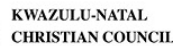


# SUMMARY REPORT

## HOMOPHOBIA & THE CHURCHES IN AFRICA

### A DIALOGUE



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## Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa – 7 & 8 April 2016

### INTRODUCTION

The Other Foundation, in partnership with the Open Society Foundations and working with the Ujamaa Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Gay and Lesbian Network, the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council and the Arcus Foundation, convened about one hundred invited delegates from 12 countries at a two day dialogue in the hospitable and comfortable setting of Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary. Delegates came from Southern and East Africa as well as the United States and Europe and included people who self-identify as LGBTI, church ministers and theologians, and funders.

As a poignant reminder that the issues being discussed have very real and painful import, the parents of Eudy Simelane (who was raped and killed in KwaThema near Johannesburg on 28 April 2008 because she identified as lesbian) were present throughout the proceedings. Their dignity and courage were remarked on by many as an inspiration to all.

The dialogue was divided into the social analysis model of “See, Judge, Act”. Each phase comprised both plenary presentations and small group discussions. This report will not attempt to capture the rich content of the entire proceedings, as all plenary sessions were video recorded and are available to be viewed online by clicking [here](#). The detailed programme, a run through of the process flow of the convening, and the papers presented are also available at the link above. We have made all these available for everyone to use as resources to take forward the outcomes of the convening.

This report was produced by the listening team for the convening that was led by Janet Trisk, a Canon of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, and comprised of Mote Magomba from the UKZN School of Religion, Dumisile Sibisi from St Joseph’s Theological Institute, Mabuluki Kangwa from the All Africa TEE Association, Philippa Cole from the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, and Albert Bangirana from the UKZN School of Religion.

## SEE

In his opening words of welcome, Professor Simangaliso Khumalo suggested that the problem facing us is the lack of inclusivity and space for dialogue at the ecclesiological level, namely: How do we hold together with our different views? Whilst this is an important theological (and practical question) we also watched a video clip of an interview with a woman whose daughter was killed because she was lesbian and heard painful testimony from those who have been rejected by their churches. This tension between, on one hand, a desire to engage in theological exploration and on the other, an urgent frustration at the lack of action on the part of the churches, was an on-going theme.

In the midst of these painful reminders, we were also called by several delegates to see signs of hope – for example this very gathering. Again, the tension between pain and hope was one which threaded through the two days of conversation.

A panel led by Bella Matambandazo from the Other Foundation and comprising of representatives of the organizing committee including Maxim Anmeghichean from the Open Society Foundations, Douglas Dziva from the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council, Gerald West from the Ujamaa Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and Anthony Waldhausen from the Gay & Lesbian Network, engaged with the participants' expressed views on what the purpose of the gathering should be. A shared sense emerged that the convening was a step along a long journey together, to chart out what might be a few good ways forward for now.

In a paper derivative of wide research Masiwa Ragies Gunda then reminded us that "phobia kills". Substance abuse and suicide are often the result of exclusion and persecution. He went on to identify ways in which we might help church members become aware of homophobia and transphobia and possible strategies of resistance. He further challenged bullying and the stigma associated with the conservativeness of Christianity towards women empowerment and the LGBTI community. It was noted that the Bible can be used as a tool of discrimination with the Church of Jesus becoming a missionary of death.

Discussion on the paper was then followed by a panel chaired by Ian Southey-Swartz. Representatives of various organisations spoke about their work and the possible lines of resistance. The panellists were Jane Kaluba from the Zambian Dette Resources, Ecclesia de Lange from Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, Steve Letsike from Access Chapter 2 and Douglas Dziva from the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council. The theme which kept emerging from this discussion was the complex relationship between human rights and religious freedom.

Delegates then split into small groups for discussion on present practices and a consideration of what is and is not working. The small group discussions were led by Judith Kotze from Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, Anna Mmolai-Chalmers from LEGABIBO, Bruce Tushabe from MANARELA, and Teboho Klaas from the Gauteng Provincial Department of Community Safety.

Groups reported the following useful approaches and strategies:

- Acceptance of LGBTI people in the Church. This included engaging with the heteronormative view of husband and wife that is dominant in the churches, as well as the issues of disclosure and support.
- Contesting issues of language in the Churches
- Churches being proactive and not reactive
- Envisaging sexuality as part of development
- Training by way of workshops and Bible studies, seminary training, university courses and research
- Activities which include the parents and families of LGBTI persons
- Building coalitions across different faiths
- Documenting and demonstrating evidence
- Courageous pastoral engagement by some clergy
- Listening to the experiences of LGBTI people
- Starting with what binds us rather than what divides us
- Recourse to the legal framework / constitution

Groups also considered what is not working, namely:

- Alliances between politicians and religious groups
- Trying to achieve all desired change outcomes by using one strategic approach
- The imposition of constraining rules by funders
- Clergy waiting for a synod or conference approval before speaking up and taking pastoral action
- Expecting activism from lay members of the church when there is no buy-in from clergy
- A swing towards conservativeness by church leadership
- Radical approaches that do not engage church leaders

Thursday afternoon opened with a powerful and moving physical theatre performance by the Gay and Lesbian Network's drama group. The fact that many people remembered this better than most of the words they heard reinforces the value and importance of embodied resistance and engagement with the arts. You can watch a video of the performance by clicking [here](#).

Professor Gerald West then gave a presentation on the theme *When Faith Does Violence*, based on theological work that he is undertaking along with Charlene van der Walt and Kapya Kaoma at the request of the Other Foundation. During his presentation and in the a panel discussion after his presentation, the following points were raised:

- There is need to engage with the normative sexual hegemony  
There is need to affirm the epistemological privilege of LGBTI people in the theological discourse about homophobia. It should be centred on the agency of LGBTI people.
- Scriptural hermeneutics that is life-denying should be contested.
- We need to reclaim liberation theological resources for engagement about homophobia.
- Hetero-patriarchy and its branding of queer bodies should be defined as such and subverted.
- LGBT and I realities should be disaggregated for meaningful reflection and engagement.

The panellists in this discussion included Charlene van der Walt from the University of Stellenbosch, Kapya John Kaoma from St John's University College, Episcopal Divinity School, and Boston University, and Laurie Gaum from the Centre for Christian Spirituality.

An important idea that emerged from the paper is the recognition of the body as a site of trauma and the need therefore, to make space for mourning. This idea clearly linked to the drama which preceded this paper and it was thus surprising that more was not made of this in later discussions.

Delegates again broke into small groups to discuss issues of language, and in particular the connections and disjunctions between human rights language and religious language. Not for the first time in the consultation, it was recognised that theology, especially church theology, very often shies away from the legalistic language of human rights. "Dignity" as a concept shared by theology and human rights discourse could offer a way into finding a common language.

Other issues raised in the small group discussions around issues of language included:

- The recognition that there is a gap between language used in academic discourse and everyday communication, for example the use of "queer" has a particular understanding in the academy but is understood negatively in common conversation.
- Many African languages do not have words which enable expression regarding matters of sexuality, for example "transgender".  
Non-verbal language, for example as displayed in the theatre piece or dress, holds a very important place in communicating to overcome homophobia.
- There is a recognition that current language (and theoretical frameworks) are overwhelmingly heteronormative.

The small group discussions were led by Virginia Magwaza from the Foundation for Human Rights, Esther Adhiambo from PEMA, Alice Mogwe from Ditshwanelo: The Botswana Centre for Human Rights, and Motsau Motsau from the University of the Free State.

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## JUDGE

Day one ended with the first Eudy Simelane public lecture delivered by Edwin Cameron, Justice of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, and an address by Steve Letsike from the South African National Task Team on LGBTI Hate Crimes. The lecture was preceded by a moving documentary which briefly described Eudy's life as a young person growing up in KwaThema, her life as a soccer player, her tragic death and interviews with her parents and brother. You can watch the documentary and Justice Cameron's address by clicking [here](#). The lecture moved us into the "Judge" phase of the process.

In welcoming those who attended the lecture the Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Prof Cheryl Potgieter, made it clear that she does not belong to a faith tradition and questioned why, in the light of the churches' homophobic attitudes and practices, anyone would want to be a member of a church. This of course is not a new

question, but as had been articulately pointed out during the day, most people in Africa *are* people of faith and so the question is more usefully framed as follows: How might LGBTI people claim the church and assert their place in it?

Day two opened with a presentation by Professor Isabel Phiri in which she considered what we might learn from the experience and practice of the World Council of Churches (WCC). She suggested that strategically one should commence with storytelling, the “lived experience” of LGBTI persons. This approach resonated with the paper previously delivered by Gerard West in which he argued (following the methodology of theologies of liberation) for an epistemological privileging of LGBTI people’s experience.

Isabel Phiri suggested five areas that need to be addressed, namely:

- The need to develop a theology of sin and a theology of compassion
- How the Church might offer places/ spaces of grace
- The relationship between individual sexual rights and social justice
- Why LGBTI matters are discussed as *moral* issues rather than social justice issues
- The place of the Bible and whether we should consider replacing the contestation of particular biblical verses with talk of values instead.

She further highlighted:

- The need for sensitivity to different cultural contexts when engaging with issues of sexuality, family, and identity.
- The need to develop theological terminology for this debate
- The need to initiate conversations with the people affected (i.e. LGBTI people)  
The need to engage at a community level to raise awareness and sensitization
- The need to explore story-telling methodologies in the churches
- The need to break down essentialist ideas that undergird sexism  
That the language of “justice for all” could work
- The importance of theological education that is inclusive of LGBTI issues
- The need to promote dialogue and moral discernment

A panel discussion moderated by Bafana Khumalo from Sonke Gender Justice explored the input given by Isabel Phiri. The panel included Phumzile Mabizela from INERELA+, and David Mbote from the Futures Group, along with Isabel Phiri.

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## ACT

From the middle of day two we moved into the “Act” phase. Small groups were encouraged to discuss where are the organizational, knowledge, opportunity and strategic gaps are, that should be addressed to deepen engagement. These small group discussions were led by Madelene Isaacs from TULINAM, Mote Magomba from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Lilly Phiri from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and Guillain Koko from Church World Service.

Some suggestions which emerged included:

- Assist with the development of links between universities and seminaries where LGBTI issues may be addressed in theological training. This could include invitations to those working in NGOs to assist with the training.
- Identify individuals in training institutions and universities who can influence change.
- Work on ways to deconstruct unhelpful frameworks and concepts such as conventional or currently normative understandings of the concept of “family”
- Identify and work with helpful practices such as the change made in Vatican II or ecumenical theology or the Methodist teaching regarding God’s kin-dom.
- Identify areas of research that need to be done and pursue funding
- Develop apologetic and processing skills for clergy who can become agents of change
- Develop new resource / reading / Bible study material for ongoing educational and conscientizing work
- Find ways of connecting to broader human rights issues
- Offer pastoral care for “cover wives” (women married to gay men)
- Address the tensions between pastoral care and the position of the church hierarchy
- Review the church canons / rules from and LGBTI perspective
- Embrace the blessing of same-sex marriages
- Compile liturgies that could be used in church groups
- Identify and confront core teachings which are used to exclude

Having carefully tracked the discussions from the beginning of the dialogue, the listening team identified the following main themes and issues that had emerged so far:

- The *economics* of sexual othering in the Church. In other words, taking a stand for full inclusion of LGBTI persons may have economic consequences for a church and this in turn could lead ministers to shy away from taking a prophetic stance.
- Africanising LGBTI to ITBGL. Recognising that context is crucial, some delegates suggested that while it is sometimes said that to be gay or lesbian is “un-African” the lived reality for all Africans is that we know transgender or intersex people.
- Embodying resistance.
- The ambivalent relationship between LGBTI groups and the churches.
- The complicated relationship between human rights discourse and language about LGBTI issues in Africa. Linked to this issue is the struggle to find common language or a means of expression in local languages. Also connected to the issues of language are the politics of language and the different languages of those in the centre and those on the margins.
- What have we / can we learn from previous struggles – such as the response to HIV, the struggle against colonialism and racial oppression, and the struggle for women’s emancipation?
- Identifying signs of hope. There is a need to recognise where there is energy, progress, small victories, and safe spaces. In South Africa the place of the Constitution is critical.
- The violence done to people identified as “other”.
- Claims made about what is or is not African. This covers a wide range of issues. For example it is sometimes claimed that to be gay or lesbian is un-African. Others claim human rights discourse is un-African. Some claim the church or the Bible are un-African.

- The need to partner with other supporters, for example lawyers, in challenging unjust laws, developing safety and support and in compelling the police to act.
- The power of story-telling.
- Should we be emphasising social justice rather than individual rights? How?
- Fear: The fear of LGBTI persons, and fear of violence and rejection.
- Training – of clergy, of church members, on-going training of church leaders
- Issues around funding such as the parameters set by some funders.
- The importance of art, drama, film, etc as a tool of expression and a way of informing and transforming.
- Intersecting issues of race, gender, and economic privilege.

From this long list, four questions were formulated for discussion in small groups (one question in each small group) to develop practical strategies for action in that particular area. Delegates were asked to choose a group in which one of the questions was to be discussed and some practical suggestions offered. The following questions were posed:

- Language: How and where do we develop a common language of human dignity in response to the challenges raised in this forum?
- Theology: What theological work needs to be done in response to issues raised?
- Church leaders: What are the short term and long term goals for practical interventions? Who will take this up with our church leaders and how will you do it?
- Lived experience: What strategies or projects can we adopt to encourage the expression of trauma and the lived experience of LGBTI people? How might this be documented? What rituals might be developed? How might LGBTI people claim a space in the churches?

The group discussing language responded that there is no need for a uniform language. Each local context should formulate its own culturally contextual language. This “local language” should include multiple voices and should respond to our African context. Because the language of human rights does not resonate well in the faith communities, the language of “dignity” is a more useful alternative.

Once again it was noted that the language of human rights and even the language of LGBTI activists from the faith communities is too often seen as “secular” and part of the agenda of the global North. However, the concepts themselves are important and so a locally developed way of challenging the churches to live up to their social justice responsibilities is very important.

It was also noted that the “messenger” may be vulnerable and ways of protecting spokespeople should be devised.

The group discussing theology committed itself to a mapping of theological resources. The group also undertook to promote publications as well as the less conventional methods of the use of social media and drama. The Ujamaa Centre undertook to initiate this work and has already provided a link on its website.

The group on church leaders undertook in the short term to mobilise church leaders, ensure that LGBTI people have a voice, mobilise and call church leaders to a conferences like this one, and engage theologians to develop an African queer theology. The group also committed themselves to the conscientisation of queer clergy to wake up, form networks and spiritual groups for LGBTI members, create a pastoral guide for religious leaders to engage with LGBTI

members, use queer Biblical hermeneutics and advocate for the respect and acceptance of the dignity of LGBTI people in the churches. In the longer term the group undertook to create lobbying and advocacy groups to work towards changing church policies in synods, and to provide gender neutral bathroom facilities in church buildings.

The group looking at “lived experience” identified the following practical strategies:

- Look for ways to bring homophobia onto the African agenda and search for positive and creative language to do so
- Project positive and helpful role models in writing and the fine arts, film, children’s story books, and theatre
- Mobilize sponsorship to promote writing and develop stories as a tool of conscientisation
- Engage both survivors and perpetrators of homophobia
- Develop community resources such as quiz games, community radio broadcasts and opinion pieces in the print media
- Develop programs for children
- Engage the churches and encourage church leaders to welcome LGBTI persons
- Establish links with organisations who have been working for change such as the Gay and Lesbian Network.

Now the work is to begin.

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## MIND THE GAP

The listening team identified a few “gaps” in both the content and the process of the dialogue.

Perhaps the most significant was the absence of a good representation of church leaders. Whilst there were a number of clergy present, clerics who have responsibility at a regional level were not present.

Another gap was the failure to consider in more depth, the traumatic embodiment of rejection, homophobia and violence and how the churches might offer spaces and rituals of mourning and healing.

Thirdly, it was noted that disruptive strategies of resistance were not really explored. Creative, non-violent ways of disrupting usual practice can be very effective.

Finally, the listening team recommended that small group facilitators as well as panel moderators could usefully have been offered some specific guidance regarding their role, for example to include those who sat in silence, or in how to formulate questions for discussion.



## CLOSING LITURGY

A short liturgy was held in the chapel at the end of the second day. It was perhaps difficult to anticipate where the conversation would have led by the end of day two and therefore not easy to design a liturgy. However, if a similar process were to happen over again, the following considerations might be taken into account:

- The liturgy should include several languages
- It would be good for all delegates to take some share in the creation of the liturgy, for example by being invited to write a poem, draw, or contribute in some small way.

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## CONCLUSION: PAIN & HOPE

Despite two days of emotionally exhausting process, the energy which was manifest at the opening of the dialogue seemed not to have dissipated by the time delegates came to enjoy a closing reception. Old acquaintances renewed and new ones forged led to lively and loud conversation. It is to the credit of the organisers that there was no shying away from pain and the hard conversations. However, there was also a real sense of hope that those who had been part of the conversation were re-energised, changed and given some practical strategies for making a difference.

