

## From Polluted to Prophetic Bodies: Theo-Pastoral Lessons from the Lived Experiences of Gay, HIV-Positive Christian Men in Singapore

Joseph N. Goh

To cite this article: Joseph N. Goh (2017) From Polluted to Prophetic Bodies: Theo-Pastoral Lessons from the Lived Experiences of Gay, HIV-Positive Christian Men in Singapore, Practical Theology, 10:2, 133-146, DOI: [10.1080/1756073X.2017.1296240](https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2017.1296240)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2017.1296240>



Published online: 02 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 10




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# From Polluted to Prophetic Bodies: Theo-Pastoral Lessons from the Lived Experiences of Gay, HIV-Positive Christian Men in Singapore

JOSEPH N. GOH 

*School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia, Selangor  
Darul Ehsan, Malaysia*

This article garners theo-pastoral lessons from the lived realities of gay, HIV-positive Christian men in Singapore. Such lessons are premised on the belief that gay HIV-positive men are prophets with lessons of life and faith for Christian communities, rather than polluted victims of a disease who simply merit pastoral assistance. The analysis of the narratives of three gay, HIV-positive Christian men through a Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology is assisted by Erlinda N. Senturias' notion of People Living with HIV and AIDs as bearing God's mission for human wholeness. It explains that these men see the intersection of their sexuality, serostatus, and faith as invitations to collaborate in the unfolding of God's plan in their lives, and to form a greater appreciation for their physical bodies and loved ones.

**KEYWORDS** gay men, HIV, queer theology, sexuality, Singapore

This article aims to glean theo-pastoral lessons from gay, HIV-positive Christian men in Singapore. In the context of this present work, my use of the term 'theo-pastoral lessons' is predicated on the belief that gay HIV-positive men ought not to be considered as culpable, unfortunate, and passive victims of a disease who warrant compassionate pastoral assistance, but instead, as I will clarify in the course of this article, as *prophets* with practical lessons of faith and life for Christian communities. Hence, my proposal is that Christian communities remove the suspicion, fear, and misunderstanding that they may have long harboured against gay and HIV-positive people, and learn from their lived experiences. To do so is to embrace radical love, which [Cheng \(2011\)](#) describes as 'a love so extreme that it dissolves ...

*existing boundaries*' (x; emphasis in the original), including boundaries that alienate gay and HIV-positive people from Christian communities.

I speak of the demographic particularities of Singapore in terms of a highly-developed 'global city-state' (Olds and Yeung, 2004) that moulds its gay, HIV-positive inhabitants from transnational as well as specific geopolitical, economic, and socio-cultural contexts. Hence I write from the actual lived experiences and contexts of these men in twenty-first century, globalized Singapore. As such, while there may be similarities with other parts of the world in terms of sexuality and disease, these similarities are lived out in specific Singaporean contexts. Consequently, I believe that there are elements of 'experiential sameness' (Nash, 2010: 137) in issues of sexuality and HIV that may render my musings useful for Christian communities outside of Singapore.

A matter I find particularly noteworthy is derived from Keith,<sup>1</sup> one of the gay, HIV-positive Singaporean men whom I interviewed, who remarked that 'When you are diagnosed ... people will distance themselves ... especially as a Christian, people's perception are that you are dirty'. His lamentation reflects the fact that despite the insistence by Singaporean church leaders, such as Roman Catholic priest Gerardus Suyono (as quoted in Boon, 2011), that HIV-infection should not be taken as divine punishment, negative attitudes remain prevalent in certain Singaporean Christian communities. A good example resides in a startling remark made by Nina Khong — the wife of Lawrence Khong, the controversial senior pastor of the Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC) who is often scathing in his remarks towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) Singaporeans. Also a senior pastor of the same church herself, she referred to HIV as divine punishment meted out on gay people in a Facebook posting in 2014, which has since been deleted.<sup>2</sup> HIV is thus seen as, borrowing from the words of van Klinken (2010: 449), 'the result of sexual immorality, or even a curse from God'.

Reflecting on Douglas' (2002: 9) assertion that 'holiness and impurity are at opposite poles', I suggest that such 'dirty' people are reduced to the status of impure, polluted bodies. Therefore, the presence of a pathogen brought on by a 'deviant' sexuality becomes the polluting agent which distinguishes and disengages impure, dirty gay, HIV-positive bodies from purity or holiness, 'the attribute of Godhead' (Douglas, 2002: 62). Aside from being perceived as polluted, these bodies bear the possibilities of polluting others by challenging socio-cultural and religious norms through their very existence.

Little wonder then that such men — who may be perceived as both polluted and potential polluters — are ascribed a subordinate status in many Christian communities. In response to such exclusionary attitudes, I suggest that such Christian communities move beyond the 'God is punishing you' and 'God wants you to repent' rhetoric in issues pertaining to gay men and HIV, and set aside their preconceived ideas and assumptions. In place of the imposition of therapy, counselling, conversion, guilt or pity on its gay and HIV-positive members, I propose a methodology

<sup>1</sup> The names of the men in this article are self-selected pseudonyms which are meant to ensure their confidentiality and safety. They speak English with varying levels of proficiency.

<sup>2</sup> Based on an interview with Miak Siew by the author on 22 February 2016, as well as the Singaporean online news portal, *The Online Citizen* (*The Online Citizen*, 2014).

of deep appreciation — of love seeking understanding and listening deeply from the heart — that dismisses the notion of polluted bodies in favour of prophetic bodies.

In this regard, I look particularly to the person and prophetic role of Christ. Punt (2011: 333) names ‘the “prophetic outsider ministry of Jesus” [as] a focal point in gay and lesbian theologies and informs a Christian theology that emphasizes justice and inclusion rather than tradition and commandment, relationality and mercy rather than purity’. Prophets are those who, according to Goss (2003: 35), ‘shake the theological roots of ... Christian communities and challenge them to undertake a more inclusive theology of sexuality and justice-based sexual theology’. As such, I suggest that gay, HIV-positive men are experts of their own lives who continue to struggle with public and ecclesiastical disapproval, yet who can furnish Christian communities with valuable insights, and thus act as prophets of theological and pastoral inclusivity and justice.

In this article, I first provide a brief discussion on issues of homosexuality, HIV, and Christianity in Singapore. Thereafter, I explain my methodology and framework before culling theo-pastoral lessons from the narratives of three gay, HIV-positive Singaporean men who make meaning of their lived realities through faith-inflected lenses. Their insights, as I will elucidate, reveal that they see the intersection of their sexuality, serostatus, and faith as an invitation to collaborate in the unfolding of God’s plan for human life and to form a greater appreciation for various aspects of life.

## LGBT, HIV, and Christianity in Singapore

Much has been written on Singaporean LGBT subjectivities, including historical developments (Heng, 2001), mobilization and social movements (Chua, 2014), citizenship and cosmopolitanism (Tan, 2009), and the creation of online identities and connections (Offord, 2003). Various offline and online LGBT and HIV-related movements and organizations have proliferated since the 1990s, and continue to this day, including People Like Us (PLU) and Action for Aids (Heng, 2001), Oogachaga (Oogachaga, 2014), and RedQueen! (Tang, 2012). Sayoni (Sayoni, 2016) and Pelangi Pride Centre (Pelangi Pride Centre, 2016) are more recent initiatives. Despite the fact that such significant inroads have been made, the Singapore Penal Code continues to criminalize ‘any act of gross indecency’ between male persons (Government of Singapore, 2008, sec. 377A), which effectively outlaws the majority of gay men’s sexual expressions.

HIV burst on the Singapore scene in 1985 (Tey *et al.*, 2012). In 2014, there were 456 new cases of infection, which brought the total number of seropositive Singaporeans to 6685 by the end of that year. Ninety-six percent of those cases were due to sexual transmission, with 216, 182, and 42 cases via heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual routes, respectively. Heterosexual transmission still exceeds non-heterosexual means of infection, but non-heterosexual transmissions are escalating (Ministry of Health, Singapore, 2014; see also Annex A). Homosexual people — namely gay men — have been blamed for the dispersal of HIV in Singapore (D. Goh, 2008). As the availability of antiretroviral drugs since the 1990s has dispelled

the default assumption that HIV inevitably leads to death, Singapore focuses more on the quality of life among people living with HIV (PLHIV) (Paton *et al.*, 2002, 2006). This reality may well be a driving force behind the attitudes of the three men whom I feature in this article.

Singaporeans comprise Buddhists or Taoists (44.2%), Christians (18.3%), Muslims (14.7%), Hindus (5.1%), and other religions (0.7%). Those without religious affiliations constitute 17.0% of the resident population (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2010). Christianity is cherished by many Singaporeans for numerous reasons. Goh (1999) posits that the ideologies of Protestant Charismatic fundamentalism are upheld as markers of modernity that concomitantly allow adherents to retain a sense of transcendentalism.

Nonetheless, mainstream conservative churches in Singapore disapprove of LGBT identities and expressions in varying degrees, largely due to religious convictions and traditional societal norms pertaining to notions of sexuality (Detenber *et al.*, 2007). This is particularly true of Christians who demonstrate ‘an intrinsic religious orientation [and] see religion as the primary driving force in life’ (Herek, 1987, as cited in Detenber *et al.*, 2007: 369). Numerous churches in Singapore have adopted the fight against homosexuality as a major *raison d’être* (Siew, 2009). Despite insisting on compassion and condemning discrimination against LGBT people, the Roman Catholic church has reinstated its disapprobation of same-sex expressions and commitments (W. Goh, 2014).

In more recent years, Lawrence Khong of the aforementioned FCBC has been visibly vitriolic towards non-heteronormative people by naming the LGBT movement as the ‘onslaught of the evil one’ and insisted that a ‘homosexual lifestyle’ was responsible for the spread of disease (as quoted in Tan, 2014). Khong thus emblemises the connection between homosexuality and HIV in the minds of many Singaporean Christians, and the subsequent formation of gay and HIV-positive people as polluted bodies. While Christians do not form the majority of Singapore’s resident population, their influence in political, legal, academic, and socio-cultural domains are wide and far-reaching (Chong, 2011; Siew, 2009).

Amidst this unyielding disapprobation of homosexuality, Free Community Church (FCC) has emerged as an inclusive, affirming and safe haven for LGBT- and heterosexual-identifying Christians. Shepherded by its executive pastors Miak Siew and Pauline Ong, pastoral advisor Yap Kim Hao, and board members Gary Chan, Jaime Low, Chong Lip Koh, and Shawn Lee, FCC strives to provide spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical assistance to its congregants, based on the conviction that ‘individuals of sacred worth [are] created in God’s image’ (Free Community Church, 2013). Despite FCC’s willingness to discuss issues of sexuality and faith with fellow Christian communities (Siew, 2013), it has been unsuccessful in engaging in dialogue with them, including with FCBC. FCC also provides relevant information, legal services, constructive counselling, and other forms of support to its HIV-positive members.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Based on an interview with Miak Siew by the author on 22 February 2016.

## Methodology and framework

Jumbo, Keith, and Ben are young, educated, middle-class, upwardly mobile, gay, practising-Christian, Church-attending, HIV-positive Singaporean men, who provide specific vignettes rather than overarching insights into the negotiations of sexuality, serostatus, and faith. They constitute three out of nineteen research participants whom I interviewed in a collaborative qualitative research project with the regional, community-based coalition APCOM<sup>4</sup> on the intersection of Christianity, sexual diversity, and access to health services. The project was undertaken in hopes of providing valuable information that can trigger social transformation among Christian communities in the Asia-Pacific countries in relation to attitudes towards sexually marginalized peoples and their sexual health.<sup>5</sup>

The theo-pastoral lessons in this article are grounded in the lived experiences of the three aforementioned men. My analysis and theorizings deploy a Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology in which the researcher and the research participants collaborate in the construction of knowledge from the articulated meaning-makings of lived realities by research participants (Charmaz, 2000). Hence, my aim is to theologize from the narratives of these men, that is, to construct theology by using lived realities as theological resources. This article is thus a project of building theology from the ground up, rather than a top-down approach of interpreting the narratives of these men by merely utilizing existing theological insights. Consequently, my analysis and theorizings which utilize and are woven around the narratives of research participants consider how ‘bodies that suffer are ... those who know (suffering) as opposed to the primacy of historically laudable mediators of knowledge, translators of experience and codifiers of faith’ (Bong, 2002: 123).

These theorizings are further aided by activist and physician Senturias’ (1994: 277) perspective of PLHIV and people living with AIDS ‘as bearers of God’s mission’.<sup>6</sup> Senturias (1994: 279) formulates a theological idea of God’s desire for ‘the possibility of wholeness in the midst of brokenness’ among people, including PLHIV. She sees this wholeness incarnated in the mission of many PLHIV to form meaningful perspectives on life amidst disease, challenging structures of inequality and power in various spheres of human life — including ecclesiastical circles — and caring for others with HIV and AIDS (Senturias, 1994). As such, to be HIV-positive is not to succumb to the role of victimhood. It is a call to participate in

<sup>4</sup> APCOM represents a diverse range of interested parties that work together to advocate, highlight and prioritize issues of health and human rights that affect men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender people (TG) in Asia-Pacific countries. APCOM strives to shift attitudes and sensitize society to the needs of sexual minorities, including bridging the gap between faith and the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity. While respecting the freedom of religion and expression, APCOM believes that they can never justify the denial of basic rights among sexual minorities. See <http://www.apcom.org/>

<sup>5</sup> This project, which was undertaken in the first half of 2016, aimed at uncovering: (i) Christian attitudes towards MSM, TG, and PLHIV; (ii) the impact of such attitudes towards MSM, TG, and PLHIV in terms of access to health services; and (iii) Christian teachings and strategies that affirm MSM, TG, PLHIV, and their access to health services. Research participants from Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong, India and Tonga comprised those who are knowledgeable in, and work at the grassroots level in issues of Christianity, gender, sexual diversity, sexual health, and HIV, as well as self-professed MSM and TG who are practising Christians. Interviews in person and via Skype were all conducted in English.

<sup>6</sup> As this article deals exclusively with men who have HIV, rather than AIDS, it uses the term ‘PLHIV’ instead of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA).

God's own mission to promote human wholeness by fruitfully 'living out God' in the concreteness of everyday life.

## From polluted to prophetic bodies

This section discusses the narratives of gay, HIV-positive men who upend the notion of pollution by crafting alternative self-perceptions of sexuality, serostatus, and faith. In so doing, these men become prophets who challenge and deconstruct death-dealing ideas, and reimagine theo-pastoral inclusivity and justice.

### *HIV as an invitation to collaborate in God's unfolding plan for human life*

My conversations with these men reveal important insights into the sense-making of being gay, HIV-positive, and Christian. A particularly important strategy for them lies in interiorizing the conviction that being infected serves as an invitation to collaborate in God's overall life plan for them. For Jumbo, the journey towards acceptance involves a shift in perception that conscripts divine intervention:

When I first found out about my status ... I cried a bit ... I realised ... God makes no mistakes. Having HIV is not a mistake, or God punishing me for anything. No it was meant for me. And that gave me so much hope and faith. Suddenly I trusted that I could live it through, it was meant for me. ... He put me out into the world to make it a better place ... I'm going to use it to make you a better person, make you special, unique, because of it ... God loves you regardless, don't ever feel that God is punishing you through it.

Jumbo's act of 'cr[ying] a bit' is a coping mechanism with which he confronts the initial knowledge of his serostatus and its attendant emotional and mental upheavals. He injects spiritual meaning into this discovery through a personal belief that contracting HIV is 'not a mistake' because 'God makes no mistakes'. By constructing a nexus between HIV and God, Jumbo seeks recourse in the notion of divine wisdom and intentionality in his serostatus. He refuses to succumb to a popular Christian theological understanding of HIV as an indication that 'God [is] punishing [him] for anything', which I suggest could include a reference to his sexuality as a gay man. Instead, he experiences God as one 'loves [him] regardless' of how he may perceive himself or be perceived by others. Jumbo's experience of God as an *Intimate Accompanier and Unconditional Lover* reflects the reality that 'God reveals Godself to [Jumbo] because God loves [him] and wants to share Godself with [him]' (Cheng, 2011: 45).

Furthermore, Jumbo's firm assurance in his divinely-dictated destiny, that '[HIV] was meant for [him]', reveals a major spiritual insight which infuses him with 'much hope and faith' and trust that he '[can] live [through it]'. He sees his positionality as a PLHIV as a divinely-intended advantage. By being a 'special, unique' and 'better person' who is 'put ... into the world to make it a better place' through an interweaving of sexuality, serostatus, and faith, Jumbo embodies the reality that people are 'blessed by and through each other's humanness' (Edelheit, 2004: 505). As human and divine experiences are inextricably linked for Jumbo, to bless others through

his humanness as a gay HIV-positive man of faith is fundamentally *an act of channeling God* to them.

Keith shares Jumbo's views on his serostatus as bearing the marks of a divine purpose:

HIV is just a status, it's not your life. Your life is determined by what God has created you to be. He never promised that life will be hundred percent good. It's always through people mouth that state that God always give you the best thing. Every experience that God trying to bring you through, he wants to make you become stronger. And HIV is just that phase ... Because a lot of time, as human, as a gay man, you know being broken ... already.

Akin to Jumbo, Keith makes a mental shift and interprets his identity as a PLHIV through the lens of spirituality. He first charges God with the responsibility of creating and determining his life. This belief in divine createdness enables Keith to articulate a method of relegating his serostatus to 'just a status [and] not [his entire] life'. In other words, he is able to engage in self-reflexivity by envisioning himself as the *embodiment of intentional divine createdness*, which includes his two-fold identity as gay and a PLHIV. In this way, Keith attests to the reality that he is 'lovingly invited by a gracious God to meaningful existence, vision and voice' (J. N. Goh, 2014: 49).

Keith's scepticism of the popular belief that 'God always [gives people] the best thing[s]' in life reveals an important coping mechanism and method of spiritual survival. His declaration that '[God] never promised that life will be a hundred percent good' is, I suggest, an allusion to his serostatus. Moreover, this scepticism maintains the unfathomable and inexplicable intricacies and mystery of life for him, of which God is a part, and which compels him towards a personal sense-making as a PLHIV. Consequently, he is able to conceive of his serostatus as an invitation to collaborate in the unfolding of God's plan, in which 'every experience that God ... bring[s him] through', including HIV as a 'phase', is meant 'to make [him] ... stronger'. Hence, by relating his serostatus to God, Keith understands his HIV status *as the conduit through which God bestows personal strength and empowerment* on him. This bestowal is particularly important to him, as he is aware that he is regarded as 'broken ... already' as a gay man. This situation is aggravated by the idea of HIV as 'a "homosexual disease"' (Mashau, 2008: 27).

Within these men's understanding of being HIV-positive as God's invitation for collaboration in God's plan is a deeper vision of responding to God's call to help, support and love others, as Keith shares in the following narrative:

I started to question God a bit more, asking him why are you doing this to me? I know you do it for a reason, but I need to know what. It wasn't really very clear in the beginning, but slowly as I move on my journey, it became very apparent, you know, what he wanted me to do. And ... it's really about supporting people ... I think God wanted me to demonstrate love ... you can love anyone, no matter what kind of status they have. Economic status, issues, or they have sexual orientation, crisis, issue, or they have chronic disease issue, this person are still people created by God.



As a method of coping and acceptance, Keith questions and even blames God for ‘doing this to him’, or allowing him to be infected with HIV. The interrogation and accusation gradually yield to a more productive coping mechanism. Keith gains greater clarity ‘slowly as [he] move[s] on [in his] journey’. He engages in a shift of consciousness in which God is no longer blamed, but responsible for his serostatus ‘for a reason’. From groping for a reason that ‘wasn’t very clear in the beginning’, Keith eventually becomes aware that he is called to respond to a divine calling to ‘[support] people’ and ‘demonstrate love’. The reason, as such, is to mirror ‘the compassionate body of Jesus Christ’, who is God in human flesh, and ‘who was in solidarity with those who suffer and are marginalized’ (van Klinken, 2010: 461).

Keith’s increasing awareness of God’s plan leads to a shift in his overall perspective of life. He develops *a vision of camaraderie in suffering*, which recognizes that ‘God want[s] him to demonstrate love [for] anyone, no matter what kind of status they have’, because they are ‘created by God’. I suggest that he feels the need to raise them up, borrowing from Longchar’s (2011: 417) words, from being ‘nobody to somebody’. Keith draws a parallel between his ‘status’ as a HIV-positive man to the ‘status’ of others who are marginalized due to their ‘economic status ... sexual orientation [or] chronic disease’. He recognizes that the pain and confusion which he experienced at one stage in his life as a gay PLHIV somehow parallels that of others in the specificities of their own pain and confusion.

Keith’s increasing clarity is also experienced by Ben, as he describes in the following narrative:

If there’s one thing that I know, there’s a recurring theme that God is there and God has a plan. That has shaped me as someone who has HIV ... Using me as a wounded healer? I have been privileged to be in contact with people that require help and advice ... and somehow I have been there at the right time and place to be there for them. But beyond that, I’m not really sure of the plan, because it keeps changing (laughs) ... I try to seek out opportunities where I can be there for people. At a point in my life, I was in no shape to help even myself, what more other people. Thus, I guess I try to build myself up ... so that from there I am in a stable state to help others in need.

Being ‘shaped ... as someone who has HIV’ for Ben involves an acute awareness of the intimate connection between his personal spirituality and serostatus that prompts him to collaborate with God’s plan for him to ‘preach hope over fear’ (Messer, 2011: 393) from three perspectives. First, this collaboration involves a recalibration of his self-perception and sense of purpose, which is built on his awareness of God’s presence in, and proposed purpose for his life.

Second, this collaboration is comprehended and expressed in his conviction that he is used by God ‘as a wounded healer’. Similar to Jumbo’s statement that ‘[God] put [him] into the world to make it a better place’, Ben interprets his serostatus as a calling which manifests itself both in serendipitous moments of being ‘in contact with people [who] require [his] help and advice’, as well as in a proactive stance of ‘seek[ing] out opportunities where[by he] can be there for people’. Ben’s personal relationship with God and the concrete assistance that he renders to others is a form of body restoration, in which the derided, ‘polluted’, and denounced gay, HIV-positive body appropriates a significance of its own. That Ben sees himself ‘as a

wounded healer' demonstrates how, as Bong (2002: 127) avers, 'the restoration of bodies that suffer ... becomes the dialectical site of redemption'. *Ben's body becomes the location in which the grace and love of God are extended.*

Third, this collaboration triggers a transformation in which he migrates from being a person who 'was in no shape to help even [him]self' to one who 'tries to build [him]self up ... in a stable state to help others in need'. His availability to PLHIV as a gay, HIV-positive man constitutes his collaboration with God's unfolding plan. Nevertheless, Ben's understanding of God's plan 'keeps changing', as his understanding of it is not permanent, exhaustive or totally clear.

All three men do not seem to indicate that their serostatus is God's plan per se — what they suggest in their narratives is that their serostatus is part of a larger plan that will unfold as they accept the invitation to collaborate with God to make sense of their lives.

### ***HIV as an invitation towards a greater appreciation for life***

My discussions with these men on their sexuality, serostatus, and faith also reveal coping strategies that deal with a greater appreciation for life, including a heightened sense of valuing familial relationships and personal existence. In the following narrative, Jumbo shares how his 'reconcil[ing] with that part of [him]' that is HIV-positive, as well as accepting that he is not being penalized for it, allows him to gain deeper insights into his life:

... very early on, I kind of reconciled with that part of me, that God is not punishing me. There are so many experiences, having HIV kind of saved me. Having HIV has given me a sense of life, an appreciation for life. It has made me closer to my family. If it wasn't for those things that formed pillars in my life, I wouldn't be the person that I am today. Treatment has made me appreciate my body a lot. The moment I started my medication ... I thought I was going to die (chuckles). When you see your body suffering and you can do nothing about it. As my body grew stronger ... I feel that my body is a connection to God that's very physical, and we're made in God's image right ... a testament to that, I suppose.

By declaring that 'HIV kind of saved [him]', Jumbo links his belief in divine salvation with his serostatus, as evidenced by his use of the strongly Christian-inflected term 'saved'. He recasts the meaning of his serostatus as *a transformative instrument of sexo-sero-salvation*, or a mediator of salvation that draws on his sexuality and serostatus, and which 'form[s] pillars in [his] life'. It is not the idea of the afterlife that forms his notion of salvation — it is the here-and-now, the passion of living life to the full as a human person. As HIV 'touches the precious gift of God — life in it[s] fullness' (Longchar, 2011: 409), Jumbo's 'sense [or] appreciation for life' which now colours his entire existence evokes the reality that he is striving towards an appreciation and accomplishment of the gift of 'life in its fullness' as a gay PLHIV Christian. It unfolds itself concretely and practically in Jumbo's becoming 'closer to [his] family'. Jumbo extends the idea of being 'saved' by HIV to include not just an increasing appreciation for his body, but to designate his body as 'a connection to God that's very physical'.

A careful listening to his body allows Jumbo to understand that he is ‘made in God’s image’. Being created in God’s likeness, as Canceran (2011: 12) posits, ‘pertains to the total and concrete human person, who is indispensable in her/his place in the whole of creation’. To be patterned after God is to occupy a space of individual uniqueness as a human person. In applying this concept to Jumbo’s case, I suggest that to be created in God’s image for Jumbo is to inhabit *a divinely-intended, irreplaceable space of being-oneself-ness* in the world as gay, HIV-positive Jumbo.

I further suggest that Jumbo accepts a divine invitation to embrace his gay, HIV-positive body as bearing a ‘spark of divinity’ (Messer, 2011: 394), and which acts as ‘a testament’ to his deep relationship with God. His body appreciation is particularly manifested in his HIV ‘treatment’, whereby he recognizes the contrast between his initial belief that ‘he was going to die’, particularly in ‘see[ing his] body suffering’ and being unable to alter his condition, and the experience of his ‘body gr[owing] stronger’. This acute sense of connection with his body allows it to become a sacred site which engages ‘in the sense making of human experiences that allow manifestations of the divine’ (J. N. Goh, 2012: 515) to emerge.

Keith’s interpretation of his serostatus is similar to Jumbo’s. He annexes his gratitude to God for ‘making [him] HIV-positive’ to a complete reversal of his former lifestyle, which he understands from a negative perspective:

... my prayer to God ... is, God, thank you for making me HIV-positive. Then people answer are you crazy. No, I said, if not because of my HIV status, probably I would still be the wild person that I am, the type of person who don’t really care about what other people’s feeling about, I don’t really take care of myself ... I’ll still continue drinking, I’ll still continue to have wild, raw sex, or group sex to infect other people, I don’t really care ... That’s how it really changed my whole life.

Keith’s ‘prayer to God’ which assumes the form of thanksgiving for his seropositivity is met with incredulity by ‘people’ who accuse him of being ‘crazy’. The idea that contracting HIV is a divine gift is unthinkable for many in Keith’s circle of acquaintances — it is in fact considered a mark of lunacy. Nevertheless, an earlier narrative in which Keith expresses how being HIV-positive endows him with personal strength and empowerment is reflected here as well. Moreover, not unlike Jumbo, Keith’s serostatus is also an instrument of transformative *sexo-sero-salvation*, for ‘if not because of [his] HIV-status’, he would continue to be a ‘wild person’. For Keith, to be a wild person is to be someone who pursues life destructively by disregarding ‘other people’s feeling[s]’, not ‘really tak[ing] care of [one]self’ and indulging in ‘drinking ... raw sex, or group sex to infect other people’.

I suggest that the appreciation for life in Keith’s mind is ignited by a ‘wake-up call’ of being HIV-positive, and that this wake-up call is initiated by God, for which he owes God his gratitude. Furthermore, it is the enactment of a complete life transformation by abandoning a lifestyle that he names as ‘wild’, chiefly insensitivity to others, alcohol consumption and irresponsible sexual activities. Therefore, to be HIV-positive for Keith is to be simultaneously *life-positive*. It is to relinquish a negative lifestyle in which he was entrenched while he was still seronegative, and

to accept the mission of God to love himself, which ‘is about life in all its abundance’ (Senturias, 1994: 277). For these gay, HIV-positive men, HIV loses its sting as a death sentence and offers them a renewed vision of life that accords them the ability to cherish family members and appreciate their bodies even more deeply.

## Conclusion: prophetic lessons


I agree with Mashau (2008: 32) that the church should be ‘a healing, inclusive and accompanying community which does not discriminate against its own members who are infected and affected by HIV and Aids’. Nevertheless, I am aware that this perspective can reinstate Christian hierarchies and communities as the sole purveyors of unidirectional compassion towards gay men and PLHIV. Moreover, this perspective presumes that the power of teaching and learning is held exclusively by such hierarchies and communities. Consequently, gay, HIV-positive men stand the risk of being reduced to recipients of pastoral charity who have nothing to offer to their Christian communities. Instead, I suggest a humble listening to gay, HIV-positive men in their lived realities as prophets who can provide valuable lessons on the intersection of sexuality, serostatus, and faith for Christian communities. In this way, Christian communities can learn, teach, foster, and live out practical theologies of sexuality and HIV which ‘undergo confirmation, clarification, and correction continually within the changing contexts in which [Christian communities] find [them]selves’ (Yap, 1990: 41).

This article has shown that the idea of HIV as a divine punishment is not prolonged in the minds of gay Christian men in Singapore. Neither does it spell the termination of a meaningful and fulfilling life. First, these men see their serostatus as a divine invitation to collaborate with God in the unfolding of God’s plan in their lives. God is experienced and imagined as journeying intimately with them in unconditional love. This same God calls them to become intermediaries between God and PLHIV and non-PLHIV by emanating help, love, and support. In this process, these men are able to appreciate themselves as more than simply harbourers of disease — they become living embodiments of God’s purposeful creation and wounded healers who are able to empathize with others in their sufferings. Second, gay, HIV-positive men understand that being HIV-positive is a divine invitation to form a greater appreciation for life by being closer to their loved ones and being more connected to their bodies. Through various meaning-makings of their lived realities as gay PLHIV, these men reject the idea of pollution, and become prophets of God’s deep, just, and inclusive involvement in human existence.

## Acknowledgement

This article is dedicated to Free Community Church, Singapore.

## ORCID

Joseph N. Goh  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5442-6785>

## References

- Bong, Sharon A. 2002. "Suffering, Resisting, Healing: An Asian View of the Body." *Concilium: International Journal for Theology* (2):122–9.
- Boon, Darren. 2011. "Interfaith Forum on HIV/AIDs." *Catholic News*, December 25. [https://catholicnews.sg/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6880&Itemid=38](https://catholicnews.sg/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6880&Itemid=38).
- Canceran, Delfo. 2011. "Image of God: A Theological Reconstruction of the Beginning." *Asia Journal of Theology* 25(1):3–23.
- Charmaz, Kathy. 2000. "Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Second edition., 509–35. London: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Cheng, Patrick S. 2011. *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*. New York: Seabury Books.
- Chong, Terence. 2011. "Filling the Moral Void: The Christian Right in Singapore." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 41(4):566–83.
- Chua, Lynette J. 2014. *Mobilizing Gay Singapore: Rights and Resistance in an Authoritarian State*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Department of Statistics, Singapore. 2010. "Census of Population 2010 — Administrative Report." [http://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications\\_and\\_papers/cop2010/census\\_2010\\_admin/cop2010admin.pdf](http://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications_and_papers/cop2010/census_2010_admin/cop2010admin.pdf).
- Detenber, Benjamin H., Mark Cenite, Moses K. Y. Ku, Carol P. L. Ong, Hazel Y. Tong and Magdalene L. H. Yeow. 2007. "Singaporeans' Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men and Their Tolerance of Media Portrayals of Homosexuality." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 19 (3):367–79.
- Douglas, Mary. 2002. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Edelheit, Joseph A. 2004. "The Passion to Heal: A Theological Pastoral Approach to HIV/AIDs." *Zygon* 39 (2):497–506.
- Free Community Church. 2013. "Free Community Church — WELCOME HOME." <http://www.freecommunitychurch.org/>.
- Goh, Daniel P. S. 1999. "Rethinking Resurgent Christianity in Singapore." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 27 (1):89–112.
- Goh, Debbie. 2008. "It's the Gays' Fault: News and HIV as Weapons Against Homosexuality in Singapore." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 32(4):383–99.
- Goh, Joseph N. 2012. "Mak Nyah Bodies as Sacred Sites." *CrossCurrents* 62(4):512–21.
- . 2014. "Reclaiming Vision and Voice: A Queer-Feminist-Liberation Reading of Mark 10: 46–52 in Relation to Non-Heteronormative Malaysians." in *God's image* 33(1):40–51.
- Goh, William. 2014. "Pastoral Letter to Catholics with Same-Sex Orientation." *Catholic News*, July 13. [http://catholicnews.sg/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=10241:pastoral-letter-to-catholics-with-same-sex-orientation&catid=407:july-13-2014-vol-64-no-14&Itemid=473](http://catholicnews.sg/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10241:pastoral-letter-to-catholics-with-same-sex-orientation&catid=407:july-13-2014-vol-64-no-14&Itemid=473).
- Goss, Robert E. 2003. *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
- Government of Singapore. 2008. *Penal Code (Chapter 224). Original Enactment: Ordinance 4 of 1871*. <http://www.icla.up.ac.za/images/un/use-of-force/asia-pacific/Singapore/Penal%20Code%20Singapore%201871.pdf>
- Heng, Russell Hiang Khng. 2001. "Tiptoe Out of the Closet: The Before and After of the Increasingly Visible Gay Community in Singapore." In *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, edited by Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson, 81–97. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Herek, Gregory M. 1987. "Religious Orientation and Prejudice." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 13 (1):34–44.
- Longchar, Wati. 2011. "Unclean and Compassionate Hand of God." *The Ecumenical Review* 63(4):408–18.
- Mashau, T. D. 2008. "Where and When it Hurts Most: The Theology of Hope and Accompaniment in the Context of HIV and Aids in Marriage and Family Life." *Exchange* 37(1):23–34.
- Messer, Donald E. 2011. "Getting to Zero Embracing Science, Breaking the Silence, and Overcoming Stigma." *The Ecumenical Review* 63(4):384–96.

- Ministry of Health, Singapore. 2014. "Characteristics of New Cases of HIV Infection Reported in 2014." *Update on the HIV/AIDS Situation in Singapore 2014*. [https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh\\_web/home/statistics/infectiousDiseasesStatistics/HIV\\_Stats/update-on-the-hiv-aids-situation-in-singapore-2014.html](https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/statistics/infectiousDiseasesStatistics/HIV_Stats/update-on-the-hiv-aids-situation-in-singapore-2014.html)
- Nash, Catherine J. 2010. "Queer Conversations: Old-Time Lesbians, Transmen and the Politics of Queer Research." In *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, edited by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash, 129–42. London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Offord, Baden. 2003. "Singaporean Queering of the Internet: Toward a New Form of Cultural Transmission of Rights Discourse." In *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, edited by Chris Berry, Fran Martin and Audrey Yue, 133–57. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Olds, Kris and Henry Wai-Chung Yeung. 2004. "Pathways to Global City Formation: A View from the Developmental City-State of Singapore." *Review of International Political Economy* 11(3):489–521.
- The Online Citizen. 2014. "Singapore's So-Called Moral Majority." *The Online Citizen*, July 24. <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2014/07/singapores-so-called-moral-majority/>
- Oogachaga. 2014. "Oogachaga." <http://oogachaga.com/>.
- Paton, Nicholas I., Chere A. T. Chapman, Siew-Pang Chan, Karen M. Tan, Yee-Sin Leo, Jamila Aboulhab and Chang-Heok Soh. 2002. "Validation of the Medical Outcomes Study HIV Health Survey as a Measure of Quality of Life in HIV-Infected Patients in Singapore." *International Journal of STD & AIDS* 13(7):456–61.
- Paton, Nicholas I., Chere A. T. Chapman, S. Sangeetha, Sundhiya Mandalia, Richard Bellamy and Eduard J. Beck. 2006. "Cost and Cost-Effectiveness of Antiretroviral Therapy for HIV Infection in Singapore." *International Journal of STD & AIDS* 17(10):699–705.
- Pelangi Pride Centre. 2016. "Pelangi Pride Centre." <http://www.pelangipridecentre.org/>
- Punt, Jeremy. 2011. "Queer Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Biblical Interpretation: A Preliminary Exploration of Some Intersections." In *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, edited by Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, 321–41. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature Atlanta. Queer Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Biblical Interpretation.
- Sayoni. 2016. "Sayoni :: To Empower Asian Queer Women." *Sayoni :: To Empower Asian Queer Women*. <http://www.sayoni.com/>
- Senturias, Erlinda N. 1994. "God's Mission and HIV/AIDS: Shaping the Churches' Response." *International Review of Mission* 83(329):277–84.
- Siew, Miak. 2009. "The Conservative Majority: Examining the Emergence of a Vocal Conservative Minority in Singapore." *Unpublished Manuscript*.
- . 2013. "Open Letter to Pastor Lawrence Khong." *Free Community Church Blog*, January 14. <http://freecomchurch.blogspot.com/2013/01/14-jan-2013-from-desk-of-rev-miak-siew.html>
- Tan, Chris K. K. 2009. "'But They Are Like You and Me': Gay Civil Servants and Citizenship in a Cosmopolitanizing Singapore." *City & Society* 21(1):133–54.
- Tan, Sylvia. 2014. "Singapore Anti-Gay Pastor Behind Petition Targeting Health Ministry." *Gay Star News*, February 15. <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/singapore-anti-gay-pastor-behind-petition-targeting-health-ministry150214/>
- Tang, Shawna. 2012. "Transnational Lesbian Identities: Lessons from Singapore?" In *Queer Singapore – Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*, edited by Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow, 83–96. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Tey, Jeannie S. H., Li Wei Ang, Joanne Tay, Jeffery L. Cutter, Lyn James, Suok Kai Chew, and Kee Tai Goh. 2012. "Determinants of Late-Stage HIV Disease at Diagnosis in Singapore, 1996 to 2009." *Annals of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore* 41(5):194–9.
- van Klinken, Adriaan S. 2010. "When the Body of Christ Has AIDS: A Theological Metaphor for Global Solidarity in Light of HIV and AIDS." *International Journal of Public Theology* 4(4):446–65.
- Yap, Kim Hao. 1990. "Inter-Contextualization: Releasing the 'Theological' Frog from Underneath the Coconut Shell." *Asia Journal of Theology* 4(1):36–44.

### **Notes on contributor**

Joseph N. Goh is a Lecturer in Gender Studies at the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia. He holds a PhD in gender, sexuality, and theology, and his research interests include queer and LGBTI studies, human rights and sexual health issues, diverse theological and religious studies, and qualitative research. Goh's personal weblog is at <http://josephgoh.org>

Correspondence to: Joseph N. Goh, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia, Jalan Lagoon Selatan, 47500 Bandar Sunway, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia. Email: [joseph.goh@monash.edu](mailto:joseph.goh@monash.edu)