Journeys of Faith tells the stories of members of the LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex) community and their personal journeys in reconciling their religious or spiritual beliefs with their sexuality. The stories come from those in leadership positions within various religious organisations, ordinary people navigating their faith and identity, as well as religious institutions and organisations that have provided a safe haven for LGBTI members to practise and negotiate their faith. These are stories of a highly personal nature and therefore, as much as possible, are told through the words of those involved.

Although LGBTI rights are protected by South Africa’s constitution, many religious leaders declare homosexual relationships to be sinful and unnatural. In Journeys of Faith those that share their stories have engaged with these contradictions and judgements and tried to find a place where they are at peace with their faith, sexual orientation and gender identity. In many cases, this has resulted in breaking with some of the more conservative leaders of their faith and coming to an interpretation and understanding of their religion and its dominant texts that accommodates their LGBTI identity. For most, this is a quest to reconcile an all-loving and accepting God with the religious-backed judgements that are often used against them by their elders and religious leaders.

“Opposing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is a matter of justice. It is also a matter of love. Every human being is precious. We are all – all of us – part of God’s family. We all must be allowed to love each other with honour. Yet all over the world, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are persecuted. We treat them as pariahs and push them outside our communities. We make them doubt that they too are children of God. This must be nearly the ultimate blasphemy. We blame them for what they are.” Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, *God is Not a Christian*, 2011
Navan grew up in a Hindu household in Johannesburg, but now identifies as a ‘Hindu atheist’. For Navan, the largely unspoken judgment around homosexuality has come from the Indian cultural community, rather than directly from Hinduism itself.

He works as an academic and lives with his Christian partner of four years. Although his immediate family and friends are accepting of this, extended family tend to talk around the issue of his sexuality, or ignore it completely. The overwhelming feeling for Navan is a silence from the Hindu community on LGBTI issues.

“As a teenager dealing with my sexuality, I started rationalising that I don’t believe in God, mainly because I don’t think that any kind of higher power would put anyone through that kind of internal struggle.”

“There is a silent but deadly monster of conservatism in the Hindu/Indian community ... There’s no one who is visibly willing to talk about things like this.”

“If there is a God, and I’m meant to believe, I always thought that something would happen that would make me believe. So up until that point ...”
Thabisile was thrown into a mothering role as a teenager after the death of her parents left her to look after her six brothers. She trained as a teacher and worked with special needs children. After being medically boarded at age 40, she began the Sithabile Child and Youth Care Centre. She served as the vice-president of the South African Council of Churches (SACC).

Still active within the SACC, Thabisile is a coordinator of the Women’s Ecumenical Conference in Gauteng, Together with Ekurhuleni church women, she started a women’s group that works to educate and support parents of LGBTI children. They help parents to accept the sexual orientation of their children, and also support the families of victims of hate crimes by attending court cases. This group is made up of mothers of both LGBTI and straight children, among them Mally Simelane, mother of Banyana Banyana midfielder Eudy Simelane, who was a victim of ‘corrective’ rape and murder in 2008. It was such acts of violence that brought the group of women together.

“Our slogan is ‘My child is my child, irrespective of sexual orientation’.”

“We want to assure them that they are our children. The abuse and rejection that they experience comes from their own families, their own mothers. That’s where church women come in, helping the mothers to understand.”

“We are training women and religious leaders in Gauteng in order to empower them so that they understand this issue. Not all of them want the training though ...”

Members of the SACC Women’s Group show their support outside the Venterdorp Magistrate Court at the case of Disebo Gift Mekau on 29 January 2015.

A teacher at heart, a mother to all

THABISILE MSEZANE
DIRECTOR OF SITHABILE CHILD AND YOUTH CARE CENTRE
LEADER OF THE SACC WOMEN’S GROUP
Nazmah is transgender. She grew up in a Muslim family on the Cape Flats, a period of her life she describes as mostly happy years, largely due to her positive outlook. When Nazmah was a teenager her mother took her to a doctor who told her: “Your son is a female trapped in a male’s body”. This resonated with young Nazmah who now finally had the words to describe how she had always felt. At this time she began experimenting with women’s clothing and has been living as a woman since the age of 20.

Over time Nazmah’s immediate family have come to be largely supportive, although she still experiences hostility from some members of her Muslim community. Despite no longer being actively religious, Nazmah maintains a personal relationship with God. She works as a stylist in Cape Town.

“It was never about being attracted to males, it was more about just being a girl.”

“I’m not religious but I try to live within the boundaries of my religion, especially when dressing as a female and being a Muslim lady.”

“My sexuality doesn’t determine my religion. In any religion, when you pray to God it’s not about your physical body, it’s about being in contact with God, with your mind and your soul.”

“I’m very proud of who I am and how far I have come in spite of what I’ve been through.”
Sally Gross was born intersex, with a sexual anatomy that didn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. Born to Jewish parents, she was raised as a boy (Selwyn) who later converted to Catholicism and was ordained as a Dominican friar. During this time Gross lived with the inner conflict that she identified as female and eventually underwent medical tests confirming her intersex status and changed her name to Sally. A lengthy and painful battle with the Catholic Church followed. As a woman, Gross could no longer serve as a priest. Fundamentally, the Church rejected all avenues she proposed for her continued involvement. Despite engaging with other religions, nearing her death, Gross professed to have lost all faith and considered herself an atheist.

“Religion looms large in my life-narrative. My Christian commitment and faith died slowly and painfully.”

“In and through all of this, I’m Jewish. This is cultural rather than religious.”

“At some level I think I’ll always see myself as a priest and religious. I hanker for religious life and I hanker for the ministry.”

“I was ostracised, stripped of status and even identity, and forbidden to exercise my vocation.”

“Since 2000, I’ve drafted amendments bearing on intersex and these have been lobbied into law.”

SALLY GROSS
FORMER DOMINICAN FRIAR, INTERSEX ACTIVIST [1953 - 2014]
Mshengu Tshabalala serves both as the Archbishop of the Zionist church he established in 1984, Believers in Christ, and the Executive President of the Zulu-speaking Zionist sector, Ikhaya leZayoni (Home of the Zion).

Due to his belief that all humans are created equal and should be accepted in his church, Mshengu is undergoing a process of trying to understand sexual orientation and gender identity in its full complexity. Some LGBTI members of his congregation have ‘come out’ to him and he has started working with their families, a process Mshengu believes cannot be rushed.

“There are members who have opened up to me. They can see that I at least accommodate and try to understand them.”

“LGBTI people need to be seen participating in the church, like all other church members.”

“The preaching of amaZayoni is negative towards gays and lesbians, because of their background and how they were taught. This mindset, it is so difficult to ‘unteach’.”
From an early age German-born Katrin was drawn to eastern mysticism and practice, and was encouraged by her parents to be creative and explore life. She experienced “a home coming” when she fell in love with a woman for the first time after dating men and being “unconscious” of her sexual orientation. Since then she has identified as a lesbian. Katrin’s spiritual journey unfolded through meditation and yoga. After travelling to India, she moved into a yoga centre in Cape Town where she lived and worked for many years.

Katrin now lives on a communal smallholding in the Underberg community at the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains, a setting that complements Katrin’s minimalist and self-sufficient lifestyle. Her physiotherapy work is with disabled children. Aligned to Buddhist teachings and practices, she uses meditation as a reminder to remain mindful of and engaged with life.

“The process of making conscious and integrating the realisation that I was a lesbian happened on a number of levels, over many years.”

“The acknowledgement of and respect for the diversity of all living beings is integral to Buddhist teachings.”

“The emphasis in Buddhist teaching is not on sexual orientation – it is really about our experience as human beings.”
Zean Nkunzi Nkabinde was born in Meadowlands Soweto, as a female-bodied twin. His brother came first but was still-born. His parents named him Zandile Beauty and he was raised as a girl. For much of his adult life, Zean lived as a lesbian female.

In *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, Zean gives an autobiographical account of this balancing of many identities: sangoma, umZulu, lesbian and human rights activist.

Having always felt like a man inside, four years ago Zean consulted with his ancestors and was given permission to transition from a woman to a man. He has begun the process and now calls himself Zean. He plans to write a sequel to his book which he wants to call *Living a life of a man in me*.

“When I think about my life I realise that I felt the presence of my ancestors at a young age. They were always with me.”

“This woman gave me an opportunity to find out about my sexuality and I couldn’t turn it down. I was 13 and she was 30 when our affair started. It went on for five years.”

“My daughter is seven years old now. She has always called me Baba. So I wanted to look like the man she was calling. I wanted for my child to see that man in me. I am happy about that.”
The Reverend Rowan Smith became South Africa’s first openly gay Anglican Dean when he came out to his congregation after being appointed as the Dean of St. George’s Cathedral in Cape Town in 1998. He held this position until his retirement in 2010. Before coming out publicly, Rowan spoke privately to then Archbishop Tutu, who responded: “I surmised”.

During his tenure, sometimes controversially, Rowan brought LGBTI issues to light within the church, making St George’s a place of welcome for all. During his time as Dean, despite being publically gay, Rowan refrained from having a partner and remained celibate, a position that he admits brought with it great loneliness.

“In the ’70s I started meeting people in Cape Town who were gay and formed close friendships with them. And then I began to explore. But not within the church; it was more a parallel lifestyle.”

“The Anglican Church will say they do not discriminate because gay and lesbian people can be ordained. But they can’t be in a relationship ... they must remain celibate.”

“The church needs to challenge its people. It’s sad that the church seems to have lost its prophetic voice.”

ROWAN SMITH

RETIRE D DEAN OF ST GEORGE’S CATHEDRAL, CAPE TOWN

The St George’s Siyahamba Labyrinth is used as a meditation tool by all, regardless of religious persuasion.

Walking the labyrinth, reflecting on life
Raised in a charismatic church, Ecclesia later joined the Methodist Church, where she trained and was ordained as a minister. Prior to this she had spent time with the Rhema Church, where she was involved with a support group for ‘recovering’ LGBTI people, but realised that her sexuality was not something that needed ‘fixing’.

In December 2009 she announced to her Windsor Park and Brackenfell congregations that she was marrying her female partner. This led to her suspension and later dismissal as a Methodist minister, same-sex marriage being a divisive issue within the Methodist Church.

Ecclesia has since been fighting to overturn this dismissal and her case is scheduled to be heard by the Constitutional Court. Ecclesia now works for the Faith-based NGO, Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), in Cape Town.

“When I was younger I was unable to differentiate between God and the church. But now I’m very clear: the church is not God.”

“When I was exploring my call to the ministry, focusing on my sexual orientation was not the priority. It was only at seminary that I had to face who I am.”

“I thought that the church would have more grace with its clergy and be more serious about journeying with gay members. But the way they dealt with me was quick and punitive.”

“It makes much more sense for me to be involved directly with transformation through IAM, but I certainly desire to return to the church, fully accepted as a minister.”

ECCLESIA DE LANGE
FORMER METHODIST MINISTER AND PROGRAMME MANAGER AT INCLUSIVE AND AFFIRMING MINISTRIES (IAM)

Living in truth and freedom
This exhibition is a result of the collaboration between Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) and the Apartheid Museum, and was made possible by generous funding from the Aids Foundation of South Africa (AFSA).

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Makhosazana Xaba and Linda Chernis

Research, interviews and text
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Editing
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(Apartheid Museum)

Design
Megan Visagé
“I started having a burning need to work for God … It felt good to preach and bring hope to those who have lost hope. I stopped worrying about my sexuality; I had found a way to somehow make the two work together, and I was at peace.”

“When my church found out about my sexuality, I was hounded in such a way that I thought God did not exist … They said it was an abomination, evil.”

“I remember when I was ordained into the HUMCC my grandmother said: ‘I accept you. You cannot be anything else. Just be yourself’.”

“The HUMCC was established in 1994 by Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso, with its first home in rented rooms above The Skyline bar in Hillbrow. For 18 years it served as a spiritual home to those seeking guidance in reconciling their sexual identity with their relationships with God. After Thandekiso’s death in 1997, leadership of the church was taken over by Reverend Nokuthula Dhladhla and Reverend Paul Mokgethi-Heath.

“For me Church is not about sexuality, it’s about everybody coming together and worshiping God and feeling at home.” Reverend Mokgethi-Heath

“When I first went to the HUMCC I was overwhelmed, meeting a gay priest and being around so many gay people … But then I heard Reverend Thandekiso preach about how God made us all unique and special.”

Reverend Dhladhla

“Choosing loving families, cultivating visionary leaders...”
“My work with migrants led me to hear about the struggles of LGBTI people in their community – first being rejected at home and then by the refugee community in South Africa.”

“There was a certain amount of opposition and some people were uncomfortable. But in time most people got used to the idea.”

“LGBTI is a very contentious and divisive issue in the Catholic Church. You put yourself on the line by speaking out about certain issues. For the most part it’s not addressed. There’s just silence around it.”

Tino*, originally from Zimbabwe, came to Johannesburg in 2010. He doesn’t have a full-time job and struggles to make ends meet, but has found a spiritual refuge at Holy Trinity. Tino first joined the LGBTI group that meets at Holy Trinity and has since adopted Catholicism in favour of the Pentecostal tradition in which he grew up.

“Tino* is not his real name.

“...It was just a feeling inside me, waiting to come out. But with the situation back home, it was difficult; there was no one to talk to about these things.”

“I grew up in a religious family and attended a Pentecostal church which is totally against homosexuality – they saw it as the work of the devil.”

“I don’t have any problem serving God because of my sexuality. He created me this way. I’m His son and I serve Him.”

“The Holy Trinity group showed me that I could connect the Bible, my sexuality and my relationship with God.”

Father Russell Pollitt is the current Director of the Jesuit Institute of South Africa and served as the parish priest for seven years at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. During this time, an LGBTI support group was established at Holy Trinity. Members were actively welcomed into the life of the church and the group continues to meet fortnightly.

Father RussellPollitt blessing a leader of the LGBTI group at a prayer service before the 2012 Pride March.

Providing spirituality for the marginalised
“When I reached puberty, my first attraction was to a boy in my class. At that point, I knew I was in trouble. My grandfather was an imam too and used to preach about those people that will go to hell.”

“Is it good Muslim practice to disregard someone who is different from the mainstream simply because they do not fit in with our interpretation of Islam?”

“They always say Islam is against homosexuality and that is how they silence you. Muslims are still suffering between loyalty to their faith and loyalty to their children who are gay.”

Muhsin Hendricks grew up in a traditional Muslim family, the grandson of an imam. After pursuing Islamic studies in Pakistan, he married and got a part-time teaching job while also serving as an assistant imam.

At 29 Muhsin got divorced and came out as openly gay. He was asked to leave the mosque where he worked and worshipped, and continued to have a tense relationship with the local Muslim community.

Muhsin’s own struggles with his sexuality and religion made him realise there must be others going through similar experiences, and led him to establish The Inner Circle (TIC).

The Inner Circle (TIC) is a Cape Town-based support organisation for LGBTI Muslims, with beginnings as far back as 1996.

Starting out as an informal study circle in Muhsin’s house, TIC has since grown into a public service provider with various programmes aimed at reconciling faith and sexuality amongst queer Muslims. TIC members range in age from 16 to 70, falling across the LGBTI spectrum.

Muhsin is also certified as a marriage officer allowing him to perform traditional Muslim weddings as well as Civil Unions.

“TIC is a Human Rights Organisation working within an Islamic framework to give psycho-spiritual and social support to Muslims who are marginalised based on sexual orientation and gender identity.”

“The Quran is a book for all times and it should be studied in its context in order for it to become relevant to our times. We believe in interpreting the Quran in a way that brings healing and mercy to people rather than guilt and shame.”

“We do not believe that the Quran is discriminatory or that it condemns sexual diversity, but rather that the Quran embraces sexual diversity and instructs its adherents to act sexually within a framework of faithfulness, justice, self-restraint and God consciousness.”
I started feeling I didn’t have a place in the Orthodox Jewish community because of my sexuality and other reasons. It’s quite difficult to be openly gay and remain an Orthodox Jew in the full sense.

One of the hardest things in my life was telling my parents I was gay, but we were able to work through it, to the point of complete acceptance.

I didn’t want to choose between being Jewish and being gay; they’re both central parts of my life.

“My family was very involved in the Beit Emanuel synagogue when we were growing up. We were encouraged to think critically about our society, and to work out what we could do to contribute to change.”

“At Beit Emanuel women participated equally in all aspects of religious life. I never internalised the idea that women’s role should be limited or subordinate to men.”

“Temple Israel is so inspiring. It has continuously held services since 1936. It currently serves a small and marginal community and is completely open-hearted, tolerant and generous.”

David worships primarily at Beit Emanuel in Parktown, Johannesburg. Growing up in a Modern Orthodox Jewish household, he struggled to come to terms with his sexuality, religion and culture. He is the founder of the LGBTI group Jewish OUTlook, serves as the international chair of Limmud – an organisation dedicated to Jewish learning – and participated in the successful bid to have same-sex unions legalised in South Africa.

David Bilchitz
Professor of Constitutional Law and Lay Religious Leader

Lael worships at both Temple Israel in Hillbrow and Beit Emanuel in Parktown. She grew up in a liberal, middle-class Jewish family in Johannesburg. She lives with her wife and two adopted daughters.

As Temple Israel has no full-time rabbi, services are run by members and volunteers. Lael conducts services once a month on a Saturday morning and on Jewish festivals and holy days.

Lael Bethlehem
Urban and Economic Development Practitioner

The Progressive Jewish community in South Africa welcomes LGBTI people, and Progressive rabbis conduct same-sex marriage ceremonies.

The first Progressive synagogue in South Africa, Temple Israel in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, opened its doors in 1936. Soon after, the congregation established a school in Alexandra township and continued to support it throughout the apartheid years.

Progressive or Reform Judaism is a liberal branch of Judaism that breaks with the more traditional and rigid teachings of Orthodox Judaism. Principles of the Progressive movement include informed choice, gender equality, social justice and an acceptance that Judaism will continue to evolve and change.

The Progressive or Reform Judaism movement was founded in America in the 19th century, and later spread to other parts of the world. It is characterised by its emphasis on personal choice and individual expression, and its willingness to adapt to new social and cultural realities.

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“I came from Mandeni where it was a shame to be a lesbian or to have same-sex attractions because it was considered abnormal. I did not disclose early; I kept quiet until I was exhausted with hiding.”

“I am a lesbian, I am born again, I am a child of God and I am going to preach the gospel.”

“My job is to tell people like me that we are created in His image and we are unique. We can’t just focus on queerness because within that queerness lies godliness.”

“As the mother of the church, Magatsheni has to find time first for her church duties: to help the congregation, read scriptures and spend solid time with God while I am working.”

After dating for many years, Pastor Zungu and her partner Magatsheni married in 2012. Pastor Zungu was a teacher by profession while Magatsheni was a fashion and interior designer.

Both Zungu and Magatsheni were raised in charismatic churches strongly opposed to same-sex relationships. Zungu served as a child preacher but eventually left the charismatic churches due to their homophobia. After trying an LGBTI-friendly church, Zungu was disappointed by the ‘un-Christian’ lifestyles of those that attended, eventually leading her to start her own church in 2011.

The couple live with their adopted daughter in Chesterville, KwaZulu-Natal, and work within their congregation and the broader community supporting those seeking to reconcile their faith and their sexual orientation.

“I grew up naïve, then I met someone like me in my 20s. She was butch and I am fem. She approached me and I was very scared; her life seemed demonic.”

“I struggled to come out at home. After I told my mother she prayed for three months and went on a fast. I could tell she was hurting. Now my mother is a recruiter – she sees a queer person anywhere and tells them about us, that she has children like them who have a church.”

“My son attends church with us. He loves us and understands queerness.”

“The principal at Zungu’s school is very supportive. When there is an emergency, they allow her to leave so she can go and do God’s work.”

Together in marriage, together in church.