

Playing the Waiting Game: The Changing Nature of Companionate Marriage at a Small Pentecostal Charismatic Church in Pretoria, South Africa

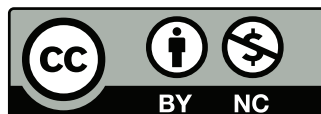
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Abstract

This article focuses on the ways in which a group of mostly gay, Afrikaans-speaking Christians interpret, appropriate, and deploy the institution of marriage at a small Pentecostal Charismatic Church in Pretoria. In so doing, it demonstrates that research into the relationship between Christianity and same-sex relationships in Africa needs to focus not only on moral panic and homophobia, but also on how Christianity creates agentive spaces for claiming sexual responsibility and constructing virtuous personhood. Through three life histories, it illustrates how a group of gay Afrikaans-speaking Pentecostals use the institution of marriage to broadcast outward respectability, reconfigure kinship, and refashion community. However, it also speaks to the frustration of this cultural ideal and the ways in which ‘waiting’ works to mitigate such frustrations.

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Introduction

In a post on the London School of Economics' Religion and the Public Sphere blog, Dutch scholar of religion and sexuality Adriaan van Klinken (2017, 2) suggestively asked whether religion is "only and inherently an obstacle, or can it also be source for African LGBT identity, community and activism? Can religion play a role", he continued, "in (re)building Africa as a continent of diversity including in matters of sexuality?" In answering these questions, he makes the argument that there is a need to move beyond "a narrow focus on African religious homophobia and to attend to the multiple and complex roles that religion plays in the contemporary dynamics of African sexualities" (2017, 4). In this article, I intend to do exactly that by focusing on the ways in which the institution of marriage has been appropriated and deployed at Elatio Ministries¹, a small Pentecostal Charismatic Church (PCC) in the north-east of Pretoria where I conducted my doctoral fieldwork between October 2013 and September 2016.²

Suffice it to say here that Elatio (from the Latin 'to lift or raise up') was founded in the erstwhile Verwoerdburg, today's Centurion, a suburb on the southern outskirts of Pretoria (Tshwane), just after South Africa's democratic transition. Founding members consisted of around five men, all from Charismatic Christian backgrounds, who shared a need for a charismatic church that catered to gay Afrikaans-speaking Christians. Elatio made the most of the constitutional and legislative changes that accompanied democracy and employed Pentecostal rhetoric, style, and rituals to provide a counter-narrative to claims that homosexuality was un-Christian and/or morally abhorrent, and to create space for the development of an integrated identity for gay Christians in a South African context. Servic-

es were initially held in a Scout hall in Verwoerdburg, but as the congregation expanded and contracted, and its means and needs changed, the church moved several times. The first move was to a small chapel in Irene, another suburb on the southern outskirts of Pretoria, and the second to an office complex in Centurion. Around the turn of the new millennium, the congregation moved to a community centre in Silverton, in the semi-industrial north-east of Pretoria, where services were attended by a small but dedicated congregation of about 30 members every Sunday evening. Although the congregation included members drawn from the middle classes, many congregants suffered financially as they were in and out of work or unemployed.

In this article, I focus on the ways in which marriage as an institution is employed and deployed at Elatio: to reconfigure kinship ties based on ideas other than those that turn solely on metaphors of shared blood and genes (Weston 1997), to fashion community, to broadcast outward respectability, and to lay claim to a cosmopolitan identity. In so doing, I also try to provide some insights into the continued salience of marriage for Elatio's gay congregants – despite the many critiques of marriage that have emerged from "Gay and Lesbian Coalitions who have correctly attacked marriage as an institution based largely on exclusion and exclusivity, both of which are antithetical to any proper concept of democracy" (Perumal 2011, 10). Through three life histories, I historicize same-sex relationships at Elatio and attempt to unpack the ways in which past experiences have shaped congregants' subjectivities and how they think about and negotiate companionate marriage as process rather than event, in some cases substituting it with legitimized forms of cohabitation. Lastly, I attempt to contribute towards filling a gap in the literature identified by Pauli and Van Dijk (2017, 261) who, in the introduction to a collection of essays on marriage in Southern Africa, noted that "research on same-sex marriage" is "very important" and "should be

¹ I make use of pseudonyms to protect the identities of institutions and informants.

² When the ethnographic present is used, it refers to this period.

considered in future comparative explorations of the topic of marriage.”

The changing nature of marriage in South Africa

Local versions of companionate marriage, and interpersonal experiences of intimacy more broadly, are shaped by social and political contexts (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, 2). In South Africa, same-sex marriages were illegal until well into the 21st century. The Civil Unions Act (Act No. 17 of 2006), passed by Parliament in 2006, made the country the eighth in the world and the first on the African continent to legalize homosexual unions. This piece of legislation paved the way for many homosexual men and women to marry officially.³ However, religious ministers and magistrates are not formally required to “solemnize these unions” and can “object on the grounds of conscience” (Burger and Nel 2008, 452). Moreover, many established mainstream churches prohibit their officials from performing same-sex marriages. The Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), for example, “does not allow its pastors to endorse same-sex marriages” and “a practicing homosexual cannot become a member of the AFM” (Burger and Nel, 452). Later iterations of Pentecostalism, and especially the Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCCs), have been even more scathing about same-sex marriages, proclaiming them un-Christian.

Deborah Posel (2005) makes the argument that sexuality has become one of the most important arenas of political contestation in South Africa post-1994. Characterized by a struggle over the discursive constitution of sexuality and shaped by wider dimensions of the post-apartheid social order, this politiciza-

tion revolves around the politics of race, class, generation, and nation. Graeme Reid (2013) frames this as a battle between patriarchy and constitutional values. Accordingly, constitutionally guaranteed equality on the basis of gender and sexual orientation stands in direct opposition to pervasive patriarchal and homophobic attitudes at the societal level. Same-sex unions form part of this contestation. For proponents, same-sex unions form part of a project with which to achieve individual fulfilment and satisfaction, and a means through which to lay claim to a global, cosmopolitan identity. For opponents, who tend to think about marriage in terms of social and sexual reproduction, same-sex unions represent a threat to the social order and the ‘traditional’ family life on which it rests.

The tradition-modernity dichotomy was once an elegant explanation and an important analytical framework for insights at a macro-level, but on the ground, things are often more complex. The “organization of production and consumption enables or impedes various kinds of conjugal ties” and informs the ways in which people experience local forms of companionate marriage (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, 2). In a South African context of joblessness and poverty, it can be particularly hard for some to build “relations structured primarily around affect, pleasure, and satisfaction” (2006, 6). The literature abounds with examples of young men and women who enter into relationships in order to achieve social and economic success and mobility (see for example Hunter 2010; Cole 2010; Thornton 2009). In the middle classes, too, economics has influenced how companionate marriage is viewed and practised. Deborah James (2017), for instance, notes that female members of the emergent South African black middle class are increasingly likely to “stay single in order to escape from the expenses and dependencies associated with getting married.” In such a context, partial or unfinished but no less consequential unions marked by cohabitation proliferate (White 2017), enlarging the social

³ Data regarding marriage and divorce rates released by Statistics South Africa in 2015 (Shisana et al. 2014) indicate that the number of civil unions registered in the country increased from 760 per year in 2009 to 993 per year in 2013.

space between full marriage and illegitimate cohabitation and reconfiguring gender and family relationships (Hunter 2017). Indeed, heterosexual marriage rates in South Africa have fallen and cohabitation has increased between 1995 and 2008 (see Posel et al. 2011, 104).

In this article, I argue that some of these “partial or unfinished” unions can be viewed as liminal spaces betwixt and between singlehood and marriage, marked by waiting, a state comparable to what Alcinda Honwana (2014) calls ‘waithood’. This state, characterized by the inability to achieve culturally sanctioned markers of successful adulthood such as marriage and the ability to provide for a family, is brought about in the main by failed neo-liberal economic policies and the disappearance of stable jobs across the African continent. However, Honwana stresses that “waithood” can be creative and involve the use of agency to fashion new spaces in the margins of mainstream society. “Partial or unfinished” unions, thus understood, constitute efforts to fashion “a new moral, social and cultural order in which” the objects of desire figure, and as attempts to “shape and transform vague hope ... into effective desire” by transforming “the setting so that these objects of desire could be hoped for – awaited – efficaciously and not just passively” (Crapanzano 2003, 20, 22).

In many instances, churches aid in the establishment of this “new moral, social and cultural order” (Crapanzano 2003, 20). Scholars such as Maria Frahm-Arp (2012) have argued that in situations where the attainment of cultural ideals has become difficult, churches can change people’s social behaviour and social relations and thus provide different ways of achieving cultural ideals such as marriage. At Elatio Ministries, the reinterpretation and deployment of marriage provides one such example. The resultant prolonged engagements may be viewed as a form of “soft patriarchy” (Van Klinken 2013), that is, as patterns of local church-based reconfigurations of sexuality that, although not entirely freed/removed from

patriarchy, nonetheless engender notions of gender equity and gender justice among congregants. I call such prolonged engagements “singlescapes.”

Companionate marriage at Elatio

During the services I attended at Elatio, Pastor Peter frequently spoke about romantic relationships and the need for faithfulness to one’s partner (singular). Companionate, faithful, monogamous marriage, sanctioned and solemnized by the church, was seen as the primary mechanism with which to fashion the connective tissue of committed same-sex relationships into kinship ties. In the third instalment of a three-part series of sermons entitled “Marriage / Relationships”, Pastor Peter drew this link quite explicitly: “God designed families,” he declared, “to provide for each other’s *liefdesbehoefes* [love needs] and to teach, lead, motivate and care for one another.” The institution of marriage, seen as the primary means of producing families, was also “designed by God”. It is a “gift from God” and constitutes “a hard-and-fast union (*vaste verbintenis*)” and “a cooperation agreement between two equal partners.” “A marriage,” he continued, “is to help each other to grow.” The institution is taken very seriously indeed. This is evidenced by the fact that prospective members of the church board must sign an agreement in which they undertake, among other things, to “be faithful to my life partner and to support and fulfil monogamous relationships as an example to the congregation.” The wife or husband of a new member of the church board automatically also becomes a member. And before they are married, both fiancés generally wear engagement rings to show that they are not only churchgoers but also part of a monogamous, committed relationship and therefore respectable members of society.

While performing marriages has become quite a cottage industry for pastors who want/need to supplement their incomes, it is not the

norm at Elatio. In more than two years of attending services, I saw numerous couples intending to get married in the church come and go without having their unions solemnized. Getting married can be a long drawn-out process for many congregants, though the reasons may differ from couple to couple. Jeanette and Magda, to mention just one example, first received marriage counselling from Pastor Peter after they had indicated to him that they planned to tie the knot. He “spoke with me for a long time, perhaps an hour or an hour and a half,” Jeanette remembers.

“He asked me whether I’m ready for it. I then told him that it feels right to me, it feels as though I had been in the closet. At one stage, with things that had happened in my life, I was a young girl, I am not going to elaborate, my lifestyle could have been different, but I didn’t know how my parents would react. And she [Magda] changed my life with a kiss.”

They would subsequently make a life-commitment (*lewensverbintenis*) at Elatio, but they are still “trying to get together a little money to do a big [real/formal] wedding.”

Since it became legal to do so in 2006, Pastor Peter has presided over a total of just 22 weddings – an average of about two per year. Pastor Peter expects prospective couples to attend services for extended periods of time before he is willing to preside over their weddings. When I quizzed a church elder about the reasoning behind this expectation, he answered with a question: “If you don’t want to attend church, why do you want to get married [in church]?” I also asked Pastor Peter about his reasoning for only allowing the weddings of church-goers, and he answered that:

...you can make quite a bit of money and I [sometimes] urgently need the cash ... But I have seen over the years that few of the guys who I don’t know really come to church. ... I want to know that every

relationship is a safe relationship. [We have an] unwritten rule that you don’t marry people if they haven’t been with us for a year. ... Seeing that marriage is an institution of God we want to do it right as far as possible. ... We have to create space for biblical principles ... so marriage is important to me ... it is important that we don’t just have *los-en-vas* [promiscuous] relationships.

This is a commonly held sentiment among senior church members at Elatio. According to one church elder:

Gay relationships in the past sometimes only lasted for a week. So, if guys can keep from going to bed together for six months or a year, it means that a relationship might last.

I think it interesting that, not in all cases but in many, people who have long-term or lifelong relationships are people who took it slowly at first, thought everything through carefully and came to a point and said “now I expose myself to you.” You know, who didn’t simply surrender everything at once ... I think it may have to do with mutual respect...

And you know, people today are just like, “it’s okay, let’s just jump in the bed” ... I may be totally wrong, but this is not only applicable to gay relationships. I think it is the order of the day. ... But you will see that people who hold back and who are perhaps engaged for a long time ... before they decide to get married and only then jump into bed are people whose marriages probably last longer...

I mean there are marriages that last for as long as people live, that we know of today, but not enough. It’s actually in the minority if I look around me... [and] I look on Facebook and read articles and

the newspapers. ... And many a time one wonders if people don't just get too impatient and rush into things without thinking it through properly and don't make sure and then later they regret it. You need conviction in your heart, you mustn't go look for conviction in other places...

I think today ... it is more about your physical needs than the long term and personal needs. ... I think if long term personal needs were prioritized then you'll know "listen, let's wait a bit and see if this thing is going to work?" "Is this person the right one?" Then you are going to have conviction.

As part of a sermon on the topic of marriage, Pastor Peter displayed a PowerPoint presentation he had made on a screen usually used for displaying the lyrics of songs sung during praise and worship. The presentation included "tips for a successful marriage". Tellingly, the only tips followed by exclamation points were "Become spiritually mature before you plunge into a relationship!!!!!" and "Never engage in a long-term relationship with a short-term person!"

Waiting is an important trope among believers at Elatio. It is also deeply symbolic. In addition to fashioning strong kinship ties within the church, it can be seen as a disciplinary practice that creates obedient wills and helps to make sense of the near constant state of waiting that marks many congregants' lives – waiting on and expecting things that rarely occur: waiting for spiritual gifts, waiting to eat during fasting, waiting for benefits, waiting for jobs, and waiting in clinic lines for antiretrovirals (ARVs). As Crapanzano (2003) explained, waiting can be understood as a concept that redefines the people who speak about and engage in it – changing the ways in which they perceive aspects of the world around them and therefore also their selfhood. Understood in this way, waiting in Elatio is a transforma-

tive act. In addition to its purely functional or instrumental aspects, the expectations and supposed virtues of waiting with regard to marriage in the church works to normalize waiting more generally and helps congregants make sense of and accept a feature of their lives that might otherwise become unbearably frustrating. As the church teaches, when one is patient, disciplined, and observant, a meaningful and long-term romantic relationship is a likely result. This, in turn, could very well lead to other meaningful gains such as non-biological kinship ties and community within the church, the ability to broadcast outward respectability to the world as well-thought-of members of society, and the ability to subvert a quintessentially patriarchal institution to lay claim to citizenship (in heaven and on earth).

In her work on the reconfiguration of sexuality in charismatic churches in southwestern Nigeria, Tola Olu Pearce (2012) writes that new subjectivities can be crafted through the training of emotion and sexuality regulated by producing and channelling feelings of sexual desire. Melissa Hackman (2016) terms this kind of emotional, bodily, and religious discipline and practices "desire work". In Elatio, waiting might also productively be considered "desire work" in that it constitutes a technology of the self with a focus on attention, care, and the correction of individual subjectivity with a view to shaping the ways in which congregants make sense of and shape the world, as well as their place in it.

Case studies

Companionate marriage is clearly a cultural ideal at Elatio. Pastor Peter and his partner are married and serve as an example to other church members. They met in church, made a "life commitment" (*lewensverbintenis*) in December of 2007, and were officially married on October 12, 2013. Theirs is not a marriage based on classically stereotypical, patriarchal gender roles. "I dominate on certain levels,"

Pastor Peter told me, while his partner “dominates on others. We supplement each other well.” The three-part series of sermons on “Marriage / Relationships” mentioned above included a message to Pastor Peter’s partner:

This I want to say to my husband: Thank you for always building me with positive words. Thank you for always working in quality time for me. ... Thank you for putting my needs before your own. Thank you for supporting me... May our marriage be an example to you [congregants].

But theirs is by no means the only example of companionate marriage at Elatio. The three case studies that follow serve to illustrate some of the ways in which companionate marriage is perceived to fit into and change congregants’ lives.

Tilly

Tilly is in her late thirties. Born in what used to be referred to as a ‘Coloured’ community in a small town (“about as big as your eye”) in the Northern Cape province during apartheid, she was raised by her grandparents. Her grandmother, a staunch Catholic, “was very parochial, very conservative, and she felt you’re in the Catholic Church or you’re not in the Catholic Church.” Tilly therefore spent her childhood in the Catholic Church, but told herself that she would leave home and the church the moment she turned eighteen. “Their beliefs” and “the way they did things” had made her feel unwelcome in the church. True to her word, she moved to Pretoria upon turning 18 a little more than two decades ago. She also joined a Pentecostal church.

Having been aware of her homosexuality from an early age, she decided to join a sexually conservative Pentecostal church, because she felt that if she converted and lived according to the church’s prescriptions (she wore

long skirts and long sleeves, did not cut her hair, and covered her head, for example), she would be cured “of this wrong thing that I do. It is in the Bible, it is wrong, you go to hell if you live like that; that is what I believed. So I thought that if I went there then I will become straight.” She also participated actively and sang in the church’s youth groups. She was not ‘cured’, however, “because you don’t just become straight.” Indeed, it “didn’t happen like that and in my attempt to be straight I had a son and came out of the closet pregnant.” Tilly subsequently left the church and did not find another spiritual home for the next four or five years.

But she did find love, and love brought her to Elatio. She met her partner through a mutual friend and they “started dating more-or-less the same day.” They moved in together after having dated for about two years and were married five years later. They had bought each other engagement rings, and later replaced these with wedding rings. But getting married was no easy process. Tilly and her partner went to Home Affairs in 2010, but they “were treated relatively badly there” and they left without being able to tie the knot. However, someone did give them the contact details of a pastor who could help them. They contacted the pastor, who met them for marriage counselling and then invited them to Elatio. They “attended and attended and attended and became involved and later became fully fledged congregants in the church.” The pastor subsequently agreed to officiate the wedding. Tilly struggled to get her mother to come to terms with her choice, but she “eventually said that she accepted it.” Securing a venue also proved very problematic, “because the moment they hear[d] it is a same-sex marriage or a gay marriage then it became difficult.” They did, however, ultimately manage to find a little hall and a caterer. The hall was set up like a church, and they held a “typical, ordinary wedding;” with Tilly’s mother walking her down the aisle and her partner’s brother signing as a witness. Tilly and her partner adopted a baby girl that

same year.

The pastor who had introduced Tilly to Elatio and who had presided over her wedding would leave the church after an acrimonious divorce, taking a substantial number of (female) congregants with her. Tilly decided to stay, however, because she felt she had become “important to the church, and the church was very important to” her. The result has been that Tilly is one of only a few long-time, female congregants in the church. “The split is none of my business,” she told me, and “while I was not welcome anywhere else, I could not leave the church because of a mess/shambles.”

Tilly’s own marriage would not last either. She was divorced in 2015. She and her partner have joint custody of the little girl they had adopted. (Tilly has sole custody of her teenage son.) Both still attend church. Tilly is an important member of Elatio’s music ministry. She sings and has recently learned to play the drums. She travels from Silverton to Centurion every Thursday evening for practice and arrives at church approximately three hours before the service on Sunday afternoons to help unpack and set up equipment. She has performed with the music ministry in Durban and Boksburg. “I am very committed,” she told me, “I have to say, when I put my heart on something. The music ministry is important to me.”

Marius

Pastor Peter considers Marius a “model congregant.” After Marius’ recent engagement, Pastor Peter proudly told me: “Look where he came from, and where he stands today.” Marius’ story is a remarkable one. Shortly after I had met him in church in 2013, he agreed to share his life history with me, which I recorded during a set of interviews in my office on campus and over lunch. He also supplied me with copies of letters he had written to his dead mother and father in order to try and work through unresolved feelings. Relying

on these sources, I retell relevant parts of his story here:

Marius was born in 1983 and spent most of his early childhood living in towns on the East Rand, depending on where his father found employment as a road-worker. When Marius was around ten years old, his father was involved in a work-related accident and was medically boarded⁴ as a result. The family subsequently moved around until his mother found work as a nurse in Ventersdorp, where they settled. Marius attended high school in the town. He also became aware of his own homosexuality during this period (he told me that he had known that he was gay since the age of fifteen) and suspected that his parents were aware of the fact.

Marius had not yet finished high school when his mother suffered heart failure and passed away. This left his father unable to support the family financially (seeing that they now had to make do with only his disability pension). To supplement their income, Marius left school and started working a cash register at a local grocery store. However, his father, a member of the Old Apostolic Church, came to blame Marius for his mother’s death and left town not long thereafter. Left completely to his own devices, Marius made his way to Witbank in 2001 “to get away from Ventersdorp”. From Witbank he moved to Middelburg, where he stayed for a few months. In October of 2003 he decided to hitchhike to Pretoria.

In the capital, he found work at a gay nightclub. Though he had had previous sexual encounters, “a new world opened up” for him there and he “slept around terribly.” Ri-aan, whom he met at the club around 2003/4, invited him to church the following year and Marius “gave his heart to the Lord” in 2005. This initial attempt was not successful, however; Marius thinks this was because of “bad influences” in the form of relationships and drug use that followed his diagnosis with HIV. In the period that followed, Marius’ health

⁴ Medical boarding refers to the inability of an employee to continue with their job because of illness or injury.

suffered, and he lost teeth due to his ‘Meth’ addiction. To sustain his addiction, Marius started to work at a sex shop and to pirate and sell DVDs. Crystal Meth, he told me, “took me down.”

Marius remained in contact with Riaan during this difficult period and decided to go back to church around 2010. This, he feels, is when things really started to change for the better – both materially and spiritually. At church he came into contact with “the right people”, met his “real family”, and “really” gave his “heart to the Lord.” Riaan helped him to find work in the formal economy and to access medical care while Pastor Peter helped him to realign himself spiritually and to process feelings about his parents (among other things, he encouraged Marius to write the letters mentioned above). Marius subsequently managed to obtain a high school diploma in 2013. “Riaan brought me to my feet,” he told me, and “Pastor Peter saved me.”

Marius met his partner at church. They were both members of the music ministry and of a similar age. Romance ensued and resulted in an engagement. When I recently had a chance encounter with Marius at a medical centre where he had just started work as a receptionist (a job that Pastor Peter helped him secure), he told me about the engagement and the plans for their upcoming wedding in November. He beamed with joy and told me that he “can’t believe” he is “getting married.” He also told me that he and his fiancé are not yet cohabiting but that they have “plans” and that he is excited at the prospect of moving in together. Clearly, this represents the culmination of a long process.

But the process is not yet complete. When I mentioned Marius’ engagement to Riaan, he told me that he thought it a good thing that Marius had met his partner, someone “strong in his faith”, in church. He thought it just as important, though, that “they don’t yet stay together, they are going to wait.” He continued, “the two of them decided that they

are going to keep the tuck-shop⁵ closed until they have conviction in their hearts that it is the right thing to do, which I naturally admire because there are very few people today [who have such an attitude].”

Riaan

Riaan is a long-serving member of, and elder in, the church. He is in his early sixties and works as a bookkeeper. Owing to the particularities of the South African legal situation, he was denied the possibility of companionate homosexual marriage for most of his adult life. This was a cause of great frustration for Riaan. He is much older than his partner, who is in his thirties. They have been engaged for more than two years now and have been cohabiting for an extended period.

When I quizzed him about his apparent hesitation (and other gay couples’ more generally) to tie the proverbial knot, he told me that “everybody wants commitment, but is not always willing to make it. Many people stay engaged,” he continued, “because it leaves them with a way out. It is commitment, but the commitment is not total.” He also mentioned that money can be an issue. Some people might not be in the financial position to pay for a wedding and others are wary because there have been instances where divorces have led to congregants losing substantial amounts of money.

On the surface, it seems as though engagement has, to a large extent, provided Riaan and his fiancé with most, if not all, of the advantages of marriage, but without many of the possible drawbacks. Making a ‘life commitment’ (*lewensverbintenis*) has allowed Riaan and his partner to circumvent the church’s stance on premarital sex and cohabitation, allowing them to live as though they were a

⁵ Tuck-shops are small stores that sell sweets and snacks and are usually located on the premises of schools. The expression “to keep the tuck-shop closed” refers to not making treats (or sex) available.

married couple without fear of sanction or judgement. It has allowed them to establish a nuclear family. The kinship potential of marriage as an institution has thus more or less been realized. It has also allowed them to broadcast outward respectability to the world.

Many of the advantages of marriage have thus been achieved without many of the possible drawbacks. There is commitment, but the commitment is not total. The door is left open, or at least unlocked. Moreover, nobody is exposed to potentially expensive divorce settlements. According to Pastor Peter, “then there isn’t all this [potential] legal costs [involving] attorneys” and “everything is much easier.” The ‘ease’ to which Peter refers goes beyond simply guarding against potentially expensive divorces. It also refers to a way around expensive ceremonies involving family members who might be negatively disposed or directly opposed to homosexual unions. Riaan’s partner, Rudi, for instance grew up in a family of Jehovah’s Witnesses.⁶ Although his relationship with his close kin had been strained for quite some time, “because I did things that were not right in their eyes ... I was a smoker ... I drank heavily [etc.],” he still kept contact with his sister and father (although they did not see each other). But when they learned that he was going to get married, they threatened to break off all contact: “[i]t was OK for them that I lived in sin,” he told me, “but if I got married then it is different.” This is significant, because prior to meeting Riaan and joining the church, Rudi had been in “a totally open relationship. I was very promiscuous ... I was in the club scene, I did all the wrong things, you can just imagine...” During this time his family did not completely sever all contact with him. Yet the thought of a homosexual union, sanctioned and solemnized in

the church, was too much for them to countenance. Under such circumstances it is understandable that people might want to avoid or at least to delay wedding ceremonies.

The above are all seemingly good reasons to prolong engagements, but they also seem very instrumentalist. We might interpret the long engagement as a liminal phase connected to congregants’ changing structural positions in the church. But there seems to be more to it than that. I discuss elsewhere (Pieterse 2016) how a perceived lack of spiritual gifts frustrates congregants who wait on these experiences that stand so central to Pentecostalism. What is more, I show how experiences of marginalization and suffering impede the cultivation of faith on which relationships with the divine can be constructed, and in turn frustrate direct experiences of spiritual gifts. This leads to a near constant state of waiting that characterizes congregants’ lives within church. Symbolically, the long engagement – much like waiting on gifts of the Spirit – reflects the lives of many congregants outside of church and helps them to better come to terms with it. The wearing of engagement rings, for example, works as an outward marker of respectability. The gesture therefore has symbolic resonance with the performance of becoming moral.

Riaan’s life has been characterized by waiting. He was diagnosed with HIV in 1990, when antiretroviral medication was unavailable. Upon his diagnosis, his doctor told him, in as many words, to get his affairs in order. He consequently cancelled his insurance and cashed in on his retirement fund. He would be confined to death’s waiting room until the commercial availability of antiretroviral medication in South Africa. As we have seen, he has also had to wait for a very long time before he could even consider marriage to another man. In addition to the purely instrumental motivations discussed earlier, his apparent hesitation to marry might be seen as a symbolic continuation – and normalization – of other forms of waiting that have marked his life. In this sense

⁶ The Jehovah’s Witnesses are a Christian church that believes that the end of the world is looming. They also hold the conviction that the secular world is corrupt and that social interaction with non-members should be limited. Baptized members who leave the church can be shunned or ‘disfellowed.’

it can be seen as a form of desire work, or disciplinary practice (characterized by waiting), that has marriage as an end-goal.

Conclusion

The three stories outlined above illustrate some of the differences in the ways in which marriage fits into congregants' lives at Elatio. These differences are informed by factors such as age or generation, biological sex, and class position. We have seen how a quintessentially patriarchal institution has been appropriated by a group of gay Christians in order to lay claim to a cosmopolitan identity. Patriarchy is simultaneously bought into and subverted. Traditional gender roles, while being spoken of as the ideal, are altered. These three case studies are good examples of what Adriaan van Klinken (2013) calls "soft patriarchy". That is to say that they represent patterns of local church-based reconfigurations of sexuality that, although not entirely freed or removed from patriarchy, nonetheless engender notions of gender equity and gender justice among congregants. Moreover, they provide evidence for Van Klinken's (2017, 2) suggestion that religion is not "only and inherently an obstacle" but that it can "also be a source for African LGBT identity, community, and activism" and that it might "play a role in (re)building Africa as a continent of diversity including in matters of sexuality."

What is more, this paper draws the attention to the ways in which local forms of companionate marriage are shaped by large, structural forces such as political economy, and how these forms can be simultaneously unique and universal. Experiences of increasing economic hardship have transformed the way in which marriage fits into the lives of Elatio's congregants. As in other parts of South Africa (see, for instance, White 2017; Hunter 2017), "not quite" marriages have increased and become more acceptable, although they have taken on somewhat different forms. The AIDS

epidemic too has changed perceptions around the institution. Although these are comparable to shifts in perception in other parts of and among other groups in the country, these changes cannot be said to be exactly the same. The Elatio case illustrates how marriage as an institution serves as a technology of the self with which a group of gay Afrikaans-speaking Pentecostals broadcast outward respectability (in that marriage continues to symbolize bourgeois respectability) and lay claim to citizenship (in heaven and on earth). But it also speaks to the frustration of this cultural ideal (including the high cost of weddings, the danger of being ostracized by family, the risk of costly divorces, and not fitting into a culture that does not emphasize long term relationships) and the ways in which this is made sense of and negotiated.

Vincent Crapanzano (1985, 44–47) writes that the experience of waiting can produce "feelings of powerlessness, helplessness and vulnerability", and that people often seek to free themselves from such feelings through "magical ways" (p. 44). These might include the affirmation of faith in a transcendent power, god, or spirit through pilgrimages and/or offerings. People may also invent their own "magic", personal taboos, and/or rituals. In so doing, waiting becomes "a moral allegory – a private purgatory in which" moral and psychic fibre is tested, virtue rewarded and vice punished (p. 45). People are "expiated through waiting." They "learn from it." They "become disciplined, hardened, [and] stoical" (p. 45). Through acts of disciplined optimism, waiting can be transformed (and anxiety lessened) into something specific – such as eternal peace or the Second Coming. Crapanzano warns, however, that such acts risk "sacrificing 'reality' to 'psychic need'" (p. 47). Past experiences of waiting certainly engendered feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and vulnerability in Riaan. And it is clear that Pentecostal rhetoric and ritual provided some of the tools necessary to alleviate those feelings and to transform experiences of waiting into something more positive – in

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this case, an expectation of companionate homosexual marriage sanctioned and solemnized in the church. But it also seems clear that this process did not produce neuroses, psychoses, or other harmful breaks with ‘reality.’ Rather, it is more likely to have helped him to experience the world that is (‘reality’) as the world that should be.

This paper shows how the employment and deployment of marriage in combination with specific forms of desire work, in a context of bricolage and cultural osmosis, has helped some gay Afrikaans-speaking Christians to cope with the vicissitudes of life in the post-colony. In much the same way as it has for the majority of their fellow South Africans, mar-

riage for the average congregant at Elatio has become a complex, unfolding process rather than a singular event; in some cases giving way to newly legitimized forms of cohabitation that, in the form of partial or unfinished unions, work to reconfigure gender and family relations in the context of a rapidly changing society (it is worth mentioning that this trend is different from the one Solway (2017) noted in Botswana, where complex “slow marriages” were giving way to “fast”, singular events). These reconfigurations work to create ontological shifts that help congregants to see the world and their place in it differently, and therefore to counteract the experiences of marginalization and suffering that mark their lives.

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