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The Future of Christianity and LGBT Rights in Africa – A Conversation with Rev. Dr Bishop Christopher Senyonjo

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Abstract

In this interview, Rev. Dr Bishop Christopher Senyonjo narrates his involvement in LGBT advocacy in Uganda, and reflects on his pastoral and theological motivation and inspiration for this work.

Keywords

Christopher Senyonjo

Uganda

Sexuality

LGBT advocacy

Christianity

Africa

This interview took place in Leeds, on 18 July 2018, the day after Bishop Christopher Senyonjo had been ceremonially awarded an honorary doctorate – the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa *– by the University of Leeds in recognition of his outstanding work as clergyman and LGBT human rights defender in Uganda. Still exhausted from his flight to the UK, and overwhelmed by the festivities (which included a symposium in his honour), I sat down with the 86 years old bishop and had a chance to converse with him about his commitment to defending the rights of LGBT people in his home country, Uganda, and beyond.*

Congratulations, Rev. Senyonjo, on the award of your honorary doctorate. It is such a privilege to recognise your tremendous contribution and to celebrate this occasion with you.

Thank you so much, Dr Adriaan. I am grateful to you and your team for your hard work to make this happen. Let me add that I'm also extremely grateful to my wife Mary, who is also my best friend. It's a pity that she cannot be here, but she is sending her appreciation to the University for rewarding my work with the honorary doctorate. When I left home, she said that she felt that the award was the end of the storm we have faced as a family.

That is wonderful. Please send her our warm regards. Could you narrate the storm that you just mentioned? How did you become involved in the struggle for LGBT human dignity and rights?

It was after my retirement in 1998. As a priest and later as a bishop in the Church of Uganda, I had always understood the mission of the church as ministering to those who are marginalised and oppressed in society. The Good News of Jesus Christ is specifically aimed to them. So when in December 2000, I was asked if I would provide counselling to a group of disenfranchised youth, I did not hesitate. I first met them in January 2001: a group of four young men, sharing with me their experiences of discrimination and hate by their families and the schools they attended. Only after several sessions of counselling, I realised that they were gay. I assured them of God's love, as they were made to feel that even God was not interested in them. They had been told that they were destined to go to hell, but I assured them of the inheritance of eternal life just as anyone else who trusts in the salvation of God through Jesus Christ. Salvation does not depend on your sexuality. Through these four men, I came to meet other members of the LGBT community seeking pastoral support. That's how, as a counsellor, I became gradually involved in the struggle for LGBT human dignity and rights.

Can you tell about the work you have been doing?

On my part, along with a team of young people we have put our heads together to support families and willing institutions to achieve dialogue among individuals with LGBT family members and congregations willing to accept LGBT parishioners.

In 2009 I established the St Paul's Reconciliation and Equality Centre which was later registered as Senyonjo Christian Foundation, with the broad objective to represent my personal calling to support all God's people into worshipping God in their own churches be it Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, as well as in Muslim communities, without prejudice and fear of judgement.

St Paul's aims to broaden pastoral ministry to all people regardless of their identities and backgrounds, we support families through counselling for all people including LGBT. We assure confidentiality as a core principle in our counselling services given the sensitivity of the subject of LGBT in Uganda. Here one should not forget the scare of the Kill the Gay Bill [the Anti-

Homosexuality Bill] in Uganda in recent years.[1] The LGBT community grew to distrust most churches and counselling services due to the government policy of reporting gay people to the service delivery centres.

I have set up a plan to build a centre to support both heterosexual and LGBT people to attain support without prejudice. The challenges are in fear to access services and logistical support, but this has not stopped me and the young people to work towards building a friendly network without establishing a separatist church. Our services at this point include signposting the LGBT community to friendly health services, which is a current challenge given that doctors and nurses are encouraged to report their LGBT patients against their professional oath.

As a Centre, we also want to contribute to educational programmes. It is crucial that we teach our children to support people of all orientations. If people believe that people of different sexual orientations are inhuman and therefore can be discriminated against or even killed, Africa faces painful hate within its people that is facilitated by ignorance and lack of understanding. As Hosea 4:6 notes, "God's people perish because of lack of knowledge". If the people of Africa, on the other hand, realize that LGBT people are not aliens but are part of their own people who just differ from them in one respect, I believe that acceptance will follow.

Furthermore, I strongly believe that the promotion of Christianity and LGBT rights in Africa requires documenting all events and experiences happening today. The coming generations will judge us right or wrong through our writings. In Africa one of our weaknesses lies in poor record keeping as a result of which no trace of evidence is left to build on. I have written a small book to explain some of these concepts and explained my journey in my autobiography entitled *In Defense of all God's Children*.[2] I continue to write and hope to publish more of my work God willing.

Your own country, Uganda, with its infamous Anti-Homosexuality Act (2013), has become a symbol of what is often referred to as "African homophobia". How do you explain the anti-gay sensitivities in Uganda and the continent more generally?

Africa consists of 54 recognised states and 2 other states whose independence is disputed (Somaliland and Western Sahara). It is the second largest continent in the world both by land and population. It is impossible to generalise about such a vast continent, so the talk about "African homophobia" is not very helpful.

[1] The Anti-Homosexuality Bill was proposed in October 2009 by Ugandan MP David Bahati (as a private member's bill). It was dubbed the 'Kill the Gays Bill' by Western media and by pro-gay rights advocates, because it included a death penalty clause for 'aggravated homosexuality'. The latter clause had been removed from the version of the Bill that on 20 December 2013 was passed by Parliament, and that on 24 February 2014 was signed into law by President Museveni. On 1 August 2014, the Constitutional Court of Uganda ruled the act as invalid because it was not passed with the required quorum.

[2] Christopher Senyonjo, *In Defense of All God's Children: The Life and Ministry of Bishop Christopher Senyonjo*, New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2016.

In terms of religion, over the past century or so, Africa has developed from having most followers of indigenous, traditional religions, to being predominantly a continent of Christians and Muslims. Uganda where I come from is a religiously diverse country in which Christians are the majority, but with a sizeable Muslim minority. The LGBT community was known but seen as culturally unacceptable and thus families are still wary of being found to have family members who are LGBT.

African cultures tend to be reserved on discussing sexuality and issues related to sex. The subject of LGBT has developed into a platform to discuss human sexuality in Africa although from a negative perspective at this time. There is an expressed fear that LGBT identities have been imported from Western communities to distort families and reduce African populations. Politicians use the topic for their own political purposes, mobilising voters behind an agenda of "resisting Western pressure" and "defending African cultural values", which speaks to many people's postcolonial sensitivities.

What is your understanding of human sexuality?

In the past, the emphasis in the Christian tradition was on sexuality for procreation, and some churches keep emphasising this as the key purpose. This notion is of course supported by the Bible, the biblical command to be fruitful and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28). Yet as my understanding evolved, I came to appreciate that there's more to human sexuality.

In Genesis 2:28, the purpose of human sexuality is established as companionship. In the words of the Bible "it was not good for man to be alone". Conservative Christians argue that this is about a "suitable", that is, heterosexual, companion. Yet same-sex loving people should not be forced to be alone due to what others perceive to be unsuitable partnership. Indeed, God's instruction of companionship goes beyond procreation. Christianity in my opinion needs to advocate for love and companionship of all people to enable peace and coexistence in the family and the world.

Another purpose of human sexuality is the thrill and pleasure accrued from the union of two lovers. Two consenting adults should not be limited on what they do for sexual pleasure. The same is true among heterosexual relationships. Like all aspects of life, sex should be for enjoyment, just like with food, work, and exercise to mention but a few.

I also have come to realise that an integrated personality allows for human wholeness and creativity. Thus promoting the integration of sexuality with the human soul will lead to creativity and human flourishing. The people who get stigmatized and marginalized because of their sexual orientation usually feel like outcasts. Such feelings have led to fear, anxiety, indecision and even depression. Marginalized people have not been able to achieve their God given potential as they try to fit themselves in a community that chooses to exclude them from all activities of life regardless of their talents and love of God.

Some LGBT people I know have expressed their hate for God as they see hate and discrimination by religious leaders who are portrayed in society as the supposed bearers of good

counsel. Yet many other individuals I met were able to distinguish a loving God from some of his personnel that fails to reflect his character.

What is the key theological insight that you have gained through your advocacy for LGBT human rights, and your work with LGBT people?

The key theological insight that I have gained is that God's revelation to the church is received if one is open to truth that is not limited by time or space, as indicated in John 8:32 and John 16:12-13. The truth is the belief in the universal God of compassion and love. That truth has set me free as it allowed me to embrace people who are marginalised because of their sexuality, as I could see they are made in God's image, and are loved by God. To put it simply, I have come to understand that God's love is for all people (1 John 4:7-8).

Who or what inspires your hope for the future?

I receive inspiration from many different people fighting for justice, promoting God's inclusive love, and contributing to the flourishing of humankind. I think of Dr Martin Luther King who in the 60's dared to express his thoughts in a society where institutions were tied to discrimination; I think of Nelson Mandela who in 1994 felt the way forward post-apartheid lay in forgiveness and reconciliation; I think of the lives of great LGBT people who have not been able to fulfil their dreams in Africa such as my friend David Kato who was brutally murdered; I think of the great brains of various LGBT who have enabled the world to evolve in new technologies and innovation because they overcame prejudice and excelled in their areas of specialty such as Sir Elton John, Tim Cook, to mention but a few.

Also, I should mention my wife, Mary. Although not directly involved in my work, she has been a constant source of strength and support through prayer, encouragement and acceptance of me as a person regardless of my personal shortcomings.

The future of Christianity and LGBT rights in Africa is unfortunately not a one-day thriller. Just like the American civil rights struggle, the journey for sexual rights in Africa is one of faith, strong conviction, tears and determination. It is for all, not just for an isolated LGBT community. It will need interdependence, advocacy, and family support. Unfortunately, if not handled well it will continue to divide the church and many families especially as most people of LGBT orientation live in fear of being found out. As the Bible says in John 8:32, "Know the truth and the truth will set you free". I know that even in the so-called developed countries the church still faces challenges. As is the case here, some will choose to understand with more education, yet we are not naïve in thinking that everyone will open their ears to understand others who are not like them.

How do you envision the future of Christianity and LGBT rights in Africa?

I envisage a future of Christianity in Africa that takes truth more seriously: with a faith that seeks understanding (John 8:32); a Christianity that is open to the ongoing revelation of the Holy Spirit (John 16:12). Christianity needs to internalize the scriptural reality that God is a creator and he continues to create to this moment (John 5:17).

The Anglican Church in Southern Africa has already opened doors to allow LGBT parishioners. Churches with links to the Episcopal Church of America and a few other Anglican communities across the African continent have also encouraged LGBT parishioners to worship with them, and so have churches in other denominations. The future of LGBT Christianity in my opinion does not lie in separation but continuing dialogue, engagement and inclusion in existing churches.

Furthermore I see the future of Christianity and LGBT rights in Africa in preaching the Gospel of love, or with a New Testament word: *agape*. This unfailing, non-discriminatory love should continuously be preached in churches alongside the message of LGBT rights.

Thank you so much, Bishop, for this conversation. I really appreciate your time and you sharing your journey and the wisdom you have gained through all the years of ministry.

You are most welcome, it has been a pleasure. May God bless you in your work here at the university.