UNDER ATTACK: Kgosi Thebe and Sinethemba Cekiso, who were discriminated against for being gay. PICTURE: CINDY WAXA

Stand up for gays and lesbians, leaders told

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RELIGIOUS leaders have been asked to use their influence to protect those targeted and violated because of their sexual orientation.

At an event at safe house iThemba Lam, Gugulethu, yesterday, Elizabeth Petersen, founder of the South African Faith and Family Institute, said that religious leaders had to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions.

"Faith communities must be a safe haven for all God's people," she said.

Attending the meeting was the family of Zoliswa Nkonyana, a 19-year-old lesbian who was murdered in 2006.

Nkonyana was stabbed and beaten to death by 20 men a few metres from her Khayelitsha home, after she and a friend had been taunted for being lesbians by a group of girls.

The trial of nine men accused of her murder has been postponed 38 times.

Yesterday, Funeka Soldaat, a volunteer from Luleki Sizwe, an international campaign against corrective rape, said that lesbians were forced to hide when it came to religion.

After she "came out", her mother, a dedicated patron of the church, didn't speak to her for 10 years. "I know more than 30 lesbians that have been killed," she said.

"I could have been one of them. There are times when I'm really scared… but can't go to the church to ask for help."

iThemba Lam, established in 2007, is a safe house for people discriminated against because of sexual orientation.

Father John Oliver, from the Western Cape's Religious Leaders Forum, dismissed the notion that rape could "correct" sexuality. "We as religious leaders have the responsibility of spreading the word."

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