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Edited by

Michael Wilkinson
Peter Althouse



BRILL

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Contents

Acknowledgements	IX
List of Contributors	X

Introduction: Social Theory, Religion and the Body	1
<i>Michael Wilkinson and Peter Althouse</i>	

PART 1

Ritual, Emotion, and Experience

1 Pentecostalism, the Body, and Embodiment	17
<i>Michael Wilkinson</i>	
2 Emotional Regimes in the Embodiment of Charismatic Prayer	36
<i>Peter Althouse</i>	
3 Spiritual Property Rights to Bodily Practices: Pentecostal Views of Yoga and Meditation as Inviting Demonization	55
<i>Candy Gunther Brown</i>	
4 Worship Rituals, Discipline, and Pentecostal-Charismatic “Techniques du Corps” in the American Midwest	77
<i>Travis Warren Cooper</i>	
5 Embodied Gospel: The Materiality of Pentecostal Theology	102
<i>Wolfgang Vondey</i>	
6 Pentecostal Revivalism and the Body	120
<i>Stephen Hunt</i>	

PART 2

Globalization, Migration, and Meaning

7 Before Habitus: Embodied Indeterminacy in Black Atlantic Pentecostalism	141
<i>Devaka Premawardhana</i>	

- 8 **Emotions and Spiritual Knowledge: Navigating (In)Stabilities in Migrant Initiated Churches** 159
Rafael Cazarin
- 9 **Pentecostal Rituals, Human Wellbeing, and the Reshaping of African Migrants at Word Communication Ministries, Belgium** 177
Joseph Bosco Bangura
- 10 **Spiritual Embodiment in Yoruba Pentecostalism in Southwestern Nigeria** 196
Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale and Olufikayo Kunle Oyelade

PART 3

Gender, Race, and Class

- 11 **A Silence Like Thunder: Pastoral and Theological Responses of Australian Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches to LGBTQ Individuals** 217
Mark Jennings
- 12 **Maintaining Sexual Purity: Ritualized, Embodied, and Spatial Strategies among Neo-Charismatics in Stockholm** 239
Jessica Moberg
- 13 **Body Limited: Belief and (Trans)Formations of the Body in a Pentecostal Roma Community** 256
Raluca Bianca Roman
- 14 **A Hegemonic Masculinity: Ethos and Consumption in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Brazil** 274
Soraya Barreto Januário
- 15 **Women and Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe: Negotiating Leadership in the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God 'Forward in Faith' (ZAOGA FIF) Ministry, Harare** 291
Sandra Bhatasara, Rumbidzai Shamuyedova, Naume Zorodzai Choguya and Manase Kudzai Chiweshe

- 16** **Contra-Deprivation: A Bourdieusian Analysis of the Production of Glossolalia as a Competitive Form of Religious Capital** 307
Erica M. Ramirez
- Index** 331

A Silence Like Thunder: Pastoral and Theological Responses of Australian Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches to LGBTQ Individuals

Mark Jennings

I used to always feel as though the church was always talking about the “invisible children” around the world, when all the while there was a whole community of invisible children sitting amongst the congregation. Nothing was ever relevant to us—relationships seminars, Valentine’s Day, women’s conferences, men’s conferences, the entire community was set up to be heterocentric, so when you come out you have no choice but to leave because there really is no self-respect in staying inside a community that holds up a banner saying “welcome home” while simultaneously rejecting your very presence by silence. The silence was like thunder to me. (JY, personal communication with the author)



Individuals and communities who self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning—usually referred to by the acronym LGBTQ—are significantly, if often covertly, present in Australian Christian congregations. Census data from 2011 indicates that Christianity (40 percent) was the second highest religious affiliation of same-sex couple partners in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012a).¹ Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity (hereafter PCC) is a fast-growing global phenomenon. Australia’s largest PCC

¹ The ABS document does not go into detail about denomination. The census question in 2011 had the following options: Catholic; Anglican; Uniting Church; Presbyterian; Buddhism; Greek Orthodox; Islam; Baptist; Lutheran; No religion. There was also the “other” option, for those whose religious affiliation differed from the prescribed choices (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012b).

denomination, the Australian Christian Churches, boasts over 280,000 followers in 1,100 member churches (ACC 2014).

Based on these numbers, it is not surprising that some LGBTQ people also identify as PCC in Australia. Former PCC pastor and self-described “gay ambassador” Anthony Venn-Brown (2014) outlines a first-person perspective on the union of these two disparate worlds, including the PCC spiritual experiences and phenomena many LGBTQ people participate in:

LGBT people from Pentecostal and Charismatic churches have been involved in a form of Christianity that is extremely experiential. We have probably sensed the presence of God, seen miracles and healings, enjoyed vibrant worship, spoken in tongues, believed that the Bible is the inspired inerrant Word of God, had prayers answered and been totally committed to Jesus Christ and the church. It has been the foundation not only to our lives but also to our social network ... Our identity above everything else has been that we are Christian.

Faced with the moral conservatism of many PCC congregations, LGBTQ members may live closeted lives, fearing the rejection of their communities if the truth were known. At times, only their pastors or pastoral carers are aware of their personal journeys with sexuality.² Those who remain in PCC congregations negotiate unique challenges, and require sensitive and compassionate pastoral care from church leaders. Recent research strongly suggests that LGBTQ people who continue to identify as Christian, experience greater “homonegativity”—negative and shame-filled feelings about their own sexuality—than non-religious or even formerly Christian LGBTQ people (Sowe, Brown, and Taylor 2014).

Based on a series of in-depth interviews, this chapter explores the pastoral, theological, and cultural implications of one of the issues LGBTQ people face in PCC churches—full inclusion in the life of the congregation, including the possibility of volunteering and ministry. Based on a conservative hermeneutic approach to the Bible, some of the PCC pastors interviewed have felt compelled to take a position described in Stanley Grenz’s book of the same title as “welcoming, but not affirming” (Grenz 1998). The result of pastors adopting this position is that, while LGBTQ people are welcome to attend, their sexuality cannot be “affirmed” by granting them the authority to participate as volunteers. Pastor informants report that LGBTQ people regard this as a barrier to

² Please note that throughout this chapter, I have tended to eschew the gender specific pronouns in favor of the non-gendered “they” or “their” even when referring to singular entities.

acceptance and inclusion, and feel understandably rejected by this position. Some LGBTQ Christians who come out in non-affirming churches make the wrenching decision to leave their congregations as a result.

Importantly, PCC pastors who have witnessed what they hold to be undeniable spiritual experiences in LGBTQ people under their care are confronted with a theological challenge. For these PCC pastors, such experiences, believed to have their source in God's Holy Spirit, are the primary empowerment and authorization for PCC ministry.

Several pastors interviewed have taken pains to help their congregations, comprised of both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ members, to understand the complex theological, cultural, and pastoral issues at stake, while others have regarded it as too controversial to address publicly. Some of the pastor informants demonstrated a willingness to pastorally assist LGBTQ people in their congregations to work through their experiences of negativity, guilt, and fear, finding that drawing a line before full inclusion made this important work much more difficult. Several of those interviewed expressed the view that current exclusive positions, based in a conservative biblical hermeneutic, are untenable, unjust, and would be abandoned by future generations of leaders and churches.

I conclude this chapter with a reflection on the progressive origins of Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century. At its beginnings, the movement enabled participation and ministry by those at the margins—the poor, women, and African Americans. This progressive and inclusive approach would perhaps serve as a model for Australian PCC engagement with the marginalized LGBTQ people, who currently may experience the church's refusal to acknowledge them as—in JY's words—a silence like thunder.

Methodological Background to the Research

This chapter emerged from the "Two Different Worlds" project, initiated by the author in 2015 in order to find out more about the experiences of LGBTIQ³ people who attend or have attended PCC churches in Australia. This research was funded by grants from the Australian Research Theological Foundation Inc. (ARTFinc), and Murdoch University. From the commencement of the research, I determined that it was important to also survey PCC pastors who have

3 The "I" in the acronym stands for "Intersex." The reason I have focused on LGBTQ in this paper is, at the time of writing, I have been unable to interview any Intersex PCCs, or pastors who have knowingly ministered to Intersex people.

worked with LGBTIQ people in their congregations, and were willing to talk to me. At the time of writing, I have completed eleven in-depth interviews with PCC pastors from across Australia, with more planned. I have also completed fifteen in-depth interviews with LGBTIQ individuals who attend—or formerly attended—PCC congregations, again with more planned.⁴

With regards to sampling, the nature of the project made probability sampling inappropriate—we are not dealing with a universal phenomenon, but a fairly narrow one, even if it is fair to say that it is difficult to know how many people make up the demographic. The easiest form of sampling was a combination of convenience sampling—drawing on my own networks in the PCC community—and snowball sampling, whereby I relied on my informants to recommend other people who could either contact me, or who I could get in touch with. I also advertised the project via the Murdoch University website, and also sought permission to advertise via the website Freedom2B, an online community forum for LGBTIQ Christians (freedom2b 2016). By far the largest response has been from participants who were encouraged by peers to get in touch with me. As with nearly all research that passes through university ethics committees, anonymity and de-identification is mandated, and in this case, is particularly important. All interviews were anonymized, and participants were assigned a two-letter coded abbreviation for the purposes of this research.

I designed two sets of indicative interview questions, one for LGBTIQ participants and one for PCC pastors. The interview questions for PCC pastors began with a general “grand tour” question, and moved toward more specific questions about their experiences of working with LGBTIQ church members, and the theological and pastoral challenges of, and resources for, working with this cohort. I also included a number of questions seeking the definitions of terms, in order to explore the pastors’ knowledge of contemporary language, categories, and thinking around gender, sexuality, and LGBTIQ itself. Also included were some scenario questions, with a set of scaled responses that could be selected. As with any ethnographic interviewing, the questions were purposefully indicative, meaning that I had the flexibility to drop questions when I deemed them not useful, or to expand and probe by asking questions not in the list. I also made sure to give participants the opportunity to ask me any questions they might have about my own background, the nature of the

4 Interviews will continue until “data saturation”—namely the point at which no new themes or unfamiliar narratives are emerging from interviews—is reached. My initial proposal was to complete twenty in-depth interviews with PCC pastors, and thirty to fifty with LGBTIQ participants.

research, and my goals. The indicative questions for PCC pastors are included in Tables 11.1 and 11.2.

TABLE 11.1 *Non-scaled questions for pastor informants*

-
1. How did you come to be involved with ministry or leadership in a Pentecostal-Charismatic church?
 2. What do you most value about Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and spirituality?
 3. What, if anything, would you like to change in regard to Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and spirituality?
 4. Can you share your understanding of the meaning and/or significance of the following terms:
Gender; Lesbian; Gay; Bisexual; Transgender; Intersex; Straight; Cisgender; Queer
 5. Are you aware of anyone who is part of your congregation or under your pastoral care who identifies (whether covertly or overtly) as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Intersex (LGBTI)? If so, can you tell me more about how learning this unfolded?
 6. If the answer to question 5 was “yes,” what (if any) are the unique pastoral challenges involved in ministering to and supporting LGBTI people? What are the unique theological challenges?
 7. Do you believe that LGBTI people would regard the church you minister in to be safe and inclusive? If so, how so?
 8. In your experience, has anyone left your church—or any Pentecostal-Charismatic church—specifically as a result of identifying as LGBTI? If so, can you relate more about that experience?
 9. What, if any, are the theological and/or pastoral resources that have helped you in providing pastoral care to LGBTI people?
 10. From your perspective, what are the unique challenges faced by LGBTI individuals in Pentecostal-Charismatic churches?
 11. Have you ever counselled anyone in your church (or anyone at all) to participate in “conversion therapy?” If so, can you relate more about that experience?
 15. Imagine having a discussion with a close teenage relative who was beginning to wonder about their sexual orientation or gender. What would you say to that person about becoming involved in a Pentecostal-Charismatic church?
 16. Is there anything else you would like to add?
-

TABLE 11.2 *Scaled questions for pastor informants*

12. Imagine a member of your congregation or someone under your pastoral care returns to church after an absence and introduces you to their spouse—who is of the same gender as them. Which of the below might be closest to your response?				
(a) I would tell this person that I loved them, but I believed what they were doing was sinful.	(b) I would be polite, reserving judgement, but I might feel uneasy.	(c) I would warmly welcome both this person and his or her spouse into my congregation.	(d) I am unsure.	(e) Something else (please specify).
13. If someone involved in the ministry of your church told you that they were planning to have gender reassignment surgery, which of the below might be closest to your response?				
(a) I would tell this person that I loved them, but I believed what they were doing was sinful.	(b) I would be polite, reserving judgement, but I might feel uneasy.	(c) I would offer my full support to this person.	(d) I am unsure.	(e) Something else (please specify).
14. You invite a guest speaker to your church, and in the middle of a sermon this person expresses the belief that LGBTI individuals are condemned by God and/or will go to hell. Which of the below might be closest to your response?				
(a) I would approve or affirm the statement.	(b) I would say nothing at the time, but I might address the speaker about the propriety of the statement privately.	(c) I would publicly repudiate the statement.	(d) I am unsure.	(e) Something else (please specify).

For the purposes of writing this chapter, I found thematic analysis, with the assistance of the qualitative software NVivo 10, useful in “fracturing the data,” separating out emerging ideas and tropes into categories, and facilitating ease of access. For the planned forthcoming monograph, I hope to also draw on different forms of analysis which allow more holistic insight into the narratives

present in the interviews. Interviews are not, in my view, simply reducible to “data”—they are stories, rich texts that narrate personal experiences and contain what hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur refers to as “emplotment” (1984: 54–71). The next stage of writing will, therefore, draw on the work of Richard Biernacki (2014), who eschews coding in favor of what he refers to as “a humanist approach” in which the position of the interpreter is declared and other possible interpretations of the data are footnoted. This approach invites the reader into the process whereby validation through the “conflict of interpretations” has taken place.

In order to position myself in relation to this research, and provide some personal context for this paper, I take this opportunity to declare my own horizons. I am a cisgender, straight male, and I have attended PCC churches most of my life (I am, at the time of writing, in my late thirties). My personal understanding of LGBTQ people and issues began with ignorance and—frankly—bigotry, moving toward an acceptance that this phenomenon was real but could not be reconciled with Christianity, to an embracing both of the interpretive nature of all approaches to the Bible and of LGBTQ as a fully legitimate set of forms and practices of human gender and sexuality. I still attend a PCC congregation, and now regard myself as an advocate and ally for LGBTQ inclusion and acceptance in PCC and wider societies.

Theological Background to the Research

One challenge to conceptualizing this research involves the increasingly difficult task of categorizing the quite hybrid and diverse phenomenon nominated in this chapter as “PCC.” The movement that ostensibly began around 1906 in Azusa Street Apostolic Mission in Los Angeles (this origin story is itself contested) is very much a global phenomenon in late modern, early twenty-first century societies. The early Classical Pentecostals, perhaps as a result of their most direct antecedent—the Holiness Movement, with its strong emphasis on a “second blessing” of sanctification—by and large seem to have taken the position that a discrete experience following conversion was a normal part of the Christian experience. They called this experience “Baptism in the Holy Spirit,” and taking their cue from a fairly literal reading of the second chapter of the Book of Acts in the New Testament, proposed that the “initial evidence” that this experience had taken place was glossolalia—or “speaking in tongues.” This emphasis on tangible experience has arguably remained a strong hallmark of the phenomenon, perhaps explaining its remarkable growth in the midst of a secular age (Jennings 2015).

The Charismatic Movement, beginning in the 1960s, brought many of the experiential phenomena of Pentecostalism, particularly speaking in tongues (but also divine healing and prophecy, among others) to the mainstream churches—Catholicism, Anglicanism (or Episcopalianism in the United States), and Evangelicalism.⁵ Charismatic Christians, unlike the early Pentecostals who were in many cases rejected by mainstream denominations and forms of Christianity, were able to remain within their congregations. In many cases, this meant that they did not abandon different theological positions, and for many of the new Charismatics, the idea of baptism in the Holy Spirit as a discrete second blessing was theologically untenable. This has resulted in far more theological diversity within PCC, and arguably the Classical Pentecostal view is no longer the majority theological position of those affiliated with the phenomenon.

However, it is worth noting that, while PCC has been linked since its outset with an ecstatic form of spirituality, it has also based this on a literal interpretation of the biblical material, particularly from the Book of Acts. Arguably, this stems from PCC's roots in the Protestant tradition, dating back to Martin Luther's emphasis on *Sola Scriptura* as one of the major criterion for authority in faith. Pastor WR, after identifying his church as most closely aligned with the Classical Pentecostal position, went on to describe their community as "people of the book," meaning the Bible: "You know, we are people of the book, and if you can show that it's in the book, we will change our behavior to match what's in the book. We have not always been very accurate with that. But we attempt to live on what we consider to be the plain understanding of scripture."

This may help explain the seeming disparity between what may be perceived to be a non-conservative spirituality and an (at times) strongly conservative moral ethic still present in PCC today. Perhaps the most fundamental challenge underlying all of the discussions I had with PCC pastors was in theologically reflecting on the place of LGBTQ sexuality in Christian life and ministry. This was made particularly acute, as we will observe in the next section, by the undeniable fact that these pastors could point to what they viewed as undeniable spiritual experiences in LGBTQ Christians under their care, who nevertheless remained LGBTQ. For PCC pastors, this has important implications in crafting a pastoral theology concerning the place of LGBTQ

5 There seems to be a trend in North American religious studies to regard PCC as a branch or form of Evangelicalism. This is generally not the case for Australian PCCs, who make a sharp distinction between the two phenomena.

people in PCC congregations in terms of inclusion, spiritual experience, and ministry.

LGBTQ Individuals and PCC Spiritual Experience

The PCC pastor informants I interviewed were mostly open about the pastoral challenges to providing pastoral care to LGBTQ individuals and communities within their churches. These pastors framed their answers in terms of their responsibility to provide compassionate and honoring pastoral care to both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ people. In regard to the former, this involved being up-front about how safe and inclusive the congregations were likely to be toward LGBTQ people themselves—whether or not they would feel hurt, abused, or rejected, or simply “othered.” Apropos of the latter, pastors were keen to ensure that non-LGBTQ people did not feel threatened, confused, or “led to stumble”—a phrase we will return to later.

A particular challenge is raised by several stories pastors shared with me of LGBTQ individuals who had, in their view, clearly had PCC-type spiritual conversions or experiences. Pastor GO related the following story:

We had a woman have quite a conversion to Christ, this was probably seven years ago, you know, the Holy Spirit really touched her in our worship, she was crying, had a real conversion, we baptized her on a weekend, you know—quite radical life change, and then discovered she actually had a lesbian “friend,” and they’d been in a relationship for 17 years ... And it was kinda like “Wo! What do we do here?” We tried to be very compassionate and went slow, didn’t in any way confront her or say “You have to break off,” but over time she kind of found what the community was like and she moved on, so they’re the real tensions. But to be honest with your question, I think hopefully we’re a growingly compassionate, accepting church, but theologically—if you want to be in leadership here, you couldn’t be in a same-sex relationship. So, you know, for some that’s not welcome.

This was a challenge in two ways. Firstly, the fact that in the view of these pastors and congregations, LGBTQ people were having authentic experiences of God’s Holy Spirit, yet remaining LGBTQ, presents a theological challenge in that God was willing to bless LGBTQ people without necessarily making them “straight.” This is particularly an issue in PCC Christianity, where the primary qualification for Christian ministry is authentic spiritual experience, rather

than ordination. Secondly, the LGBTQ person GO described above, clearly had no awareness that their LGBTQ status might be a barrier to full participation in the congregation.

The meaning of “full participation” is also nuanced. Most of the PCC pastors did not seem to regard LGBTQ orientation as something that might automatically exclude people from being part of the church. Pastor FU put it thus:

I think the appropriate reading of scripture is that sexuality is not a salvation issue. It's a sanctification issue. So, our acceptance by Christ isn't determined by our sexuality. Our journey to becoming more like Christ involves our sexuality. But it's not—like, it's not a barrier to our connection with Christ.

However, in the understanding of several of the PCC pastors I spoke to, sexual orientation did become a barrier when LGBTQ individuals sought to volunteer or minister in their congregations. PCC ministers taking this position justified it on theological grounds, indicating that they could not reconcile full inclusion of LGBTQ people in ministry with what they understood to be orthodox theology.

Pastor FJ: If they [LGBTQ people] want to worship at [our church] and live that way, they would be very welcome to be part of [our church]. If you want to be part of [our church's] leadership, that opportunity won't be open to them—because if you want to live—if you want to be a leader at [our church], whether you are heterosexual or whether you are same sex attracted, it needs to still be in conformity with what we understand to be the will and ways of Jesus, otherwise we're contradicting ourselves. And of course, none of us are perfect, but there has to be at least that overt sense of alignment with sort of the theology and practice of this place, otherwise we won't stand for anything.

Pastor CT: At the moment, our position is that if you're going to volunteer here that we would hold to a fairly orthodox position of scripture, that any activity that scripture says is banned—let me put it that way—we would say if you're going to volunteer here, you can't be involved. So, that would mean that if an alcoholic presented and said, “I'm an alcoholic and I'm actively drinking alcohol”—We would go, “Okay, well, get that sorted out, and we're happy to be a part of your life as far as worshipping community is concerned, but when you represent us as a volunteer, then get that sorted out and then let's look at that.” With anyone in a gender

position, it would be exactly the same. So, we have people—if someone said, “Look, you know, I’m same sex attracted, but I’m not actively involved in a sexual relationship,” we would go, “Okay, well, that’s fine. That fits the orthodox position of scripture,” because the orthodox position of scripture is that sexual activity is between a man and a woman in a heterosexual relationship in marriage, and anything outside of that, either side, hetero or homosexual, is outside of that position. So yeah, we do have a line, and that line is drawn at volunteering.

Pastors empathized with the LGBTQ people in their congregations, and acknowledged that drawing a line around full inclusion at volunteering made it difficult for LGBTQ people to feel accepted by their congregation. They also believed it was one of the reasons LGBTQ people left PCC congregations. This is confirmed by pastor CP, who now ministers as an openly LGBTQ pastor. CP indicated that in a previous church the experience of being told by the leader that they were “welcome to come into the lounge room, but I certainly couldn’t come into the kitchen”—in other words, they could attend but could not minister or volunteer—was an important factor in motivating them to leave that congregation.

CT is not alone in making a distinction between celibate LGBTQ people and those in active LGBTQ relationships. Another pastor informant, TP, indicated that if LGBTQ congregants were celibate, “that’s much less of an issue for us.” So, broadly the stance taken by a number of PCC pastors is that being LGBTQ may not be a theological barrier to volunteering and ministry in the church, but being in a same-sex relationship is. While several pastors interviewed pointed out that there would also be barriers to people in unmarried sexual relationships, this is not an equivalent. As Matthew Vines (2014: 17) points out, the church never asks heterosexuals to relinquish any hope of future marriage, and that such a position ends up condemning as sinful “every possible expression of their [LGBTQ] sexuality.”

Clarifying Positions on Sexuality: Welcoming but Not Affirming?

Some pastor informants related stories of closeted LGBTQ people who, in the view of church members and leadership, had been blessed with authentic and life-changing spiritual experiences, and had taken up leadership and volunteer roles in their congregations. However, once they came out about their LGBTQ status and/or became part of a same-sex relationship, they were no longer permitted to volunteer or minister. This was an injustice keenly felt by many

whom these pastors ministered to, and also by some of the pastors themselves. FU articulated this.

But the reality is—like, so much of being part of a Christian community is—and something that we tell young people is that, you know, “God’s given you gifts and talents and he wants to use you, and you’ve got things that”—like, the body, everyone’s got a part and a role to play. But all of a sudden, “Oh, but now you say you’re gay, you can’t do that anymore.” So, people’s natural response is, “Well, I don’t feel like I’ve changed. I’m the same person. Why is it now I can’t do that, when I used to be a volunteer in this way, or I used to do this thing, and now I can’t?”

Former pastor vZ echoed this, sharing the following story about a young woman who had left their congregation.

Well, that young lady that I just told you about that—you know, so she grew up at church, went to the Christian college, terrific woman. Obviously is a lesbian. The church leaders know that. And she was fine until she took that partner, then she had to step down. She’s left ... So, she’s left, and rightly so. You know, like it’s—but it’s so sad, because for her, it’s her space of belonging. It was—all her formation happened there.

This young woman’s experience would seem to support Mark Henrickson’s (2007) remark that some in the LGBTQ community have found “it is easier to be religious and gay, than gay and religious,” a wry description of the reality that it is sometimes easier for LGBTQ people to remain in the closet in religious communities, rather than risk being “made objects of curiosity, pity or scorn”—or in this case, being relieved of ministry—by coming out.

Within the limited literature written by PCC LGBTIQ pastors in Australia, the authors have also pointed out the incongruity of these exclusions and their own stories of effective ministry. Graham Douglas-Meyer, PCC pastor of an inclusive PCC congregation in Perth, Western Australia, discusses the fact that that they have always been gay, even as they were empowered (in their view) to minister by God’s approval and Spirit:

I can now confidently say that I have always been gay and also that I have spent time in different areas of ministry both behind the scenes as well as out front on the dais. I have experienced some amazing things in ministry, including the miraculous and have been used by God in all of these circumstances.

DOUGLAS-MEYER 2014: 214

Similarly, Venn-Brown in their autobiography explains in detail the ministry that they believe they were chosen and empowered by God to conduct.

My message was preaching the relevancy of Jesus Christ to a world in need, and sharing the power of God to change lives ... Thousands of people attended my seminars and weekend camps ... What thrilled me most of all was that thousands had become Christians after hearing me preach, now convinced God was real and could change their lives.

VENN-BROWN 2015: 25–26

Venn-Brown relates the fact that they had always been gay, even seeking out “conversion therapy”—a form of Christian-based therapy engaged with the goal of changing a person’s sexual orientation—but to no avail. Venn-Brown was therefore a LGBTQ PCC minister, not only experiencing the blessing of the Holy Spirit personally, but, in the belief of the church, responsible for and able to catalyze this blessing in the lives of others.

The pastors who took the “line in the sand” position—excluding LGBTQ people in active relationships from volunteering and ministry—expressed empathy, but nevertheless regarded this as a line that could not be transgressed at this point. I asked TP to explain what was understood by volunteering, and expand on the reasons for drawing the line at volunteering.

I think everything is fine until they [LGBTQ people] express a desire to be involved in a leadership role in the life of the church, which then creates complications for us to let them know that we love them and value them, but we—because the majority of our congregation are yet to resolve all the theological issues with regards to this particular position, they’re only going to cause people to stumble if we give them leadership roles, and they take that personally, and believe that we’re—we don’t really love them, because we’re not prepared to put them into leadership roles ...

Interviewer: When you say “leadership,” I’m curious as to what—what is inside that term? So, are we talking preaching, or is it all sorts of different ministries in the church?

TP: It’s any position of leadership. Any positions of influence in the life of the church. So it could be a small group leader, it could be somebody—you know, leading in the youth ministry. So, we have a process where we’ve identified that people have responsibility in the way that we make disciples and responsibility in the way that we manage the programs that we run, so once people step into shouldering that responsibility and accepting that privilege, then that becomes an issue of leadership for us.

The remark about causing people to “stumble” is probably a reference to the New Testament passages Romans 14:13–23 and 1 Corinthians 8. These passages are both about the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols, an issue for the early churches in the pagan contexts they were in. In them, St Paul suggested that there is no problem with eating this meat, but it would be better not to if eating it would cause someone else, who regarded eating the meat as sinful, to stumble. Detailed and expert exegesis of these passages is outside the scope of this chapter, but the application which is apparently being drawn here is that, while there may be some in TP’s congregation who see no issue with LGBTQ people in same-sex relationships volunteering in the church, there would be some who might regard this as sinful, and may in turn cause them to sin. The rationale, therefore, is that it is advisable to prohibit this.

From this, we may reasonably deduce that, while some PCC pastors may not view same-sex attraction or LGBTQ as a “salvation issue,” several still regard it as a real theological barrier to the full inclusion of LGBTQ people, if for no other reason than non-LGBTQ people might find full inclusion offensive. At this point, it is important to note that volunteering is of particular significance in PCC congregations, which place a premium on congregational volunteering, which in many cases acts as a pathway to ministry and leadership in the church. Indeed, several of the pastors I spoke with had started out by volunteering their time to ministry in the church. Thus, this barrier not only prevents inclusion, but also effectively means that no LGBTQ people can move up into more senior roles in the church, where they might be able to promote a more inclusive position.

TP’s response seems to leave open the possibility that at some future time, perhaps when the majority of the congregation has “resolved” the theological issues, this stance could be addressed. This was complicated by two factors: TP’s reluctance to allow LGBTQ people to “proselytize” others toward a more inclusive position, and their decision not to address the theology of LGBTQ “from the pulpit.” TP justified this decision as follows:

It’s not my position to tell people what to believe. It’s my position to introduce people to the points of view and conversations of having to figure it out, and with this particular one, it’s not helpful for church unity or for people genuinely loving one another because they just take sound bites from a preacher and they misinterpret it and they use it for their own ends to try and win their own battles, so ... It’s too hot a potato. You know, it’s not a conversation you can have at a pulpit where love is the end result.

Unless conversations that will assist congregation members in assessing and evaluating the issues on LGBTQ inclusion in churches are happening at a more private level, this does seem to mean any more progression on this issue is unlikely.

Other Australian PCC pastors have taken the opportunity to articulate a public position. Rob Buckingham from Bayside Church in Melbourne preached a widely reported sermon entitled “Real Christianity is Accepting” in 2009, and in it expressed the view that LGBTQ people were welcome to worship freely in that church (Buckingham 2009). Dale Stephenson, senior pastor of Crossway Church in Victoria, presented a teaching session to his congregation on the topic, which was recorded and made available via the church’s website (Stephenson 2015). In that message, Stephenson invited a celibate LGBTQ church member to address the congregation. Mark Conner, the senior pastor at CityLife church in Melbourne, recorded a teaching session he presented to his congregation in May 2015 and made it available via YouTube (M. Conner 2015a) and podcast, and included much of the content in a blog post (M. Conner 2015b). Conner’s message is particularly useful, as he outlines in it the various theological and pastoral scholarship on LGBTQ issues, and invites the congregation to actively engage this scholarship and think critically about the issues. However, Conner draws a similar line in the sand—people actively involved in same-sex relationships cannot volunteer at CityLife Church.

While the approach of these pastors to address the issue from the pulpit may be seen as one way of ending the “silence” faced by LGBTQ Christians in PCC churches, announcing a public line in the sand can have significant negative pastoral consequences. Former pastor TA discussed the important work being undertaken by pastors who were able to operate in the liminal, if uncomfortable, space of uncertainty, which is perhaps the experience of closeted LGBTQ Christians themselves. This made pastoral care and progressive discussion possible even within a problematic paradigm they compared to “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

I would tend to say that [before the decision to clarify the church’s position] there was an emerging conversation ... all the LGBTI stuff, we were beginning to see the emergence that the approach that this is something that could be changed was coming to an end and I think has ended, and I think that led to a dialogue that said we need a better pastoral response ... and the church was on a journey to inclusive conversations around that. Now you could see that at [church name] ... had a US army approach of “don’t ask, don’t tell” it was starting to wrestle with inclusiveness ... there

was real pastoral care going on, but also what I discovered was a culture of almost a secret society of “how are we going to deal with our gender identity?” ... So there was kind of—it was known you had gender diversity issues you were hidden and then you were given all these strategies to try and work through that were ad hoc and were usually generated either by pastoral people with an awareness of what was going on, or other people who themselves were journeying with gender stuff.

However, for TA, the church leadership’s decision to draw a similar “line” as has been expressed already—stating that LGBTQ people were confronted with the choice of being celibate or being prohibited from volunteering or ministry positions in the church—led also to the marginalization of the pastoral issue.

... But then ... the church decided to clarify that position, and they were very clear that they went for a model that said “sexuality cannot occur without the sanctity of marriage, and marriage is between a guy and a woman, so you can be gender diverse, you just can’t practice it, you’re welcome here but you could be only a member, but to participate and volunteer, you now need to agree to that.” ... I think as well that’s tied with the debate on same-sex marriage becoming—that’s wrenched it away from pastoral and it’s become political, and so the whole thing’s got progressively worse since then because the pastoral issue is now off the table again, the conversations are not including those with gender diversity, so I became quite sad and disillusioned.

Other former pastors were more forthright about what they viewed as the injustice of the “welcoming but not affirming” position. Former pastor QG expressed consternation at the implications of this phrase.

Welcomed but not affirmed. So, we love you, we welcome you into our presence, but we don’t affirm your lifestyle. So, that’s—that, to me, is a real concern, because it’s—it’s almost like with one hand you’re shaking them by the hand and with the other hand you’re slapping them in the face.

Former pastors vZ and GC were even more critical:

vZ: And of course, the welcoming and affirming thing, you know. Like, we’re welcoming but not affirming. Well, that’s a load of shit. Because really, I mean—and I sit with people who either have children that are

gay, or who are gay themselves, nearly every week from [our church], and they don't hear any welcome ... When you say "welcoming but not affirming," really what you're saying is "we cannot accept you." ... So that is a huge hurdle, and something I pushed back on, and I would say that the gospel is not found in those sorts of statements. It really isn't, you know. And so—yeah, so I think that is a major hurdle to overcome.

GC: The unique challenges, I think, is that they see through the affirmation of the person and the prohibition on who they are. I think that is at the centre of the issue that LGBTQI people face, and I don't think it's anything more complex than that. They know that actually, they're not welcome. Unless they can either not do it, and by "do it" I mean have sex—because that's the preoccupation with Christians ... So, they're welcome as long as they are seen to be a project ... and the specific end is for you not to express your sexuality. That's the end goal. And I think that is—so the affirmation, which is ... I think for somebody who has thought it through, it's bullshit.

These former pastors, all of whom had arrived at inclusive positions on LGBTQ issues, regarded the stance of welcome but not affirmed as both theologically and pastorally empty.

It should be noted that all of the pastor informants expressed empathy with the LGBTQ people in their congregations, and acknowledged the less than ideal nature of the position they were proffering. Some argued too that this position was the only one they could arrive at, on the basis of their reading of the Bible. Others, such as GO, bluntly indicated that full inclusion would "blow up the church."

A Silence Like Thunder: LGBTQ and the Tough Conversations and Spaces

This chapter began with the words of former PCC LGBTQ individual JY, who noted that the church's silence on LGBTQ was in itself a profoundly othering act, rendering those of diverse gender and sexuality invisible. It is clear that some PCC pastors have attempted to publicly address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ people and communities in PCC churches, and have opened up to some extent on their own theological wrestling with the issues. However, breaking the silence in this way was not in itself a liberating act, as a publicly stated position that excluded people who may previously have experienced no barriers to full participation—and in some cases, ministry—within their

churches was arguably as problematic for many LGBTQ people as a lack of acknowledgement.

As we have noted, PCC churches tend to take a theologically conservative position on LGBTQ people and issues, and ethical issues in general, aligning themselves with Evangelicalism. However, as vZ pointed out, Pentecostalism began as a progressive movement—not just in terms of expression of worship and experience, but also socially and ethically.

vZ: I think what I would say—can I preface this by saying I think that modern Pentecostalism by and large has lost its way a little bit. I think that—you know, if you're reading the history—obviously, the history of Pentecostalism, you know, it was very much a movement on the margins. Spontaneous. You know, whacky at times, absolutely, but there was this identification of margins, of—you know, people who were oppressed, the poor. I think now, if you look—if you compared that—the values or ethics that shaped it, they're too—some of the larger Pentecostal churches now, and probably even smaller—I do think there's been quite a bit of change in the way they've morphed and what they now value.

I: Yeah. That's a good point.

vZ: I don't think, for example—I don't think they value the margins anymore ... I think there's been a dramatic shift, and I find that quite sad.

vZ makes an interesting point. Early Pentecostals in the United States, particularly in the wake of the Azusa Street revival, appear to have facilitated and valued the ministry of African Americans (such as William Seymour) and women (such as Maria Woodworth-Etter, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Sarah Lancaster in Australia), at times when there were significant social and cultural barriers to these two demographic groups participating equally in society (Clifton, 2009; Daniels 2011; Alexander 2011; Payne 2015). As early Pentecostal preacher and writer, Frank Bartleman, approvingly declared, “the color line was washed away in the blood,” expressing the apparent full equality of both African Americans and non-African Americans in the nascent revival. It took some time for American society to approach the egalitarianism of the early Pentecostals, and as vZ expressed, perhaps the opposite is now the case—PCC in some cases lags behind the social norms and mores of the societies it finds itself in, rather than reflecting a more progressive possibility.

The early history of PCC was marked by what Max Weber (1978) called “charisma” (not “charisma” in the PCC sense here)—a form of irrational power that ushers in social change. Perhaps for this reason, the early movement was thus characterized by ministry to those at the margins and brought a vision of egalitarian social change, when all God's followers could and would be

baptized and empowered by the Holy Spirit for ministry. This progressive edge that was present in early Pentecostalism seems to have gradually slipped away (“routinization”), and the church has adopted a more conservative position toward the margins. Perhaps some might argue this point, claiming that PCC has from the outset been characterized by a strong adherence to the biblical texts. This would be to ignore the fact that PCC churches in particular, and Christianity in general, have shifted in the emphases placed upon scripture, as a survey of the history of interpretation of texts dealing with formerly vexed issues such as slavery, drinking alcohol, and divorce will quickly demonstrate.

Certainly, some of the pastor informants I spoke with believed that change was inevitable, and in many cases welcomed.

GO: I definitely feel for the future of the church we need to see more healthy and fruitful models of welcoming and affirming churches. If anything’s going to change in the broader church, I think until, and most gay people don’t want to go to a gay church, they want to be part of a broader church family. I think they’re some of the things that are going to be important moving forward.

FU: But I actually think it’s quite a—like, a generational thing, that that’s actually not going to change. My experience is that anyone that’s under 30 doesn’t have an issue with [LGBTQ], and so we’re going to see a generational shift ... It might take 10 or 20 years, but I think there’s definitely a progression in that way.

GC: So, the acceptance of homosexuality in the Pentecostal church I don’t believe it is going to happen until the next generation. And I don’t even mean in Gen Y probably, I probably mean Gen Z. I think probably they are the ones.

Conclusion

As the experience outlined by GO has demonstrated, a theological issue for PCC pastors grappling with LGBTQ is the undeniable spiritual experiences that LGBTQ church members have had. This is because, arguably, ecstatic experience is the hallmark of PCC spirituality. Paul F. Bauer (1976: 119–20), having conducted participant observation of MCC (Metropolitan Christian Churches) in the United States, observed that gay Christians in those congregations themselves interpreted the experiences of answered prayers as evidence of God’s love and acceptance. Similarly, Scott Thumma (1991) has suggested that gay

evangelicals engage in “identity negotiation” through theological reflection on scripture, in order to arrive at a position of congruity between their LGBTQ status and Christian faith. This research indicates that this process is not one-sided. PCC pastors and churches themselves are aware of the incongruity and even the injustice of acknowledging that LGBTQ people have authentic spiritual experiences, yet are not fully included in their congregations—usually by not being allowed to take up volunteering positions—unless they remain celibate or commit to trying to change their orientation.

As pastor GO revealed, “behind closed doors these are conversations that are happening,” and so perhaps the slow process of change is being facilitated by pastors talking to each other and wrestling with these issues in private. Some, on the other hand, have taken the opportunity to make public their changing positions on this issue. Nicole Conner, formerly one of the pastors of Melbourne’s CityLife Church, reflected on the experience she had of moving to an inclusive position toward LGBTQ Christians, pointing out that so many of the LGBTQ individuals reminded her of so much of Jesus, and that the experience had turned her previous ideology and paradigm “on its head” (Conner and Beck 2015). Indeed, for PCC pastors, the belief that LGBTQ individuals have experienced the Holy Spirit, which in Christian theology is generally held to “form” Christ in individuals, has the potential to turn exclusive paradigms and worldviews upside down.

PCC seems by and large to have adhered to a conservative position on the question of full inclusion for LGBTQ people. This is at odds with the historical roots of the movement, especially the ways in which the earliest manifestations of Pentecostalism in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, opened ministry to marginalized and excluded groups such as African Americans and women. Several of the pastor informants I spoke to indicated that change was coming, but, in the words of GC “We [the church] are going to fight to the death until we finally realize that we can’t get out of it any longer, and then 10 years later we’ll be preaching it.” As has been discussed, it is undeniable to many interviewed that LGBTQ people in PCC churches are having authentic spiritual experiences, and this in itself was understood to be the empowerment and authorization for ministry in the early days of Pentecostalism, regardless of social position. It appears that this time, PCC churches in Australia will bring up the rearguard of cultural and social progress, rather than taking a leading position.

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