent queer men. What this chapter has demonstrated is that scholarship which seeks to explore the possibilities of institutional transformation in churches that continue to deny expansive queer rights to its members can be helpfully expanded by looking beyond the politics of marriage by instead exploring the politics of the domestic and erotic.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have used a sociological ethnographic approach to explore the lived experiences of six queer clergy (one of whom was discontinued) in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). The research was guided by three research questions: ‘what are the lived experiences of queer clergy in the MCSA?’, ‘what are the institutional cultures and politics of the MCSA?’ and, ‘why do the institutional cultures and politics of the MCSA and the lived experiences of queer clergy co-constitute each other in the ways that they do?’. In investigating answers to these questions I have paid particular attention to the ways in which the politics of belonging, body politics and politics of marriage in the MCSA have framed, and have been reframed by, the experiences of my participants. In addition, I incorporated into my analysis the ways in which participants also perpetuated and inhabited the normative framings of these politics and in some ways transformed them through various modalities of agency.

In this final chapter it is difficult to discuss the answers to these questions in three separate parts. This is because the theoretical framework and findings of this study suggest that an intimate relationship exists between lived experience and the context of the MCSA. Therefore, answering these questions requires a different approach which allows the research contribution to be framed in ways that reflect more holistic conclusions than what could be done when broken up into the constituent research questions. Following this, I discuss four key contributions which I argue this study has made to academic discussions at the intersections of religion and sexuality.

First, I discuss why and how the queer sociological ethnographic methodology of my research is significant in the context of queer politics in Africa and South Africa. Second, I explore how participants’ experiences of the MCSA expands on the transformation literature which has characterised recent studies on queer Christians’ lived experiences. Third, I discuss the ways in which incorporating a lens of materiality and embodiment in my research contributes to thinking about clerical identities in relation to gender and sexuality. Fourth, I argue that my research expands understandings of queer activism and agency and thus demands a complication of the politics of same-sex marriage in religious institutions. Before I discuss each of these contributions in detail, it is helpful to first sketch some of the limitations of this research.

## **1. Limitations**

Whilst my study contributed in the ways I will elaborate on below, there were also a number of limitations to my study. For one, in wanting to make assertions about the culture of the denomination I have perhaps, in my focus, gone too wide to explore certain dynamics and simultaneously too narrow for others. Too wide because while participants' experiences reflected experiences of Methodism and indeed demonstrated the ways in which denominational identity still matters in South Africa, it also limited the depth in which I was able to explore the particular congregational cultures in which each of the participants worked. On the other hand by focusing in-depth on the experiences of a select few members of the Methodist Church I am conscious that other Methodist clergy or other MCSA members may read this dissertation and find very little of what they construe as Methodism in here. This may especially be the case for those who are members of the MCSA but whose experiences of Methodism takes place in a constituent country other than South Africa. Indeed this study cannot be said to be reflective of what everyone or every queer member experiences as Methodism. This limitation is reflective of the ways in which the denomination is continually created and recreated and attaches different meanings for different people. This, therefore, presents further opportunities for research to explore the broad and more localised ways in which the cultures and politics of the MCSA are co-constitutive of the lives of those who affiliate to the denomination.

In the introductory chapter I conceptualised church and institutional culture. I made the argument that the invisible ecclesiological and theological church becomes visible in the ways in which people live their lives in the institution. Thus, I focus on lived experience in this study. However, it was beyond the scope of this study to incorporate alongside it a comparative ecclesiological or theological analysis of institutional doctrine, liturgy and policies. Such an analysis may further elaborate on the ways in which more formalised institutionalised norms are lived, reproduced, transformed and resisted. This could be helpfully explored through an institutional ethnographic study which relates lived experience back to text and doctrine to demonstrate further the ways in which the two co-constitute each other.

## **2. Methodological contribution to research of queer Africa and South Africa**

I introduced this study by situating it within contested discourses which frame Africa as religiously conservative and queer-phobic. Within this politicised context key scholars such as



Zethu Matebeni (2014), Ezra Chitando (2016), and Adriaan van Klinken (2016; 2019) have emphasised the importance of avoiding the reproduction of queer narratives which are homogenous and essentialised. In this study, I argue that the queerness of my methodology is significant in producing more complex and nuanced narratives and subjects in this research. In chapter four I used Alison Rooke's (2010) queer sociological ethnographic perspective as a basis from which to develop a methodological framework for this study. This study expands upon Rooke's original suggestions of what this queer methodology may look like and discusses it in terms of three components namely; 1) performance and materiality, 2) co-production and kinship and 3) allyship and activism. Framed by this methodology, I was not only able to produce research narratives of queer clergy but, also research insights which queered the very production of those narratives in ways which are mindful of the queer politics in Africa.

The queer sociological ethnographic perspective of this study helped to focus attention on how social identities and lived experience, are constituted within certain cultural and institutionalised contexts. This speaks to van Klinken and Chitando's (2016) argument that in order to dispel the myths about a homophobic Africa, narratives and subject positions should be contextualised. While van Klinken and Chitando refer broadly to historical and political contexts of different geographic spaces, I have localised this further and suggest that investigating the specific culture and politics of a religious denomination can provide more nuanced accounts of queer Christians. Thus, within the findings there is, on one hand, evidence of the violence experienced by queer women. Chapter six in particular provides narrative evidence of the ways in which women of colour experienced how their gender and sexuality were subtly policed by taken-for-granted Church processes of candidating, through the mentorship relationships developed in the institution and more violently controlled through sexual assault. Yet, while it was important for me to pay attention to these experiences, they were not the only ones which characterised participants' narratives. In chapter seven, I explored more mundane (yet politicised), domestic lives of these same participants and the everydayness in which they negotiated their matrimones, sexual relationships and family life. The ability to explore both violence and mundanity has brought a complexity and tension to the findings which resists producing singular, homogenous subjects which interact with power in essentialised ways.

Another way in which I was able to produce nuanced narratives and subjects was through a serious interrogation of my own positionality and the dynamic relationships between myself

and my participants. In feminist and queer research, intersectionality has become what reflexivity has in recent years become to qualitative research methodologies, in so much as scholars recognise it as important aspects of theories of method, yet do not quite know how to employ it practically. Thus, instead of integral parts of a research product, these become cordoned off concepts in methodology chapters to which only lip service is paid. However, in this study a consciousness of intersectionality allowed for creative and productive research encounters in which participants became active agents in producing their narratives. In this way I was able to explore the intersections of gender, sexuality, religious identity and race in participants' experiences. Due to the scope of this study I have perhaps neglected to discuss other intersections which emerged such as class, age and tribalism. However, I would argue that an intersectional lens does not necessarily require that in every study, every possible identity intersection needs to be accounted for but rather that an intersectional study reflects a critical in-depth analysis of the ways in which intersections nuance narratives and provide possibilities of agency.

Finally, I argue that, a consciousness of allyship and activism needed to be built into my methodology. This was especially important because of my own positionality as a heterosexual woman of colour in doing queer research. However, because positionalities are fluid and the boundaries between who has power and who is powerless is unfixed this is important for any research which claims to be queer. I believe this has allowed me to produce narratives and research where ethics did not become a delimitation or hindrance to the research but rather which was an integral part of the epistemology of the research. A reflexive analysis does not stand alone as a chapter or section in the methodology but is weaved throughout the analysis of my findings. Precisely because the narratives I produced were ethically informed the written analysis remained conscious of the subjects being produced.

The queer sociological ethnographic approach to conducting my fieldwork was integral to producing data and findings which not only produced answers to my research questions but which enabled me to frame those answers in contextual, nuanced and queer ways. Being critical of what it means to do 'queer' research the methodological framework of this study enabled me to produce research which was not only queer but which was conscious of the politics of producing narratives and research on queer Africa and South Africa. By being conscious of the ways in which participants' narratives were informed by the ethnographic field – including where and when and with whom the research encounter was taking place I was able to

contextualise and nuance the narratives of participants. Further, by being conscious of my own shifting positionalities as well as those of my participants I was able to consider a more nuanced conceptualisation of institutional power. By illustrating the importance of method to findings, this study takes seriously the value of narratives, as argued through feminist and queer research. However, there is more space, especially in the field of religious studies, to theorise more rigorously around the practical fieldwork techniques, interview strategies and observation guidelines which we use to produce narratives. There is also space to theorise more critically around how these narratives are analysed and written about in ways which give account of the complex intersections and fluidity of narrative-making and remaking in research. Further, it is necessary for scholars to theorise how these narratives are produced, who produces them, and what this means in relation to building up and breaking down harmful institutions and systems of power.

### **3. Queering transformation in religious institutions**

In reviewing the scholarship on sexuality and queer Christianity I discussed three predominant framings namely, opposition, negotiation and transformation. I align this study ideologically with more transformational framings as the narratives of my participants demonstrate that they are able to reconcile and live their identities as both queer and Christian. However, I find that the literature thus far has neglected to consider the politics of transformation within the context of institutionalised religion. This means that serious sociological exploration of how queer Christians inhabit, construct and reconstruct traditional and normative practices and theologies in the context of institutionalised religion has not been closely interrogated. Apart from Michael Keenan's (2008) work, scholars have paid scant attention to the attachment queer Christians have to institutionalised religion, not merely as a site of possible oppression or of resistant transformation but as a place of belonging. This has obscured the ways in which Christians and specifically clergy live both inside and outside of institutional realms of religious belonging. Therefore, while other scholars have been interested in investigating overt acts of resistance and subversion and the ways in which this produces what has become understood as queer theologies and queer religiosities (such as van Klinken, 2019), I was more interested in the nuanced everyday ways which participants inhabit the norms of the institution.

I explored this idea most overtly in chapter five in which I discuss participants' experiences of becoming Methodist and the politics of their belonging in the MCSA. Through my analysis I

found Thomas Tweed's (2006) theory of religion and, more precisely, his concepts of dwelling and homemaking particularly apt in explaining the politics of belonging that participants in this study were implicated in. In my research I found that the transformative work which participants were engaged in was not that which required resistance and subversion of the norms of the MCSA, but which more often ascribed to and produced those very norms. For example, I found that for many of my participants, Methodism was an inherited identity which they discursively constructed in ways which naturalised their belonging in the institution. Further, even those who were not born into Methodism were able to belong through performances of Christianity and Methodism which aligned with the normative values and particular cultures of the denomination such as for example being a prophetic, missional church (or what I described as 'the Church of Mandela'). Even when participants felt a sense of disenchantment with the organisation it was often not because they themselves experienced a deep sense of exclusion but because they felt that their 'home' had betrayed its identity as 'the Church of Mandela'.

This finding I argue, does not dismiss the concept or necessity of transformation. By using Tweed's (2006) concept of dwelling I do not argue that participants passively belonged to the MCSA by doing very little. In fact, Tweed's (2006) theory shows that dwelling, a seemingly sedentary state of being, is in fact an achievement of an active process of homemaking. Therefore, by referring to themselves as "born Methodist" and restating that as an authenticity of their belonging, participants were engaging in a discursive act of homemaking which legitimised an inherited belonging as a valid claim to 'home'. By performing their Christianity and Methodism in normative ways participants were continuously embodying and constructing themselves as Methodist and the MCSA as 'home'. Indeed, even the act of referring to the MCSA as 'home' serves to create that very home. Therefore, I found that rather than actively resisting the norms of the MCSA, participants were able to transform the MCSA through inhabiting its norms and through dwelling in the church.

I temper this finding, however, by arguing that the dwelling and homemaking of the participants in this study was not necessarily one which they chose in an uninhibited fashion. In fact, I argue that the metaphor of homemaking in this study is evocative of the experiences of those who cannot afford to choose a home and thus settle for the 'best' and safest home available to them. This tempering does not deny the agency of participants in this study but, rather, it recognises the nuanced intersectionality of their identities and the ways in which these

interact with systems of power to claim various forms of belonging. This study demonstrates that there are numerous intersectional moments of belonging and not belonging, and that these are not wholly placed on queer Christians from an oppressive outside structure but are also protected and perpetuated by the motivations of queer Christians for safety and belonging.

Dwelling and homemaking as a lens of belonging is not a once off experience in the way that signing up for a formal membership to an organisation is. It is a continuous process of connecting, building, referencing, embodying and creating. This finding highlights that being an insider or an outsider is always a work in progress, is permanently subject to renegotiation and is best understood as relational and situational. In this way this study lays the groundwork for further research which proceeds from the everyday experiences of clergy and laity in order to understand institutional church cultures and how it operates for different people in various religious spaces. Through exploring the ways in which hierarchical systems – as these are informed by intersections of race, class, culture, gender, age or religion – become entrenched and disrupted, possibilities of moving toward a more transformative inclusivity in religious institutions can be uncovered. This does not mean that research on policy and doctrine is not important for inclusion, nor do I claim that a focus on institutional culture will be a panacea for all issues of inclusivity in the church. However, for the MCSA and other denominations seeking to become truly inclusive of queer, women (and all other) members, bringing lived experience into conversation with institutional cultures in research may sharpen our ability to address the ways in which church can indeed be a place of inclusivity instead of rejection.

This research not only provides a nuanced insight into the ways transformation can be subtle in the form of dwelling but it also draws attention to the importance of research on institutionalised religion. While the popularity of lived religion and religious pluralism scholarship has grown, focusing on institutionalised religion has become somewhat passé. By critically theorising the MCSA as a sociologically important institution in framing and transforming religious and queer politics, I have positioned the denomination itself as an important religious site with significant social, religious and political power in South Africa. This research has also used the MCSA as a case study which represents the ways in which institutionalised religion continues to be co-constitutive of not only individual experience but of various social systems and hierarchies which shape those experiences.

#### 4. Theorising both religious and gender and sexuality identities

In research on institutionalised religion, the role and experiences of queer clergy has not garnered as much academic attention and thus theorisation as queer lay experiences or even of women clergy. When they have been researched queer clergies' experiences have often only been made visible in descriptive, narrative ways and through fixed moments of ordination and coming out. This has left a lacuna in literature which critically theorises the everyday experiences of queer clergy. Through this study I have aimed to contribute to this scholarship by conceptualising ordained ministry not only as an occupation or even calling but as a significant social and embodied identity which is constructed, negotiated and deconstructed in the everyday lives of queer clergy. In addition, by employing the lens of queer lived religion I have co-produced (with participants) narratives and lived experiences that reflect the complex ways in which clergy understand their religious identity – not only as Christian but as Methodist.

By incorporating a lens of materiality and embodiment into my research I was able to investigate the ways in which clerical identity was socially produced. Often gender and sex identities are considered embodied experiences but in this research I brought this into conversation with the materiality of religious identity. In chapter six I employed this theoretical framing to explore the ways in which particular bodies are produced within, as well as excluded from, the heteronormative church cultures of the MCSA through body politics. Most notably I explored how this was done through institutional processes such as candidating, screening and through the construction of a non-institutionalised binary gender uniform. Therefore, this study highlights the ways in which patriarchy and heteronormativity allows men to claim positions of desirability and power while doing violence to the bodies of especially the black, women participants in this study. However, I was also mindful of the ways in which queer bodies, especially those that are black, woman and African, have been represented in the literature. I have thus provided nuance to these experiences by, for example, in chapter seven, illuminating the ways in which participants were involved in consensual domestic relationships as well as in sub-cultures of the MCSA in which promiscuous sex was embraced (albeit at times in problematic ways). In this way I have resisted essentialising participants' experiences but have instead demonstrated the complexities and variations of sex, marriage and family. Further, by incorporating ordinary, non-pathologised narratives which represent clergy as erotic and sexed bodies I have opened up discussions about both religious and gender-sex identities as fluid, constructed, intersectional and embodied. This brings an interdisciplinary lens to a vast body

of literature which more often gives critical theoretical attention to one while essentialising the other, which has in turn, lead to the perpetuation of a theoretical structure-agency binary.

Through a critical exploration of clerical identity I have shown that, even within an institution which ‘allows’ women and queer people to enter into the ordained ministry, the embodiment and legitimacy of that role continues to be reserved for those who embody heteronormativity and gender-complementarity. Thus, as feminist researchers have suggested for the full inclusion of women into the church, alternative institutional conceptualisations of leadership and clericalism need to be explored (Ruether, 1983; 2011; Alliaume, 2006: 97). The scope of the discussion on clericalism in this study is too broad to suggest what these alternatives may look like, however, it does suggest that it is not enough for policies to merely ‘allow’ queer people or women to be ordained. The exclusion and marginalisation of queer clergy in this study demonstrates the ways in which rules, practices and processes which guide the procedure of ordination are continuously informed by heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions. It is these elements which needs to be queered. This lays the groundwork for future research to explore how these processes might be queered and perhaps how the concept of clericalism itself may be queered.

## **5. Expanding queer rights discourses to include more than same-sex marriage**

Same-sex marriage has been framed as one of the most contentious matters for Christian churches over the last few decades with various church denominations taking multiple stances on the matter ranging from being firmly opposed to fully affirming. In South Africa the issue of same-sex marriage in religious institutions has dominated the focus of media and institutional church discourses. This dominance of the issues of marriage, I argue, has meant that research on the MCSA has been fairly concentrated on the same-sex marriage debate in the institution. While this is of course an important area of queer rights which reflects the realities of many queer people in the Church, it is by no means the only issue within queer politics. The dominance of marriage as indicative of queer rights has obscured the realities of those outside of those realms and produced an activism which is single issue. In chapter seven I have broadened this by not only discussing the politics of queer matrimonies but also promiscuities, silences and imagined celibacies.

I have made the point throughout the various findings chapters, that clergy queer agency is not necessarily equivalent to subversion and resistance. Rather, agency can be found in the

everyday ways in which people inhabit the structures and systems which they encounter in their daily lived realities. In chapter seven I nuance this by arguing that when these everyday realities encounter highly politicised issues, such as that of same-sex marriage, these ordinary realities become framed either as complicit or subversive. In considering a variety of intersecting normativities which operate in the production of institutional church culture to frame a variety of everyday experiences, I am able to explore how these give space to multiple expressions of kinship and relationship, that which is domestic, erotic and single.

Thus far, the MCSA, and indeed other denominations in South Africa seeking a more certain way forward on their stances of inclusion of queer members, have focused centrally on same-sex marriage. However, by exploring the lived experiences of my participants I have demonstrated how this discussion is too narrow to consider various positionalities in relation to marriage. For example, despite the MCSA's official policy, Sam has been able to enjoy a domestic life with her covenant partner – a relationship which she fully discloses to the Church. Kagiso, on the other hand, engages openly in a generally accepted and well known promiscuous sub-culture in the Church. Anele, too, while also participating in this sub-culture, is more discreet about his sexuality, and, in having no desire to be in a matrimony is quite comfortable in acknowledging his sexuality in more silent ways. Discourses and indeed activism which focus solely on the issue of same-sex marriage fail to take into consideration the various ways in which queer clergy experience and live their domesticity and eroticism.

In chapter seven in the exploration of participants' relationships with the domestic and erotic, I have aimed to neither romanticise nor vilify and thereby essentialise queer experiences. While I do try to present un-sensationalist narratives of participants' domestic and erotic lives in order to avoid presenting these as spectacles of kinship and relationship, I have also highlighted the ways in which heteronormativity continue to harm and be harmful in various ways. By doing this I argue that more holistic understandings of the ways in which institutionalised cultures in churches frame queer lives needs to be incorporated into institutional and academic debates. For example, participants' experiences of the MCSA's stationing procedures in which ministers are invited to work in particular congregations demonstrates the ways in which heteronormative and patriarchal families remain the celebrated norm in particular congregations. In addition, participants' experiences of the ways in which promiscuity is accepted when taking place in patriarchal ways demonstrates how heteronormativity resides even in seemingly queer spaces. This shows that institutional conversations and research on queer rights in the Church should be expanded to include not only policies which speak directly



to queer inclusion but should include a broader interrogation of the gender and sex norms which pervade various taken-for-granted processes and practices. The political project of research should expand to explore the possibilities that varied ways living the domestic and erotic can trouble normative powers of race, class, gender and sexual orientation.

This is perhaps an especially important contribution for research which seeks to explore queer activism in a context such as South Africa. In this context the provision of rights for sexual minorities have been progressive and human rights and reconciliation discourses are pervasive. However, as Ryan Thoreson argues (2008: 695) “the public may not be willing to tolerate gay and lesbian individuals in their community, but appear grudgingly to tolerate the gay rights rulings of the Constitutional Court as a necessary (if undesirable) by product of democratisation”. Further, because queer people occupy different positions in relation to power due to various intersecting identities and structures, the ability to access rights or even inhabit spaces of matrimonies, promiscuities and silence within the MCSA is varied. Space thus exists for more focused research which provides nuanced insights into the opportunities, possibilities and variations of activism.

Overall, while there are concepts that would benefit from further investigation in future research, this study has provided a unique insight into the experiences of queer clergy in the MCSA. At a time where many religious institutions in South Africa continue to have conversations around same-sex marriage and ordination and continue to journey toward seeking more transformative and affirming policies, an examination of the lives of the clergy who are in the midst of setting these agendas is significant. The consequences of these conversations provides important insight into the considerations for the politics and institutional cultural dynamics which impact upon these. Further, in an African context where queer identities are often politicised into either oppressed or activist caricatures to make arguments either for or against the furthering of queer rights on the continent, this study offers a contribution to the continuous nuance and complexity which is needed.

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