

**an Inclusive Approach
to Gender-Based Violence
– *leaving no one behind***



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Welcome

Opening Prayer

*Almighty God, through your Holy Spirit
you created unity in the midst of diversity;*

*We acknowledge that human diversity
is an expression of your manifold love for your creation;*

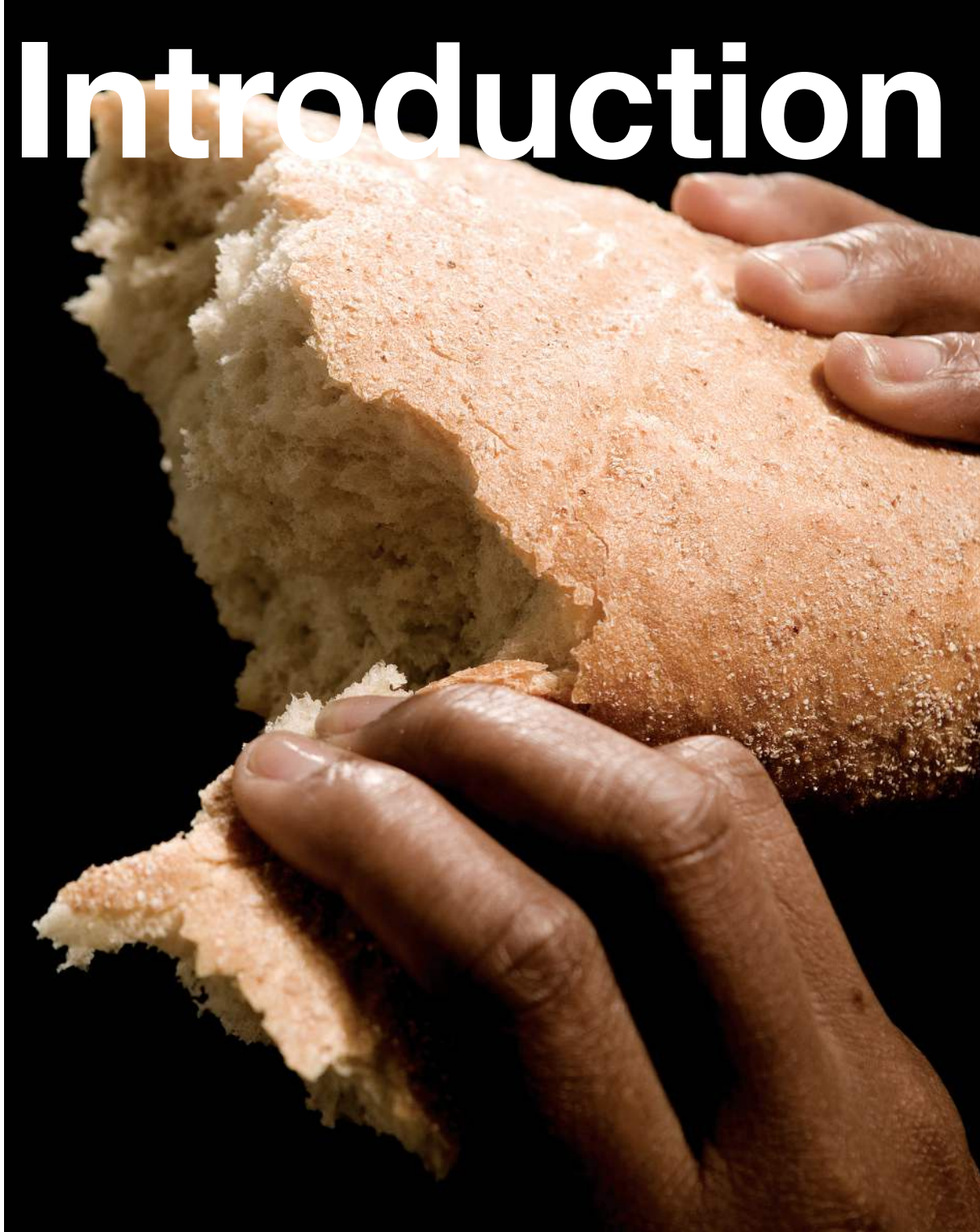
*We confess that in our brokenness as human beings
we turn diversity into a source of alienation,
injustice, oppression, and wounding.*

*Empower us to recognise and celebrate differences
as your great gift to the human family.*

*Enable us to be the architects of understanding,
of respect and love; Through the Lord,
the ground of all unity, we pray.*

Amen

Introduction



Background to FOCCISA

The Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISA) dates from 1999. It emerged from an ecumenical fellowship founded in 1980 that covered Eastern and Southern Africa.

FOCCISA seeks to be an ecumenical dialogue partner with the social, political and economic actors of the SADC region. Its deep theological self-understanding is as a fellowship of Christian churches bearing witness to the kingdom of God and the promise of abundant life for all. This is especially important in a region that has been characterised by political instability, economic marginalisation, displacement of people, regional fragmentation and vulnerability of women and children. FOCCISA is inspired by the recognition that the region enjoys great assets: mineral resources, a youthful population, a skilled and educated labour force, vast arable land and favourable climate, rich culture, and strong religious adherence. These assets need to be harnessed towards the dignity and equality of all people across the SADC region.

Bearing witness to the Kingdom of God

FOCCISA provides a forum to facilitate consultation, networking and co-operation for the member churches of 11 national Councils of Churches in the 16-country SADC region. It represents Councils of Churches from: Angola, Botswana, eSwatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This enables the churches of the region to speak with one voice on issues affecting them all, such as development, social-economic issues, health and gender.

FOCCISA's history of fighting for social justice

Just as countries in Southern Africa were brought closer to each other in the fight against Apartheid in South Africa, similarly the Councils of Churches in the region worked together to support the SACC (the South African Council of Churches) laying the foundation for the formation of FOCCISA.

During that time, the Councils of Churches in Southern Africa also cemented relationships with Councils of Churches in European countries to support the fight against Apartheid. A particular bond was created with the Christian Councils in the Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. This is the origin of the Nordic-FOCCISA Cooperation.

Our national Councils of Churches are bodies that bring together different churches. FOCCISA is made up of different churches and councils in Southern Africa. Furthermore, the Nordic-FOCCISA Cooperation brings together Christians from two continents.

We are therefore especially aware of the strength that comes from unity in diversity, an idea that St Paul beautifully captures in Rom 12:4-8 and his image of 'One Body'.

Rom 12:5

In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

FOCCISA's One Body Series

In 2003, the general secretaries of all the Councils of Churches in FOCCISA and Nordic countries met to explore what role this relationship should now have. It became clear that one key purpose for the co-operation was in response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

This led, in 2005, to the publication of a manual addressing some of the challenges emerging from the HIV and AIDS context. The title of the manual was: *One Body – North-South reflections in the face of HIV and AIDS*. This manual was written by people in Zambia, Mozambique, Denmark and Norway, and included people living with HIV. It capacitated churches to address these challenges and contributed to the reduction of stigma and discrimination in Southern Africa.

We have given these volumes the title *One Body* for in Christ we are all one. As individual human beings, we are one body made of flesh and blood. Christ the Healer, Christ the Reconciler is raising us up and giving us new life, both as individuals and in community. However fragile we are, however sick, however confused and difficult our real lives are, we are whole in the eyes of God, created in God's image and given new life in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. The same applies to the community of the Church.

God is reflected in the unity of the body, which in turn is the image of our unity with God. So our image of God, our understanding of who we are as the Church and our view of human sexuality are all closely linked to one another. This one-ness is what we celebrate when we come together as a community.¹

In 2011, the FOCCISA Health and Gender Justice Network (FHGJN) was established as an arm of FOCCISA to enhance the advocacy work of national Councils of Churches and promote gender, health and social justice in the SADC region.

In 2014, a second volume of the One Body series was published by FHGJN on behalf of FOCCISA entitled: *One Body – Human dignity inherent in every human being*. This addressed gender-based violence and other forms of abuses. All the 14 countries who, at that time, were in the Nordic-FOCCISA Cooperation contributed to this volume. It focused on three themes: gender equality, young people and overcoming abuse.

Ubuntu was a central theme and is described below

Ubuntu is a word that says something important about an African way of understanding life as something relational. By the way we relate to one another, we create one another's lives, and by the way we meet one another we can either expand or reduce one another's lives. The Church is one body.²

Other themes included gender equality and violence against marginalised groups. Gender equality affirms the equal dignity of women and men. Gender includes all people: female, male and people who do not conform to traditional gender identities. Gender inequality is an injustice that privileges one gender over others. The consequences of gender inequality include violence, abuse and discrimination.

Marginalised groups are found in all communities. They suffer violations of their dignity through violence, stigma, abuse and discrimination. The response to these violations of human dignity from *One Body vol 2* was as follows:

The Church as a Christian community should play a vital role for the marginalised groups of people in society. Instead of mocking, avoiding and stigmatising people, we need to translate the Gospel into action. This demands practical solidarity and a genuine affirmation that all people on this earth are part of the community of Christ, invited into the fellowship of love, care and reconciliation.³

Evolution of *One Body vol 3*

In February 2016, there was a meeting of the General Secretaries and the Gender and HIV/ AIDS Coordinators of the FOCCISA Councils. The aim of this meeting was to discuss, in a closed forum, the issue of gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against marginalised groups of people in Church and society. There was a growing awakening that LGBTI⁴ issues could no longer be excluded from the long-established advocacy of Churches in Southern Africa on gender and social justice. As a result, FHGJN felt the need to develop a faith-based response that would promote and protect the dignity of every human being without exception.

²OB2, p.3

³OB2, p.66

⁴LGBTI has become established as an acronym used to describe the diversity of sexual and gender minorities. The letters stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans-gender and Inter-sex. There are also shorter and longer versions of the acronym.

This led to a follow up meeting in August 2016 of the Heads of Churches, Project Coordinators and General Secretaries of all the Councils of Churches in Southern Africa (FOCCISA), to discuss the topic “The role of the Churches in the context of marginalised groups such as LGBTI people”.

At this meeting, participants were exposed to a comprehensive overview of LGBTI issues from theological, ecclesiological, anthropological, historical and cultural perspectives. Representatives from the LGBTI community shared a paper on challenges that they face. At the end of the meeting, all the participants committed themselves to action and training that will capacitate FOCCISA members to speak out against discrimination and violence against LGBTI people in their respective countries.

They agreed to a training manual based on the presentations made during the meeting. The result was the publication in 2017 of *OBS: One Body Supplement: The role of the churches in the context of violence on marginalised groups such as LGBTI peoples*.

This was a training manual to empower Dialogue Facilitators and Partners to be change agents in their local churches and communities as well as to respond pastorally and prophetically to violence against LGBTI people.

OBS was used in sensitisation, awareness building and the training of dialogue facilitators in Lesotho, Botswana, Malawi, Namibia and South Africa. Based on these experiences, it was obvious that an updated version of OBS was needed to address insights, contributions and challenges emerging from these training sessions. The updated *One Body vol 3 (OB3)* incorporates much of the material from OBS and includes new sections such as images of God, violence, African culture and Sankofa. Its full title is

One Body: an Inclusive Approach to Gender based Violence – leaving no one behind

Speak out against discrimination and violence

Relationship between OB3 and The *One Body* Project

Thus, since 2004, FOCCISA in co-operation with the Nordic Christian Councils has been implementing and broadening the *One Body* program: from addressing the stigma and discrimination of people living with HIV and AIDS; to addressing gender-based violence and violence against youth; to addressing violence against marginalised groups, in particular LGBTI persons.

Throughout, the *One Body* project and its material has been fully initiated, developed and upheld by the Councils of Churches; this full ownership of the *One Body* project makes it simple for member churches of the Councils to implement it.

The most valued principles of the *One Body* program are:

- everybody is created in the image of God,
- the endorsement of human dignity inherent in every human being
- this dignity and image should never be violated
- “nothing about us without us”
- We are one Body in Christ
- *Ubuntu*

These principles resonate with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as “Leave no one behind” and should include all people irrespective of colour, faith, sex, gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. The *One Body* program has always been implemented on the ground by the national Councils of Churches. Regional meetings and trainings are held for Heads of Churches, General Secretaries and national coordinators who then implement and support the project. The national coordinators are responsible for preparing local trainers/ dialogue facilitators who then implement the project in the local churches and communities.

Introduction to this Workshop

Southern Africa, like other parts of the world, is grappling with socio-political challenges and other injustices that can no longer be ignored. FOCCISA has a long history of engaging in social justice and providing a strategic direction for Christian Councils to address critical issues in the region.

It has provided a forum for Religious Leaders and other faith actors to struggle together and wrestle with challenging issues and the results have been astonishing. *One Body vol 3* and this workshop are a continuation of FOCCISA's

mission of being prophetic and pastoral in the face of regional crises and helps FOCCISA fulfil its mandate as an instrument of justice and peace.

Safe space for constructive conversations

The purpose of this workshop is to provide a safe space for constructive conversations for all levels of leadership in the Christian community across Southern Africa. These are dialogues that can lead to transformation in the Church and in society. The manual is divided into modules and each module has sections that cover different topics. This allows in-depth discussions on foundational issues to take place in their own time and thus enable participants to engage on key issues without feeling pressure to complete the whole material in an allocated period of time.

We use dialogue to raise awareness about gender justice with a specific focus on gender-based violence in marginalised communities and what impact this has on the social fabric. Particular attention is given to violence against LGBTI people among marginalised communities because of FOCCISA's intention to "leave no one behind" and their sensitivity to communities that still face a lot of controversies.

We also aim to stimulate actions to strengthen and implement Gender Justice programs that Christian Councils and churches already have. Early actions may include further research into the issues discussed, and also personal reflections about these issues. This will equip participants to have more insights into situations in their specific places.

Our aim is to build the capacity of Councils of Churches, Ministers and Lay Leaders in churches, other faith actors and people who themselves belong to marginalised groups, to engage in theological reflections on the issues being discussed. This will help them to come up with theologies that are aimed at affirming the human dignity of every human being and to address violence and injustice against all.

To do this we must reflect deeply on the mission of the Church and lead participants to develop actions plans that are realistic and which Councils of Churches are likely to support in their context.

It is hoped that the Councils of Churches in each country will implement the *One Body* program as part of their commitment to fulfil FHGJN's mission and mandate.

theologies aimed at affirming human dignity ... and to address violence and injustice

Structure of the Workshop

There are 8 modules in total, which build on each other. Therefore it is important for participants to understand clearly each module before progressing to the next one.

After introducing the [Methodology](#) that we propose, the concept of [Human Dignity](#) is explored both in the wider world and in relation to the Christian tradition. Two additional key concepts are then introduced: *Kairos* and *Sankofa*. The next module looks at [Human Sexuality](#) and then segues into a discussion of [LGBTI people as part of One Body](#) which in turn is linked with the concept of *Ubuntu*. Then there is a module that focuses on [Working with Scripture](#) – introducing both Contextual Bible Study and Images of God. The final model explores what it is to be a [Visionary Church](#).

The modules flow logically, step-by-step, guided by important questions as follows:

Module 1: Introduction

Questions: Who is responsible for the vision of an inclusive gender focus that includes LGBTI people and leaves no one behind? What decisions, processes led to the adoption of this commitment? Who was involved and when did this happen? Who is FOCCISA?

Module 2: Methodology (Dialogue; See, Judge, Act)

Questions: LGBTI issues are very sensitive and a source of division among Christians. How will this topic be addressed to ensure all voices are heard and no harm is done in dealing with differences among the participants?

Module 3: Human dignity; marginalisation and Jesus' example; humanity as *One Body*

Questions: Are there foundational principles that we share as Christians despite our diversity of beliefs that can guide us in developing a response so that we can find consensus?

Module 4: Two key concepts – *Kairos* and *Sankofa*

Questions: Are there lessons from Church history on how churches/Christians responded to injustice and other challenges in their context from which we can learn?

Module 5: Human Sexuality; historical overview of African Sexualities; teaching about Eunuchs in the Bible

Questions: What questions about identities are raised by LGBTI issues?; What do these letters stand for?; What is sexuality? Is sexuality only for LGBTI people?; What is the understanding of sexuality in African contexts and in psychology and science? Are LGBTI identities ‘un-African’? Are there only two sexes?

Module 6: Challenges faced by LGBTI people; Ubuntu and the Bible

Questions: What does it mean to be an LGBTI person in our world? How do they experience the world through social institutions such as schools, university, employment, family and church? Does possessing an LGBTI identity exclude people from being African? Are there resources in African culture that affirm the human dignity of LGBTI people?

Module 7: Contextual bible study; story of Sodom and Gomorrah; images of God

Questions: How do we read Biblical texts in context? Whose voice is being prioritised when we read Scripture? Are there resources in Christianity that affirm the human dignity of LGBTI people?

Module 8: A Visionary Church that acts; the call to churches to be light and salt for the world

Questions: How should churches respond to the challenges of LGBTI people? What characteristics are necessary for churches to play their role as defenders and safe spaces for LGBTI people?

Methodology



Dialogue as a tool of reflection

In the work of the FOCCISA Health and Gender Justice Network (FHGJN) dialogue has been adopted as the chosen method to discuss sensitive issues. Facing these issues head-on is imperative if people are to be truthful to each other and to their faith. But facing issues requires, first of all, recognising each other as created in the image of God, especially when we hold different views and beliefs. This openness to each other, rooted in listening and sharing, is the basis of dialogue. One example of dialogue in the Bible is when Paul goes to Athens, the great centre of philosophy of that age. He realised that he could only engage with others by being willing to enter into dialogue (Acts 17: 16-23, 32-34).

Acts 17:17

Paul reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there..

In dialogue we respect other views, making it possible to understand themes from different points of view and in different contexts. It is easier to listen to others when we exercise a radical openness and accept that every human being has inherent human dignity. True dialogue always places all human beings at an equal level regardless of race, class, gender or age. Open-mindedness and respect are the foundation of co-operation between people and of being ‘One Body’. Dialogue conveys ideas of friendship rooted in equality.

Dialogue is something more than a conversation or a discussion. It is a chance to explore shared beliefs as well as differences of opinion and understanding. It is a method, a tool of reflection, allowing us to shed light on sensitive issues. But it is also a goal in itself, reinforcing the dignity and equality of the persons participating and the relations between us.⁵

Dialogue in the Bible

In the Bible, people are given a chance to use dialogue to voice their complaints, doubts and fears. Faith makes it easier to engage in dialogue: with God, with Jesus, with people across ethnic differences, between women and men, between generations. These encounters open us up for changes in attitudes and beliefs. We see this so often in the encounters with Jesus of Nazareth, for example Lk 19:1-10; Jn 4:1-42; Jn 3:1-21; Mt 8:5-13.

Christianity can be seen as a community of dialogue between God and humanity. Dialogue is an open invitation to reason together about issues in our societies in the presence of Christ. Dialogue implies a willingness to listen to each other's views with an open mind. This challenges us to be one as the body of Christ is one, even when our viewpoints differ.

This oneness, in which we can see our unity in Christ despite our differences and take responsibility for each other, is central to the meaning of the African word *Ubuntu*. It is our hope that the dialogue can continue in the spirit of partnership.

The dialogue method therefore is a tool for addressing sensitive and controversial issues. It acknowledges that Christians may have different views on any given topic and seeks to provide guidance on how to express our different views in respectful ways that do not violate the human dignity of those who differ from us. With the practice of dialogue we learn to listen, to understand different points of view, and to see why other people think the way they do. In this way, we can grow in knowledge together; at times we agree to disagree in the spirit of the diversity of the one body that Paul talks about (1 Cor 12:4-31).

1 Cor 12:4-5

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord

? Questions for Dialogue

1. What are some of the words or phrases used to say what Dialogue is, and what it is not?
2. Why do you think Dialogue is a preferred method for dealing with sensitive issues?
3. In what way have you seen the material from previous volumes of *One Body* being used to promote greater understanding and acceptance?
4. Discuss a story in the Bible that exemplifies dialogue.

Some rules for dialogue

1. Create a safe place in which no one is to be harassed or silenced because of their opinions or who they are.
2. Ensure confidentiality. What is said in the room stays in the room.
3. Respect the human dignity of each participant in the dialogue.
4. Listen carefully to everything being said, rather than focusing on what you yourself would like to say.
5. Give women and men, LGBTI persons, differently-abled persons, girls and boys the same attention, space and respect.
6. Dialogue is not about 'convincing' anyone of your viewpoint, it is about helping each other to move to new levels of understanding.
7. Adhere to the slogan 'nothing about us without us' which means allowing groups to speak for themselves and avoid speaking about groups in their absence.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Look at the rules above and choose one which is very clear to you and of which you have had personal experience. Recount this to the others.
2. Now look at the rules above and choose one which is not so clear to you or which you are not convinced about. Discuss this with the others.

Safe and brave spaces for courageous conversation

Dialogue is the basis for safe and brave spaces that lead to courageous conversations, necessary particularly for discussions on sensitive and controversial topics.

What are safe and brave spaces?

A safe place is “a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment or any other emotional or physical harm.” (Oxford Dictionary).

Thus, a safe place is a supportive, non-threatening environment where all participants can feel comfortable to express themselves and share experiences without fear of discrimination or reprisal.

A brave space is a ‘twin’ to a safe space.

It is a supportive place where participants feel comfortable learning, sharing honestly and equally, and growing individually and together. Brave spaces take hard work as they encourage uncomfortable conversations that move participants out of their comfort zones, and build capacity to foster better or new understandings. Creating Brave Spaces is essential for challenging societal norms, fostering empathy, and building coalitions that can collectively work towards a more equitable and just society. To quote from one commentator:

“Brave spaces are designed to handle risk and discomfort. The people within them are prepared to exist in discomfort and navigate it together. There may be a moment when someone feels offended or

**Brave spaces
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conversations**

hurt by something that someone says or does in a brave space. In these cases, both parties are committed to remaining in the discomfort and using healthy methods of navigating through it together. Brave spaces require courage.”⁶

Guidelines for safe and brave spaces

1. Listen actively: listening to understand.
2. Be open to multiple viewpoints.
3. Respect the speaker or speak respectfully, even if you don't respect the statement or the views it represents. Respect doesn't require agreement.
4. Challenge with care and non-harm and be willing to be challenged too.
5. Think about how to question ideas without personal attacks.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Think of an experience of being in a group where you experienced safety and could express your opinions freely. What contributed to the group being a safe place for you?
2. Then think of the opposite – an experience of being in a group where you felt unsafe, fearful and intimidated and could not freely express your opinions. What made the group unsafe?
3. Describe an experience of engaging in 'brave conversations'.
4. If you were to create a safe and brave space what would be the key principles that you would apply?

Our proposed approach: See, Judge, Act

Commitment to dialogue and safe spaces is essential for our methodology which is ‘See, Judge, Act.’ This methodology empowers us to address challenging issues in a systematic step-by-step process that starts with the context, then applies a biblical lens and ends with action for justice.

Bishop Malusi Mpumwana, the Secretary General of the South African Council of Churches, provides an overview of this method.

The SEE is research, to seek to know enough about all there is to know to be able to reach a social analysis and understand root causes. This is necessary if you are to plan your action intelligently.

Focusing, for example, on people who are marginalised, the SEE questions might be as follows:

- What social and public policy environment do we have?
- What are the myths that society holds about these marginalised communities and where do these myths come from?
- What happens to people who are known to be part of these marginalised communities?
- In what circumstances are people molested, and in what circumstances are they safe?

There may be many questions to answer in order to get a full picture of the situation for a situational analysis.

Then, knowing what we now know, we move to JUDGE. The word ‘judge’ in this methodology is not the same as we use in everyday language to decide whether something is right or wrong. Judge in this methodology means discernment which is applying our theological lenses and principles from the Bible to help us listen in fresh and new ways to how God wants us to respond

to a particular situation. Paul in his 2nd letter to Timothy challenges us to make right judgements (2 Tim 1: 6-7). What does the love of Christ require of us in regard to what we know to be the case?

There are many different interpretations of sacred texts. This is why it is necessary to invest in pastors, so that the JUDGE stage can be informed by sound theology. Even if there is a question of sinfulness, Jesus has a message for us which may not be what we expect (John 8: 7).

John 8: 7

They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, “All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!”

ACT – describes the practical actions that will be taken to address the injustices described in “See” and ‘Judge’. The actions are informed by the information gathered from “See” and “Judge.” The goal for action is justice, change and transformation in Church and Society.

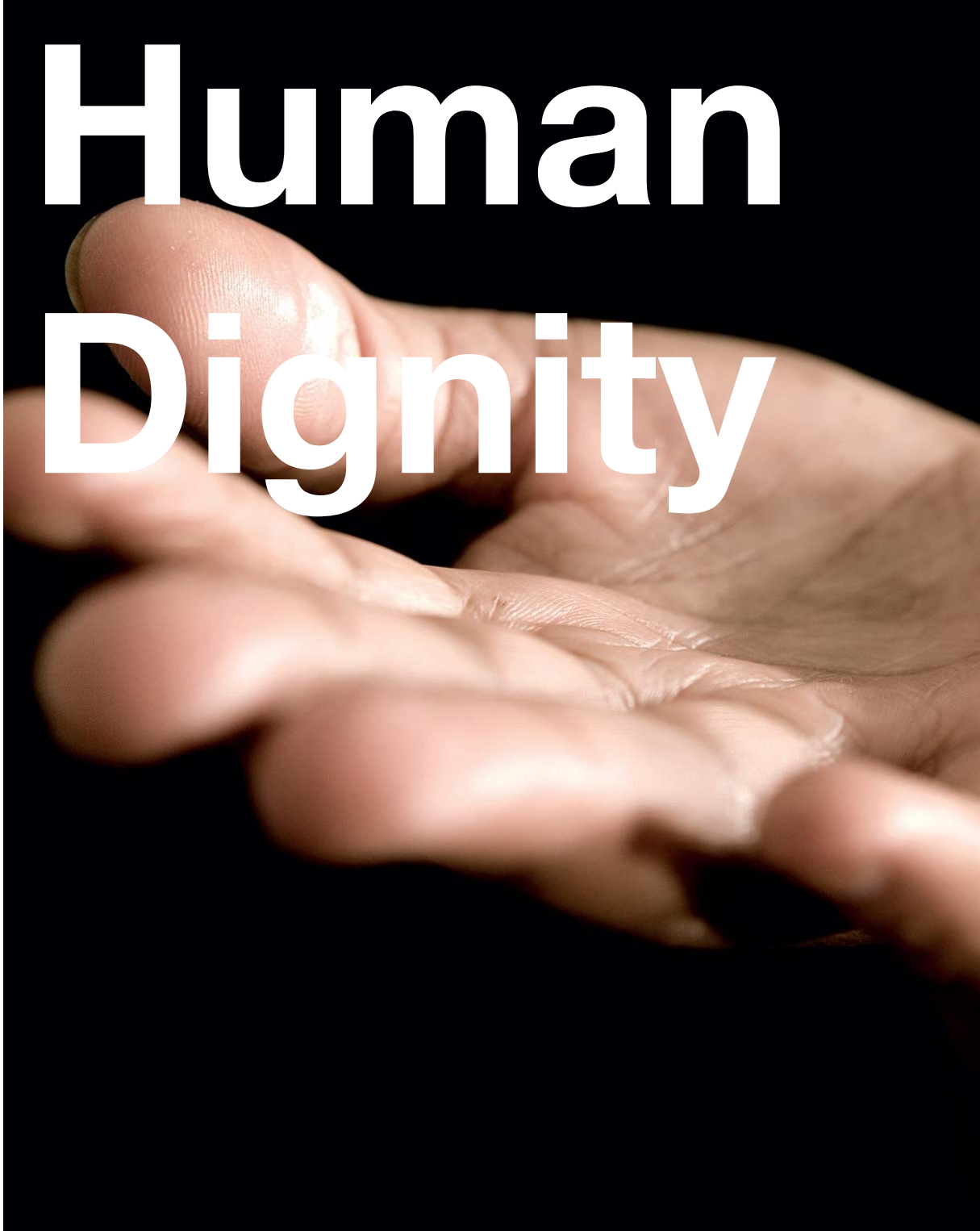
? Questions for Dialogue

1. What does it mean to ‘See’ in the ‘See, Judge, Act’ method?
2. What does it mean to ‘Judge’ in the ‘See, Judge, Act’ method?
3. What does it mean to ‘Act’ in the ‘See, Judge, Act’ method?

The ‘See, Judge, Act’ methodology is also applied in contextual Bible studies which we will describe and apply in a later session.

The next section will discuss the fundamental principle that guides our commitment to justice and equality of all and leaving no one behind. The principle is human dignity.

Human Dignity



What is Human Dignity?

Dignity means ‘worthiness’ – every person is worthy of honour and respect for who they are by virtue of being human.

Human dignity is the God-given intrinsic value of being human – irrespective of class, race, gender, ability, nationality, culture, sex, religion, education, sexual orientation or any other division⁷

Every person without exception has intrinsic dignity. ‘Intrinsic’ means belonging naturally because it is an extremely important, basic characteristic of a person or thing. Human dignity belongs to all human beings equally and can never be taken away from anyone. It can be disrespected and abused, but never taken away.

For faith institutions, the concept of human dignity is anchored in the belief that every human being – woman, man, girl and boy is created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). Each person has been given a unique position in God’s world with their own responsibilities and tasks. The idea of a shared and equal human dignity also lies behind the African concept of *Ubuntu*.

**Human
dignity
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beings
equally**

Human Dignity, Human Rights and *Shalom*

In legal terms, the religious/philosophical concept of Human Dignity is expressed in the form of Human Rights. The “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (UDHR) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, and represents “the first comprehensive agreement among nations as to the specific rights and freedoms of all human beings”. According to the preamble of the UDHR, the basis of human rights is the “recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family”. African countries in the post-colonial era developed their own human rights declaration known as the “African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights”. It was adopted in 1986, as a document created to promote and protect human rights and basic freedoms based on African cultural values such as individual duties and responsibility to family and community. The African Charter has been a catalyst for the development of other documents that focus on specific rights of groups such as women, migrants and refugees. The Maputo Protocol is an example of a document on women’s rights in Africa.

In both the UDHR and the African Charter human rights are:

- universal: that is, for everyone without exception;
- inalienable: which means that they can never be taken away from anyone;
- and indivisible: that is, all rights are connected and not separate.

That means that every person – irrespective of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class etc. – is entitled to all human rights at all times.

Human rights are comprehensive and cover every aspect of life. In this regard human rights show many parallels with the concept of *Shalom* in the Old Testament. *Shalom* is usually translated as ‘peace’. We tend to limit our definition or understanding of peace to simply mean the absence of war or conflict. But in fact *Shalom* is a much fuller promise of human flourishing. One definition of it is as follows:

“The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfilment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *Shalom*. We call it peace but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *Shalom* means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Saviour opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.”⁸

***Shalom*
means
universal
flourishing,
wholeness
and delight**

Jesus, Human Dignity and Social Justice

Jesus treated everyone, particularly marginalised people with dignity and equality and set an example for us to follow. Therefore, we are all “considered close friends, equal as sisters and brothers of Christ. There is no room for stigma, discrimination or condemnation of any human being. We are one Body, united in the spirit of love and compassion”.⁹

The commitment of every church to fighting for social justice is linked to the importance Jesus placed on human dignity. Social justice is needed when people are treated unfairly, that is when their intrinsic human dignity is not respected. Because Christians believe that human dignity is God-given, to fight for social justice is to fight for the reign of God’s kingdom on earth which we pray for every time we recite the prayer that Jesus taught us, the ‘Our Father’.

Violence and human dignity

Violence constitutes actions that violate the dignity of victims and perpetrators. Violence undermines the most basic human rights of victims: the right to life, to health, to security, to liberty and to freedom from torture or cruel inhuman treatment. That is why violence is an act of injustice that needs to be eradicated.

Although anyone can potentially be a victim of violence, some groups are more vulnerable than others. Examples of these groups include: women; persons with albinism; differently-abled persons (formerly described as people with disabilities),

minority ethnic groups, LGBTI people, refugees and migrants. Since all human beings without exception are created in the image of God, the Church cannot be neutral or silent when violence is perpetrated against members of any group.¹⁰

It is important to emphasise that there are no human rights that are particular for a specific group of people. There are no special human rights for women or LGBTI people. But all human rights should apply to all people without exception – leaving no-one behind.

**Violence
undermines
the most basic
human rights of
victims**



Questions for Dialogue

1. Explain Human Dignity in your own words, in the way you understand it.
2. Share experiences where you felt your human dignity was affirmed. How did you feel? What was said and done to you in this experience?
3. Share experiences where you felt your human dignity was violated either personally or as a member of a particular group (race, ethnicity, faith community etc). How did this experience affect your human dignity?
4. Name and describe groups in your community that are subjected to violence and discrimination. How has your church responded to these violations in the spirit of Jesus?

The next section will address an example of the violation of human rights that often leads to violence which is marginalisation. The focus will be on understanding marginalisation and how Jesus responded to marginalised groups in his community.

Marginalisation

Jesus does not just reach out to those who are suffering but actually identifies himself with them. By doing this he provides a clear model of how Christians should respond to marginalisation.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary: “to marginalise is to treat someone or something as if they are not important.” The Dictionary of Sociology defines marginalisation further:

“Marginalisation has been defined as a complex process of relegating specific groups of people to the lower or outer edge of society. It effectively pushes these groups of people to the margin of society (economically, politically, culturally and socially) following the policy of exclusion. It denies a section of the society equal access to productive resources and avenues for the realisation of their productive human potential and opportunities for their full capacity utilisation.”

Marginalisation is characterised by:

- Prejudice, stigmatisation and discrimination against particular groups
- ‘social exclusion’ – excluding these groups from equal participation in society
- multiple forms of violence against these groups (physical, mental, psychological, economic and spiritual)
- stereotyping
- depriving groups of their human rights

People are marginalised through their group identity and through their personal identities. Group identity refers to the group that one belongs to such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and political/ religious affiliation. Just by belonging to these groups people face marginalisation. Personal identities refer to someone’s personal situation and include: age, marital status, education,

physical appearance, sexuality, health and economic status. Some people experience multiple forms of marginalisation, for example a poor person with disabilities faces double marginalisation first because of being poor and secondly because of being differently abled. Marginalisation can result in self-marginalisation where marginalised groups and individuals internalise and accept their oppression as ‘normal’.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Discuss these statements in relation to marginalisation:
“relegating specific groups of people to the lower or outer edge of society”
“pushes these groups of people to the margin of society”
“denies a section of the society equal access to productive resources”
From these statements formulate a definition of marginalisation.
2. Have you experienced marginalisation on the basis of any group that you belong to (race, ethnicity, gender etc.)?
3. Have you experienced marginalisation on the basis of your personal identity?
4. Share your experiences of marginalisation and how it felt.
5. What is your response to self-marginalisation – is it something you have experienced or have overcome or never experienced?

Jesus and Marginalisation

Mozambican theologian, Elias Zacarias Massicame, reminds us that for Jesus compassion was the most important principle and that this drove him to reach out to the margins of society:

“Love and compassion characterise Jesus’ ministry and this therefore becomes an imperative above all for those who are called by His name. As Christians we are called upon to love and not judge. Jesus Himself gave us the example by the way He showed love and compassion for the suffering. Jesus tells us, ‘love one another as you love yourself’.

Therefore, we must show compassion in the deliberate intention of suffering with another.”¹¹

Jesus interacted with marginalised groups in his community including tax collectors, Samaritans, lepers, the poor, women and sex workers. His actions brought criticism and condemnation from religious leaders:

Mark 2:16

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’

Their criticism did not stop Jesus; instead, he continued to spend time ministering to marginalised people. Here are some examples of his pastoral and prophetic ministry:

- Healing the leper (Mk 1:40-45)
- Visiting Zacchaeus a tax collector in his home (Lk 19:1-10)
- Allowing a woman described as a ‘sinner’ to touch and anoint him (Lk 7:36-50)
- Sharing meals and socialising with marginalised groups (Mt 11:16-19)
- Publicly having a conversation with a Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-26)

Jesus' pastoral and prophetic ministry included:

- Solidarity: he spent time with individuals from marginalised groups in public, offering gifts of unconditional love and friendship;
- Home visitation: he visited individuals from marginalised groups in their homes, offering gifts of acceptance, compassion, care and fellowship
- Subversion: he defied social norms and prejudice by publicly speaking to a woman of a different ethnic group (a Samaritan), offering her the gifts of the Spirit and salvation

Jesus excluded no one, was open to all people, had no favouritism or preferences, challenged the prejudice and discrimination in his society and publicly stood in solidarity with marginalised people; he did not withhold care, love or ministry. Through his actions, Jesus modelled ministry to the marginalised for the Church. God's gifts of love, grace and salvation, and his promises in the Bible, are for all people without favouritism or discrimination.

1 Pet 1:17

The heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favourites.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Describe the different ways in which Jesus responded to individuals from marginalised groups in his community.
2. Who were his main critics who condemned him for his ministry to the marginalised?
3. Who are some of the groups in your community who are marginalised?
4. Based on the pastoral and prophetic practices of Jesus to marginalised groups, how would you design a similar program for LGBTI people in your community?

Responding to Marginalisation: Lessons from the context of HIV and AIDS

In responding to HIV and AIDS, the Church has learnt important lessons from the life of Jesus of how to respond to Marginalisation as explored in *One Body vol 1*.

Jesus reached out to those who were marginalised in his society and this provided a clear model of how the Church is called to reach out to people affected by HIV who have been marginalised in our society.

The healing of the leper was not an isolated incident but instead was just one example of the compassion that characterised Jesus' entire life and ministry. Just as Jesus repeatedly responded with compassion in the face of ignorance, hunger, sickness, and even death, so the Church is called to respond.

Jesus' compassion did not remain merely at the level of emotion. On the contrary, it expressed itself in practical ministry. Out of compassion, he raised the dead, taught the multitudes, and healed the sick. The Church has been at the forefront of showing practical support to people affected by HIV and AIDS.

The compassion of Jesus knew no boundaries, flowing out beyond his friends to encircle his enemies. Jesus is not merely an outstanding example of human compassion; he embodies the compassionate heart of the God of the Bible. The Church's response was initially for its own members, then for their families and now for broader society.

Stigmatisation

Stigmatisation is “the act of describing or considering somebody/something in a way that unfairly suggests that they are bad or do not deserve respect” (Oxford Dictionary). During the HIV and AIDS pandemic, people living with HIV were often stigmatised and rejected by family, society and churches.

In response to the challenge of stigma, UNAIDS organised a workshop in Namibia, in 2003, for leading theologians from five continents. The agreed statement from this workshop said:

“Christian theology has, sometimes unintentionally, operated in such a way as to reinforce stigma, and to increase the likelihood of discrimination.”

This situation, said the theologians at the Namibian workshop, needs to be addressed at the level of what Christians believe, what their clergy preach, what they sing and how they pray, and what is taught in their seminaries.¹²

There is an irony in the fact that the term used to mark out someone for rejection is ‘stigmatisation’. That is because the word comes from the Latin term used to describe the signs of anguish on the body of the dying Jesus: the nail marks in his hands and feet, the wounds where the thorns cut into his head, the hole pierced in his side. Thus, stigmatisation is a violation of human rights and contradicts the example of Jesus who did not stigmatise marginalised groups in his community.

Signs of anguish on the body of the dying Jesus

The mission of the Church in response to stigma and marginalisation: Lessons from HIV and AIDS

In these extracts from 'The Compassion of God', Japhet Ndhlovu a theologian from Zambia draws lessons from the experience of responding to HIV:

By its very nature and mission, the Church cannot ignore the call to fight stigma, prejudice and oppression. The Church should live and witness even in this time of AIDS. Human beings were created in the image of God (Gen 1: 26-28) and the Church must be his body. Christ is the abiding head of this body and at the same time the one who, by the presence of the Spirit, gives life to it.

Theology is a community activity for both experts and laypersons; it grows out of life together with people of faith. It grows as people share together their lives and the interpretation of events that surround them in the light of faith.

Theology is and always has been the living product of communities of faith wrestling with the meaning of their faith in the face of the ambiguities of life.

Jesus was consistently engaged in breaking down the categorical exclusions imposed against such people as women, Samaritans, lepers and the demon-possessed. That process has also been an ongoing feature of the community of faith wherever it has found itself. The community of faith is often found struggling with the issues of inclusion/exclusion and with breaking down the walls of partition that separate people from each other as they come to a renewed vision of God's acceptance of all people.

Jesus did not simply seek the company of the excluded; he was also establishing a new set of relationships, a new kind of community, a new Israel that would embody the reign of God, which he announced. In this new community, God's presence and power would be evident above all in the practice of love. And it would be effective love, feeding the hungry, setting the prisoners free, restoring sight to the blind, letting the lame walk, healing all manner of sickness (Luke 4: 16).¹³

A personal story of stigmatisation and marginalisation

*Dr. Fulata Lusungu Moyo shares her personal story and uses it to show a 'contextual reading' of Matthew 15:21-28.*¹⁴

I came back to the University of Malawi as a fourth year student even though I knew I was pregnant. The university rules clearly suspended pregnant women until after their babies were two years old. How could I tell my Christian family that I was pregnant? I was a Christian leader at university and I was not married. The father of my unborn baby was also a respected Christian leader. I feared facing my judgmental Christian community that seemed to value the outward observance of accepted norms more than living the gospel of compassion. I even considered my own death or abortion as easier options than facing discrimination and condemnation from those whose love and acceptance I desperately needed as my community.

When [my boyfriend Solomon and I] gathered courage and told our Christian community, one of the standard reactions was: "You are bringing shame to the body of Christ! Why didn't you prevent pregnancy or even abort so as not to pour humiliation to the Christian community?" It did not matter that God in Christ accepts us just as we are. The discrimination from our brothers and sisters that took different expressions was so unbearable that at one point

Solomon wondered whether being Christian was worth it. It was easier to struggle in prayer alone, consumed in self-pity and a feeling of unworthiness, than to pretend to be in ‘fellowship’ amongst people who treated you as if you were ‘other’, as if you were sin itself. If it were not for the few Christian brothers and sisters and some members of our two families that courageously took extra steps to embrace us, our faith would have been put off by the darkness of bitterness and oppressive shame.

But I found comfort in the story of the Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21-28). Matthew (following Mark) refers to the woman not by name but through her ethnicity as a Canaanite. In the New Testament world, Canaanites were marginalised and despised because it was believed that they engaged in unethical trade practices (cf. Joel 3:4-8; Zech 9:9-13). So Matthew uses this as a derogatory term to emphasise the contrast between pious religious leaders and this foreign woman. After seeming to ignore her first cry for help, Jesus uses the term ‘dogs’, an abusive Jewish way of showing discrimination towards Gentiles. Jesus’ echoing of the Jewish stigma against this woman and her daughter can be understood as an expression or critique of the sexism and xenophobia that was common in his community. But then the healing of her daughter is testimony to the power of their dialogue in overcoming the stereotypes and prejudices in the community.

Both I and the Canaanite woman in our biblical text suffered a lot of gender-based violence mainly through words as well as the general response from people we looked up to for help.

I found comfort in the story of the Canaanite Woman

When I became pregnant, there were some Christian brothers and sisters who went to Solomon to caution him against me on at least two accounts. Firstly, so as to advise him against accepting his responsibility: the church I was fellowshiping with excommunicated me but did not excommunicate him. Secondly, they argued that even if he was sure that he was responsible, he still did not need to accept responsibility because they were sure that I had deliberately enticed him into sleeping with him: I was responsible for tempting him into falling into sin.

In each class I went into, I found written messages against me. For example: “She ate the forbidden fruit and tempted an innocent man of God to eat it too!”

Biblical texts were always used to justify my Christian community’s discrimination against me as a sinner. I painfully learnt that sexual ‘sins’ are considered heavier sins than others, especially if the consequences are visible through pregnancy.

Mt 15:28

Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”

Questions for Dialogue

1. Summarise Moyo’s story. Share your feelings and reactions to her story.
2. Discuss the following themes from her story: use of the Bible; gender-based violence, sexism.
3. How does Moyo relate her experiences to that of the Canaanite woman?
4. What do you think would have happened if Moyo had encountered Christians who used the Bible to show her the love, forgiveness and renewal that Christ brings?

Sharing of our stories

“Until the lions are allowed to tell their own stories as the hunted, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunters”¹⁵

Moyo, through the impact of sharing her story, encourages us to share our own stories. We are all multi-storied people with many stories that reflect the different experiences of our lives: success, failures, challenges, sadness, trauma, shame and much more. The challenge is to be mindful that one story does not define who we are – we are more than any one of our stories and so are other people. Some people carry stories of shame or are defined by stories of shame which they carry throughout their lives e.g. someone who was convicted as a criminal; or a divorcee or alcoholic. Let us avoid reducing ourselves and others to one story – we are all multi-storied and multi-dimensional.

**One story
does not
define
who
we are**

We are also wounded by life experiences and surrounded by wounded people. Sharing stories in safe and compassionate spaces brings healing. Jesus recognised the importance for healing of sharing personal stories of shame in the story of the woman with the issue of blood – she touched Jesus and was healed. Jesus asked her to reveal herself and share her story as part of healing and restoration to the community who had shamed her because of her impurity (Lk 8:43-48).

The next section explores further the topic of violence.

Violence and marginalisation

Sadly one of the ways in which people's marginalisation is most clearly felt is through violence. Many of us live in countries with a high level of violence:

- sometimes this is state-sanctioned violence, for example by police officers or army
- sometimes this is random violence, for example as part of a robbery
- sometimes it is personally targeted violence, for example directed towards a political rival
- sometimes it is group-related violence, aimed at people because they are seen to belong to a certain sub-population (women, LGBTI, migrants, people with albinism)
- sometimes it is self-inflicted violence (such as self-harming and even suicide) which results from internalising a low image of oneself

What is violence?

Acts of violence are usually thought of as physical (beating, hitting, stabbing etc.). But there can also be other less visible forms of violence:

- sexual (rape, harassment, assault)
- mental (verbal abuse, humiliation, shaming)
- psychological (emotional abuse, controlling, belittling)
- economic (denying or withholding resources)
- spiritual abuse (the use of biblical texts or religious authority to marginalise and discriminate against others as well as abuse of religious power)
- and also the threats to commit any of these acts.

Violence in Scripture

In the Bible we find stories about violence, texts that condone violence and texts that condemn violence. For example the story of Tamar (2 Sam 13) describes her experience of rape which combines elements of incest and domestic violence. In Mt 5: 21-22, however, Jesus condemns all forms of violence not just physical acts but violent thoughts:

Mt 5:22

If you say, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Give examples of biblical texts that:
 - talk about violence
 - condone violence
 - condemn violence.
2. What is the overall attitude of Jesus towards violence?

How do our churches respond to violence?

Our societies are characterised by multiple forms of violence. How do churches respond to violence in general and in particular in relation to marginalised groups? There is not one answer to this question. It seems to depend on who is the target of the violence. We do need to acknowledge, recognise and encourage every single effort done by churches and church leaders to prevent and reduce violence. However there are instances both in history and currently where churches and church leaders do not speak out against violence and might even go so far as to condone it or encourage it.

? Question for Dialogue

From the list below, select 3-5 groups who in the context of your own community regularly experience violence. Describe the types of violence they experience. What are the responses from your church or other churches to the violence they experience?

Groups	What kind of violence do they experience?	How have church leaders responded?
People with albinism		
Differently abled		
Widows		
LGBTI		
Elderly		
Migrants		
People with mental health illnesses		
Single people		
Orphans		
Ethnic minorities		
Homeless people		
People injecting drugs		
Children living on the streets		

The next section will focus on one of the prevalent forms of violence which is gender-based violence.

Gender-based Violence

Gender-based Violence (GBV) is violence perpetrated against individuals or groups because of their gender, typically by some men targeting women. But GBV also targets people who do not conform to the gender norms that are expected of them. It can refer to gender expressions or presentations (how someone looks and dresses) and to behaviour, preferences and roles that do not conform to gender norms. Persons who do not conform to expected gender norms are often humiliated, violated and in some cases killed.

Some of the examples from countries in Africa are shocking (some names have been changed in the reporting):

Thabiso Motaung, a 19-year-old member of the LGBTI community in Cape Town, was filmed being stripped naked and beaten by three young women in Khayelitsha.

John Mukisa, a 36-year-old trans man in Uganda, was beaten, arrested and questioned over his sexuality and gender identity. Mukisa, who is yet to undergo sex reassignment surgery, reports being placed in a cell with male inmates, despite his pleas against it, where he was allegedly raped, encouraged by police authorities – a traumatising attack from which he says he contracted HIV.

The remains believed to be of lesbian Nomvula Chenene were found buried under a shack in Lakeside, near Vereeniging.

Sheila Adhiambo Lumumba, a 25-year-old non-binary lesbian, was found murdered in Karatina, Kenya. An autopsy report revealed that Lumumba was raped, strangled, stabbed several times in the neck and eyes and their legs had been broken.

A study in Zimbabwe showed that at least one in three lesbian, bisexual and transgender women experienced violence based on perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. At least 65 percent of these people said they never reported the abuse they experienced for fear of double victimisation.

GBV can happen in all the different forms mentioned earlier: physical, mental, psychological, sexual, economical, spiritual, and threats to commit these acts. It happens in our homes, in schools and universities, at our workplaces, in politics

Beliefs and practices that perpetuate marginalisation

– yes and even in churches: in every part of our societies. The root causes of group-related violence, including GBV, are cultural, social and religious beliefs and practices that promote and perpetuate inequality and marginalisation.

Violence in all these different forms has both short-term and long-term devastating impacts on the mental, psychological, physical and spiritual health of victims/survivors. A particular impact that we as churches need to be aware of, is the internalisation and spiritualisation of the violence that has happened to a person, in particular when it has happened in a church context or by a person with religious authority. The one being violated can think that it is their own fault, that they deserved it, that it was the will of God and that they therefore have to accept it and not oppose God.

Gender is different from sex and this difference is important in understanding the causes of gender-based violence.

The difference between Sex and Gender

What is Sex?

Sex relates to biological characteristics and physiological differences between female and male. For example, females can bear children and breastfeed, males cannot do that, but have an equal part with females in procreation.¹⁶

Gender can be defined as follows:

The word gender is used to describe the characteristics, roles and responsibilities of women and men, boys and girls in different cultures and at different times. The concept of gender is related to how we are perceived and expected to think and act as women and men – not because of our biological differences, but because of the way our societies and cultures are organised and developed. Gender perceptions change over time and across different cultures.¹⁷

The difference between sex and gender is that sex is biological while gender is the social/cultural beliefs, roles and practices that assign different roles, behaviour and status based on biological sex. Because gender roles are created by human beings, they can be changed. This means that roles, beliefs and prescribed behaviours of women and men that contribute to gender-based violence can be changed and replaced with non-violent alternatives that promote equality.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Define GBV and the different forms of violence with examples.
2. Why are people who do not conform to gender norms violated and discriminated against? Share examples and stories from your context.
3. What do you think are the root causes for violence in general and GBV in particular? Consider the question at a personal level, community level, relational level, cultural level and level of belief.
4. Why is violence a violation of Human Dignity and an injustice?

Gender refers to differences that lead to inequality and violence. But there is an alternative which constructs differences in positive life-affirming ways. The next section will emphasise a theme that has been mentioned earlier: that the image of One Body promotes unity in diversity.

Humanity as One Body

As mentioned earlier, all human beings are created in the image of God and have equal dignity. This has been affirmed throughout the *One Body* series e.g.: “We are One Body, united in the spirit of love and compassion”.¹⁸

St Paul has a famous image of the Church as ‘one body’ (1 Cor 12:12-27).

1 Cor 12:12a, 26

There is one body, but it has many parts. But all its many parts make up one body. If one member [of the body] suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

The Nordic-FOCCISA Cooperation thought that this was a particularly powerful image when facing the challenge of HIV and AIDS within our Church communities.

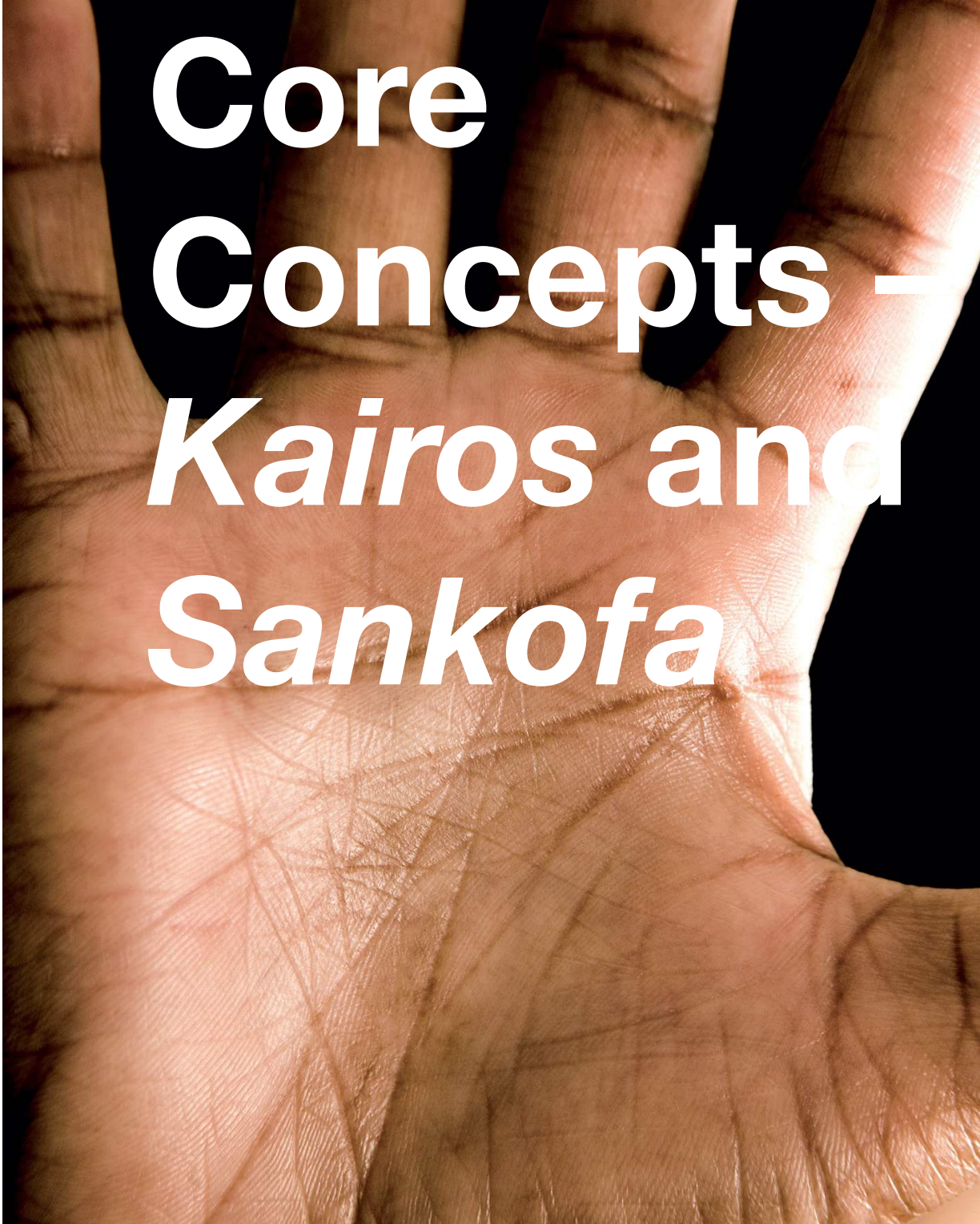
“The human race is, in truth, one person, one universal body ... When we destroy another person, we destroy something within ourselves and, as a consequence, in all of humanity. What you do to others, you do to yourself and to all of us. But this does not mean that we humans are alike. There is great variety among us, in the same way that there is variety in each and every one of us. Exclusion and denial occur when this diversity is unacknowledged.”¹⁹

Human beings are not disconnected individuals but are connected, interdependent, yet different from each other and united together as one family. The African concept of *Ubuntu* describes the communitarian nature of humanity as follows: “I am because we are, we are because I am”; “a person is a person because of others” and “I relate therefore I am.” Discrimination, prejudice and violence occur when differences among human beings become the basis of inequality rather than a celebration of God’s gift of diversity.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. What lessons can be learnt from these statements about humanity as one body?
“When we destroy another person, we destroy something within ourselves and, as a consequence, in all of humanity.”
“There is great variety among us”
“Exclusion and denial occur when this diversity is not celebrated”
2. Describe *Ubuntu* from these statements:
“I am because we are, we are because I am”
“a person is a person because of others”
“I relate therefore I am.”

The discussions so far on dialogue, marginalisation, human rights, human dignity, violence and much more present a context that requires a timely intervention from churches. In the next section, we will discuss the concept of Kairos as it relates to the challenges discussed.

A close-up photograph of a person's open palm, showing the intricate patterns of the skin. The hand is positioned centrally, with the fingers slightly spread. The background is dark, making the skin's texture stand out. Overlaid on the palm is the text 'Core Concepts – Kairos and Sankofa' in a clean, white, sans-serif font. The word 'Core' is at the top, followed by 'Concepts –' on the next line, 'Kairos and' on the third line, and 'Sankofa' on the fourth line. The text is centered horizontally and vertically on the palm.

Core Concepts – *Kairos and Sankofa*

Kairos – now is the favourable time

In the Greek of the New Testament there is a clear difference between *chronos* (a moment as part of the passage of time) and *kairos* (a key moment or opportunity).

As Christians we believe that God chose a specific moment to intervene in history and sent Jesus, the Son of God, to earth to save humanity. Jesus expresses this in his first public proclamation (Lk 4: 16-21); and Paul reinforces this in 2 Cor 6:1-2.

2 Cor 6:2

Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation.

Ever since the time of Jesus, there have been repeated moments in the history of the world when the Church, as Christ's body on earth, has also been called upon "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." These times are often referred to as *Kairos* moments. One of the most famous uses of *Kairos* was by a group of ecumenical theologians who issued The *Kairos Document* in South Africa in 1985:

The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived. ... It is the *kairos* or moment of truth not just for Apartheid but also for the Church.

We as a group of theologians have been trying to understand the theological significance of this moment in our history. It is serious, very serious. For very many Christians in South Africa this is the *kairos*, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favourable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action. It is a dangerous time because, if this opportunity is missed, and allowed to pass by, the loss for the Church, for the Gospel and for all the people of South Africa will be immeasurable.

Notice how the theologians articulated *kairos* as an uncompromising call to ‘decisive action’ with a warning that ‘failure to act’ would be dangerous because an opportunity would be missed resulting in an immeasurable “loss for the Church, for the Gospel and for all the people of South Africa.” When *Kairos* is applied to a context, it will be in a situation where failure to act against injustice and violence would be a great loss to the church.

Apartheid was an infringement of Human Dignity and violation of the rights of non-white people. In response, countries in the Nordic region and countries in the Southern part of Africa chose to work together, with many other activists in society, to oppose this oppressive system.

When Apartheid as a legal system was successfully abandoned and the God-given dignity of millions of South Africans of all races was restored, the Nordic-FOCCISA Cooperation turned to new areas where Human Dignity was being infringed. In other words new *Kairos* moments. The HIV and AIDS pandemic was a *Kairos* moment for the world and the churches.

Seizing a *Kairos* moment requires the courage to challenge the prevailing culture, to break taboos and sometimes to speak out against political power. That is something that Jesus was not afraid to do; and it was something that many Church leaders across Africa have not been afraid to do. We call such courage ‘prophetic’.

In One Body vol. 1, we read the following reflection on how the Church can respond in moments of crisis:

Faced with the HIV-epidemic, love is what those who were affected cried out for. There was too much shame. It was life threatening. The virus threatened too much of their lives. They called out to the Church. They wanted us who are in the Church to be the ones to bring the epidemic down to earth, so that the virus could be seen for what it was – without having moral judgements attached to it. They wanted us to keep a firm hold on Human Dignity when so many had lost all sense of it.

But the Church closed in on itself. It shut its doors. It didn't realise how important it was for the life of the world. It didn't see the suffering. Only 'immorality'. And just as morality is good, moralising is evil. It makes some people better than others and sticks a label on people.

The Bible tells the story of Jesus. It's clear that many people felt at ease in his company. It seems as though their self-esteem was strengthened through meeting him. He revived their faith in their own dignity.

At a time when Human Dignity seems to be on cheap offer, this must be one of the most important tasks for the Church today: to increase respect for human beings as the beloved creatures of God that they are.²⁰

? Questions for Dialogue

1. How did churches in your country initially react to the advent of HIV? Was their response 'prophetic'?
2. Looking back over the history of your country, when have particular Church leaders grasped a *Kairos* moment? When have they demonstrated prophetic leadership and what was the result? (Think in terms of politics, liberation struggles, social issues, etc).
3. Looking back over the history of your country, when have Church leaders failed to grasp a *Kairos* moment? What do you wish they had done that they did not do?

The responses to Kairos moments by churches illustrates the importance of drawing lessons from the past in order to inform the future. This is the lesson from Sankofa which will be discussed next.

Sankofa – learning from the past

The idea of looking back to the past to learn for the present has a firm link to African tradition.

Sankofa (pronounced SAHN-koh-fah) is a word in the Twi language of Ghana meaning “to retrieve” (literally “go back and get”). It is often associated with the proverb *Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi* which translates as: “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.”

Sankofa also refers to the *Bono Adinkra* symbol represented by a bird with its head turned backwards while its feet face forward carrying a precious egg in its mouth. This symbolises taking from the past what is good and bringing it into the present in order to make positive progress through the benevolent use of knowledge.



It can be helpful to reflect on the ways in which as a Church we have, over time, developed our understanding of what God is calling us to do. The temptation has been to use a text to justify a position but another text could justify a very different position. Slavery is a good example of this.

The Old Testament clearly take the concept of slavery for granted and rarely challenges it; even in the Gospels the mention of slaves is very matter-of-fact. Similarly some texts from Paul were used in the past to justify slavery (Eph 6: 5-8).

Nevertheless, to us today the idea of people owning slaves, or Christians condoning the slave trade is unacceptable. We can be proud that it was Christians who led the campaign against the slave trade (as movingly captured in the hymn *Amazing Grace* written by John Newton and expressing his conversion from slave trader to abolitionist).

So, the campaign against slavery was also justified with Scripture, for example by this text Galatians:

Gal 3:28

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Scripture has been used to justify both poles in this argument and also positions in the middle. Thus, the letter to Philemon has been used to justify slavery (Paul returns the fugitive Onesimus), to justify ending slavery (Paul encourages Philemon to free Onesimus) and to argue for a middle ground (it is OK to keep slaves as long as you treat them well).

If we can find so-called “bullet texts” to justify various positions within the same argument, that approach cannot be the best way to discern how God is calling us. Instead we propose an over-riding principle, a lens through which to interpret texts. This is called a hermeneutic frame.

Amos 5:24

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream.

When considering the whole shape of Scripture, and in particular the life of Jesus, it is clear that Justice and Compassion recur as overriding principles. When looking at gender injustice and toxic masculinities in *One Body vol. 2*, we concluded:

Injustice dehumanises life and prevents full participation in co-humanity. Justice is, therefore, viewed simply as ‘that which people need to be human’. ²¹

When we look at other contentious social questions, we can probably find texts to justify a range of positions. Consider some of the following issues and imagine how Scripture could be used to justify different positions on a spectrum:

	←		→
Role of women:	Subservient to men	Second-class but treat with respect	Equal to men
Disability/Albinism:	A punishment from God	No moral significance	Part of God’s benevolent plan
Traditional culture:	The work of the devil	A mix depending on what it is	An expression of God’s bounty
People who are mentally ill:	Possessed by demons	Evoking pity	Needing acceptance and love
Apartheid and racism:	Ordained by God	Part of human frailty	Condemned by God
HIV/ AIDS:	A punishment for sin	A call to repentance	A morally neutral illness
Colonialism:	Part of God’s plan	Part of human development	A perversion of God’s plan
Gender-based violence:	Reflecting the natural difference in sexes	An unfortunate but necessary corrective	Condemned by God

²¹ OB2, p.23



Questions for Dialogue

1. Looking at the themes above, can you identify ways in which church attitudes in your country have changed over time to move towards an approach which privileges justice and compassion? Discuss three examples from the list.
2. Identify from your experience three examples from the list where some churches have not changed their positions over time.
3. What has been the impact when attitudes do not change? On individuals and families? On the Church?

Cultural beliefs and practices also influence responses to these groups. People speak of certain perspectives as 'my culture' or 'not my culture'. Culture plays an important role in influencing our beliefs as Christians. The next section will briefly discuss culture.

Understanding Culture

Many of the questions raised in previous sections, about marginalisation and violence, bring up the question of Culture. Behaviours are justified by saying “It’s my culture”; change is often resisted by responding “It’s not my culture.”

So what is culture? There are many definitions of culture. Here is an example of a definition of culture:

Culture is a human construction that represents a worldview, belief systems and customs that define a community and are shared by its members. It is a complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or a social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs. However, culture is not innate or biological. Cultures are historically located and evolve over time through interaction with other cultures and changes in material and non-material aspects. (*World Conference on Cultural Policies, Mexico, 1982*).

Cultures also change over time

Culture is transmitted from one generation to another through beliefs and practices (rituals, ceremonies etc) from birth to death (socialisation). African cultures are communal/ community-based and have rich oral traditions such as stories, legends, songs, rituals that are resources for transmission of cultures.

Cultures also change over time. There are examples of practices that have either been abandoned or replaced in response to new knowledge and challenges. Here are three examples:

- a. the practice of widow cleansing through sexual intercourse with the brother of a deceased husband was abandoned in some ethnic groups because of the risk of HIV transmission and led to non-sexual methods of cleansing;
- b. the killing of one twin in some ethnic groups is no longer practiced;
- c. child marriages have been abandoned and replaced with education

Kanyoro describes culture as a double edged sword which is a: “creed for community identity on the one hand and on the other hand the main justification for difference, oppression and injustice”.

Questions for Dialogue

Below are some African cultural practices. Discuss which ones you think are life-giving practices and which ones are harmful cultural practices. Has this changed over time?

1. community consciousness and emphasis on relationships
2. restorative justice
3. patriarchy in marriage
4. hospitality
5. belief in God and many names for God (there is no physical representation of God)
6. widow cleansing
7. extended family
8. no exclusionary spaces for members who were different
9. child marriage
10. interdependence and concern for others
11. genital mutilation
12. people with disabilities as cursed
13. rejection of barren women
14. witchcraft as the cause of all misfortune

Sankofa: Lessons from HIV and AIDS of both harmful and life giving cultural practices.

In a similar way, in their response to HIV/ AIDS, Churches sometimes drew on the best life-giving cultural practices but sometimes more harmful ones.

One Zambian theologian, Japhet Ndhlovu, reflects on the way in which a patriarchal culture has affected the impact of HIV:

Much like the biblical world, churches and African societies are still very patriarchal. Like many other societies in Southern Africa, Zambian society still marginalises women from access to property and decision-making. Many who are married or in relationships fear to insist on safe sex lest their providing husbands/partners desert them and leave them without food or shelter. Furthermore, male violence has escalated so much in the HIV/AIDS era that many girls, women and elderly women are raped both in the home and in public.

In such a set-up, the formula of 'being faithful' becomes unworkable for many married and unmarried women. The formula of 'abstaining' is defeated by underlying social ways of distributing power unequally.²²

On the other hand there have been many positive cultural practices during HIV and AIDS such as extended family members taking care of grandchildren, nieces/nephews, brothers/sisters at great cost to themselves after their parents died of AIDS.

Japhet Ndhlovu continues:

The nature of the intersection of marriage, gender and HIV/ AIDS calls for leadership in the Church to challenge the social norms and values that assign an inferior status to women and girls and condone violence and abuse against them. The leadership is also challenged to promote equal power relations between women and men. In this way, men will benefit from the process just as much as women. A terrible burden is imposed on men by gender roles which equate masculinity with: sexual prowess, multiple sex partners, physical aggression, dominance over women, and engaging in high-risk behaviour. If men can be encouraged to behave in ways, which are in accordance with the scripture, and which reduce their own risk of HIV transmission, then they themselves will emerge stronger: no longer stigmatised as drivers of the pandemic but enlisted as partners, as fellow leaders, in finding the solution.

Questions for Dialogue

1. What is your response to the above quotation from Ndhlovu - are there points that you agree with or disagree with and why?
2. Can we challenge cultural practices? What is our view of our own cultures?

Let us now learn from Jesus and how he engaged with his culture

Jesus and Culture

Jesus belonged to a particular community which had religio-cultural practices that he followed (for example, the circumcision of male babies).

He also recognised that, with time, cultural practices meant for good had failed to serve their purpose, for example interpretation of Sabbath laws, beliefs that linked disease or disability to sin, purity laws about washing hands or speaking to women or members of different ethnic groups.

Have a look at these texts which show something of Jesus' response to the culture of his people:

- Mt 15: 1-2
- Jn 4: 7-9
- Lk 24: 9-12
- Jn 9:1-3

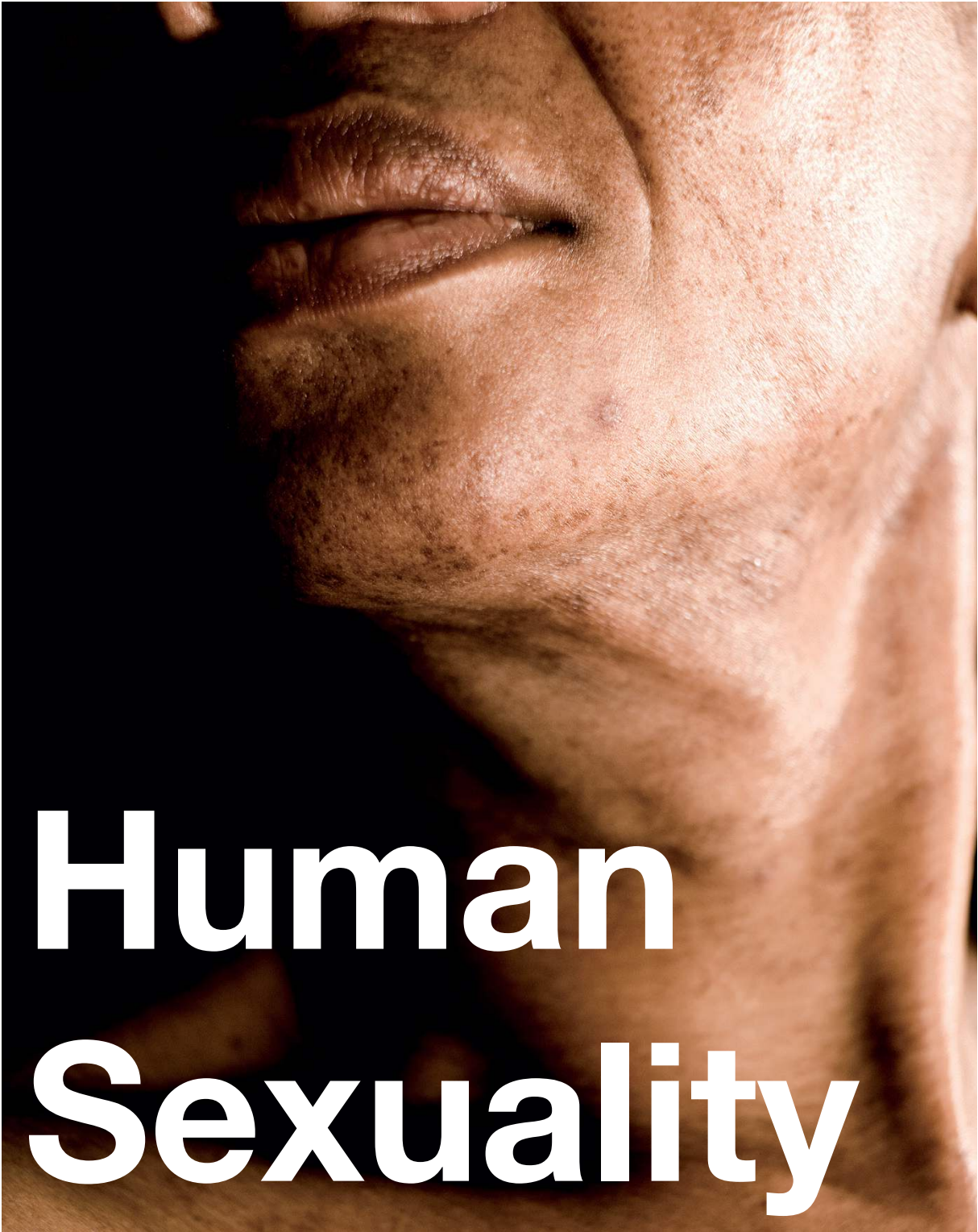
Jn 9:3

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him”.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. How did Jesus go against culture in these texts?
2. In which other texts did Jesus go against cultural norms?
3. What lessons can we learn from Jesus when it comes to religious-cultural norms used against LGBTI people in your context?
4. Reflecting on the discussions on both harmful and positive aspects of culture, how can we engage with our culture in a similar way to Jesus?
5. What is the Church's relationship to culture in your country?
6. How is culture used to support / justify particular abuses in your Church?

Now that we have laid the necessary foundation for discussions on the status and challenges of LGBTI people, we will move to the next section that will discuss sexuality.



Human Sexuality

Sexual and Spiritual

We are created in the image of God and sexuality is part of the creation of human nature. God created us as sexual human beings in all our differences and this sexuality is to be celebrated, enjoyed and treated responsibly. The Church therefore needs to talk positively about sexuality and bring out good stories related to sexuality. All human beings are spiritual beings because we have a soul; and all human beings are sexual beings because we have a physical body. Sexuality forms a part of who we are.

Ethics of sexuality

It is important that we can talk about sexuality in a way that is in line with human dignity and respect and which does not make people uncomfortable. Here are some principles that should guide how we do this.

- God created us for one another and for himself. Our bodies are the temple of the Lord and the abuse of these bodies is therefore an offense both against God and against God's creation.
- God created us to enjoy sexual relationships and, in treasuring this gift, there are values that are to be attached such as respect, responsibility, caring, forgiving, loving and equality. In discussing sexuality, there are issues to be addressed by the Church such as misuse of power, exploitation, abuse, oppression, disrespect and sexual violence.
- In honouring one another as sexual beings, we are honouring life itself. The Church must acknowledge that many people are forced to, or choose to, live outside of a sexual relationship sometimes as a result of stigma associated with sexuality. The Church should therefore play a proactive role in dealing with these issues.
- Individuals should take responsibility for their sexuality including responsibility for protection. The Church has to acknowledge that sexuality

Positive engagement by the Church

is part of everyday life, and that people have to protect themselves. The simplistic strategies of prevention need to be challenged.

- The Church should also encourage communication and openness among couples in sexual relationships.

Based on this understanding of Human Sexuality and promoting a positive engagement by the Church on this issue in the face of HIV, the Nordic-FOCCISA Core Group, meeting in Lusaka in 2004, made certain recommendations. It is interesting to consider how these apply to broader questions of sexuality, beyond HIV/ AIDS.

They recommended that the Church should:

- Provide sexual education;
- Talk openly about sexuality from the pulpit;
- Provide sexual counselling for people – with a special emphasis on young people;
- Provide life skills that would encourage self-assertiveness;
- Listen to people’s own experiences;
- Include the topic of HIV and AIDS in theological training;
- Encourage formation of support groups for those infected;
- Form solidarity support groups for those who are positive and those who are negative;
- Include HIV and AIDS in its liturgy;
- Tackle gender issues.

They believed that these suggestions would contribute to the reduction of stigma in relation to sexuality and HIV.

The historical understanding of human sexuality and queerness in African communities

The following are extracts from an article by Lebohang Matela from Lesotho, Executive Director of FOCCISA Health and Gender Justice Network. This paper will be divided into different sections with opportunities to pause, reflect and discuss.²³

²³ OBS, p.21-23
Queer is an umbrella term that includes LGBTI persons and others who do not fit into these acronyms or any other category.

Definition of Human Sexuality:

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. It is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, religious and spiritual factors.

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life

The role of taboo and secrecy in relation to sexuality

Human sexuality in Africa is enshrouded with great secrecy and hedged in with taboos that carry serious consequences if broken. To talk openly about sex and sexual orientation among people of different ages and in public is not easy.

Secrecy is sustained by a strict code of conduct. Sex taboo forms a code of sexual conduct such that any deviation from it is deeply detested. The code stipulates the time or manner of having sex and also the person with whom one may or may not enter into a sexual relationship.

Sexuality in Africa

Sexuality can be understood in the African context through the stories of creation which are found in African religions. A common feature is that human beings appear on earth in pairs, as male and female, as husband and wife, right from the time of creation by divine providence. In most of these myths, the husband was created first and then the wife. In other myths, however, man and woman appear at the same time very much like in the first biblical story of creation in Gen. 1:26. The purpose of sexuality in these myths is procreation, although in Genesis 2 the purpose of marriage is companionship, not to be alone, procreation is not mentioned. But most African societies insist on procreation as the primary purpose of human sexuality.

A broader understanding of the purpose of human sexuality

The following was presented in One Body vol 1:

Sexuality expresses a person's innermost being. It is a deeply felt impulse that drives one individual close to another, in a desire to create something that is greater than either of them can embody alone. This creativity can include creating children – but it is not confined to producing physical fruits of sexuality. In the tenderness itself, in the intimacy a boundary is crossed – I realise that I am more than myself, that I am also part of another. In this intimate arena, where I am suddenly more than just myself, a qualitatively new depth of being is attained and it is this new level of being that is sexuality's deepest and most beautiful purpose.²⁴

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Describe sexuality and list some of its characteristics.
2. Discuss the following statements:
“Most African societies insist on procreation as the primary purpose of human sexuality”
“Human sexuality in Africa is enshrouded with great secrecy and hedged in with taboos that carry serious consequences if broken”
3. To what degree is there secrecy or discomfort in talking about sexuality? Has that impacted the Church’s ability to respond to HIV or to GBV?
4. How close do you feel the teaching of your church is to the lived experience of sexuality of your community members?

We continue with the article by Lebohang Matela from FOCCISA Health and Gender Justice Network.

The prevalence of heterosexism

The code of who to have sex with was also influenced by heterosexism. This is a prejudice against LGBTI people on the assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation. It is influenced by those creation stories in which a man and woman appear as a couple thereby already prescribing their sexual roles (though these are not the only creation stories).

Stories of homosexuality in African culture

However, history through many authors tells us that sex between people of the same sex has always happened and that homosexuality is as old as the human race. In many communities in Africa, there are accounts of men who lived with men and women who lived with women, and though everybody knew about it nobody felt offended by such acts.

Where I grew up, we used to have what was called *skhona*, that was an elder woman in love with a younger woman and that relationship would be kept alive for many years. What kept it alive were things like love tokens, kisses etc. and nobody was offended or hated people or lovers because of that. In the ancient military, researchers found that a separate military unit was reserved for boy love or for sexual activity for men to boost their fighting spirit.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Discuss the following statements:
“History through many authors tells us that sex between same-sex people has always happened and that homosexuality is as old as the human race”.
2. Heterosexism is an approach which assumes that heterosexual is ‘normal’ and everything else is ‘abnormal’. What parallels are there with sexism (which defines the ‘male’ as the norm) or with racism (which defines ‘white’ as the norm)?
3. Are you aware of African stories about people who do not conform to the heterosexual norm?
4. Have LGBTI issues always been a focus of religious and political leaders? Why do you think they are now beginning to raise so much anger and hatred?

We continue with the article by Lebohang Matela from FOCCISA Health and Gender Justice Network.

Queerness in African Communities

There is consensus among many scholars within Africa that sexual diversity (which is another term for queerness) has been a part of African cultures. The homophobia²⁵ and criminalisation that we are seeing came with colonialism and Christianity. Msibi notes that “The punishments used to discriminate against those who engage in same-sex relations in Africa largely arise from anti-sodomy laws that were introduced by the colonialists, when colonial authorities were keen on regulating sexuality. These laws remain largely unchanged in postcolonial Africa today.”

Homophobia and criminalisation came with colonialism

Africa’s rich past of gender non-conformity, coupled with transgender behaviours and transgender realities, is deeply embedded within various ethnic groups across the continent.

Shanna Collins notes that in Mali, the Dogon tribe generally maintain that the perfect human being is androgynous; the tribe worships *Nommo*, ancestral spirits who are described as androgynous, intersex, and mystical creatures, and who are also referred to as “the Teachers”. In an uncircumcised penis, the foreskin is representative of femininity, while the clitoris is considered to represent masculinity.

²⁵ ‘Homophobia’ is a term which refers to fear or hostility towards LGBTI people (in the same way that xenophobia refers to hostility towards foreigners).

The existence of intersex spiritual deities laid the foundation for the acceptance of transgender behaviours for other African tribes in addition to the Dogon: The Imbangala people in Angola had men in women's apparel whom they kept together with their wives.

The Zulu of South Africa also initiate transgender shamans, calling them *Isangoma*. Transgender women were diviners in the Ambo tribe of southern Angola. Similarly in Ethiopia the supreme spirit *Kalunga*, not only appeared in feminine dress, and acted as female, but was actually regarded as having become a woman. No physical change of sex had transpired, yet this person was free to occupy a feminine identity and role, even to the extent that marriage to a man was permissible. There was no need to undergo sexual assignment surgery and legal identity change in our African culture.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. What terms are used in your culture for people who do not conform to heterosexuality? Think of ones which are negative, positive and neutral.
2. Do you have anti-sodomy laws in your country? Do you know when/how they were introduced?
3. Discuss the following statement:
“There is consensus among many scholars within Africa that sexual diversity which is another term for queerness has been a part of African cultures. Homophobia and criminalisation that we are seeing came with colonialism and Christianity.”

Research on Sexuality: Homosexuality

In 2016 the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) published a report titled *Diversity in Human Sexuality* and hosted a dialogue on this subject. The purpose of the dialogue was to discuss the implications of the report on policy, particularly in light of legislation on the continent that criminalises homosexuality.

Some of the findings from the dialogue include evidence that sexuality is not a simple binary opposition of hetero-/homo-sexual and normal/abnormal. Rather there are ranges of human variations, very little of which can justifiably be termed abnormal.

Significantly, there is lack of evidence to support the idea that the way parents bring up their children, or the relationships formed between children and parents, impact on sexual orientation. While family environment may shape the way gender or sexuality is expressed, orientation is not correlated to family upbringing.

In addition, they found no evidence that:

- i) sexual orientation can be acquired through contact with LGBTI persons,
- ii) same-sex orientation can be changed through ‘conversion’ or ‘reparative’ therapy
- iii) Homosexual or transgender and intersex people recruit young people and are sexually abusive of children.

**Clear
evidence
that more
repressive
environments
fuel violence**

However, they found clear evidence that more repressive environments not only pose a health threat to LGBTI people but also fuel violence. Homophobia, transphobia and hate crimes continue unabated on the African continent, where LGBTI people get attacked daily on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The LGBTI community continues to be at high risk of the twin pandemics of GBV and HIV/ AIDS. High rates of HIV amongst lesbians and bisexual women have been attributed to alarming incidents of rape and sexual violence suffered by this group. There is a shortage of targeted prevention and mitigation interventions for women who have sex with other women. Their vulnerability is made worse by the lack of understanding of the specific sexual practices of women who have sex with women, as well as a lack of knowledge of their sexual and reproductive needs.

Myths and Implications

There are certain myths about sexuality which are often prevalent:

1. Homosexuality is a ‘Western phenomenon’
2. LGBTI people are ‘not normal,’ they are a creation of the modern age; their identity is a ‘trend’
3. Homosexuality is an illness, or a health issue
4. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are ‘dangerous to children’
5. Homosexuality is a choice

The narrow definition of sexuality in Africa and the myths associated with LGBTI issues has many implications for sexual and reproductive health and the community’s wellbeing. Communication about sexual and reproductive health is most likely to promote healthy sexual development and reduce sexual risks. Communication is the principal means for parents to transmit sexual values, beliefs, expectations and knowledge to their adolescents. Cultural taboos, shame and lack of communication skills hinder communication between parents and their children. The consequences of lack of parent-to-child communication about sexuality results in adolescents engaging in risky sexual behaviours with adverse health outcomes including unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

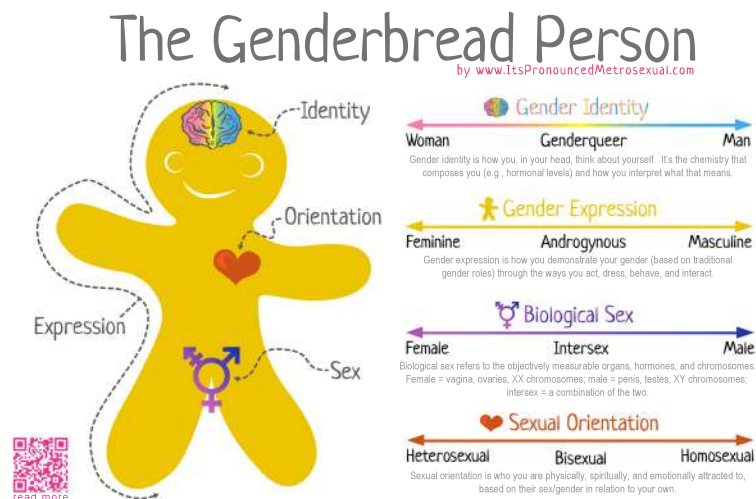
The myths surrounding LGBTI issues lead to understanding heterosexuality as the only sexual orientation, fuelling violence against LGBTI persons and creating barriers to their access to service delivery including healthcare.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Scientific research has challenged beliefs about sexuality: Read the following statements and identify which cultural and social beliefs are being challenged.
 - “there are ranges of human variations, very little of which can justifiably be termed abnormal”
 - “there is biological evidence for the diversity of human sexualities and for sexual orientations in particular.”
 - “there is no evidence that sexual orientation can be acquired through contact with LGBTI persons”
 - “there is no evidence that same-sex orientation can be changed through ‘conversion’ or ‘reparative’ therapy”
2. Discuss the myths above about homosexuality in Africa. Which of these myths have you heard and are widespread in your context? Explain the ways in which these myths might be challenged.
3. How can the method of dialogue be used to promote discussions on sexuality in the home, in community and in the churches? Are there practices or programs that you are aware of that promote dialogue on sexuality?

“The Genderbread Person”

Sexuality is a gift from God, we are all sexual beings. We will discuss sexuality through the *Genderbread Person Diagram*.²⁶



Biological Sex: physiology



On the left we have ‘female’ and on the right, we have ‘male’, the two biological sexes we all grew up knowing about. Biological sex refers to the objectively measurable: organs, hormones, chromosomes. Female = vagina, ovaries, XX chromosomes; male = penis, testes, XY chromosomes.

In the middle, we have a new term ‘intersex’ which describes someone whose sexual organs are not strictly male or female but a combination of the two. An intersex person can be someone born with the appearance of being male (penis, scrotum, etc.), but have a functional female reproductive system inside. There are many examples of how intersex can present itself. An example of ‘intersex’ is the famous South African athlete Caster Semenya.

²⁶ <https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2011/11/breaking-through-the-binary-gender-explained-using-continuums/>

Sexual Orientation: Who You Are Attracted To



On the left, we have ‘heterosexual’, meaning attracted to people of the opposite sex or being straight. On the right, we have ‘homosexual’, meaning attracted to people of the same sex, or being gay or lesbian. And in the middle we have ‘bisexual’, meaning attracted to people of both sexes.

Sexual orientation is all about who you are physically, spiritually, and emotionally attracted to. If you are male and you are attracted to females, you are heterosexual; if you are female and attracted to males you are heterosexual. If you are a male or female who is attracted to both males and females, you are bisexual. If you are female and attracted to females you are lesbian; if you are a male who is attracted to males, you are gay.

Gender Identity: Who You Think You Are



On the left, we have ‘woman’ and on the right, we have ‘man’, two terms you are already familiar with. In the middle, we have the term ‘genderqueer’, which is used for an identity that is somewhere between woman and man.

Gender identity is how you, in your mind, define your gender based on how much you align or do not align with the exterior biological characteristics you are born with. Do you identify with the societal role of ‘woman’ or ‘man’ or are you somewhere in-between the two? Or do you consider your gender to fall outside of the spectrum completely? The answer is your gender identity.

Gender Expression: How You Demonstrate Who You Are



On the left we have ‘feminine’ and on the right we have ‘masculine’: this means what it is to be seen as a ‘woman’ or a ‘man’. In the middle, we have a new term ‘androgynous’, which describes an ambiguous or mixed form of expressing gender.

Gender expression is all about how you demonstrate your gender through the ways you act, dress, behave, and interact – whether that is intentional or unintended. For example, if you identify as ‘feminine’ you will act, dress, behave and interact in ways that are expected of women in your culture and society, even though you might be biologically male, and vice-versa if you identify as ‘masculine’. If you are in-between ‘androgynous’ you will also express your gender in a way that reflects who you are as a mix of what is expected of a woman or a man.

Exercise

Each person will pick a piece of paper that has one of the topics in The *Genderbread* Person. These topics are:

- Biological Sex
- Sexual Orientation
- Gender Identity
- Gender Expression

Re-read the section and write a description in your own words. Then those who have the same section will come together in a group and share their descriptions. Together they will formulate a description that they will share with the group.

- describe the difference between male, man and masculine
- describe the difference between female, woman and feminine

Diversity in the Bible: the story of Eunuchs

Sexual diversity is sometimes discussed by churches as if it was a modern phenomenon but we have stories in the Bible that reference sexual diversity such as the use of the term ‘eunuch’.

The teachings of Jesus on eunuchs (Mt 19:12) are an example of recognising diversity of gender and sexuality and even diversity among eunuchs themselves.

It is always helpful to look at a passage like this in context and so read this teaching alongside Mt 19:1-11.

Eunuchs are mentioned again in a story about the reception of the gospel (Acts 8:26-31). Here the Eunuch is held up as a model of faith.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Mt 19:1-12
 - a. What does Jesus say about eunuchs and the types of eunuchs?
 - b. What was Jesus discussing before describing eunuchs?
 - c. Describe the connection between Jesus’ teachings in this passage.
2. Acts 8:26-31
 - a. Describe the three characters in this story and their relationship to each other: the Holy Spirit, Philip and the Eunuch?
 - b. What does this story teach us about the inclusive nature of the Gospel?
 - c. Looking at the action of the Holy Spirit, the obedience of Philip and baptism of the Eunuch, what lessons could there be for the Church’s ministry to LGBTBI people?

Personal Integration

Lack of personal integration is a common source of spiritual unhappiness. We see it for example when a person's race or cultural identity feels at odds with their religious beliefs; or when their role as a man or woman in society is not integrated with their role in church; or when an identity is imposed on someone which is not true to who they are, as has happened during colonialism.

Sexism, racism and colonialism are all forces that work against personal integration and do not allow people to enjoy the diversity that is part of all of us.

The integration of faith and sexuality is something that is important for each of us since we are all spiritual beings and we are all sexual beings.

How do we integrate?

- First we need to acknowledge each part of who we are.
- Secondly, we need to avoid shame or the acceptance of negative expressions about ourselves
- Thirdly, we need to celebrate diversity and thus honour people's multiple identities.

We are different in so many ways, physically, spiritually, sexually etc. Diversity is intrinsic to humanity and to the human identity of each one of us. Denying diversity can lead to violence towards others and towards oneself. All groups have diversity – even the eunuchs are diverse as described by Jesus

Questions for Dialogue

1. What examples have you witnessed of people not being fully integrated and what has been the consequence of this?
2. In what ways is lack of integration created by sexism, racism, colonialism, homophobia?
3. What are the different aspects/multiple identities of who we are as individuals? How can we best integrate them?



Challenges faced by LGBTI people

The following extracts are from a paper by Rev. Nokuthula Dhladla entitled “Multiple Challenges faced by LGBTI from Society”²⁷

Personal challenges faced by LGBTI

As members of a marginalised group, LGBTI persons face many challenges. They are stereotyped, isolated, discriminated, rejected, stigmatised, verbally abused, murdered, bullied, vulnerable to HIV infection and subjected to ‘corrective rape’. These are some of the multiple forms of violence experienced by LGBTI people that constitute a violation of their Human Dignity and their right to life, free from violence and discrimination.

These experiences have negative psychological, spiritual and social effects on LGBTI people such as: low-self-esteem, trauma, mental health issues, depression and limited access to health services; under-achieving or dropping-out of schools and universities; loneliness; un-integrated sexual and spiritual identity; homelessness; self-hate, anger and suicide.

LGBTI and Families

For most people in Southern African countries, families and churches are two of the most significant spaces in which socialisation and community life occur and where social attitudes and ethical responses are formed.

Families are an important support structure as well as sources of identity and values that contribute to wholeness of life such as love, compassion and belongingness. The community and church inform the values of families and therefore many LGBTI people are afraid of disclosing their identity because of the fear of how people will react. In this social climate of non-acceptance, many families resort to a range of strategies to correct someone’s sexual orientation including: seeking cures, deliverance, forcing them to marry

someone of the opposite sex and in extreme cases rape by family members particularly of lesbians. Families reject LGBTI members because of fear of losing respect and status in the community and with the church. Too often, if an LGBTI family member will not accept the 'solution' proposed, they are kicked out of their homes or isolated from the rest of the family which leads to the breaking up of families.

Most of the time, the parents of LGBTI people find it hard to accept them because of:

- shame
- the attitudes of the extended family
- the teachings of the Church
- the views of wider Society

Some parents blame themselves – thinking that they might have done something wrong; or they blame God – seeing it as a curse or a punishment.

LGBTI and Workplace

There are often cases of discrimination against LGBTI people who are seeking employment or when they are already in the workplace. LGBTI job seekers are often denied employment due to their sexual orientation or gender identity or because of a so-called masculine or feminine style of dress code. In places of employment, many experience being passed over for promotion or training, regular animosity from colleagues and supervisors, name calling, intimidation and blackmail. Because of the Christian context of this region, there are many instances where employers or supervisors or colleagues use the Bible to condemn LGBTI persons. Further there are no policies in place in many workplaces to handle violations against LGBTI people.

In most countries in the region, there are no laws protecting LGBTI employees from discrimination. But even in a country like South Africa, where the Bill of Rights prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and there are a number of protections relating to labour and employment, there is still discrimination at work.

LGBTI and Churches

Churches are central to the faith and practice of Christians. This is the place where we gather together with other Christians in fellowship, prayer, worship and teaching about the Christian way of life. The Bible is central to our faith and is the basis for our morals, beliefs and practices. As we have discussed earlier, churches are divided on their interpretation of the Bible on many issues including the status of LGBTI people. Sadly, churches, like families, are places where discrimination and hate occur the most for LGBTI persons.

Many churches fuel and facilitate a climate of intolerance through biblical interpretations of homosexuality that promote hate that leads to practices of discrimination, stigma, violence and even murder.

LGBTI and Communities

As in churches, many LGBTI people live in fear of harm from their communities. For example, in some communities raping or killing an LGBTI person is praised and encouraged and those committing this violence are treated as heroes because of the belief that being LGBTI is a choice that can be changed or a disease that can be cured. Further, many believe that LGBTI is 'unAfrican' and therefore has no place in their communities.

Churches, like families, are places where discrimination and hate occur the most for LGBTI persons

LGBTI people in the closet

Faced with the trauma of revealing their sexual identity in a hostile environment, many LGBTI people choose to remain secretive or ‘stay in the closet’. This is an example of when diversity is denied because of fear that people have of ‘coming out’. This has a negative impact on their quality of life and self-esteem. Some people in the closet go to the extent of getting married to hide their identity or they engage in harmful sexual activities: both of these put themselves and others at risk. Such inner conflict will impact people in a very negative way since they cannot be fully themselves. They fight with themselves and that leads to resentment which they take out on themselves, their families and others (especially other LGBTI people). A community leader in the closet can be highly detrimental leading to extremely homophobic behaviour to try and hide who they are.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Describe the multiple forms of violence against LGBTI people and the impact on their lives. Give examples from your context of cases of different forms of violence against LGBTI people.
2. Discuss this statement: “the Church and family are the two places where discrimination and hate occur the most for LGBTI persons.”
3. Can you think of ways in which churches and families can be transformed into safe places that support the dignity and rights of LGBTI?
4. What role do you think dialogue can play in bridging the gap between LGBTI and their families, churches, workplaces and communities?

The challenges faced by LGBTI present a Kairos moment for both culture and church. The next section will explore resources within culture (Ubuntu) and in the Bible for responding to these challenges that violate the human dignity and rights of LGBTI people.

Building on a core African Cultural Concept

Ubuntu is a concept from many African traditions. The phrase expresses issues like caring, grace and dignity, and Africans usually say “I live because you live” or “I am not me, without you, without a fellowship”. In that way, *Ubuntu* is a word that says something important about an African way of understanding life as something relational. By the way we relate to one another, we create one another’s lives, and by the way we meet one another we can either expand or reduce one another’s lives. This is the opposite of an understanding that sees life in more individual terms.

This corresponds with our recurrent theme of One Body.

Rom 12:5

Though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body.

Zimbabwe-born theologian Dr Masiwa Ragies Gunda expands on the concept of Ubuntu, the status of the Bible/Scripture, different beliefs among Christians and two different beliefs about LGBTI people among Christians. He then goes on to highlight some aspects of Ubuntu and the Bible that challenge us to re-think our perception towards LGBTI persons and others who are marginalised in our community.²⁸

Ubuntu

The term *Ubuntu* comes from Bantu languages and is used to describe what it means to be a person. *Ubuntu* is described as a philosophy that places the importance of group or communal existence or identity as opposed to the Western emphasis on individualism and individual human rights. In *Ubuntu*, everything is done in the interests of the community ahead of the interests of the individual (*Mangena*). In short, *Ubuntu* is understood as a philosophy that places the primacy of the community over the individual, and to further elaborate on this, some phrases and idioms have been used such as:

- in the Nguni/Ndebele phrase, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (“a person is a person through other persons”)
- in the Xhosa proverb, *ungamntu ngabanye abantu*, (“a person is made a person by other persons”)
- in the Shona phrase, *munhu unoitwa munhu nevamwe vanhu* (“a person is made a person by other persons”)

Resources for Re-appraising People on the Margins

If we reflect on *Ubuntu* and Scripture, we can find resources for affirming the human dignity of LGBTI people. At the heart of the revolutionary Christian faith, and attested both in the Old and New Testaments, is the charge to protect the vulnerable (Ex.12:49, 22:21-22; Lk.4:18-22).

- o *Ubuntu* is the idea that no one can be healthy when the community is sick. *Ubuntu* says I am human only because you are human. If I undermine your humanity, I dehumanise myself.
- o *Ubuntu* is the interdependence of persons for the exercise, development, and fulfilment of their potential to be both individuals and community.

From these two key meanings of *Ubuntu*, one could argue that it is in its openness to protecting all persons within the community that it could become “the gift to the world” because our world is driven by philosophies that are built on discrimination of marginalised individuals. All members of the community, notwithstanding their diversity, are fully accommodated in the community. Their role and status in the community is not dependent on them converting to be like the majority. Diversity has always been a part and parcel of all communities.

I am not suggesting that there are no expectations or obligations for those that are members of the community, because they are there. There are expectations and obligations not to harm other members of the community and to assist in every way possible, members of the community. These expectations do not seek to eradicate the diversities that exist among community members.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Describe the two meanings of *Ubuntu* described above.
2. Apply these principles to how we respond to marginalised groups.

We continue with the text from Dr Masiwa Ragies Gunda.

Ubuntu and Sacred Texts

Coming to the Bible and taking the Bible as a ‘site of struggle’, it is important to consider how we approach the Bible. We should especially be aware that some of our readings may cause death and harm while others may give life, comfort and security to people who need it most. I consider the following points to be critical for our engagement with the Bible:

- In the Old Testament, God’s Israelite project is to create a society that is governed on the principles of justice, righteousness, equality and equity. In this society, all would be welcome and would be catered for: the image of Eden, the Abrahamic nation, the promise to the Exodus party, the settlement in the Promised Land and the reigns of Judges are all inter-woven into this project of God. The prophetic theology (Is 1:17, Jer 7:5-7, Am 5:24) of the Old Testament also falls into this consistent strand of thought that God is making Israel a pilot project for a just human society. All that God asks is for us to be agents of justice and righteousness towards the vulnerable and marginalised in our communities (Micah 6:8).
- In the New Testament, the great inaugural statement by Jesus in Luke 4:18-20 follows this consistent strand of thought. Jesus proclaims the ‘good news’ which would offer hope, comfort and security to those who were at the mercy of the Roman Empire. Are we surprised, then, that from its inception Christianity started off by being a refuge to those that were outcasts of their time? Christianity was a movement where the marginalised were brought inside and acknowledged as full members without exception!

Mi 6:8

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Dr Masiwa Ragies Gunda points out that such an understanding of the importance of liberation in the Bible was not prominent when it was colonial powers, through missionaries, who were interpreting the Bible for Africans. But this then changed when Africans could interpret the Bible for themselves.

The Bible and Colonialism

During the colonial-evangelisation onslaught and before the colonised-converted could read the Bible for themselves, the Bible was presented as a single unified document with a single unified voice on all matters, hence all who heard the text read were obliged to obey and follow its instructions. During this period, one could not refer to the Bible as a site of struggle, for there was no such struggle because the Bible was being read by one for the other, from the single perspective of the one reading.

? Questions for Dialogue

1. What does it mean to see the Bible as a 'site of struggle'?
2. Comment on the themes of justice and liberation in the Old and New Testament and how this has evolved to impact on the mission of the Church.
3. How did the interpretation of the Bible by Africans challenge colonial missionary interpretations? Share examples from your context and theology.

The Bible as a 'Site of Struggle'

Building on the notion of 'a site of struggle', Dr Gunda points out that, although the Bible is held in high esteem equally by all Christians, on some issues Christians are divided and have different even contradictory beliefs. Earlier we had looked at the way in which Church attitudes to social issues (like slavery, or the role of women, or HIV) have changed over time. Scripture had been used to justify one position and then other Scriptural texts have been used to justify a different position.

For example, there have been differences among Christians on issues such as the status of women and polygamy. Some Christians accept polygamy while others reject it and believe in monogamy. In some churches, women cannot receive Holy Communion unless their heads are covered while in other churches women receive Holy Communion without covering their heads. These are examples of some of the many issues that we disagree on as Christians even though we all quote from the same Bible.

**On some
issues
Christians
are divided**

? Questions for Dialogue

Baptism, Eucharist (Lord's Supper) and Ministry (e.g. Leadership structures) are some of the key practices of Christians and yet there are differences in practices between different groups of Christians supported by their interpretations of the Bible.

Can you list some of the differences and support/line of argument used from the Bible?

Practice	Examples of differences in practices	Examples of justification of practices from the Bible
Baptism		
Eucharist/ Lord's Supper		
Bestowing Ministry or leadership (e.g. ordination)		
Role of women in leadership		

Understanding how Christians interpret the Bible differently is the first step in recognising and acknowledging the different interpretations of the Bible by Christians on LGBTI issues. The next section will describe different interpretations on LGBTI issues.

Different interpretations of the place of LGBTI people

Differences in interpretation make the Bible a ‘site of struggle’. Some Christians search for verses in the Bible that become weapons to fight and marginalise targeted groups of people while other Christians wrestle with the Bible in search of God’s liberating message in relation to all people irrespective of who they are. Based on these different uses of the Bible by Christians, one can conclude that the many forms of marginalisation practiced by Christians are actually based on just one particular reading of the Bible among many.

Liberated from a colonising approach to the Bible, Dr Masiwa Ragies Gunda describes existing and current examples of two different lines of arguments on the status of LGBTI people among Christians:

The Bible and LGBTI people

We have now come to the point where LGBTI persons who have been confined outside because the Bible has been read for them, have now started questioning the ways of reading and the motivations behind those who are inside, who continue to refuse them their humanity and who refuse to see the image of God that is in them. Through their readings, we are reminded of our own past of deprivation and rejection, when because of our skin colour we were considered not human enough.

- o The first line of argument is that sexual minorities are not a normal part of the created world, that God intended for heterosexuality hence ‘God created Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve’. Through the use of the so-called “bullet texts” (Genesis 19; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:9-10 and Jude 1:7), it has been suggested, based on Genesis 19, that homosexuality was so wicked that God punished the people of Sodom severely and that if any society were to accept sexual minorities it would put them on the path to destruction. In some cases, physical violence against LGBTI people has been supported by Christians based on these texts.

- o The second line of argument is that sexual minorities are a wonderful part of God's creation, and that God created males and females and others who are neither male nor female. This diversity is not an abomination but a divinely ordained difference. Through the use of some texts such as Matthew 19:12 ("eunuchs who were born that way") and 1 Corinthians 12-13 (diversity and difference) it has been argued that diversity is part of God's creation yet all are united in their diversity and difference as one body created in the image of God. The hermeneutic of love and abundant life have been central to this reading of the Bible that seeks to "enlarge the tent of the House of God" (Isa.54:2) to accommodate all those that have been excluded so far.

Now aware that there are two differing positions, all based on an interpretation of texts in the Bible, we can appreciate that this is the 'struggle' in which the One Body (which includes LGBTI members) are invited to engage. We are called to "wrestle with the Bible" (as Jacob wrestled with the angel in Genesis 32:22-31) with help from God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit particularly in relation to issues where we differ as Christians as in the case of LGBTI. However, we need to be aware that the largest threat to this struggle is the politicisation of LGBTI people in our communities. Christians are called to follow the mission of Christ and must engage with LGBTI persons through the example of Jesus' own dealings with those that were on the margins, the outcasts of his time.

Questions for Dialogue

1. In the case of Christians and LGBTI, an example of two different arguments is presented. Can you explain the differences?
2. Are there other perspectives or lines of argument that are missing and need to be considered?
3. How can Christians with differing views find common ground in responding to the challenges faced by LGBTI people?

The many ways of interpreting the Bible emerged as a challenge that created differences among Christians. The next section will discuss the method of Contextual Bible study.



Working with Scripture



Contextual Bible Study: a step-by-step approach

Contextual Bible Study (CBS) is a method of reading the Bible in groups that focuses on a particular theme. It recognises that we cannot read the Bible without context: the context of the text when it was written and the context of we who are now reading it. Moreover, by reading together with others the context becomes broader since it must include the experience of all those who are reading. This was the discovery of early missionaries who tried to impose a ‘whites only’ reading of Scripture when they were sharing it with African people.

Contextual Bible Study challenges us to go beyond what we think we already know: to look at the text itself, to look behind the text, in front of the text, and above and below the text.

There are four steps:

- 1) choose a theme;
- 2) find a biblical text;
- 3) questioning and reading; and
- 4) developing a plan of action.

Step 1: Choose a theme

CBS begins with a theme or burning issue that is chosen by the group. The group comes together to discover for themselves what the Bible teaches about the theme. So CBS starts with the experiences of people and brings these to their reading of the Bible. For example when the poor bring their experiences of poverty, they discover that, in the Bible, God takes sides with the poor, opposes injustice and promotes liberation.

Step 2: Find a relevant biblical text

The group chooses biblical texts that they are familiar with which address their theme or burning issue. The group might select passages such as: Is 58:6-8; Amos 5:21-24.

Step 3: Questioning and reading

Questioning and questions are key characteristics of CBS. Three sets of questions are asked:

1. The first set of questions is about my own experience in relation to the theme: my questions, beliefs and concerns.
2. The second set of questions is to find out about the experiences of other group members in relation to the theme: their questions, beliefs and concerns.
3. The third set of questions shifts the focus to the biblical text itself with questions that encourage participants to go deeper into the text, re-reading it in its context and listening afresh to the message of the text.

The purpose is to discover for ourselves new insights from the text related to the theme.

Step 4: Action plan

The goal of CBS is to produce a concrete, practical action plan for change, justice and transformation based on insights and reflections from the reading of the biblical text. The plan needs the full participation and commitment of all members of the group in every aspect of implementation. Action, no matter how small, is better than non-action. A CBS is incomplete without an action plan with time frames, concrete steps that will lead to a program of action for justice.

We will practice contextual Bible studies starting with the mission of the Church, then go on to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Contextual Bible Study: The Mission of the Church

The mission of the Church is expressed fully in the life, teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ. Liberation and love are at the centre of the mission of Jesus. We will read two passages from Luke that talk about liberation and love to discover more about the mission of the Church applying the CBS method.

We can go through the steps of the CBS for these two biblical texts.

Step 1: Theme:

‘The mission of the Church’

Step 2: Biblical Texts:

Read Lk 4:18-19 and Lk 10:25-37

Step 3: Questioning and reading

Specific questions for each text:

Lk 4:14-19

- What are the key words that Jesus uses to describe his mission?
- Explain the meaning of each word with practical examples.
- Jesus is the standard for the mission of the Church: based on the mission of Jesus describe the mission of the Church.

Lk 10:25-37

- What is the context for the parable of the Good Samaritan – who was Jesus speaking to and what question was he answering?
- What is the significance of Jesus’ summary of the entire law (Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy) into two commandments?
- How does Jesus define love in the parable of the Good Samaritan?
- Why does Jesus make the Samaritan the hero of the story when there was conflict between Jesus’ own ethnic group and Samaritans?
- How does this passage respond to the theme question: what is the mission of the Church?

Step 4: Action

The goal of CBS is concrete action that challenges injustice and brings transformation. Now that you have formulated the mission of the Church the next step is to apply it in response to challenges faced by LGBTI people in your community. Design a step-by-step action plan with a timeline and specific roles for each member of the group.

Contextual Bible Study: The story of Sodom and Gomorrah

Dr Masiwa Ragies Gunda & Dr Nontando Hadebe lead us through a CBS of this text (Gen 18:20-19:29).²⁹

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has been widely used by Christians to justify why the Christian churches cannot acknowledge the full humanity and dignity of LGBTI persons. This is based on one particular understanding of what sin God was punishing. We are invited to engage with the Bible once again to try and understand what we can learn from the narratives and whether that can help us in our quest to hear God speaking to us regarding LGBTI persons in our community and church context.

We will discuss the background then apply the four steps of Contextual Bible Study

Step 1: Theme:

‘Homosexuality and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah’

Step 2: Biblical Text

Read Genesis 18:20-19:29

Step 3: Questioning and reflection on the text

To begin our Bible study, let us begin by thinking about strangers and visitors to our homes and churches. We all have received strangers and visitors, now let us answer the following questions:

- What do we do when strangers or visitors come to our homes or churches?
- What proverbs or idioms do we have in our language that tell us what to do to strangers and visitors?

Reading: The story of Sodom and Gomorrah

Answer the following questions about the story:

1. Identify the characters in these chapters
2. What good did Abraham do in this narrative towards strangers?
3. What was the difference between Lot and the men of Sodom regarding the strangers?
4. What are the sins of Sodom described in these chapters?

We then need to ask about the biblical context of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah

References to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and a description of the sins committed are found in other parts of the Bible. Four examples will be discussed and enable us to ask what sins are mentioned that are related to Sodom and Gomorrah: Ez 16:49-50; Jer 23:14; Mt 10:14-15; Jude 1:7.

Describe what you have learnt about the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and how does this challenge previous understandings?

Step 4: Action plan

Based on lessons learnt about Sodom and Gomorrah, what actions need to be taken to ensure that the unjust interpretations are challenged and rejected as the basis for justification of discrimination against LGBTI people?

Contextual Bible studies played an important role in the formation of the Kairos document that we discussed earlier. At the heart of contextual Bible studies is our image of God. The next section will discuss images of God.

Images of God

At the heart of the questions we are asking are our images of God and through God our images of the Church. The two are linked because the Church is the continuing embodiment of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity.

As Christians, our religious language is infused by positive images of God.

- The first person of the Trinity is ‘God the Father’, described through many names in the Old Testament. This is often a positive image of a Father who is a Creator, Liberator who rescues the Israelites, who leads them back from exile, and who promises a Messiah: “For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son” (Jn 3:16).
- The second person of the Trinity is ‘God the Son’ who is depicted through a multiplicity of images especially in the Gospel of John: the Bread of Life; the Way, the Truth and the Life; the Good Shepherd; the Vine; etc
- The third person of the Trinity is ‘God the Holy Spirit’ introduced to us through multiple images as the One who is on our side ‘the Advocate’, ‘the Sustainer,’ ‘Resident Teacher’ living in us teaching and transforming us (Gal 5:22)

Our religious language is infused by positive images of God

But there are also in the Bible other images of God as Judge, Warrior etc so that even while church leaders are portraying ‘God as Love’, people experience and hear of God as violent. This is the remnant of the God portrayed in the story of Sodom. Jesus revealed God as a lover of humanity who desires salvation and fullness of life for everyone: “I have come that you might have life and life in abundance” (Jn 10:10). God is ultimately beyond human comprehension and categories

Sankofa: Looking back to Images of God in the face of HIV/AIDS

In humanity's quest for greater understanding of the suffering associated with HIV and AIDS, people were often inclined to revert to negative images of God, images which sometimes were provoked even by the teachings of the Church.

These negative images of God included the following:

- A vindictive judge – due to humanity's misunderstanding of divine justice;
- A rigid bookkeeper of our mistakes;
- A sadistic being who takes pleasure in our sufferings;
- A fateful force who has determined the destinies of all;
- An indifferent God who does not care about humanity's suffering.

Thus, when reflecting on HIV /AIDS, the writers of One Body vol 1 asked these questions:

If we think of HIV infection as a punishment from an angry and vindictive God, how does that check out against the God of our scriptures, or the God we meet in church? When people living with HIV infection or AIDS feel stigmatised and excluded from their own congregations, what does that say about our understanding of the Church we believe in? When the link between HIV and sexuality is said to be one of the reasons why many people infected or affected by HIV are stigmatised, does that reflect a Christian view of human sexuality or doesn't it? ³⁰

The Nordic-FOCCISA Core Group meeting in Lusaka in 2004 realised that we are not bound by this.

The Church needs to proclaim and teach positive images of God in its struggle against stigma, discrimination and the subsequent feelings of guilt and shame.³¹

The document then draws on images of God from both the Old and New Testament that might be a helpful counter-balance:

- God as Creator
- God as Emmanuel
- a grace-filled God
- a suffering God
- God as a companion
- God as healer
- God as servant
- God as helper
- God as lover

The following is an extract from a reflection by a chaplain who works with marginalised people particularly people living with HIV and AIDS: ³²

Constructive and Deformed Images of God

During my eight years of pastoral counselling, as a chaplain to people who live with HIV and AIDS, I have encountered two particularly destructive images of God and of ourselves. They are:

- God as judge – human beings as punished criminals. Justice is the keyword. We are in a courtroom. Law rules. Power is exercised.
- God as tyrant – human beings as victims. Injustice is the keyword. We are in a torture chamber. Lawlessness rules. Power is abused.

I try to encourage my clients to adopt, instead, an image of God that is Christ-centred and a self-image that has its source in the Christian gospel, leading to:

- God as lover – human beings as the beloved. Justicelessness is the keyword. We are in an intimate alcove within the divine spacious-ness. Love and grace rule. Powerlessness is a condition of life.

I find it useful to introduce the concept of ‘justicelessness’. As I see it, God is beyond all conceptions of justice. God does not measure out justice in millimetres. He loves – and that is something qualitatively different. God is a lover. He loves human beings – and his love neither can nor will change that fact. A reflection of this is seen in 2 Tim 2:13: “If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.” God is neither reasonable nor unreasonable. He doesn’t want to crush us, he wants to caress us. A reflection of this perspective is seen in Jn 15:13-15.

Jn 15:15

“I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”

Being Aware of our Images of God

Just as our image of God has affected our attitude towards people affected by HIV, so we need to be aware of how our image of God affects our attitude towards other marginalised people who are nevertheless part of the One Body that is the Church.

It is not that one image of God is right and one is wrong: rather the Bible intentionally presents us with multiple images of God because God cannot be reduced to one image. This is already true in the Old Testament but it becomes especially relevant for Christians for whom God is Trinity, a communion of three Persons, equal yet different. The invitation is to be open to the different images of God that are present across texts or even within the same text.

Take for example Mt 25: 31-46, the separation of the sheep and the goats. What is our image of God in this passage? The instant reaction is to see God as the Judge who is doing the separating, albeit using criteria which are not the ones that we might have expected. But Jesus clearly makes the point that he is to be associated with those who are in need of help: the hungry, the imprisoned, the naked. Moreover, Jesus has told us “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:8). So this text should show us God not only as Judge but also as the hungry, the imprisoned, the naked. It is interesting that we tend to veer towards one image and away from the other one.

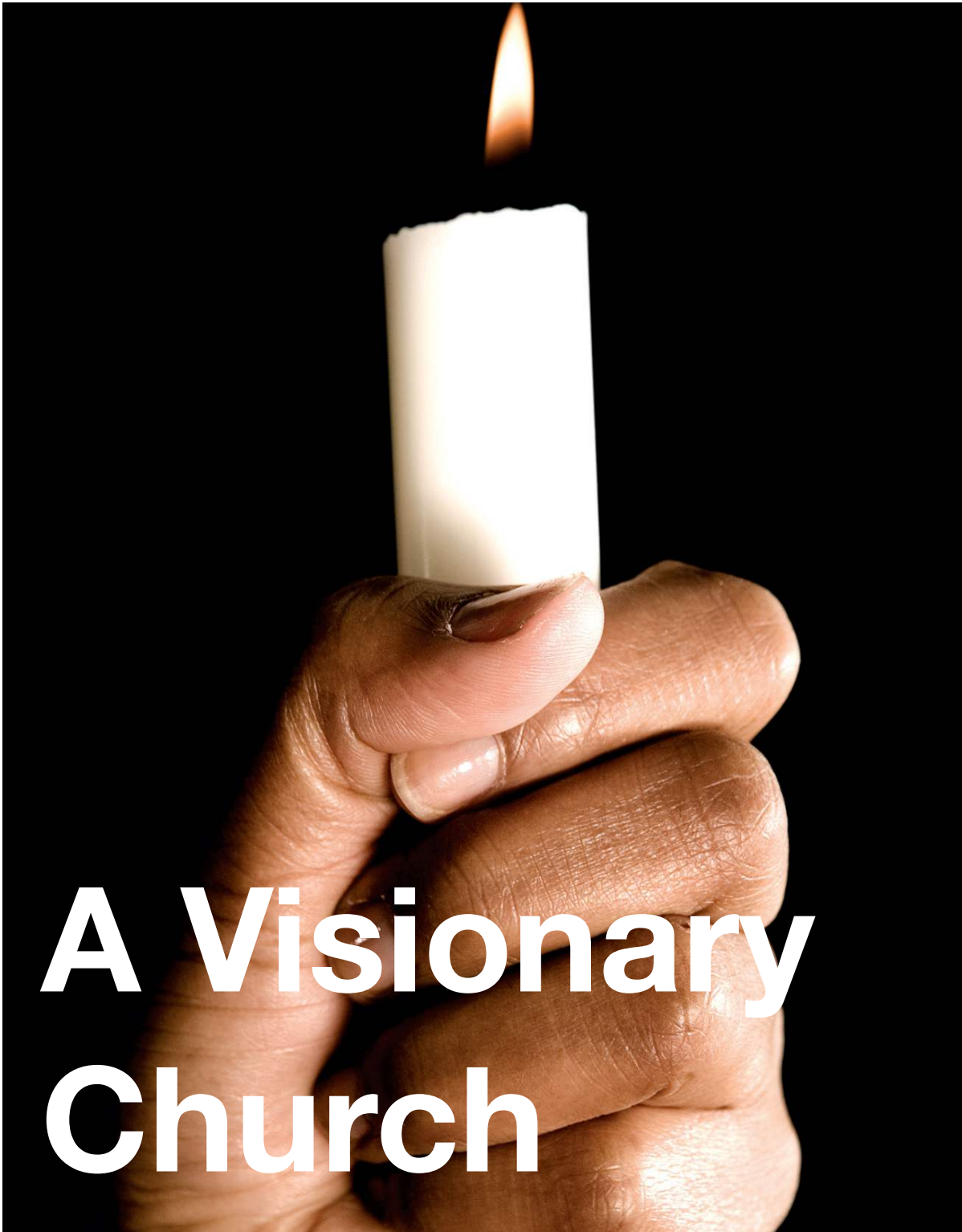
The cross which is at the centre of our imagery as Christians also poses this same dilemma. It contains within it both the image of God who allows his Son to suffer and of God who is suffering. We are too quick to see God as one who inflicts punishment and fail to see God as one who receives punishment as evident on the cross.

So among the many things that are said by the religious leaders, we often do not hear the voice of Jesus or see the images of Jesus: who he was and what he has modeled for the Church. It is as if Jesus is missing in action, a Silent Messiah. And thus the images of God as compassion, as love, as welcoming get overlooked. We need to recall that Jesus is ‘the bread of life’ (Jn 6:35), brings ‘life to the full’ (Jn 10:10), the mother hen (Mt 23:37). And also that if God is a father, the kind of father that Jesus shows God to be: he is Abba and is compared to the woman who sweeps out the whole house to just find one lost coin (Lk 15:8-10), or the shepherd who seeks out the one forgotten sheep (Mt 18:10-14).

Questions for Dialogue

1. How does my image of God affect my image of the Church?
2. How does this image of God as relational and communal deepen our understanding of what it means to be human, made in the image of God? How is this linked to *Ubuntu*?
3. Where do I see God in Scriptural texts, as oppressor or oppressed? As judge or victim?

Now that we understand the nature of God as compassionate and loving to all and (as we saw previously) Jesus as committed to marginalised groups, we seek to understand the role of the Church in response to vulnerable groups.



A Visionary Church

How should the Church relate to the present situation for marginalised groups such as LGBTI people?

The following extracts are from an article by Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, the Secretary General of the South African Council of Churches, entitled: “The Church called to be Salt and Light of the World.”³³

Mt 5:13a,14

You are the salt of the earth!... You are the light of the world!

Our identity as Christians

I shall make this my starting point: “You are the salt of the earth! ... You are the light of the world!” This is the charge, the mandate that Jesus gives to his disciples; to you and me; and to the congregations we are called to accompany in the pilgrimage of faith. This is a description that defines our identity.

In other words, Jesus’ message that we are ‘the salt of the earth’ and ‘the light of the world’ suggests that we cannot and should not seek to claim the title of disciple to the Lord, without practicing as salt and light. In the same way that light spreads out to expel darkness where it exists, we say that the Church is called to be the light of the world. In the same way that salt eats away at rot to preserve the corruptible sheepskin turning it into a cured usable item, we say that the Church is called to be salt of the earth.

The burden of our discipleship

In addition, to be sure that no one thinks this requirement is just for the Church leaders who stand in the shoes of the Apostles, Jesus in Mt 25:31-46 paints the picture of judgement day, the burden of our discipleship:

- o I was marginalised and weak, and hooray! You stood up for me!
- o I was bullied and violently persecuted, and alas, you looked the other way!
- o Like the priest and the Levite in the Good Samaritan parable, you were too busy and preoccupied with the business of going to church!

As you and I seek to justify ourselves with “When did we look the other way?”, the Lord says as long as you looked the other way when my children were vilified for being different from the majority, as long as you left the killing of people with albinism, and the social and physical violence against the LGBTI community, you abandoned me and looked the other way at my crucifixion!

As explained at the beginning, One Body recommends a Methodology of ‘See, Judge, Act’ to bring about action in the churches. Bishop Malusi applies this methodology to the response of the Church to its LGBTI members. Although we have discussed the methodology at the beginning of the workshop, it is worth repeating as revision and reminder.

Now for the content issues: We recommend a SEE, JUDGE, ACT model. What is that?

The SEE is research, to seek to know enough about all there is to know in order to plan your action intelligently. Focusing on the LGBTI situation:

What social and public policy environment do we have? What are the myths that society holds and where do these come from? What happens to people who are known to be in the LGBTI community? In what circumstances are people molested, and in what circumstances are they safe? There may be many questions to answer for a very good picture of the situation for a situational analysis.

Then, knowing what we now know, we do the JUDGE, that is, applying our theological lenses to say, what does the love of Christ require of us in regard to what we know to be the case? What does the message of Paul to Timothy mean to us when he says?

2 Tim 1:7

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

There are many different interpretations of sacred texts. This is why it is necessary to invest in pastors, so that the JUDGE can be informed by sound theology. Even if someone thought it is sinful to be an LGBTI person (as many do argue), there is yet the message of Jesus in John 8

Jn 8:7

He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.

ACT – describes the practical actions that will be taken to address the injustices described in the “See” and ‘Judge’ which includes social analysis (understanding root causes) and theological reflection (principles from the Bible that help us to discern how God wants us to respond to the situation). The actions are informed by the information gathered from “See” and “Judge.” The goal for action is justice, change and transformation in churches and in society.

? Question for Dialogue

Describe how you would structure your own action plan based on this methodology.

In conclusion, we believe that the challenges described and discussed in our seminar call for a visionary Church to respond to this *Kairos* moment.

What does it mean to be a Visionary Church?

This final section starts with the characteristics of a visionary Church from the *One Body vol. 1*. What was true of a visionary Church in the face of HIV and AIDS can also be true of a visionary Church in the face of LGBTI and other social issues. What would it be to show pastoral and prophetic ministry in response to violence against LGBTI people?

Characteristics of a visionary Church from *One Body Vol. 1* ³⁴

Characteristic	Description	Possible Actions in response to violence against LGBTI people
Listening	“To be relevant to the lives of women and men today and to create a welcoming home as a place of solace and refuge for ALL in need, we have first of all to be present and listen to and hear the cry of God’s people, to hear their needs, their thirst and hunger.”	Engage with groups and individuals from your church community who are LGBTI. Provide a safe space to listen to their experiences.
Inclusive	“The Church has to start with ones with whom Jesus identified himself, the outcasts, the rejected one, the marginalised and people in need. People in these circumstances should not be ‘objects’ for our good deeds, they are not there to give us credit in the eyes of God. On the contrary, it is when we are in the midst of such life situations that God reveals Godself. This calls for a genuine solidarity with all human beings in need.”	Identify exclusive and exclusionary language that is used by your church community and explain to people why it is not loving and should be avoided. Where possible, allow space in your church leadership for people who can speak for the LGBTI community.

<p>←</p> <p>Light of the world</p>	<p>“Being a light, living our lives in the light, means also to live positively and to break the silence over issues that we often don’t want to talk about like sexuality. The Church also has an obligation to start talking about [LGBTI] issues. Raising the issues in our sermons, in a sensitive and compassionate way, can help to break the silence.”</p>	<p>When encountering hateful speech and violent action in your society directed towards LGBTI people, speak out as you would against other forms of violence.</p> <p>Hold leaders, especially politicians to account for their language and the actions they provoke.</p>
<p>Healing</p>	<p>“God’s intention for creation is expressed in the Old Testament vision of <i>shalom</i>: a term which indicated a wholeness, fulfilment, harmony and peace that characterised the earth and all its inhabitants. This is the root of the Bible’s understanding of health; it provides a basis for the Old Testament understanding of salvation. This <i>shalom</i> is never individual but corporate, known in community. Jesus is the prince of this <i>shalom</i>.”</p>	<p>In situations where a religious leader or a whole church have themselves been the source of hateful speech and violence find ways of apologising publicly for the sin and seeking reconciliation.</p> <p>Call on others who have perpetrated hateful speech and violence to apologise.</p>
<p>Informed and competent</p>	<p>“An informed and competent church is one that understands and has accurate knowledge of issues in society particularly in relation to marginalised groups and is able to respond to the needs with compassion, justice and action.”</p>	<p>Collect information constantly about the situation for LGBTI people in your society and especially in your church.</p> <p>Look at the ways in which other churches in your community or in Africa have demonstrated compassion and justice.</p>

? Questions for Dialogue

1. Discuss and summarise each characteristic of the Church listed above.
2. How would these characteristics empower churches to respond pastorally and prophetically to the challenges facing LGBTI people?
3. What are the steps that you need to take to make your church visionary and prophetic?

Finalising action plans

The last part of the methodology of ‘See, Judge, Act’ is Action: that is concrete steps that will be taken to engage in community dialogues and advocacy so that our churches are sources of knowledge, inclusion and care for LGBTI people. Our actions will be informed by knowledge gained through the process of ‘Seeing and judging.’ Action is implied in the description of Christians by Jesus as the salt and light of the world. Action includes small beginnings.

Jas 2:26

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Conclusion

One Body vol 3 builds on the original *One Body Supplement*. This was commissioned after the meeting of Heads of churches, project coordinators and General Secretaries of FOCCISA, held in Johannesburg in September 2016, to discuss the topic “The Role of the Churches in the context of Marginalised Groups such as LGBTI People.”

Five papers/articles were presented at that meeting and extracts were in the Supplement and in this volume. This is a continuation of the *One Body* Series and several themes from both Volume 1 and 2 are referred to and discussed building on the method of dialogue as explained and applied throughout the Series.

This is only an introduction to LGBTI issues and does not claim to cover all aspects. There is information on additional resources at the end of this together with a Glossary of the terms used. Please consult the additional material so that you can learn more about LGBTI issues in this region. All the countries in Southern Africa are included in this research.

In conclusion, the goal of this work is that participants take the knowledge that they have learnt and apply it through concrete action plans that they can implement in their churches. But beyond this goal is a much greater vision of transformation in churches and in society through the visionary Church and action plans so that gender justice and *shalom* is inclusive of everyone and leaves no one behind.

Action is the goal! So act on what you know and together we can stop the violence against all marginalised groups and contribute to a society free from all forms of marginalisation, violence and violations of human dignity. This is the way of Jesus and the calling of his Church.



Franciscan Blessing

May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears,
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,
So that you may reach out your hand
To comfort them and
To turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you
With enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do
What others claim cannot be done
To bring justice and kindness
To all our children and the poor.

Amen



Glossary

Albinism = a genetic condition that whitens the skin of some African people (who are sometimes referred to as ‘Albinos’)

Anti-sodomy laws = legislation, usually dating to colonial times, that criminalises certain sexual acts

Apartheid = a system of regulated racism that existed in South Africa from 1948 to 1994

Asexual = a sexual orientation whereby a person has a lack or low level of sexual attraction to others and does not desire sex or to have sexual partners. An asexual person may be straight, gay, bisexual, transgender. Asexual people may be emotionally attracted to others and desire partnership, but may not wish to express that attraction sexually. Discrimination and prejudice directed at people based on their sexuality is called **Aphobia**.

Bisexual = a person attracted to both men and women. This attraction may not be split equally between genders, and there may be a preference for one gender over others.

Coming out = the voluntary process by which an individual declares to others that they do not conform to sexual/ gender norms. (**Being outed** is the involuntary process).

Contextual Bible Study or CBS = an approach to reading passages of the Bible that recognises both the context in which it was written and the context in which it is being read

‘Corrective rape’ = a misguided attempt to make an LGBTI person straight through unconsented heterosexual intercourse

FHGJN = FOCCISA Health and Gender Justice Network

FOCCISA = Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa

Gay = a term used to describe individuals attracted to the same sex, though more commonly refers to men who do not identify as heterosexual

Gender = the characteristics, roles and responsibilities of women and men, boys and girls in different cultures and at different times (not the same as ‘sex’)

Gender identity = a person's perception of their gender and how they choose to identify themselves. i.e. man, woman or gender neutral.

Gender-based Violence = violence perpetrated against individuals or groups because of their gender

Homophobia = a general term for negative attitudes toward members of LGBT community. These attitudes often translate into discrimination, different forms of violence and hate crimes. The term extends to bisexual and transgender people, but terms like **biphobia** and **transphobia** are used to emphasise specific prejudices against bisexual and transgender people. (Compare with xenophobia = negative attitudes towards foreigners)

'in the closet' = an LGBTI person who is not public about their sexuality

Intersex = a term used to describe people whose biological sex is unclear. Thus, internal sex organs and genitals differ from the two expected patterns of male or female.

Kairos = a key moment in time

Lesbian = a term used to describe a woman attracted to the same sex and women who do not identify as heterosexual.

LGBTI = established as an acronym used to describe the diversity of sexual and gender minorities. The letters stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender and Inter-sex. There are also shorter and longer versions of the acronym (e.g. LGB, LGBTIA, LGBTQI LGBTQI+).

Nordic countries = Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden

Queer = a general term used to describe people who do not identify as straight or who have a gender-variant identity. It is often used interchangeably with LGBTI, but due to its historically derogatory use, not all LGBTI people use or embrace the term

SADC = Southern African Development Community (comprising 16 member states)

Sankofa = a Ghanaian concept of drawing on the past for the future

Sexual orientation = relates to a person's physical attraction to another person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Transgender people can be straight, gay or bisexual.

Straight = heterosexual (***Straight-acting*** is someone who is not heterosexual but behaves in a way that they hope others will think that they are heterosexual).

Transgender = an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression is dissimilar from the sex they were born with. Transgender people may identify as transwomen (male-to-female/MTF), trans-men (female-to-male/FTM), transsexual or gender variant.

Transphobia = a general term for negative attitudes towards members of the Transcommunity.

Ubuntu = a concept from a number of African cultures which recognises the importance of the community and not just the individual



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