

'Let's Talk': Sexuality and Perceptions of Personhood in an Apostolic Church in Gaborone

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This paper considers how leaders of the Baitshapi Church, a small-scale Apostolic church in Gaborone, Botswana have approached the issue of how to speak about sexuality under shifting epidemiological and social conditions over the past ten years. Drawing on John Iliffe's argument that conceptions of male and female honour have driven responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa, the paper explores how speech and silence about sexuality may reflect ways in which key aspects of personhood -- care, trust, and reputation -- are valued in religious terms. Baitshapi leaders' concerns about perceptions of personhood have led them simultaneously to accommodate and to resist official and quasi-official public health campaigns encouraging 'talk' about AIDS.

These church members' approaches to speaking about sexuality possess a historicity of their own, intersecting with broad shifts in Botswana in therapeutic interventions, mortality patterns, public health campaigns, and the significance of marriage and divorce. During the late 1990s, when AIDS mortality was at a height, the founding female bishop of the church made efforts to sustain a 'spiritual family' by speaking words of consolation and trust in God rather than denouncing 'promiscuous' sexual behaviour. Since the founder's passing in 2006, her male successor has made efforts to establish his own reputation and enhance the status of the church. In so doing, he has recalled the founder's preaching in consoling divorced church members with exhortations to trust in God, as well as in questioning the efforts of some Pentecostalist leaders to discourage childbearing outside of marriage. In general, members of this Apostolic church have framed the issue of what God says about sex in terms of what people ought to say to one another in order to accomplish the difficult task of sustaining relationships of care over time.