

Review

Graeme Reid (2010) *Above the Skyline: Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso and the founding of an African gay church*. Pretoria: UNISA Press

Stephanie Rudwick
stephanierudwick@gmail.com

Graeme Reid's *Above the Skyline* is a compelling ethnographic account about an African church that created a 'home' for Christians who have same-sex desire and homosexual lifestyles. Founded in the mid-1990s in Johannesburg, South Africa and lead by the charismatic gay Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso, the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) preached Pentecostal Worship of a God who loves all humans irrespective of their sexual orientation and gender identities. While 'heterosexual participation was the exception' (8), the church was not meant to be an exclusive place for LGBT members. The Reverend's embracing nature and undisputed spiritual leadership is described in great detail by the author who conducted his fieldwork from 1995 to 1997. Although the personality and activities of Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso are the central focus in the book, Reid also succeeds in providing a vivid and balanced account of the social, political and gender dynamics in this predominately African church community. *Above the Skyline* offers valuable insights into the challenges facing Christian LGBT members. Providing rich ethnographic detail, the book is altogether a very accessible resource to students and staff in the humanities and in fact, to anyone interested in the complexities of LGBT Christianity in South Africa.

The book is structured into ten chapters and a postscript based on the prevalent themes emerging from the participant observation perspective of the author. The first chapter introduces the reader to the particular spiritual basis of the church and its inception. The second chapter provides classical anthropological introspection and offers some anecdotes to introduce

significant church members. In Chapters Three and Four, Reid describes in close detail how the church developed a theology that reconciled the conventionally perceived as dissonant identities of a ‘gay’/‘lesbian’ and ‘Christian’ person. The Reverend devised a broad conception of the term ‘home’ which signified, perhaps most importantly, being able to integrate, reconcile and to be comfortable with one’s Christian gay identity. ‘Being at home’ symbolised this comfort, but ‘being at home’ in the HUMCC also meant embracing church activities, while ‘being at home’ in one’s family meant holding good relationships with parents and the family [notwithstanding potential rejections]. The central metaphor in the theological teachings of the church is the concept of ‘healing’ but unlike in other Pentecostal traditions where healing primarily refers to physical, emotional or spiritual health, ‘healing’ in the HUMCC also related to social and political elements that inhibited a homosexual Christian identity. Hence, as the author of this book aptly summarises: “‘Salvation’ and ‘coming out of the closet’ were both aspect of ‘healing’ that demonstrated the transformative power of metaphor on reconciling potentially conflicting identities’ (68).

In Chapter Five, Reid describes the performance of gender identities in the context of a beauty pageant organised by Reverend Thandekiso. While contrasting the rigid and dichotomous construction of social and sexual identities suggested in the seminal work of McLean and Ngcobo (1994): *skesana* and *injonga* (the former representing the feminine male partner and the latter retaining a male social identity in a gay relationship), with the church’s mission, Reid attempts quite successfully to discuss the shifting ideas about homosexuality and gender identity. The building up to the event of the pageant and its multiple dynamics are described painstakingly and may not find the interest of all readers, but through this the author manages to describe the identity model of the church’s gender ideals, namely the stepping away from the dichotomised model of *skesana* and *injonga* in order to give way to a gendered-structured model that allows both partners in a male same-sex relationship to be men and two lesbian partners to be women. As a gender scholar in South African one can appreciate the progressive nature of the HUMCC’s stand at the time. While Reid’s account refers to the mid 1990s, there is no doubt that even today, a multitude of current African homosexual relationships in South Africa persist on being constructed around the dichotomised *skesana* and *injonga* model, which ironically often includes heteronormative power dynamics.

Something Reid repeatedly highlights in his book is the significance of kinship ties in African society and more specifically, for this African church community. While the HUMCC offered congregants 'one kind' of home, the charismatic Reverend and his colleagues consistently and effectively argued that the HUMCC could and should not replace one's family home. Hence, although the church provided 'some respite to family rejection' (132) the aim was never to replace the kinship bonds. The author focuses in two chapters (Six and Seven) on describing how the relationship with parents, siblings, other family members and the belief in ancestors is a major hurdle in the 'coming out' process among HUMCC members. Trying to 'live up' to one's family's expectation and wishes causes major distress for many African homosexuals and constitutes for many an insurmountable obstacle in living a homosexual lifestyle. Reid illustrates neatly how HUMCC sermons were often employed to stress that it was the church member's responsibility to help her/his parents and close relatives to come to terms with her/his same-sex orientation. But the author also illustrates how family violence permeated the 'coming out' process of certain individuals and how reconciliation attempts between the homosexual members of the church and their families sometimes failed.

Chapter Eight once again echoes the crux of the church's mission: the integration of homosexual activity and the Christian belief system, and the immense significance of 'gay and lesbian proselytizing in the HUMCC'. In the subsequent chapter, the author describes how the persistent rant that homosexuality is un-Christian continued to threaten the HUMCC but also stirred the Reverend's emphasis on the growth of the church. Against the background of a controversial Radio Metro programme in which a leader of the HUMCC, and other Christian, Islamic and Jewish leaders discussed homosexuality, Reid described the expansion and founding of a new church branch in Durban which was led by a lesbian pastor called Nokuthula Dhladla. This, the author emphasises was 'a manifestation and demonstration of the proselytizing mission of the HUMCC' (164). The Reverend Thandekiso's death is described in the last chapter, providing detail of the funeral and its conflict dynamics that also give further insight in the remarkable life that Tsietsi Thandekiso led.

The issue of HIV/AIDS receives only marginal attention in an earlier part of the book and is later mentioned in the postscript again. Although the author states that 'the impact of HIV/AIDS on the lives of the members of the church community was apparent' (54), the reader can only wonder about

the extent of the impact and whether perhaps Reverend Thandekiso may have been affected himself. Although it is mentioned that HIV/AIDS was occasionally discussed in the sermons, it is also clear that there was much silence surrounding the issue. Some church elders warned the congregation and particular member who are HIV positive not to live in hiding and isolation and to join the church, but there seem to have been no organised gatherings and activities directed towards people affected by HIV/AIDS in the church community. In the postscript, the author raises the subject again and describes in one paragraph how by the turn of the century, sadly, the virus took its toll on many members of the congregation of the HUMCC.

Not only does this book provide a quite phenomenal counter-narrative to the obstinate argument that homosexual activity is un-African, it also demonstrates that a Christian belief system can very well embrace non-heterosexual lifestyles. The theology of the HUMCC's is based on the belief that God created gay and lesbian people and consequently, the conviction that their natural sexuality is no perversion. Persons could sin only by not accepting their God-given, natural sexuality, whether hetero- or homosexual. While Graeme Reid's *Above the Skyline* represents a comprehensive and refreshing account of how an African church succeeded in reconciling individuals' homosexual identities with their devotion to Christianity, the book also leaves many questions unanswered for someone interested in the spiritual activities of the LGBT community in South Africa. But perhaps this just highlights that there remain many areas in the field that require further research.

References

McLean, H and L Ngcobo (1994) 'Abangibhamayo bathi mgimnandi (Those who fuck me say I am tasty)', in M Gevisser and E Cameron (eds) *Defiant Desire: gay and lesbian lives in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.