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# On being LGBT-affirming pentecostals: exploring affirming resources from within Indonesian pentecostal churches

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## ABSTRACT

LGBT Christian activism in Indonesia was initiated by progressive wings within ecumenical denominations, while backlashes were mostly voiced by evangelical groups. Disrupting such a binary, we interviewed affirming Pentecostal church leaders and members (both LGBT persons and allies) to explore theological, discursive, and congregational resources that were drawn upon to constitute an affirming evangelical position. While previous studies in the West have paid significant attention to theological reinterpretations of texts and traditions, our findings demonstrated that there are other contextual resources to explore, both at the personal, communal, and institutional levels which may support an affirming subjectivity for allies and LGBT persons themselves. Three resources were identified in this study, namely, a strong sense of personal moral agency, the tight-knit church community, and the self-governed, market-driven church institution. The implications of the study are discussed in relation to Pentecostal theologies and LGBT Christian activism in contemporary Indonesia.

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## Introduction

Scholars in the field of sexuality studies have demonstrated how legal and socio-political regulations of sexuality in contemporary Indonesia have been shaped by the dominant regimes of religious morality.<sup>1</sup> While human rights and other democratic discourses are slowly gaining more currency, post-authoritarian Indonesia has also witnessed the resurgence of religious conservatism, including in the field of sexuality. For example, the passing of the controversial anti-pornography bill in 2008, which criminalizes any forms of pornography and erotic acts in public spheres, represents the powerful role of religiously conservative discourses within the parliament and public debates on sexuality.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, LGBT movements in Indonesia have also grown significantly in the last two decades particularly activism initiated by waria and gay men, often considered as one of the largest LGBT movements in Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup> Advocating for state protection of sexual minorities, Indonesian LGBT activists have recently worked together with progressive religious leaders, particularly Muslims and Christians,<sup>4</sup> in addition to their previous secular, rights-based approaches.<sup>5</sup>

Indonesia is the home to the world's largest Muslim population, and studies on LGBT identities and religion in this context have mainly been conducted among Muslim communities.<sup>6</sup> To complement these studies, the current research focuses on Christian communities, which make up approximately 9.9% of Indonesia's 270 million population, the second largest religious group after the Muslims. In the last decade, LGBT-affirming Christian activists and theologians in Indonesia have organized themselves into a network mobilized by the Centre for Gender, Sexuality, and Trauma Studies (PKGST) at the Jakarta Theological Seminary, the oldest seminary in Indonesia. PKGST has conducted annual international conferences and webinars on Christianity and sexuality, established support groups for LGBT Christians, published books and anthologies, and maintained activists' communication through social media groups. One of the milestones was the official statement by the Indonesian Council of Churches (PGI) – the largest Indonesian ecumenical church association – in 2016 which affirmed LGBT rights. Backlashes abound, particularly from evangelical preachers such as Yakub Tri Handoko and Andik Wijaya, with their persistent campaign, seminars, and books.<sup>7</sup> In some ways, these discursive contestations mirror the condition in other international contexts such as in the US, where the fast-growing, theologically-conservative evangelical churches tend to condemn LGBT sexualities, while the affirming ones are progressive groups within mainline or ecumenical denominations.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, international scholars have recently noticed the emergence of small but increasing groups of more progressive younger generations of evangelicals vis-à-vis LGBT identities, ranging from the ambivalent<sup>9</sup> to affirming ones.<sup>10</sup> Studies in this area have documented some evangelicals' tolerant attitudes toward LGBT identities,<sup>11</sup> specific LGBT-affirming evangelical churches and activist groups,<sup>12</sup> the experience of LGBT individuals in evangelical churches,<sup>13</sup> and theological reinterpretations that underpin the affirming evangelical views.<sup>14</sup> While the presence of affirming evangelicals is not entirely new, the growth of this trend and academic research about it has significantly increased in recent years. However, most of these studies were conducted in Western contexts; more studies are needed to understand how various local contextualities, with their own unique discursive landscapes, have shaped the ways evangelical Christians have taken affirming stances.

To the best of our knowledge, there is no study exploring this specific group of affirming evangelicals in Indonesian contexts. Within the wide network of LGBT-affirming activists we are currently part of, there are hardly any Christian leaders affiliated with evangelical denominations; the members of the network are predominantly from mainline or ecumenical churches. In fact, anti-LGBT evangelical preachers have repeatedly attacked affirming Christian activists as un-Biblical due to the perceived lack of Biblicism among those mainline-affiliated activists. Considering the magnitude of evangelical growth in Indonesia, a crucial strategy for LGBT activism here might be to develop affirming discourses *from within* evangelical traditions themselves. Here, we refer to evangelicalism as the Protestant tradition arising from eighteenth-century revival movements associated with figures like John Wesley and George Whitefield, characterized by conversionism, activism, biblicism, and cruci-centrism.<sup>15</sup> Predicated upon the premise that social realities are always more complex than simple binaries, the current study seeks to begin filling this gap by – as a small first step – identifying and initiating conversations with affirming evangelical church members and leaders,

and exploring discursive, institutional, and congregational resources underpinning their affirming position, and the possible theological implications arising from such conversations.

More specifically, the current study focuses on a major group within the Indonesian evangelical tradition, namely, the Pentecostal churches. The reason for this focus is because Pentecostalism is one of the fastest growing denominations in the world<sup>16</sup>; and the growth of its megachurches is considered “one of the most exceptional religious trends in recent times within the Christian spheres”.<sup>17</sup> Pentecostalism has specific characteristics,<sup>18</sup> including (1) Biblicism or high view of scripture, (2) a revivalist culture that encourages the renewal of one’s spiritual life (commonly known as being born again), (3) a strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, such as the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the exercise of spiritual gifts, (4) active proclamation of the Gospel to all people, (5) the use of contemporary music and motivational sermons, and (6) a generally conservative approach to sexual morality, such as encouraging abstinence outside of marriage and non-acceptance of LGBT identities.

Theoretically, or to be precise, theo-philosophically, our study was informed by James K. A. Smith’s<sup>19</sup> “Thinking in Tongues”, in which he exposed the similarities between features of Pentecostalism and philosophical themes with the purpose of exploring Pentecostal contributions to Christian philosophy. Specifically, we consider Smith’s discussions on Pentecostal epistemology useful for analyzing our participants’ experiences of either bearing LGBT identities or being allies of LGBT individuals, particularly to respond to the endemic biblicism that undergirds many Pentecostals’ resistance to accepting and affirming LGBT identities. For instance, it is prevalent for many Pentecostals to quote Bible verses, especially those that appear to condemn LGBT identities, to articulate their disagreement with affirming LGBT people. This “Bible-based” rejection of LGBT identities assumes that the Bible is the sole source of truth, and therefore, dismisses the subjectivities like those of our participants as unbiblical. Smith identifies a different, anti-rationalistic way of knowing in Pentecostal communities, found in the culture of giving testimonies and sharing life experiences with God during worship or other religious meetings. He argues that Western rationalism has long determined the status of knowledge, tending to overlook affective, material, and experiential ways of knowing, such as those expressed in Pentecostalism. Smith shifts the focus of knowability from *what is known* to *how we know*. In other words, the question should not be on what the Pentecostals know about God, but how they know about God, or how the (experiential) knowledge of God has transformed the lives of Pentecostals. This Pentecostal critique of Western rationalism gains plausibility in the tapestry of philosophical thinking with the rise of postmodernism and its derivatives in social theories. Subjectivities, particularities, and embodiment of experiences are Pentecostal traits crucial to rid the rationalistic residue of Western philosophy that is still enmeshed in faith articulations in Protestant Christianity. Smith’s theo-philosophical arguments aid us in crafting our response to anti-LGBT Biblicism, not by uncovering the hazards of their hermeneutical direction or alternating their interpretation with a counter-interpretation of those biblical texts, but by attending to the core problem of interpretive hegemony perpetuated by Christian institutions, which befits the characteristic of excessive modern rationalism; of which Smith counters with the concept of Pentecostal epistemology.

## Literature review: studies on affirming pentecostals

The LGBT-affirming stance within Pentecostal traditions is not a new phenomenon. In the 1960s, Reverend Troy Perry, the founder of Metropolitan Community Church in the U.S., drew heavily on Pentecostal rhetoric and practices of revivalism.<sup>20</sup> Ralph Blair and his initiative, Evangelical Concerned Inc. ([www.ecinc.org](http://www.ecinc.org)), have expressed a high view of scripture since the 1970s. In the 1990s, a popular gay memoir was published by Mel White,<sup>21</sup> who had served in evangelical ministries. Toward the end of the 1990s, Lewis Smedes, a Fuller Seminary ethicist, wrote an essay proposing a more accepting stance on same-sex sexuality.<sup>22</sup>

Following these pioneers, movements and studies about affirming Pentecostals and the larger evangelical groups have grown significantly in the last two decades, with stronger commitments to basic tenets of evangelicalism as well. As the cultural and legal landscape of sexual politics changed dramatically, particularly in the West, an increasing number of evangelical Christians have diverged from the official conservative position of their churches, and demonstrated affirming or at least ambivalent positions on LGBT sexualities.<sup>23</sup> Other survey-based studies also showed that younger evangelicals and those having LGBT friends tend to hold more tolerant views.<sup>24</sup> New LGBT activism initiated by young evangelical figures have also flourished, most notably the Gay Christian Network founded by Justin Lee (<https://www.qchristian.org/>) and The Reformation Project founded by Matthew Vines (<https://reformationproject.org/>). The latter was studied as a doctoral research project by Burrow-Branine<sup>25</sup> because of the resistance it performed from within the dominant conservative regime of truth is considered productive of new ethical and political possibilities.

In this section we focused on four academic publications within this specific literature on affirming Pentecostals, namely, Thumma's,<sup>26</sup> Stell's,<sup>27</sup> van Klinken's,<sup>28</sup> and Yi et al.'s,<sup>29</sup> because they represent key arguments essential for understanding contemporary affirming evangelicals in both Western and non-Western contexts.

Thumma's study explained the ways an evangelical gay organization, Good News, construct and maintain a gay evangelical identity. These ways include reinterpreting scriptures previously used to condemn same-sex relationships; identifying theological resources for a more accepting stance (e.g. distinguishing Greek word for pederasty from modern same-sex relationships, essentializing gay identity and connecting it with the image of God as creator); and replicating the Pentecostal heritage of members through intense small group activities, Bible retreats, revivalistic gatherings, and evangelistic activities. Almost three decades later, Stell similarly identified how LGBT movements initiated by evangelical members, such as the Gay Christian Network and The Reformation Project, have reclaimed main features of evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, such as a high view of the Scripture, revivalism, and the work of the Holy Spirit. What is relatively new, Stell argued, is that these new LGBT Pentecostals have deployed what he called the "rhetoric of inverted belonging" where "those who have long been regarded as irrevocable outsiders of evangelicalism are portraying themselves as more rightful insiders". An example of this is the way these LGBT movements refer to Protestant reformers such as Luther and Calvin to argue that mandatory celibacy for anyone, including gays and lesbians, is against the Protestant teaching on love and marriage. Good evangelicals

are then constructed as good reformers; affirming Pentecostals are, likewise, reforming contemporary Protestantism.

Thumma and Stell have both devoted considerable attention to theological reinterpretations, which might be more relevant for the Western contexts characterized by the dominant discourse of Western scientific rationalism. Thumma stated that the “first task” is “to alter their religious beliefs” particularly on Biblical passages explicitly mentioning same-sex sex. Comparably, Stell explicated how five major criteria of evangelicalism have been reclaimed in the rhetoric of the new evangelical LGBT movements, such as biblical authority and evangelical cruci-centrism. A similar focus on theological reinterpretations also characterized the work of other Western scholars in this area.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, theological reinterpretations might not necessarily be the main key discourse drawn upon by affirming evangelicals outside of the West because scientific rationalism might not be the dominant discourse constituting Christians’ religious subjectivity. More studies are needed to understand affirming evangelicals in non-Western contexts because – due to global inequality in knowledge production – most existing studies in this area were still from the Global North.

A glimpse into non-Western contexts of affirming Pentecostals can be seen in van Klinken’s and Yi et al.’s studies in Zambia and South Korea, respectively. In van Klinken’s study, a key resource contributing to an affirming view he identified among Zambian gay Pentecostal Christians is the discernment of spirits, which is recognized as one of the Holy Spirit’s spiritual gifts. This gift refers to a spiritual ability to judge moral influences, which van Klinken argued “hinders the creation of collective ethic because such an ethic is “continually interrupted” by individual experience of faith and by personal spiritual power”. Here, instead of textual reinterpretations, personal experience with the Holy Spirit was drawn upon to affirm LGBT sexualities. In the contexts where traditional spirituality was a part of the society’s collective (sub)consciousness such as in Zambia and Indonesia, personal mystical experience with God has been a common feature of Pentecostal praxis.

Yi et al.’s ethnographic study in South Korea did not explicitly focus on resources for an affirming evangelical stance, but rather, their study sought a better understanding of why LGBT Christians chose to stay in Pentecostal congregations with relatively conservative moral theology instead of moving to affirming ecumenical churches. Some of the reasons were the familiarity with church teachings and practices, particularly for LGBT Christians with an evangelical upbringing; the availability of material-social resources, including salaried, full-time pastors and staff, language translators, and dedicated lay members; and the strong connection with one’s traditional affective network such as close friends, work colleagues, and blood relatives. Nevertheless, their thick contextual descriptions hinted at some valuable resources pertinent to the constitution of affirming Pentecostal subjectivity, such as the tight-knit church community, which we will further discuss in the Findings section below.

Joining and complementing these studies on affirming Pentecostals outside of the West, the current study continues and contributes to this growing literature by providing empirical data from Indonesia, which may offer alternative contextual resources to destabilize the hegemonic views that Pentecostals and evangelicals, more generally, cannot be affirming. Before we discuss the findings of our analysis, the next section will explain the methodology of the current study.

## Methodology

The data in the current study are co-constructed with participants who are affiliated with Pentecostal churches and hold an affirming or at least a tolerant position on LGBT identities. After ethical approval was issued by the first author's university (No.: 167/KE/VI/2021), an advertisement was distributed on social media groups advocating LGBT rights in Indonesia and the researchers' personal network. Considering the scarce and closeted nature of affirming Pentecostal Christians in Indonesia, the current research is a small case study focusing on initial exploration rather than a representative sample or comprehensive explanation. Only two church members and two church leaders were interested to participate. While the number of participants is considerably small, they provided valuable insights into initial understandings of the possibility of affirming Pentecostals in Indonesia (see Findings section). They were given a research information sheet and an opportunity to ask questions before signing the consent form. Pseudonyms were used in this study to refer to participants. They are Maggie (25 years old, church member, female, heterosexual ally), Yulius (38 years old, church member, male, gay), Tony (27 years old, church leader, male, heterosexual ally), and Nicky (52, church leader, male, heterosexual ally). We were cognisant that only one participant belongs to the LGBT community; the analyses should not be considered as exhaustive, proportional, or representative; but instead, explorative and illustrative.

Consenting participants were then interviewed in a 1-hour, semi-structured, audio-taped, online video interview. The questions were about their Pentecostal background and current activities in the church, their churches' and their own views on LGBT identities, and their experience with LGBT persons in the church. The data were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis method,<sup>31</sup> in which codes and themes pertinent to the research questions were generated, reviewed, and then discussed in the report. Both researchers also grew up in Pentecostal traditions and were familiar with Indonesian Pentecostal contexts; both researchers were involved in LGBT activism among Indonesian churches. While this insider status could be double-edged, in this study it provided more advantages for the researchers, that is, a better contextual understanding of participants' narratives. The credibility of the data and the analysis are not rested upon traditional criteria such as sample size, representativeness, and reliability, but rather, upon the authenticity and verisimilitude for the readers, and the insightfulness of the data to advance academic knowledge in this field.

## Findings

Our analysis revealed that there are various resources drawn upon by participants in their affirming ways of seeing LGBT identities. These resources are categorized into three key themes representing different levels of Pentecostal church experience: personal, communal, and institutional. It is important to note that the findings discussed here were not intended to be generalized. Instead of objective and exhaustive, participants' narratives were understood as illustrative of the Pentecostal Christians' experience vis-à-vis LGBT identities.

### *A strong sense of personal (moral) agency*

The first characteristic of Pentecostal Christianity that we argue can be a resource for an affirming position is a strong sense of personal agency (i.e. the capacity to make



independent choices within one's discursive contexts). Our data demonstrated that, while Pentecostalism has a strong commitment to individual moral conduct,<sup>32</sup> who and how to define moral truth is highly contestable. Personal disagreement with religious authority in terms of morality is not uncommon. In this section we explore various discourses drawn upon by participants that gave rise to such a sense of personal moral agency within Pentecostal traditions.

An example of the exercise of personal moral agency can be seen in Maggie's (female, heterosexual ally, church member) narrative. She expressed little or even no apprehension when explaining her disagreement with her pastors on LGBT issues:

Researcher: (Considering your affirming position,) is it okay for you to disagree with the conservative position of your church on LGBT identities?

Maggie: Pastors are humans (not God). Not all they said are true. Some pastors even do immoral things. Youth leaders who are seemingly pious do not necessarily walk their talk. What is true is what my heart says, the Word of God I read, being close to God.

Maggie drew upon examples of hypocrisy and misconduct of Christian leaders to challenge authoritative moral claims commonly made by Pentecostal leaders. During the interview, she quoted the Biblical scriptures of "judging trees by their fruit" (Luke 6:43–45) to back up her opposition and accused some religious authorities, including youth leaders in her church, as hypocrites (they don't "walk their talk"). Maggie's confidence to selectively choose and decide for herself which moral truth to be followed also resonates – to a degree – with the notion of spiritual gift of discernment commonly recognized in Pentecostal traditions.<sup>33</sup> The Holy Spirit in each Christian's heart is believed to enable them to make correct religious, prophetic, and moral judgements despite what their church says.

Maggie's narrative also hints at another source of an individual's sense of agency, namely, personal experience with God ("being close to God") as the source of moral truth. Yulius (male, gay, church member) provided more explicit evidence:

God is very close to me, attends to me every day, like, in many small things. My heart is full of love for God. From there I know God accepts me just the way I am (as gay). I have no problems in my heart with God.

Yulius did not need to engage in theological or textual reinterpretations to arrive at the conclusion that God does not condemn his same-sex desire. Since he understands Christianity as a relationship with God instead of a set of doctrines – which is a popular rhetoric in Pentecostalism – Yulius confidently claims God's acceptance of same-sex sexuality based on *what he felt* during his *personal* prayer. Similar narratives of personal emotional relationship with God have also been documented in previous studies on LGBT Christians<sup>34</sup> albeit were not specifically discussed as a key discursive resource.

In addition to personal prayer time with God, personal Bible reading and learning were also commonly encouraged in Pentecostal religious practices. The theological foundation of the Protestant belief is that Christians have direct access to the knowledge of God through the Bible, without the need to be mediated by church authorities. Tony (male, heterosexual ally, church leader) considered such a habit of learning and pursuing knowledge are responsible for his "encounter with queer theology" and the eventual "open-mindedness for LGBT sexualities." Growing up as a devout Pentecostal Christian,



Tony had read the Bible from cover to cover since his childhood. As also identified by Clifton-Soderstrom in the historical context of Pentecostal women in nineteenth century Sweden, devotional Bible reading could give rise to a sense of personal empowerment and faithful resistance against the orthodoxy. When we asked how Tony dealt with different moral-theological views on LGBT identities while reading queer theology, Tony acknowledged that deep learning inevitably resulted in the awareness of multiple perspectives and interpretations on LGBT sexualities. According to Tony, which interpretation is true should be judged – like Maggie’s argument – by “the fruit of that interpretation”. Tony believes that affirming Biblical interpretations tend to result in “kind, loving, just, and inclusive practices; and these are the fruits of the Spirit”.

During his intellectual-theological struggles around queer theology, Tony decided to ask for signs from God – which is another Pentecostal resource for personal sense of agency. It is quite common in Indonesian Pentecostal churches that when Christians are struggling to decide or unsure about something, they may ask for prompts from God. Tony did not ask for nonsensically miraculous signs as if testing God, rather, he asked God “to open doors, assure my heart, and to lead me meeting the right people”. The signs came, including meeting us through this research, and those signs convinced him that God has led him to this new moral truth, despite it being unpopular within his Pentecostal circles.

As these participants demonstrated, there are various discourses and practices in Pentecostal traditions that may give rise to a strong sense of personal moral agency as a Christian, including alternative moral views on LGBT identities. These resources may include – but not limited to – personal emotional relationship with God, the devotion to Bible learning, the practice of asking for signs, spiritual gift of discernment, and even cases of misconduct by Pentecostal leaders. During the interviews, our immediate impressions of most participants were that they were bold, confident, and fearless, because they believed God was with them. As a result, their exercise of personal moral agency was evident in their current LGBT-affirming stance. Expanding the current discussion on *individual’s* agency in this section, the next section focuses on resources at another level, namely, in the social dynamics of Pentecostal *community* life.

### **The tight-knit church community**

Our analysis identified another resource within Pentecostal traditions that may facilitate more affirming positions, namely, the tight-knit church community. Pentecostal congregational culture is commonly characterized as energetic, dynamic, informal, joyful, participatory, hospitable, and outreach-oriented.<sup>35</sup> These characteristics give rise to a tight-knit, emotionally close congregation, particularly through small group communities often called as cell groups. We argue that the social dynamics within such contexts might enable friendship, understanding, and even acceptance of LGBT identities, despite the officially conservative theological position of the church.

Yulius’ (male, gay, church member) experience in his small Pentecostal church in a rural Indonesian town best illustrates the role of this resource:

All accept me, all are tolerant. We have a strong sense of *kekeluargaan* (family-ness). Nobody accuses LGBT person as sinful. Never being mentioned in the sermon. It’s just an ordinary thing, they all are relaxed about it ... I’ve never really come out, but closest friends knew, and perhaps everyone else too (laugh).

Different from Western contexts where being out or closeted is often clearly demarcated, being out or closeted might not be as separated in other socio-cultural contexts, like in Yulius' experience. On the one hand, Yulius claimed he had no rejection whatsoever from the church community as no one explicitly condemned him for being gay. Yulius attributed such "acceptance", albeit not yet affirmation, to the tight-knit community life in his church. Family and friends have been in that small church for years; everyone knows everyone. On the other hand, Yulius only suspects that the whole congregation knows about his sexual identity, because of the culture of "gossiping" which he described as "rural town people's everyday entertainment". Actively involved in various church ministries, Yulius was well-known by the church community; they were able to see him as a nice human being, not an imaginary evil gay predator. As a result, Yulius was trusted to hold youth leadership positions in the church for many years, including at the inter-church, regional level.

The tight-knit nature of Pentecostal church community is also evident in the urban contexts, such as in Maggie's (female, heterosexual ally, church member) church. While her church is much larger than Yulius', the availability of cell groups and the lively church youth activities provided her with a sense of community, belonging, and friendship, and also an unexpected opportunity to meet – as Maggie described – an "effeminate male youth". The encounter eroded conventional stereotypes and presumptions, and humanized Maggie's views of LGBT people:

I now understand it is a sensitive issue, it must be very difficult for him (to be gay). I don't want to add more pressure by being theologically moralistic. So I just accept him as he is, and I pray for his happiness in life.

Similarly, Nicky (male, heterosexual ally, church leader) did not explicitly express his affirmation during the interview; stating instead that, theologically, he is "still in the process of learning, listening, and understanding." But he also shared his experience in dealing with a male church member who returned as female after being absent from the church for some years. He encouraged the cell group to be "hospitable" and to create "a safe space for everyone to just 'be'". He said he was glad that people in the cell group did not express moralism, but interacted with her kindly, and started to refer to her with female pronouns during group prayers. When a deep, human-to-human encounter took place, empathy and solidarity might subsequently follow; and theological moral accusations might be held back for a while, or permanently, or even questioned, renegotiated, and redefined. The intense sociality in Pentecostal community life is a probable place for such encounters.

The importance of tight-knit community and traditional affective networks as parts of Pentecostal congregational culture for LGBT Christians and LGBT activism is also evident in previous studies. Yi et al.'s study in South Korea documented the case of a heterosexually-married male senior member who came out as gay, but the Pentecostal congregation did not ask him to change or repent, they even elected him as an elder because they all knew his moral strength, personality, and genuine love of God. This case led the lead pastor renegotiated and redefined the church's position on LGBT identities to be more tolerant. The lack of tight-knit church community and worshipfulness were also often stated by LGBT Christians who had a Pentecostal upbringing but then moved to affirming mainline or ecumenical churches.<sup>36</sup> In Yi et al.'s study, for example, the

openly affirming churches available for their gay participants were a near-atheist liberal church and a leftist church that frequently involved in street protests. Further, the social and community building skills mastered by Pentecostal youth leaders like Yulius (male, gay, church member) were apparently useful when he initiated and maintained a network of LGBT youth in his town. They called him “*bunda*” (mother) because he genuinely cared for them, not just sought sexual experience. The Pentecostal pastoral and community practices of hospitality, passionate outreach, and taking care of each other in small groups might be a valuable resource to both advance LGBT affirming views and foster LGBT Christians’ sense of community and belonging.

### ***The self-governed, market-driven church institution***

The third and the final contextual resource that emerged in our analysis of Pentecostalism is the nature of church organization which is relatively self-governed and decentralized both theologically, institutionally, and financially; and therefore – to a degree – market-driven. In contrast to mainline or ecumenical churches, which generally have centralized organizational structures and strong policies, Pentecostal churches follow a “congregationalist polity” which means that they are autonomous, governed internally by their own members, and only loosely affiliated with other congregations.<sup>37</sup> In Indonesia, it is a common secret that cases of disagreement between Pentecostal church members can result in the opening of new churches, as long as there are resources and people willing to attend. To attract more people, Pentecostal churches have been employing marketing-like strategies, adopting an entrepreneurial ethos, and responding well to shifting trends, such as sermon/worship style, popular music, youth culture, and social media.<sup>38</sup> We argue that the institutional flexibility and market adaptability of Pentecostal churches might enable the possibility for alternative views, including moral theology on LGBT identities.

A tension between theological independence and market survival can be seen in Tony’s (male, heterosexual ally, church leader, seminary lecturer) church. His current church and seminary were founded by a Bible scholar and charismatic leader who is “considered controversial by some Christians”, as Tony explained, because of his unique “doctrines on salvation and Trinity”.

We talk about controversial doctrines in classes, not at the pulpit ... what if people do not want to come anymore ... well, everything is about money (laugh) ... So we are experts in this thing, like avoiding social media debates, limiting what to say during Sunday worship, and discussing difficult doctrines only in educational or Bible study settings.

While having a degree of theological independence, controversial or unpopular views need to be carefully managed by Pentecostal churches because they rely heavily on the congregation to survive financially. Maintaining more than 10,000 church members in a highly competitive church market in the megacity of Jakarta, Tony and the church leaders are aware that they could significantly lose their funding base and future market if they say something controversial and then goes viral on social media. Familiar with managing controversies, learning queer theology – for Tony in his church – is just another theological controversy to manage.

The market-driven attitude of the church is even more perceptible in Yulius’ (male, gay, church member) observation of the theological and social dynamics in his

church. As a Pentecostal church in a rural town, resources – both money and people – are considerably limited. Yulius said that his church is “very anxious about losing members”. In the context of rural people he characterized as “loving gossips and easily offended”, a wrong word from the pulpit could be interpreted as unpleasantly targeting a church member, and could result in a family moving to another church. Therefore, as Yulius explained, the content of the sermons in his church “revolves around faithfulness and material blessings”. The comforting promise of prosperity for those who are faithful to God and the church was repeatedly preached, displaying commonly recognized affinity between Pentecostalism and prosperity theology and middle-class aspirations. In such a context, Yulius identified that “moralistic pressures are low”, and “differences (including his sexual orientation) are tolerated as much as they can”, because the church wants to avoid any unpleasant messages.

In contrast with Yulius’ rural contexts, the Pentecostal church’s market in Indonesian urban settings is becoming increasingly educated, middle/upper-class, and even multinational. Here, access to more tolerant discourses around LGBT identities is relatively more available. For instance, in Tony’s (male, heterosexual ally, church leader) conversations with church members, he identified that talking about LGBT identities from scientific perspectives is a good start (e.g. how it has long been removed from the DSM), as most of his educated urban congregation “believe in science”. Maggie (female, heterosexual ally, church member) was initially interested in gender equality, justice, and rights in her university study before she became involved with LGBT issues. In Nicky’s (male, heterosexual ally, church leader) English-speaking international church, expatriates and Indonesians returning from overseas like himself take for granted democratic values and respect for personhood in their doings of religion. In these urban and cosmopolitan contexts, the Pentecostal churches have to carefully negotiate tensions between the changing attitudes on LGBT identities in their market and the traditionally conservative moral position of Pentecostalism.

A further possibility for affirming Pentecostals is hinted by Nicky (male, heterosexual ally, church leader), who referred to mainstream Pentecostal churches as “classic” several times during the interview, in the conversational context of distancing his church from them. Despite the apparent Pentecostal outlook of his church, his theological disposition and posture are not typical of Indonesian Pentecostal churches, such as how he emphasized “the descent of Holy Spirit (as) an *inclusive* moment involving people of different languages”, the “God’s expanding love and justice to all people not just certain confessional community”, and how he is uncomfortable with “top down, toxic hermeneutics”. He further described:

I feel that there has been an organic move in the congregation ... against dichotomous, black/white ways of thinking ... including in this LGBT issue. They are not into outspoken conservative evangelical preachers like from the U.S. who are harsh on LGBT persons. So I try to introduce social justice in this church community, but it cannot be top-down, right? We have to learn and struggle together.

The insertion of social justice issues in Nicky’s church can serve as a pathway to discussions on LGBT identities. His church’s interest in situating the gospel vis-à-vis LGBT issues, informed by the church’s direct encounter with a transgender person, opens up the possibility of using theological and biblical frameworks on social justice to assess

and discern their communal ethic on sexual and gender diversity. Nicky's experience suggests that small and younger church communities with more theologically moderate pastors can potentially be at the forefront of LGBT identity affirmation in Indonesia.

Nicky's church might exemplify possible new future directions for Pentecostal churches considering the changing nature of the contemporary urban/cosmopolitan church market. With Nicky's educational background, namely, a Doctor of Theology from overseas, and the congregation's yearning for a Pentecostal church with a more complex approach to human realities beyond "dichotomous, black/white ways of thinking", there is a potential to explore and democratically develop a more inclusive approach, including in matters related to LGBT issue. As demonstrated throughout this section, the institutional independence and market-oriented nature of contemporary Pentecostal churches can be enabling and even, perhaps, timely for such progressive development.

### **Reflections on LGBT identity affirmation and pentecostal theologies**

As we contemplate the participants' narratives and data analysis, we consider some further insights which may enrich the discourses on LGBT identity affirmation and Pentecostal theologies. Firstly, Maggie's narrative of disagreeing with her pastors on the morality of LGBT identities indicates that there is a space for personal voices in Pentecostalism. This openness is traceable to the narrative of Pentecost in Acts 2, often seen as the biblical history of Pentecostalism.<sup>39</sup> Maggie's unapologetic disagreement with her church's position on LGBT identities demonstrates her courage to challenge the authority of the church. Her firm disagreement is rooted in her personal conviction of who God is. She also reflects an embrace of equality by positioning herself as not inferior to the religious authorities. By disagreeing with the church authority, she exhibits a boldness which was once demonstrated by Peter when he stood in front of the crowd upon receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14).

In verse 14b of Acts 2, Peter, a humble fisherman once portrayed as a coward who denied his knowledge of Jesus, stood up before the crowd and confidently addressed them. In the same verse he said: "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say" (Acts 2:14b, NRSV). The way Peter begins his remarks signals that he speaks for his own behalf and shows his personal authority. Raising his voice amidst the mocking crowd entails bold courage that can only be possessed by someone who is certain of what they are talking about. Peter did not withdraw from or get dismayed by the dominant voices around him. He stood firm with what he believed was true. In Maggie's story, we see such empowerment materializes in her critical distance and opposition to her pastor's stance on LGBT identities. By saying that pastors are human and hence not flawless and infallible, she places the pastor as her equal, and not superior. It is only a person who is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit (like Peter) who can confidently challenge the powers that be.

Maggie emulates Peter by standing up to the powers that be at her church, by confronting or at least questioning – which is a critical step – the pastoral authority that makes the pastor think that it is rightful to alienate LGBT people. The liberation from heteronormative oppressions can and must also be considered as a form of salvation. Here, salvation is not constrained to the spiritual category, which is often understood

as the cleansing away of sin disinterested in social transformation, but also includes liberation from harm. When Moses is called by God to break the 400-year-old chains of enslavement that has long bound the Israelites, God is not acting to liberate them from spiritual sins, but from material suffering.

Maggie's bold opposition to the archaic religious moralism and her oppositional stance on the ecclesiastical authority's attitudes toward LGBT identities do conform to Peter's bravery in standing up to the crowd. However, the most noticeable difference is that Peter expresses himself publicly to the crowd, while Maggie only keeps her opinions to herself. Maggie did not clearly explain her silence, or why she did not set forth with her opinions to the church authority. This might have something to do with the tight-knit community structure which she refrains from disrupting, should she decide to publicize her opinions. Maintaining harmony in her community could be done by saving personal beliefs or opinions to herself, particularly in an Indonesian cultural context where the public version of the private self must be carefully represented.<sup>40</sup> Another possibility is simply related to the difficulty of "coming out" in the Indonesian context. The LGBT communities in Indonesia are mostly struggling with coming out, allies like Maggie might also share the same struggle with sharing unpopular opinions about being LGBT-affirming. Expressing publicly or saying her opinions about a controversial issue such as the LGBT issue out loud could alienate her from the community.

Secondly, in his story Yulius emphasizes "relationship with God" as something he lives in as a Pentecostal. This relationship is shown in his personal prayers. Unlike many Western scholarly works that employ theological reconstructions to defend LGBT identities, his self-affirmation originated from his own personal time with God. Personal time with God, in Pentecostal communities, is a quality time with God where one can express oneself freely without worrying about being judged by other parties. In their prayers, people are free to be candid with God about their concerns, express their remorse, share their feelings, and tell their stories to God unabashedly. There is nothing to be ashamed of before God. One can cry, shout, and even laugh in God's presence. Here, in Yulius' story, we learn of his "unlimited access" to God, not as a wretched sinner begging for salvation, but as a proud and out – by which we mean being "out" to God – gay man who believes that God affirms his identity.

Reflecting on the alienation of LGBT people in Indonesia, Yulius has engaged in deep conversation – and silence – with God about his sorrow, such as when he lived in another town during his university study, and the church he attended condemned LGBT identities. There have been tears involved in his constant questioning of himself, and the "conflicting" identities that he possesses. Stell,<sup>41</sup> in explaining about what happens in revivalist movements, alludes to the space to mourn for one's own sinfulness. When faced with their own identities, LGBT evangelicals engage in tearful prayers and cry about their identities. Yulius, who came to peace with his sexual identity, already passed the struggling stage of crying, perhaps self-cursing and self-denouncing, cross-carrying, and questioning about his presumed conflicting identities. Such an attitude before God is reflective of a Pentecostal faith. Smith<sup>42</sup> considers the hermeneutical courage demonstrated by Pentecostals, which he traces to Peter's courage to offer a (counter)interpretation of the events he and the disciples are involved in. Smith specifically alludes to Peter's act of "standing up" to the crowd (Acts 2:14) with the eleven



disciples and elaborates his “reading” of the events. In Yulius’ case, he might not publicly stand up to a particular crowd and present his reading of the Bible and how it affirms his existence, but he was undoubtedly and unwaveringly certain about God’s love and affirmation for him. He relies the hermeneutic of himself on the personal prayers, in which he claims his space in conversations with God.

Thirdly, just like Peter’s narrative, the stories of Maggie, Yulius, Nicky, and Tony challenge the regnant and dominant theology of their times. While Peter might be, in line with the theological agenda of the Acts’ author, hinting at God’s inclusion of the gentiles, Maggie’s experience challenges the pervasive LGBT-phobia in her church or her pastor’s remarks. They base their assurance on the things they believe are true. As Pentecostals almost all the time obviate these experiences as unbiblical, Pentecostalism makes room for the experiences with God that could deviate from “orthodox” spirituality. Yulius believes from his *experience* of close relationship with God, that God loves him unconditionally regardless of his sexuality. Tony *feels* that doors are opened for him and that he meets the right people to help him deepen his understanding of queer theology and experiences of queer encounters.

Here, we can benefit from Smith’s<sup>43</sup> critical examination of what constitutes knowledge within Pentecostal theology. In his discussion on Pentecostal epistemology, he teases out traces of postmodernism in Pentecostal knowledge, describing it as a counter-modernity. He points to the significance of testimonies in Pentecostal worship services as the most telling proof of how subjective experiences are embraced in Pentecostalism – Yulius’ experience resonates with this. Yulius’ testimony of being a self-affirmed gay person of faith cannot be immediately dismissed due to its “doctrinal unfitness”. Pentecostalism, in this sense, is a critique of the rationalization of things. Pentecostal experiences have often been regarded as insignificant because it emphasizes emotional triggers and lacks in logicity. While such accusations and undermining abound, especially within the Reformed Evangelicals vis-à-vis Pentecostalism, Smith retains his views on the salience of experience in Pentecostalism. Questioning the over-legitimacy of reason and rationality, Smith asks: “What if our action and behaviour are driven not primarily by conscious deliberation but instead by a kind of non-conscious ‘feel’ for the world?” Experience might be treated as a central aspect of Pentecostalism, and, by extension, Christianity on the whole – as Maggie’s, Yulius’, Nicky’s, and Tony’s narratives have demonstrated – including in comprehending the morality of LGBT identities.

### **Concluding remarks: implications for LGBT Christian activism**

In conclusion, the current study has explored and presented a plethora of contextual resources within ostensibly conservative Pentecostal traditions that can be drawn upon to advance LGBT-affirming positions. It fills a gap in the existing literature on affirming evangelicals in non-Western contexts, where exploring contextual resources beyond theological reinterpretations is crucial. As our analysis has demonstrated, these resources exist at both personal, communal, and institutional levels; from the strong sense of personal moral agency, the emotionally close community life, to the self-governed and market-driven church institutions. We have also discussed some reflections to further the possible interconnections between these discursive resources, Pentecostal theologies, and LGBT-affirming stance. To keep exploring, identifying, and circulating such possibility might be a crucial strategy for LGBT Christian activism in Indonesia



and elsewhere. However, it is important to acknowledge that the limited number of participants in the current study made a detailed comparison between the experiences of heterosexual allies and the LGBT community in Indonesian Pentecostal churches unfeasible in the current analysis. Future studies may explore more specifically the dynamics and differences between these groups.

The implications of the current study are as follows. LGBT Christian activism in Indonesia, which hitherto was predominantly conducted by mainline or ecumenical churches (as described in the Introduction section), may find benefits in initiating conversations with evangelical communities, particularly with those inclining toward affirming positions. By understanding the ways and resources drawn upon by affirming Pentecostal Christians in the current study, such dialogs may be more constructive and productive. On top of initiating conversations between affirming Pentecostals and LGBT activists, networking between the two is fundamental in paving the path of social transformation. While affirming Pentecostals can provide the contextual background or plausible structure wherein rejection of LGBT identities occurs in their communities, the LGBT activists are able to provide the materials, tools, and other essential educational resources on LGBT advocacy. Information from the affirming Pentecostals can be invaluable inputs to LGBT activists to continue, update, and revise, when necessary, their approaches in advancing the discourse on gender and sexual diversities in the society, in ways that address the Pentecostal “market”. Therefore, when the “already affirming market” – thanks to this joint works of the two actors – drives Pentecostal churches to revisit their ethical vision and views on LGBT identities, they could be driven to make necessary revision, of course without sacrificing their central tenets.

The challenges would be more obvious in the megachurches which make up a considerable portion of Pentecostals in Indonesia. In these settings, reaching the affirmation stage would take more time. The tight-knit-ness of megachurches is more reflected in the cell groups which consist of four to ten people, or more, but normally do not exceed 20 people. However, in megachurches that iconize their senior pastors or founders, things can be more problematic, as the messages, theological views or visions of the senior pastors or founders are normally socialized to the branch churches and cell groups that belong to those megachurches, which are spread across the country and overseas. In these settings, more research needs to be conducted to explore and develop possible strategies to engage those mega-communities.

## Notes

1. Platt, Davies, & Bennett, “Contestations of Gender, Sexuality”.
2. Weintraub, “Morality and Its (Dis)Contents”.
3. Laurent, “Sexuality and Human Rights”; Suvianita, “Human Rights and the LGBTI”
4. Alfikar, *Christian-Islam Progressive Interpretations*.
5. Suvianita, “Human Rights and the LGBTI”
6. Garcia Rodriguez, “Who are the Allies”; Garcia Rodriguez and Murtagh, “Situating Anti-LGBT Moral Panic”; Thajib, “The Making and Breaking”.
7. Handoko, “Rethinking Homosexuality”.
8. Fuiist, Stoll, and Kniss, “Beyond the Liberal-Conservative Divide”.
9. Bean and Martinez, “Evangelical Ambivalence Toward Gays”.
10. Burrow-Branine, “Community of Counter-conduct”; Stell, “Queerly Evangelical”.

11. Jung, "Does Transnational Experience".
12. Chan, "Desexualizing Sexual Identity"; Sumerau, "Somewhere between Evangelical and Queer"; Thumma, "Negotiating a Religious Identity".
13. Natividade and de Oliveira, "God Transforms"; van Klinken, "Queer Love"; Yi, Jung, Segura, Phillips, and Park, "Gay Souls".
14. Clifton-Soderstrom, "Common Sense, Plain Sense"; Gushee, "Reconciling Evangelical Christianity"; Stell, "Queerly Evangelical".
15. Larsen, "Defining and Locating Evangelicalism".
16. Anderson, *An introduction to Pentecostalism*.
17. Hunt, *Handbook of Megachurches*, 1.
18. Fer, "Pentecostalism"; Larsen, "Defining and Locating Evangelicalism".
19. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*.
20. Stell, "Queerly Evangelical".
21. White, *Strangers at the Gate*.
22. Gushee, "Reconciling Evangelical Christianity".
23. Bean and Martinez, "Evangelical Ambivalence".
24. Pew Research Center, *Most U.S. Christian Groups*.
25. Burrow-Branine, "Community of Counter-conduct".
26. Thumma, "Negotiating a Religious Identity", 39.
27. Stell, "Queerly Evangelical", 62.
28. van Klinken, "Queer Love", 54.
29. Yi, Jung, Segura, Phillips, and Park, "Gay Souls".
30. See for example, Saylor, "Beyond the Biblical Impasse"; Gushee, "Reconciling Evangelical Christianity"; and Clifton-Soderstrom, "Common Sense, Plain Sense".
31. Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis".
32. Bartelink, "The Personal is Political"; Fer, "Pentecostalism".
33. van Klinken, "Queer Love".
34. See for example, Natividade and Oliveira, "God Transforms"; Wijaya Mulya, "From Divine Instruction".
35. Bird and Thumma, *A New Decade*; Sumerau, "Somewhere between Evangelical and Queer".
36. Thumma, "Negotiating a Religious Identity"; Yi et al., "Gay Souls".
37. Burrow-Branine, "Community of Counter-conduct".
38. Bird and Thumma, *A New Decade*; Hunt, *Handbook of Megachurches*.
39. Udampoh, "Included, Affirmed, and Empowered".
40. Bennett, "Patterns of Resistance"; Wijaya Mulya, "From Divine Instruction".
41. Stell, "Queerly Evangelical".
42. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 22.
43. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 74.

## Disclosure statement

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