



**PALGRAVE STUDIES IN LIVED RELIGION
AND SOCIETAL CHALLENGES**

Called and Queer

Lived Religion and LGBTQ Methodist Clergy
in South Africa

Megan Robertson

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Palgrave Studies in Lived Religion and Societal Challenges

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“Called and Queer” is one of the first monographs focused on the lived experiences of queer Christian clergy in an African context. Using a queer lived religion framing, it draws on in-depth ethnographic research to analyse how six LGBTQ clergy understand and practice their vocation in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). Seemingly marginalised in a denomination that maintains that marriage is only between one man and one woman, this book explores why LGBTQ clergy are motivated to live out their calling in the Church and how they make sense of their positions within it. In doing so, it looks beyond an analysis of a Church based on its official and doctrinal institutional positions on queer people and sexualities and instead uncovers the taken-for-granted ways in which gender and sex are inscribed in ‘the way we do things around here.’ By understanding how LGBTQ clergy experience and make sense of these different institutional identities in relation to their religious meaning-making, this book reveals the boundaries of inclusion within the institutional culture of the MCSA as well as the porous nature of those boundaries. In this way, this book produces a critique of the heteropatriarchy embedded within the very culture of the Church. At the same time, it provides glimpses of hope as it reveals the potential for uniquely queer ways of being Methodist in South Africa.

Praise for *Called and Queer*

“Embark on a thought-provoking exploration of identity, faith, and belonging of LGBTQ clergy within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) in ‘Called and Queer’. With sensitivity, depth, and through meticulous analysis, ‘Called and Queer’ unveils the institutional cultures that both shape and challenge queer clergy experiences within the MCSA, shedding light on the ways in which power dynamics intersect with issues of race, gender, faith, culture, and sexuality. ‘Called and Queer’ offers a timely and illuminating exploration of faith and queer-ness, challenging readers to rethink conventional understandings of religion, gender, and sexual identity. A must-read for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the complexities of LGBTQ identities within religious contexts and the ongoing struggle for acceptance and affirmation.”

—Prof. zethu Matebeni, PhD, *South Africa Research Chair in Sexualities, Genders and Queer Studies*

“Churches play an important role in forming, and deforming, social values. LGBTQ members and clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa continue to use their deep faith to claim space and shape a more just and inclusive Church. I am so grateful for this remarkable book that chronicles such stories. It is an invaluable resource for the Church and society. I highly recommend it!”

—Prof. Dion A. Forster, Public Theology, *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*,
Methodist Minister

“This is well-researched, sound, highly informative, and timely book that brings to the fore the lived experiences of LGBTQ clearly. I warmly commend this book to, among others, specialist researchers, theologians, religious leaders, development practitioners, and general readers.”

—Prof. Ezra Chitando, *University of Zimbabwe*

“Called and Queer is one of the best arguments I’ve seen for the academic study of religion as a lived experience. Robertson develops an elegant argument in describing the every-day experiences of queer clergy in the Methodist Church in South Africa who must also navigate the hierarchical structures of their institution. A delicate dance between ecclesiastical authority and queer activism, the portrait Robertson depicts is one that offers new insights for the field of Congregational Studies and Queer Studies.”

—Dr. Sara Moslener, *Central Michigan University*

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ACRONYMS

ANC	African National Congress
BMC	Black Methodist Consultation
DEWCOM	Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
IAM	Inclusive and Affirming Ministries
MCSA	Methodist Church of Southern Africa
YMG	Young Men's Guild
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and others
DRC	Dutch Reformed Church
MCO	Methodist Connexional Office



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Sitting in her office one day, Sam and I started talking about her calling to the ministry and why she wanted to be a minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA)¹ in the first place. Sam is an ordained minister in the MCSA who participated in my research. We spent many hours in conversation, even after the conclusion of the official project, and gradually formed a comfortable friendship. On this occasion, Sam explained her understanding of her calling to the ministry. For Sam, the ordained ministry was² her means of expressing a profound desire to demonstrate to others that living in a relationship with God could lead to a more compassionate way of life. She saw this as a catalyst for positive transformation in the world, fostering the creation of more just and peaceful societies. However, she also opened up about the challenges involved in aligning her calling with her identity and role as a minister in the MCSA. Sam explained that while there were “sparks” of joy and “crumbs” of hope that fulfilled her calling to some extent, it was also becoming clearer to her that she did not seem to fit the expectations surrounding being an ordained minister in the MCSA.

¹Throughout this book I use capitalised ‘Church’ in reference to the MCSA. I use lower-case ‘church’ when speaking more generally about a broader idea of the Christian church.

²I say “was” as she has since left the full-time ministry.

- Sam I realise that this person, that is Sam, that I love ... doesn't fit in with what the institution wants out of humanity (laughs).
- Megan Which is what?
- Sam Straight male, black male, but straight male.
- Megan How do you know that?
- Sam The stories that we hear about the Church, it's not actually written stories. They're lived stories so they don't get analysed as much because they're also quite romanticised stories.

So much of what this book is, is encapsulated in what Sam told me that day. There is an expected way of being in the Church that is not formally documented and, therefore, largely escapes scholarly and public scrutiny. These ways of being are not enforced through policy, doctrine, or theology. Yet, in the invisible and taken-for-granted ways of doing things, we find power operating and constructing norms that seem to control who belongs and who does not. These norms shape how relations are formed, how policies are enacted, and which identities are policed. It leaves people, like Sam, feeling as though they do not fit in, yet because of the intangibility of the norms and the power that shapes the MCSA, there seems to be no available recourse or means of change. As Sam says, the norms that come to define this unacknowledged way of doing things are taught through the stories that are told and through taken-for-granted everyday relations of power that are enacted. It is only through uncovering the living narratives and understanding how people experience the Church that it comes to be known. Through this book, I hope to provide something tangible in uncovering and naming that which makes the MCSA feel so black, male, and straight to the queer clergy whose lived experiences we encounter here.

“Called and Queer” offers ethnographic insights into the experiences of six LGTBQ clergy in the MCSA. Seemingly marginalised in a denomination that maintains that marriage is only between one man and one woman, this volume explores how LGBTQ clergy live out their calling in the Church and how they make sense of their positions within it. In doing so, it offers analysis which extends beyond official and doctrinal positions on same-sex marriage and sexual ethics and instead uncovers the unacknowledged ways that race, gender, and sex are inscribed in the institutional culture of the Church. The concept of institutional culture suggests that this may serve as a queer ecclesiology of the MCSA. However, while ecclesiological research has often primarily been interested in official doctrines, policies, and church structures, the idea of institutional culture

suggests something less official. It is as Johnathan Jansen (2004, 122) suggests simply, the “way we do things around here.” Therefore, while this book interrogates some of the more official ecclesiological aspects of the MCSA, it offers more in terms of understanding the taken-for-granted prevailing sets of norms, principles, and attitudes that are deep-rooted and emerge when the everyday lived religion of its clergy and members are taken seriously.

The lived experiences of the clergy in this book reveal that there is not only one institutional culture within which they operate in the MCSA, but rather multiple. This multiplicity is exposed through the tensions they experience in relation to the varied and shifting subject positions they occupy in the MCSA according to sexuality, race, gender, age, and functional role. This book represents these institutional cultures with symbolic figureheads who reflect the discourses and experiences that shape different aspects of the MCSA. These are:

1. The Church of Mandela, with former president Nelson Mandela being South Africa’s most famous Methodist and a representative of the MCSA’s prominent history of black consciousness, social justice, and mission. The figurehead of Mandela draws attention to questions of race and black identity in relation to queer experience.
2. The Church of Purity, with Reverend Purity Malinga being the first woman to be elected head of the MCSA in 2019. As a figurehead, she represents the enduring debates about gender inclusivity in the Church and draws attention to the intersections of gender and queer experience.
3. The Church of Ecclesia refers to Reverend Ecclesia de Lange, who was fired from the MCSA in 2011 for declaring her intention to marry her same-sex partner. Her battle with the Church represents how the MCSA is structured around abstract ideas of the patriarchal, heteronormative marriage and sex and how the everyday experiences of its clergy can contradict and queer this.

By understanding how LGBTQ clergy experience and make sense of these different institutional identities in relation to their religious meaning-making, this book reveals the boundaries of inclusion within the institutional culture of the MCSA as well as the porous nature of those boundaries. In this way, this book produces a critique of the heteropatriarchy embedded within the very culture of the Church. At the same time, it provides

glimpses of hope as it reveals the potential for queering ways of being Methodist in South Africa.

ECCLESIA VS THE MCSA

In February 2010, Reverend Ecclesia de Lange was discontinued as a minister from the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) after she announced to her congregation at a Sunday worship service the previous December that she would be marrying her same-sex partner. After the service, she provided her congregation with a letter detailing her faith story and the decision to come out publicly, stating that “I have come to see that it is better to be rejected for who I am than to be accepted for who I am not” (Kotze and De Lange 2011, 195). Despite no objections from her congregation, her supervisory minister at the time soon laid a formal charge against De Lange who was suspended the following week.

De Lange went on to face two internal disciplinary hearings where she was found guilty of breaking the laws and disciplines (i.e., the institutional rules) of the MCSA. At the time the MCSA maintained a decision made at the annual Conference in 2007 which stated that “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). De Lange’s public declaration in 2009 was viewed by the Church as a move to push the institution towards clarifying its position on same-sex unions. After a futile attempt at internal arbitration, De Lange took her case to the High Court of the Western Cape, then to the Supreme Court of Appeal in Bloemfontein, and, finally, in 2015 to the Constitutional Court of South Africa. The courts found in favour of the MCSA, and De Lange was instructed to complete the internal arbitration in which she was initially engaged. She did so in 2017. Once again, the advocate found in favour of the Church. In September 2017, De Lange submitted an appeal to the Labour and Equality Courts 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.³

³This account of Ecclesia’s case has been reconstructed based on my interview with her in September 2018 at the University of the Western Cape as well as an article which she co-authored, “Suspended, Disciplined and Discontinued: A Practical Response Towards Inclusion” (2011, *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*). She has also produced an account of her story on the blog website of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries [Available: <https://iam.org.za/ecclesias-journey/>].

Not unexpectedly, De Lange's dismissal created public controversy and debate both inside and outside the Church, and while it may have generated some support from ministers who aimed to be inclusive within their individual congregations (Kotze and De Lange 2011, 203), it did not immediately result in any official changes to Church policies and doctrines. Further statements have been made by the MCSA, including attempts to encourage the sharing of a "divergence of conviction within the church on this issue ... in ways that will preserve the integrity and unity of the church" (MCSA 2014, 215). Yet, the Church's overall official stance against same-sex unions has not progressed at the time of publishing this book. LGBTQIA+ Methodists have, however, made some progress in creating new affirming spaces of conversation through an LGBTIQ+ Task Team which began in 2021. Some individual congregations, such as the Central Methodist Mission in Cape Town, also continue to advocate for queer affirming theologies and spaces within Southern African Methodism. De Lange's case, along with the ongoing same-sex debate in the MCSA, provides part of the backdrop to this book.

METHODISM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA AND 'THE SAME-SEX DEBATE'

The so-called 'same-sex debate' in the MCSA has largely involved repetitive discussions and declarations, yielding little discernible progress over the past two decades. In 2001, the MCSA Conference⁴ declared that the Church seeks to be a "community of love rather than rejection" (MCSA 2006, 225). At Conference in 2003, the broader MCSA community was asked to engage the topic of same-sex relationships using a discussion guide that 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 that this discussion guide facilitated demonstrated that there are widely divergent beliefs held within the Church. This was confirmed again in 2006 when both affirming and rejecting views were

⁴Conference 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.

supported by MCSA theologians in unpublished presentations delivered at a meeting of the Doctrinal, Ethics and Worship Committee in 2006 (a doctrinal and policy working group of the MCSA known as DEWCOM). 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.⁵ The earlier presentations of these diverging views 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 continued to recommend that clergy not officiate any same-sex unions but instead offer pastoral counsel to “homosexual people.” The wider Methodist community was also encouraged to read the bible study material, “In Search of Grace and Truth: Christian Conversations on Same-sex Relationships” (Attwell et al. 2010) which was produced for the MCSA and provided various reflective essays and questions which were designed to help individuals and groups discuss their divergent positions on same-sex relationships. Methodists were also asked 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).

Evident in the MCSA’s navigation of the debate is the underlying threat of division that institutional rulings around homosexuality and same-sex marriage pose. Recent examples of such fracturing in the United Methodist Church in the United States suggest that this is a very real possibility. A similar fracture in the MCSA not only threatens its institutional power but seemingly, the value it places on unity. While the MCSA is not unique in upholding unity as integral to the life of the Church, it arguably carries more weight as it is this unity that allowed the Church to adopt a critical

⁵These were previously available via <https://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/> [Accessed 18 November 2019], however, at the time of publication were no longer available.