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About the Cover

Human rights are invoked and claimed by the people's struggles for justice and peace as depicted in this cover artwork by Indian artist Shashi Memuri, who hails from Kerala, India. Memuri graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts from Mysore University, India, and also studied tribal art in Odisha, India. He has made invaluable contributions of his gifted and creative artworks, paintings and designs to many ecumenical and social movements, including the film industry.

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Social Movements

The struggles of grassroots movements to bring about changes in structures of domination is the focus of this year-end issue of *IGI*. Themed 'Social Movements', the articles inside examine and analyse various community-based people initiated efforts to deal with concrete issues that unjustly impact the lives of people such as the LGBTIQ, immigrants and Dalits. Each writer challenges our pre-conceived notions of the "others" and widens our understanding of what it means to be a Christian in a variety of social actions that seek to expand the democratic space to be inclusive of diverse voices for the well-being of all.

In the first article, **Eun-joo Lee** of Korea looks at the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster that claimed 304 lives, including young people, paying attention to the dynamic aspects of the phenomena the disaster had revealed, and the spiritual journey the Korean people walked, path by path, along with the revelation. **Shuba keerthana K.** describes the oppressive manual scavenging occupation of Dalit women as "deeply rooted modern-day slavery" in Indian society, and calls the church to stand in solidarity with this marginalised community to eradicate this inhuman practice and restore their rights and dignity. **Shannon Clarkson** details a US community's active response to an immigrant woman's deportation ordeal and likens it to the gospel story of the Syrophenician woman whose challenge turned Jesus around.

Donald E. Messer and **Joseph N. Goh** provide some practical theological reflections on LGBTIQ people and churches, believing that "... the time has come for churches to locate the face of God in unconventional and unfamiliar spaces." **Le Ngoc Bich Ly** examines why the Evangelical Church of Vietnam has been slow to recognise women's full participation in leadership, and shows how the unique political-religious context of Vietnam and the authoritarian leadership style of church leaders have been strong factors in this slow process. The article by **Vedha Kani Na** focuses on three voices of biblical women in relation to Jesus and his ministry in order to learn more about the significance and theology behind these narrations. **Norma Dollaga** contributes a poem "At 53" and **Elizabeth E. Castillo** writes a poetic essay "Ambush Conversation with God".

The production of this December *IGI* issue has been made possible by the joint effort of a team of dedicated individual members of AWRC while the search process is on for the new AWRC Coordinator and Publications Secretary. *IGI* records its appreciation for the voluntary work provided by Woon Yoke Heng in editing the articles, Hisako Kinukawa in co-ordinating the collection of articles and writers, Yong Ting Jin for sourcing the artwork for the cover design, and the Editorial Advisory Committee members, Hisako Kinukawa, Limala Longkumer and Eunice Novio, for their invaluable advice. *IGI* is also grateful to Clare Law for coordinating the final production work and to Indian artist, Shashi Memuri, for his contribution of his powerful artwork for the cover. Most of all, *IGI* wishes to thank all the writers for sharing their thought-provoking articles in this issue.

IGI Production Team

Locating the Face of God¹

Practical Theological Reflections on LGBTIQ People and Churches

by Donald E. Messer and Joseph N. Goh

This essay, which adopts a practical theological tone, aims to locate the voice of God in spaces that are conventionally disassociated with 'proper' and 'valid' spirituality, namely in the thoughts, voices, wisdom, insights and lived experiences of people who do not conform to normative socio-cultural and religious prescriptions of gender and sexuality, namely lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and other queer (LGBTIQ) people. We believe that the time has come for churches to locate the face of God in unconventional and unfamiliar spaces. As theologians, activists and colleagues from the United States and Malaysia, our collaboration in this essay hopes to inspire deeper considerations and rethinkings of the role and presence of LGBTIQ Christians in church and society. To this end, we turn our

attention to impasses in churches that preclude an unconditional embrace of LGBTIQ people.

Our reflections are framed by postcolonial feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan's theological conviction that Asian feminist theologizing needs to prioritize the lived experiences of women, particularly as "[women's] experiences have been left out of theological reflection."² We feel that Kwok's assertion is relevant for theologizings on LGBTIQ people, whose "claims, experiences and perspectives are invalidated and denounced as inconsequential."³ Our methodology thus emphasizes a 'theology from below,'⁴ in which we foreground the empowering and disempowering lived experiences of LGBTIQ as resources for our theologizing. Nevertheless,



God created Diversity

¹ An initial version of this essay was first presented by Donald E. Messer as a keynote address at the International Consultation on Church and Homophobia at Jakarta Theological Seminary, Jakarta, Indonesia, November 23 to 26, 2014.

² Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 39.

³ Joseph N. Goh, "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, no. 1 (June 2014): 41.

⁴ Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, eds., *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 39.

Kwok poses the caveat "since women's experience is always shaped by a complex interaction of factors, such as class, race, colonialism and sexual orientation, a woman's viewpoint will always reflect her situation and perspective."⁵ Hence, while our theological reflections in this essay are premised on our firm belief in the indisputable worth and gravitas of LGBTIQ lives, we humbly acknowledge the immense diversity in which these lives are embodied from specific contexts and location of ethnicity, nationalism, history and culture, religion, class, educational and economic status, ability and age.

Thus, we allow our reflections to be guided by a theological notion that all aspects of life, including gender and sexuality, constitute valuable resources for the task of theologizing. Here, we are reminded of C.S. Song's theological insight that was proposed almost four decades ago, and which has been incarnated in diverse contextual and practical theologies: "the totality of life is the raw material of theology."⁶ Second, theology must deal effectively with the actual flesh, blood, sweat and tears of human beings in order to be effective. It cannot be a purely abstract enterprise. To succumb to the temptation of pursuing theology as a purely philosophical construct is to render it impotent in relation to social change and transformation. Hence, theology must speak without discrimination and negative preconceptions to the people on whom it impacts, and allow their voices to come to the fore.

Our essay is structured as a series of six questions that aim at inciting theological and pastoral reflection. Our hope is that

the questions we ask herein will yield "wise, spiritual response[s] instead of an in-your-face identity politics"⁷ from either mainstream churches who disapprove of non-heteronormative genders and sexualities, or from LGBTIQ people themselves.

Question 1: Where does God Speak?

Sometimes one hears the Gospel of Christ expressed "in the realms of the seemingly unconventional and peculiar."⁸ Just as the scriptures reveal a Christ who is often incognito in the hungry or the homeless person that we treat kindly (Matthew 25:31-40), so God often is a shout in the street—a voice for equality and justice in places we had not anticipated. We go to church and Christian communities hoping to hear God's word of acceptance, forgiveness, love and inclusion, but too often we are disappointed, or even experience exclusion, judgment, hostility, rejection and even hate.

For Donald E. Messer, a vivid experience of hearing God's message in relation to the acceptance and affirmation of LGBTIQ people was when he and his wife attended the award-winning popular Broadway musical called *Kinky Boots* in the United States. On the theatrical stage they watched drag queens teach and preach the Gospel of God's inclusive love in Jesus Christ. The drag queens elided the use of fancy theological terms and liturgical catchphrases. Nevertheless, they helped tell a tale based on the true story of how a struggling British shoe factory was about to go bankrupt, until they switched from making standard men's shoes to creating "kinky boots"—women shoes in men's sizes for transgender people

⁵ Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 39.

⁶ C. S. Song, "New Frontiers of Theology in Asia: Ten Theological Theses," *The Southeast Asia Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (1979): 15.

⁷ Gina Masequesmay, "How Religious Communities Can Help LGBTIQ Asian Americans to Come Home," *Theology & Sexuality* 17, no. 3 (September, 2011): 330.

⁸ Joseph N. Goh, "Bethlehem Revisited – the Sacred in the Unfamiliar," *Malaysiakini*, December 22, 2012, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/217261> (accessed February 21, 2013).

and drag queens. As Messer understood it, the musical portrayed the bias and prejudice of factory workers and their transformation into persons who can "accept others as they are."

For Joseph N. Goh, the acceptance and affirmation pertaining to LGBTIQ people often translated into ministry for him in his multiple dealings with straight-, lesbian-, gay- and trans-identifying students during and outside his lectures in gender studies at his university. While God and religion were not always explicitly discussed, formal lectures and informal conversations on how personal lives, country politics and social justice intersect with issues gender and sexuality opened up spaces for deeper reflection and alternative understandings. Goh sees these occasions as spaces of the Spirit, in which the Holy One is incarnated in discourses of human vulnerability.

These experiences lead us to ask the question, "Why is the inclusive gospel of Jesus more closely portrayed in an entertainment production and secular lecture halls than in many of our local churches?" Why is it that the search for God is restricted to the usual, the familiar and the comfortable, when this search can be fruitfully extended to include "the unexpected and unusual workings of God in human lives ... and perhaps even to consider the presence of the holy in the lives of [LGBTIQ] persons"?⁹

Question 2: Why is the Church a Site of Soul Killings?

We acknowledge the pain of LGBTIQ Christians who have had to bear with a fiery "homophobic siege from the pulpits,"¹⁰ in which they were talked down to as sinners unworthy of the rewards of heaven despite being loyal and faithful church members. Valerie L. Jackson,

the senior pastor of the First United Methodist Church of Aurora, Colorado, once remarked to Messer that this treatment was "homiletical homicide." The only "sin" that LGBTIQ persons commit is living into their own truth, by being who God created them to be. Jesus placed the highest value on love through his teachings and example, and yet many of our churches condemn certain individuals for their expressions of this very virtue which 1 Corinthians 13:13 acknowledges as the greatest attribute which abides in the world, above even faith and hope.

When we look around in our world and find war, disease, unspeakable inhumanity and injustice, should our churches not be on the side of the Christ who was seen time and time again as seeking, loving and caring for those who were viewed at the time to be pariahs and ostracized? So in our time would Christ not be on the side of our LGBTIQ sisters and brothers around the globe who are marginalized and treated as outcasts, and should we not do likewise? Why is it that our churches, our bible and our liturgies continue to be sites that oppress, diminish and kill the souls of LGBTIQ people?

Question 3: As Church, Are We Conspiring towards Goodness or Evil?

The term "conspiracy" can have a double-edged meaning. Words like "conspire" and "conspiracy" usually evoke negative connotations. When we speak of political or social conspiracies, we often talk about how persons who may be manipulating or manufacturing evidence or the truth in order to make a false claim or achieve an evil purpose. Globally, whenever we have uncertainty, fear and/or historical suspicion, we can be certain

⁹ Goh, "Bethlehem Revisited – the Sacred in the Unfamiliar".

¹⁰ Robert E. Shore-Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 144. We also recognize the reality of transphobia in many churches.

conspiracy theories will flourish about whether AIDS or Ebola is a Pentagon plot,¹¹ or what really happened to the missing Malaysian airline MH370.¹² Not all conspiracies are unreal or false; some are real and true—and very harmful to humanity and the environment.

Conspiracies, however, also can be good and positive. Literally the English word “conspiracy” comes from the Latin term “conspirare” which means “to agree, unite, or plot together” and “spirare,” meaning “to breathe together.” Thus it is possible to work together for good, not just something wrong or evil. A famous instance of “a conspiracy of goodness” occurred during World War II when Christians in many European countries worked secretly and against Nazi law to save Jews from persecution and death.¹³ During the Holocaust a courageous minority group of Christians worked at great risk to themselves and their families in order to prevent genocide. These Christian rescuers acted out their faith, committing unlawful acts by the norms of the Nazis, but not by the standards of God.

In today's church and society, faithful Christians have to be willing to be conspirators of goodness, standing up for the basic human rights of LGBTIQ persons, even when there are significant risks and consequences. We are called to be engaged in what the French Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin termed “a conspiracy of love,”¹⁴ which seeks to raise

the edifice and quality of human life. Are we willing to be engaged in “a conspiracy of goodness” with LGBTIQ brothers and sisters, who have chosen to be true to themselves as both LGBTIQ and Christian?

Question 4: As Church, Why Are We Silent?

Those of us who identify as Christians know that Christianity has had, and continues to experience difficulties in issues related to sexuality and sex.¹⁵ Repressed and oppressed, and fearful about the beauty and power of God's great gift of sex, Christians have often endorsed either silence or dire warnings of condemnation about sexual expressions outside of heterosexual marriage.

For instance, a conspiracy of silence about AIDS still prevails in most of our churches worldwide—an unwillingness to talk honestly and openly about how to educate and prevent the disease. Talking about using correct and consistent use of condoms and lubrication is a forbidden topic in most communities of faith. Churches regularly fail to reach out to key populations most impacted by the pandemic, namely men who love men (MLM), commercial sex workers,¹⁶ injecting drug users and others. How many churches are encouraging the distribution and use of new preventive medicines like the pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) drug called Truvada, even

¹¹ See, for instance, Alan Fueur, “The Ebola Conspiracy Theories,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2014, Sunday Review edition, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/19/sunday-review/the-ebola-conspiracy-theories.html?_r=0 (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹² Agence France-Presse, “MH370 Anniversary: New Report on Missing Malaysia Airlines Flight,” *The Guardian* (March 8, 2016), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/08/mh370-anniversary-new-report-missing-malaysia-airlines-flight> (accessed May 25, 2016).

¹³ See Donald E. Messer, *A Conspiracy of Goodness: Contemporary Images of Christian Mission* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, cited by Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau at a United Nations Habitat Conference in Vancouver, and quoted in Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), 19.

¹⁵ See Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 52–77.

¹⁶ A large unknown percentage of persons labeled as commercial sex workers are actually impoverished persons engaged in “survival sex” since they have no choice if they are to feed themselves and their families.

though scientific evidence demonstrates that persons using it have about a 96% chance of non-infection of HIV?¹⁷

The conspiracy of silence around HIV and AIDS in the church still prevails nearly fifteen years after the then African United Nation's General Secretary Kofi Annan declared the world had to act to "end the conspiracy of silence, the shame over this issue."¹⁸ A prominent Asian figure from South Korea, United Nations General-Secretary Ban Ki-moon, has challenged the world to "strongly support equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people everywhere." We must "speak out against the appallingly high levels of stigma, discrimination and violence people suffer because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. I say to all people: raise your voices. Ending homophobia and transphobia is a great human rights cause ... Together, we can—and we will—make a safe, fair and just world for everyone, no matter who they are or whom they love."¹⁹

Are we, as church, willing to raise our voices, in order to:

- Speak out against the stigma, discrimination and violence from which our LGBTIQ sisters and brothers suffer because of their sexual orientation or gender orientation?
- Challenge our churches and leaders to join

in the great human rights cause of ending homophobia and transphobia?

- Acknowledge our own personal complicity, and that of our faith communities, in fueling the high levels of stigma, discrimination and violence from which persons suffer because of their sexual orientation or gender identity?
- Recognize how too often we fail to live out the Gospel command to "love one another" as Christ has loved us?
- Plan a strategy for breaking the silence of conspiracy on LGBTIQ issues?; and
- Join hands and hearts with all who will pledge to, borrowing from Ban Ki-moon's words, "make a safe, fair and just world for everyone, no matter who they are or whom they love"?

No one strategy or approach from any one country will be sufficient. We will need to engage our church leaders in our own respective countries and challenge their thinking. In this regard, we will now refer to a few efforts in Asia. We need to encourage Bible studies in human sexuality, like the National Council of Churches in India's publication entitled *Public and Sensual*.²⁰ Likewise, we need publications such as the booklet *An Ecumenical Document on Human Sexuality*, also published by the National Council of Churches in India,²¹ and the discussion paper *Christianity, Sexual Diversity and Access to Health Services* published by the community-

¹⁷ Associated Press, "Human Rights Campaign Endorses Truvada for HIV Prevention," *Associated Press*, October 19, 2014, <http://www.sfgate.com/health/article/Human-Rights-Campaign-endorses-Truvada-for-HIV-5832125.php> (accessed October 7, 2017); see also Donald E. Messer, "Getting to Zero: Embracing Science, Breaking the Silence, and Overcoming Stigma," *The Ecumenical Review* 63, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 384–396 (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹⁸ Kofi Annan, as quoted in Victoria Brittain, "More Die of Aids Than War in Africa Says Kofi Annan," *The Guardian*, March 14, 2000, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/mar/14/unitednations> (accessed October 7, 2017).

¹⁹ Ban Ki-moon, "Ending Homophobia, Transphobia Is Great Human Rights Cause, Secretary-General Says in Video Message to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Ministerial Event | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases," *United Nations Press Release*, last modified September 22, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sgsm16208.doc.htm> (accessed October 7, 2017).

²⁰ Christopher Rajkumar, *Public and Sensual: Exploring Solutions: Bible Studies on Human Sexuality* (Nagpur, Maharashtra, India: National Council of Churches in India, 2012).

²¹ The Commission on Justice, Peace and Creation, National Council of Churches in India, *An Ecumenical Document on Human Sexuality* (Nagpur, Maharashtra, India: Inside Creation, 2012).

based coalition APCOM.²² We need creative new theological approaches addressing these issues, such as Boon Lin Ngeo's innovative introduction of *Tongzhi* (Comrade) Theology which he identifies as "a Chinese queer theology with its roots in the Confucian tradition,"²³ in contrast to Euro-American theologies dominated by the discourse of "white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class gay men."²⁴ He cites Chou Wah-shan, a Chinese queer scholar, who asserted that "it is crucial to historicize and theorize same-sex eroticism, and to dismantle the presupposed universality of the Anglo-American experiences of lesbian identity formation."²⁵

We need conferences like the one held in Chennai, India in 2014, which focused on the "Christian Response to AIDS, Homophobia, and Violence against Women."²⁶ At that forum, Episcopal priest Winnie Varghese urged participants "to be disruptive to the status quo in our local contexts," pointing out the Bible's contradictions, and encouraging "genuine empathy" that creates connection between persons.²⁷ We need prophets like Singapore's Christian pastor Miak Siew who publicly challenged a homophobic pastor and others in his country, by saying in an Open Letter, "you are misrepresenting the truth,"²⁸ and inviting

persons to "a dialogue, so that we can listen to one another, in love, in respect, and learn to understand each other better."²⁹

We do not pretend that we are qualified to know how best to chart a new course of church history, change the hearts of the homophobic and transphobic, or create a tsunami of compassion and caring among Christians. Nevertheless, we call for an awakening to injustice and inequality, and an urgency to defend human rights for *all* people everywhere.

Question 5: As Church, Are We Courageous?

Changing centuries of negative teaching and preaching in the church will not happen overnight. Even Pope Francis has discovered how difficult it is to change the culture and teachings of the church. He has experienced a backlash of criticism from conservatives from his recent Vatican consultation, when even a mild and moderate change in welcoming sexual minorities was met with rabid outrage. Nevertheless, Pope Francis seems to persist in seeking to break the conspiracy of silence, saying: "God is not afraid of new things. That is why he [sic] is continuously surprising us, opening our hearts and guiding us in

²² Joseph N. Goh, *Christianity, Sexual Diversity and Access to Health Services* (APCOM, November 9, 2016), https://apcom.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/DiscussionPaper_Christianity-2016.11.25.pdf (accessed December 11, 2016).

²³ Ngeo Boon Lin, "We Are Comrades!—Tongzhi (Comrade) Theology and Its Contribution to Christian Theologies of God in the New Millennium" (ThD diss., School of Theology, Boston University, 2013), 3.

²⁴ Ngeo Boon Lin, "We Are Comrades!", 3.

²⁵ Chou Wah-shan, *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2000), 5, as cited in Ngeo Boon Lin, "We Are Comrades!".

²⁶ Concern for AIDS Research and Education (CARE) Foundation, *Christian Response to Aids, Homophobia and Violence Against Women* (Chennai, India, March 2014), <http://www.citizen-news.org/2015/02/report-christian-response-to-aids.html> (accessed May 26, 2016).

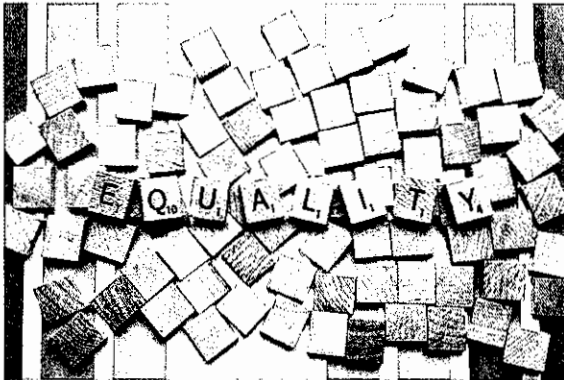
²⁷ Concern for AIDS Research and Education (CARE) Foundation, *Christian Response to Aids, Homophobia and Violence Against Women*.

²⁸ Miak Siew, "Open Letter to Pastor Lawrence Khong," *Free Community Church Blog*, January 14, 2013, <http://freecomchurch.blogspot.com/2013/01/14-jan-2013-from-desk-of-rev-miak-siew.html> (accessed May 26, 2016).

²⁹ Miak Siew, "Open Letter to Pastor Lawrence Khong".

unexpected ways.”³⁰ He then added that the Church had to “respond courageously to whatever new challenges come our way.”³¹

Yet, are we sufficiently courageous as church? Years ago in 2000, Messer sponsored an amendment to a resolution announcing that “We Will Not Be Silent” at his jurisdictional church conference. It declared that “we cannot accept discrimination against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons, and will therefore work toward their full participation at all levels in the life of the church and society.”³² It was adopted and has been a hallmark witness and strategy for United Methodists in the western part of the United States. Nevertheless, these perspectives have not prevailed in the life of the larger denomination.



In God's Eyes, All are Equal

In Messer's own Christian denomination, the United Methodist Church (UMC), the struggle for equality for LGBTIQ persons

has been long, heart-breaking, and contrary to his understanding of the Gospel of Christ's inclusive love for all persons. The official church doctrine of UMC declares that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,”³³ and it forbids UMC clergy to be openly LGBTIQ. It even holds church trials and defrocks clergy who officiate at same sex marriages involving their own children. Melvin Talbert, a clergyperson and fearless champion of human rights, has been censured by his fellow bishops and charges have been filed against him because he performed a wedding for two loving gay UMC men. Globally, UMC is on the verge of schism, because it disagrees so deeply on these LGBTIQ issues. The United Methodist Council of Bishops issued a statement in this regard:

... our hearts break because of the divisions that exist within the church ... We recognize that we are one church in a variety of contexts around the world and that bishops and the church are not of one mind about human sexuality. Despite our differences, we are united in our commitment to be in ministry for and with all people.³⁴

From a UMC perspective, this minimalistic statement was a small breakthrough in that for the first time the bishops acknowledge that the “bishops and the church are not of one mind about human sexuality.” Sometimes, church leaders—both clergy and laity—will go to any extreme, digging their heads in the sand in ridiculous denial.

³⁰ Pope Francis, as cited in The Huffington Post, “Pope: ‘God Is Not Afraid of New Things,’” *The Huffington Post*, October 19, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/19/pope-homosexuality-church-gay_n_6010904.html (accessed May 26, 2016).

³¹ Pope Francis, as cited in The Huffington Post, “Pope: ‘God Is Not Afraid of New Things’”.

³² See also Sally B. Geis and Donald E. Messer, eds., *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

³³ The United Methodist Church, “Homosexuality: Full Book of Discipline Statements,” <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/homosexuality-full-book-of-discipline-statements>, last modified 2015 (accessed December 1, 2015).

³⁴ Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, “Bishops Call United Methodists to Prayer in Human Sexuality Statement,” *The United Methodist Church*, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/bishops-call-united-methodists-to-prayer-in-human-sexuality-statement>, last modified November 7, 2014 (accessed October 7, 2017).

Question 6: As Church, Can We Turn Back and Overcome Fear?

The Turkish proverb declares that “no matter how far you have gone on the wrong road, turn back.” If one is headed in the wrong direction, no matter how long one has journeyed that way, one is still not going to get to the right destination. For centuries, churches have been going down the wrong road when it comes to human rights for LGBTIQ persons. Instead of following the compass of Christ's ministry to the marginalized and his roadmap of caring for the “least of these” in society, theologies of exclusion and hate have triumphed over theologies of inclusion and love.

Increasingly, some Christians and denominations have repented and sought reconciliation with their LGBTIQ sisters and brothers—they have turned back and discovered “Jesus' kingdom praxis [which] fundamentally symbolized and actualized freedom,”³⁵ in which all are warmly welcomed and accepted. Overcoming fear remains fundamental to achieving this change and transformation in church and society. Fear is a deep-seated, and often irrational emotion. Repeatedly Scriptural passages counsel followers not to be fearful (Isa. 35:4; Ps. 27:1; Jn. 14:27; Rom. 8:38-29), yet Christians often let their fear triumph over faith, their hatred over hope, and their labeling over their love.

Owen Nyaka notes that in Africa, the media fails to report on the life and the violence perpetuated on sexual minorities. What he says about journalists could be applied to clergy as well. He says they have a deep-seated “fear

of being labeled, the fear of being disowned and the fear of the unknown. As a result, the media is failing in its duty to provide accurate and balanced information to the public it serves.”³⁶ Due to that fear, both public health and human rights suffer. Instead of playing a positive role, the media contributes to a hostile environment, using inappropriate language, and perpetuating stereotypes, stigmatization and discrimination. The voice of marginalized groups is excluded from the media and social injustice continues.

Likewise the voice of marginalized groups is excluded within the church. Churches regularly debate on LGBTIQ issues but never invite speakers from the LGBTIQ community to speak on their own terms and from their own experiences. They use language that hurts, not heals. They act like they are somehow superior and more blessed by God because they are heterosexual. They fail to understand the depth of the pain, the agony of the suffering, and the torment of exclusion and discrimination. They hide behind scriptural interpretations and church traditions that reflect bias and bigotry.

Conclusion

There are no second-class citizens in the reign of God. Likewise there can no longer be second-class citizens in God's church. The sin of exclusion can no longer be tolerated. We need to recognize God in unfamiliar and unconventional spaces. We end this theological and pastoral reflection with the words of James Alison, who spoke at the Synod of Bishops on the Family in Rome, and said that the Holy Spirit in today's church and world:

³⁵ Shore-Goss, *Jesus Acted Up*, 75.

³⁶ Owen Nyaka, “Fear Causes Media to Self-Censor on Sexual Minorities in Africa,” *Key Correspondents: Reporting for Action on HIV*, <http://www.keycorrespondents.org/2014/10/14/fear-causes-media-to-self-censor-on-sexual-minorities-in-africa/>, last modified October 14, 2014 (accessed October 7, 2017).

... leads us into all truth, kicking, protesting, shocked and disheveled, by insisting on producing boldness of speech in season and out, when it is convenient and when it is not. And those most shocked and come running along last are those who think that any change should be managed by them on their terms, preferably without their losing face by having to admit that they too need forgiveness.³⁷

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Donald E. Messer is the Henry White Warren Professor Emeritus and President Emeritus of The Iliff School of Theology, Denver, Colorado, USA. He holds a Ph.D. from Boston University in social ethics. Author of sixteen books, most recent writings address the church, human sexuality, HIV/AIDS and world hunger. He is Executive Director of the Center for Health and Hope, focusing on global HIV and AIDS. More information at <https://www.centerforhealthandhope.org/>.

Joseph N. Goh is a Lecturer in Gender Studies at the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia. An ordained priest with the Old Catholic movement, he holds a Ph.D. 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. His personal weblog is at <http://josephgoh.org>.



Love is Love, Regardless of Gender