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RELIGIOUS LEADERS AS AGENTS OF LGBTIQ INCLUSION IN EAST AFRICA

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When Ugandan parliamentarians passed a new Anti-Homosexuality Bill in March 2023, they reportedly did so under pressure from, and with the enthusiastic support of, religious leaders.[1] In other African countries, too, recent legal and political struggles around LGBTIQ rights often feature religious leaders as key actors in campaigns that incite hate speech against, and contribute to the marginalization of, LGBTIQ communities and actively support or promote anti-LGBTIQ legislation and policies.[2] Given this situation, it is easy to view religious leaders as drivers of what has been described as the 'homophobia spectacle' that can be witnessed across the continent.[3] Even in countries that recently decriminalized same-sex relationships, such as Botswana, church pastors continue to argue that homosexuality is 'against Christianity' and therefore 'should not be allowed

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1. Kristof Titeca, 'Unpacking the geopolitics of Uganda's anti-gay bill', *African Arguments*, 10 March 2023, <https://africanarguments.org/2023/03/unpacking-the-geopolitics-of-uganda-anti-gay-bill/> (22 March 2023).
2. LGBTIQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (sometimes a plus is added to indicate other categories and self-identifications). We recognize the debate around this terminology but acknowledge that versions of this acronym are widely adopted by African activists and scholars; see Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (eds), *The queer African reader* (Pambazuka Press, Dakar, 2013).
3. Kenne Mwikya, 'The media, the tabloid, and the Uganda homophobia spectacle', in Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (eds), *Queer African reader* (Pambazuka, Dakar, 2013), pp. 141–154. For a debate about the usefulness of the term 'homophobia', see Ryan Richard Thoreson, 'Troubling the waters of a "wave of homophobia": Political economies of anti-queer animus in sub-Saharan Africa', *Sexualities* 17, 1–2 (2014), pp. 23–42.

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in this country'.[4] Within international Christian bodies, such as the worldwide Anglican Communion, African church leaders are often associated with anti-LGBTIQ stances.[5] For instance, early in 2023, the Anglican churches in Uganda and Kenya strongly rebuked the Church of England for its decision to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions.[6]

Much can be, and has been, said about the reasons why religious leaders have become so deeply involved in anti-LGBTIQ politics in Africa over the past 20 years or so and what this tells us about the complex intersections of religion, sexuality, politics, and law at local, national, continental, and—given the transnational dimensions—global scales.[7] Yet, it would be incorrect to characterize the role of the Church in Africa only in terms of international networks and national policy influence concerned with anti-LGBTIQ activity. More nuanced analyses are needed, especially at the local level.

In this briefing, we focus on the flip side of these dynamics, which hitherto has received far less attention in the media and scholarly research: The possibility that local religious leaders can be, and in fact already are emerging as, the 'unlikely allies' of LGBTIQ activists and communities on the continent.[8] The most illustrious example is the late Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, who, after the end of apartheid in 1994, declared the fight against homophobia to be the next priority in the quest for justice in South Africa and who became one of the most outspoken religious leaders globally advocating for the dignity and rights of same-sex-loving persons.[9] Less prominent, and working in a country far less conducive to LGBTIQ

4. Neo Kolantsho, 'Pastors pledge to "heal" homosexuals', *The Midweek Sun*, 16 February 2022, <https://www.pressreader.com/botswana/the-midweek-sun/20220216/281505049646256> (30 July 2022).
5. Robert Vanderbeck, Joanna Sadgrove, Gill Valentine, Johan Andersson, and Kevin Ward, 'The transnational debate over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion', in Stanley D. Brunn (ed.), *The changing world religion map: Sacred places, identities, practices and politics* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2015), pp. 3283–3301.
6. See Rev. Dr Stephen Samuel Kaziimba, 'Church of Uganda responds to Church of England's decision to bless same-sex unions', Church of Uganda, 10 February 2023, <https://churchofuganda.org/blog/2023/02/10/response-to-church-of-englands-decision-to-bless-same-sex-unions/> (24 February 2023); Sharon Resian, 'Gay marriages won't apply in Kenya: ACK's Ole Sapit', *Capital News*, 12 February 2023, <https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2023/02/gay-marriages-wont-apply-in-kenya-acks-ole-sapit/> (24 February 2023).
7. See the special issues Barbara Bompani and Caroline Valois (eds), 'Sexuality and morality in Uganda', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 9, 1 (2015); Ebenezer Obadare and Adriaan van Klinken (eds), 'Christianity, sexuality and citizenship in Africa', *Citizenship Studies* 22, 6 (2018); M. Christian Green (ed.), 'Law, religion, and same-sex relationships in Africa', *Journal of Law and Religion* 36, 1 (2021).
8. Ezra Chitando and Tapiwa P. Mapuranga, 'Unlikely allies? Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists and church leaders in Africa', in Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (eds), *Christianity and controversies over homosexuality in contemporary Africa* (Routledge, New York, NY, 2016), pp. 171–183.
9. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, 'Race and sexuality in Desmond Tutu's theology of Ubuntu', in Sarojini Nadar, Tinyiko Maluleke, Dietrich Werner, Vincentia Kgabe, and

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rights, is another (retired) Anglican bishop, Christopher Senyonjo, who lost his position in the Church of Uganda as a result of his advocacy for LGBTIQ people.[10] These and other examples demonstrate the significant contribution that progressive religious leaders make to change the public narratives of religion and sexual diversity in contemporary Africa.[11] Yet, the focus of our discussion here is not on these relatively high-profile figures but on the recent efforts of LGBTIQ community–based organizations in East Africa to engage with religious leaders as potential allies and advocates at grass-roots levels, enlisting them as agents of change for LGBTIQ inclusion.[12]

East Africa, specifically Kenya and Uganda, is one region where issues of sexual and gender diversity have become deeply politicized in recent years, often with the active support of conservative religious actors, and also where there is a network of relatively well-organized LGBTIQ activists and groups campaigning for social, political, and legal changes.[13] This briefing is informed by the collaborative work we, as authors, have recently undertaken as part of the research project, 'Sexuality and Religion in East Africa' (SERENE) in the period 2020–2023, in collaboration with a group of local community-based organizations in Kenya and Uganda.[14] Representatives of six local organizations participated in a workshop on 'Religious Leaders as Agents of Change: Promoting LGBTIQ Equality and Inclusion in East Africa', held at Egerton University, Kenya, in February 2022. Each of these organizations engages with religious leaders on issues of LGBTIQ equality and inclusion. The aim of the project and workshop was to map these efforts and analyse their strategies in order to understand the role of religious leaders as crucial actors in achieving social change, promoting equality, and building inclusive societies, specifically in relation to sexuality.

Rudolf Hinz (eds), *Ecumenical encounters with Desmond Mpilo Tutu: Visions for justice, dignity and peace* (UWC Press, Cape Town, 2021), pp. 99–108.

10. Adriaan van Klinken, 'Changing the narrative of sexuality in African Christianity: Bishop Christopher Senyonjo's LGBT advocacy', *Theology & Sexuality* 26, 1 (2020), p. 2.

11. See Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity and sexual diversity in Africa* (Hurst & Co., London, 2021).

12. For broader context, see the report written by Marie Ramtu, 'Faith-based efforts in East Africa to combat discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity' (Arcus Foundation, Kalamazoo, 2022), <https://www.arcusfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Faith-Based-Efforts-in-East-Africa-to-Combat-Discrimination-Based-on-Sexual-Orientation-and-Gender-Identity.pdf> (9 March 2023).

13. Stella Nyanzi, 'Queer pride and protest: A reading of the bodies at Uganda's first gay beach pride', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, 1 (2014), pp. 36–40; Damaris Parsitau, 'Law, religion, and the politicization of sexual citizenship in Kenya', *Journal of Law and Religion* 36, 1 (2021), pp. 105–129.

14. See Sexuality and Religion Network in East Africa, University of Leeds, no date, <https://serene.leeds.ac.uk/> (12 April 2023).

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Why engage religious leaders?

Given their influence on communities' beliefs and social behaviours and the trust placed in them, religious leaders are increasingly recognized as critical gatekeepers with regard to addressing developmental and societal challenges, including matters of gender and sexuality.[15] Their ability to affect change with regard to values, social norms, and attitudes towards non-conforming groups in contexts of high religiosity is crucial and is increasingly recognized by the international development community.[16] This is particularly true in Uganda and Kenya where levels of religiosity are extremely high, with more than 90 percent of the population claiming some religious affiliation.[17] When asked about the rationale for their efforts to engage with religious leaders, representatives of the community-based organizations participating in our project all referred, in various ways, to the important role religious leaders play in local communities and in society at large. As Ishmael Bahati, Executive Director of PEMA Kenya,[18] put it:

> Faith plays a big role in terms of decision-making in this country be it political, social, economic, or health. We thought that working with religious leaders would be a better approach for inclusivity towards the LGBTQ community. Discrimination and stigmatization are majorly based on faith. So, we figured that the best way to deal with such a challenge is to involve faith leaders so that they can educate people on the matter of sexuality and gender in relation to faith.[19]

The point here is that religious beliefs and the interpretation of sacred scriptures, such as the Bible and the Quran, shape many people's views of, and attitudes towards, issues of LGBTIQ rights. Given that such beliefs and interpretations often come from religious leaders, the latter can also play a

15. Elisabet le Roux, Neil Kramm, Nigel Scott, Maggie Sandilands, Lizle Loots, Jill Olivier, Diana Arango and Veena O'Sullivan , 'Getting dirty: Working with faith leaders to prevent and respond to gender-based violence', *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 4, 3 (2016), pp. 22–35.
16. Olivia Wilkinson and Susanna Trotta, 'Partnering with local faith actors to support peaceful and inclusive societies' (Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities, New York, NY, 2019), <https://jliflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/PaRD_SDG16_Scoping-Study.pdf> (9 March 2023).
17. Pew-Templeton data on religious affiliation in Uganda and Kenya: <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/uganda#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010&region_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2016>; <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/kenya#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010&region_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2016> (25 July 2022).
18. PEMA stands for Persons Marginalized and Aggrieved.
19. Interview, Ishmael Bahati, PEMA Kenya, 20 August 2021, online, by Keith Embeywa (SERENE). Only participants who provided their consent to publish their personal details are named in the article. Others are referenced by their initial.

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critical role in the process of reinterpreting sacred texts and religious beliefs. As a young Anglican priest stated:

> I have come to appreciate that there are multiple expressions of faith and Christianity. The one I grew up in is one that I call conservative, but I have come to identify with what I call, not a liberal but an affirming Christian expression of faith — basically where everybody belongs. Where everybody is called before God, where our bodily selves are not demonized but celebrated.[20]

This respondent makes a subtle yet significant distinction between a 'liberal' and an 'affirming' theological outlook, anticipating and addressing the insinuation that being inclusive towards sexually- and gender-diverse people automatically means that one has bought into a liberal (supposedly Western) agenda. His indirect claim is that one can be LGBTIQ-affirming while remaining doctrinally orthodox because questions of sexuality are not part of the key tenets of the Christian faith. At the same time, his narrative does suggest a transformation in his theological thinking about sexuality, which he captures as moving from 'conservative' to 'affirming'.

Other religious allies do not necessarily adopt new theological interpretations, and they may still consider non-conforming sexualities as a sin and morally wrong. Nevertheless, as a result of exposure and sensitization, they have come to recognize and advocate for the human dignity, rights, and well-being of LGBTIQ people. For example, a Catholic lay preacher who had attended PEMA Kenya training workshops began to undertake important advocacy work for the LGBTIQ community in the Kenyan coastal region, despite continuing to view homosexuality as a personal choice and a sin. He said: 'You have your choice; they have their choice. What matters to me is sharing Christ. Do you really have to speak about sin and condemn every single time? Where is the gospel of hope, of love?'[21] Similarly, a Muslim leader from coastal Kenya said that thanks to the PEMA training, 'I got to see that we are all human beings. And if they are human, who am I to judge? I should add that I am not promoting these people, what I am trying to do is to emphasize that they are human beings, and we should not subject them to judgements or deny them their rights.'[22] These religious leaders still subscribe to some aspects of prevalent homophobic discourse. Nevertheless, they explicitly recognize the intrinsic value of LGBTIQ people as human beings, and they forego widespread attitudes of demonization

20. Interview, Rev. J. (Anglican priest), Nairobi, Kenya, 10 November 2022, by David Kuria Mbote (SERENE).
21. Interview, Evangelist V. (Catholic lay preacher), Mombasa, Kenya, 21 December 2022, by David Kuria Mbote (SERENE).
22. Interview, Sheik I. (Muslim leader), Mombasa, Kenya, 20 December 2022, by David Kuria Mbote (SERENE).

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and condemnation. In the context of countries such as Kenya and Uganda, this is a significant step, which can make a difference in local communities as it may help to foster cultures of tolerance and, gradually, acceptance.

Religious leaders in this region not only are influential within a narrow religious domain but also have influence in the community and in society at large. As another participant explained, 'religious leaders in Africa hold power; they are like opinion leaders, what they speak is unquestionable'.[23] Thus, the rationale for engaging with religious leaders on LGBTIQ equality and inclusion reflects many of the reasons offered by the United Nations Development Programme for engaging religious leaders in development practice more broadly, such as their legitimacy in the eyes of communities and their subsequent roles as gatekeepers and opinion shapers, with the related potential for community impact, policy influence, and fostering inclusive social values and best practices.[24]

Furthermore, many LGBTIQ individuals in Africa are religious themselves, and even in religiously led homophobic contexts, many do not abandon their faith. Thus, engaging with inclusive leaders and spaces to profess their faith and reconcile with religious scriptures and teaching is crucial in the reconstruction of their own well-being. Such a pastoral approach is expressed by a Ugandan Pentecostal bishop, who said: 'I do advise LGBTQ+ people to forgive like Joseph[25] because forgiveness is the best medicine. However, they should not continue going to churches that hurt them. They should instead identify those churches that regard them as human beings. They should go to churches that treat them as children of God.'[26]

A critical point here is that LGBTIQ people and religious leaders are not necessarily distinct or dichotomous groups. In fact, several LGBTIQ-identifying individuals in countries such as Uganda and Kenya are religious leaders themselves, and several religious leaders identify as part of LGBTIQ communities. As a Kenyan gay–identifying clergyman narrated his own journey of reconciling his faith and sexuality:

> Being a religious leader who is openly gay and is promoting the cause of LGBT inclusion has been a difficult and painful, but also a beautiful and engaging journey. Difficult and painful because recanting those statements that I used to use on myself — like, I am a sinner, I need to

23. Interview, Tom Twongyeirwe, United Coalition of Affirming Africans—Uganda, online, 26 January 2022, by Keith Embeywa (SERENE).
24. United Nations Development Programme, 'UNDP guidelines on engaging with faith-based organizations and religious leaders' (UNDP, New York, NY, 2015), p. 7, <https://www.undp.org/publications/undp-guidelines-engaging-faith-based-organizations-and-religious-leaders> (9 March 2023).
25. Bible passage, Genesis 50:19–21.
26. Interview, Bishop J. (Pentecostal bishop), Luweero district, Uganda, 19 January 2023, by David Kuria Mbote (SERENE).

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> die, I am not worthy, I will go to hell – recanting those statements took me time. Also accepting the fact that it is OK to be gay and Christian took a painful journey. There were moments I was confused, there were moments I wanted to die. There were moments I was depressed. There were moments I tried a lot of things just to heal.[27]

This pastor is now focusing his ministry on fellow LGBTIQ people still struggling to reconcile their faith and sexuality, drawing on his personal quest as a pastoral resource to encourage others. Both in Kenya and Uganda, there are several religious communities established and led by, and often catering primarily for, LGBTIQ people of faith, such as the Cosmopolitan Affirming Church (CAC) in Nairobi and the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries (TFAM) in Kampala.

Talking about mainstream religious leaders who are not openly LGBTIQ-affirming, participants broadly distinguished between the two groups. On the one hand, there is a very vocal group of religious leaders actively involved in fuelling anti-LGBTIQ attitudes and politics. This group might be less prone to change, although there are some stories of explicitly homophobic religious leaders who have changed their views and attitudes. One example of the latter is a Ugandan Muslim youth leader, who also works as a nurse in a clinic. He publicly condemned gay people in the past but changed his attitudes after encountering LGBTIQ people during a training workshop at a local reproductive health organization. He explains:

> At first, I did not like them for religious reasons, or what I thought was the right religious teaching. But when I started to investigate more, I was particularly struck by one of the Surahs in the Quran that says: 'You cannot say, "I am fearing God" when you have not been tested'[28] So, with that verse in mind I decided to go ahead. I now recognize the humanity of LGBTQ+ individuals.[29]

On the other hand, there is a perhaps larger group of religious leaders who are less vocal on these issues, and who have a broader faith-inspired commitment to supporting marginalized communities, but who may not have the knowledge and understanding of LGBTIQ issues. This group is the main target of the efforts of recent initiatives to engage with religious leaders. These various efforts have a range of objectives, but broadly speaking, they aim at the following:

27. Interview, Rev. J., 10 November 2022.
28. Surah Al-'Ankabut 29:2.
29. Interview, A. (Muslim youth leader), Kampala, Uganda, 19 January 2023, by David Kuria Mbote (SERENE).

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(i) Enhancing religious leaders' understanding of LGBTIQ issues in order to correct popular societal misconceptions regarding sexual and gender diversity.
(ii) Promoting pastoral sensitivity among faith leaders towards LGBTIQ persons in their communities so that the latter no longer face ostracization and exclusion.
(iii) Offering alternative theological readings that depart from dominant conservative interpretations of the Bible or the Quran regarding sexual and gender diversity, exposing religious leaders to inclusive and affirming faith views.[30]
(iv) Developing the skills of religious leaders regarding social advocacy and public communication in order to serve as allies to the LGBTIQ communities.

Some organizations involved in this work are LGBTIQ organizations who do not have a religious mission themselves but who recognize the importance of societal change. Other organizations, such as the Universal Coalition of Affirming Africans Uganda (UCAA-UG), were founded by Ugandan faith leaders—some of whom identify as LGBTIQ themselves, and others who are affirming—with the aim of 'advocat[ing] for the respect of the human rights of LGBTIQ communities through mindset change using faith-based strategies', and inspired by 'the biblical norms and principles of love'.[31] The Kenya-based organization CAC, too, is an inclusive faith community of and for LGBTIQ persons of faith. As part of its ministry, it engages 'grass-roots faith leaders and faith communities through joint worship experiences and theological training'.[32]

Most of these organizations operate in a predominantly Christian context, yet PEMA Kenya is based in Mombasa, which has a strong Islamic presence, and their programmes cater to both Muslim and Christian leaders. Their work presents a fascinating example of how the struggle for LGBTIQ inclusion can turn into an innovative space of interreligious dialogue around the contested issues of sexual and gender diversity. The just-mentioned Ugandan organization, UCAA-UG, has organized workshops for members of the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCA), with a view to educate and sensitize them on LGBTIQ issues in the hope that this might help to calm down social, political, and religious homophobia in

30. The terminology of 'inclusive' and 'affirming' is common in progressive Christian circles and refers to theological and religious views that are affirming of sexual and gender diversity and are inclusive towards LGBTIQ persons.
31. Universal Coalition of Affirming Africans—Uganda, 'Vision and mission', <https://ucaaug.org/vision-mission/> (30 July 2022).
32. Cosmopolitan Affirming Community, 'About us', <https://cac-kenya.com/aboutus/> (30 July 2022).

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Table 1 Organizations doing LGBTIQ advocacy through religion in Uganda and Kenya (non-exhaustive list).

Organization name	*Country*	*Type*	*Start of work with religious leaders*
PEMA Kenya	Kenya	Local organization; non-faith-based	2010
Nyarwek	Kenya	Local organization; non-faith-based	2012
CAC	Kenya	Local organization/ church associated with an international network of affirming churches; faith-based	2013
UCAA-UG	Uganda	Local organization/ network; faith-based	2017
TFAMU	Uganda	Local organization/ church associated with an international network of affirming churches; faith-based	2018
SMUG	Uganda	Umbrella body of various local organizations; non-faith-based	2018 (Shut down by government in 2023)
St Paul's Reconciliation and Equality Centre	Uganda	Local organization; faith-based	2010 (Currently not active)
St Paul's Voice Centre	Uganda	Local organization; faith-based	2013 (Currently not active)

the country. These examples illustrate the diverse aims and objectives driving the engagement with religious leaders, the common thread being the underlying notion that religious leaders are important influencers in local communities and potential agents of societal change.

Resources, methods, and strategies

Cognizant of religious leaders as key actors, several LGBTIQ organizations in Uganda and Kenya in the 2010s began to develop strategies and tools to reach this group of stakeholders (see Table 1).

Most of these organizations are registered with their respective national bureaus or are affiliated with locally registered organizations, and they are run by Kenyan or Ugandan staff providing support and advocacy for local beneficiaries. Registration, in many cases, is a tricky process in which the aims and objectives of the organizations frequently need to be rephrased in such a way as to make the focus on LGBTIQ-related work less explicit,

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if not invisible. As per other faith-based and 'secular' non-governmental organizations, they largely rely on external funding applications. Religious leaders involved in programmes run by those organizations are part of the local community. Although TFAM and the CAC belong to an international network of affirming churches with headquarters in the USA (TFAM is an originally African-American network, based in California[33]), they are local initiatives; part of their resources are collected locally, and their staff and leaders belong to the local community. This is an important element in challenging accusations of non-Africanness and impositions from the West with regard to LGBTIQ advocacy and support. In any case, such accusations are rather tenuous, in light of evidence that anti-LGBTIQ campaigns in the countries under discussion themselves receive considerable Western (mostly American Christian right) support.[34]

PEMA and Nyanza Rift Valley and Western Kenya Network (Nyarwek) have each produced manuals for use in their training programmes for religious leaders. PEMA's manual 'Facing our fears: A training manual on stigma reduction, tolerance and brotherly/sisterly acceptance in diversity' was initially developed in 2011, in collaboration with 12 religious leaders, both Christian and Muslim.[35] It was reviewed and updated in 2018. The main goal of the 4-day training is '[t]o educate religious leaders on HIV, stigma and discrimination, and gender and sexual diversity, and to discuss their roles in protecting the human rights of all persons' (p. 2). The manual is unique for its balanced engagement with both Christian and Islamic traditions and its careful and constructive reliance on both the Bible and the Quran in the quest of developing affirming religious interpretations. Inspired by the initial success of the PEMA training, Nyarwek also developed its own manual, 'Safe Spaces', which is subtitled 'A training manual on religious inclusion for Christians at the periphery' and was produced in 2017.[36] It has been designed mainly for and in collaboration with Anglican, Catholic, and Pentecostal Christian leaders. Compared to the PEMA manual, the Nyarwek version focuses less on a sexual health approach and more on making a theological intervention.

33. For a discussion of its work in (East) Africa, see chapter 6, 'Building a progressive pan-African Christian movement: The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries', in van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, pp. 113–128.
34. See Kapya J. Kaoma, *Colonizing African values: How the U.S. Christian right is transforming sexual politics in Africa* (Political Research Associates, Somerville, MA, 2012).
35. PEMA Kenya, 'Facing our fears: A training manual on stigma reduction, tolerance, and brotherly/sisterly acceptance in diversity' (PEMA Kenya, Mombasa, 2018), <https://serene.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/105/2022/02/FACING-OUR-FEARS-MANUAL.pdf> (30 July 2022).
36. Nyarwek, 'Safe spaces: A training manual on religious inclusion for Christians at the periphery' (Nyarwek, Kisumu, 2017), <https://serene.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/105/2020/03/NYARWEK-Religious-leaders-training-manual-booklet-1.pdf> (30 July 2022).

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Workshops across these and other organizations are shaped by the argument that most conservative religious leaders have never personally engaged with LGBTIQ individuals and are therefore unable to recognize their 'humanity' and their 'faith'. Through exposure and contact, the workshops introduce LGBTIQ persons to religious leaders to find similarities and challenge misconceptions and assumptions.[37] Thus, PEMA Kenya deliberately includes a session 'dedicated to the testimonies of people who have experienced stigma and discrimination' in its training workshops for religious leaders, with the latter being encouraged 'to listen with love, to consider their fears, and to show empathy and compassion'.[38] A similar strategy of personal encounter is utilized by the CAC, which organizes visits to not explicitly affirming churches, for joint worship and exchange. These methods, centred around encounter and exchange, have been found to help building bridges and enhance empathy and understanding.[39]

PEMA alone has reached over 800 religious leaders. According to the Executive Director, Ishmael Bahati, the outreach has reduced homophobic attacks on the LGBTIQ community in Mombasa, especially during religious festivals. Almost three-quarters of the leaders claimed to have changed their perspective after attending the workshops and became allies of the LGBTIQ community.[40] Peer-to-peer conversations where trained affirming religious leaders reach out to conservative fellow religious leaders, with whom they are also friends, seem to be a productive means of reaching individuals otherwise unapproachable by LGBTIQ organizations.[41] The short- and longer-term impact of this work has recently been investigated by a team of researchers; they found significant changes in attitudes towards LGBTIQ people, especially among male religious leaders and those with originally more fundamentalist views.[42]

Creative and visual arts are also becoming productive spaces for counteraction against religiously led homo- and transphobia in the region. For example, the Uganda-based East Africa Visual Artists (EAVA Artists) uses many different artistic expressions 'to tell stories which change minds and perceptions'.[43] Recognizing the lack of affirming religious voices in media,

37. See, e.g., contact theories explanations; Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, 'Does intergroup contact reduce prejudice: Recent meta-analytic findings', in Stuart Oskamp (ed.), *Reducing prejudice and discrimination* (Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2000), pp. 93–114.
38. PEMA Kenya, *Facing our fears*, p. 69.
39. Van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, p. 102.
40. Interview, Ishmael Bahati, 20 August 2021.
41. Interview, Tom Twongyeirwe, 26 January 2022.
42. David Kuria Mbote, Esther Mombo, Zablon Bundi Mutongu, Anthony Mkutu, Adam Ciarleglio, and Theo G.M. Sandfort, 'Facing our fears: The impact of a 4-day training intervention to reduce negative perspectives on sexual and gender minorities among religious leaders in Kenya', *The Journal of Sex Research* 59, 5 (2021), pp. 587–598.
43. See Twitter: @eavisualarts and Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Eastafricavisual.artists>.

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social media, and other spaces, they aim 'to document faith-related homophobia, and amplify voices of affirming faith leaders who have limited to no access to mainstream media'.[44] Similarly, film is starting to explore the interconnection between religion and sexuality. For example, the documentary 'Kenyan, Christian, Queer' gives visibility to LGBTIQ religious persons and features LGBTIQ religious leaders and communities.[45] In 2022, UCAA-UG launched its 'This Is My Story' campaign, in which LGBTIQ persons, some of whom religious leaders themselves, shared their story on camera, with the recordings being published on YouTube and social media.[46]

Challenges and limitations

Obviously, working with religious leaders in order to bring about more positive perceptions of and attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity is a labour-intensive and long-term process, with change happening locally and incrementally. Virtually all participants in the workshop commented on the popular view that homosexuality and other non-confirming expressions of sexuality and gender are considered 'un-African', 'un-Christian', and/or 'un-Islamic', which they find to be deeply ingrained in the minds of many religious leaders. The organizations reported struggles to secure sufficient funding for this work, among other reasons, because many secular donor bodies refrain from funding religiously based programmes. At the same time and ironically, they reported that the efforts of engaging religious leaders are hindered by the misconception among the general public that organizations use money in order to 'court faith leaders into supporting LGBTIQ agendas'.[47]

Project participants also noted the considerable risks for religious leaders who participate in these programmes. For instance, an evangelical pastor who took part in one of PEMA's training workshops lost his position after he tried to educate fellow pastors of his church. Similarly, a Muslim leader from the Kenyan Coast said:

> Unfortunately, due to this work I have been branded very many names. Of all the social justice issues I have worked on, this one [LGBTIQ rights] has been the most challenging to the extent of me losing my job in 2021.

44. EAVA Artists Limited, 'Documenting and combating religious homophobia', <https://eavisualarts.org/program/documenting-and-combating-religious-homophobia/> (30 July 2022).
45. Aiwan Obinyan (Director), *Kenyan, Christian, queer* (AiAi Studios, London, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsU6QR0lfzs&t=34s> (30 July 2022).
46. Most of these videos were taken offline in February 2023, when homo- and transphobic speech in Uganda intensified, out of security risks for the people being featured.
47. Interview, Ishmael Bahati, 20 August 2021.

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> I have been living without any source of livelihood … but the provider is God.[48]

Several Anglican priests who participated in training offered by Nyarwek were suspended by their diocese, with a significant impact on their careers, their standing in the community, and their marital and family lives.[49] Nyarwek subsequently reached out to the bishops of various denominations in order to avoid similar repercussions for clergy participating in future programmes. Yet, it is not only fellow clergy or the church hierarchy who may expel priests but also congregations and society more generally that, in the words of a Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) staff member, create fear among religious leaders 'of being excommunicated or demonized' when participating in pro-LGBTIQ activities.[50] As the national coordinator of UCAA-UG reports, 'Sometimes you call for a workshop and people will not attend for fear of being named in a newspaper. They have always that fear of a backlash and other consequences that come with engaging with you.'[51] In a later interview, this participant mentioned the example of the IRCA, which had publicly expressed concern about the 'growing spread of homosexuality and the LGBTQ agenda, and the implication it has on the wellbeing of children and families' even after UCAA-UG's long-term efforts to engage with the Council.[52] The UCAA-UG National Coordinator reflected: 'For years, we've been investing in building relationships with these religious leaders, sensitizing them on LGBTIQ issues. But now the situation has become critical; you try to call them and they don't pick up. One reason being that even for those who are our allies, it is risky to intervene, their reputation is at stake, they might lose their following. There is little for them to gain by speaking out, and a lot to lose!'[53] The point is that even for religious leaders who may be sympathetic towards, and possibly supportive of, LGBTIQ communities and their cause, there are negative repercussions for positive engagement with LGBTIQ causes, making them constantly calculate the risks. This is particularly acute in contemporary Kenya and Uganda, which in the first months of 2023 witnessed intensified anti-LGBTIQ campaigns.[54]

48. Interview, Sheik M. (Muslim leader), Mombasa, Kenya, 20 December 2022, by David Kuria Mbote (SERENE).
49. Interview, Daniel Onyango, Nyarwek, online, 31 May 2021, by Caroline Yator (SERENE).
50. Interview, Diane Bakuraira, Sexual Minorities Uganda, online, 10 September 2021, by Keith Embeywa (SERENE).
51. Interview, Tom Twongyeirwe, 26 January 2022.
52. NTVUganda, 'IRCU urges united effort against promotion of LGBTQ agenda', 15 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7_QR0rSIGU> (1 March 2023).
53. Interview, Tom Twongyeirwe, Universal Coalition of Affirming Africans—Uganda, Kampala, Uganda, 25 February 2023, by Adriaan van Klinken.
54. Kerry Cullinan, 'Sharp rise in homophobia in East Africa sparks fear of violence', *Health Policy Watch*, 3 March 2023, <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/sharp-rise-in-homophobia-in-east-africa/> (12 March 2023).

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Conclusion

Against the background of often virulent, religious-inspired homo- and transphobia in many parts of Africa, this briefing has highlighted a significant development in which religious leaders are increasingly engaged as potential agents of LGBTIQ inclusion in local communities and society at large. Focusing on East Africa, we have discussed several initiatives in this field, identified key actors involved, and examined resources and efforts that have been developed for this purpose. Some of this work has been supported by organizations from elsewhere, such as Inclusive and Affirming Ministries from South Africa, the US-based TFAM Global, and the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical HIV and AIDS nitiative in Africa programme. Arguably, there is a transnational dimension to religious-inspired pro-LGBTIQ mobilizations in the region. Yet, many of the initiatives have a high level of local ownership, with efforts being led from the bottom up. Transnational involvement does not necessarily mean a lack of local agency.

The mid-term effect of these efforts is that dominant narratives in which religion is antagonistically opposed to sexual and gender diversity are increasingly nuanced, complicated, and transformed. The bottom-up approach allows for the building of networks in local communities, with new alliances emerging between religious leaders and LGBTIQ communities to promote a deeper understanding of LGBTIQ issues and hopefully to foster a culture of tolerance, acceptance, and inclusion towards sexual and gender minorities. The longer-term effects can only be speculated at, with the hope being that they may include legal, political, and other forms of structural change in society at large. Currently, there are considerable setbacks, such as the passing of the new Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda. Community-based organizations are aware that they need to build much more grass-roots support if the change is to happen at a national level. Religious leaders will not be a 'magic bullet' for societal change,[55] yet they can play pivotal roles in the process of building societies that are characterized by respect for human dignity and rights and by principles of equality, inclusion, and diversity. This is particularly true in contexts with high levels of religiosity, where religious institutions and leaders are held in high esteem, wield political influence, and are assigned considerable moral authority.

55. Marit Tolo Østebø and Terje Østebø, 'Are religious leaders a magic bullet for social/societal change? A critical look at anti-FGM interventions in Ethiopia', *Africa Today* 60, 3 (2014), pp. 82–101.

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