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LGBTQ Religious Archives Network

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Title

Paul Mokgethi-Heath Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

July 5, 2025

Extant

70 minute interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this interview, Doris Malkmus interviewed Paul Mokgethi-Heath and Nokathula Dhladhla, co-founders of Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) in 1999. They discussed their early religious experiences in Soweto and MCC support in founding a LGBTQIA positive church. Paul described his political activism in the 1990s and later marriage to the director of The African Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV or AIDS, (ANERLA) and his fight to move to Sweden while HIV positive.

Biographical

Rev. Paul Mokgethi-Heath was born in Soweto, South Africa, and was raised in a church led by Anglican monks. Recognizing his feelings for men while in high school, he organized other gay friends in a prayer group. He also became active in advocating for in LGBTI issues in South Africa, as the new South African constitution was written the 1990s. As one of the founding members of the Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand (GLOW), he was one of the people behind the first Gay Pride March in Johannesburg (1990).

Paul and 6 other members started a small prayer group where they met every Sunday evenings to talk about their experiences and journey of Faith. The group grew significantly and soon they needed a bigger space. So they rented a room at the Harrison Reef Hotel in Hillbrow which was above the famous Gay bar called the Skyline Bar. The challenge was that none of them was ordained and they needed someone to led the group. They heard of a man by the name of Rev. Tsietsi Thandekiso who was a gay priest but was kicked out of his church because of his sexual orientation so they approached him and Thandekiso led this worship until his death in 1997. Subsequently, the group, which by now included the lesbian activist Nokuthula Dhladhla,

decided to join MCC. They explored MCC and were licensed to preach in 1998, and were ordained in Los Angeles the following year. They founded Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) in 1999. The church grew until 2010 and its last meeting was held at Paul's house in Melville in 2013.

Paul Mokgethi-Heath tested HIV positive in 2000. AIDS was considered a death sentence in those days in South Africa, but no one, not even Hope and Unity spoke about it. The HUMCC congregation experienced many deaths. As Paul spoke out, other HIV positive people started to come out and be open about their HIV status but still some were struggling to come out. And that meant we could help get people onto treatment, and that meant people were living openly with HIV. Caring for people through the process of getting onto HIV treatment, counselling them through the side effects, supporting them through the relationships which suffered, became a core mission of HUMCC

A South African HIV+ organization ANERELA was headed by Paul's partner, Farher Japé' Mokgethi-Heath. It was known as The African Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV or AIDS. As ANARELA+ grew, it became international as INARELA and now known as The International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally by HIV or AIDS. After Paul married his partner, he moved to Sweden in 2013 and became the INERELA+Europe network coordinator. At the time of his immigration, he became entangled with the Swedish law concerning his HIV status The resulting court battles later helped change Swedish law.

Although Paul currently lives in Sweden and considers it his home, in 2023 he and Nokuthula decided to unify LGBTQ worship groups in Southern Africa under the MCC umbrella. They christened the Johannesburg church, Hope and Unity. Since then, MCC spiritual groups have opened in Lesotho, Mozambique, Botswana, and Zimbabwe.

Biography Date: September 30, 2025

Scope and Content

In this interview, Doris Malkmus interviewed Paul Mokgethi-Heath and Nokathula Dhladhla, co-founders of Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) in 1999. They discussed their early religious experiences in Soweto where Paul had formed a study group that included openly gay members. Paul also described his political activism in the 1990s. They described MCC support in founding a LGBTQIA positive church. After Nokathula left the interview, Paul described his marriage to the director of The African Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV or AIDS, (ANERLA) and his fight to move to Sweden while HIV positive.

This interview was conducted by Dr. Doris Malkmus as LGBTQ-RAN archivist as part of a series of oral histories at the MCC General Conference in 2025.

Access

Open to all researchers at <https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/paul-mokgethi-heath>

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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Tags

Metropolitan Community Church, Soweto, South Africa, clergy activist, AIDS