

GAY MEN, THE INVENTION OF ECCLESIAL INJUSTICE, AND ASPIRATIONS FOR REDRESS AND RENEWAL

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The 2019 progress report of the Sustainable Development Goals states that despite notable developments registered in global efforts towards attaining gender equity (SDG5), these efforts are hampered and undermined by “insufficient progress on structural issues . . . such as legal discrimination, unfair social norms and attitudes, decision-making on sexual and reproductive issues and low levels of political participation.”¹ The understanding of gender equity in many parts of the world, however, is ordinarily limited to purposeful provisions for the sexual and gender empowerment of women and girls. For instance, the intended reforms in accordance with SDG5 in Malaysia—whence the case studies on gay men for this article are drawn—concentrate solely on female citizens in terms of the eradication of discrimination, violence, sexual exploitation, forced marriages and female genital mutilation (FGM), redressing unpaid reproductive labor, inaccessibility to leadership and ownership positions in socio-political and economic arenas, and attenuated accessibility to resources pertaining to technology as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights.²

While these reforms are indispensable in the pursuit of greater equity in Malaysia that is home to 32.6 million people,³ I argue that they ironically demonstrate a lack of inclusivity on numerous levels through a deliberate elision of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) issues.⁴ Malaysian leaders portray LGBTQ people as enemies of Islam, consumers of a deviant and immoral culture, satanic disciples, malady-

stricken miscreants, and hapless victims of western moral depravity.⁵ They dismiss LGBTQ rights, principally same-sex marriages, as antithetical to Malaysian values⁶ despite the fact that sexually diverse and gender-variant people are an indelible part of the history of the Malay Archipelago.⁷

Same-sex expressions are criminalized in both secular and *Syariah* (Islamic) laws.⁸ Protection against gender discrimination as enshrined in Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution has been interpreted as exclusive of sexual diversity and by extension, gender variance as both non-normative genders and sexualities are often conflated.⁹ For instance, gay men are sometimes perceived as obsessively desirous of Gender Affirming Surgeries and transgender women are accused of being men who merely impersonate women.

State-sanctioned exclusion of LGBTQ people is not executed exclusively in Malaysian politics and jurisprudence, but also in non-affirming ecclesial spaces. Akin to Malaysia's deliberate focus on women and girls in its SDG5 advocacies, such churches readily embrace and support gender-related social justice issues, insofar as they represent "decent" and "respectable" heteronormative and cisnormative issues, such as those involving women and girls who conform to socio-culturally sanctioned gender performativities. These efforts are undeniably crucial but deficient in ecclesial efforts towards more holistic gender equity in the country. Fueled by one-dimensional approaches to biblical interpretation, tradition and canonical legalities, non-affirming churches stand as unyielding bastions that participate in the ossification of what the United Nations refers to as "structural issues" of inequity which contribute to suspicion and discrimination among LGBTQ people.

In this article, I showcase narratives from Malaysian Christian gay men that evince the injustice they experience in their own churches and their hopes for a more affirming praxis of communal Christianity in the country. "Aadesh," "Artisan," "Freddie," "Henri" and "Rainbowboy", whose selected narratives I feature, are English-speaking, educated, self-identifying gay men of various Christian denominations from Malaysia's Klang Valley who participated in a more expansive qualitative research project I undertook between 2012 and 2014 involving thirty Malaysian gay and bisexual men.¹⁰ While some of them continue to attend church services, others have ceased any form of ecclesial participation and formulated

individualized spiritualities or combined both, as most churches continue to act as sites of protracted oppression, intolerance and stigmatization for Christians whose sexual and gender identities are incongruous with ecclesial and theological heteronormativity and cisnormativity. I am not setting out to construct a gay-affirming or masculinist ecclesiology in this article, or generalize the experiences of Malaysian gay men. My intention is to accompany the discourses of a selection of Malaysians who are customarily silenced and disregarded due to condescending perceptions of aberrance and iniquity by unpacking the praxis of ecclesial prejudice to which they are subjected and their imaginings of radical inclusivity in their own faith communities. The realities of these gay men resonate with other LGBTQ people in and beyond Malaysia.

Despite the many important inroads that governments and churches worldwide have made in terms of LGBTQ affirmation, including in Asia, these efforts continue to be the exception rather than the norm.¹¹ By showcasing the voices of Asian people who live in Asia, I wish to provide a reminder of these extant realities as well as augment mostly Western-slanted literature on the continuing discomfiture and tension that exist between LGBTQ Christians and their churches due to non-normative sexualities and genders, and struggles with issues of heterosexism and heteropatriarchy.¹² As such, *my goal in this article is to unpack the main dynamics of ecclesial injustice as encountered by gay men, and parse the meanings behind their hopes for redress and eventual change on the part of churches.* In some ways, these hopes can be interpreted as a desire for “reparative justice,” or “a certain set of meanings that are communicated between those who make amends and those who receive them.”¹³ Rather than (re)entrenching them as victims devoid of agency or self-actualization, I aim to expose and foreground the real challenges that these men face and their aspirations for more life-giving ecclesial futurities.

I use the term “ecclesial injustice” in this article to refer to church practices, policies and programs which seek to obliterate, denounce or stifle same-sex attractions and behaviors which depart from acceptable gender norms and expectations. “Affirming” and “radical inclusivity” point towards “an attitude of total and unconditional acceptance”¹⁴ of LGBTQ people instead of conditional acceptance or patient tolerance.

Devising injustice

In Muslim-majority Malaysia, Christianity—along with Buddhism, Hinduism and other non-Muslim faiths—is a minority religion. Christians comprise Roman Catholics, Orthodox Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians, in addition to members of the Salvation Army, Assembly of God, Full Gospel Tabernacle and Evangelical Free Church.¹⁵ These are but a smattering of Christian traditions that have proliferated in Malaysia since the sixteenth century with the notable arrival of Roman Catholicism.¹⁶ With the exception of Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur (GSKL) and Antioch Mission in Asia (AMA) which mostly command membership of lesbian and gay Christians, and are unrecognized by both state and mainstream Malaysian Christian hierarchies,¹⁷ churches in Malaysia generally decry same-sex behaviors and unions.¹⁸

Consequently, many gay men have abandoned a Christian identity and/or church affiliation and/or participation, often in rage and sorrowful disillusionment with the contradiction they perceive between the proclamation of an affirming God, and conditional acceptance or outright rejection by churches. Unfortunately, “for too many Christians today, their belief in God who is forgiving and inclusive is challenged by a church which is not forgiving and inclusive.”¹⁹ Some continue to participate in religious events but compartmentalize their religious and sexual identities. Others embrace celibacy with mixed emotions. Others still construct distinctions between church and God, and formulate individualized spiritualities that are premised on a *mélange* of scriptural interpretation, traditional practices and non-Christian elements, and which eschew or minimize any form of ecclesial affiliation or adherence to doctrinal stipulations.²⁰ There is a significant number of Christian gay men, however, for whom individualized practices of Christianity that are devoid of church affiliation and/or participation do not constitute the fullness of a Christian identity. When I asked Artisan, a Cantonese-Chinese Malaysian and Pentecostal Christian in his late forties on how he felt about church in regard to in his relationship with God, he responded as such:

It's part of my life. I wouldn't say it's an option. And when I say I'm a Christian, one way to show your love is to be in a fellowship of his family, the brothers and sisters, instead of, oh God can be

everywhere, but if you can be outside, we don't have to go to church or whatever, I don't think this is a relationship.

Christianity, as Artisan envisions it, is a communal rather than personal practice which is suitably expressed through active performances of fellowship with "[God's] family" by "going to church" rather than a solitary devotion that hinges on a belief in God's omnipresence. Sathianathan Clarke posits that "Asian theology is personal but not private,"²¹ and its living out for many is communally exercised. For Artisan, a relationship with God is significantly compromised without regular church attendance. Artisan's view represents many sexually diverse and gender-variant Christians in the country for whom the doings of faith are necessarily annexed to, if not conflated with church participation, even if they have experienced churches as sites of oppression. The narratives in the ensuing section unveil the highly nuanced and intricate details of structural sexual inequity which contribute to ecclesial injustice.

Remedying homosexuality

Among the many manifestations of such injustice, Christian gay men speak most passionately against attempts at reparative therapy, also known as conversion or aversion therapy, which "is rooted in the notion that any nonheterosexual sexual orientation is a pathology in need of a 'cure'"²² but "challenged in court and found to be a fraud perpetrated on LGBTQ people and their families."²³ Freddie, a Hokkien-Chinese Malaysian educator in his early thirties who calls himself a "liberal Christian" recounts an experience of reparative therapy in the form of gay exorcism by well-meaning church leaders at his former church:

I had demons. At one point they sat me in the middle of a sanctuary, pastors and senior leaders of one of my former churches, they sat me in the middle of the sanctuary and they were arranged surrounding me like a circle, and they started to pray in tongues and started to cast demons out of me, and started to pray for the blood of Jesus to cover me again, and to cleanse me, to heal me from inside out and things like that.

Freddie's detailed account of the exaggerated ritual undertaken by "pastors and senior" leaders to rid him of "demons" through the practice of "pray[ing] in tongues" alludes to three significant ideas concerning

individuals with same-sex attraction in many Malaysian churches. First, and not unlike the belief of many churches around the globe, homosexuality is believed to be caused by destructive and debilitating diabolical elements that have successfully entrenched themselves in an individual.²⁴ Second, same-sex tendency is perceived as an ailment that can be effectively treated and resolved through specific forms of communal prayer that evoke “the blood of Jesus”—a biblical semiotic of “covenant, reconciliation, cleansing, sanctifying, redeeming, justifying, and victory”²⁵—as an insulating, protective, cleansing and healing force. Third, churches have also become significant purveyors and mechanisms of a belief that genders and sexualities are reform-able through divine interventions. In so doing, churches become co-conspirators in nation-wide projects of reparative therapy that exist in various pseudo religio-scientific forms. These projects, which mostly involve Malay-Muslim men and occur in dedicated centers,²⁶ have now found new homes in Malaysian churches.

Rainbowboy, a 22-year-old Cantonese-Hakka-Chinese Malaysian Lutheran has also been exposed to attempts at reparative therapy at a Pentecostal church he is currently attending although his experiences have not been as melodramatic as those of Freddie’s:

They actually have leaders there to talk to you about your sexual orientation, they will have prayer meetings, discussion, counselling, and I think it’s what they call to try to make you straight. I mean they don’t actually force you to change your orientation. They will tell you to go at that place where you’re comfortable with, and if you should really decide for help to be straight again, then by all means you can approach the church leaders, then they could have some sort of prayer meetings or stuff for you.

Rainbowboy speaks of a “comfortable” and conducive environment that is created at his church for gay men like himself who wish to “seek help to be straight again”. The mention of the word “again” suggests that these “church leaders” believe in an a priori heterosexual existence, perhaps alluding to an original state of grace that was subsequently tarnished and distorted through the sinfulness of human nature whereby “desire has functioned as an interpretation of the Fall of humanity.”²⁷ Furthermore, one is not “force[d] ... to change [one’s] orientation,” but encouraged to contemplate one’s same-sex inclinations in a “place where

[one is] comfortable." Many gay men of faith, and other sexually diverse and gender-variant people who cherish their religious beliefs, often construct spaces of spiritual breathability in response to experiences of homophobia, transphobia and biphobia in churches.

I argue that the comfortable place of which Rainbowboy's church leaders speak is in reality an avenue to unnerve and destabilize any form of self-assurance and self-actualization that has transpired in Christian gay men who may have established an interior reconciliation between their sexuality and spirituality, and who are learning to understand that both elements of subjectivity "are flip sides of each other—to be sexual is to be spiritual; and to be spiritual is to be sexual."²⁸ I suggest that for these leaders, the very notion of being Christian while remaining gay is unthinkable.

In contrast with Freddie's experience, Rainbowboy's is subtle. Rather than an explicit and elaborate ceremony of exorcism, a gay man is subtly invited to self-reflection and subsequently the possibility of ostensibly non-threatening "prayer meetings, discussion[s and/or] counselling" through which a transformation in sexual desire can potentially occur. Reparative therapy is thus couched in persuasively palatable and pastoral terms. The creation of such options denotes a belief that homosexuality is a divinely disapproved passing phase that should be tolerated at best. Thus, while the presence of a gay man may even be embraced at church, his sexual proclivities can never be accepted or affirmed. The sinner is loved, but his "sins" must continue to be decried and his condition "cured."

Persecuting from the pulpit

Some Malaysian gay men may not be subjected to reparative therapy, but still experience verbal attacks on their sexualities from their church leaders. Henri, a 30-year-old self-described "liberal Anglican" Tamil-Indian Malaysian deplores the malice that is embedded in "sermons":

When you go to church and there's sermons that, you've got the preacher, the minister, saying things, having his outburst against homosexuality out of nowhere, or making other sorts of statements, I just feel like, why do I want to subject myself to this, I'm going to church, and I almost invariably leave being more

frustrated than I was before I went in, yeah, I don't need this and I don't think this is me.

The “outburst” which Henri mentions refers to his righteous rage which erupts upon hearing “sermons”—likely shorter Anglican homilies—that bemoan a perceived moral decadence in the country. While this type of religious rancor rails primarily against “homosexuality,” it also targets departures from gender norms and expectations involving the role of Malaysian women as homemakers.²⁹ The pedagogical act of speaking against sexually diverse and gender variant people from the pulpit conscripts a God who is partisan to and solely favorable of heteronormative and cisnormative agendas, and protracts an incitement to homophobia, transphobia and biphobia in the country.

Henri's motivation for “going to church” is likely for the experience of God's unequivocal acceptance through a performance of communal liturgies and interactions which “envision[s] not only the creation of a church in which LGBT Christians are beloved, but a church in which all Christians, of all sexualities, can grow into fullness of life by the grace of God.”³⁰ Nonetheless, he discovers that the reality is quite the reverse for him. Based on his experience, church effectively canonizes condemnation, and his statements that he “do[es]n't need this and ... do[es]n't think this is [him]” instantiates a firm refusal to “subject [him]self” repeatedly to a potential guilt-induced sense of anti-gay victimhood at his (former) church.

Artisan shares similar experiences of what Michael Bernard Kelly calls “structured, sanctified oppression”³¹ at “mainline churches,” or churches which propound conservative, non-affirming theological approaches to LGBTQ people and practices:

Even though the mainline churches have been preaching it over the pulpit, you know, Sunday after Sunday, on their sermons that gay is sinful, gay go to hell and all that, I don't believe it. I used to be scared about it and that's why I stop having sex with men for a long time ... but now, with my personal relationship with God, coming to know more gay pastors and all that, and through our conversation, their teachings and all that, I don't think I am excluded from the love of God.

The “public excoriation of non-heteronormative sexuality ... typical in many churches”³² which Artisan used to experience on a weekly basis

propels him towards a self-imposed abstinence from “having sex with men” due to a deep-seated fear of offending God and the prospect of eternal damnation. For a period of time, he interiorized an ecclesial ideology that being a non-celibate gay man “excluded [him] from the love of God” as being sexually active contradicts common ecclesial exhortations for sexually diverse and gender-variant people to desist from acting on their inclinations.³³ Nevertheless, due to his “personal relationship with God,” or the formulation of a gay-affirming individualized spirituality that lies beyond the prescription and policing of “mainline churches,” he now finds himself liberated from his previous fears and included in God’s loving acceptance.

Artisan’s spiritual turnabout is also invigorated by steady acquaintance and interaction with “gay pastors,” possibly those whom he has met at open and affirming ecclesial spaces and/or events in and outside the country. Openly gay male pastors of Asian descent who are also human rights activists include Joe Pang and Jason Ho of Hong Kong,³⁴ Gary Chan and Miak Siew of Singapore, Joseph Chang of Taiwan, and Patrick S. Cheng and Boon Lin Ngeo of the United States. The presence of gay Christian pastors does not only endorse what is frequently condemned as blasphemous and unacceptable interlacings of faith and non-normative sexualities and genders. That pastors—representatives of God and church who are dedicated to interpreting, exercising, upholding and proclaiming divinely revealed truths—can be radically self-appreciating gay men themselves amplifies Artisan’s self-validation as a Christian gay man and fractures the myth that a Christian identity is necessarily heteronormative and cisnormative.

In experiences of “entrenched, sanctified homophobia”³⁵ from—and perhaps extending beyond—the pulpit that are similar to those of Henri’s and Artisan’s, 41-year-old Malayalee-Indian Malaysian Aadesh who identifies as a non-practicing Roman Catholic attributes his previous decision of withholding his sexuality from public knowledge to the operations of churches:

One of the reasons I think I was in the closet for so long was because of my faith. Here was a church that’s saying that inherently there’s something wrong with you. After I came out, I never doubted God but there was a clear rejection, in sort of like you

know don't hurt me anymore, because ... you've kept me in the closet for long enough.

Unlike Freddie and Artisan, Aadesh demonstrates a conflation of God and church in his perception of the faith. Despite the fact that he “never doubted God” and thus understands that “God cannot be used as the excuse to exclude women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered [sic] or other marginalized people,”³⁶ the “clear rejection” that he experienced at his previous church was inevitably translated as God’s own repudiation of his sexuality. Roman Catholicism paints a condescending image of people with same-sex attraction as miserable unfortunates in need of “respect, compassion, and sensitivity,”³⁷ their tendencies as “objectively disordered”³⁸ and their sexual activities as gravely depraved, intrinsically disordered, contravening natural law, futile, and lacking true anatomical and emotional complementarity.³⁹

What many non-affirming Christian establishments do not realize is that sexuality is integral rather than peripheral to the subjective production of many gay men, just as both sexuality and faith—“which seem to touch the very core of a person—the soul even”⁴⁰—are integral to the subjective production of many Christian gay men. Hence, the “trial”⁴¹ which Roman Catholicism is convinced that people with same-sex attraction endure does not stem from non-normative sexuality itself, but from political, socio-cultural and religious antagonism towards sexual tendencies which people with same-sex attraction experience as innate and a variation of human sexuality rather than pathological and sinful. As such, to be rebuffed through this logic by churches as representatives of God is for Aadesh’s very existence to be devalued and dismissed by God.

During the course of our conversation, Aadesh explained that being “in the closet” for him was not as much a matter of concealing his sexual identity in the public sphere as it was an active practice of denying who he really was to himself. He appears to perceive “‘outness’ as a reflection of a positive identity,”⁴² and to remain “in the closet” or eschew any form of self-acceptance is thus a deliberate act of shameful self-diminishment due to a reiterated and an interiorized belief in his worthlessness in the sight of God as ratified by the church’s pronouncement that “there’s something wrong with [him].” Little wonder therefore that even after Aadesh is able to embrace his sexuality, the sensation of being smothered

by his faith lingers in an indefinite manner. Emotionally-tagged memories of being “hurt” by Christianity continues to deliver an incapacitating experience.

Imagining redress and renewal

This section explores the narratives in which some of the gay men I interviewed articulate their hopes for churches to make amendments and undergo change in relation to their treatment of gay men by non-affirming Malaysian churches. These hopes, I suggest, are also aspirations for reparative justice. While Christian leaders and churches in various parts of the world have apologized for acrimonious attitudes towards LGBTQ people in both unambiguous and tentative tones,⁴³ no such endeavor exists in Malaysia. On the contrary, subtle measures to stamp out sexual diversity and gender variance have increased in recent years.⁴⁴ The following narratives are some responses from my research participants to my question on what they want to hear churches say to them in connection to their sexuality. For Rainbowboy, nothing short of a radically inclusive ecclesial demeanor is acceptable:

I would prefer, they will actually like, tell that to all the people, to gays like us that it's okay to be gay and it's okay to be Christian at the same time. Sometimes I really like the church to be more supportive for us, to actually tell us that it's okay to be gay. Just come to the church. Everyone is fine with it, we're your friends, we don't judge you, and yeah, we just want to get along with you.

A pronouncement from churches that “it's okay to be gay and . . . Christian at the same time” is, as Rainbowboy understands it, simultaneously an official declaration of unqualified affirmation for Christian gay men. He translates his earnest hope for churches to act in an unconditionally “supportive” manner towards gay men as the extension of genuine, heartfelt friendship and fellowship, and the absence of vituperative judgement. An invitation to “just come to church” is simultaneously an invitation to be part of a Christian community without what must often seem as an obligatory accompanying experience of suspicion, secrecy, subterfuge and skepticism.

A church where “everyone is fine with it”—“it” being shorthand for being gay—is the provision of a communal space where gay men's sexualities and spiritualities can be openly acknowledged, celebrated and shared

as mutually constructive and enriching. Redress and renewal must thus be a radical reversal of, as George Zachariah observes, how “sanctuaries which are expected to offer hospitality, comfort, and fellowship to all those who are weary and heavy-laden have become places that breed hatred, prejudice, and bigotry”⁴⁵ for people of non-normative genders and sexualities.

Henri appears to be doubtful of unconditional affirmation as materializations of redress and renewal, but expresses what he deems as acceptable:

Ultimately what I would like to hear is you're welcome to this church, that God loves you as you are, but failing that I would settle for not being vilified, not being made to feel that you are an anomaly, or rather that I'm an aberration to the natural order of things, yeah. That would be the least I could hope for.

The fundamental message that Henri desires to hear from churches is that of an unequivocal “welcome” predicated on the principle that “God loves [gay men] as [they] are,” and which gestures towards a conviction in God’s purposeful creation of gay men,⁴⁶ a view similarly held by other sexually diverse and gender-variant Christians.⁴⁷ This radical welcome also constitutes radical affirmation as it does not stipulate any condition either for ecclesial membership or pedagogical communications of divine love from churches.

As alluded to earlier, Henri almost seems to envision this approach as idealistic and likely unattainable when he expresses an alternative of “not being vilified” and treated as “an anomaly” or “an aberration to the natural order.” This secondary option, a form of “qualified acceptance of homosexuality”⁴⁸ serves the purpose of enabling him to be respectfully treated as a fellow Christian insider instead of being reviled as a deviant outsider. Henri appears to be minimally amenable to a situation in which churches are willing to refrain from their liberal and vociferous vilification of gay men as a divine mandate, and merely tolerate him and any expression of his sexuality even if they continue to disagree with how he chooses to live his life and faith. There are, as such, realistic limits to imagining and realizing ecclesial restitution and change.

Not all Christian gay men, however, seek redress and renewal. Churches have lost their significance for Aadesh and his self-understanding as a Christian gay man:

I've never asked myself that question because I don't believe that it needs to say anything to me anymore. I don't look at the church as playing that function, maybe that's why I identify as a non-practicing Catholic, listen, like many things in the history of the church, our absolutes have often been wrong. I finally have come to a place where I don't need the church to hear that anymore, I would say that because for young people who were like me, who are in church, and who really, genuinely want to be a part of that expression, for their sense of acceptance, that would be important, but not for me anymore.

Aadesh also challenges "an inflated sense of discursive authority"⁴⁹ in churches that dismisses the truths of actual lived realities. He speaks back to hubris of churches by bringing to light the reality of mistakes that exist "in the history of the church," including present "absolutes" in understanding and acting on issues of sexual diversity. By highlighting ecclesial errors, Aadesh engages in a "politics of counter-rejection"⁵⁰ which challenges and argues against the boastful metanarratives of churches.

Nevertheless, he holds no hope for redress or renewal. For him, churches only play a significant role in the lives of "young people" who continue to appreciate their involvement in church-related activities in order to gain "acceptance." As "a non-practicing Catholic," he purposefully creates a chasm between churches and his sexuality, and renders churches irrelevant and inconsequential to his existence. Aadesh no longer looks to churches for guidance, wisdom, validation or approval for his life as a gay man.

Conclusion

In the experiences of Aadesh, Artisan, Freddie, Henri and Rainbowboy, ecclesial injustice assumes the primary modes of reparative therapy and verbal castigations in churches. As these men and I have discerned together, such dynamics prove to be problematic and oppressive on numerous levels. Churches perpetuate the myth of gay men as demon-infested, psychologically broken beings in need of healing, conversion and repair by way of "heterosexualisation."⁵¹ They insult the capacity of gay men as "morally [and] spiritually bankrupt"⁵² subjects to form productive

relationships with God, other Christians and fellow human beings. By constructing these men as emblems of deviance, churches unwittingly sustain the notion that gay men are deserving targets of vitriol due to their “sinfulness” and collude with the ongoing systemic vulnerability of sexually diverse and gender-variant communities in Malaysia. Ecclesial injustice is an act of violence by churches against sexually diverse and gender-variant people in the name of a God whom they also paradoxically proclaim as all-embracing and limitlessly inclusive. Some of these men imagine possibilities of redress and renewal from churches in the form of ecclesial repentance and/or greater or wholehearted acceptance. Their musings are reflective of the desire for reparative justice, aware as they are that “the struggle for justice is an expression of faith in a world of injustice.”⁵³ Others like Aadesh are more inclined towards a complete detachment from official ecclesial spaces.

If Malaysian churches are sincere in their mission to be the loving presence of God in the twenty-first century, they need to re-evaluate their existing understanding and practices of inclusivity. If “the Christian faith is about God-human and human-human interconnectedness [and t]he church is a player responsible for fulfilling such interconnectedness,”⁵⁴ churches can play an important role in empowering LGBTQ people and assisting them in addressing the fragmentation caused by political, socio-cultural and ecclesial disapprobation. In the context of sexual diversity, the mission of power that churches hold must “[lead] to considerable diversity of expression, growth and human flourishing.”⁵⁵ Churches need to believe in, appreciate and be committed to deepening their understanding of diverse human realities, an approach which can only serve to shed greater light on the meaning and relevance of their own existence in an ever-evolving world.

Notes

1. United Nations, “Progress of Goal 5 in 2019,” Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls, 2019, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>.
2. Department of Statistics Malaysia, “Sustainable Development Goals Indicators,” Sustainable Development Goals, 2015, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/uploads/files/4_Portal%20Content/2_%20Statistics/SDG/goals/Goal_5.pdf.
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4. In this article, I use “LGBTQ” interchangeably with “sexually diverse and gender-variant.” I also refer to gay, lesbian and bisexual people as “people with same-sex attraction.”

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