

# Building welcoming and inclusive congregations: Biblical hospitality as a theological paradigm

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This article addresses the question, 'how can congregations that exhibit prejudice toward LGBTQQIA+ persons (different expressions of nonheterosexuality), overcome bias and discriminatory practices to become missionally holistic, hospitably welcoming, and inclusive of these individuals?'. The answer can be found in engaging an alternative biblical hermeneutic that emphasises the socio-historical context of a given narrative, thus creating a broader and deeper understanding of the principle of biblical hospitality as a fundamental theological premise inherent within the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Accomplishing transformative change demands intentionality by clergy equipped to engage the issues effectively. Pastoral ministers must cultivate the exegetical skills needed to guide local missional churches towards greater inclusivity, with the goal of creating more hospitably welcoming and inclusive faith communities.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article engages a dialogue between biblical and practical theology as missional praxis supporting congregational development as ecclesial reformational transformation to enable local churches to become hospitably welcoming and inclusive.

**Keywords:** biblical theology; congregational development; exegesis; hermeneutics; hospitality; inclusivity; LGBTQQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual-aromantic/agender, plus); nonheterosexuality; progressivism; postmodernism.

## Introduction

In the early 1990s, Tony Campolo (1988:105–120) named homosexuality one of the 20 'hot potato' issues facing the Church. Campolo's prediction quickly came to be realised as Christian denominations, and churches struggled to engage matters related to nonheterosexual persons. The results have been mixed, with churches in opposition refusing to embrace an unqualified invitation to all people. Ecclesial opinions continue to be varied on the subject with sides being intractably taken, and conflict and schism, often accompanied by forced removal from denominational affiliation, sometimes an unfortunate result.

## Background

The Church throughout its history has generally considered nonheterosexual behaviour in any context to be sinful. Prior to his becoming Pope Benedict xvi, Cardinal Joseph A. Ratzinger (2003) called homosexuality 'deviant'. To uphold traditional Church teachings on matters of human sexuality, Ratzinger blanketly condemned nonheterosexuality, with homosexual acts singled out as the most immoral. It may be argued that the purpose of Ratzinger's pronouncement, that his motivation determining his methodology as the head of the Catholic Church as its major gatekeeper, was to preserve the status quo traditionally accepted in Roman Catholic ecclesiology and theology. It may also be argued that Pope Benedict, while being practical, was not engaging practical theology. The current Pope Francis, has certainly taken a more open and less judgemental stance with the LGBTQQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual-aromantic/agender, plus) community, including a way, devoid of a Sanctuary and Sacrament, to bless the relationships of nonheterosexual couples (cf. Becky Sullivan<sup>1</sup>).

For the purposes of this article, Church (upper case C) (from the Greek *ecclesia*), refers to the universal Church namely, the faith movement begun by early followers of Jesus of Nazareth. The term church (lower case c) refers to a local gathering of persons for the purpose of religious or

1. <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/18/1220077102>.

spiritual worship or instruction. In this context, the term church is used to describe Christian congregations exclusively.

Views regarding nonheterosexuality are made from a surface reading based on 6 to 12 presumably prohibitive texts, a number determined by the way these scriptures are grouped. These specific biblical texts are historically cited to forbid nonheterosexual acts (Gn 9:20–27 and 19; Lv 18:22 and 20:13; Jdg 19; Rm 1:21; 26, 27; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Tm 2 1:10; Pt 2 2:6; and Jud 1:7). These texts being acknowledged, the Church and local missional congregations, particularly over the last three decades, have had reason to revisit and reconsider how best to relate to nonheterosexuals. Narrow biblical and theological perspectives regarding persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation are becoming increasingly subject to debate because of the influence of science, particularly scientific discoveries found in the fields of anthropology, biology, psychology, and sociology. Arguments once considered settled are now being approached by many congregations that are pondering a more open perspective, allowing for a broader position, creating dramatic shifts in corporate life.

The letters LGBTQQIA+ serve to define different expressions of nonheterosexuality, including persons of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual-aromantic/agender, plus orientation. Some individuals prefer 'pansexual', determining that this term is broader and more expressive than say, bisexual. Despite members of the LGBTQQIA+ community being categorised as a homogenous group, these individuals are diverse and varied in their political, social, and theological preferences. For the purposes of this article, however, these individuals are discussed as a community, because as such they continue to be ostracised by churches because of their sexual or gender orientation. Not surprisingly, however, the results of the research did indicate that churches affirming of this people group are employing a wide range of ministries in their attempts to engage this community, while recognising the diversity within it.

## The role of the Bible and tradition

From its canonisation, the Bible has been used by Christians to support dogmatic viewpoints leading to doctrines and creeds. Those who consider themselves biblical literalists often claim the text to be 'infallible' and 'inerrant'. From such a narrow perspective, biblical texts may seem clear on many issues, and especially so regarding nonheterosexuality. Church leaders, however, should encourage parishioners to consider more than just the written words. By applying the best methods of current biblical scholarship to their preaching and teaching, clergy can help congregants engage meaning beyond the words themselves. There is always more to these ancient texts than may appear from a surface reading, particularly with regard to the contextual and cultural milieu of a narrative (Bessler 2020:4–5, 8). Providing parishioners with a window into the complexities of the biblical narrative may help sincere Christians raise appropriate questions and address a major ecclesial concern in this 21st century postmodern era.

Throughout the Church's institutional evolution, congregations have faced numerous societal challenges to ecclesial authority and influence. This article explores the impact of synthesising an interrelated intersection of biblical hospitality, ancient Near Eastern hospitality – including its contemporary praxis – and the role of science in forming the nexus driving ecclesial inclusivity as a means toward building up a local missional church. A local church can certainly be missional and not be inclusive of the LGBTQQIA+ community, but that is a debate for someone else on another day. This article argues for a more comprehensive, holistic, hospitable welcome and inclusion of all persons. Biblical and ancient Near Eastern hospitality go hand in hand, both of which no doubt informs and impacts the other. The customary practices contained within each create a paradigm for hospitably welcoming those generally deemed to be the other, in this case persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. For some churches, this unbound invitation has served to revitalise them in new and exciting ways, giving these willing congregations a new life, a dynamic which has certainly served to build them up in ways never imagined. By design, the connections between the Bible, Near Eastern hospitality as an ancient custom and practice, including its contemporary, postmodern, expressions, and scientific discovery, all combined can bring about processes towards reformational transformation in terms of mission and ministry (Nel 2015).

Although volumes of literature (cf. Alexander & Preston 1996; Baird & Baird 1995; Cleaver 1995; Edwards 1985; Glaser 1990; Kader 1999; Piazza 1997; White 1994) exist on the topics of nonheterosexuality and the Bible and nonheterosexuality and the Church, little consensus has been achieved regarding the issues. In his book on practical theology, Ray S. Anderson (2001, 266–283) includes a chapter titled 'Homosexuality', in which he discusses the inherent challenges of missional ministry with LGBTQQIA+ persons. Anderson (2001) presents the usual pro and con arguments, and determines that,

... a theological and pastoral approach to the issue of homosexuality within the church must consider a wider spectrum of biblical teaching than the few texts that condemn specific homosexual acts. (p. 271)

Succinctly stated, Anderson advocates for a larger role for the Bible in practical theology.

This article advocates for the Church and local missional churches to explore deeper meanings within biblical texts traditionally believed to exclude this specific people group, as well as texts calling for respecting and welcoming outsiders. Through this work, Christians can find support for embracing persons of nonheterosexual orientation and inviting them into every aspect of congregational life.

## Practical theology and the study of hospitality

A potential task of practical theological inquiry may be to objectively address the convergence of the Bible, the Church, and persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation by examining all

sides of this complex issue. This process would include dialogue and debate about positions held by the Church throughout its institutional history. In this regard, the goal of practical theology is to explore new ecclesial possibilities based on a broader and deeper understanding of a people group that has been subject to abuse, ostracism, and rejection. An exegetical study of the Bible that employs the best methods of modern biblical scholarship can lead local missional churches to a more hospitable hermeneutic. Such discussions must not be isolated within academia, but also readily available in local congregational settings. Clergy have a responsibility to assimilate this information from recognised scholarly sources and disseminate it among the laity. Clergy who attend theological institutions which teach historical-critical methodologies will possess the tools needed to explore the cultural milieu that framed the biblical texts relevant to such discussions. When this level of scholarship is lacking, however, congregants may remain unaware of the contextual complexity that spawned a given text.

### Congregational development and hospitality

In his book *Identity Driven Churches: Who Are We, and Where Are We Going?* Malan Nel provides a detailed analysis of the steps that are necessary for determining and formulating identity and enacting transformational reformation as a byproduct of this kind of process, creating an environment for the kind of change that is impactful and contains integrity of process (Nel 2015:203–346). The goal put forth by Nel (2015:12) is to, not only describe ‘in a positive way what Congregational Development or building up missional congregations of local churches is all about’, but to outline ways that congregations can develop their self-understood identity and can then go about the task of transformational reformation that will empower a local missional church to go about the business of being on mission. ‘It is a matter of being and not so much of *doing* missions’ (Nel 2015:12). The hard work with any congregational initiative begins with a church determining who and what it is, discovering and claiming its purpose for being, and then moving towards strategic action plans. Nel reminds his reader that the starting point for any congregational conversation in terms of ‘building up’ a local missional church requires, ‘What the Bible has to say about this subject’ as ‘the primary consideration’, with ‘most theological paths’ coming ‘together on this point’ (Nel 2015:13). Nel (2015) adds:

The use of this metaphor [*building up*] in Scripture and the particular meaning given to it by Jesus and especially Paul is of great value for congregational/development/building up or cultivating a local church in our own time. (p. 13)

As is always the case with any ecclesial dialogue, the Bible is the beginning point for any consideration, always at the centre of any debate or discussion.

### Osmer’s four tasks of practical theology and hospitality

Practical theologian Richard R. Osmer offers a framework for gaining clarity around engaging an issue or problem within

a local congregational setting, including ways to find solutions. Osmer offers four questions representing four tasks, suggesting that these must be asked, not only when engaging in practical theological research, but in addressing concerns and solving problems within local churches as well. The tasks and accompanying questions are included here.

1. *The descriptive-empirical task.* Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts. *What is going on?* (Helminiak 1994).
2. *The interpretive task.* Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring. *Why is this going on?* (Levine 2022).
3. *The normative task.* Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from ‘good practice’. *What ought to be going on?* (Spong 2005).
4. *The pragmatic task.* Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the ‘talk back’ emerging when they are enacted. *How might we respond?* (Osmer 2008:4; Tribble 2022).

In his blog, ‘Imagining the Normative Task of Practical Theology’, Wesley Ellis (2015) comments:

We cannot offer something as normative if it only includes a privileged few. The God revealed in Jesus Christ – the God who shares God’s very identity with the ‘least of these’ (cf. Mt 25) – refuses to afford us such exclusivity.

As John Swinton (2000) has argued:

If a definition includes the weak and vulnerable ... then this is a strong indication that such an understanding may be concomitant with the God who reveals [*Godself*] in the Biblical narrative and especially in the life of Jesus, that is, as a valid theological understanding. If it in any way excludes such people, then it must be considered an inauthentic representation of the God who ‘secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy ...’. (n.p.)

Osmer employs a pragmatic circle or cycle, or as Kevin G. Smith (2010:101) prefers, ‘the hermeneutical spiral’, to clarify the interdependency among these four tasks. Using Osmer’s paradigmatic guide in discussing nonheterosexual persons in relation to the Bible and to the Church, clarity begins to emerge as to ways to engage what is frequently a controversial subject confronting both denominational and nondenominational churches. ‘What is going on?’ is the fact that many congregations continue exclusionary practices, discriminating against persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation based on biblical theology. ‘Why is this going on?’ is based on a traditional biblical and theological premise that nonheterosexuality is sinful and is thus a disqualifier for church membership and even attendance. This traditional understanding is born of the idea that human sexuality is based on a choice to be made or is the result of influence and environment rather than being a natural part of the DNA of an individual. ‘What ought to be going on?’ is exploring

another perspective gleaned from careful biblical exegesis determining a different, perhaps new, hermeneutic that removes traditional barriers to church participation by persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation and thus hospitably welcoming and including them into every aspect of a local missional church's corporate life.

### Root's broadening of Osmer's model: Now what?

Andrew Root (2014), commenting on Osmer's model, declares,

Therefore, from my perspective, it may be better to see Osmer's normative question, *what ought to be happening?* not solely in an ethical frame, but also in a revelatory one, that is, asking, *what ought to be happening [what ways should we perceive of reality, ourselves, the church, our practice, and conceptions of God] now that God has encountered us? What ought to happen now that we have experienced the event of God's encounter?* I might change this question to, *now what?* After we've had an experience with the living Christ, now that the divine presence has come to us in hope or dream, in our very concrete and lived experience, ministering to us. Now that we've called these experiences *real*, now what?. (p. 26)

The approach Root takes to the normative task of practical theology indicates a desire to discover new pathways, new avenues for growth and development in local churches. There is less emphasis on preserving traditional paradigms and ministry models, and more emphasis on increasing missional opportunities. Underneath the movement toward becoming hospitably welcoming and inclusive of all persons is the hope of the Church that the movement of God will be experienced in the process, as LGBTQQIA+ persons become the focus of love rather than judgement. 'How might we respond?' is found in honestly engaging the issues, developing an openness to persons of every sexual orientation, and valuing all individuals for who they are and were created to be. It may be said that Root's motivation, always determining methodology, is found in addressing a mode of engaging practical theology while not specifying a particular issue.

### The nature and scope of the research

In a survey of 22 randomly selected ministers from four denominational bodies known to include churches that are hospitably welcoming and inclusive of the LGBTQQIA+ community, participants recommended ways to empower local churches to become more inviting of this specific people group. Survey transcripts were analysed with both the ATLAS.ti and NVivo qualitative analysis instruments. The results revealed the consistent influence of ecclesial and theological environments on the faith formation of these clergy. Beliefs and practices were, for the most part, developed from childhood and youth. One consistent comment among these pastors was the need for better and deeper Bible study. These pastors argued for modern biblical scholarship as a necessary tool in the curricula and the didactic programmes of the church. Discovering textual

nuance, subtleties, and variants within a given text can lead to finding meanings with greater breadth and depth. One interviewee recommended that churches

[D]eeply study the Bible, paying careful attention to literal interpretations of scripture that I (and many others) would argue do not exist. Be open to metaphorical interpretations of texts where we admit what we do not know, understanding the ways that symbol and meaning change from one era to the next.

Another clergy person noted the need to 'Read the Bible through the lens of historical and theological understanding. This approach demands taking a thorough delving into the biblical narrative'.

### The origins of hospitality as a customary practice

According to New Testament scholar John Koenig (1985:2), hospitality is 'inherited from the ancient Greek and near-Eastern peoples ... concerning a sacred (unbreakable) bond between guests and hosts', an ancient practice 'which has virtually disappeared from contemporary Western culture...'. Koenig (1992:299) points out that 'the practice of receiving a guest or stranger graciously was common to many social groups throughout the period in which the OT and NT were composed'. Hospitality was first practised by nomads and eventually codified by the Bedouins to assure safe travel among mistrusting tribes and clans. O'Gorman (2005:146) observes that 'the oldest collection of texts that refer to hospitality are those of the literary genre of ancient Near East texts'. Koenig (1992) notes that:

[T]he practice of receiving a guest or stranger graciously was common to many social groups throughout the period in which the OT and NT were composed. But special nuances of hospitality, particularly regarding the guest and host roles played by God or Christ, serve to distinguish the notions of the biblical writers from those of their contemporaries. (p. 299)

Martin (2014:2) argues 'that any attempt to construct a Christian theology of hospitality must utilize a variety of resources, including theology, Christian tradition, political realities, social customs and the biblical witness'. Tuohy (2012:35) notes that in the ancient Near East, eating was rarely done alone and food sharing was a core component of hospitality as a cultural phenomenon of this period. John Dominic Crossan (1991:261–264) argues for 'open commensality' as a distinguishing element in Jesus' proclamation and modelling of the 'kingdom of God'. He declares, 'An open table and an open menu offered alike against any cultural situation in which distinctions among foods and guests mirror social distinctions, discriminations, and hierarchies' (Crossan 1991:262). As R. Alan Culpepper (conversation, December 2023) notes, "Jesus" 'eating with tax collectors and sinners' was particularly scandalous to Pharisees who formed *chaburot* or communities that observed strict ritual purity so that they would not be

rendered unclean by eating with someone who did not maintain their standards of purity'. It could be argued that hospitality in the form of table fellowship, even more than circumcision, was the most controversial issue facing the early Church as it expanded beyond Jewish proselytes to embrace Gentiles heavily influenced by Hellenistic culture.

Katherine Southwood (2018) notes that,

Hospitality is an extremely evocative topic with political, cultural, and ethical overtones that induces unrelenting questions about how the stranger, traveler or migrant is to be welcomed. It suggests a structure which dichotomizes social relations between self and Other, inside and outside, kin and non-kin, home and away, private and public, as well as guest and host, both on an individual and at an international level. The concept is enormously relevant for contemporary discussions concerning migration but is an equally important idea for examining narratives of migration within the Hebrew Bible. (p. 469–470)

Expanding on Katherine Southwood's thesis (2018:469–470), hospitality may be extended to any individual or group that lives on the fringes of society, the dispossessed and disenfranchised. Interpreted in this manner, hospitality can be understood as a social justice issue involving any person at any time, in any circumstance or situation. This is certainly the case with regard to the LGBTQQIA+ community which has long been shunned by society in general, and the Church and the churches in particular. Southwood's work calls for a much broader circle of inclusion, made possible by a studying scripture with a new biblical hermeneutic employing greater objectivity and the latest and best exegetical tools and techniques.

### Biblical hospitality

It might be argued that hospitality, as conceived among nomadic cultures in the ancient Near East and codified by the Bedouins, has largely been overlooked as a biblical and thus a theological concept. First appearing as a detailed event in Genesis 18 in the story of Abraham, Sarah, and their surprise guests by the oaks of Mamre, hospitality subtly and strongly appears as a recurring theme throughout the Bible. From the care of widows and orphans to the respect and protection of those referred to in the Hebrew Bible as aliens, foreigners, and strangers, to the numerous individuals and groups welcomed into his circle by Jesus, including the embrace by the early Church of Gentiles, the Bible offers a panoramic view of hospitable welcome and inclusion. An understanding and embrace of hospitality as a theological premise based in the Bible has the potential to assist clergy in their profound roles as transformational leaders. Hospitality as a biblical and theological concept has for the most part been lost or overlooked, the term now associated with the 'hospitality industry', including inns, hotels, motels, restaurants, and other service-related businesses. While hospitality has come to be defined from this contemporary perspective, this term has a long and storied history birthed in the ancient Near East. A recovery of hospitality located in its foundational roots not only seems to be an imperative for contemporary

congregations but has the potential to offer local missional churches new avenues for discovering an unqualified welcome and inclusion of all people, in this specific case the embrace of a people often shunned by the Church, persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation. Biblical hospitality then and now is a rich resource, a treasure trove, of rich theological imagery that can be foundational, a significant building block to developing congregational identity or ethos, an instrument of grace, a tool enhancing the ability of clergy to work toward 'building up' local missional churches. Biblical hospitality as a theological concept can directly aid in the reformational transformation of churches seeking to broaden the scope of their invitation, to widen the circle of what should be an ever-expanding reach as a mandate of what is called the Great Commission in the Gospel of Matthew. According to certain scholars, the phrase *panta ta ethnē* is better translated as 'people', rather than 'nations' some suggesting that the text refers exclusively to the inclusion of Gentiles while others posit that it also includes Jews (cf. Culpepper 2021:582; Danker 2000, 276; Stagg 1955). Matthew 28:18 and Acts 1:8 both call the Church to resist every impulse toward nationalisation and tribalisation, including every discriminatory social, ethnic, or gender boundary.

### A pivotal text

The quintessential text demanding the level of exegetical analysis that has been described is the story of Lot and his guests in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. The text is traditionally understood as a blanket condemnation of homosexuality because of the desire of the mob of men at Sodom desiring to gang rape Lot's visitors. A careful review of the text strongly indicates that the sin in question in Sodom was that of inhospitality, homosexual rape being the occasion and not the issue at stake in the narrative. While there has been significant debate regarding the interpretation of Genesis 19, Old Testament scholars such as Walter Brueggemann argue that homosexuality was not the root cause of the condemnation of Sodom and Gomorrah (Brueggemann 1982:164). The fate of Sodom, based on its wickedness, had already been sealed, Abraham previously bartering for sparing the city (Gn 18:22–32). Ezekiel (16:49) claims that other sins were committed at Sodom while the Gospel of Matthew (10:15) attributes a quote to Jesus who authenticates inhospitality as the egregious violation of the male citizenry of Sodom. This is the kind of intensive study that needs to be invoked whenever one of the presumably prohibitive texts is cited in condemnation of homosexual behaviour. The comments gleaned from the clergy interviewed regarding their views on biblical hospitality and homosexuality are reminders of the need for a deeper engagement of the Bible, something to which all Christians could probably agree.

### An exemplar case study engaging a New Hermeneutic

Gerald O. West, Sithembiso Zwame, and Charlene van der Walt (2021:5–23), in an article titled 'From Homosexuality to

Hospitality; from Exclusion to Inclusion; from Genesis 19 to Genesis 18', which is a contemporary theological project, have conducted an interesting Contextual Bible Study (CBS). They invert Genesis 18 and 19, reading them in reverse order, to illustrate clearly that hospitality, versus inhospitality fuelled by hostility, is the actual sin committed by the men at Sodom, rather than homosexuality. Their research provides a working example of the way the Bible can be approached through the lens of practical theology. In their contrast of the hospitality described in Genesis 18 and the inhospitality described in Genesis 19, clear distinctions come into view. It can be argued that gang rape, misappropriated as homosexuality, was the occasion in the story at Lot's house in Sodom, but that the lack of hospitality was the defining issue. Misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the thrust of this text has led to centuries of homophobic behaviour, exacerbated by an obviously biased agenda, and resulting in pain and sorrow for LGBTQQIA+ individuals. By 'moving textually from Genesis 19 to Genesis 18 and moving contextually from concerns about homosexuality and exclusion to concerns about hospitality and inhospitality and inclusion', (2021:5) conversations can be initiated that address the traditional biblical and theological interpretations and understandings about homosexuality specifically and nonheterosexuality in general. This textual approach can also serve as a springboard to discuss human sexuality from a more holistic perspective, considering ideas from anthropology, biology, psychology, and sociology.

Citing the work of the Ujamaa Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, West, Zwane, and Walt describe the way that this organisation devotes itself to agendas related to social justice, human sexuality being but one part of the equation defining marginalised individuals and people groups. The approach of the Ujamaa Centre incorporates a practical theological methodology that undergirds its goal and purpose in striving to facilitate social change, enacting a different societal perspective, understanding that necessary societal shifts can be achieved through a different didactical approach, specifically employing a new exegetical and hermeneutical approach to the Bible. According to West, Zwane, and Walt, the work of the Ujamaa Centre, specifically their engagement and their inversion interpretive approach to Genesis 19 and Genesis 18 have caused traditionalists to give 'textual pause and cause to reconsider. Proclamations of hate have been transformed to gestures and words of welcome. Welcomed strangers have shared gifts. Exclusion has been transformed into inclusion' (2021:23). All these changes are possible when Biblicalists are open to new interpretations and understandings that have been germane to these ancient texts all along. To understand fully the primacy of hospitality in both Genesis 18 and Genesis 19, a reading of both texts must be a part of any disciplined analysis of either.

## Conclusion

This article addresses the question, 'how can congregations that exhibit prejudice toward LGBTQQIA+ persons

overcome bias and discriminatory practices to become missionally holistic, hospitably welcoming, and inclusive of these individuals?' Not that the process is simple in any way, but the short answer to helping congregations overcome bias and discriminatory practices toward persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation can be found in the continuing education of both clergy and laity, a dynamic that was revealed in the survey responses. Knowledge gleaned from deeper and more comprehensive studies of the Bible, including curricula devoted to nonheterosexuality and the Bible and the Church can enable and even empower congregations to become missionally holistic and hospitably welcoming and inclusive. Invoking a didactic engagement of science, specifically as it relates to discoveries about human sexuality as informed by anthropology, biology, psychology, and sociology, would also go a long way to encouraging local churches to develop attitudes that are less fearful and more open, accepting and affirming, of persons from the LGBTQQIA+ community, enabling and even empowering them to do so from a biblically based perspective. Curriculum is available! By employing the best methods of modern biblical scholarship, a different interpretation leading to a new hermeneutic becomes possible, knowing that maintaining fidelity to scripture to be an imperative for many Christians.

Processes leading to radical reformational transformation are invariably slow and challenging, requiring meticulous intentionality and sensitivity on the part of clergy. While the issues may be different in terms of creating change within specific congregational systems, the principles enabling, even empowering, shifts of any significance remain static. A major factor in making these advancements is found in a local missional church's development through claiming its unique identity, assuming that congregational identity is always adapting and evolving. A challenge accompanying this discovery process is that churches not merely accommodate, acquiescing to cultural mores without invoking a solid biblical and theological baseline. There can be a tendency to 'feel' pressured to make decisions based on societal concerns.

Helping congregations overcome bias and discriminatory practices toward persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation requires continuing education of both clergy and laity. Knowledge gleaned from deeper and more comprehensive studies of the Bible, the Church, and nonheterosexuality can empower congregations to become missionally holistic and hospitably inclusive. Engaging anthropology, biology, psychology, and sociology, as they relate to human sexuality, can encourage local churches to overcome fear to develop attitudes that are more open, accepting and affirming of LGBTQQIA+ individuals. Employing the best methods of modern biblical scholarship can lead to a biblical hermeneutic that supports a new openness of thought as well as the integrity of scripture.

Biblical hospitality provides a means of encouraging local missional churches to expand their circle of welcome, specifically regarding the invitation to persons from the LGBTQQIA+ community. The resulting expanded welcome from churches not only has the capacity to enhance local communities in general but will also help to build up a specific local congregation. 'Building up' local missional churches through reformational transformative process comprises a major emphasis described in detail by Malan Nel (2015:25, 205). Though not addressing the parameters associated with this issue, Nel's research was especially helpful regarding this study focussed on creating local missional congregations, specifically informative in developing hospitably welcoming and inclusive faith communities, churches that are open to the LGBTQQIA+ community.

A better understanding of the Bible from a holistic perspective, employing all the tools of modern biblical scholarship can lead congregations to embrace a wider perspective of invitation and outreach, but any resolution regarding how the church understands and engages issues related to nonheterosexuality and the Church will continue for some time to come. There will continue to be disagreement and division among sincere Christians, and the Bible will continue to be used to defend every perspective on the issue. But there is hope that cross-contextual and cross-cultural congregational conversations can become more prevalent on local missional churches, allowing for the potential to bridge the divide characterising this polarising issue facing 21st century Christendom.

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

### Authors' contributions

E.E.M., M.N. and T.W.S. conceptualised the research and performed the investigation. E.E.M. and M.N. assisted with project administration, gave direction with writing (review and editing), and supervision.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author, T.W.S. The

data is not publicly available because of it containing information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors, and the publisher.

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