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Culture Wars, Race, and Sexuality: A Nascent Pan-African LGBT-Affirming Christian Movement and the Future of Christianity

Adriaan van Klinken

University of Leeds (UK) and Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (South Africa)¹

Abstract

In order to challenge and decenter monolithic narratives about Christian-inspired homophobia in Africa, this article draws attention to Christian counter-mobilizations that seek to affirm the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Africa. It focuses on the work of an African American organization, The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries (TFAM), to build a pan-African LGBT-affirming Christian movement. TFAM presents its work as a response to the involvement of American white conservative evangelicals in the spread of homophobia in Africa. Where the latter has been framed as the export of American culture wars, this article discusses TFAM's work as an attempt to counter-balance the culture wars and to define the future of African Christianity in progressive ways. The article proceeds by discussing one of the fruits of TFAM's activities, an LGBT church in Nairobi, Kenya.

Keywords

Culture wars, homosexuality, LGBT, race, Christianity, Africa, African-American, Kenya

Introduction

In recent years many countries on the African continent have witnessed heated public debates and controversies about issues of homosexuality and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) human rights. A growing body of scholarly literature demonstrates how this politicization of, and mobilization against homosexuality and LGBT rights is actively fueled

by Christian actors and beliefs.² The campaigns in support of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda and the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill in Nigeria are well-known examples of this dynamic, and they exemplify a much broader trend on the continent.³ As Ezra Chitando and I have argued,

From all parts of Africa where Christianity is popular, examples can be given of prominent pastors and church leaders warning against ‘the dangers of homosexuality’, opposing gay and lesbian human rights advocates and calling for tough measures from their governments to ensure that homosexuality is and remains a criminal offence and will not become accepted in their countries. Also, in different parts of the continent we have seen political leaders and statesmen using strongly Bible-based rhetoric and Christian-inspired imaginary to depict homosexuality and ‘gay rights’ as a moral threat to their nations.⁴

The religiously inspired anti-homosexual rhetoric used by African church leaders and politicians, and dominating much of the public sphere, has given rise to rather monolithic narratives about ‘African homophobia’ and ‘homophobic Africa’, which are problematic for various reasons.⁵ One effect of such generalizing narratives is that they mask some positive developments in various countries, such as the increasing levels of organization of LGBT activists, a growing visibility of LGBT communities, and steps towards a greater public and legal recognition of the human rights of sexual minorities. As Marc Epprecht argues, there are considerable ‘grounds for optimism in the struggle for sexual rights and justice’ in contemporary Africa.⁶ Specifically in relation to Christianity, the dominant narrative of a Christian inspired homophobia in Africa renders invisible the small but growing number of pastors, church leaders and theologians supporting LGBT human rights, the faith-based

initiatives to address and overcome homophobia in church and society, and the emergence of LGBT-affirming Christian movements and communities in a number of countries.⁷ Without denying that Christianity is a major cultural, social and political force driving mobilizations against homosexuality and LGBT rights in Africa, the present article seeks to nuance this picture by drawing attention to a case of emerging Christian counter-mobilizations.⁸

Interestingly, where recent literature has linked the spread of homophobia in Africa to the active involvement of Christian conservative groups from the United States who are exporting and globalizing their ‘culture wars’, the case study in this article presents an example of American progressive Christian involvement in the politics of homosexuality in Africa. More specifically, it documents and examines an African-American initiative to promote a progressive, LGBT-affirming Christian movement in Africa as part of a competition to define the nature and future of African Christianity as a crucial part of world Christianity. Thus, this article focuses on the African-American organization called The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries (henceforth, TFAM), specifically their LGBT-activist work in Africa, discussing this as part of the broader global economy of Christianity and of the struggle to define the nature and future of Christianity in Africa and indeed worldwide.

I learned about the work of TFAM when, in February-March 2016, I was conducting research in Kenya as part of a project on Christianity and queer politics in Africa. One of my case studies in this project is a Nairobi-based church led and attended by LGBT people of faith. This church had been established in 2013 and since then mentored by Bishop Joseph W. Tolton, who is TFAM’s director of Global Ministries. While in Nairobi, I had a chance to meet and interview Tolton. This interview forms part of the material on which this article is based, complemented by other, mostly online sources from or about TFAM. In addition, the final section of the article focuses on the above-mentioned Nairobi church, on the basis of my fieldwork in this congregation.⁹

Although in this article I do not aim to make a theological contribution myself, but instead to document and analyze theological developments and reflect upon their significance in the global economy of Christianity, I wish to point out at the beginning that as a white European scholar of African Christianity, I am deeply committed to the cause of sexual justice and have a personal interest in theological traditions supporting this cause. Being in a same-sex relationship myself, and having close connections and deep personal friendships with LGBT people in several parts of Africa, I agree with the feminist dictum that the personal is political, and that my scholarship in this area therefore is both personally and politically motivated and is inspired by a vision of what I call, queer solidarity. As an expression of this vision, I wish to dedicate this essay to my friends at Cosmopolitan Affirming Church in Nairobi, Kenya – with whom I have prayed and worshipped, sang and danced, laughed and cried, shared food and hang out, as they accepted me – a mzungu – in their midst and made me feel more than welcome.

Exporting the Culture Wars: US Conservatives and Homophobia in Africa

The recent politicization of homosexuality and the mobilization against LGBT rights in a range of African countries is a complex dynamic, driven by a range of cultural, economic, social and political factors. One major explanation for the ‘waves of homophobia’ in Africa, according to several scholars and commentators, is the active involvement of American conservative evangelical Christians in African sexual politics. In particular, the campaign for the controversial Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda, first tabled by Ugandan MP David Bahati in October 2009, has been associated with US evangelical influence.¹⁰ The 2013 documentary film *God Loves Uganda*, for example, presents a narrative in which the Bill and its Ugandan supporters are directly linked to American evangelical leaders and movements.¹¹ This narrative is based, among others, on the report *Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S.*

Conservatives, African Churches, and Homophobia (2009), written by the originally
Zambian US-based scholar and activist, Kapya Kaoma, who also prominently features as a
commentator in *God Loves Uganda*. In this report, and the follow-up 2012 report *Colonizing
African Values: How the U.S. Christian Right is Transforming Sexual Politics in Africa*,
Kaoma demonstrates that conservative evangelical Protestants, or the Christian Right, in the
United States, are deeply involved in influencing social policy and legislation around issues
of sexuality and reproductive health in a range of African countries, especially those with a
major Christian population. Taking up the term ‘culture wars’ – a term referring to the social
and political polarization within the United States revealing a deep conflict between different
sets of values and ideas, usually framed as progressive versus conservative, secular versus
religious¹² –, Kaoma develops a twofold argument. First, he argues that

U.S. conservatives mobilized African clergy in their domestic culture wars at a time
when the demographic center of Christianity is shifting from the global North to the
global South, increasing Africa’s influence on Christianity worldwide.¹³

In this context, he particularly refers to conservative evangelical groups within the US
mainline Protestant denominations, such as the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist
Church, and the Presbyterian Church USA. These denominations have a long history of
progressive social witness and political influence in the US, which conservatives within their
midst sought to counter by mobilizing clergy in African churches with which the US
denominations had partnership ties. The flagship issue became the ordination of lesbian and
gay clergy, as well as the blessing of same-sex unions, with American conservatives
mobilizing the influence of African church leaders to slow down, or even stop, the full
recognition and inclusion of gay and lesbian people in their denominations. Where this is an

example of ‘importing’ African influence into US culture wars, Kaoma argues, second, that American conservatives also exported their culture wars to Africa, when they realized they may be losing the battle back home. He documents how in recent years, key US Christian conservative organizations of various backgrounds – Roman Catholic, Mormon, Protestant evangelicals – have built new institutions and initiated campaigns on the African continent to promote their socio-political agenda, specifically opposing women’s reproductive health rights and LGBT human rights. Doing so they successfully framed issues of homosexuality in a neo-colonial discourse, fueling anxiety about the ‘Western gay agenda’ that would be promoted by the US government, the United Nations and international human rights organizations – a rhetorical frame that many African Christian religious and political leaders easily bought into as it fits in with broader postcolonial sensitivities. Yet this framing is highly ironical and opportunistic, as Kaoma points out, because the American Christian Right has historically never cared much about Africa’s liberation from colonial and otherwise imperialist regimes and structures.

At the background of this export of the American culture wars, Kaoma suggests, is the awareness of the shifting demographic center of Christianity worldwide, from the global north to the global south, a development well-documented by scholars such as Andrew F. Walls and Philip Jenkins.¹⁴ Africa plays a crucial part in this shift, as its rapidly growing Christian population increasingly determines the face of contemporary Christianity. As Walls puts it, African Christianity has become ‘a major component of contemporary representative Christianity, the standard Christianity of the present age, a demonstration model of its character’.¹⁵ Out of this awareness, US Christian conservatives have demonstrated a strategic interest in building alliances and promoting their interests within Africa. In other words, Africa has become a critical locale to influence the nature and future of Christianity, and

issues of homosexuality and LGBT rights have become the highly symbolic and contested terrain where this future is decided.

US conservative involvement is only one factor in the complex dynamics of the recent mobilizations against homosexuality and LGBT rights in Africa. Some critics have warned not to overemphasize this factor, as it results in an American-centered account that does not adequately acknowledge African agency. As Lydia Boyd points out with regard to the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Bill, ‘to analyze this bill as simply the result of the transposition of an American homophobia misrepresents Ugandan concerns as mere reflections of an American agenda and obscures the motivations of local activists.’¹⁶ I sympathize with this concern, and in some previous publications I have analyzed the local motivations and interests underlying mobilizations against homosexuality in particular countries, while at the same time acknowledging how these are embedded in wider transnational networks.¹⁷ In the present article I do not seek to engage in this debate as such. Instead I aim to complement the account that is concerned with the export of American culture wars, by drawing attention to how a US progressive Christian movement has adopted the very language of culture wars and seeks to counterbalance the attempts of their conservative counterparts to define the nature and future of Christianity in Africa.

Counterbalancing the Culture Wars: Progressive African-Americans

As Didi Herman has argued in her study of faith-based anti-gay politics in the United States, the Christian Right that is at the forefront of the national (and increasingly international) anti-gay agenda is, racially speaking, very much a white movement.¹⁸ This is not to deny that there are also non-white conservative Christians in the US who hold negative views towards homosexuality and LGBT rights, however they are not as prominent. Against this background, the recent involvement of a progressive Christian African American organization, The

Fellowship of Affirming Ministries (TFAM), in a pro-LGBT rights campaign in Africa, becomes particularly significant.

TFAM presents itself on its website as ‘a multi-denominational group of primarily African American Christian leaders and laity’, and its mission is ‘to support religious leaders and laity in moving toward a theology of radical inclusivity which, by its very nature, requires an equally radical social ministry reaching to the furthest margins of society to serve all in need without prejudice or discrimination.’¹⁹ Bearing in mind the African American historical experience of oppression, the Fellowship is particularly concerned with structures of exclusion and oppression currently maintained within African American religious circles through judgmental theologies and conservative politics, affecting, for example, people living with HIV and AIDS, people suffering from substance abuse, sex workers, and what TFAM calls ‘same gender loving people’. The TFAM website lists about 40 churches and ministries who are officially affiliated with the Fellowship, and in the words of Alton B. Pollard these are part of a broader movement of ‘prophetic Black churches’ that are ‘dotting the national landscape’ which specifically welcome ‘the most wounded and silenced members of the African American community’, that is, ‘the children of neglect and abuse, the severely disabled, the incarcerated poor, and lesbians and gays’.²⁰

The fellowship was founded by Rev. Yvette A. Flunder, who currently is the Presiding Bishop. In my interview with Bishop Tolton, who works closely with Flunder in TFAM, he went to great lengths to trace her roots in the history of African American Christianity, linking her to her grandfather who was a ‘pioneering apostle ... commissioned by the infamous Bishop Mason who was the founder of the Church of God in Christ’ (one of the largest classical Pentecostal denominations in the US, with a predominantly African American membership).²¹ Bishop Flunder, in Tolton’s account, is a ‘third generation preacher’ in the Church of God in Christ who left the denomination after realizing that she was a ‘same

gender loving woman'. Since the 1980s she has been involved in HIV and AIDS activist work in the San Francisco bay area. In 1991 she founded City of Refuge Church in inner city San Francisco, through which she seeks 'to unite a gospel ministry with a social ministry'²², specifically targeting people living with HIV, members of the LGBT community, and refugees, and building what she calls 'a community of radical inclusion'.²³ Broadening the scope of her work, in the year 2000 she founded TFAM, reportedly in response to a call from God to free African Americans from the 'punitive theology' dominating the black church.²⁴

Where the primary focus of Flunder's and TFAM's activities is on the African American community in the US, the scope has gradually widened to include Africa. This was motivated initially by the HIV epidemic, which in the 1990s reached devastating proportions in many African countries. However, according to Tolton, this Africa ministry expanded to include and address LGBT issues in 2009, when the anti-homosexuality bill was first tabled in the Ugandan parliament:

It was during the crisis in Uganda in 2009 that the Lord spoke to her [Flunder] about the need for African Americans to be a part of that response, because Americans were implicated by the Ugandan bill because it was American money that supported the bill, and it was Americans who actually helped to design it.²⁵

In response to Flunder's request, Tolton himself in 2010 became, in his own words, 'a missionary in Uganda', travelling there to build connections with local LGBT communities, civil society organizations and faith-based groups. In the following years the work expanded to other countries, mostly in East Africa: Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and Cote d'Ivoire. Tolton gave up his role as pastor in New York to dedicate himself fulltime to his new ministry: overseeing the international work of TFAM. Under the name The Fellowship

Global (TFG) several programs are run that contribute towards a vision of promoting social justice and building an inclusive pan-African Christian faith movement:

As heirs of the civil rights movement, African spirituality, Christian traditions, and prophetic witness we have a vision for a radically inclusive revival to usher in a new era of social justice.²⁶

One of the fellowship's programs is called United Coalition of Affirming Africans (UCAA), which is active in various countries – Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo, among others. Through national 'chapters' in these countries, UCAA seeks to build partnerships with local Christian clergy, supports faith-based LGBT activism and advocacy, and provides theological training. This is considered key to the 'on the grounds grassroots movement building' that TFG claims to be typical of its approach.²⁷

In the process of expanding his work-field, Tolton visited Kenya for the first time in 2013, where he was involved in organizing a screening of the documentary film *God Loves Uganda*.²⁸ At this occasion, he met members of the Kenyan LGBT community and in the conversations with some of them the idea emerged of starting an inclusive and affirming church in Nairobi. With the moral, spiritual and financial support of Tolton, Cosmopolitan Affirming Church (CAC) was established. Tolton visits Kenya several times a year, at which occasions he meets with the CAC leadership team as well as other members to discuss the running and growth of the church. During those visits he will also usually preach in a CAC Sunday service and celebrate Holy Communion – the latter being something that the CAC lay ministers do not do. During his Kenya visits Tolton also organizes theological training classes for clergy involved in UCAA.

Countering the possible criticism that CAC is an ‘American driven thing’, Tolton downplayed to me his own role by pointing out that over the past two years he has attended and led not more than 8 to 10 of the Sunday services. He concluded: ‘So it’s not me, it’s the people on the ground who are running their church and moving their church forward. ... God has given leaders on the ground to make it happen.’²⁹ Crucially, he acknowledges African agency by emphasizing the role of local Kenyan community activists in establishing and building up the church. The CAC leaders, on the other hand, acknowledged the important role Tolton plays to date, both in financial terms – without the resources provided by TFG the church could not run – and in terms of nurturing them morally, spiritually and theologically in leading the church.

What is of crucial interest for the purpose of this article is the way how the TFAM activities in Africa are framed by TFG, and by Tolton personally, as part of ‘the global economy of Christianity’.³⁰ In their understanding, the recent manifestation of social and political homophobia, and the introduction of new anti-homosexuality laws, in various African countries, is first and foremost the result of the active involvement of American evangelicals. It is believed that ‘colonialist laws and missionary mentalities have become the springboard for the export of homophobia by US-based Evangelicals like Scott Lively and Rick Warren.’³¹ Hence, the 2015 tour of Tolton through several African countries was presented by TFG as an attempt to ‘counteract’ evangelical Christian anti-gay politics in Africa:

As black gay Christians who identify with Pentecostal worship and as people of social justice, we are countering the work of conservative, mostly white American evangelicals who are doubling down on their attempt of spiritual colonization of Africa.³²

Tolton here adds an explicitly racial dimension to Kaoma's argument about the US conservative exportation of American culture wars. In the view of TGM and TFAM, it is black progressive US Christians who are called to resist and counter this white conservative campaign of promoting homophobia, both in the US and in Africa. The attempt by US conservatives to export their cultural values and political ideas to Africa exemplifies, according to Tolton, their colonizing agenda and reveals the 'dominionist' nature of American evangelical theology. Hence he explained the Ugandan anti-homosexuality bill as a political experiment:

the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was the great experiment of creating a law that was driven by essentially a Levitical code to see if that law could actually become enshrined as the political or social law of the day in that country. And if they were successful there, they wanted to try to replicate that model throughout Africa, around the world.³³

According to Tolton, American evangelicals have set their mind on Uganda, to begin with, because of the 'apocalyptic notions' of the land as the biblical Garden of Eden, the source of the Nile River, and the cradle of humankind.³⁴ Uganda, in this religious geography, is a highly symbolic place and as such becomes the crucial entry point for the African continent as a whole. Furthermore, Tolton argued, US evangelicals have set their mind on Africa more generally because this is one of the continents believed to be decisive to the future of Christianity. As an illustration, he referred to prominent American evangelical mega-church leader, Rick Warren, who reportedly has stated: 'The future of Christianity is not Europe or North America, but Africa, Asia, and Latin America.'³⁵ Indeed, for one time Tolton seemed

to agree with Warren. The sense that African Christianity, in the words of Walls, is ‘potentially the representative Christianity of the twenty-first century’³⁶, motivates TFAM to engage in a battle with American conservative evangelicals – a battle for the soul of Christianity in Africa. In Tolton’s words: ‘There are two strains that are flowing throughout Christendom right now. We call one “dominionism” and one “discipleship”’.³⁷ Where US evangelicals, in this account, represent a dominionist form of Christianity and seek to export that to Africa and other parts of the world, TFAM stands for discipleship, understood as following Jesus Christ, serving the world in his name, and embodying a theology of radical inclusivity. Through its activities, TFAM seeks to spread this understanding of the Christian faith in Africa, laying the ‘groundwork for a pan African progressive Christian movement’.³⁸ Echoing the point made by Walls, Tolton explained:

We’re very interested in a ‘discipleship’ strain of Christianity, the inclusive message of the Christ, really becoming the dominant strain of Christianity. Because whatever strain of Christianity Africa embraces over the next 50 to 100 years will be what Christendom is known as in the world, because this is the place where it will be defined.³⁹

The progressive and inclusive form of Christianity that TFAM seeks to promote is not only concerned with issues of sexual and gender diversity but has a broader socio-political agenda that addresses Africa’s economic, social, and health concerns. The organization claims to adopt an ‘inter-sectional perspective of structural social change’ that ‘pro-actively connects the LGBTI experience in Africa with the totality of the human experience in Africa’.⁴⁰ Elaborating on this approach, Tolton explained the link he perceives between American evangelical’s opposition of homosexuality and campaign against LGBT rights, and their

support of neoliberal socio-economic policies. Pointing out that capitalism – ‘particularly the type of capitalism that America has experienced’ – is inherently connected to patriarchy, homophobia and racism, he argued that both African Americans in the US, and LGBT people in Africa, are the victims of the social, economic and political agenda driven by American evangelicals of European descent.⁴¹ This realization of having ‘a common oppressor’, he further contended, should motivate African Americans in general, and LGBT Americans of color in particular, to support and engage in the work TFAM is doing.

Echoing the queer of color materialist critique that the white LGBT community in the US tends to uncritically accept, and in fact benefits from, the current economic system, and that the successful campaign for equal marriage rights was largely about securing the economic privilege of white gay men, Tolton outlined the need for ‘queer people of African descent’ in the US to spearhead a global movement with a much broader agenda than promoting equal marriage: ‘It has to be [about realizing] a fundamental structural change in how humanity understands itself (...) and ultimately undoing an unjust capitalist system that is deeply connected to, married to patriarchy’.⁴² The ideas presented by Tolton and reflected in the work of TFAM is in line with the emerging discourse of African queer politics. For example, the African LGBTI Manifesto explicitly calls for an ‘African revolution’ liberating the continent and its people from centuries of political and economic oppression, and underlines the need for justice and self-determination ‘at all levels of our sexual, social, political and economic lives’.⁴³ Along the same lines, Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas define the African queer political agenda as opposed to ‘oppressive hetero-patriarchal-capitalist frameworks’, thus underlining the interconnections between capitalism, patriarchy and heteronormativity.⁴⁴

Observing that generally speaking ‘there is not a tremendous African-American presence in Africa’⁴⁵, Tolton believes that the current moment of social and political

homophobia in Africa inspired by American evangelicals, provides African Americans with an opportunity to reconcile and become engaged with the continent and people of Africa. He uses the word ‘reconciliation’ in the sense of ‘healing’ because in his understanding, the experience and legacy of slavery has deeply traumatized, not only the people from African descent in the Americas but also the people who were ‘left behind’ on the continent and their descendants. Slavery, colonialism and current socio-economic and political policies, Tolton argued, have deliberately sought, and seek up to date, to divide the people of Africa and the diaspora, out of the idea that as long as you ‘keep the people apart, keep them wounded, you will always be able to exploit them because they’ll never know their full power until they’re reconciled.’⁴⁶ A reconciliation of African Americans with the African people could be empowering for both, according to Tolton, and would pose a serious threat to the current economic system that only serves the interests of the elites both in the US and in Africa. Where ‘dominionist Christianity’ has come to defend this system, TFAM seeks to engender ‘a grassroots movement with a progressive faith frame’⁴⁷ that will bring about ‘a radically inclusive revival to usher in a new era of social justice’.⁴⁸

Tolton believes that the faith-based advocacy presented by UCAA can be much more effective in bringing about change in the social attitudes towards LGBT people in Africa than the secular oriented human rights approach of many African LGBT activists and the Western organizations supporting them. Criticizing the latter for their usual ‘disdain for religion’, he argued that in order to successfully engage with people, one will have to ‘come through the Bible’.⁴⁹ In this context, ‘coming through the Bible’ does not just mean providing people with a different interpretation of the biblical verses often used against homosexuality. The difference, he explained, is made by what African Americans call ‘anointing’:

We can explain the Levitical Code, and Romans, and Sodom and Gomorrah, but we also have an experience that we literally cannot explain, and that is our interaction with the Holy Ghost. And that's the piece that I think distinguishes us and really pushes over the edge, because when other folks come to worship with us, they feel something incredibly familiar, and that they can't deny the presence of God.

Tolton alludes here to the embodied-spiritual way of experiencing faith, engaging the Bible and mediating its meaning that is typical of black Pentecostal worship as well as of popular African Christianity. This form of religiosity comes with a 'spirit of discernment' through which the believer can sense and validate religious authenticity and authority, in a way that surpasses the more rational question of religious orthodoxy. Thus, Tolton narrated his experiences in Africa, with clergy and other Christians being confused by a black pastor, whom they intuitively recognize as 'a man of God' and in whom they 'feel the Spirit of God', preaching them a message of radical inclusion that is at tension with what they, hitherto, had held as biblical truth. Yet according to Tolton, after their initial confusion people were more likely to accept his message while they would have remained emotionally and spiritually unaffected by the 'secular gospel' of human rights. He explained further that in the same way, African LGBT Christians struggling to reconcile their sexuality and spirituality can easily recognize and identify with him, an openly gay black pastor, through 'this Pentecostal thing that just connects with people at a very embodied level'.⁵⁰

“Rewriting the Book of Acts”: An LGBT Affirming Church in Kenya

The earlier mentioned Cosmopolitan Affirming Church (CAC) in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, is a crucial part of TFG's strategy of providing pastoral care for LGBT communities and pioneering an open and affirming church movement in hostile climates in Africa.

Obviously the beginnings of such a movement are still small: Sunday services at CAC, at the time of my fieldwork, were attended by up to fifty people, mostly in their twenties and early thirties. A significant part of them were not Kenyan but belonged to the group of Ugandan LGBT refugees who have settled in Nairobi, where they struggle to make ends meet. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed ethnographic account of the church. Instead, I will focus on a particular theological narrative that I found in CAC and that reveals the ambition of the church and the nascent movement it is part of.

During my fieldwork I came across a very interesting discourse on the theological importance of the work CAC is doing and the contribution it is making to the wider LGBT struggle and queer political project in Kenya. This is the discourse of ‘rewriting the book of Acts’. Acts – fully named Acts of the Apostles – is the name of one of the books in the New Testament, and it tells about the emergence of the Christian faith and the early years of the Christian church. The discourse of ‘rewriting the book of Acts’ was introduced by Tolton in one of the sermons he preached at CAC. As he narrated later,

I told the congregation a couple of weeks ago that they are Acts, they are the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts is the book where the church emerged and figured out who and what they were going to be, and they’re literally writing acts with their lives.

With every step they take, they are writing the Book of Acts again.⁵¹

The suggestion that CAC members are ‘literally’ rewriting the Book of Acts with their communal lives is deeply significant. The parallel suggests that like the early Christian church two thousand years ago, CAC is currently ‘figuring out’ its identity and mission which will be decisive for nothing less than the nature and future of Christianity – in Kenya and possibly even more widely. One might react by saying that this comparison with the early

church – led by legendary figures such as the apostle Paul – is a bit too pretentious for a few dozen people worshipping in an office space on Sunday afternoons. Yet the comparison should be interpreted with the above discussed vision of TFG in mind, in which CAC is one crucial initiative in a broader project, still in its early stage, which is believed to give rise to a new, progressive Christian movement in Africa that will reshape the face of Christianity on the continent. In the same way as the early church, according to the Book of Acts, was inspired by the Holy Spirit and was part of God’s plan with the world, so CAC is believed to be at the forefront of a Holy Spirit driven movement, crucial to realizing God’s mission in Kenya, Africa and indeed the world.

Tolton’s notion of rewriting the Book of Acts had been picked up on by the congregation – several church members alluded to it in conversations I had. One of the CAC leaders elaborated on the theme in a sermon, delivered a number of weeks after Tolton had introduced it. He gave the notion an explicit political edge, calling the congregation to come in action and become a movement for change:

It is time as a church to rewrite the Book of Acts. It is time for us to change the constitution of Kenya as a church. It is time for us to fight all this discrimination, all this branding of names. We know our brand. It is time to stand and tell people: this is what we want, this is what we believe in – we believe in inclusion, we believe in liberation, we believe in freedom, justice and equality. That is what we believe in. It is time to be counted, it is time to be in the process. We need leaders who will stand and say, this is what we want. (...) It is you, you, you, all of us, myself included, who need to be in this process.⁵²

The parallel drawn in the first two lines between rewriting the Book of Acts and changing the Kenyan Constitution is rather telling, the suggestion being that Acts is being rewritten through working for constitutional change in order to achieve inclusion, liberation, freedom, justice and equality for all Kenyans. It illustrates how the notion of ‘rewriting the Book of Acts’ refers to a religious as much as a socio-political project – in fact, it is a political-theological metaphor capturing the significance of the movement for change CAC is involved in.

This project of change was framed, in the same sermon, in an eschatological way. The Scripture readings being taken from the Book of Isaiah (chapter 65 verse 17)⁵³ and the Book of Revelation (chapter 21 verse 1-2)⁵⁴, which both center around the vision of ‘a new heaven and a new world’ that are symbolized by ‘the new Jerusalem’, the preacher equated this eschatological vision to the queer struggle in Kenya:

We are in the new Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem which signifies equality, the new Jerusalem which signifies inclusion, the new Jerusalem where there is space and joy. In our country today we are facing oppression as the LGBTI community, we are being branded names, people don’t want to see us, our family members don’t want to be associated with us because they think we are outcasts. But God is telling you today that in the new Jerusalem, amen, there is equality, in the new Jerusalem there is inclusion, in the new Jerusalem there is restoration, in the new Jerusalem there is hope. God is good all the time. We are marching to the new Jerusalem. We are heading to the new Zion, the beautiful city of God. We are heading to the new Jerusalem. Come and march. Come and let us journey together, let us walk together because we are in the new heaven and the new earth. God is good all the time.

The new Jerusalem in biblical language is a city of salvation and redemption, the image of God's new creation. In this sermon, it is equated to a place of sexual equality and inclusion, a place where queer people are no longer stigmatized and oppressed but experience joy and fullness of life.

Interesting is the apparent paradox between 'we are in the new Jerusalem' and 'we are marching to the new Jerusalem'. This echoes a tradition within Christian theology emphasizing that salvation (in the broad sense of the word, also referred to in biblical language as the kingdom of God, or the 'new heaven and the new world') are 'already but not yet'. This tradition has been labeled as 'presentist-and-futurist eschatology'⁵⁵, and refers to 'a sense in which it [the kingdom of God] is a present reality but another [sense] in which it has not yet come in all its fullness'.⁵⁶ In liberation, queer and other political theologies, this dual sense leads to a stress 'on a God acting in history', and involves a notion of prophecy as being about 'discerning God's activity in the world now, the meaning of that activity for the community of faith, and the appropriate response'.⁵⁷ The above noted apparent paradox, then, in the sermon becomes a productive tension: one the one hand an emphasis on God, who is 'creating [the new earth] in this world today', and on the other hand an emphasis that 'God is counting on you today', culminating in a call upon the congregation to become part of God's movement for change. As the same preacher preached at another Sunday:

God is counting on you today, God is calling you today: "Come my son, come my daughter, I want you to stand, I want you to seek after me, and I will show you the way." I want you as an LGBT person to be the prophet of this community. I want you to stand and fight against all this hatred labeled against our community. I want you to stand and speak against all this evil happening in our society, corruption, tribalism, nepotism, all this happening in our society. God is counting on you. God is believing

that you are able, he has empowered you, he has given you this vision, he has commissioned you today to go and stand and seek after him. Amen? Amen! God is calling you today. Just stand and say: Yes I'm here, I want to seek after you; I want healing in my community, I want healing in my society; I want this to happen in our family, I want this to happen in this church, when we seek him. Amen? Amen. He's counting on you today. He's saying, come and stand. Be the prophet of our society. I believe in you. Do you receive it brothers and sisters? Amen? Amen! May God bless you, may God continue to use you. I love you all.⁵⁸

This was the closing part of the sermon that Sunday, and the congregation received it with applause, expressing their agreement and excitement.

Particularly significant in this quotation is that the political edge of CAC's theology is framed in a much broader way than just the struggle for LGBT human rights. CAC members are called to stand up 'against all evil' happening in Kenyan society. The issues alluded to here – corruption, tribalism and nepotism – were not just mentioned incidentally. In another sermon, the same preacher went into more detail to discuss the problem of poor governance and weak democratic institutions in Kenya and he imagined the new Jerusalem as a place, not only 'free from homophobia and transphobia', but also free from all the other 'social injustices' affecting negatively upon the lives of Kenyans. Referring to the upcoming 2017 presidential elections, he called upon members to register as voters, asking them 'Have you registered? Are you ready to vote for good governance, for morality, integrity among our leaders, or are you the kind of person asking: from what tribe is that person coming from?'⁵⁹ Further elaborating on his political sermons, the preacher in an interview explained to me that he considered it part of CAC's mission to address these kinds of issues. In his observation, the church is supposed to be an 'authority of morality' in society, but in Kenya and other

African countries the established churches are misusing this position to discriminate certain groups of people, and they also tend to maintain the tribalism affecting Kenya leading, for example, to the 2007-8 post-election violence. Hence he concluded:

That's why I feel that as CAC, we should also be at the forefront to speak against all these vices that are happening not only in our political systems, but in our institutions and all aspects that concerns humanity.⁶⁰

Adding to this was his sense that because CAC is a young congregation with members having the potential to become future leaders in the country, 'we should mentor them to be leaders who have the interest of the people at their hearts'.

CAC members, through becoming 'agents of change' and taking up their role in the movement for equality, justice and freedom in Kenya, become co-workers with God in realizing the eschatological vision. It is believed that through their actions in this process, they are rewriting the Book of Acts:

The Book of Acts will always be written by the radical people, by the people who are ready for change, by the people who have a vision, amen, the people who really have the purpose, the people who are driven by a strong will, who are really self-motivated and are ready to take the challenge, amen. Oh my God. The new earth and the new Jerusalem is not for the cowards.⁶¹

Elaborating on the latter, the preacher went on to argue that members of the congregation might feel weak because of all the pressure they face in society, but that with God's help they will be able to achieve:

As an LGBT member you are in a very hostile environment, and there is oppression, discrimination left, right and center. (...) But God is telling you today: You will withstand that pressure. And that's why I think you are in Kenya, in this country, because God knew that you will withstand the pressure, because God knew that you will overcome the storm, because God knew that he is developing you for a greater task, God knows that he's preparing you for a greater future.⁶²

Clearly this exhortation sought to affirm and empower members spiritually, making them believe that they can become agents of change because God is on their side. LGBT people of faith are presented as being at the vanguard of a movement of socio-political change in Kenya; they are targeted to become 'agents of change' by emphasizing that God is counting on them since political and religious leaders in the country have failed.

Conclusion

In a recent article about Christianity and pan-Africanism, Roland Nathan highlights the historical role of US black Christian churches and their leaders in the development of pan-Africanism from the late 18th century. He continues by calling for a 'neo-pan-Africanism', with a renewed engagement of people of African descent living in the diaspora with the continent and its future: 'The present generation of pan-Africanists need to create new and lasting partnerships and/or networks that will bring transformation for the long-term development of Africa and its diaspora.'⁶³ Nathan then identifies three existing African Christian bodies that could be strategic partners for a renewed pan-Africanist engagement: the All African Conference of Churches, the Organization of African Instituted Churches, and the Association of Evangelicals in Africa. Indeed, each of these organizations is, in different

ways, involved in faith-based programs concerned with issues of development, democracy, human rights, and justice. However, when it comes to issues of sexual diversity these organizations tend to be rather conservative; for theological and political reasons, none of them has begun to work towards the recognition of sexual minorities in Africa. With that in mind, the significance of the work of The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries as an African American organization promoting a progressive, inclusive and LGBT-affirming Christian movement, not only in the black church in the US but also in Africa, becomes apparent. Their activities on the one hand stand in a long tradition of Christian-inspired pan-Africanist movements, while on the other hand also courageously applying the justice and human rights agenda to an area hitherto declared taboo by the just mentioned established African Christian bodies. Adding to this significance is the realization that African Christianity, in the earlier quoted words of Andrew Walls, is a major component of contemporary global Christianity, and the awareness that Africa, in the words of Achille Mbembe, ‘is gradually perceived as the place where our planetary future is at stake—or is being played out’.⁶⁴

It is tempting to ask whether the LGBT-affirming progressive pan-African Christian movement that TFAM seeks to engender will be successful in (re)shaping the future of Africa and African Christianity. Obviously, this movement is still at an embryonic stage and its human and financial resources might prove far too limited to win the culture wars. However, the nascent movement does present the potential to challenge and decenter monolithic narratives about Christian-inspired, and American evangelical sponsored homophobia in Africa. The recent controversies in African societies, and in African Christian circles, about homosexuality and LGBT human rights reveal deep-rooted conflicting understandings of personhood, human dignity, and sexuality. Initiatives such as TFAM and CAC counter-balance hegemonic discourses and narratives, and they remind us that there are, indeed,

multiple modernities and multiple Christianities in contemporary Africa that in complex ways are linked to trans-Atlantic dynamics.

One possible way for this nascent pan-African LGBT-affirming Christian movement to grow and expand its impact and reach is by promoting the underlying progressive theological project. In African theology to date there has been little engagement with issues of homosexuality and LGBT human rights, although a few theologians, in particular African women/feminist theologians, have recently begun to address these issues in progressive ways building on traditions of liberation theology and its commitment to social justice.⁶⁵ In African American theology, there is a longer engagement with, and a more substantial body of literature on these issues.⁶⁶ Historically, there is a long tradition of pan-African collaboration and exchange between African and African American theologians, especially within the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) – an organization strongly committed to a liberation-based interpretation of Christianity, among others in the areas of gender and sexuality. Building on this tradition, EATWOT could possibly also play a role in developing a pan-African theology that affirms homoeroticism and promotes sexual diversity and justice. Where EATWOT represents ecumenical, mainly Protestant, traditions of theologizing, TFAM is firmly rooted in Pentecostalism which is important given that Christianity in Africa and worldwide is becoming increasingly Pentecostal-Charismatic in nature. At the crossing point of these various traditions, a new pan-African progressive and affirmative theology could emerge that indeed may be able to influence the future of Christianity.

¹ Work on this article was initiated and largely completed during a 2016 Fellowship at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS), Wallenberg Research Centre at Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch 7600, South Africa.

² E.g. see the case studies on various countries and denominations presented in Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken, eds., *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

³ See Barbara Bompani and Caroline Valois, "Sexualizing Politics: The Anti-Homosexuality Bill, Party-Politics and the New Political Dispensation in Uganda," *Critical African Studies*, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2015.1137479>; Danoye Oguntola-Laguda and Adriaan van Klinken, "Uniting a Divided Nation? Nigerian Muslim and Christian Responses to the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act," in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, ed. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 35–48.

⁴ Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, "Introduction: Christianity and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa," in *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa*, ed. Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.

⁵ Cf. Patrick Awondo, Peter Geschiere, and Graeme Reid, "Homophobic Africa? Toward A More Nuanced View," *African Studies Review* 55, no. 3 (2012): 145–68, doi:10.1017/S0002020600007241.

⁶ Marc Epprecht, *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance* (London: Zed Books, 2013).

⁷ For a recent overview of the intersections of church and LGBT activism in Africa, see Ezra Chitando and Tapiwa Praise Mapuranga, "Unlikely Allies? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) Activists and Church Leaders in Africa," in *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 171–83.

⁸ The case study in this article complements another case study I have conducted, see Adriaan van Klinken, "Christianity, Human Rights and LGBTI Advocacy: The Case of Dette Resource Foundation in Zambia," in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, ed. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 229–42.

⁹ Initial contacts were made during an exploratory fieldwork period in July–August 2015. More in-depth fieldwork was conducted in February–March 2016.

¹⁰ This Bill caused great international controversy, not at least because it initially included a death-penalty clause for 'aggravated homosexuality'. A revised version, from which this clause had been removed, passed through the Ugandan parliament in December 2013 and was signed into law by President Museveni in February 2014. In August 2014, Uganda's Constitutional Court annulled the Act on procedural grounds.

¹¹ Roger Ross Williams (director), *God Loves Uganda*, 2013.

¹² See Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹³ Kappy Kaoma, "Globalizing the Culture Wars. U.S. Conservatives, African Churches & Homophobia," RPRT (Somerville: Political Research Associates, 2009), 3.

¹⁴ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002); Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, 119.

¹⁶ Lydia Boyd, "The Problem with Freedom: Homosexuality and Human Rights in Uganda," *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (2013): 699, doi:10.1353/anq.2013.0034.

¹⁷ Adriaan van Klinken, "Homosexuality, Politics and Pentecostal Nationalism in Zambia," *Studies in World Christianity* 20, no. 3 (2014): 259–81, <http://www.eupublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/swc.2014.0095>; Oguntola-Laguda and van Klinken, "Uniting a Divided Nation? Nigerian Muslim and Christian Responses to the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act."

¹⁸ Didi Herman, *The Antigay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 11.

¹⁹ <http://www.radicallyinclusive.com/the-purpose-of-the-fellowship> (accessed 13 April 2016).

²⁰ Alton B. Pollard, "Prologue", in *The Black Church Studies Reader*, ed. Alton B. Pollard and Carol B. Duncan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), xvii.

²¹ Interview with Bishop Joseph Tolton, Nairobi, 24 February 2016. It is not clear why Tolton refers to Charles Harrison Mason (1866–1961) as 'infamous'. Mason is generally recognized as one of the most prominent African American figures in the early 20th century Pentecostal revival and as founder of the Church of God in Christ, see "Church of God in Christ", in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African*

and *African American Experience* (2nd ed.), ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 77-78.

²² <http://www.radicallyinclusive.com/our-presiding-bishop> (accessed 18 September 2016).

²³ Yvette A. Flunder, *Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press 2005).

²⁴ Interview with Tolton.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ <http://thefellowshipglobal.org/about-us/> (accessed 13 April 2016).

²⁷ <http://thefellowshipglobal.org/the-programs/empowering-progressive-clergy-in-africa/> (accessed 18 September 2016).

²⁸ 2013 documentary film by Roger Ross Williams, exploring the role of US conservative evangelicals in promoting homophobia in Uganda.

²⁹ Interview with Tolton.

³⁰ <http://www.globaljusticeafrica.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/TGF-United-Coalition-of-Affirming-Africans-PDF-for-web-site.pdf> (accessed 13 April 2016).

³¹ <http://thefellowshipglobal.org/the-programs/empowering-progressive-clergy-in-africa/> (accessed 13 April 2016).

³² <http://www.believeoutloud.com/popular-categories/joseph-tolton> (accessed 13 April 2016).

³³ Interview with Tolton.

³⁴ There is indeed a popular narrative about Uganda along these lines, although it is not clear how widespread this narrative is in US evangelical circles. For example, see Simon M. Kakande, *Uganda: The Garden of Eden – Now Discovered* (place unknown: Flashfaith publishers, 2012), and A.B.T. Byaruhanga-Akiiki, “A Holistic Approach to Human Rights in Uganda: Challenges to Theology and Philosophy”, in *Ethics, Human Rights and Development in Africa* (Ugandan Philosophical Studies III), ed. A.T. Dalfovo et al (Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2002), 180 n. 29.

³⁵ <http://www.believeoutloud.com/popular-categories/joseph-tolton> (accessed 13 April 2016).

³⁶ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 85.

³⁷ Interview with Tolton.

³⁸ <http://www.globaljusticeafrica.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/TGF-United-Coalition-of-Affirming-Africans-PDF-for-web-site.pdf> (accessed 14 April 2016).

³⁹ Interview with Tolton.

⁴⁰ <http://www.globaljusticeafrica.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/TGF-United-Coalition-of-Affirming-Africans-PDF-for-web-site.pdf> (accessed 14 April 2016).

⁴¹ Interview with Tolton.

⁴² Interview with Tolton. For a more systematic account on these issues, see for instance Anna M. Agathangelou, “Neoliberal Geopolitical Order and Value,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 15, no. 4 (2013): 453–76, doi:10.1080/14616742.2013.841560.

⁴³ Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas, eds., “African LGBTI Manifesto,” in *Queer African Reader* (Dakar, Nairobi and Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2013), 52–53.

⁴⁴ Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas, “Introduction,” in *Queer African Reader*, ed. Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (Dakar, Nairobi and Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2013), 3.

⁴⁵ Interview with Tolton.

⁴⁶ Interview with Tolton.

⁴⁷ <http://thefellowshipglobal.org/the-programs/empowering-progressive-clergy-in-africa/> (14 April 2016).

⁴⁸ <http://thefellowshipglobal.org/about-us/> (accessed 13 April 2016).

⁴⁹ Interview with Tolton.

⁵⁰ Interview with Tolton.

⁵¹ Interview with Tolton.

⁵² Sermon by EK in CAC, 6 March 2016. At the request of the preacher, I only use their initials.

⁵³ Which in the NIV reads: ‘See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.’

⁵⁴ Which in the NIV reads: ‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.’

⁵⁵ Peter C. Phan, “Roman Catholic Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 221.

⁵⁶ Jerry L. Walls, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13.

⁵⁷ Mary Engel and Susan Thistlethwaite, quoted in Vitor Westhelle, "Liberation Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 319.

⁵⁸ Sermon by EK in CAC, 21 February 2016.

⁵⁹ Sermon by EK in CAC, 6 March 2016.

⁶⁰ Interview with EK, Nairobi, 10 March 2016.

⁶¹ Sermon by EK in CAC, 6 March 2016.

⁶² Sermon by EK in CAC, 6 March 2016.

⁶³ Roland A. Nathan, "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds: African Diaspora Christian Movements and African Unity," in *The Africana World: From Fragmentation to Unity and Renaissance*, ed. Mammo Muchie, Sanya Osha, and Matlotleng P. Matlou (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2012), 281.

⁶⁴ Achille Mbembe, "Africa in the New Century," *The Massachusetts Review* 57, no. 1 (2015): 91–104.

⁶⁵ For an assessment of African theological engagement with homosexuality, see Adriaan van Klinken and Masiwa Ragies Gunda, "Taking up the Cudgels against Gay Rights? Trends and Trajectories in African Christian Theologies on Homosexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 59, no. 1 (2012), 114–38, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2012.638549>. Examples of African women theologians who have begun to address issues of homosexuality in progressive ways are Musa W. Dube from Botswana, Esther Mombo from Kenya, and Mercy Oduyoye from Ghana.

⁶⁶ E.g. Roger A. Sneed, *Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010). See also various essays in the volume *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2004).