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Let Them be Free: Adult Education in an Underground LGBT Church in Jamaica

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Abstract: This study investigated the experiences of members of an underground LGBT church in Jamaica and their educational practices. In particular, to understand how they negotiated and navigated their identity in light of their spirituality and religious commitments in the context of a culture that was hostile to the LGBT community.

Introduction and Background

Religion and spirituality are important for the Jamaican people and Christianity has had a central role in the historical development of Jamaicans (Dick, 2002; Whyte, 1995). For many, religion is oftentimes understood as a set of codified beliefs and associated with organized groups or institutions. This is usually seen as institutional religion. On the other hand, many people affirm that spirituality is about a personal belief system (Prest & Keller, 1993; Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon & Helmeke, 1994). According to Wilson (1996, p.18): “Spirituality connotes a non-institutional, individualistic belief system, a private path to peace or enlightenment. It has none of the dreadful association of religion.” In contemporary society, spirituality is quite popular. It has taken on something of a consumer orientation: one can sample, shop, or surf for spirituality, which is seen as harmless religion. Some persons note that spirituality and religion are closely related; indeed spirituality from this perspective is best expressed in and through organized religion. Both offer insights on the interpretation of one’s experience.

The mainstream and evangelical churches in Jamaica have taught that homosexuality is wrong (Amber, 2009; White & Carr, 2005). Homonegativity – contempt for persons who understand themselves to be attracted to individuals of the same sex and express themselves in that way is clearly visible in Jamaican church circles especially in the preaching and teaching ministries. Accordingly, many same gender loving persons have rejected religion because of the hostility of religion (Brooke, 1993; Oberholtzer, 1971). Many gays and lesbians experience enormous struggles when asked to choose between their sexual orientation and their religious and spiritual beliefs. Oftentimes they experience this struggle in painful ways because of their socialization and commitments to their religious faiths (Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994).

Some members of the LGBT community in Jamaica were not able to reconcile their spirituality with their sexuality resulting in tremendous unresolved issues in their lives. With the advent of Sunshine Cathedral Jamaica (SCJ) in 2005, a congregation of the Metropolitan Community Church from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA, a worshipping community openly accepting of the LGBT community was formed in Jamaica. The church offered an alternative approach to Christianity, a liberal/progressive one. In this congregation, sexuality was understood as God’s gift. Whether one was homosexual or heterosexual, one’s sexual orientation was to be celebrated.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this case study was to investigate the experiences of the members of the church as they negotiated and navigated their spirituality and sexuality as members of a LGBT community of faith. In particular, the study looked at the religious and spiritual educational practices,

safe space and fugitive space that were provided for these persons through the various ministries. The study investigated how the safe and fugitive space enabled educational opportunities to be created and delivered, how others erupted through informal approaches and how the multiple educational programs were experienced, understood, and applied. The study was conducted in 2011.

Research Questions

1. How do members of the SCJ understand their sexuality and spirituality?
2. How has the SCJ nurtured their understanding of their sexuality?
3. What is the essence of the SCJ experience for members of the LGBT community?

For this study, the research participants were ten male Jamaican members of the SCJ from 25 years old to 60 years old.

Relevant Literature and Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

Approaches to Homosexuality

Yakushko (2005) has advanced four approaches that might be taken by religious institutions to homosexuality. There is the “rejecting punitive” approach. From this perspective, homosexuality is seen as inimical to religious faith and therefore constructed as a sinful act. Accordingly, institutions that construct homosexuality in this way will be hostile to persons from the LGBT community and will reject or resent their participation or active membership in their institutions. There are those institutions that take a “non-rejecting punitive” stance. From this perspective, homosexuality is understood or constructed as “deviant and sinful.” In this regard, persons practising homosexuality are embraced but the practice is rejected. A third approach is the “qualified acceptance.” From this perspective, homosexuality is seen to exist within a hierarchy of acceptable and unacceptable sexualities. So, homosexuality is seen as acceptable (or “tolerable”) but certainly inferior to heterosexuality. Finally, there is the approach that constructs homosexuality as a valid option and persons engaging in this lifestyle are affirmed. From this position, there is “full acceptance” of members of the LGBT community. In this regard, they are seen as persons who live out one of the many acceptable and normative expressions of human sexuality.

Issues of Identity

Empirical research suggests that exposure to non-affirming religious communities of faith, those that espouse non acceptance of LGBT persons and are hostile to them, may cause persons to experience conflict with their sexuality, religious expression and spirituality (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Ritter & Oneill, 1995). This might even cause or exacerbate internalized homophobia. It is also noted that this internalized homophobia could be responsible for some developmental setbacks particularly as it relates to the expression of an authentic and integrated sexual orientation. In fact, the result of this conundrum might be that the individual assumes the identity of a heterosexual, “pass as heterosexual” (Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) have stated that when gay persons are faced with hostile religious settings, some might respond by developing healthy and well integrated identities. Others however, seek to resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and their religious identity in other ways so they might reject their homosexual identity or they might separate these identities. A gay person might operate in a way which suggests that the gay identity is unrelated to religious identity and the result is that the individual’s life is compartmentalized in ways that could be problematic.

Within the LGBT community, there are those who have decided to eschew organized religion, often times because of the enormous pain they have experienced by their participation in non-affirming communities of faith. Some persons who eschew organized religion will readily define themselves as atheists. Others simply reject public involvement in religious life; hence they will not attend churches etc. However, they might engage in private acts of devotion or meditation and in this way facilitate the expression of their religious and spiritual identities and commitments (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Some persons who identify as members of the LGBT community and admit that they continue to participate in organized religious activities, particularly church life choose to pay scant attention to the relevance of the anti-gay doctrines or disregard them altogether (Dworkin, 1997; Mahaffy, 1996). It is clear from the extant research that LGBT individuals' private and public expressions of faith or religiosity are influenced by the tensions that they experience between their religious identity and their sexual identity.

The Question of Reconciling Identities

The research is showing that persons in the LGBT community who identify as gay and Christian often experience enormous difficulties in reconciling their identities. There are those who feel forced to choose between their religion and sexual identity and this is as a result of the homonegativity that inhabits many Christian communities (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Ritter & Oneill, 1995). Some also suggest that oftentimes these persons live under feelings of bondage, of being the scum of the earth. To resolve this might mean that they have to deny their sexuality or give up their active participation in church life. This is heart wrenching for many (Dworkin, 1997; Mahaffy, 1996). Since the choice is so difficult, this leads to cases where there is no meaningful integration of one's sexual identity and ones religious commitments. Accordingly, many people abandon their religious affiliation and embrace their gay identity or at least live out the gay lifestyle even if they cannot bring themselves to accept in totality this identity. This is more marked when they experience very negative faith group experiences (Beckstead, 2001; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Some opt to pursue other expressions of spirituality for instance new thought and new age orientations and likewise embrace their gay identity.

It is now known that the struggle between sexuality and religion can have mental health implications. Some attempts at the reconciliation of this struggle have resulted in depression, guilt, shame, suicidal ideation and difficulty accepting homosexuality (Rodriquez & Ouelette, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Oftentimes spirituality and religion are seen as having linkages and hence the negative views towards sexual expression outside of marriage especially in Christian circles intensify the struggle for integration of spiritual and sexual identities in adults who are at the point where they are about to acknowledge their sexuality as being lesbian, gay or bisexual (Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson, 2005).

Transformational learning (Mezirow, 1990, 2000) and queer theory (Grace & Hill, 2004; Jagose, 1996) provided the theoretical foundation for the study. Transformative learning as outlined by Jack Mezirow involves a trigger event or disorienting dilemma followed by the important elements of critical reflection, discourse and perspective transformation (Mezirow's (1981, 1991). Critical reflection is about being open and questioning, assessing our ongoing thought, being mindful about why we were thinking in particular ways. Discourse is about meaningful communication with others in as close to an ideal as is possible. Mezirow uses Habermas' 'ideal discourse' to denote specific dialogue intended to validate an individual's experiences and ideas (Mezirow, 1978, p. 102). "Discourse allows us test the validity of beliefs and interpretations" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 165). These ideal conditions are considered authenticity,

truth, equal free will, safety for all (Mezirow, 1981). It is in this process that a person develops communicative competence, which is the ability to negotiate one's own purposes, values and meanings rather than to simply accept those of others. Perspective transformation is achieved when an individual assesses beliefs and determines where they came from and subsequently changes ones frames of reference. "Perspective transformation, or transformative learning is the emancipatory process of assessing and becoming aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 6). Thus critical reflection is important in the overall process. It helps learners to make explicit their implicit assumptions and this is ably facilitated through discourse or talking and sharing about the process and ones beliefs and assumptions with others and then changing or transforming ones perspectives is the basis for transformative learning. Accordingly, transformative learning underscores how individuals interpret, construct, validate, and reappraise their life experiences.

Queer theory is often understood to have emerged from critical theory in the early 1990s and also out of the fields of queer studies and Women studies. In short, it is a critical approach to sexuality, questioning traditional understandings or traditional norms of sexuality (Jagose, 1996). It is a technique that is used to analyze social texts with an interest in exposing underlying meanings, distinctions and relations of power in the larger culture which produces these texts. Queer theory provides the lens for the critical examination of the dominant culture with respect to sexuality. It provides space for the interrogating of normative and deviant understandings of sexuality. In fact, it poses substantive challenges to settled notions of heteronormativity, calling into question what it means to live, love, think and act outside constructions of the norm.

Research Design

This was a qualitative research project employing the case study approach. It made use of approaches associated with phenomenological research. Ten members of the underground LGBT church in Jamaica who were considered "information rich" were purposively selected. Each person was asked to sign the research protocol developed for the exercise after the research was properly explained.

The data was collected with the use of interviews, focus group discussion and document analysis. Data analysis was continuous and ongoing. There was a thorough review of data after each interview, transcribing, and multiple re-reading of transcripts. After multiple readings of the transcribed texts of the interviews and focus group discussion, thematic categories were identified. The stages of analysis were not linear. At each stage revisions were done as deemed necessary and examination and re-examination of the data proved worthwhile. The notes taken during the interview were reviewed at the relevant stages of the analysis.

Data processing progressed through open coding of the interviews by carefully reading and rereading and exploring them for the broad concepts expressed in the interviews that answered the research questions. The data analysis also called for the application of axial coding by linking the broad categories to sub categories. The third phase of the process included the coding of the narrative responses. For the purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each research participant. The trustworthiness of this research was secured by the use of triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing and clear audit trails.

Findings and Conclusions

The findings indicated issues of sexual identity were problematic since they had to operate within their traditional churches as heterosexuals. Some felt the LGBT underground church was a safe and liberating space, others felt that it was not a true church. Some of the experiences of the interviewees included the verbal aggression encountered in Christian churches mainly as a result of how the conservative Christian teachings were interpreted and communicated. These proved problematic, causing enormous conflicts in terms of their understanding of their sexuality, in fact at times some hated themselves for who they were (internal homophobia) and even considered themselves to be hypocrites for embracing the Christian faith and with the knowledge of their gay sexual orientation. In the underground church they were empowered to be who they were especially through the educational programmes and to get in touch with themselves as gay men who were simultaneously Christian/religious/spiritual. Hence the underground church provided a liberated space at least a space for expressing their sexuality as Christians.

Other findings also pointed to opportunities for peer education that aided the attainment of transformational experiences and resulted in personal liberation from ways of seeing themselves that were unwholesome. The distribution of religious literature dealing with sexual orientation issues, the verbal teaching about such issues and the educational reach of the curriculum of all the programmes aided the process of self discovery, reconciliation, resolution and liberation so that they could embrace their identities as men who were simultaneously gay and Christian. One of the oft repeated phrases used in the findings was that the ministry “transformed lives.” The educational ministry was not only experienced through the actual teaching of the church but through practices such as the friendship circles, especially those created for support of HIV positive persons. Further, the emotional support offered, the encouragement to live the best lives possible, and the fact that the precincts of the church provided fugitive and recuperative spaces were all greatly appreciated and communicated significant theological understandings.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This study revealed that religious education was important in the lives of these LGBT persons and that this particular kind of adult religious education from a progressive or liberal lens had enormous positive impact. A major finding of this study was the possibility of wholesome integration of this particular expression of Christianity with gay sexual identity enabling persons to express themselves as simultaneously gay and Christian. This proved liberating for many of the participants in this study.

Adult religious adult education in this study became a site for affirmation, spiritual, religious and emotional recuperation and intellectual resistance from micro aggression and other oppressive experiences. It afforded time and space for reflection and consciousness raising to occur. In fact, it served as a counterpublic space, offering a liberative alternative to the dominant public religious space available to members of the LGBT community. Hence members of this subordinated group experienced religious adult education that provided alternative discourse in a safe place, a place of retreat, recuperation, reconciliation, resolution, and liberation. The study showed that liberative adult religious education is a distinct possibility and this has implications for those who work in this area.

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