Conversations on the Pilgrim Way

Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality

A Resource for Reflection and Action
Received by WCC Central Committee at a meeting held 9-15 February 2022 by video conference

World Council of Churches

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WCC Publications is the book publishing programme of the World Council of Churches. The WCC is a worldwide fellowship of 352 member churches which represents more than half a billion Christians around the world. The WCC calls its member churches to seek unity, a common public witness and service to others in a world where hope and solidarity are the seeds for justice and peace. The WCC works with people of all faiths seeking reconciliation with the goal of justice, peace, and a more equitable world.

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Executive Summary

This document was received at the meeting of the central committee held from 9-15 February 2022 by video conference.

The Report of the Programme Committee Revised reads as follows:
The programme committee received and discussed 'Conversations on the Pilgrim Way: Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality - A Resource for Reflection and Action' (GEN PRO 03.1) and made the following observations:

In the introduction it was underlined that this is a resource document for those member churches that are interested in deepening the discussion. It was requested by member churches for information and guidance. In the meantime it is clear that human sexuality is a sensitive topic and some churches may have objections to even discuss this topic. However, it was noted that the Busan Assembly stated that controversial themes, like human sexuality, should have a safe space for conversation.

The programme committee is aware that human sexuality could be a divisive topic in churches and in our fellowship. The committee underlines the importance for ecumenical dialogue in a safe space on topics that could be divisive and welcomes the invitation in this document to journey together in ethical dilemmas.

Being aware of matters that churches find hard to deal with

Recommendations

5. *The programme committee recommends that the central committee:*
   a. receives with appreciation the Conversations on the Pilgrim Way as a resource document for those member churches and ecumenical partners interested in dialogue on issues of human sexuality;
   b. thank the Reference Group on Human Sexuality on the work done.

Approved by consensus
Dr Theodora Issa (Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East), Prof. Dr Very Rev. Jack Khalil (Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East), Very Rev. Fr. Hrant Tahanian (Armenian Apostolic Church, Holy See of Cilicia) objected to the reception of the document. The objection is recorded here and the rationale is recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

1. Introduction

At the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), held in Busan, Republic of Korea, in response to the issues raised during the ecumenical conversations, business sessions and other presentations regarding the challenges that issues of human sexuality pose to WCC member churches and their constituencies, the assembly through the Programme Guidelines Committee made the following recommendation:

> *Being aware of divisive issues among churches, the WCC can function as a safe space to enter into dialogue and moral discernment on matters which the churches find challenging. Examples which have been heard strongly in this assembly include questions of gender and human sexuality. Controversial issues have their place within that safe space on the common agenda, remembering that tolerance is not enough, but the baseline is love and mutual respect.*[1]

In response to the above recommendation, the WCC general secretary formed both a Staff Group and a Reference Group on Human Sexuality to address these issues. The membership of the group displayed a wide variety of church traditions and different contexts. Members were drawn from Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Oriental Orthodox, Methodist, Reformed and United and Uniting Churches, and from different countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, North America, and the Pacific.

1.1 Introducing the World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is a fellowship of 352 Orthodox, Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, United and Uniting Churches, Mennonites, Friends, Congregationalists, Disciples, and African Indigenous Churches. Although they are not members, there is close collaboration also with the Roman Catholic Church and with some Pentecostal and Independent Churches. The WCC is the broadest, most inclusive Christian organization in the world, representing more than half a billion Christians around the world:

> *The primary purpose and vision of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.*[2]

The World Council of Churches came into existence not because of the unity of the church but because of the division of the church. The message from the first assembly of the WCC, in Amsterdam in 1948, declared:

> *We are one in acknowledging Him [Jesus Christ] as our God and Saviour. We are divided from one another, not only in matters of faith, order, and tradition, but also by pride of nation, class, and race. But Christ has made us His own, and we are not divided. In seeking him, we find one another. Here at Amsterdam, we have committed ourselves afresh, to Him, and have covenanted with one another in constituting this World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together.*[3]

Over seven decades, the council has been a space in which divisive issues of theology, practice, and ethics have been and are being addressed.

1.2 Nature and purpose of the document

Conversations on the Pilgrim Way is a World Council of Churches conversation on human sexuality, whose aim is to inspire and promote conversations for those interested within and among the churches. It is a continuation of a long-term series

1. "Report of the Programme Guidelines Committee," *10th Assembly of the WCC in Busan, Republic of Korea, 2013, Doc. No PGC 01,* 5–6, par 28.
2. *Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches,* amended by the 10th Assembly of the WCC in 1998, at https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/wcc-constitution-and-rules.
3. "Message," First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam,1948, in *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches,* ed. W. A. Visser't Hooft (London: SCM, 1949), 9.

of conversations conducted by the member churches of the WCC. It is therefore not a new conversation, but the latest phase of a variety of conferences, consultations, and study processes which have been mandated by the member churches over some 50 years.[4] Already at the New Delhi assembly attention was drawn to the need to examine issues of sexual relations before and after marriage, particularly in the light of the effect of illegitimacy, polygamy, and the availability of contraceptives. These concerns were reiterated at the WCC assembly in Uppsala (1968) with the addition of the issues of homosexuality and abortion. As a result of this, a major consultation was held in West Berlin in 1974 on the topic of "Sexism in the 1970s."[5] The WCC assembly in Nairobi (1975) sought a theological study on sexuality, while the assemblies in Vancouver (1983) and Canberra (1991) both pointed to the same concerns as other assemblies. During the 1990s, the issue of homosexuality played a central role. After the assembly in Harare (1998), a conversation between churches on issues of sexuality was initiated. A series of seminars at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey provided a safe space for dialogue and created a model which could be replicated in other places for the discussion of human sexuality issues.

These conversations and initiatives have taken place in different parts of the world. In the light of the different contexts, they have brought into the discussions a number of issues and experiences and expressions of sexuality, which are best addressed by the churches together.

It is not the intention or objective of this document to present a final document or ethical consensus of the churches on issues relating to human sexuality. *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way* is not intended to be a WCC policy document. Different views on these issues were argued passionately. It was decided that the objective is to serve as a tool to facilitate honest, committed, and theologically inspired dialogue, and to increase deeper mutual understanding on issues that many churches are wrestling with both within their confessional traditions as well as between different denominational families.

In the conversations the member churches have been seeking to share perspectives, concerns, and questions in a spirit of mutual accountability. It has not been their intention to make common statements on these matters. Rather, the focus has been to create a space that would be inclusive of the many different voices and approaches, and that would enable a sharing of views, insights, and concerns in an ethos of mutual respect and exchange. Through such conversations, new insights emerge.

As has been mentioned, the current phase of conversation on human sexuality was mandated at the 10th Assembly of the WCC in Busan in 2013, and subsequently reiterated by the executive committee in June 2014, when the terms of reference for a Reference Group on Human Sexuality were approved. At the same assembly, the member churches, other churches, faith communities, and people of good will were invited to join a pilgrimage of justice and peace. *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way* was placed within that framework of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. Since this exploration is conducted by churches, this pilgrimage is grounded in theological reflection, and it has been conducted respecting the inherent human dignity, rights, and responsibilities of every person.

Therefore, the objectives of this document are to:

1. present reflections on different sources of foundations for discernment on issues of human sexuality
2. outline common theological principles for understanding human sexuality
3. identify the signs of our times in how sexual and gender-based violence is experienced by different groups of people
4. share information on different aspects of human sexuality as experienced in the WCC fellowship
5. provide examples of establishing safe spaces of dialogue for conversation on human sexuality

4. See chapter 7 for a brief account of this process; also, chapter 8, section 8.1.1.
5. *Sexism in the 1970s: Discrimination Against Women.* A Report of the World Council of Churches Consultation, West Berlin 1974 (Geneva: WCC Publications,1975).

1.3 Discerning the signs of our times

The WCC Strategic Plan 2014–2017 asserts:

> *A particular challenge in understanding today's reality in societies, churches and the ecumenical movement is the social, economic, political, ecclesial, and ecumenical diversity. What might seem to be urgent and relevant in one part of the world, may be meaningless in other parts. The World Council of Churches represents the realities of a great number of churches each bringing their own concerns and expectations to the ecumenical debate.*[6]

Therefore, it becomes imperative to discern the signs of our times. In this document, churches are being called to discern together how to address issues of human sexuality. The WCC Strategic Plan 2014–2017 called for this to be done by identifying the trends of our times in the world, in the church, and in the ecumenical movement, and by looking into key sources and spiritual dimensions which inspire and orient the social ethics and witness of the church—namely scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. A reflection on sources and foundations for the churches' ethical discernment appears in chapter 3, and an analysis of the signs of the times follows in chapter 6.

Churches and societies are confronted with the impact of economic globalization, macro and micro instability, inequities, the continuing perpetuation of injustices, and changing perspectives on human sexuality. This includes the trivialization, commodification, and commercialization of sexuality, fuelled by the fast progress of communication achieved by social media, which affects the lives of all people. People who are at the margins of society, including sexual minorities, are especially influenced by these changes. Unfortunately, human sexuality is one of the most divisive issues that confront the churches today. Churches and societies have struggled to address this issue. Sometimes discussions are also influenced by stereotypes, mutual prejudices, or a politicization of controversies, which then are used to also serve other interests rather than to genuinely look for the best pastoral and ethical answers serving the unity of the church as well as the dignity of human beings.

Discussions at the United Nations (UN) are trying to address human sexuality as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda 2030 in which human sexuality—while not being addressed directly—is at least implicitly referred to in SDG 3 (Good Health and Well Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).[7] It is clear that such goals cannot be fully implemented without the critical engagement of the faith communities. It is also clear that the values of the reign of God which the churches have to communicate are not simply absorbed by or identical with the goals of the SDG agenda. The horizon of the Christian understanding of salvation and reconciliation is wider and deeper than the content of a political document such as the SDG agenda.

Many societies look to churches to offer moral guidance as they face these issues, which affect their communities. At other times and places, churches have found themselves offering a counter-witness in situations where pervasive trends seem to make vulnerable or undermine justice and peace. In recent years, clergy and officials in some churches have been found guilty of involvement in the sexual abuse of minors. Often, churches have been complicit, through their silence or by actively covering up when persons have been subjected to intimidation and violence on account of their gender and sexuality, instead of cooperating in the public legal prosecution of perpetrators. While some churches have now put in place disciplinary measures to address issues of abuse, these have come only after public exposure and outcry. This has done considerable damage to the moral credibility of all churches.

However, there are still huge differences in terms of whether, how, and to what extent issues of human sexuality have and can become part of a public discourse within churches themselves in different contexts. In many churches there is not yet a well-developed and articulated form or forum of ethical reflection on this, since issues related to human sexual behaviour and gender relations within the family are taboo in many churches and church communities. It has therefore been important to encourage churches to share their experiences, frustrations, and insights as they have deliberated on these issues.

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6. See the WCC Strategic Plan, 2014-2017 (Document GEN 11), approved by Central Committee, Geneva, 2014.
7. United Nations General Assembly, *Sustainable Development Goals* (2015), https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/.

Increasingly churches and societies are being faced with the cries of those who have been or are being sexually exploited. These cries emerge from people suffering from sexual violence in domestic and public spaces, including the workplace, service-providing institutions, prisons, places of worship, and refugee camps. The cries also emerge from victims/survivors of rape as a weapon of war, cyber sexual violence, and the trafficking of persons to satisfy the "sex trade," as well as the exploitation, abuse of, and violence against children. This crisis is made worse by the attitudes of persons and societies that encourage stereotyping and the marginalization of persons of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics. Many persons have, for the sake of their sexual orientation, been forced to hide their real self from others. They have not been able to be themselves among others and have been hindered from using many of the gifts given to them by God. However, after centuries of silence in some cases, these issues and situations have become increasingly visible and have appeared relatively recently on the agenda of some churches. A sustained process of discernment has then been required to seek to understand and respond to these seemingly new trends.[8] Standing up against the spread of brutal, open, or covert forms of violence, particularly in such a sensitive and personal area as human sexuality, should be a common ground for churches. Many churches have realized the seriousness of the challenge to develop a more profound attitude toward victims and to never again dismiss reports of victims on sexual abuse.9 Such a challenge can also serve as a starting point to deepen and broaden the theological dialogue.

The WCC has significant experience and expertise in addressing HIV and AIDS and accompanying churches in facing the epidemic since 1984.10 Humanity has made great progress in dealing with HIV. With the increasing availability of anti-retroviral treatment, people living with HIV who have access to this treatment are enabled to lead relatively healthy lives. But struggles related to the relationships and life experiences of people who are vulnerable to becoming infected by HIV continue to be challenging and need to be transformed for the better. The journey has exposed the deep interconnectedness of HIV with human sexuality, gender relations, masculinities, and violence, especially sexual and gender-based, including abuse within intimate relationships. It is clear that churches and communities have to deal with these issues holistically for society to be able to address the vulnerabilities and continue to face and confront the future with greater hope. The inability to address the sexuality and sexual expressions of people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions leads to an inability to provide HIV-related treatment, preventative measures, and support services to the same.

As people face situations and circumstances of stigma and discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, some churches have sought and are seeking to address and redress[11]these issues, offering a witness to society based on justice, peace, right relations, and covenant love—in the hope of alleviating suffering.[12] Listening to the stories of the victims of sexual violence is an essential component for the ecumenical learning journey on human sexuality. In conversations in this document, it is apparent that as churches seek to engage with these issues, and hear the stories of the oppressed and victimized, they do so by wrestling with the testimony of scripture, the insights of theology and tradition, the expressions of liturgy, and the experience of reconciliation and grace. It is hoped that this document will facilitate conversations on this learning journey.

The churches face the challenge of a lack of theological coherence on human sexuality. Since they exist in different contexts, and have different histories and theological understandings, it is not surprising that the approach to these issues differs and that churches find themselves adopting different stances. There are churches or Christian attitudes which view material createdness, including sexual desire, as something that needs to be overcome to liberate the soul from all earthly desires. Some churches or movements believe that human sexuality is non-ontological, which suggests that sexuality is not central to what it means to be human, and they view sexual activity as a temptation to be avoided. Other churches

8. To aid such a process of discernment, the Faith and Order Commission has produced a study document, *Moral Discernment in the Churches,* Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/moral-discernment-in-the-churches-a-study-document.
9. See Pope Francis's comment in Ciara Nugent's article on the February 2019 global summit on sexual abuse cases, "Why the Pope's Summit on Abuse Disappointed Some Survivors, Time, 28 February 2019, https://time.com/5540867/pope-francis-sex-abuse-summit-2/.
10. HIV refers to human immunodeficiency virus; AIDS is acquired immunity deficiency syndrome, a disease in which there is a severe loss of the body's cellular immunity.
11. Redress, that is, seeking to put aright a situation of imbalance in society; see, for example, Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), esp. 1–16.
12. These are the core concerns of the Torah, according to Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. See his book *To Heal a Fractured World* (London: Continuum, 2005).

and traditions have been determined by a teaching tradition of original sin that associates human sexuality with sinful transgression. Still other churches follow an incarnational theology of creation in which all human desires, including sexuality, are part of God's good creation, though always subject to possible sinful estrangement and perversion. There is an increasing awareness that churches and church communions are not homogeneous with regard to these ethical positions and horizons. Many individual Christians hold their own views on the ethics of human sexuality, and there is no automatic cohesion within even one church community concerning positions on human sexuality. Many churches embrace a wide spectrum of individual views and approaches to understanding within themselves, while at the same time seeking "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

Today, the church in every part of the world is challenged by changing ideals and life patterns. Commercialization, visualization, and brutalization of human sexuality (for instance, through human trafficking and the pornography industry), which have become a global phenomenon and threat, at the same time demand a common and clear position of all Christian churches together for protecting human dignity. There is a growing awareness of the interdependence of the nations and churches of our world. Thus, in facing such contemporary challenges, churches seeking to discern God's will on these matters have found that the ecumenical movement, and particularly the WCC, offers a space for addressing and discerning the issues together as they read the signs of our times and seek to be faithful to the gospel in their situation and circumstance. It has, therefore, been all the more important that an inclusive space for conversations exists in the WCC, as churches continue on the pilgrim way.

1.4 Definition of terms used in this document

There are four key terms emphasized in this document. These are human sexuality, conversation, theology of the pilgrim way, and safe spaces of dialogue.

Human sexuality

Human sexuality is much more than sexual feelings or sexual intercourse. It is an important part of who every person is. It includes the complexity of feelings, thoughts, and behaviours, of being female, male, or transgender, being attracted and attractive to others, and being in love, as well as being in relationships that may include various forms of sexual intimacy. Hence human sexuality and how it is perceived and addressed in society have profound implications for a person's identity and quality of life. Sexuality concerns relationships and potential vulnerability to be marginalized or taken advantage of, as well as risks pertaining to sexual and reproductive health.

Christians, in all church traditions, believe that all human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1) and affirm that "Jesus Christ is the one in whom true humanity is perfectly realized."[13] Sexuality is recognized as part of God's good creation, and is integral to human identity and integrity. It is considered a divine gift, intrinsically good, intended by God for humanity to celebrate in life-giving, consensual, faithful, and loving relationships. In dealing with such an approach to sexuality, human persons can grow into the fullness of their humanity and divinity.[14]

In exploring these issues, the broad working definition of the World Health Organization (WHO), based on recent scientific understandings, proves helpful. The various aspects of human sexuality are brought together in a manner that shows their interrelatedness. It says:

> *Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, 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. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.*[15]

13. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology,* Faith and Order Paper No. 199 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 10.
14. Manoj Kurian, "Critical Analysis of Churches' Stand on Human Sexuality and a Way Forward," in *A Theological Reader on Human Sexuality and Gender Diversities: Envisioning Inclusivities,* ed. Roger Gaikward and Thomas Ninan (Utrecht: CSA Kerk in Actie, NCCI, 2017), 152–68.
15. World Health Organization, "Defining Sexual Health: Report of a Technical Consultation on Sexual Health, 28–31 January 2002" (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2006), cited in *United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Special Rapporteur's Compilation of Articles on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Sexuality,* September 2017, 3n2.

There is an increasing awareness of the need to understand human sexuality in its fullness. The substance and content of this document is developed from a Christian ethical perspective, while this is articulated in a context which is informed by the above broad-based and secular WHO definition. While this document addresses a wide spectrum of experiences and issues regarding human sexuality, it cannot be totally comprehensive. It therefore focusses on the principal issues facing the churches now.

Conversations on the Pilgrim Way

Conversations on the Pilgrim Way is an invitation to engage in exploring together issues which lie at the heart of human living. The word *conversation* has a rich tapestry of meaning. Conversation is "the action of living or having one's being in or among others"; it is "the action of consorting with others: living together in an ethos of commerce, society, intimacy." It has been used to mean "sexual intimacy," and more commonly "the interchange of thought and words, familiar discourse or talk."[16] Conversation is central to human relationships. It enables individuals and communities to give thanks for the divine gifts of creation and life, above all through the celebration of feasts, as is evident throughout the scriptures. It is also central to processes of reconciliation, as the expression and voicing of hurt and pain can begin the journey to healing and new life. Conversation enables individuals and communities to share and give at the deepest level and to bring to expression a commitment of bondedness, of living, and of having one's being in and among the other.

Theology of the pilgrim way

The 17th-century Swiss Reformed theologian Johannes Wollebius explored such a bondedness and defined theology as "God talk"—God's conversation. In the first instance, he emphasized the inner conversation of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit conversing within the Godhead—the Divine Conversation—as the source of all conversing. Out of this internal conversation came the conversation in creation and creating, and in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who was and is God's word to humanity. In response to this divine-human conversation, there emerged and emerges a community around the Word. Wollebius characterized the continuing conversations of the church on earth as it seeks to understand God's word as a community which "see[s] in a mirror darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12).[17] In so doing, Wollebius was reaffirming one of the earliest designations of the church—the people of the Way.[18] The church by its very nature is a pilgrim people, a people engaged in conversation seeking to understand God's word, and travelling in hope and expectation between the "now" and the "not yet."[19] Such a community and conversation are rooted in that of the Holy Trinity.

The community of the wayfarers therefore seeks to discern and acknowledges its limitation in understanding the mystery of God. It realizes that all its understandings are provisional and penultimate. In his *Catechetical Homilies,* Cyril of Jerusalem (4th century CE) stresses this point: "For we explain not what God is, but candidly confess that we do not have exact knowledge concerning Him. For in what concerns God we confess that our ignorance is our best knowledge."[20] For this reason the tradition of apophatic theology (proceeding by negatives), and that of the wayfarers reminds us of the limitations of theological knowledge, and of the need to constantly seek to understand and to live in the event of the incarnation. The recent Faith and Order document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* offers a helpful perspective:

> *The Christian understanding of the Church and its mission is rooted in the vision of God's great design (or economy) for all creation: the "kingdom" which was both promised by and manifested in Jesus Christ . . .. The dynamic history of God's restoration of koinonia found its irreversible achievement in the Incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. The Church, as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry and so participates in God's work of healing a broken world. The Holy Trinity as source of life*

16. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: On Historical Principles, 3d ed.,* vol 1 (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1986), 418.
17. Johannes Wollebius," Compendium Theologiae Christianae," in *Reformed Dogmatics: Seventeenth-Century Reformed Theology through the Writings of Wollebius, Voetius, and Turrentin,* ed. and trans. John Beardslee III, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1977), 29. See also Rosemary Radford Reuther, Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology (London: SCM, 1983).
18. The Didache.
19. Wollebius, "Compendium."
20. "Cyril of Jerusalem," quoted in Misha Cherniak, Olga Gerassimenko, and Mchael Brinkschroder, eds., *For I Am Wonderfully Made* (Esuberanza: European Forum of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christian Groups, 2016), 139.

> *and communion, is both the gift by which the Church lives and at the same time, the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing.*[21]

As churches journey together to address what leads to a wounded and divided humanity, they provide times and places for reflection and discernment on their own situations and those of their societies through the provision of safe spaces.

Safe spaces of dialogue

Safe spaces of dialogue are where one receives the other unconditionally, in the presence of God, with all their differences, gifts and joys, deficiencies, and strengths, as fellow sojourners in this life. Churches acknowledge that all fall short of the perfection of God, and do not merit God's grace. Hence, each person, as a child of God, is loved by God and sits around the same table, relating to others with humility and respect, recognizing mutual vulnerabilities and flaws. Because of these vulnerabilities and flaws, it is evident that there is no completely safe space—only safer spaces. "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Safer spaces of dialogue provide the opportunity for the discussion of issues of human sexuality, as a community, through Bible studies, personal stories, and insights from tradition and contemporary understandings, so that the attitudes of many participants can be transformed and a more inclusive community formed, despite persistent differences of opinion.

1.5 Methodology and outline of the study

There are four main elements which form the basis of this document and provide a lens for understanding the issue of human sexuality. These features also define the WCC. At the assembly in New Delhi in 1961, in the Constitution, the basis of the WCC was declared to be:

> *a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

As the WCC website notes, "the basis serves as a point of reference for WCC members, a source or ground of coherence."[22] Thus it is that the following elements in the basis of the WCC provide the frame of reference for interpreting and understanding issues of human sexuality:

- the centrality of the Holy Trinity
- interdependence because we are one in Christ through baptism
- work and life grounded in the light of scripture, and
- the responsibility to each other as member churches of the WCC

First, the Holy Trinity is a dynamic reality which is the foundation for understanding human relatedness and the interdependence of persons. "God as Trinity is a living reality, linked to the whole of our human existence."[23] The reflections here on the issues stress the importance of living in the interpersonal communion, conversation, and fellowship of the Holy Trinity. This foundation has the potential to address human sexuality in its entirety, with its emphasis on community, justice, diversity, plurality, and identity.

Second, Christian relationships are conducted on the basis of mutual respect because of being baptized by and into Jesus Christ and therefore bonded together.[24]

Third, the work in this document has been conducted in the light of biblical studies, which permeated the life and work of the Reference Group on Human Sexuality, offering insights and challenges for contemporary life together.

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21. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision,* Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 5, para. 1.
22. *The basis of the WCC,* https://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us/self-understanding-vision/basis.
23. Dimitri Dudko, *Our Hope* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), 36.
24. See Alan Falconer and Martin Robra, "When Christians Meet: Signposts for an Ecumenical Pilgrimage," *Ecumenical Review 56,* no. 4 (2004): 384–89.

Fourth, these conversations envisage a safer space of grace, created for the exchange of experiences and reflections by the member churches of the WCC in the ethos of mutual accountability and respect—an expression of what it means to be a fellowship of churches.

Throughout the various conversations, the importance of storytelling grounded discussions. Whether these stories emerged from individuals, communities, the pages of scripture, or insights of tradition, they resonate beyond their immediate context and occasion. This study is about people and human relatedness. It is about people who are celebrating grace-filled relationships. It is also a vehicle for the voices of people from the margins who have been and are being abused sexually or subjected to stereotyping, discrimination, or situations of fear, terror, and victimization. They include people living with HIV; people with disabilities; the elderly; children; women; sexual, racial, religious, and ethnic minorities; those who are single; and widows or widowers. Their situations and stories are an invitation to journey with them, and to realize that while their stories are individual and unique, they open up questions, issues, and perspectives beyond their immediate context and to common action to address such circumstances.

St John of Damascus in one of his treatises wrote: "The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God."[25] We are called and committed to live in community, in every context, reflecting the love and glory of God. Such is enlivened by the sharing of experiences and stories.

This document will share how issues of human sexuality have been addressed within the WCC and provide examples from member churches, Christian world communions, national councils of churches, and regional ecumenical organizations. Sometimes such reflections have been prompted by developments in society: for example, changes to state law. On other occasions, discussions have arisen in the light of the exercise of church discipline. In some cases, church members and leaders have found traditional standpoints to conflict with what they regard as the most central teachings and experiences of Christian life. Knowledge emanating from health sciences and the journey of such organizations as the UN and its agencies, including the WHO, regarding the understanding of human sexuality, and in particular the conclusion in 1992 that homosexuality is no longer regarded as a mental disorder, have also prompted churches to review their attitudes and understandings. However, churches find themselves addressing both common and different aspects of these issues. Undoubtedly, the member churches bring into the ecumenical conversations, and into the "ecumenical space"[26] of the WCC, their own reflections as a result of their theological, ethical, and pastoral concerns and decisions. In this forum, churches may learn from each other's experience. (An account of the journeys of churches and ecumenical bodies is given in chapter 7.) This document attempts therefore to create space for conversations on these questions in a spirit of mutual accountability.

Thus, some churches offer their experience and insights into marriage as sacrament. Some view marriage as the only space for sexual relations for both procreation and pleasure.[27] There are also witnesses to the affirmation of celibacy. Yet others offer their reflections on singleness in our contemporary societies. Some share their reflections on the ordination and inclusion of persons of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics.[28] Other churches regard homosexual relationships as being irreconcilable with the testimony of scripture and the witness of tradition. Others offer educational tools, particularly for young people, in addressing HIV and AIDS and health and wholeness in human relationships. In the process of accompaniment, churches have acted in solidarity and also as advocates alongside those who have been violated and whose rights have been ignored or suppressed. Some churches also bring their new pastoral reflections on second marriages after divorce or the death of a spouse.

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25. St John of Damascus, *Treatise 1: On the Divine Images* (New York: St Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2003)
26. See Alan Falconer, "Ecumenical Space," *Ecumenical Review: Essays in Honour of Konrad Raiser 56,* no. 1 (2004): 85–92.
27. For example, Kelvin F. Mutter states that "Chrysostom's views stand in contrast to other voices his congregation would have heard. Where these voices advocated public eroticism and viewed the home merely as a place for breeding children, Chrysostom declared that with or without children, the only legitimate place to practice one's sexuality was within marriage. In seeking to remove eroticism from the marketplace, and by encouraging marriage partners to share their bodies with each other, Chrysostom upheld the value of marital concupiscence" ("John Chrysostom's Theology of Marriage and Family," *Baptist Review of Theology 6,* no. 2 [1996]: 22–32).
28. A common way of denoting these different identities is LGBTIQ—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Questioning.

While some churches have taken decisions on these matters,[29] others find themselves in a continuing situation of wrestling with these issues. In some of the churches, the issues addressed have been highly contentious. Within and between churches, the discussions on issues of human sexuality have been passionate and at times polarizing and deeply divisive. (These matters are addressed in chapter 7.) This document attempts therefore to create space for conversations on these questions in a spirit of mutual accountability.

The parameters of such a spirit have been identified by Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, former general secretary of the WCC, in his book *The Truth We Owe Each Other*. He stressed that "mutual accountability comprehends reliability, faithfulness, trustfulness, solidarity, openness, ability to give and take constructive critique, and receptivity. These elements are interrelated and to some extent integrated."[30]

It is in this spirit and ethos that this document offers tools for discussion and encouragement for action. Further, it provides material and reflections which have been found helpful by member churches, other churches, and people of good will as they have sought to address issues of human sexuality. It provides an opportunity for others to enter the ecumenical conversations on issues of human sexuality. The document offers a glimpse of the state of the question now. Clearly, this is a conversation which is a continuing process in the spirit of prayerful reflection on this pilgrimage. Given our common bondedness in Christ, this document is a call to all the member churches to contribute to and offer their insights, decisions, and questions to each other in a space of mutual respect, accountability, and awareness on issues which are still sensitive and painful. It is an invitation to participate in the conversations on the pilgrim way.

29. The Pan-Orthodox Council in 2016 agreed upon a document on the basis of its analysis of scripture and tradition, in which it declared that "The Church does not deem it possible for her members to contract same-sex unions or enter into any other form of cohabitation except marriage" ("The Sacrament of Marriage and Its Impediments," Section 1.10, 28 January 2016, http://www.pravoslavie.ru/90247.html.

30. Olav Fykse Tveit, *The Truth We Owe Each Other: Mutual Accountability in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016), 333. This work is a wide-ranging analysis of Faith and Order documents and other WCC studies, in which Fykse Tveit traces the development of the idea and ethos of mutual accountability throughout the history of the WCC.

2. Core Spiritual Values for the Conversation

The framework noted in the previous chapter has been evident throughout the life and work of those contributing to this document. The centrality of the Holy Trinity, our interdependence through being baptized into Christ, our work and life grounded in the light of scripture, and our responsibility to each other as member churches of the WCC have provided the inspiration and context for our work. Biblical and theological inquiry, and the sharing of church traditions, as well as the stories and experiences of the members of the Reference Group, have been at the heart of our attempt to understand and to treat those with different opinions with respect and understanding.

Within that framework, *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way* is undergirded by three core spiritual values: The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, the quality of relationships based upon our understanding of God, and the worth and dignity of persons within and beyond the body of Christ.

2.1 The values of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace

Conversations on the Pilgrim Way draws on the values that undergird the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The intentional use of *pilgrimage* conveys "that this is a journey with deep spiritual meaning and with profound theological connotations and implications."[31] The conversations seek to engage people of good will everywhere in a transformative journey grounded in love, which is the foundation of justice and peace, and with attentiveness to the signs of God's reign.

The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, initiated at the Busan assembly in 2013, was further affirmed by adoption of the 2014 WCC central committee document entitled *An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*. This document encourages the member churches and others to journey with an open mind and heart and to engage with a sense of offering companionship and accompaniment to those who join the pilgrimage. It suggests three dynamic and interdependent dimensions for learning, inspiration, discovery, and transformation that offer a way towards new relationships of justice and peace.[32]

1. Celebrating the Gifts (*via positiva*):

> *We do not journey with empty hands, nor do we walk alone. The "original blessing" of being created in the image of God and together—as a fellowship—we are a unique part of the wider web of life, which amazes us. Together we celebrate God´s great gift of life, the beauty of creation and the unity of a reconciled diversity. We feel empowered by this grace of participating in God´s movement of love, justice and peace. — We receive in prayer.*[33]

Through these conversations, the pilgrimage invites member churches and others to explore and celebrate the way in which human sexuality is an integral part of *God's great gift of life* and embrace the gift of human sexuality in ways that nurture health and wholeness for pilgrims, the church, and the world.

2. Visiting the Wounds (*via negativa*):

> *This pilgrimage will lead us to the locations of ugly violence and injustices. We intend to look for God´s incarnated presence in the midst of suffering, exclusion, and discrimination. The true encounter with real, contextual experiences of a broken creation and sinful behaviour against each other might inform us anew about the essence of life itself. It might lead us to repentance and—in a movement of purification—liberate us from obsession with power, possessions, ego, and violence, so that we become ever more Christ-like. — We listen in prayer.*[34]

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31. *An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace* (revised), WCC Central Committee, 2–8 July 2014, Geneva, Switzerland, 2, https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2014/an-invitation-to-the-pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace.
32. *Invitation to the Pilgrimage,* 3
33. *Invitation to the Pilgrimage,* 3.
34. *Invitation to the Pilgrimage,* 3.

All of creation groans because of the threats to justice and well-being. Walking and acting together for justice and peace in relation to human sexuality offers opportunities to create safer spaces of grace for conversations of learning and dialogue on the ways in which the human family has experienced brokenness, including the causes and effects of injustice, ignorance, stigma, suffering, and violence, and to "express the dignity and destiny of human beings as created in God's image, redeemed in Christ, and sanctified by the Spirit."[35]

3. Transforming the Injustices (*via transformativa*):

> *Being transformed ourselves, the pilgrimage may lead us to concrete actions of transformation. We may grow in our courage to live in true compassion with one another and with nature. This will include the strength to resist evil—injustice and violence, even if a church finds itself in a minority situation. Economic and ecological justice as well as the healing of the wounded and the striving for peaceful reconciliation is our call—in each and every context. The credibility of our actions might grow from the quality of the fellowship we share—a fellowship of justice and peace. — We are transformed through prayer and act in prayer.*[36]

The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace is a transformative journey that inspires and motivates pilgrims to move and act in ways that overcome injustice, ignorance, stigma, suffering, violence, and brokenness. to bring about reconciliation, healing, and wholeness. *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way* embraces an openness to the mystery of our salvation and the transformative way that God, in Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, is working in Christians and churches and in the world. It affirms what the Apostle Paul said, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Drawing again from *An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, the following prayer expresses the spirit for the journeying:

> *We are a fellowship on the move, a community of pilgrims. We journey together towards life in all its fullness. We pray for God's guidance and inspiration, so that our pilgrimage will open us to one another through dynamic and creative interaction for justice. God of life, lead us to be living instruments of your justice and peace!*[37]

2.2 The value of relationships based upon our understanding of God

Such a spirituality of relationship and relatedness derives from an understanding of God. Before the creation of all, the Holy Trinity was there as a living, dynamic reality out of whom all life sprang and springs. When God looked upon creation, God saw that it was good. That is an affirmation that is repeated throughout the creation story in the book of Genesis. Creation is an expression of God's love. The goodness of being God's creature lies in the relationship with each person that is inaugurated by the triune God. Herein lies the foundation for the unity of humankind. It exists in the fact that all are God's creatures.

The relations within the Trinity form the model of relationships with the other and the others. The Holy Trinity is the source of all relations, of all conversation. The different persons of the Trinity are fully interdependent. While being three persons, each with their own personhood, they together remain one triune God.[38]

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35. *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace,* Faith and Order Paper No. 224 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2017), 6, para. 17.
36. *Invitation to the Pilgrimage,* 3.
37. *Invitation to the Pilgrimage,* 5
38. See, for example Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate;* also John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,* Book 1, both in Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1963); and the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers, St Augustine and St Ambrose, among others; See also contemporary expositions, such as Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970, repr., 1997); Boris Bobrinskoy, *The Mystery of the Trinity* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: DLT, 1997); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); and the British Council of Churches, *The Forgotten Trinity: The BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today,* 2d ed. (London, CTBI, 2010). See also Andrei Rublev's icon of the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah, in Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (New York, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 200-205; Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity: Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

Affirming that being created is an expression of God's love means that in the eyes of a loving God there are no categories of human beings divided according to status, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or ability. All human beings are God's children. To be God's creature is to be included in God's conversation, embraced by God's loving kindness. The first act toward each of God's creatures is this gift.

Because human beings have rejected and do reject this gift, God in unconditional love sent the Son to the world, and he was made human. Through the incarnation this world has been sanctified. In and through Jesus of Nazareth, it is clear that the body is a temple of God and human beings are given reasons to be grateful and proud of their bodies and human needs, such as love and sexuality.

Through the Son, who was humiliated and suffered, God knows vulnerability. Through the life of Jesus, his suffering, death, and resurrection, he himself opens up for grace and new life to all who long for it. Through the resurrection of Jesus, our bodies are sanctified. According to *The Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*, "The Lamb of God is apportioned and distributed; apportioned, but not divided, ever eaten, yet never consumed; but sanctifying those who partake."[39] The *epiclesis*, the Prayer to the Holy Spirit in the liturgy, asks for the gift of sanctification of the elements and the people of God.

2.3 Worth and dignity within and beyond the body of Christ

The church is called to reflect that triune love in its life. As the mission statement, *Together towards Life,* of the WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) emphasizes: The mission of the church is "the overflow of the infinite love of the Triune God."[40] For the Christian community, the image of the body of Christ as both diverse, having many members, and unified, being of the same body (1 Cor. 12) affirms the dignity and worth of all. One cannot say to the other, I have no need of you. The body is arranged so that "the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor. 12:25–26).

The church is called not only to be concerned about Christians, but to be committed to all humanity, in all its diversity of culture, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and belief. Every person is made in the image of God; and as such, every person has been endowed by God with worth and dignity. Because this worth and dignity are given by God, they are something that human judgment cannot set aside. Honouring the worth and dignity of every person is a hallmark of these conversations, as it is of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

39. These are the words of the priest at the dividing of the holy bread, as the communion hymn is chanted.
40. Jooseop Keum, ed., *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012), para. 19.

3. Ethical Discernment on Issues of Human Sexuality: Sources and Journeys in Learning

3.1 Major sources for ethical discernment

In continuing the conversations on the pilgrim way, the WCC, as a privileged instrument of the ecumenical movement, often affirms that it can serve to prepare "a safe space to enter into dialogue and moral discernment," particularly on controversial issues.[41] The WCC assembly in Busan affirmed that "Controversial issues have their place within that safe space on the common agenda, remembering that tolerance is not enough, but the baseline is love and mutual respect."[42]

Such controversial issues that divide the church are mostly dealt by the Faith and Order Commission. Although its mandate is focused largely on theological issues related to ecclesiology, there has also been significant attention paid to the ethical dimensions of church unity and division, especially on ecclesiology and ethics. Issues of human sexuality have arisen in a number of studies. An important contribution to ecumenical encounter is the Faith and Order document *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, which was presented to the assembly in Busan. It offers important perspectives that may help to shape the conversations among member churches from diverse confessional families. It assists in opening up discussion on human sexuality.[43]

The *Moral Discernment* study process followed earlier work undertaken by the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches and in a study on ecumenism and moral issues, which identified different "pathways" that churches use for reaching ethical and moral decisions based on the same sources, as well as on different authoritative means for moral discernment.

Clarity on the use of sources is needed to navigate the encounters between pilgrims from diverse confessional families as they engage in conversations on issues and dimensions of human sexuality, as they share their biblical perspectives, and as they guide the engagement with all the realities and complexities of this facet of human living.

The sources and resources of the Judeo-Christian moral discernment—*scripture; tradition; reason* (including scientific research as well as international law and standards); and human *experience*—are essential, since they provide a solid basis for reflecting on and responding to the opportunities for life-giving experiences of human sexuality and the challenges of violence.

3.1.1 Scripture

Scripture, being common to all Christian traditions, serves as an authoritative guide on the pilgrimage. However, as the Moral Discernment study document acknowledges and identifies, there are different sources that different faith traditions engage to shape the understanding and interpretation of the Bible. These are important since they determine biblical perspectives on human sexuality. Interpretation of scripture not only involves finding out what the text originally meant to its original writer and readers (exegesis) and discerning a text's continuing application in the variety of contexts of today (hermeneutics), but engaging in a much more multilayered, intersectional, and multidimensional analysis. For many Christian churches through the centuries there have been certain classical, key texts which were often reflected on with regard to their implications for understanding human sexuality. These include the creation narratives from Genesis, the images of the Song of Solomon, and St Paul's teachings on baptism, sin, and Christian freedom. Such hermeneutical keys gave coherence to the understanding of the Christian life, including human sexuality.

Recently, in African theology, another way of reading the scriptural text has emerged. To illustrate this, we refer to a biblical text which only recently has been highlighted in African theological work on human sexuality in the context of

41. "Report of the Programme Guidelines Committee," *10th Assembly of the WCC, Busan, Republic of Korea, 2013,* Doc. No PGC 01, 4, para. 28.
42. "Report of the Programme Guidelines Committee," 5, para.
43. Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document. https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/moral-discernment-in-the-churches

dealing with the new debate on sexualized violence. It is an unusual text, but at the same time it is also an example of such a new engagement for a new contextual hermeneutics in dealing with biblical texts.

The story of the Levite's concubine recorded in Judges 19:1–30 tells of a woman, a Levite's concubine who leaves her husband and returns to her father's house. Her husband subsequently goes to the father's house, and the woman is sent back with him. On their way home, they are offered hospitality overnight by an old man, and while in the old man's house, men from the village come demanding to have sex with the male visitors. The concubine is instead given to the men and subjected to gang rape through the night.

Although it seems strange that such a terrible story is in the Bible—though it is not the only one[44]—it invites critical reflection on the sexual violence experienced by this woman and its link to stories of contemporary victims of sexual violence. In addition, it might challenge those who are privileged by education and positions of power to act on behalf of and in solidarity with the silenced victims of sexual violence, some of whom are simultaneously experiencing other aspects of marginalization, such as racism, poverty, and mental illness.[45] In this case, the Bible becomes a resource for the naming of unnamed atrocities, for critical thinking, and inspiration for action to redress sexual violence and other existing and intersecting forms of marginalization.[46] Such an approach to reading scripture is of course replicated in other parts of the world. Ernesto Cardenal, for example, developed a method of participatory Bible study with his community.[47]

3.1.2 Tradition

Church tradition or sacred tradition in the liturgies of the church and in the experience and wisdom of the fathers and mothers of the church is a second, interconnected resource. It helpfully reminds contemporary Christians and communities of their place in history and of the resources on which they can draw for inspiration and instruction. It also reminds them of the need to combine tradition with Bible, reason, and experience as they seek to address issues of human sexuality and confront sexual violence and all forms of abuse and injustice. Many churches believe that there is an inseparable link between the holy scriptures and tradition and that the Holy Spirit works in and through both of them to guide the church in its witness for the truth.

In the ancient church, the holy scriptures and sacred tradition were inseparable, the latter being "the authentic interpretation of Scripture and in this sense . . . co-extensive with Scripture." Tradition was actually "Scripture rightly understood."[48] The Faith and Order document *Tradition and traditions: Sources of Authority for the Church* (2004) has described *tradition* as "the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church."[49] This is to be distinguished from both (lower case) *tradition,* namely the process of transmitting a community's beliefs and practices, and from (plural) *traditions* which are more narrowly denominational or confessional.[50]

St. Vincent of Lerins offered a formulation identifying tradition as "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all." Patristic understandings of tradition contrast the variety of "private" opinions to the "common" mind of the church. Tradition was, therefore, the scriptural mind of the church. It did not add anything to the scriptures but was the only means to ascertain and to disclose the true meaning of scripture. The "rule of faith," was "the only key to the meaning of the Scripture."[51] In the 20th century, Vladimir Lossky claimed that "Tradition is the life of the Holy Spirit

44. Several other biblical passages can reveal surprising insights into both the realities of human sin in the area of human sexuality, as well as the promises God has given for allowing our bodies to be temples of the Holy Spirit and instruments of God's love.
45. See Robina Winbush, "Not A Mumbling Word," in *Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story,* ed. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth (Geneva: World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2011), 100–113.
46. See also Hans Ruedi Weber, *The Book That Reads Me* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995).
47. Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel of Solentiname* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982). See also the Bible study materials by Hans Ruedi Weber when he was director of the WCC Biblical Studies desk.
48. Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition* (Belmont, Mass: Nordland Publishing Co., 1972), 75.
49. For a discussion of this, see The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal, "Scripture, Tradition and Traditions," para.39 in *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: The Report from Montreal 1963,* ed. Patrick Rodger and L. Vischer (London: SCM, 1964)
50. The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal, "Scripture, Tradition and Traditions," para.39 in *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: The Report from Montreal 1963,* ed. Patrick Rodger and L. Vischer (London: SCM, 1964), 50.
51. Florovsky, Bible, Church, Tradition, 70.

in the Church,"[52] and Fr John Meyendorff wrote that tradition is "the story of right choices made by human beings in their encounter with God's prophetic word, correctly responding to the specific historical circumstances of their time."[53]

The canonical and patristic witness concerning matters of sexuality is not unanimous, but the large majority of the fathers and teachers of the ancient church affirmed gender difference (male as default), the sinfulness of desire and lust, the sanctity of marriage, the ideal of monasticism, and the virtue of virginity and sexual renunciation. By the same token, it frowned upon what would now be termed gender fluidity, homosexual practices, licentiousness and promiscuity, sexual immodesty, and even nudity.

There were, however, instances of gender renunciation: women disguising themselves as men, even as monks (Thecla and Eugenia); self-castration among men aspiring to become "brides of Christ;" and some pluralism in debates regarding the origin (Genesis 1 and 2) and end (eschatology) of sexual differentiation.

In churches that assign decisive significance to tradition as a norm for ethical discernment, the cumulative witness of tradition is creatively appropriated and applied to contemporary dilemmas. Such an approach may be based on an understanding of natural law. In such an understanding, God's will can be discerned through nature and the orderliness that is God's gift in creation. The individual and the community thus seek to live in accordance with natural law. However, such a tradition of ethical norms is itself subject to an understanding of a developing tradition which draws on wisdom and reason. Thus, it is evident that tradition is simultaneously constant and dynamic, and adherence to it does not imply a rigid or blind traditionalism: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."[54] As Andrew Louth stresses, "the very notion of tradition is bound up with encountering change. There would be no need for the process of handing down the deposit of faith if everything remained the same, but things don't remain the same."[55]

Jesus challenged his hearers, "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Luke 12:56).

This implies that certainly there are churches in the ecumenical fellowship which emphasize the tradition of the fathers (or natural law, as interpreted by church tradition) as a kind of absolute norm and therefore are warning that bending toward a more historical and contextual understanding of Christian ethics runs into the danger of being overwhelmed by or assimilated to contemporary values (*zeitgeist*)—a legitimate cautioning which needs to be heard sensitively by all churches. There are occasions when the churches need to stand against the trends of society and offer an alternative prophetic vision. But all churches, including those which emphasize some kind of alleged "absolute ethics," are not exempt from the need to interpret and discern the holy tradition of the church in ways which are meaningful and communicable to contemporary human beings. They must also address new pastoral challenges in contexts which constantly change and demand new efforts for unfolding the essence and the unchangeable core of the gospel, which is about God's love. It belongs to the essential character of God's incarnation that the "absoluteness" of his immortal and all-encompassing love for creation always needs to be mediated, communicated, and immersed in concrete historical and human realities. Therefore, the alleged conflict or polarity between "absolute" and "contextual" Christian ethics might be an artificial construct and at the bottom does not present an insurmountable barrier within Christian ethical hermeneutics within world Christianity, as long as all churches are in consonance with the core principle that their ethics has to reflect nothing but the unconditional love of God to each and every human being.

3.1.3 Reason

Besides the more directly theological or ecclesial sources of scripture and tradition, all churches appeal to other sources in the analysis of concrete situations demanding moral discernment.[56] All recognize the importance of human reasoning

52. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 188.
53. John Meyendorff, Catholicity and the Church (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's. 1983), 88.
54. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 252.
55. Andrew Louth, "Being Human," The Wheel 13/14 (Spring/Summer 2018), 13.
56. Moral Discernment, p 23–25.

and critical thinking, conscience and experience, and the shared wisdom of humanity, as reflected in, among others, natural, medical, social, and human sciences. Churches may differ in the relevance and weight given to the use of reason relative to other sources of authority.

Although the history of the relationship between Christian faith and reason is a complex one,[57] contemporary church teachings emphasize the interrelatedness of faith and reason. Biblical traditions highlight the role of critical reasoning ("Let us argue it out." [Is. 1:18]). About the Apostle Paul we read that "Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4; also Acts 18:19). He emphasized that Christians should "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). Christians are called to apply critical reasoning also in moral and ethical issues: "Test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). It is a common conviction therefore that the Bible is not against reasoning. On the contrary, scripture encourages people to reason and to apply critical discernment in listening to insights from other sciences: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Phil. 4:8).

All churches apply critical reasoning and consider science as a valuable resource. New findings concerning, among other things, gender, and sexuality, however, present new moral challenges and call for deepened theological and moral reflection. The findings of science may assist the churches in the moral discernment process on human sexuality, for they form the data for judgments about what can be done or what ought to be done in the light of what is known from science.

The sciences, for instance, discover more and more about the enormous (bio)diversity on earth and among human beings. The broad parameters of the natural world, which science had previously set, appear in no way to articulate its detail. Variations in the world of plants and animals comprise the complexity and beauty of the natural world.[58] When human beings are considered, findings from biological, medical, and social sciences inform us that we too are part of a story in which diversity and variation play a critical role. New scientific knowledge points in the notion that gender dysphoria—the incongruence between a person's physical characteristics of gender and their experienced gender—might have a biological basis.[59] It may be due to hormonal differences experienced *in utero,* as the result of other underlying variations that scientists have not yet identified, or other factors.

The knowledge provided by these data can help churches to better understand the phenomena of intersex and transgender conditions. It leads to new sensitivities in relation to people who often have experiences of being marginalized and excluded simply because they do not fit any category. It may help church communities to respond to these people and their relatives in an informed and pastoral way, and to offer adequate accompaniment.

In a similar way, scientific research on human sexuality has helped to provide us with information that challenges perspectives about women's intellectual inferiority and women's sexuality, as well as about sexual identity, sexual orientation, and sexual expression. It was a huge milestone for ensuring the protection of sexual minorities from physical and medical violence when in 1973 the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality in the official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). In 2018, the World Health Organization published the latest version of its classification system: the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD 11).[60] The developing knowledge with respect to gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual expression provides resources to inform religious bodies and individuals, as thorough reflection is needed to decrease the impact of violence on human sexuality and to accompany persons in their growth toward sexual wholeness.

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57. As in, for example, the interactions between Christianity and the Enlightenment.
58. See, for example, *Integrative & Comparative Biology 53,* no. 4 (October 2013), the issue on "Phenotypic Plasticity and the Evolution of Gender."
59. A. Saraswat, J. D. Weinand, and J. D. Safer, "Evidence Supporting the Biologic Nature of Gender Identity," *Endocrine Practice 21, no. 2* (February 2015): 199–204; Sarah Melanie Burke, *Coming of Age: Gender Identity, Sex Hormones and the Developing Brain* (PhD diss., Vrije University Amsterdam, 2014).
60. World Health Organization, "International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD)," n.d., http://www.who.int/classifications/icd/en/. For the ongoing discussion, see the National Institutes of Health National Library of Medicine behavioural science archive, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4695779/.

3.1.4 Experience

Throughout the history of the church, prayer, meditation, and contemplation have been considered experiential practices that provide insights for deepening the process of moral discernment. Alongside these classical ecclesial practices, the lived experience of individuals and communities directly involved in particular moral issues may also be regarded as a critical component of the process of moral discernment.

Indeed, for some, experience is more than a component of theological reflection. It is the very root out of which biblical and theological reflection is conducted.[61] Such experience affects how people perceive, understand, and define the problem, as well as what they understand to be at stake in the moral issue. For some, shared experience about religion and human sexuality can expose a life-threatening or life-affirming reality and, when well interpreted, can radically affect our ways of moral discernment.

This aid for our conversations on the pilgrim way may benefit from borrowing a leaf from liberation theologies, which have extensively probed life experience to articulate theological questions and concerns and have broken the silence on extreme cases of vulnerability and marginalization that demand radical moral action. Some of these experiences are shared through storytelling and through narratives—including fictional narratives—on religion, human sexuality, and violence. Such narratives can unmask deeper concerns and provoke or demand acts of moral discernment rooted in a community of dialogue, empathy, love, and mutual action. *Moral Discernment in the Churches* affirms:

> *For some Christians, and indeed perhaps for all in certain ways, it is into their own experience that God speaks. Respect for and listening to the experiences of others (particularly those who have very different lives from our own) can radically affect our discernment of moral issues. Human experience has always to be interpreted (like a living document), but it can often be a place of insight into God's design.*[62]

In some cases, the conversations on religion and human sexuality are challenged to take very seriously historical experiences of communities that have been subjected to extreme, protracted dehumanization and discrimination that have effectively rendered sexuality discourse a taboo issue. As such, contextualization of the conversations, listening without prejudice, and avoiding quick moral solutions will enrich the pilgrim way and the healing process toward a fellowship of justice and peace.

3.1.5 Additional sources

Contextual theological reflections in many parts of non-western Christianity have emphasized in past decades that theological reflection and ethical discernment can be enriched by a fifth category of insights, which can be characterized as indigenous wisdom traditions from non-western culture, often reaching back before the arrival of Christianity in these cultures. Doing theology with Asian or African or indigenous resources has brought the realization that some of the cultural and wisdom traditions which are still alive have profound meaning for dignity and social identity in non-western cultures. This has direct implications also for understanding human sexuality.[63]

Thus, in African traditional religions, proverbs, myths, sayings, traditions, taboos, and customs are distinct sources in moral discernment. African myths, customs, traditions, and beliefs affect moral discernment. The issue of sexual diversity, for example, is said to be un-African and un-Christian. However, there are African proverbs and sayings that point to the existence of sexual diversity in traditional Africa. In most traditional communities, morality is ontologically interconnected—the social and religious norms are usually the same. Speaking about African morality, Ogbu Kalu argues that African tradition "supplies the moral code and indicates what people must do to live ethically."[64] This argument is also made by Laurenti Magesa, who argues that African "morality is steeped in tradition; it comes from and flows from

61. See, for example, the work of Latin American liberation theologians.
62. *Moral Discernment,* 30–31, para. 45.
63. *Moral Discernment,* 30–31, para. 45.
64. Ogbu Kalu, "Religion and Social Control in Igboland," in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John Mbiti,* ed. Olupona K Jacob and Sulayman S. Nyang (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993), 115.

God into the ancestors of the people."[65] Indeed such is the approach and understanding of many of the First Nation peoples of Latin and North America, Australia, New Zealand, Sápmi, and other peoples and nations in Asia and Europe.

As in ancient Israel and the early church, the elders' wisdom is another source of moral discernment.[66] The elder had a specific role in serving the community of the church, bringing to the church insights of tradition and the ways in which wisdom can be sought on contemporary problems. As Bembas say, *umukulu apusa akabwe, tapusa cebe* ("an elder's hand can miss a target with a stone but not moral advice")—again speaking to the role the elders play in African moral discernment.

In Asian cultures, cultural teachings, beliefs, and other written texts are authoritative sources too. Just as biblical and early church writers utilized prevalent non-Christian philosophies in developing moral theology, Asian Christians take the liberty to appropriate non-Christian texts in moral discernment. This is grounded in the belief that the gospel of Christ incarnates in people's culture. The incarnate Word becomes flesh in a specific cultural context. As the Gospel of St John asserts: "The Word became flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). If the gospel is to incarnate in peoples' communities, then human cultural traditions are a vital key in moral discernment. An example of this is Paul's appropriation of Greek mythology in Athens when taking up the people's veneration of "an unknown God" (Acts 17:23). The values, norms, and beliefs of specific communities inform and direct how certain issues are appropriated or rejected within a given faith community.

In the case of human sexuality, for example, the various contexts of Christians affect how they respond to sexual ethics and norms. For instance, it is normal in Africa for a mother to breastfeed in public, but it is considered less acceptable in the global North. Similarly, an African man may marry more than two wives, but still oppose same-sex marriages. A Western Christian may accept same-sex marriage but oppose polygamy. The way moral discernment is contextual explains some of the disagreements associated with human sexuality in global Christianity. Morality is contextual in most cases.

Related to culture is the role of ancestors and living elders in moral discernment. Elders are an important source of moral discernment in most non-western cultures. Today, with regard to human sexuality, the elder's role of moral discernment is to a large extent occupied by formal religious leaders, who in many ways claim to possess traditional authority to interpret sexual morality. Indigenous morality is highly influenced by the role of the elders. As guardians of morality, elders are the true interpreters of sexual norms and values—they are expected to guide young generations in sexual norms. In African societies, for example, the role of women elders in explicit sexuality education of girls at certain life cycles—puberty, marriage, and birth of first child—is paramount. The same is expected of male community elders—they must educate boys in sexual matters. Because missionary-founded Christianity discouraged sexuality rites, Africans have generally participated in these rites outside the church's authority, although there are some mission churches in Africa that have incorporated sex education during church rites. If there is something to learn here, it is that sexuality education needs to be planted in the cultural context of the people.

In addition to sexual rites and taboos, the concept of *ubuntu* ("I am because we are") allows African people to view human sexuality as part of their common life. Being human (*ubuntu*) demands appreciating the personhood or the humanity of every member of the community. But it also allows people to appreciate that sexuality is not just a private issue but carries community expectations and obligations. In this frame, the question is not "What is good for me?" but "What is good for the community?" The community has an interest in my whole life, just as I have interest in my whole community life.

3.1.6 The interrelation of sources

While all of these resources—scripture, tradition, reason, experience, and additional wisdom traditions—can be regarded as fundamental and significant for the conversations on the pilgrim way, it is precisely the balance between them that is sometimes strongly contested and a matter of controversy. Yet each of these resources offers insights which carry resonance beyond their immediate circumstance and context, thus potentially opening up discussion on issues which

65. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 35.
66. See 1 Timothy 5:17–19; 1 Peter 5:2; Ezekiel 20:3; Exodus 3:16.

have proved to be divisive. While different church traditions in some cases have different opinions on what exact value and authority should be given to the various sources, a mutual understanding and consensus that all these fundamental sources for ethical discernment can play a role in arriving at certain ethical positions will help the churches to a level of deeper understanding and mutual learning. The recognition and affirmation of commonalities in approaching issues of moral discernment serve as common ground on which to enter dialogue.

While the WCC, along with nearly every ecumenical organization, cannot and will not prescribe to any member church how they should relate the different sources of ethical discernment to each other, it is inviting member churches, as well as non-member churches, to become conscious of and to share honestly with each other how and why insights from all these sources are interrelated as they seek to arrive at moral and ethical positions regarding human sexuality. This acknowledgment will contribute to better mutual understanding in the fellowship of churches. Churches are invited to reveal and share the ways in which they arrive at their conclusions in an attitude of mutual respect, transparency, and mutual listening.

3.2 Causal factors of disagreement between and within churches

The study document *Moral Discernment in the Churches* distinguishes between two categories of factors that typically cause disagreement between the churches or within churches on moral issues. Different social and ecclesial approaches to reading the Bible, the influence of historical and cultural contexts, the emotional intensity of human sexuality issues, different structural characteristics of the churches, stereotypes, power imbalances, and attitudes toward otherness shape their interpretations and moral reasoning. Factors stemming from different approaches to reading the Bible, as well as the use of different sources and attributing different authoritative weight to the sources, can lead to different conclusions with regard to the moral guidance on issues of human sexuality.

Throughout the *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way,* such different approaches to scripture are evident. The same applies to tradition, which includes in the Orthodox understanding of scripture as the first source of tradition. Differences in approaches to tradition have come to light, for example, in disputes on whether or to what extent the lives and writings of particular saints are authoritative.

The *Moral Discernment* study document points to a helpful way forward for the churches' conversation by stating:

> *Avoiding accusing others of simply dismissing or disregarding certain authoritative sources can help involved communities recognize that appealing to different sources and weighing them differently can be a reflection of the complexity and richness of Christian ethical reflection. Recognizing that people make moral arguments in different ways is an essential procedural step in creating an atmosphere of open and productive dialogue. It is only when people are able to truly understand the argument that their opponent is making that they will be able to recognize and appreciate where their differences lie.*[67]

In the *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way,* churches and church communions are inspired and called forward by Christ and seek to understand and be faithful to the gospel in their particular time and place. As churches and communions have engaged in conversations on matters of human sexuality and recognize it as the inextinguishable desire of human beings for communion, love, and intimacy, many have found themselves confronted by and affirming the mystery of the Holy Trinity. They have been reminded on the ecumenical journey that the church is "fundamentally a communion in the Triune God, and at the same time, a communion whose members participate together in the life and mission of God. The Church is "a reflection of the communion of the Triune God."[68]

67. *Moral Discernment,* 48, para. 77.
68. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision,* Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 14, para. 23; 15, 25.

4. Milestones in History: Struggling to Understand Human Sexuality as Learning Journey in the Churches

Having identified the sources and resources central to the process of moral discernment in the previous chapter, it is important to explore how the church has wrestled with issues of human sexuality in different periods of Christian history. Conversations in the churches on human sexuality are not new; they have been evident in every age.

While the importance which is accorded to church tradition differs among Christian denominations, there are sometimes also different views about which elements of Christian tradition and teaching can be attributed to common apostolic tradition and which elements are a reflection of a given historical period and cultural influences. Any expression of Christian tradition can also be understood as the result of a complex interaction between core Christian convictions and teachings, on the one hand, and cultural trends, major ethical challenges, and philosophical mindsets within a given period, on the other hand. This will be illustrated by four significant periods and certain milestone developments—bearing in mind that this document cannot give a full and comprehensive account of the complex history of Christian teachings and reflections on human sexuality.

4.1 Aspects of sexuality in early church history

While Jewish tradition in general was rather positive in terms of human sexuality, early Christian teachings in the ancient church were marked by a double frontier against which the specific Christian understanding had to be explained: The ancient church wrestled with an exuberant glorification of sexuality in some ancient cults and religious traditions in the oriental world. However, it also reacted against a dominant trend in that period toward an ascetic and gnostic perception of life, which implied rejection of human sexuality (which was viewed as always belonging to the fallen world), only to be tolerated within rather rigid boundaries and not as an integral component of the created good order of God. The positioning of the ancient church thus was marked by a rejection of widespread libertarian, destructive, and pervasive sexual practices in the ancient and Hellenistic world, such as prostitution, adultery, castration, pederasty, and sexual slavery, as well as by a critical engagement and partial rejection of diverse gnostic movements. These movements sought a remedy over and against the dangerous temptations of this world by promoting permanent or temporary chastity and celibacy. Chastity thus for many centuries was viewed as the ideal lifestyle option for Christians.[69]

Many Eastern Fathers conceived of marriage as an antidote to sin and death, attributing sexuality to the results of the fall. Human sexuality had its proper space and role only within the limited realm of a male-female marriage and was seen as legitimate as long as the explicit purpose of procreation was combined with it. The big milestone of the ancient church in its context was the refutation of an exclusively hostile view of sexuality or bodily existence at all and a positive valuing of marriage—although in a context and cultural mind-set which saw sexual love mainly as part of the fallen world and not belonging to God's original good order of creation.[70]

It helps to understand this positioning of the ancient church since–unlike modern times—consensual sexual behaviour between adults was a rather exceptional phenomenon in antiquity. In most cases, sexual practices were part of a pattern of human relationships which were marked by exploitative hierarchical relationships of objectivization, ownership over other bodies, bondage, and brutal power relationships between adults and children, men over against women, free humans over against slaves. Thus, the position of the ancient churches should also be understood as a rejection of the immense violence and denigrating exploitation which marked human relationships in antiquity.

69. In Eastern Syria, celibacy was always viewed as the more godly way of life.
70. However, there also was another minority line of interpretation among the Church Fathers, teaching that sexual desire was present in Adam and Eve even before the fall, thereby pleading to break the strict link between sexuality and the fall (Ireneäus in the 2nd century and Pope Kallistos of Rome in the 3rd century, for instance).

It is important to understand the determined defence and more positive evaluation of Christian marriage as the only legitimate place for human sexuality in this historical context. Roman civilization regarded the bond of marriage as a foundation for state and society as well as a rejection of radicalized religious movements and escapist spiritual lifestyles. Recognizing and reinforcing the institution of marriage also underlined the importance of Christianity for the Roman Empire as "Christianity arose at a time when the Roman Empire itself had begun to stress the importance of legitimate marriage and childbearing for the maintenance of social and political life,"[71] and these views accorded well with the Christian stance on marriage.[72] In addition, the Christian understanding of marriage emphasized a distinct additional feature and humanizing aspect of marriage and human sexuality over against Roman contemporary cultural trends. The Christian view of marriage was distinct in two significant ways. First, in Christian marriage—though still practised in the context of predominantly patriarchal social systems at that time—the spouses were at least in principle seen as moral equals and held to a single standard of fidelity (unlike the double standard in Roman marriage, where adultery was permissible for the husband but not for the wife). Second, marriage, at least in principle, represented a lifelong, indissoluble bond, and divorce was not permitted. These differences had an impact upon the spread of the Christian ideal of marriage in the Roman world.

The teachings of the early church on marriage, human sexuality, and the family are rich and manifold and cannot be fully presented here. The rich heritage of the ancient church fathers' teachings, which is of relevance still for today, is taken up and reinterpreted in many ways both in the Latin West as well as in Orthodox theological thinking today. For all churches there have been challenges to integrate and reflect on this heritage in relation to the anthropological turn of theological thinking in the 20th and 21st centuries, which focused attention on the *conditio humanae* in the light of dialogue with modern social science, medicine, and psychology. In recent decades, some Orthodox theological thinkers have sought to critically reinterpret the patristic tradition in the light of contemporary challenges.[73] This has been done in a way compatible both with the apostolic *kerygma*, but also with the needs and ongoing search for ethical and pastoral orientation in current times. The aim is to unfold a holistic understanding of human sexuality grounded in the notion of all human desires potentially contributing to the *theosis* of human beings, that is, the fullness of human beings with all their senses in their longing for God.

4.2 The Reformation on aspects of human sexuality and family

A second example from another historical period, illustrating the complex interaction between the conceptualization of Christian teachings on human sexuality and contemporary philosophical and ideological trends and mindsets, is the period of the European Reformation. Theological reflections were formulated within this period against a double frontier. The first consisted first of Augustinian perceptions of human sin. The second frontier was the system of spiritual hierarchies of the imperial, centralized Roman church at that time, which prioritized monastic disciplines of chastity over individual choices for free married life. The Reformation articulated a dialectical concept of human existence being justified by grace alone, without merits and without rigid spiritual asceticism. At the same time, human beings remained subject to the captivities of sin. But the Reformation also liberated the understanding of a human being as being created in God's image with all its senses, including sexual desires. The Reformation thus gradually moved toward a perception in which human sexuality could be grasped more fully as part of the created order as well as a gift to be used according to God's mandate to serve others.

The reformers rejected the double standards in which the medieval church both encouraged people to join the marital estate and considered marriage a sacrament while at the same time insisting on a celibate clergy because celibacy was seen as the more perfect state. "These two tendencies, the fostering of marriage and the praise of celibacy, existed side-by-side within the clerical culture."[74] Protestant reformers, however, rejected clerical celibacy and the subordination of marriage to it, and they denied that marriage was a sacrament. For many Protestant reformers, marriage was a human institution,

71. Susan Mobley, "The Reformation and the Reform of Marriage: Historical Views and Background for Today's Disputes," *Issues in Christian Education 48,* no. 3 (Summer 2015), para. 5, https://issues.cune.edu/the-lgbt-disputes-teaching-and-practice-in-the-church-2/the-reformation-and-the-reform-of-marriage-historical-views-and-background-for-todays-disputes/#_ftn10.
72. See Mobley, "Reformation and Reform."
73. For example: Sergius Bulgakov, John Zizioulas, Christos Yannaras, Kallistos Ware, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, and Nonna Verna Harrison.
74. Mobley,. "Reformation and Reform," para. 16.

though one ordained by God; and as such it fell under the jurisdiction of the civil authorities, though they insisted that the secular government was itself instituted by God and thus its laws and rule should be based upon and reflect God's law.

The history of the Reformation and its impact on the understanding of human sexuality is part of a much longer, difficult, and complex process of Christianizing the very understanding and social and political practice of marriage. For the larger part of the medieval period, marriage was an issue of private law or feudal family relationships and outside the realm of the responsibility of the church. Thus, for example, the process of Christianizing Germanic marriage practices—which were dominated by "serial monogamy" (meaning a man who married and dismissed several wives in succession, probably while keeping concubines on the side)—took several centuries. Only by the end of the 12th century CE, records indicate, did it become common for people to include church rituals as part of a formal marriage ceremony, thereby challenging the Germanic medieval world full of "illicit, irregular, furtive or clandestine" marriages.[75] The struggle for the church during the Reformation period was to take marriage "from the private or semi-private spheres of home, domestic rite, or unwitnessed promise and to bring it into the public space of a church."[76] This effort can be regarded as part of an attempt to humanize sexual relationships and to underline the significance of Christian values for understanding human sexuality and the marriage process.[77]

4.3 The period of European colonization

A third example from a different period of history illustrates another model of interaction between emerging conceptualizations of Christian teachings on human sexuality and contemporary ideological trends in a given period. It has been argued that the process of colonization in the period of European imperialism was not just a matter of economic and political expansion of power, but at the same time exercised a profound influence on the emerging teachings of Christian churches in the global South on issues of family and human sexuality. Since 19th-century missionaries were products of their own time and cultures, for example, their views on human sexuality can be traced back to their 19th-century contemporaries.

To use Ronald Hyam's words, "The expansion of Europe was not only a matter of Christianity and commerce" but also of "copulation and concubinage."[78] For instance, colonial frontier settlements in some cases were supplied with prostitutes.[79] Richard Phillips adds that the colonial imperial project was organized around heteronormative sexual arrangements. Hence "the heterosexual nuclear family was the building block for agricultural colonization of large parts of the world."[80] The imperial milieu not only influenced the behaviour and the beliefs of missionaries and settlers, but also their attitudes toward sexuality and in turn ethical attitudes of the younger churches. For instance, in the imperial period of colonialism, males' sexual urge was considered as biologically natural while virtuous women were asexual. Similarly, male unchastity was normal, while female unfaithfulness was anathema. Traditional mores and practices in non-western cultures, such as early initiation into sexual practices, the celebration of sex during certain periods of transitions in life, plural marriages, and explicit sex education cultures, were curbed and declared as belonging to pagan heritages, strictly to be forbidden. Thus—with the help of colonial administrators, missionaries, and often also the police—the authorities outlawed those views that contradicted their values; and the more rigid and puritanical views and regulations of human sexuality became dominant in Christian churches in much of post-colonial Christianity.[81] Thus the colonial heritage, while changing many of the previous, more liberal perceptions on human sexualities in non-western cultures through the moral values promoted in the Victorian era, has had a profound impact, particularly on the silencing of an

75. Mobley, "Reformation and Reform," para. 10.
76. Mobley, "Reformation and Reform," para. 10.
77. For further reading on the reformers and marriage, see: John Witte Jr. "John Calvin on Marriage and Family Life," https://www.johnwittejr.com/uploads/5/4/6/6/54662393/a140.pdf; Trevor O'Reggio, Martin Luther on Marriage and Family, (Andrews University Faculty Publications, 2012). https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=church-history-pubs; Carter Lindberg, "Martin Luther on Marriage and the Family" in *Perichoresis* vol 2 Issue 1 2004 pages 27-46
78. Richard Phillips, "Heterogeneous Imperialism and the Regulation of Sexuality in British West Africa," *Journal of the History of Sexuality 14,* no. 3 (2005): 291.
79. Phillips, "Heterogeneous Imperialism," 292.
80. Phillips, "Heterogeneous Imperialism," 292.
81. Phillips, "Histories of Sexuality and Imperialism: What's the Use?" *History Workshop Journal 63,* no. 1 (Spring 2007): 143. There is a difference with Portuguese and Spanish colonies, where homosexuality was not explicitly outlawed. To some extent, this explains the difference between former English and non-English colonies in regard to legalization of homosexuality.

explicit language on human sexuality within the realm of non-western Christianity.[82] This is underlined by the fact that, even now, issues relating to human sexuality are virtually absent from church hymnody and liturgical language.

A post-colonial hermeneutic belongs to the conversations on the pilgrim way as churches discuss issues of human sexuality. Because of the polarization of the churches, it is an important contribution to the churches' conversation, as it emphasizes the interdependence of the churches and the need to patiently articulate the departure from what has been transmitted and enacted in earlier phases of the conversation.

4.4 The contemporary period

The journey of learning and struggling to understand human sexuality entered a new period in the second half of the 20th century. Major trends and philosophical-ideological changes have challenged churches in all parts of the world to reinterpret their teachings on human sexuality. These include:

1. An anthropological turn in social sciences and in medicine whereby homosexuality was no longer classified as a disease
2. A medical revolution through modern means of contraception, which allowed for a less direct connection between sexual intercourse and fertility and hence procreation
3. A new international anti-discrimination discourse, which is based on a broader understanding of human rights explicitly to include people with different sexual behaviours
4. A movement for gender-awareness and feminist theological reflection, which articulate themselves as critical of hidden aspects of male domination and stereotypes that view human sexuality predominantly from a male perspective.
5. A common global political awareness of mobilization against violence against women.[83]
6. The global HIV and AIDS pandemic and its theological reflection, which has quite significantly changed the international ecumenical discourse on human sexuality, discrimination, stigmatization, and inclusive communities.

   In the latter regard, the "Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Sweden" emphasized:

   The Church of Sweden, together with other churches, must stand up for every person's right to care and treatment. In this context, no person or country should be seen in the light of their shortcomings, but in the light of their potential. HIV makes it possible and necessary for us to appreciate the equal value of everyone and everyone's shared vulnerability. This is the empathetic path that God himself showed by making Jesus Christ human for our sake."[84]

7. A new international ecumenical discourse on intercultural and inter-contextual ethics, in which the need is emphasized to bring different Christian ethical teaching traditions into dialogue with each other, despite severe differences to arrive at common principles of "moral discernment."
8. The impact of social media on the pattern of relationships and the sharing of values, particularly on young people. While a negative aspect of this has been the spread of pornography, child abuse, paedophilia and the difficulty of policing websites, the positive aspect relates to increased awareness to provide sound and proper ethical information and sexual behaviour education by churches. Failure to engage here will allow for further exposure of young people to the harmful powers of commodification and commercialization of sexuality.

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82. See Daniel Osei Bediako-Akoto, *Towards Holistic Sexual Flourishing in Africa* (Utrecht: Boekencentrum Academic, 2017).
83. See "A Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict," United Nations, September 2013," which has been accepted by two-thirds of the UN member states and which provides a firm context for work on violence against women and children in areas of conflict. See also the WHO "Global Plan of Action to Strengthen the Role of the Health System within a National Multisectoral Response to Address Interpersonal Violence, in Particular against Women and Girls and against Children" (69th World Health Assembly, May 2016); and on using rape as a weapon of war, UN Security Council Resolution 1820, "Women and Peace and Security," June 2008, http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1820.
84. "A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Sweden Intellecta Tryckindustri," *Solna,* 2007.

Already this brief historical survey may sufficiently underline the urgency for churches to provide each other mutual assistance in deepening their theological and ethical reflections on human sexuality. Developing contextually relevant educational resources for ethical orientation is needed, and common learning is allowed for in these sensitive areas. How the churches are dealing with these challenges, and to what extent and how they take these factors into account in their own theological teachings, remains a matter of their own church decisions. However, as the challenges and changes which affect human sexuality and dignity are not just local or regional, but very much global and comprehensive in nature, the learning processes of Christian churches in responding to these changes and challenges cannot remain just within isolated church family circles. Any divisiveness which is tearing apart the ecumenical fellowship of churches in the areas of vital importance for the common ethical struggle and positioning, is weakening the common witness of Christian churches in the face of the destructive forces at work against the dignity of human persons and the sacredness of human sexuality.

5. Common Theological Principles for Understanding Human Sexuality

5.1 Relationality: created to be in relation

As Christians and churches reflect on these contemporary questions concerning human sexuality, they do so within the horizon of fundamental theological insights.[85]

All human beings without exception are bearers of the image of the triune God (spelled out already in the creation narrative in Genesis 1:27) and are called to share the communion of freedom and love exemplified by the divine persons. "The revelation of the personal God in history manifests to us the truth about man, his ethos and the nobility of his descent."[86] As each of the divine persons indwells in the other persons *(perichoresis),* all humans as bearers of the divine image are called to their ultimate vocation of being partakers of the communion of trinitarian life through the ecclesial community. Humans were created to live in communion with and to delight in God the Father through Christ the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Similarly, they were created to commune with fellow human beings and delight in their relationships with them. To be human, therefore, is to be relational.

Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology, a Faith and Order study document, makes the statement:

> *With a trinitarian understanding, it is also clear that this image, in which all humanity is created, is first and foremost relational. As we draw together the text of Genesis 1 and the figure of Christ Jesus, we perceive that we truly image God only in communion with Christ and with one another. In communion with Christ we are drawn by the Holy Spirit into relationship with the Father, becoming capable of working together (synergia) with the Triune God for the fulfilment of God's loving design for the whole creation. This insight into the essentially relational character of true human identity before God has become a major key to addressing contemporary challenges to humanity in the light of Christian faith.*[87]

The human person is best described as a mystery: the apophatic and eschatological dimensions of Christian anthropology must always be borne in mind:[88] "The mystery of the true human being we see in Jesus, the Word made flesh, is unsearchable. Our attempts to investigate and understand human nature cannot exhaust the worth, the depth and the dignity which belongs to each person as created and loved by God."[89]

As relational beings, human persons are social in nature. Life in community with others takes various forms, ranging from intimate relationships to socialization. While culture and context may determine specific shapes of community that vary to a large extent, Christians affirm that "Life is not something that we have for ourselves. Life is something that we in one way or another share with others. Life is community. Life is relation."[90]

That all life is life in relation derives from the Christian belief that God created humans to live in relation and community with each other and with creation, to grow into full personhood, and to serve their fellow humans and the creation in humility. In the words of a recent statement:

> *God loves human life so much that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). We know, therefore, that God's love embraces us totally, including our sexuality. We also know that God created each of us not only as individuals, but also as people who*

85. Indeed, these insights also mirror the assertions of the basis of the WCC.
86. Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality,* trans. Elizabeth Briere, foreword by Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 23.
87. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology,* Faith and Order Paper 199 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 14, para. 82.
88. An apophatic theology refers to the method of theological enquiry by negatives, while eschatology refers to the theology pointing toward the final destiny of humankind.
89. *Christian Perspectives,* 12.
90. Bishops' Conference of Norway, SAMMEN 2013:14.

> *live in a variety of social communities and contexts. In response to God's love for us, we seek life-giving relationships with others and create social structures and practices that support such relationships.*[91]

One of the many gifts human persons have received from the Creator is the universal gift of human sexuality. This precious gift has been given for mutual enrichment, love, and care. This gift deepens interpersonal relationships, shared comfort and pleasure, and mutual affirmation. The gift also involves unconditional acceptance, openness, and vulnerability as well as companionship and support in the pilgrimage of life in pursuit of salvation and grace. Human beings "experience [their] reality when [they] become aware of [their] sexual nature. Sexuality is not merely an accident of this reality. It is not merely another accretion. On the contrary, it is the living, flowing energy whose physical aspect is but one mode of its expression."[92]

5.2 Personhood: the dignity of each human person

All humans have the vocation to pursue their calling of being true to the divine image they bear. While it is impossible to define the image of God in humanity conclusively and definitively, it is clear that the image is inextricably bound to the notion of personhood. Personhood is the mark of true humanity, mirroring the relationality of divine persons, the communion of love and freedom within the Trinity.

The created human is thus an earthly creature and simultaneously an icon of the uncreated Trinity: a microcosm and mediator between creator and creation. "Personal distinctiveness forms the image of God in man. It is the mode of existence shared by God and man, the ethos of trinitarian life imprinted upon the human being."[93]

Each person is therefore a unique and unrepeatable icon of the Trinity and worthy of dignity and honour. The perfect human person was Christ himself, the Logos Incarnate, and the perfecting community of human persons is his body, the church.

> *All human beings, regardless of their situation or condition, are loved by God and are to be valued as true persons. Seeming weakness—even permanent disability or terminal illness—may contain strength of the highest order, where "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Indeed it is in apparent frailty that the uniqueness of human personhood may shine forth most strikingly, reaffirming itself in both those who give and those who receive loving care.*[94]

The human person is gifted with dynamism: the potential to act, grow, mature, develop, and undergo transformation. "Human beings are inquisitive, probing, exploratory, delighting in diversity and in encountering new people and ideas. We are enabled to love one another in a Trinitarian way because God the Trinity has first loved us (1 John 4:7, 19)."[95] Human persons are blessed with the divine gift of freedom, mirroring the freedom of love and communion within the Holy Trinity. Freedom is the fundamental trait of all human persons. "The image of God in humans is a way of being in relation which is made possible only because we have been addressed in a way which intends our free response."[96] In fact, "the misery and grandeur of human existence is . . . held in dialectical tension. . . centred in human freedom and the grace of God."[97]

Even after the fall, human persons retain their freedom and are free to respond to their Creator and to their fellow humans in many ways; yet freedom in a fallen world can be both a positive force and a negative one. It can either propel or inhibit growth into fuller personhood.

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91. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *A Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (Chicago: ELCA, 2009), 10.
92. Philip Sherrard, *Christianity and Eros: Essays on the Theme of Sexual Love* (Limni, Evia: Denise Harvey, 1995), 91–92.
93. Yannaras, Freedom of Morality, 23.
94. *Anglican-Eastern Orthodox Dialogue, In the Image and Likeness of God: A Hope-Filled Anthropology.* The Buffalo Statement Agreed by the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue, 2015 (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2015), 8.
95. Anglican-Eastern Orthodox Dialogue, *In the Image and Likeness,* 8.
96. Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990), 22.
97. Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), 165.

This free response of the human person to the call of God involves the whole person and not just one part of it: "The human person is not a part of humanity; any more than the persons of the Trinity are parts of God. That is why the character of the image of God does not belong to any one part of the human make-up but refers to the whole man in his entirety."[98]

Human sexuality is a unique manifestation of every human being's vocation to free and loving communion. It is an experience of profound encounter and conversation of human with fellow human, potentially mirroring the love and communion of Creator and creature. "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner'" (Gen. 2:18).

Humans express their relational and personal vocation to love and communion through various means, including celibacy, monastic life, lay consecrated lifestyles, being single, marriage and conjugal life, abstinence, chastity, intimacy, intimacy without sexual expression, and even asexuality. Regardless of one's choice of expression, the vocation to loving communion, freedom, self-giving and sacrifice is universal: being in relation and growth in personhood experiencing and fostering community.

Curiously, while "sexuality beyond biological reproduction is the one foremost in the biblical use of sexual metaphors for God's relation to humanity,"[99] in spite of such affirmations of embodied and sexual imagery,

> *a kind of anti-fleshly mind, connected with the ascesis as the central moral principle of Christian life, nourished by the fear of falling into mortal sexual sins has greatly contributed to devaluating matter as connected with the inferior if not sinful part of creation. The threat of "pansexualism" in modern times has further strengthened this position and inspired a spiritualistic ethic as a noble struggle against the low, "dirty" and animal trends which violently assault the human body and require satisfaction.*[100]

Yet Christianity does not know of a separation of body and soul and rejects both the spiritualization of a human being and the degradation of the body:

> *The body in spite of all kinds of abuses (spiritualistic-ascetic or hedonistic) is the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is in you, which you have from God (1 Cor. 6:19). Against all idealistic beliefs of the immortality of the soul alone, we are reminded by the authentic biblical tradition that our resurrection is a bodily one. That is why, in Biblical terms one does not speak of the flesh as the inferior part of human existence . . .. Soul and body, spirit and matter, are therefore equally subjects of transformation. Their value can only be jointly defended as one and whole organism of life always on the way to their recreation and transfiguration.*[101]

The Creator's marvellous gift of human sexuality has become a curse for many Christians, who continue to experience various forms of dehumanization: discrimination, persecution, violence, and even death. If the community of love and communion on earth is to be true to its calling of overflowing the boundless merciful loving kindness of God into the wider world, its pastoral calling, and mission need to include seeking the wellbeing of all human persons. "Pastoral care . . . is for every member of the church, in one way or another, at one time or another, without exception."[102] This includes a struggle for the dignity of all human beings in the world, including the realm of human sexuality, which is an integral part of the human condition.

5.3 Embodiment: affirming the goodness of our bodily nature

The human body is the organ through which we apprehend the world around us. We do not only *have* a body; we *are* a body too. The body can recognize and be recognized at the same time. The hand that strokes the cheek feels the cheek,

98. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 120.
99. Bishops' Conference of Norway, Sammen 2013:15.
100. Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings,* ed. Eugene F. Rogers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 309–21.
101. Nikos A. Nissiotis, "Secular and Christian Images of Human Person," *Theologia 53* (1982): 956, 962.
102. Thomas Hopko, *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction: Eastern Orthodox Reflections* (Ben Lamond, Calif.: Conciliar Press, 2006), 112.

and the cheek feels the hand. In our ordinary physical bodies, we communicate with the world around us and feel hunger for food, intimacy, and healing.

From its very beginning, the Christian church has wrestled with the significance and meaning of the fact that God has created human beings with a physical body. While in antiquity there were religious and philosophical trends which viewed corporeality as mainly negative, church history has seen a growing number of theological conceptualizations which present a positive evaluation of bodily existence as *conditio humanae*. Nevertheless, the dualistic view of soul and body was strong and tempting. Biblical poetry on body and erotic love, such as the Song of Songs, has often been understood as merely metaphorical speech. Paradoxically, in the language of the church as the body of Christ, ordinary, physical bodies and their needs were rather made invisible.

Notably, in recent times, many Christian women and men, and also churches from various traditions, are returning to body-affirming theologies.[103] While they are challenged by an era which globally displays a renewed interest in materiality and the body, they respond in their own particular way by appealing to the centrality of the doctrines of creation and incarnation. Jesus' incarnation on earth, in a human body, is read as a profound affirmation of the original, intentional goodness of creation, including that of human embodiment. In the fleshly incarnation, God is revealed in and through the body. That Jesus had a body demonstrates how deeply God affirms the vulnerability of the body. This signifies something profound about the respect Christians should have for their own bodies and for the bodies of other people, "since God only comes to them in the body of the other."[104]

A church Father who clearly affirmed the goodness of bodily existence was the 2nd-century bishop Irenaeus of Lyon. He emphasized the central role of flesh in the process of redemption. He showed how Christ, through the incarnation, has restored the connection between the divine light and his body. Since Christ assumed and shared our human flesh, the divine light radiates from his flesh to our bodies and ultimately to the whole world, in a comprehensive redemptive movement.[105]

Fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa included the body in his understanding of the image of God. In his view, the human person is composed of realities derived both from God and from the earth. The human is to use his or her senses to delight in the beauty of the natural world. God blends "the divine and the earthly, so that by means of both [the human person] may have kinship and closeness to each enjoyment."[106] Gregory uses the metaphor of the mirror to describe human beings as the image of God. The human mind reflects as a mirror the light from the divine source and receives the likeness of that source. Likewise, the material body is, "as it were, a mirror of the mirror."[107] The body too is capable of receiving the divine light. Mediated by a mind that is tuned to God, the whole body is enabled to perceive the beauty of the world and to communicate God's love. The fallen, sinful condition is not caused by a body that betrays us, but by a *mind* that has turned away from God and got immersed in a material world with no awareness of divine presence. When used rightly, the body serves as a means through which God redirects fallen humanity, with all its brokenness, back to God. Remarkably, Gregory of Nyssa never associated guilt and fear with the sexual act itself. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs,* in which he depicts the way of loving union of the soul with God, he doesn't regard repression of the memory of physical love as a requirement to move from the physical to the spiritual stage. His view seems to be more integrative.

As Christians, we may witness to the goodness of creation. Our dynamic, embodied selves are also sexual selves. Erotic desire belongs to our embodied nature. As such, it may reflect God's desire, by not wanting to possess, own, or control someone, nor simply to create pleasures for ourselves, but by wanting our bodies and their activities to bring joy to

103. One example of this is Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body,* a series of lectures for general audiences, 5 September 1979–28 November 1984, https://www.piercedhearts.org/jpii/theology_body_audiences/a_theology_body.htm.
104. Susannah Cornwall, Theology and Sexuality (London: SCM Press, 2013), 21–24. Quotation is from Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 12.
105. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies* 4.20.2.
106. Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Creation of Humanity," 2.2, quoted in Nonna Verna Harrison, *God's Many-Splendored Image: Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010), 114. See also Manoj Kurian, "Critical Analysis of Churches' Stand on Human Sexuality and a Way Forward," in *A Theological Reader on Human Sexuality and Gender Diversities: Envisioning Inclusivities,* ed. Roger Gaikward and Thomas Ninan (Utrecht: CSA Kerk in Actie, NCCI, 2017),
107. Gregory, "On the Creation of Humanity," 12.9, quoted by Harrison, *God's Many-Splendored Image,* 115.

someone *other* than ourselves. As Rowan Williams phrases it, the joy created in committed sexual relationships is "the body's grace," since desiring and being desired by another person helps us to understand what it is to desire and be desired by God.[108]

From a Christian perspective, it is emphasized that body theology needs to be about *all* bodies, not just bodies deemed decent or acceptable. Theology should not reproduce bodies that are in fashion in culture. Media, advertising, and commercial culture show idealized bodies, apparently perfect, young, and healthy, while rendering invisible those of the old, the sick, the poor, as well as the bodies that look different or are differently abled. There are grounds for returning to Jesus' wounded and violated body, as this pertains to the utmost mystery of God's dwelling in the vulnerabilities of embodied human existence, crying out for a healing, passionate embrace.[109]

5.4 *Koinonia:* The church as inclusive community growing toward fuller communion

It is not without significance that one of the most important images of the church is that of the body of Christ. The Faith and Order document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* states: "Through the rites or sacraments of initiation human beings become members of Christ and in the Lord's Supper their participation in his body (cf. 1 Cor.10:16) is renewed again and again."[110] This participation bonds members and communities to each other. The report further stresses that "Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing."[111] This is the vision of the church in a context where feelings of de-humanization, fear, and lack of dignity are evident signs of the times for churches to engage in processes of reconciliation as a necessary expression of accompaniment with the affected.

Southern African scholars of humanities and social sciences have constantly identified *ubuntu* as useful in understanding interconnected or collective humanity.[112] *Ubuntu* does not only hold people accountable to one another; it also invites people to love their neighbours as themselves (Lev. 19:18; Mark 12:31; Matt. 19:19; 22:39). Similar emphases can be found in concepts from Asia and Latin America. *Sangsaeng* is an ancient Asian concept of a sharing community and economy which allows the community to flourish together, each dependent on and contributing to the life of the whole community. In Latin America, *Sumak Kawsay* comes out of the world view of the indigenous peoples in Latin America about creation. Originating from the Quechua language of the Andes, it means fullness of life, wellbeing, the integral quality of life for all. Each of these concepts affirms the interconnectedness of all life as the gift of God. It is within this *theological* context that God expects humanity to advance community well-being, while protecting the humanity of the socially marginalized. Although the application of loving our neighbours has been used to defend the rights of the materially poor, it includes all ostracized groups. David J. Bosch writes, "The poor are an all-embracing category of those who were victims of society. The poor are the marginalized, those who lack every active or even passive participation in society. It is a marginalization that comprises all spheres of life and is often so extensive that people feel that they have no resources to do anything about it."[113]

Framed this way, sexual minorities are among the poor that the Church is invited to protect from socio-political and religious forces that rob their humanity. Churches may hold different views on same-sex relationships, but the biblical God desires justice for all people. Yahweh is the God of the least ones—social outcasts.

Marginalized people, including sexual minorities, aspire to live without discrimination, fear of violence, rape, imprisonment, and death. To acknowledge that God is standing with the outcasts is to commit to break the oppressive shackles that

108. Rowan Williams, *The Body's Grace,* Address originally delivered as the 10th Michael Harding Memorial Address to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in 1989. https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/the-bodys-grace.pdf.
109. See Elisabeth Gerle, Passionate Embrace: Luther on Love, Body, and Sensual Presence (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2017).
110. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision,* Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 13, para. 21.
111. *Towards a Common Vision,* 5, para. 1.
112. Kapya J. Kaomo, "The Good Samaritan and Minorities in Africa: Christianity, the US Christian Right and the Dialogical Ethics of Ubuntu," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 155* (2016 Special Issue): 176–95.
113. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 436–37.

demean our common humanity. The Bible reflects the values of *ubuntu* when it defines Jesus's ministry as love-justice—proclaiming the good news to the poor and setting the oppressed free (Luke 4:18; Matt. 12:18; Isa. 42:7).

As discussed below, the parable of the good Samaritan speaks to what might be termed "radical *neighbourism*," which is biased towards God's love-justice. Christian love-justice breaks all sexual and socio-cultural boundaries; it challenges humanity to love the neighbour as oneself; and to see God in the unseen or socially invisible neighbours. Christian love-justice is radical; it carries socio-political and prophetic responsibilities; it demands ranking "justice over popularity."[114] As Desmond Tutu writes:

> *If we could but recognize our common humanity, that we do belong together, that our destinies are bound up in one another's, that we can be free only together, that we can survive only together, that we can only be human together, then a glorious world would come into being where all of us lived harmoniously together as members of one family, the human family, God's family.*[115]

As the family of God, Christians share a collective identity without socially construed differences.[116] The model of the *family of God* has rich implications for how sexual issues are debated. It also places moral and pastoral responsibilities on the churches to hear the cries from the margins of our societies.

As the WCC document *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes,* prepared by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, emphasizes, "The Mission of the Church is the overflow of the infinite love of the Triune God."[117] Sarah Coakley has spelled out the partaking in this mission as being allured by the Holy Spirit as the divine bond of love. She writes that the Holy Spirit delights, allures, and inflames human beings with desire for God and the fullness of life.[118] The Spirit's activity, always in concert with the Father and the Son, both unites and distinguishes. As much as the Spirit, as the divine bond of love, propels toward union, the Spirit also guards distinction, both within God and between God and creation. Acting in the world, the Spirit has the capacity to draw human beings together in union and also interposes between them, acting as guardian of human integrity. The Spirit, who unites with Christ and his cruciform way of life, progressively breaks and corrects the fallen desires to possess, abuse, and control, and opens human beings for the full taste and gift of communion.

5.5 *Kenosis:* listening to voices from the margins

"The church's mission in the world is to proclaim to all people, in word and deed, the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ (cf. Mark 16:15)."[119] Christian communities share the passion for the transformation of the world in the power of the Spirit. "They live as disciples of the One who cared for the blind, the lame and the leper, who welcomed the poor and the outcast, and who challenged authorities who showed little regard for human dignity or the will of God. The church needs to help those without power in society to be heard;" at times, it must become a voice for the marginalized.[120]

The document *Together towards Life* acknowledges that voices and insights from people on the margins may have a prophetic, revealing dimension:

> *Among the surprises of the Spirit are the ways in which God works from locations which appear to be on the margins and through people who appear to be excluded. . . . People on the margins have agency, and can often see what, from the centre, is out of view. People on the margins, living in vulnerable positions, often know what exclusionary forces are threatening their survival and can best discern the urgency of their struggles: people in positions of privilege have much to learn from the daily struggles of people living in marginal conditions.*[121]

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114. Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 90.
115. Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream* (London: Penguin Random, 2004), 23–24.
116. Kaomo, "The Good Samaritan," 104–6.
117. Jooseop Keum, ed., *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012), para. 19.
118. See Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An "Essay on the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
119. *Towards a Common Vision,* 33, para. 59.
120. *Towards a Common Vision,* 36, para. 64.
121. *Together towards Life,* paras. 35, 38.

As for human sexuality, the church not only derives its understanding from theological and doctrinal debates, important as they are, but also from the experiences and subjugated knowledge of those who have been marginalized, for instance, because of being victimized to the sexual desire and greed of others or because of their sexual orientation. The sources for Christian ethical discernment—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, and also additional indigenous sources of moral discernment—may often be understood as containing the insights and experiences of the majority, but here the focus is rather on welcoming and listening to the knowledge and experiences of various minorities in society and church. These voices of minorities cannot be excluded from the conversation toward fuller understanding of human sexuality.

The church is called to reach out, to care for, and to advocate for those who live on the margins of society or on the margins of ecclesial communities. Among others, related to issues of human sexuality, this includes recognition of the needs of various groups, such as persons with disabilities, elderly people, persons who live unwillingly as singles, widows and widowers, persons of sexual minorities, persons with a gender-variant (intersex or transgender) identity, displaced persons, and prisoners who in many countries are exposed to great health risks and sexual violence.

The church is called to reach out, to care for, and to accompany those living on the margins in a *kenotic* attitude. The apostle Paul presents *kenosis* as a characteristic of Christian life and behaviour. He calls upon the followers of Jesus to have in their relations with others the same mindset as Jesus, who, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Phil. 2: 6–7). This movement of divine love, of self-emptying in the mystery of incarnation, impels the Christian community to reach out to those in the margins, both inside and outside churches, in a spirit and attitude of unrestrained self-giving that has the effect of making genuine dialogical space to receive each other.[122]

This spiritual and moral attitude, shaped by *kenosis,* manifests itself as a power-in-vulnerability.[123] It creates a safe space in which the other can appear in truth and without fear of being hurt. In such an engaged conversation, inflicted injustices can come to light, as a first step toward healing, reconciliation, and fuller communion.

The document "Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace" calls on churches not only to listen to and accompany those who exist on the margins of society, but also to work to disrupt and eliminate forces that dehumanize fellow humans.

Listening to voices from the margins does include horror stories of violence, harassment, rape, legal and social discrimination, and other violations of human dignity experienced by sexual and gender-variant (intersex or transgender) minorities.[124] Such stories inhabit the pages of the scriptures: the abuse of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21; the rape of Dinah and the violence that followed in Genesis 32; the rape and death of the concubine in Judges 19; the rape of Tamar; the sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah in Judges 11, to name but a few. Christian communities cannot turn a blind eye to these social and political realities. A church that reaches out in a kenotic spiritual attitude to people who have been inflicted by shame, guilt, wounds, and pain, will from these encounters be encouraged to give a pastoral and theological response to issues of human sexuality. The pilgrimage toward justice and peace in the context of human sexuality involves paying attention to peoples' cries for God's intervention in their plight for wholeness and liberation. It also involves an openness to the possibility of being enriched as a church community by the spirituality of endurance and hope that can often be found among sexual and transgender minorities.

An attitude of kenotic love presupposes the gift of a shared humanity, which is created by God, redeemed in Jesus Christ, and sanctified by the Spirit to grow into a fullness of communion. This shared humanity is well expressed in the concept of *ubuntu* or *radical neighbourism*. In the parable of the good Samaritan, the ethics of "radical neighbourism" is visibly illustrated. The dying person along the road is nameless, without known status, race, nationality, or sexual orientation. The

122. See Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Person, Kenosis, and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation," *Modern Theology 19,* no. 1 (2003): 41–65.
123. Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing," in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 3–39.
124. Gerald West, Charlene Van der Walt, and John Kaoma Kapya, "When Faith Does Violence: Reimagining Engagement between Churches and LGBTI Groups on Homophobia in Africa," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 72,* no. 1 (2016), https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3511.

nameless person is only identified as a human being (*muntu*). Unlike the Levite and the priest, the Samaritan understood himself as the nameless person's keeper. The attitude of the Samaritan is not self-seeking but selfless in care and love. To the Samaritan, all life is sacred. The open wounds of *umuntu* moved the Samaritan to respond to the moral calling from the margins. Moved by compassion, he opens the space for restoring the dignity of the nameless person and invites the divine image to shine in the other.

The ethics of *kenosis, ubuntu, SangSaeng, Sumak Kawsay,* and "radical neighbourism" involve addressing how people can be prevented from being forced into life-denying situations and of how people may be prevented from forcing others or themselves into life-denying, humiliating practices and situations. It is not enough for the churches to dress the wounds of sexual minorities; the churches are also called to labour to ensure that human beings and communities are not robbed of their dignity. Jesus and the church were born from the margins. We are obliged to protect those on the margins. They are the image of God, and they may represent the invisible suffering Christ in the world (Matt. 25:33–46). The church is called to be inclusive and to mirror the divine conversation by including all in the conversations on the pilgrim way of justice and peace.

6. Human Sexuality and Violence

6.1 Language and discourse

From birth to death, sexuality is an integral part of what it means to be human. Therefore, human language always has to relate to sexuality. When God first bestowed on humans the gift of life, human sexuality was an integral part of that gift. This implies that human sexuality is an aspect of what can and should reflect the sacredness of life. Yet, sadly, human sexuality, including the language used to describe it, has often been abused by human perversion, dehumanization, and violence. On the pilgrim way, holistic conversations seek to enable pilgrims to find an appropriate language and discourse to share experiences of human sexuality. They can honour God and God's gift of human sexuality.

The challenge, however, for the churches is that so much of the language and discourse about human sexuality has not been life-affirming. The topic is controversial in many churches and cultures where language about human sexuality has the character of judgment and shame, as something dirty and evil. This has served to fuel silence and created a vacuum in the discourse which is frequently filled by cultural understandings and practices that are dehumanizing and foster discrimination, exclusion, and violence. In market-driven societies, companies and corporations, for example, use sexuality to sell their products or as a tool of power and manipulation, distorting views of human sexuality by supporting and promoting injustices.[125] In such situations it is not that sexuality is not being talked about, but it must be asked who is framing the conversation and how the language on human sexuality is shaped.

Conversations on the pilgrim way encourage pilgrims to access language about human sexuality that is life-affirming, laden with the values of love, grace, dignity, and justice. Thus, the churches should seek a healthy and holy language and discourse for engaging in conversation. As churches converse on the pilgrim way, they become aware of their interrelatedness and interdependence. They retrace the story of their involvement with each other and the impact they have had on each other. They recover the tradition that has been passed on to others, and they are invited to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The vision and challenge of this journey is to discover anew the intrinsic connectedness between sexuality, spirituality, and faith.

In some churches, as well as in different settings of dialogue, there is a tension between a faith-based and a rights-based approach to human sexuality. Faith-based language justifies ethical values, standards of behaviour, and taboos in terms of traditions specific to each religious tradition. Secular rights-based language, on the other hand, justifies ethical standards and codes of conduct as seen from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in which the essential rights of each individual are specified. In the pilgrim conversations it should not be assumed that different approaches and ways of speaking about human sexuality necessarily contradict each other, they may, rather, complement each other. Religion in many ways also participates in the shaping of language and discourse outside of its immediate circles and is an important voice in society and culture.[126]

The desire to love and be loved, and to express that love, are intrinsic to every human being, Yet the language used to talk about sexuality does not always carry such desirable connotations. If not expressed in euphemistic words or deemed unspoken, it is often burdened with stigma and judgment that come to the fore as if human sexuality is about the forbidden fruit of the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:17). This may be partly because of the reality that language and discourse about human sexuality are often shaped and defined by those who hold unbalanced power relations over and above others, whether it is based in ecclesiology, gender, race, or class. Moreover, since language is core to the cultural understanding of a people, the

125. See also Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2015). She brings to the fore questions of who shapes the popular human sexuality language by discussing the derogatory language used against the Black sexuality rooted in the North American racial context. According to her, "The result of the White cultural attack upon Black sexuality is that it has rendered the Black community practically silent in terms of sexual discourse. So unless the Black community decides to resist the white categorization by engaging in 'a frank, consistent sexual discourse' . . . the Black sexuality in all its complexity will continue to be ravaged by the sexual politics of White culture" and the Black community will be disempowered in addressing such significant matters of life and death for their communities".

126. *Statement on Universal Declaration of Human Rights,* WCC Executive Committee, Lübeck, Germany, 26 September 2008, http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/2008-09/statement-on-universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

appropriateness of the language about human sexuality is also culture-specific. The churches through the centuries have been the stewards and advocates for language, for a dignified culture of words, as they have been given the Word by God.

The changing landscape in this discourse has had a universal impact, partly influenced by the advances in electronic media, especially among the younger generation. A plethora of television shows and other electronic media feature the routine daily life of young people wrestling with questions of their own sexuality. Human sexuality language has been liberated. It includes slang terminologies and euphemistic words, as well as open discussions that touch on many other issues, including gender identity, sexual orientation, and the place of love as deep connectivity of hearts, souls, and bodies. Employing language and discourse on sexuality based on dignity of and justice for all human beings is an immense service the churches can offer to younger generations. While commodification and brutalization of language around sexuality are spreading through, for example, social media, a dignified language for speaking about human sexuality is an essential witness for protecting the dignity of human beings in human relationships. It is in the decay and decline of language that attitudes of disrespect and exploitation creep in first. It is in the reconstruction and the upholding of a dignified language on human sexuality that attitudes of love, respect, and acceptance are regenerated and cultivated anew. If sexuality is understood as a gift for human relations, and therefore the most intimate conversation between human beings, the language which is used to engage in conversations about human sexuality is important.

With the above in mind, the question is raised as to what might be the appropriate human sexuality language for churches as they converse on the pilgrim way. The invitation is for the churches to explore some of the existing terminologies within their own context and learn from the conversations in their church communion, inter-religious community, and the culture and socio-politics of their own context. In doing this the churches become cognizant of the fact that language about human sexuality has been heavily demonized, almost exclusively used with vulgar and demeaning overtones. In these contexts, the appropriateness of the language about human sexuality brings an additional dimension to the conversations.

6.2 Sexual and gender-based violence

The WCC has been on a long journey addressing sexual and gender-based violence. Reports from the solidarity visits during the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988–1998) found that the life and dignity of women were affected by cultures of violence in the homes, churches, and communities of societies. In the report *Overcoming Violence: The Ecumenical Decade 2001–2010,*[127] *it showed that violence against women continues to intensify and is in all cultures, among all people, during periods of peace and conflict. Similarly, the "Ecumenical Call to Just Peace" and the Just Peace Companion* (2012), and the report from the Global Consultation for the Commemoration of the Culmination of the Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women (2018), noted that violence against women, including economic exploitation and domestic violence, has increased in brutality.

Many churches have found themselves addressing issues of sexual violence within their own communities and societies. The violence that human beings commit against each other is one of the great sorrows, tragedies, and sins of humankind. Violence related to or stemming from a person's sexuality violates and destroys the very personhood of the victim in a way that is particularly horrific.

At its meeting in Uppsala 2018, the executive committee of the WCC urged the member churches and ecumenical partners in an extended statement

> *to condemn or reiterate their condemnation of sexual and gender-based violence and of any form of violence against women, children, and vulnerable people; to declare such violence a sin; and to make constructive efforts to overcome the attitudes that predispose to such violence.*[128]

127. *Overcoming Violence: The Ecumenical Decade 2001–2010* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2011), http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/OvercomingViolence.pdf.

128. WCC Executive Committee, "Statement on Sexual and Gender-based Violence and the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize," 7 November 2018, para. 11, https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/uppsala-november-2018/statement-on-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-and-the-2018-nobel-peace-prize.

Sexual violence (violence that uses human sexuality in violent ways) and gender-based violence (violence that is directed against a person because of expectations associated with gender or sexuality or unequal power relations between the parties) have consequences for the individual victims and survivors, of course, but also for others in the family and the community. These types of violence occur in all regions, in all cultures: in homes, churches, communities, and on the street. As a global phenomenon, however, it takes many different forms.

The World Health Organization has defined sexual violence as:

> *any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work. Coercion can cover a whole spectrum of degrees of force. Apart from physical force, it may involve psychological intimidation, blackmail or other threats—for instance, the threat of physical harm, of being dismissed from a job or of not obtaining a job that is sought. It may also occur when the person aggressed is unable to give consent—for instance, while drunk, drugged, asleep or mentally incapable of understanding the situation. Sexual violence includes rape, defined as physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration –even if slight–of the vulva or anus, using a penis, other body parts or an object. The attempt to do so is known as attempted rape. Rape of a person by two or more perpetrators is known as gang rape. Sexual violence can include other forms of assault involving a sexual organ, including coerced contact between the mouth and penis, vulva or anus.*[129]

Gender-based violence includes all the above situations as well as other forms of violence when perpetrated against a person because of distorted expectations around that person's gender or sexuality. It also includes physical attacks or verbal insults (whether sexual or not) on persons that dress or express themselves in a way that counters the expectations around their presumed gender, such as transgender men or women. It also includes the compelling of persons who are attracted to persons of the same sex into physical or psychological treatment, supposedly to cure them, often with deep psychological and sometimes physical wounds.

Indeed, for those subjected to sexual violence, aside from the physical wounds, at times including death, these "wounds more hidden"—the trauma and other psychological scars that are the legacy of the experience—can often cause harm years after the specific event has passed, surfacing in high rates among those affected of depression and anxiety, alcohol and substance abuse, prostitution, and suicide.

Family members, perpetrators, and witnesses of sexual violence are also affected. Where the sexual abuse occurs in the context of institutions, including the church, the consequences may be amplified, and all members of the institution may bear the shame and disempowerment associated with the fact that sexual abuse occurred within their midst. Where there are taboos for discussing matters of sexuality, persons who have experienced sexual violence frequently fear the stigma they may face and so fail to report what has happened to them. The challenge for the pilgrimage is the creation of spaces that are safe—spaces of grace—in which the voices of those of us who are vulnerable, wounded, and marginalized by their experiences of sexual violence may be heard and supported in response to God's call to do justice, restore dignity, bring healing, and renew wholeness.

Manisha was raised to believe that human sexuality and marriage were legitimately about unequal power relations: a man having authority over a woman. She entered into a marriage which became an abusive relationship, her husband demanding from her total submission. He was an authoritarian man who was sex-obsessed. He had multiple sexual partners and yet refused to use condoms, justifying this on the basis of his faith. He contracted HIV and infected her with the virus. He also forced her into becoming pregnant against her will, denying her access to birth control. She gave birth to a child but herself died shortly afterward of complications related to the pregnancy that she had resisted. In essence, her marriage certificate became her death certificate.[130]

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129. See the WHO's full definition of sexual violence in "Sexual Violence," *World Report on Violence and Health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002), 149, https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42495/9241545615_eng.pdf

130. Fulata Moyo, "Can Divorce Be a Solution to Marital Problems in a Christian Marriage?" *Ecumenical Review 56,* no. 4 (October 2004): 437–47.

The above narrative situates human sexuality in the sexual and gender ethical discourse, and also highlights the important intersections of human sexuality, gender justice, violence against women, HIV and AIDS, women as agents of moral discernment, and economic justice. This story, as with all such stories, is unique to the persons involved, yet it opens up questions and perspectives that transcend their particularity.

As set out at the beginning, the breadth and depth of sexual violence and gender-based violence is enormous. It is beyond the scope of this document to cover all such areas. The following subsections offer an insight into the violence experienced by some of those groups that, due to power-imbalances, particularly face violence in these forms.

6.2.1 Women

Globally, one in three women has been a victim of physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner at some point in her lifetime.[131] Men too have reported being victims of physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, and spiritual abuse from intimate partners. However, globally, the victims of domestic violence are overwhelmingly women, and women tend to experience more severe forms of violence. Hospital and police records support the fact that there are more reports of sexual and physical violence in a domestic setting from women than there are from men.

There are specific forms of physical and sexual violence experienced by women in a marriage relationship or who are cohabiting. These experiences are often connected to cultural and biblical beliefs about the ownership of a woman's body. Examples would include patriarchal teachings that married men own their wives' bodies and therefore can demand sex at any time. If the wife refuses for one reason or another, being beaten by her husband is viewed by some societies as a justifiable response. If she complains about it, she is told to endure and accept the demands of her husband. The teaching also turns a blind eye to the infidelity of husbands. When the wife discovers the infidelity and complains, she is told to endure because she is the one whom he married. However, if she is involved in a relationship outside marriage, the man is advised to divorce his wife. Divorced women suffer from stigma and discrimination, even in some churches. Where churches allow remarriage after the death of a partner or divorce, it is much easier for men than for women. In some settings, a woman who remarries is suspected of having been unfaithful to her husband even before he died or before the divorce. Men who are divorced or widowed are pitied and even assisted to find another wife as soon as possible. In some cultures, widows are treated harshly, and they are made to go through dehumanizing rituals, which in some cases include being raped by a male relative of the deceased. Death of a husband may also mean loss of children and property, thus pushing widows to a life of poverty.

In societies where there is a system of live-in maids, such women or girls often suffer from sexual abuse by the male members of the family. In addition, when the wife and the girl children discover the sexual abuse, they join in beating the maid for seducing the husband, father, brothers, or sons. In most cases, such women are not able to use the law to protect themselves as they need to send money home to help their families.

The #MeToo movement has also shown that women who work outside the home are also under constant threat of being sexually abused by their male bosses. Some women are speaking about it, even if it happened a long time ago. Others are afraid to talk about it because of the way the women who have come out are treated. At the Jamaica consultation commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, it was observed that there is need of a #Metoo movement in the church in order to stop the sexual abuse of women in the church. There was also a strong affirmation of the Thursdays in Black Campaign as a tool to be adopted by churches in order to stop sexual and gender-based violence in the church and society.[132] It is also offensive to church women when they hear some church leaders argue that it is better to rape a woman than to accept homosexuality.

131. See WHO Factsheet *Violence against Womenat:* https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women

132. The Thursdays in Black campaign (a WCC initiative) emerged from the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988–1998), inspired by the Mothers of the Disappeared in Buenos Aires and the Black Sash movement in South Africa. The campaign aims to raise awareness by highlighting the plight of those abused sexually and committing to eradicate such violence. The wearing of black on Thursdays is a sign of solidarity with the victims of such abuse. See https://www.oikoumene.org/en/get-involved/thursdays-in-black.

The invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace reminds pilgrims that in order to create a just community of women and men, we need men and women to come together to revisit the attitudes, practices, and scriptures that permit violence against women. In addition, we are reminded that "Following Jesus means meeting him wherever people suffer injustice, violence and war." Experiencing God's presence with survivors of sexual violence is an essential part of the journey toward restoring human dignity and accessing "the power and energy for the transformation of an unjust world."[133]

6.2.2 Children

According to the WCC's document "Churches' Commitments to Children," when it comes to the issue of sexual violence against children, all the churches in the conversations on the pilgrim way seem to speak with a common voice.[134] Sexual violence against children is an affront and that has been evident throughout history. From their earliest days, children are dependent on adults for the care and stewardship of their bodies, until such time that they can assume fully that responsibility themselves.

Children, by virtue of their immature bodies, minds, and spirits, are wholly incapable of mature sexual self-realization and expression. So, it is wholly inappropriate to exploit children sexually, including through incest, to satisfy the sexual self-realization and expression of adults. Sexual exploitation causes psychological as well as physical harm, as immature bodies are subjected to violence and inappropriate use. There is also the risk of sexually transmitted infections, premature pregnancy, and unsafe abortions. There is also potential social and economic harm; if the abuse is known, it may provoke isolation of the child within their family, or of the child's family within the wider community. In some settings, access to education, healthcare, employment, social and religious integration, and future marriage partners—all these may be cut off to the child and, sometimes by extension, their relations. With dwindling options, prostitution can beckon as the only way to make a life out of the wreckage of their experience.

Child marriage is, perhaps, socially accepted in some cultures, but its victims suffer many of the aforementioned harms. Further, there is a sustained risk of premature parenthood and the many documented consequences thereof; child brides and mothers rarely are able to complete even elementary levels of education, and they risk poor health and early death for themselves and their offspring. As a consequence of child marriages, there is also the problem of child widows and their vulnerabilities to harmful cultural widowhood practices.

Parents also marry their daughters for economic reasons. "Child marriage happens mostly to ensure economic security for families. These girls are the last asset that [parents] sell off in order to survive in times of conflict. . . . These girls usually have multiple pregnancies without much space between them when their body is not fully matured. They are at a much higher risk of domestic violence. They get out of education and become more prone to poverty."[135]

Moreover, sexual exploitation of and violence toward children, however and wherever it occurs, is an affront to the witness and teachings of Jesus. It violates two profound and foundational theological principles all Christians share: the appreciation of children as full human persons, and the favoured status of children for protection and inclusion that emerges from the direct instruction of Jesus in Matthew 19:14: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." These instructions by Jesus affirm a context where there is love, justice, and peace, and where children have a sense of belonging and being accepted as full human beings.

From the above examples of exploitation, it can be said that these constitute the denial of child's personhood. In sum, children suffer, without question, serious psychological and spiritual harm at the hands of their sexual abusers. That harm is never limited to the moment of abuse but pervades the whole of life—many children who grow up into adulthood

133. *An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. II. Growing in fellowship.* https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/an-invitation-to-the-pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace.
134. See *Churches' Commitment to Children: Churches Uniting for Children in the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2017), https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness/rights-of-children/churches-commitments-to-children. This work was undertaken with UNICEF.
135. Ekua Yankah, a researcher for Women and Health Alliance International (https://waha-international.org), quoted in Stav Dimitropoulos, "Europe Wasn't Ready for Child Brides, *BRIGHT Magazine,* 16 February 2018, https://brightthemag.com/syria-refugees-marriage-child-bride-human-rights-d8f045e924fb.

after such experiences suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This can often mean enduring a lifelong battle with shame, depression, a subdued sense of low self-worth, and struggles to form healthy sexual relationships. For many, statistics tell us, addiction to alcohol or drugs can seem an escape from this battle. Similarly, some engage wilfully in destructive sexual behaviour, some even becoming perpetrators of sexual abuse themselves, out of despair and a distorted concern that their sexuality is irreparably damaged.

Churches could invest in trauma transformation and healing so as to ensure a possibility of such previously abused adults experiencing healthy sexuality. A healthy sexuality has the promise of emulating the life-giving love that exists between Christ and the church. On this pilgrim way it is hoped that many churches might develop and enact processes designed to prevent child sexual exploitation within their spheres of influence. This is in line with the fact that churches are called by the gospel to make a distinctive and powerful contribution to end child sexual exploitation, not just within their own walls, but within the families that make up their communities, and within the societies where they are embedded. Churches are called to voice the value of children clearly, so as to convince others that they are worthy of protection, and to inspire hope and support healing in victims. By standing alongside victims of the violence, giving voice to their cries, and engaging in the ministry of healing, churches may provoke repentance in perpetrators and strengthen those who may be weakening as they struggle with the temptation to engage in acts of violence.

6.2.3 Persons of different sexual orientations, gender identities, and sex characteristics

The Church proclaims the words of hope and comfort of the Gospel, engages in works of compassion and mercy (cf. Luke 4:18–19) and is commissioned to heal and reconcile broken human relationships and to serve God in the ministry of reconciling those divided by hatred or estrangement (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18–21). The scourge of violence against persons based on their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity or expression calls for engagement from the churches both to stop the violence and to live out their commission of healing and reconciliation with those affected.

When a person is attacked because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, it is often motivated by a desire to punish those who do not conform to gender norms. It is considered a form of gender-based violence. A person does not need to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex to be attacked: the mere perception of homosexuality or of transgender, intersex, or other non-conforming identity is enough to put a person at risk.

Sexual orientation or gender identity- or expression-related violence has been reported in every part of the world. Violence takes place in various settings: on the street, in public parks, in schools, in workplaces, in private homes, in hospitals, and in prisons, and in police cells. It may be spontaneous or organized, perpetrated by individual strangers or by extremist groups. A common characteristic of many anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual hate crimes is their brutality: murder victims, for example, are often found mutilated, severely burnt, castrated, and showing signs of sexual assault. Transgender persons, especially those involved in sex work or in detention, face an especially high risk of deadly and extremely cruel violence.

In 2015, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported, "Hate-motivated violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual people is widespread, brutal, and often perpetrated with impunity. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, and intersex people are also victims of torture and ill treatment, including in custody and in clinics and hospitals."[136] The Commissioner also found that "'everyday discrimination,' fuelled by entrenched discriminatory attitudes and facilitated by lack of effective anti-discrimination laws, affects Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual and intersex people everywhere—including in education, healthcare, employment, housing, and within families." A World Bank study links stigma and discrimination that excludes "otherwise productive members of society from the labour market and financial systems (through marginalization in institutions, education, property, public services, the labour market, and the criminal law)" to a negative impact on the economy; thereby, it negatively affects everyone in the society.[137]

136. UN: LGBTQI+ Free and Equal NOT Criminalized, https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/lgbtqi-plus.
137. Elaine Panter, Tanya Primiani, Tazeen Hasan, Eduardo Calderon Pontaza, (eds), Antidiscrimination Law and Shared Prosperity: An Analysis of the Legal Framework of Six Economies and Their Impact on the Equality of Opportunities of Ethnic, Religious, and Sexual Minorities, Policy Research Working Paper 7992 (World Bank Development Economics Global Indicators Group, 2017) https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/26242/WPS7992.pdf.

The legal status of people of sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions other than heterosexual remains an issue in many countries and regions. It cultivates stigma and discrimination, which cause vulnerabilities to violence on a daily basis. Even in countries where there have been some developments in recognition of the rights and dignity of people of different sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions, heteronormative and cisgender structures and systems—cultural, political, religious, and economic—have a profoundly negative impact on their lives, affecting their well-being, self-esteem, and autonomy.

Being in a position of constant vulnerability affects and violates a person's sexual integrity and wholeness, many times hindering them from experiencing sexuality in a healthy, meaningful, and gratifying way. Moreover, it puts them at greater risk of sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation, as many are forced to live at the margins of society and outside of the legal frameworks that would guarantee their rights and dignity.

It is also well known and documented that the highest rates of suicide all over the world are of teenagers, adolescents, and young adults struggling with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. Besides lacking safe spaces to build a healthy sense of self, and experiencing different forms of institutional violence (in the family, in school, and in church), young people often also experience sexual violence from adults who take advantage of their struggles to come to terms with who they are as sexual and gendered beings.

Violence against gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transsexual people, whatever form it takes, is rooted in specific understandings of how one's sexuality should be lived and how gender should be expressed. The imposition of these understandings is a form of sexual violence that affects the development of a healthy, integrated self, which has significant consequences for a person's sexual life. Additionally, the intertwining of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (what it means to be a "real man" and a "real woman") also creates vulnerabilities to different forms of sexual abuse, violence, and exploitation, such as "corrective rape" or even, as a consequence of their vulnerability, blackmail or being left without the support of their families and communities and even public policies.

People who are transgender or intersex are also a very vulnerable group in terms of sexual violence. While they cross the borders of the binary gender system or transit between them, they are also subjected to forms of sexual humiliation and violence resulting from the fear and hatred of anything that destabilizes the binary gender roles. The violence against persons who are transgender, or intersex begins at the early stages of self-awareness, when a person's very understanding of themselves as created beings and their sense of self does not conform to the expectations around them. Negation, condemnation, humiliation, and undesired interventions on their bodies (as, for instance, surgical intervention on intersex children, or prohibition and impediments on sex redesignation processes for transsexual people) are forms of violence exercised on the basis of sex, understood as biologically given and immutable. Because of their nonconformity to binary sexual norms and gender constructs, their bodies and they themselves are frequently perceived to be abnormal, less than human, unworthy of dignity, a threat to society and, therefore, objects of rage and cruelty. Persons who are perceived in this way become easy targets of sexual predators and human traffickers.

Social movements, scholars, and some lawmakers have already pointed to the specificity of the violence against persons of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions and sex characteristics. Those acts of violence are socially justified by the idea that the victims are acting and behaving illegally (in terms of the law) or sinfully (in terms of religious belief and practice), thus justifying the violence committed against them. Even in places where sexual orientations other than heterosexuality and gender identities and expressions other than cisgender are considered illegal (notwithstanding the appeals of the UN and many other international organizations to eradicate those laws), a Christian ethical perspective invites the churches to denounce and fight against any form of violence: Every person, inclusive of their sexual orientation, is created in the image of God and therefore needs to be treated with utmost respect, dignity, and love. This fundamental conviction is or can become a common ground for Christian churches, even if they disagree on their ethical assessment of certain types of sexual behaviour or certain aspects and the status of same-sex relationships.

So many churches have been silent in their responses to violence against people who are or who are perceived to be LGBT, and this has meant much suffering and even death not only for individuals but also for their families and communities. Although churches in the ecumenical movement have different positions on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, there should be no question as to where the churches stand in their responses to violence against persons of different sexual orientations and gender identities.

This was emphasized by the executive committee of the WCC when they met in Uppsala in November 2018. They urged:

> *WCC member churches and ecumenical partners to condemn or reiterate their condemnation of sexual and gender-based violence and of any form of violence against women, children and vulnerable people; to declare such violence a sin; and to make constructive efforts to overcome the attitudes that predispose to such violence, including by the development of clear sexual harassment policies that clearly spell consequences of such harassment.*[138]

The churches in the ecumenical movement have affirmed their belief that God's love, mercy and justice can work through them and that the church needs to help those without power, becoming a voice for those who are voiceless. The churches therefore cannot be complacent when their neighbour faces the threat of or experiences violence. Jesus said that he came so that human beings "may have life in abundance";[139] his followers acknowledge their responsibility to defend human life and dignity. That is accomplished through self-giving, self-emptying love and a lifestyle of being for others. Such is the sign and instrument of God's intention for humankind, drawing persons into the community, the *koinonia*. This places obligations on churches as much as on individual believers. Conversations about these obligations on the pilgrim way encourage and motivate the churches to take part in initiatives to eliminate violence against people because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.

6.2.4 Engaging with persons with disabilities

There are numerous challenges that persons with disability bring to the context of conversations on human sexuality. Beginning from the significant notion of de-sexing persons with disability in contemporary society, as if such persons are asexual beings, the issue of delinking the persons with disability from the able-bodied and engaging in biblical interpretations that are not sensitive to persons with disability invites special concern in the understanding of and engagement with human sexuality.

The myths of the sexuality of persons with disabilities are contradictory. They have been seen as either asexual "angels" with no need for loving and fulfilling relationships or as dangerously sexual: sexual predators with no control. Falsely believing that persons with disability have children with disabilities, the eradication of sexuality was eugenically driven: the eradication of disability was the goal of the elimination of sexuality. This led to forced isolation and loneliness: churches would not marry them, parents would not support them, and society would reject them should they choose to marry.

The reality existing alongside those assumptions is that persons with disabilities have been more likely to suffer sexual abuse at the hands of others than the general population. When prevented by policy or threatened by punishment from expressing their need for sexual intimacy, they were forced to resort to untypical or harmful ways of expressing their sexuality, which further stigmatized disability and sexuality.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12–31, St Paul emphasizes the importance of the role of each part of the human body as contributing to the body of Christ. It is important to consider the body of human beings, irrespective of physical or mental state or medical condition, as contributing to the wholeness of the body of Christ. When one part of the body is affected, every other part of the body is affected and engages in responding with love and care. Nourishing the body and its parts is of the utmost importance. Anything short of this is abusing the body of Christ.

138. WCC Executive Committee, "Sexual and Gender-Based Violence."
139. See John 10:10.

Aspects of such nourishing have been identified by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. They affirm that every person has the right to exercise choices regarding sexual expression and social relationships, to safely discover their sexuality, and to develop friendships and emotional and sexual relationships in which they can love and be loved. Every person is entitled to receive appropriate and positive sexual information to develop reciprocal relationships full of love, intimacy, and safety and to marry. They conclude by stressing:

> *As full human beings reflecting the goodness and diversity of God's creation, people with disabilities also have the right and need to understand and express their sexuality within the holy relationship with God and one another, and to hope for the blessing from the church as they do so.*[140]

6.2.5 Migrants, refugees, and human trafficking

Even before its inception in 1948, caring for refugees of World War II was among the core programmes of the of the churches that would come together to form the WCC. Throughout the past 70 years, the WCC has been advocating for the human rights of people on the move, namely refugees, migrants, internally displaced people, and victims of human trafficking. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) experienced by people on the move has been part of the concern that the ecumenical family has tried to condemn and address.

In recent times, the world has witnessed various large-scale refugee flows throughout the globe. Although the media reports primarily about the migratory flows and their impact on the host countries, there is a danger of losing sight of people on the move as primarily human beings who, in addition to experiencing the hardship of uprootedness, also face all forms of violence *en route* as well as in the country of destination.

Women and girl refugees are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence from the moment they leave their home countries. In some instances—like the Rohingya in Myanmar in August 2017, it is the repeated and targeted attack and mass rape of stateless Rohingya women and girls that prompted many to flee to neighbouring countries in search of safety. However, as they journey from the conflict zone to their destination, they also experience—or are at risk of—being sexually brutalized by human traffickers or even border security forces.

Safety can also be quite elusive even when they reach their destination—the refugee camps or internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR):

> *In many refugee situations, particularly those involving the confinement of refugees in closed camps, traditional behavioural norms and restraints break down. In such circumstances refugee women and girls may be raped by other refugees, acting either individually or in gangs, and self-appointed leaders may thwart attempts to punish the offenders. In certain camp situations, unaccompanied women and girls have been known to enter what are called "protection marriages" in order to avoid sexual assault. The frustration of camp life can also lead to violence, including sexual abuse, within the family.*

This was, for instance, the case of the Reception and Identification Centres (RIC) of Moria and Vathy (Greece) which made headlines in 2017. "In these two centres bathrooms and latrines are no-go zones after dark for women or children, unless they are accompanied. Even bathing during daytime can be dangerous. In Moria, one woman told our teams that she had not taken a shower in two months from fear.[141]

However, gangs or self-appointed leaders in camps are not the only ones to blame. There have been numerous disturbing media reports of humanitarian aid workers sexually abusing refugees or internally displaced women and girls.[142] The misconduct of peacekeeping forces and humanitarian aid workers is a clear case of abuse of power between international

140. "Sexuality," a joint position statement of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and The Arc, 2008, reviewed and extended without revision, 2013, https://www.aaidd.org/news-policy/policy/position-statements/sexuality.
141. "Women and Children Threated by Sexual Violence at Refugee Reception Centres in Greek Islands," UN News, 9 February 2018, https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/02/1002421.
142. Catherine Powell, "#MeToo Hits the Humanitarian Aid Sector: Time to Close the Accountability Gap," blog post for Women Around the World, Council on Foreign Relations, 27 March 2018,

humanitarian aid workers and uprooted people. It is an extremely offensive form of sexual exploitation because the exploitation comes from someone whom they were supposed to trust.

The Oxfam scandal in February 2018, unmasking more than 15 years of abuse in Liberia and then Haiti, is one of the many examples.[143] Recently, in countries like Syria, the abuse is committed by third parties and local officials who are contracted by the aid agency to distribute food and other basic needs. As a result, refugee women are sexually exploited in return for aid. "The exploitation is so widespread that some Syrian women are refusing to go to distribution centres because people would assume they had offered their bodies for the aid they brought home. One worker claimed that some humanitarian agencies were turning a blind eye to the exploitation because using third parties and local officials was the only way of getting aid into dangerous parts of Syria that international staff could not access."[144]

Paradoxically, sexual and gender-based violence can also be the result of a decision made by the parents of a refugee or internally displaced child: in order to "protect" them from rape or other forms of sexual and gender-based violence (both from gangs in the camp or from humanitarian workers). Child marriage among Syrian refugees has almost quadrupled since the beginning of the conflict.[145]

It is important to mention the case of unaccompanied child refugees or migrants who become easy prey for traffickers. The exponential increase in the number of refugee and migrant children travelling alone in recent years has left many of them exposed to sexual abuse and exploitation at the hands of unscrupulous traffickers, who force them into slavery and prostitution. "Ruthless smugglers and traffickers are exploiting their vulnerability for personal gain, helping children to cross borders, only to sell them into slavery and forced prostitution."[146]

The award of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize to Dr Denis Mukwege and Ms Nadia Murad is an encouragement to all those working to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Denis Mukwege is a physician who has helped thousands of victims of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and has condemned the use of sexual violence against women as a strategy and weapon of war. Nadia Murad is a survivor of war crimes who was abducted, repeatedly raped, and abused by so-called Islamic State (IS) fighters who attacked her Yazidi community in northern Iraq in 2014 with genocidal intent. Since escaping, she has spoken out about her experience and became the UN's first Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking in 2016.[147]

It is important to emphasize that both the DRC and Iraq are priority countries on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. We recall the 2009 public statement by the WCC condemning violence against women in the DRC, and we acknowledge the work being done by the WCC to promote social cohesion in Iraq and to promote and protect the rights of religious minority communities in that country.

It is possible for faith communities to address this often-hidden crime by helping to create strong communities where justice, peace, and freedom are key values upheld, role-modelled, and supported through a victim-centred and trauma-informed approach to stop human trafficking. A joint Anglican-Orthodox initiative—the International Forum on Modern Slavery—is one church initiative seeking to protect those who are vulnerable.[148]

6.3 Some reflections

The sections above have set-out the specific sexual and gender-based violence faced by different groups—women, children, the disabled, refugees, and migrants. Although these are different groups, some common themes can be seen to offer an insight into the root causes of violence against them.

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143. Naomi Tulay-Solanke, "The World Is Shocked that Aid Workers Are Sexual Abusers. I'm Not.," BRIGHT Magazine, 15 February 2018, https://brightthemag.com/liberia-oxfam-aid-humanitarian-sexual-abuse-metoo-50a82d4f443e.
144. James Landale and Vinnie O'Dowd, "Syria Conflict: Women 'Sexually Exploited in Return for Aid,'" BBC News, 27 February 2018, .
145. Dimitropoulos, "Europe Wasn't Ready for Child Brides."
146. "Traffickers and Smugglers Exploit Record Rise in Unaccompanied Child Refugees," *The Guardian,* 17 May 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/may/17/traffickers-smugglers-exploit-record-rise-unaccompanied-child-refugees-migrants-unicef-report.
147. WCC Executive Committee, "Sexual and Gender-based Violence."
148. *Church leaders unite their voices against modern slavery.* https://www.oikoumene.org/news/church-leaders-unite-their-voices-against-modern-slavery.

Deeply misplaced expectations associated with gender or sexuality are at the core. Women, and sometimes children, are seen as commodities for the use and pleasure of a person who is in a power relationship with them. There is a deep intolerance for those who are different from the expected norm, a norm which is deeply linked with existing power and privilege. Those people who challenge or upset the status quo of perceived notions of gender or sexuality, doing so simply by the way they dress, the way they act, or who they love, seem to precipitate in those holding positions of power an abhorrence that entitles the latter to at best turn a blind eye to the violence that others will perpetrate on them, or at worst condone or commit such violence. The use of sex and sexuality as a violent tool—through sexual abuse or harassment of others, including children—is deeply linked to power and shame itself.

Human sexuality is deeply associated with values, beliefs, and practices, many of which are informed and influenced by one's faith. It is the subject of strongly and emotionally held convictions that may become points of conflict and division in faith communities and the wider society. Within many church settings, the taboo nature of discussions of sexuality also means that issues are not addressed sufficiently, and often there is a paucity of venues for discussions about human sexuality and related issues. This lack of visibility, dialogue, and discussion makes it more difficult to challenge and transform the various problems which arise because of not dealing with the issue in a holistic and forthright manner.

Can faith communities be quiet as they witness, or even at times are a complicit part of societies that perpetuate exclusion, oppression, and violence based on age, gender, and sexuality? Can churches prevent people from living full lives, creating an environment of fear and hatred that forces the affected people to live behind façades, destroying self-esteem and making people susceptible to discrimination, criminalization, exploitation, and blackmail?

Reactions associated with the response to homosexual relationships often overwhelm the discussion and avoid addressing the many issues with which the community needs to deal—sexual violence and abuse, incest, or rape and violence within the supposedly sacred spaces of family, marriage, and church. Notwithstanding the existing gender disparities, women are often still viewed ethically as perpetual minors who have no real capacity to go through moral-discernment processes without the control and intervention of the churches. But communities of faith, listening and learning from each other, are capable of comforting, coping, and overcoming these crises. The imperative for such an ethos is well articulated in Romans 8:35, which affirms that nothing can stand between us and the love of God.

Polarization around issues of gender and human sexuality can be understood against the backdrop of the new configuration of the role and place of religion in contemporary societies. Issues of gender and sexuality appear to be especially vulnerable to being wilfully framed as "culture wars" between "conservatives" and "liberals," between "religious" and "secular," or between "North" and "South." These matters of human life, embodiment, and intimacy, appear to be convenient candidates for shaping religious identities and affirming faith-based political and moral positions in contemporary society. Issues of gender and sexuality have become and are becoming highly instrumentalized and have gained emblematic status. For some, including some religious groups throughout the world's religions, rejection of sexual diversity has become the mark of true belief and the adherence to tradition.

Like other religious communities, some Christian churches are engaged in reorienting and searching for their identity and missionary response in the midst of this changing landscape of religion in the complexities and ambiguities of the contemporary world. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, offers this reflection. The church, he says:

> *is a voice that questions from a wholly different perspective, the kind of perspective that cannot be generated by corporate self-interest. It is a conversation partner, and what has sometimes been called a "critical friend" to the state and its laws; it questions the foundation of what the state takes for granted, often challenging the shallowness of a prevailing societal morality; it pushes for change to make the state a little more like the community that it is itself representing: the kingdom of God.*[149]

149. Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 2014).

Every conversation on the pilgrim way aims to bring together the churches with diverse views and perspectives on issues, in a compassionate and empathetic environment. Such conversations may not necessarily lead to convergence. But bringing together and facilitating the churches to come together in order to reflect, discuss, and engage with one another on issues of human sexuality, to bring about transformation of faith communities, to address the issues in a holistic and compassionate manner is what it means to demonstrate bondedness in Christ.[150]

150. See also Thomas Best and Günther Gassmann, eds., *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 232 - 233, para. 20.

7. Human Sexuality Conversations within the Churches

7.1 History of the conversation within the WCC

As we have seen earlier, the World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches constituted at Amsterdam in 1948. As the WCC sought to define its nature and authority, it accepted a description proposed at the Toronto meeting of the central committee in 1950. The Toronto Statement emphasized that the council was at the service of the member churches as they seek to make common cause in the search for the expression of their unity in Jesus Christ in work and life. The central committee then went on to emphasize that the WCC "is not and must never become a superchurch. It is not a superchurch. It is not the world church. It is not the *Una Sancta* of which the Creeds speak . . .. The 'authority' of the Council consists only 'in the weight which it carries with the churches by its own wisdom' (William Temple)." The statement further asserts that the WCC is not the place for negotiating unions between churches.[151]

The WCC, therefore, provides a space for taking common action and for deliberation on issues which affect the life and witness of the member churches. Since member churches have over the decades raised their concerns about issues of human sexuality, the WCC has provided a space for deliberation and common action on that topic.

As the church is called upon to fulfil its tasks in all times, not only in times past or future times but also now, the assembly in Busan in 2013 called upon the WCC to continue its work on human sexuality, which has a history going back to the 1961 assembly in New Delhi.[152] Already in 1961, this assembly had drawn attention to the need to examine the issues of sexual relations before and after marriage, illegitimacy, polygamy, short-term marriages, and easy divorce in the light of the rapidly changing morals in different parts of the world.

With the increase of means of artificial birth control, the assembly in Uppsala in 1968 called for materials to aid discussions on polygamy, celibacy, birth control, divorce, abortion, and homosexuality. In response, a major consultation entitled "Sexism in the 1970s" was held in Berlin in 1974.[153]

The assembly in Nairobi in 1975 sought a theological study of sexuality, while the assemblies in Vancouver (1983) and Canberra (1991) pointed to the same concerns as the previous assemblies, but added that of biotechnology.

In the period after the assembly in Canberra, the issue of homosexuality progressively took centre stage. Significantly, reflection on sexuality was transferred from the Family Life and Education Unit to the Unit of Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation in the WCC. The lens for addressing the issue was that of human rights, though a number of churches and the host government were not prepared to allow the human rights approach to be evident at the assembly in Harare in 1998. At that assembly, the issue of sexuality was sensitively handled in a series of presentations in the Padare, the meeting place and space for discussion of issues not directly on the programme of the assembly itself.

After the assembly in Harare, the focus was widened, and a Reference Group on Human Sexuality was appointed by the general secretary to offer him advice. It was made clear that there was no intention on the part of the WCC to take a stance on issues of sexuality. Prior to the assembly in Harare, the focus had been on homosexuality and on violence against women, with the intention to examine these in the wider context of human sexuality. The intention was to establish a conversation between the churches on these issues and to provide a space for reflection and support. The group undertook an analysis of all the statements made by the member churches on matters of sexuality. The request from the general secretary to the churches was to share with the council the results of

151. For the Toronto Statement, see *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices,* ed. Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 463–68.
152. See "Background Document on Churches' Response to Human Sexuality," https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2006-porto-alegre/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/churches-response-to-human-sexuality.
153. *Sexism in the 1970s: A Report of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1975).

their work, but not to write a new statement in the process. Second, a series of seminars was held at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute that provided a space for dialogue, but also sought to create a model that might be replicated elsewhere to facilitate conversations on issues of human sexuality. At this time, a parish discussion course from South Africa was also explored as a contextual example that might be adapted for other situations. Also feeding into this conversation was the WCC work on HIV and AIDS, and violence against women.

Prior to the assembly in Porto Alegre in 2006, the WCC, through its Faith and Order Commission, published its findings from a study process on theological anthropology.[154] After the assembly, the Faith and Order Commission engaged in a further study with a direct bearing on issues of human sexuality. *Moral Discernment in the Churches* was an attempt to explore how churches of different theological traditions come to discern moral positions.[155]

The WCC's message raising concerns regarding the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda, in 2009, is an example of how the WCC has also engaged in advocacy in addressing governments and other bodies in the defence of the rights of the vulnerable.[156] People with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions are part of the church and community, and they contribute to the welfare and fullness of society.

Since the assembly in Busan in 2013, conversations have continued on issues of human sexuality. This present document is part, therefore, of a long and continuing conversation in the fellowship of the member churches of the WCC. As many churches and faith communions have been troubled when searching for understanding and wisdom on issues of human sexuality, not least on homosexuality, the member churches of the WCC have called each other to share their insights and to continue to walk with churches challenged by these issues. In approaching the issues, in line with work undertaken after the assembly in Harare, it has been agreed that the reflections are to encompass all aspects of human sexuality, and not be limited to any one manifestation of it.[157]

Many expect the WCC to provide safe spaces of dialogue for sincere participants to meet and to engage in conversations on these matters. Indeed, the Bossey seminars mentioned earlier provided such a space for active and respectful listening, which is a model that can be replicated elsewhere. Conversation, after all, is a process of dialogue and mutual exchange, of conferring together and walking the same path, allowing the differences to be articulated, while encountering different positions in an attitude of love, respect, and interest to grow in mutual understanding. Out of such conversations, change occurs, and new understandings and actions may emerge. Such may inspire churches to changes of practice and teaching in respect of those humans who have been given a sexual orientation other than the majority's. They may also lead to a deepened understanding of the reasons behind traditional teachings and practices.

The assembly in Busan also placed the work of the council under the overarching theme of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The strategic objectives of the WCC and therefore of the pilgrimage are as follows: the strengthening the fellowship of churches; engaging each other in spirituality, theological reflection, and formation; building relations of trust and understanding with others who are working for justice and peace and communicating the inspiring and innovative work done together in and for the world.

As a recent Faith and Order document puts it: "Pilgrimages are transformative journeys that are ultimately directed toward the reign of God. As they move together and face the challenges of the journey, pilgrims may be opened unexpectedly to new experiences of the holy and be renewed in heart and mind."[158] Therefore, the WCC is a space for the churches between the "now" and the "not yet," to discern together the reign of God. Such conversations on the pilgrim way are,

154. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology,* Faith and Order Paper No. 199 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/christian-perspectives-on-theological-anthropology.
155. *Moral Discernment in the Churches,* Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/moral-discernment-in-the-churches-a-study-document.
156. Rev Dr Samuel Kobia, WCC General Secretary, Letter to the President of Uganda, Mr Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, raising concerns regarding the Anti Homosexuality Bill, 22 December 2009, http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/messages-and-letters/letter-to-the-uganda-president.html.
157. See "Background Document."
158. Introduction, *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace,* Faith and Order Paper No. 224 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2017), 9, para. 2.

as the author of the Letter to the Ephesians notes, to be undertaken with forbearance—"with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love" (Eph. 4:2).

7.2 Conversations within WCC member churches and ecumenical partners

As many churches and Christian Communions address issues of human sexuality, the question as to which of the core resources—scripture, tradition, reason, experience—should be prioritized has led to polarization, as has the understanding of the resources themselves. This is especially evident as churches have sought to face up to new contexts in which their life and work are conducted. Questions on the role of religion and the churches in modern society often focus on issues related to gender and human sexuality, among other issues, such as the position and emancipation of women and members of sexual minorities in society and within Christian communities. Debates revolve around the compatibility of religion and modernity; full acknowledgment of human rights for women and persons of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions and sex characteristics; and Christian communities claiming the right to freedom of religion and belief. Conversations also explore and interrogate the ways in which modernity has become intertwined with views on autonomy, agency, and emancipation, and how this development has affected and shaped current sexual behaviours, beliefs, identities, norms, and lifestyles. For many Christian groups, the rejection of sexual diversity has become the reaction to modern autonomy, agency, and emancipation, and how this has affected and shaped current sexual behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, identities, norms, and lifestyles.

As for interchurch relations, in particular in the last twenty years, the issue of human sexuality has evolved from a moral issue causing emotional debates and controversies in ecumenical relations into a real church-dividing issue and—unfortunately, and unnecessarily—often an issue which is highly politicized. It has led to embittered polarization. Some churches have reacted by remaining silent. The majority of Christian denominations experience serious opposition to a wider acceptance of the rights of people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. Many Christian leaders in different parts of the world generally oppose any liberalization of laws or social attitudes. The issue of homosexuality has become a chosen battleground for defending and affirming either traditional or liberal religious identities. The disagreements occur within churches as well as between churches. The churches are also mobilized on these issues from various sides to influence society and bring about policy change.

To illustrate the tensions within and between churches, here are examples from different regions and church families. They are drawn from member churches, national and regional councils of churches and Christian world communions. At this point, it is important to emphasize that the member churches of the WCC are also involved in discussions of human sexuality in their national and regional councils of churches. There are also accounts of initiatives in four theological colleges and seminaries. These accounts do not exhaust the approaches of churches, councils, and communions to issues of human sexuality. Rather they illustrate how and why they have become engaged in these matters and the extent to which they have been able to reach conclusions accepted by their members and member churches. The examples given also offer insights and approaches to living with difference when agreement has been elusive.

7.2.1 Member churches

WCC member churches throughout the world have been engaged in discussion on issues of human sexuality. On the pilgrim way, they share their experiences with others. The churches below come from different continents and theological traditions, have approached the issues in different ways, and have reached different conclusions. It is important to emphasize that each has a different polity and mode of decision making. Some rely on experts or those who carry authority in a hierarchical constitution, while others debate and discuss through a system of courts or districts. However, they each offer their story specific to their time and place.

The United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) has helped to break the silence by facilitating open discussions regarding human sexuality, sexual orientation, and vulnerability to HIV. After wide and substantive discussions, clear steps have been taken to become an affirming, welcoming, accepting, and caring community of all the followers of Christ. The acronym LGBT for UCCP corresponds to their statement, "Let Grace Be Total."

Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA). At the Provincial Synod in September 2016, a resolution on human sexuality was placed before the synod. It was defeated. The matter was then taken up by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba and brought before the Synod of Bishops in February 2017. Following further discussions, the Archbishop's Commission on Human Sexuality (ABCHS)—consisting of six commissioners—began its work in late 2017.

Guiding the commission was the memory that as a province, there has been the experience of having dealt with contentious issues in the past. These have with time become sources of celebration of diversity rather than points of schism. As Archbishop Makgoba put it in his Ad Laos on 25 February 2015:

> *Of one thing I am absolutely determined, and that is that the Church in Southern Africa should build on our history of refusing to allow our differences to separate us, and that we should continue to work patiently through them together. We overcame deep differences over the imposition of sanctions against apartheid and over the ordination of women, and we can do the same over human sexuality.*[159]

The commission has therefore as its theme that of "Journeying Together." Its mandate is to help the people of the province, right at grassroots, parish level, to be a part of a conversation—the kind of conversation that includes conscious listening to "the other" in its many forms, so that what the Spirit is saying to the church in this time and space can be discerned and heard.

When the Provincial Synod comes together again in September 2019, the commission will report on the road travelled, and a way ahead in the form of a motion to be debated.

The commission arranged an ACSA Provincial Roadshow—with facilitated engagements happening in at least eight centres around the province. Opportunities for the commission to listen to the concerns and challenges and dreams of the people in each diocese throughout southern Africa were provided. Further occasions for the whole people of God to come together and listen to one another, and to receive resources to enable further conversation to happen in parishes and congregations, have been arranged. Such local conversations have been organized by the Diocesan Reference Groups (set up by each bishop in each diocese) with the resources—worksheets, Bible studies, reading and research materials, and teaching aids—sourced and shared by the commission.

Church of Scotland. As with other churches, the Church of Scotland has been exercised by issues of human sexuality over the last six decades. In that period the General Assembly has received reports on violence against women, the abuse of children, the trafficking of sex workers, particularly from Eastern Europe, and domestic violence. The church has put in place stringent safeguarding processes, and reporting and disciplinary procedures. Members of the church have been active in the establishing and running of crisis and advice centres.

However, throughout the sixty years a predominant concern has been issues of homosexuality. In 1957, the UK Government received the Wolfenden Report, which recommended that homosexual activity between consenting adults over the age of twenty-one in private be decriminalized, and in 1967 the appropriate legislation was brought into force in England and Wales. It was not until 1980 that such legislation was enacted in Scotland. The General Assembly addressed the issue in 1967, 1968, and 1983.

In 2007 the issues were addressed again in a report entitled *A Challenge to Unity*. While there was, as in the earlier reports, an analysis of scriptural texts and an awareness of the insights of the Reformed tradition, the report identified contemporary challenges concerning sexuality, and drew on the conflicting insights of medical scientists. It emphasized that as the church continued to seek to discern on matters of homosexual love and activity, it insisted that Christians of widely different opinions are one in Christ, bound together in his Spirit, and part of his body, the church. That report was followed in 2009 by one on being single in church and society, which enunciated the theological prism of God in relationship—a prism evident throughout this document, *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way.*

159. Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, *To the Laos—To the People of God, Lent 2016,* https://archbishop.anglicanchurchsa.org/2016/02/to-laos-to-people-of-god-lent-2016.html.

The issues surrounding homosexual identity and behaviour again became the focus of work undertaken by a Special Commission for the General Assembly. The particular issue centred on whether someone who was in a gay or lesbian relationship could exercise the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament in the church. The commission sought the opinion of churches throughout the world, including those closely associated with the Church of Scotland. Alongside this ecumenical enquiry, it commissioned papers from leading medical scientists, particularly those associated with genetics. It also sent a questionnaire to all Kirk Sessions and Presbyteries to stimulate discussion throughout the church, and to elicit their opinion. Further, it listened to personal testimonies of homosexual and lesbian members and ministers. The report affirmed the importance of marriage and was critical of the UK and Scottish governments' attempts to apply the term to include homosexual couples. The commission was at pains to emphasize the need to continue discussion in a respectful manner and to promote mutual understanding with those with whom members disagree. The Special Commission concluded that homosexuality was not a bar to ordination and asked the General Assembly to appoint a theological commission to explore the issue further.

The Theological Commission once again examined differing approaches to the interpretation of scripture, exegeted the specific biblical texts associated with the homosexual debate, and explored the understanding of the church from scripture, ecumenical documents, and the Reformed tradition. The report offered a framework in church law appropriate to the task of safeguarding the conscientious rights of ministers and congregations not to consider applications from gay and lesbian ministers. It emphasized that gay and lesbian ministers who had partners needed to formalize the relationship in a civil partnership. The report further provided a liturgy for the blessing of same-sex partnerships.

The commission was unable to agree and thus offered two distinct approaches and conclusions to the issue of the ordination of persons in homosexual relations. The General Assembly engaged in a divisive debate and put in place a process for congregations to be able to call gay or lesbian ministers who are in a civil partnership, while reaffirming the traditional view of the church as normative.

Subsequently, in 2017, the theological forum offered an approach to the theology of same-sex marriage, drawing on scripture and differing approaches to the interpretation of scripture, the development of marriage, arguments from human rights, and theological arguments for the admissibility of same-sex marriage.

The Theological Forum—and the church—continues to work within the constraints of "Constrained Difference," which seeks for an area of allowable disagreement within the tradition of the church as a whole, while upholding the fundamental doctrines of the church.

In 2018, the General Assembly decided to permit ministers, if they so wished, to conduct marriage or blessing ceremonies for persons in same-sex relationships and set up a committee to create an appropriate liturgy.[160]

As a consequence of these decisions and processes, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland at its 2018 General Assembly decided not to continue the practice of inviting the Church of Scotland moderator to its assemblies and to loosen the historic ties with the Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church.[161] At the same assembly, it also decided that persons in same-sex relationships may not be members of the church, nor will they baptize them.[162]

Evangelical Methodist Church of Argentina. In 2010, the Argentine National Congress approved same-sex marriage. This change in the national legislation, which equalized the rights of heterosexual people with people of other sexual identities, led to debates and conversations throughout the country. The Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina, as well as the other historic Protestant churches, publicly agreed with the new legislation, especially emphasizing that all people should enjoy the same rights and no person should be excluded from the church.

160. For the named reports, see https://churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/70375/church-of-scotland-general-assembly-2016-volume-iii.pdf
161. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland withdrew from membership of the WCC in 1980 over the Programme to Combat Racism, and its promotion of interfaith dialogue (as, for example, in the Ajaltoun Consultation).
162. Presbyterian Church in Ireland, *Church of Scotland and URC—Statement,* 6 June 2018, https://www.presbyterianireland.org/News/2018-News-Archive/June-2018/Church-of-Scotland-and-URC-Statement.aspx.

Therefore, the Governing Board of the church sent a letter to all congregations establishing some criteria and recommendations. In the text it was made clear that if a couple of the same sex requested a ceremony of blessing after their civil ceremony marriage, the issue should be addressed by the board of the local church and that the decision, either positive or negative, should be reached by consensus. The decision should then be communicated to the Superintendent of District.

At the 25th General Assembly (2015), the issue was once again on the agenda, in the light of opposition to the 2010 decision. Two years later it was agreed to establish a study commission on sexuality and gender. Membership of the commission includes ordained and lay pastors, women and men from different geographical areas of Argentina. It was made explicit that the commissioners should not confine themselves to the issue of marriage blessing services for same-sex couples. As a church, there was a lack of reflection on human sexuality, gender equality, patriarchy, and sexual diversity, among other issues, and these might appropriately be addressed. The commission has sought to receive written contributions from experts of different disciplines—theology, medicine, law, sociology, psychology and education. The report will be drawn from the consensus arrived at with regard to these disciplines. The study commission is charged with presenting a consensus document to the General Assembly in October 2019.[163]

United Church of Canada. To appreciate the journey of the United Church of Canada (UCC), it is important to understand a number of factors which created the context for the church's decision towards full inclusion.[164]

The history of the church in its engagement with the society is important because the United Church of Canada is known for its engagement with and influence on social policies in the country.

The United Church's understanding of scripture is also a key factor in the church's ability to struggle with issues. In 1988, the Theology and Faith Committee produced the document *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture.* The document affirmed:

> *When we read or hear or say the phrase "The Bible says," we must remember that we are dealing with interpretation: what one reader or community understands the Bible says. Thus, the question of the authority of the Bible becomes interwoven with the question of a particular interpreter's authority. The interweaving of authorities is unavoidable, but it is worth keeping in mind when we discuss questions of power and authority.*

The way the church engages in its decision-making processes allows for a keen listening to the Spirit and for the fact that persons vote as their individual conscience dictates, as they are attentive to the leading of the Spirit. In the United Church, a decision of the General Council becomes the policy of the church. That does not, however, mean that every congregation and individual concurs with the decisions. When the church affirmed its approval of gay marriage, the General Council ruled that marriage was an act of worship and was under the responsibility of the local church council. It gave congregations who were not completely committed to same-sex marriage a way out. However, many congregations have changed their marriage policies to accommodate same-gender marriages. The decision of the General Council encouraged most congregations to engage in a conversation about their understanding of marriage. The power of personal stories and the creation of spaces to hear stories within the context of a moral framework is an important element in the church's discernment.

In the Canadian context, government policies and laws are supportive of the rights of LGBTQI2+ persons,[165] and have legalized same-sex marriages.

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163. This report has been received from Pastor Maximiliano A. Heusser, coordinator of the study group on sexuality and gender, translated by Alexandre Pupo.
164. Although the church uses the LGBTQI2+ acronym, it initially focused on sexual identity (homosexuality)—Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual. In the last few years, the church has turned its attention to issues of gender identity—transgender, and with the church's commitment to living in right relations with indigenous peoples, work is being engaged on two-spirit identity (2+) which is the indigenous terminology for its LGBQ community.
165. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Questioning, 2 Spirit Identity (indigenous peoples' expression for LBGT). See https://www.united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/sponsoring-lgbtiq2-refugee.

The journey to inclusion of LGBTIQ2+ persons for the United Church of Canada began over 30 years ago and is an ongoing process and reality in the life of the church. Although there are no actual data kept of ministers' self-identity, more than one-third of the current active clergy (2500) would self-identify as LGBTIQ2+.

Today, because of its commitment to inclusion, the church welcomes ministers/clergy and lay members from other denominations who are seeking safe places to live out the fullness of who they are as gay, lesbians, or transgendered persons.

There are several markers of the journey:
Prior to 1988, the United Church of Canada had not been supportive of same-sex relationships. In 1982 a support group for gay and lesbian members was established: Affirm (United). Two years later, Friends of Affirm was created, and they produced a study document and became an advocacy group within the church, providing materials for discussion at congregational level. In 1988 the General Council made two statements about sexual orientation, church membership, and church leadership. The council declared that "all persons regardless of their sexual orientation who profess faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to Him are welcome to become full members of the United Church of Canada," and all members of the United Church of Canada are eligible to be considered for ordained ministry.[166]

In 1994, Affirm United and Friends of Affirm merged and invited ministries of the church to engage in a process of study and discernment in the light of scripture and the Reformed tradition. This has subsequently provided a new ethos for the church.

Throughout the past three decades, the United Church of Canada has been engaged in supporting the federal government as it put in place civil marriage for gays and lesbians.

In 2009, the General Council affirmed the participation and ministry of transgender people within the United Church of Canada and encouraged all congregations to welcome into membership, ministry, and full participation transgender people. The executive of the council in 2012 acknowledged the distinction between gender identity (referring to a person's innate, deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, or neither) and sexual orientation (having to do with the gender to which one is emotionally and physically attracted). The United Church of Canada has subsequently ordained the first transgender woman and elected the first gay moderator and the first lesbian moderator.[167]

7.2.2 Conversations and teachings within the Roman Catholic Church

Although not a member church of the WCC, the Roman Catholic Church is a member of the Faith and Order Commission and the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, and an observer in the Commission of the Churches in International Affairs and in the Reference Group of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. It also cooperates in other aspects of the life and work of the WCC as a participant observer. The Roman Catholic Church has discussed matters of human sexuality extensively, most recently in the Synod of Bishops, (2015) and the Extraordinary Summit on the Protection of Children (February (2019).While there was no representative of the Roman Catholic Church serving on the Reference Group on Human Sexuality for the drafting of this document, in our discussions it was clear that we learned from documents in the public domain, especially *Amoris Laetitia* and the remarks of Pope Francis at the Extraordinary Summit. We realized how important they are for our own deliberations and for the wider discussions of the churches.[168]

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis focussed upon family, marriage, and love. The Apostolic Exhortation comes at the end of a period of consultation throughout the Roman Catholic Church. The *Lineamenta* (preparatory document) was sent to the bishops and to episcopal conferences throughout the world. This

166. The United Church of Canada, *Moving Toward Full Inclusion: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the United Church of Canada,* p.30, https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/full-inclusion.pdf.
167. United Church of Canada, *A Timeline of LGBTQIA+ and Two-Spirit Justice in The United Church of Canada* https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/lgbtqia-two-spirit-timeline.pdf
168. This section was drafted by members of the Reference Group on Human Sexuality and was then passed to a Roman Catholic scholar to ensure that the section did not misrepresent his church. His helpful comments were then incorporated into this section.

contained an extensive reminder of the journey the church has undertaken, through an exploration of scripture and the tradition of the church. The bishops were invited to consult with the members of the church and, in this case address some 46 questions on marriage and the family. On the basis of these responses, the bishops met in synod in Rome in October 2015. The Apostolic Exhortation emerges from this process. Throughout the process, after extensive biblical and spiritual reflections, Pope Francis declares: "Love always has an aspect of deep compassion that leads to accepting the other person as part of this world, even when he or she acts differently than I would like."[169] His focus is on true love and the virtue of patience, which is necessary for success in the vocation of marriage. But *Amoris Laetitia* emphasizes mercy and the mission of a church that goes to the peripheries of society.

As the Roman Catholic Church continues to deal with the question of the place of homosexuality in the church and struggles to respond to persons who have been abused sexually, the church insists that human life and human sexuality are closely connected, on the basis of natural, divine, and ecclesiastical laws, sacred tradition, and holy scriptures.[170] There is a vocation that God envisioned in creating humanity as man and woman which involves the "capacity and responsibility, *of love* and communion."[171] Therefore "everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual *identity*."[172] The differences between man and woman, whether physical, moral, and spiritual, are intended by God to be complementary and oriented toward the good of marriage and family life. Man and woman have equal personal dignity before God. While the Roman Catholic Church clearly teaches that homosexuality is unacceptable,[173] she recognizes that "the number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible" and "they must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfil God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition."[174]

On sexual abuse by clerics, many conferences of bishops have struggled to address these abuses and have put in place safeguarding processes and measures. In 2011, the Vatican published guidelines for dealing with the sexual abuse cases among the clergy, and Pope Francis in 2014 created a new commission—The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors—to oversee questions concerning the protection of children and minors in the Church. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis cites Pope John Paul II:

> *Sexuality is not a means of gratification or entertainment; it is an interpersonal language wherein the other is taken seriously, in his or her sacred and inviolable dignity. As such, "the human heart comes to participate, so to speak, in another kind of spontaneity." In this context, the erotic appears as a specifically human manifestation of sexuality. It enables us to discover "the nuptial meaning of the body and the authentic dignity of the gift."*[175]

In response to continuing sex scandals, particularly those involving clergy, religious, bishops, or cardinals either for committing sexual acts or for complicity in harbouring the perpetrators while not standing alongside the victims, Pope Francis convened an Extraordinary Summit of Catholic Leaders on the protection of children in Rome in 2019. Although the Vatican had said that no clear guidelines should be expected at the end of the summit, Pope Francis did list eight "best practices" formulated under the guidance of the World Health Organization. These are protection of children, impeccable seriousness, genuine purification, formation, strengthening and reviewing guidelines by episcopal conferences, accompaniment of those who have been abused, the digital world, and sexual tourism. Pope Francis emphasized that the primary goal of every measure has to be the protection of minors from any form of physical or psychological abuse. No abuse should be covered up, as was often the case in the past. He further noted that the protection of children should also take into account new forms of abuse, many of which come through the digital world. Because Pope Francis saw this as a widespread problem on every continent, he wanted pastors of Catholic communities to face the issues together

169. Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia,* para. 92.
170. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), no. 2332.
171. *Catechism,* no. 2331.
172. *Catechism,* no. 2333.
173. *Catechism,* no. 2357.
174. *Catechism,* no 2358.
175. Amoris Laetitia, para. 151.

in a co-responsible and collegial manner.[176] In May 2019, Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Letter in the form of a *Motu Proprio* entitled *Vos Estis Lux Mundi.* The Letter begins by emphasising that:

> *The crimes of sexual abuse offend our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm to the community of the faithful. In order that these phenomena, in all their forms, never happen again, a continuous and profound conversion of hearts is needed, attested by concrete and effective actions that involve everyone in the Church.*

The letter is primarily concerned to address abuse by clergy and members of religious orders, in acts which force someone to perform or submit to sexual acts, perform sexual acts with a minor or vulnerable person, or produce, distribute, or possess pornographic material. It also condemns conduct intended to interfere with or avoid civil or canonical investigations.

Pope Francis calls on episcopal conferences to establish within a year public, stable, and accessible systems for submission of reports and emphasizes that victims must be treated with dignity and respect, welcomed, listened to, and supported. On these matters silence is not an excuse, and the act of reporting is not to be deemed a violation of office confidentiality.

The *Motu Proprio* goes on to establish procedures for the examination of bishops and other clergy accused of sexual misconduct or of failure to report well-founded suspicions of such misconduct. The norms established in this *Motu Proprio* are to be enacted for a three-year experimental period.[177]

7.2.3 Christian world communions

Issues of human sexuality are divisive not only within churches, but also between churches, even of the same ecclesial tradition. In a number of instances, issues of human sexuality have been placed on the agenda of Christian world communions.

Anglican Communion. While discussions about human sexuality (including homosexuality) had been taking place in several provinces of the Anglican Communion in the 1970s and 1980s, there had been no formal debate at the global level until the Lambeth Conference of 1998. There, one of the four sections of this meeting of bishops had *human sexuality* on its agenda.

The section worked for a week within a structured format and produced a report that outlined four distinct positions on the subject. The report recommended that there not be any resolutions on the issues. However, the leadership of the conference thought otherwise, and a resolution did come to the floor of the plenary. There, with passionate speeches from several bishops, and heated debates on amendments, resolution I.10 was passed by a large majority. While assuring persons of homosexual orientation that they are loved by God, the resolution rejected homosexual practice as incompatible with scripture. It called "on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex," but said it "cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions."[178]

It is to be noted that, even before the Lambeth Conference, there had been several meetings of church leaders from what was called the global South, people who were concerned about the direction that churches in North America and Britain were taking. Conferences issued "trumpets" from these Anglican Encounters in the South, and many bishops who participated brought their concerns to the Lambeth Conference. The "Second Trumpet from Kuala Lumpur" said, for example, "We are aware of the scourge of sexual promiscuity, including homosexuality, rape and child abuse in our time.

176. See Cruxnow coverage of the February 2019 abuse summit: "Pope's End to Anti-Abuse Summit Sunday Disappoints Survivors," 24 February 2019, https://cruxnow.com/february-abuse-summit/2019/02/popes-end-to-anti-abuse-summit-sunday-disappoints-survivors/.
177. See Pope Francis, *Vos estis lux mundi,* 7 May 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190507_vos-estis-lux-mundi.html
178. Lambeth Conference, Section 1.10.e., http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1998/section-i-called-to-full-humanity/section-i10-human-sexuality?author=Lambeth+Conference.

These are pastoral problems, and we call on the Churches to seek to find a pastoral and scriptural way to bring healing and restoration to those who are affected by any of these harrowing tragedies."[179]

The reaction to the passing of the Lambeth I.10 resolution was intense. Many gay and lesbian Anglicans were outraged and profoundly hurt. Those who supported the resolution insisted that it was "the teaching of the Anglican Communion," although in fact resolutions of Lambeth Conferences while bearing considerable moral authority, are not in fact binding on the provinces unless they themselves adopt them.

In the fallout from that summer's events, the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, summoned a group of bishops from across the Communion to hold "International Conversations on Human Sexuality." After three years they published a report which, noting that there was no consensus on the main issues, nevertheless pointed out a number of areas of agreement, made recommendations for continued work on the issue across the Communion, and shared the "covenant" which they established for their conversations. This covenant has been widely used by Anglicans when discussing the matter. Some of the covenant commitments:

4. *We will have flexible understanding, attempting to understand from the point of view of others.*
5. *We will seek to learn from all perspectives.*

As a result, one of the conclusions that the group reached together was: "We discovered in our own experience the importance of 'interpretive charity': imputing the best intentions to our colleagues and other members of our Communion, telling the better stories about them, checking (if possible at first hand) before drawing conclusions."[180]https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/189015/conversations_on_human_sexuality.pdf

Archbishop Rowan Williams continued the methodology of gathering Anglicans from across the theological spectrum and from a wide variety of provinces. The Lambeth Commission on Communion, which met in 2003-2004 and produced the Windsor Report, was able to find consensus on some ways to ensure the highest degree of communion possible in the light of the ordination to the episcopate of a gay partnered man in the Episcopal Church and the authorization of a liturgy for the blessing of same sex unions in a diocese in Canada.

The Lambeth Conference of 2008 was organized in a radically different manner than had been the quasi-parliamentary model of previous Conferences. Rather than having working groups which produced resolutions for debate, bishops met in "Indaba" groups, which facilitated conversations on a wide variety of topics. Although a substantial number of bishops decided not to attend, the bishops who did attend were able to avoid major confrontations about human sexuality.

That same summer, the momentum from the global South led to a parallel conference being held in Jerusalem, where GAFCON was born. There was an expectation by some that this would be an alternative to Lambeth. In its self-description:

> *the GAFCON journey began in 2008 when moral compromise, doctrinal error and the collapse of biblical witness in parts of the Anglican communion had reached such a level that the leaders of the majority of the world's Anglicans felt it was necessary to take a united stand for truth. A crowd of more than one thousand witnesses, including Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, clergy and lay leaders gathered in Jerusalem for the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON).*[181]

Some bishops attended both GAFCON and the Lambeth Conference. Some bishops had already left their own provinces for parallel jurisdictions, and others were to follow.

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179. *Second Trumpet from 2nd Anglican Encounter in the South,* Kuala Lumpur,10-15 February 1997 section 6.5.
180. *Final Report from the International Anglican Conversations on Human Sexuality,* March 2005, 6, http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/189015/conversations_on_human_sexuality.pdf.
181. About GAFCON, https://www.gafcon.org/about.

Following the 2008 Lambeth Conference, a process of "Continuing Indaba" was established to bring together groups of bishops, clergy, and lay people from around the Communion.[182] In 2016, at the conclusion of the process, the facilitators published a book entitled *Living Reconciliation.*[183]

Moreover, intentional structured conversations were established at the initiative of the Anglican Church of Canada for bishops from Canada and Africa in particular. Groups met to discuss *mission*, in the course of which friendships were formed and more problematic issues, such as sexuality, were addressed. These Bishops in Dialogue meetings continue to be held. Similarly, intense structured conversations took place within the Church of England and in several other provinces.

The theme throughout the years that followed Lambeth 1998 has been bringing together leaders from across differences—difference about human sexuality, but also across cultures, languages, gender, power, and access to resources. The long and sometimes painful process of learning to listen to one another in deep thought and prayer has strengthened the "bonds of communion" and led to unexpected friendships. While consensus on issues relating to human sexuality has hardly been achieved, consensus that we belong together as Christians and Anglicans through it all has been much more widely accepted.[184]

Lutheran World Federation. At the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Winnipeg in 2003, issues of homosexuality came to the fore as the Church of Sweden urged the assembly to address the issue, underlining the human rights dimensions of it.[185] A task force was established, though interest in dialogue on this issue was low, probably because of the tensions linked to it and the fear of fracturing the federation by addressing it.[186] The task force delivered its report at the LWF council meeting in Lund (2007). It was received and formed the starting point of five-year dialogue period within the member churches and the federation.[187]

However, the situation became more difficult when the Church of Sweden decided to expand the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples. In the light of this, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (the largest Lutheran church in the world) announced its decision to end its fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and with the Church of Sweden for their allowance of the blessing of same-sex marriages and the ordination of homosexual ministers.[188] At the council meeting of the Lutheran World Federation, this rift in communion was a major issue. Several European member churches had taken similar stances to that of the Church of Sweden, and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus was not the only church that was critical of such a position. The Evangelical Church in Tanzania, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, and the Silesian Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, for example, were also critical but did not sever their relations with ELCA and the Church of Sweden.

At the council meeting in Bogotá in 2012, an intense dialogue took place, where it became clear that a majority wished for a continuing discussion. After the meeting the moderator and general secretary summarized the experiences of the dialogue, noting that respectful and dignified dialogues had been possible in which the unique situation of each member church was acknowledged, and that the federation as such should take no action on issues of family, marriage, and sexuality. They ended by emphasizing that the Lutheran World Federation journey as a communion of churches continues despite the unresolved situation.

Despite the tension among the member churches, they have all continued to be part of the federation.

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182. *Report of the Listening Process on Human Sexuality,* The Anglican Consultative Council XVIII Nottingham, 2005, http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/39805/listening_process-.pdf.
183. Phil Groves and Angharad Parry Jones, *Living Reconciliation* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2014).
184. We are grateful to Canon Rev Dr Alyson Barnett-Cowan for her help with this section.
185. For a history of the engagement of the LWF on this issue, see *Family, Marriage and Sexuality,* Lutheran World Federation, https://www.lutheranworld.org/family-marriage-and-sexuality.
186. "A Chronological Compilation of Key Official LWF Discussions and Decisions on Family, Marriage and Sexuality, 1995–2013," Lutheran World Federation, https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/LWF-Emmaus_chronological_compilation1995-2013.pdf.
187. "Task Force Report and Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue?," Agenda Exhibit 10 Meeting of the LWF Council, Lund – Sweden, 20 to 27 March, 2007, https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Exhibit%2010%20Report%20Task%20Force%20English.pdf.
188. "Church of Sweden Barred from Ethiopian Summit," *The Local,* 27 April 2007, https://www.thelocal.se/20070427/7133.

The general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation has emphasized:

> *As a communion of churches we will find ways better to discuss the issues that potentially divide us—issues such as human sexuality and different interpretations of scripture- in ways that honour both diversity of views on important issues and the more fundamental basis of unity among us. We will first of all rely on the power of Eucharistic worship and prayer.*[189]

Mennonite World Conference. The Mennonite World Conference (MWC), established in 1925, brings together some 10,000 local congregations distributed in 107 national Anabaptist-related churches, three of whom are members of the World Council of Churches.[190] Until now, the MWC has not entered into a formal process of conversation about human sexuality.

In 2006 MWC adopted a statement of "Shared Convictions." The fourth of these convictions affirms the importance of scripture as the basis of all theological reflection and understanding. It states: "As a faith community, we accept the Bible as our authority for faith and life, interpreting it together under Holy Spirit guidance, in the light of Jesus Christ, to discern God's will for our obedience."[191]

At the same time, MWC recognizes that its member churches have confessions of faith and ecclesial practices that are not always in agreement with each other. Beyond the "Shared Convictions," MWC does not advocate a single confession or practice for member churches; instead, it seeks to provide a safe space for member groups to learn from each other on matters of faith and life.

In general, MWC member churches in Europe and North America have engaged questions related to human sexuality and same-sex marriage more frequently than have member churches in Africa, Asia, or Latin America.

- In its *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995),[192] the Mennonite Church USA affirmed that marriage between one man and one woman is for sexual union, companionship, and procreation (Art. 19). The article has been the source of much discussion and debate since the formation of MCUSA in 2001. Beginning in 2013, several regional conferences have either openly affirmed same-sex marriage or have not disciplined local congregations who have done so. The ensuing debate in MCUSA over polity and the authority of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* has prompted other conferences to leave the denomination.
- At its assembly in July of 2016, the Mennonite Church of Canada received a report from a Task Force on Human Sexuality that established a process of discernment concerning same-sex committed relationships. That report emphasized that a prayerful study of scripture can lead to different understandings on committed same-sex relationships and recommended that the church create room to test these alternative understandings under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- In 2016 the MWC website featured an article by Emanuel Neufeld of the Evangelische Mennonitengemeinde Schänzli, Muttenz, Switzerland, that described the process of community Bible study on the topic of human sexuality.[193] The Swiss Mennonite Conference as a whole, however, has not engaged the topic in a formal way.
- Recently, the Mennonite Brethren Church in Paraguay began a study process among its leadership to clarify its position. A few churches in Latin America have issued statements strongly affirming traditional male/female gender identity.

189. Correspondence between LWF General Secretary Martin Junge and Archbishop Anders Wejryd. The General Secretary was citing *A Chronological Compilation of LWF strategy* agreed in June 2011.
190. The 3 members of the WCC are the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Germany, and the Netherlands.
191. "Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists," adopted by Mennonite World Conference General Council, 15 March 2006, https://mwc-cmm.org/shared-convictions.
192. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective,* Mennonite Church USA (Elkhart, Ind.: Herald Press, 1995).
193. Emmanuel Neufeld, "How Can We Get Answers from the Bible for 21st-Century Questions," *Mennonite World Conference Courier,* 16 May 2017, https://mwc-cmm.org/hi/node/488

In general, even though most MWC member churches would denounce the mistreatment of LGBTQ individuals, the vast majority affirm traditional understandings of marriage as being between a man and a woman and—by 2019—do not seem eager to engage the topic formally in a global way.

World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). Within the World Communion of Reformed Churches, established in 2010,[194] differences about human sexuality led to conflict, division, and rupture in relations between and among the members of the communion. At its General Council meeting in Leipzig in 2017, the communion was clear on the dignity and rights of all people, regardless of the sexual orientation and identity of people, or the diverse theological interpretations regarding this issue. The WCRC Action 56 of the General Council:

1. *Condemns all acts of violence against LGBTQ persons, regardless of our theological views, around the globe*
2. *confesses its complicity in supporting violence through its silence and*
3. *continues to commit itself to working for justice, freedom and a safe world for all persons to flourish.*

At its 19th General Assembly (General Council), it was agreed to establish a process to explore these issues of human sexuality. It is seeking to establish a space where all are included and protected and where mutual challenge, accountability, and grace underlie the discussions based on the study of scripture and the insights of the Reformed tradition. The World Communion of Reformed Churches followed up the Leipzig recommendation by organizing a consultation in Chennai under the theme "Strengthening Communion" and produced a number of commitments. However, the consultation did not feel that it could speak for the whole communion but agreed to continue dialogue and to seek to read scripture and reflect theologically together.

The Eastern Orthodox churches. The Ecumenical Patriarch, His Holiness Patriarch Athenagoras, sent letters to all the autocephalous churches calling for an Orthodox Council and inviting the churches to draw up an agenda of issues to be discussed. The first Pan Orthodox Conference, held in Rhodes, Greece, in 1961, established a long list of issues. To further this agenda, a secretariat was established at Chambesy, Switzerland, and in 1976, ten topics were agreed upon. Preparatory documents were prepared. Local churches had agreed to prepare and submit study documents on the various issues. The secretariat then compiled these documents, which were discussed, agreed upon, and eventually submitted by pre-conciliar conferences to the synods of each church. These documents drew heavily on scripture and tradition through the writings of the Fathers of the Church. However, the council did not take place at this stage, perhaps because of the changing situations in Eastern Europe. When the idea of convoking a council re-emerged, the preparatory documents were reviewed, and upon the request of some churches, adapted to new challenges. After a few rounds of drafting and redrafting by preparatory commissions with representatives of all local churches, all Primates gathered in Chambesy in January 2016 to review the texts, and they agreed that these should be forwarded to the Great Council for approval. The Great and Holy Council met 18–26 June 2016 in Crete, although some four local churches did not attend (Antioch, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Russia).

Two of the documents are pertinent to *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way*. The document "'Sacrament of Marriage and Its Impediments' emphasized that the family is threatened by secularization and moral relativism."[195] The pressing issue in society today is marriage, which is the centre of the family, and the family is what justifies marriage. Pressure to recognize new forms of cohabitation constitutes a real threat to Orthodox Christians. Civil marriage lacks sacramental character. The document goes on to emphasize that "the church does not allow for her members to contract same sex unions or any other forms of cohabitation apart from marriage." It reaffirms that marriage is sacred, involving the free consent of the man and the woman, and places this within divine law, instituted simultaneously with the creation of Adam and Eve. The mystery of the indissoluble union between man and woman is an icon of the unity of Christ with his church. The family is itself the small church. Indirectly, this rejected any discussion of homosexuality.

194. The World Communion of Reformed Churches was formed by the coming together of the World Alliance of the Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council at the Uniting Assembly at Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, in 2010. See World Communion of Reformed Churches, at http://wcrc.ch.
195. "The Sacrament of Marriage and Its Impediments," *Official Documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church,* June 2016, https://www.holycouncil.org/marriage.

The Holy Synod had received a letter written on behalf of Christian LGBT Groups by Misha Cherniak. He drew attention to the situation of their LGBT faithful and the pain they experience where the community refuses to acknowledge their presence or calls them an enemy. Many have been thrown out of parishes, denied Holy Communion, or required to undergo conversion therapy. The letter called on the local churches to stop such violence and aggression. It noted that all human sexuality can be a vehicle for sin, yet in essence it is a gift of God. The letter called on the churches to establish safe spaces of dialogue, where those of differing views can express their opinions, experiences, and doubts in an ethos of respect and trust.[196]

Although there was no discussion on homosexuality as such at the Holy Council, the second document, "The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World," contains a chapter on the "Attitude of the Church towards Discrimination," where it is affirmed that "the Orthodox Church confesses that every human being, regardless of skin colour, religion, race, sex, ethnicity and language is created in the image and likeness of God and enjoys equal rights in society. Consistent with this belief the Orthodox Church rejects discrimination for any of the aforementioned reasons since these presuppose a difference in dignity between people."

While individual theologians and some particular local churches have discussed issues of human sexuality and homosexuality,[197] the Great and Holy Council reaffirmed the importance of marriage between a man and a woman, while also condemning discrimination of persons on the basis of their sexuality.

The Oriental Orthodox churches. The Oriental Orthodox family, which includes the Coptic Orthodox, the Ethiopian Orthodox, the Syrian Orthodox, the Indian Orthodox, the Armenian Orthodox, and the Eritrean Orthodox churches, are in communion with each other. Many Oriental Orthodox churches are religious minorities in contexts where Islam is the predominant religion—particularly in Northern Africa and the Middle East, and where survival is their priority. Therefore, discussion on matters of human sexuality is greatly limited.

In response to proposed government legislation in India, limited discussion has taken place in the Indian Orthodox Church (Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church) and in the Delhi Diocese of the Indian Orthodox Church (Catholicate of the East). Both seek to respond to changes in the law with respect to homosexuality. The Synodical Commission for Moral and Ethical Issues of the Malankara Orthodox Church affirms that the love of God is generic, and God looks upon every man and woman as equal. The commission goes on to affirm that homosexuality, on the basis of scripture and tradition, is deemed to be unethical, immoral, and sinful. The commission goes on to argue that while the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to equality, the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, the appeal to human rights is made in the context of public order, morality, and health. The commission does not agree with viewing all gay men as criminals, and recommends that a distinction be made in the law between consensual and non-consensual acts and that consensual acts should be decriminalized.[198] The late Metropolitan Job Mar Philoxenos of Delhi, from the Indian Orthodox Church, responding to the same change of legislation in 2009, affirmed that the family is the basic unit of society, and that sex between husband and wife is for the continuity of the human generation. Homosexuality is a disease and has to be properly counselled and treated and is not to be regarded as a human right.[199]

While there are no official records of a joint discussion or engagement of the Oriental family with human sexuality issues, it is noteworthy that prominent theologians from the Oriental family have striven to give expression toward a life-giving engagement in this area.[200]

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196. Full text in *For I Am Wonderfully Made,* ed. Misha Cherniak, Olga Gerassimenko, and Michael Brinkschroder (Esuberanza: European Forum of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christian Groups, 2016), 298–301.

197. See the articles in *The Wheel* 13/14 (Spring/Summer 2018) by Metropolitan Timothy Ware and Professor Andrew Louth, among others. They open up discussion of homosexuality from the writings of the Fathers and the liturgies of the church, and they plead for the church to cease being silent on these issues and open a dialogue on them.

198. The Indian Orthodox Church Synodical Commission for Moral and Ethical Issues Response on Unnatural Offenses—Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, 23 December 2013.

199. Metropolitan Job Mar Philoxenos, "Indian Orthodox Church Believes Homosexuality a Crime," 3 July 2009.

200. Geevarghese Mor Coorilos, "Orthodoxy and Sexuality: Reflections on the Doctrine of God and Anthropology," in *Theological Reader on Human Sexuality and Gender Diversities: Envisioning Inclusivity,* ed. Roger Gaikwad and Thomas Ninan (NCCI/SPCK, 2017): 112–20. See also Reji Mathew, "A Biblical and a Theological Critique of Select Ecclesial Fathers," in *Theological Reader,* 65–79.

General secretaries of Christian world communions. An informal meeting of Secretaries of Christian World Communions brings together in an annual gathering the general secretaries, where common issues are discussed. Such issues affect relations between the communions and their member churches. It is therefore not surprising that at the meeting in 2016 discussion in an un-minuted session took place on the impact of issues of human sexuality on church fellowship within and between member churches of the different world communions.[201]

7.2.4 National Councils of Churches

As with Christian world communions, so with national councils of churches. Many have found issues of human sexuality being placed on their agenda by member churches. In some instances, the intention has been to create a space for respectful discussion rather than to make a statement. The councils draw on churches from different church traditions, but face similar challenges through their shared political, social, and economic context. The following accounts offer perspectives from different continents.

National Council of Churches in India. The National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), consisting of 30 churches from the Protestant and Orthodox traditions, engaged its member churches in discussion of issues related to human sexuality and gender diversity, through two "study institutes" in 2001 and 2003, both initiated by the WCC and thereafter through NCCI's Commission on Justice, Peace and Creation and at a programmatic level through the Ecumenical Solidarity for HIV and AIDS (ESHA) Programme since 2015.[202] In spite of major theological differences among the member churches, the NCCI has consistently upheld a prophetic stance; challenged the network through its programmes, literature, and key statements; and heard and listened to those marginalized due to their sexuality. A viable platform of dialogue and learning for its network has been created.

Major milestones in the NCCI journey include the *Policy on HIV and AIDS: A Guide to Churches in India* (2009) and *An Ecumenical Document on Human Sexuality* (2010).[203] The latter was developed through a two-year study and conversation among the member churches and the Key Affected People (KAP) by the Commission on Justice, Peace and Creation. In 2012, at the Quadrennial Assembly in Bangalore, the commission proposed to establish a forum for people with sexual and gender diversities, which became a reality in November 2014, with the Ecumenical Forum of the Gender and Sexual Diversities, the first Christian initiative to reach out to this community at the national level. At the pre-assembly of this forum in April 2016, at Jabalpur, it deliberated on the theme "Towards Inclusive Rainbow Churches" and issued a message to the 2016 NCCI Quadrennial Assembly.

By 2014–2015, a focused engagement in this area was envisaged through the ESHA programme.[204] Over the last four years it has been instrumental in bringing the issues of human sexuality and gender diversity out from the margins, and it has enabled (mostly reluctant) churches and the theological colleges to engage with this sensitive issue in a spirit of pastoral care rather than the traditional "sin and condemnation" mode. Many churches now realize that the issues of sexual minorities are not part of a "Western agenda," but rather issues which youth, church congregations, and theological colleges within the country are increasingly facing. A few churches have gone ahead to start special ministries among the transgender communities, while a few theological colleges have incorporated a constant process of academic engagement in this area. Efforts continue with interested churches and theological colleges, through a guided process in the form of training modules for developing inclusive communities. These have often been at the cost of risking its leadership position with some of the Indian churches who consider such a level of engagement liberal.

Jamaica Council of Churches. The Jamaica Council of Churches (JCC), established in 1941, affiliated with the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC) and the World Council of Churches, has a membership which includes

201. It is important to note that the Roman Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church (alongside the Ecumenical Patriarchate) are members of this body.
202. See "Background of ESHA Programme," ESHA, https://www.eshancci.org/about-us-2/.
203. *Policy on HIV and AIDS: A Guide to Churches in India, National Council of Churches in India,* 2009, available from https://ncci1914.com/policies/ ; An Ecumenical Document on Human Sexuality, adopted by Resolution #EC: 2010.28(9) of the Honorable Executive Committee of the NCCI, 16 September 2010, http://ncci1914.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Ecumenical-Document-on-Human-Sexuality.pdf.
204. http://www.eshancci.org/about-us-2.

Protestant churches, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the Roman Catholic Church.[205] With respect to sexuality, the JCC has issued press releases as an organization. In the 1970s and 1980s, the JCC was involved in Family Life Education programmes, sometimes in conjunction with the CCC, and in the 1990s put out public statements on legislation around marriage and the need to improve family life. Over the years, matters related to sexuality and HIV and AIDS have been the subject of public education activities, seminars for church membership, and clergy and press releases issued by the Council. A 1972 statement, for example, concurred with public opinion that there was a need to review legislation on abortion, but cautioned against abortion on demand. The JCC proposed instead that focus be placed on adoption and the financial support of pregnant women whose pregnancies were unwanted.

Seminars were held in the mid-1990s by the JCC in conjunction with the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health and with the CCC's initiative funded by WCC to sensitize the clergy and seminarians regarding HIV and AIDS. In the 21st century, the JCC organized workshops on sexual gender-based violence, to promote the Thursdays in Black Campaign to end sexual gender-based violence; also a Regional Consultation for Faith Leaders on HIV and AIDS, acknowledging the link between sexual gender-based violence and HIV, as well as the existence of HIV in faith communities.

In this context, the JCC urged a rejection of violence against members of the LGBTIQ community and provision of compassionate pastoral care by the church but rejected same-sex marriage as contrary to the scriptures.

The JCC has not shied away from matters of sexually inappropriate and abusive behaviour within the church; and in 2017, in the wake of arrests of clergymen on charges of sexual abuse of children, issued a press release condemning sexual abuse and calling the church to consistency in ethical behaviour and accountability. The JCC has also been engaged in strategies to foster dialogue among Christians of different perspectives, especially with respect to ministry with the LGBTIQ community and divergent views on the debate regarding the repeal of the anti-sodomy law.

Christian Council of Sweden. The Christian Council of Sweden (CCS) has a very broad base, with 27 different Christian churches as members. The presidium consists of representatives of four "church families"—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Free Churches (Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, and a wide range of more fundamentalist and quite liberal churches). The members of the presidium are the primates or corresponding officers of their respective churches, so that the ecumenical commitment can be maintained at a high level.

The CCS has always housed a wide variety of views on human sexuality. For a long time, it was not possible to talk much about it. Some member churches have, at least in practice, accepted cohabitation without marriage for years. For others it is unthinkable. All member churches view abortion as something that in the best of worlds would not have to exist, but several see legal and free abortion as a lesser evil than the alternatives.

Issues for deliberation in the council have normally emerged from the member churches. That holds very true for issues on same-sex relations and the concept of marriage. Issues on homosexuality had been widely discussed within the Church of Sweden at least since the beginning of the 1970s. In 1994, the bishops conference of Church of Sweden unanimously agreed that a prayer and blessing service could take place for same-sex couples in civil partnership and recommended rules for it. That brought the discussion into the CCS, but it was handled without too much conflict. Later on, when other issues about homosexuality and Jesus became prominent because of an art exhibit, quite a few tensions arose. This led to a number of seminars for church leaders, organized by the CCS, and also to a strengthening of the yearly very honest and personal days for church leaders, where the task was to get to understand each other and share the difficulties of leadership—with full openness to each other and silence to the "outer world." This fostered trust, which was needed when the issue of same-sex marriage had to be addressed. At first, the churches tried to unite around the strategy that civil partnership and traditional marriage should be regarded as different but parallel and of the same legal validity. Since the Church of Sweden, with its Lutheran background, does not affirm that marriage is a sacrament, this strategy broke up. The first religious groups accepting same-sex weddings then turned out to be the leading Baptist congregation in Stockholm and the synagogue in Stockholm. The Church of Sweden followed some time later.

205. See The Jamaica Council of Churches website http://jamaicacouncilofchurches.yolasite.com/.

Canadian Council of Churches. Discussing same-sex marriage at the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC) was an exemplar, and the first challenging test case, of the "Copernican-revolution" decision that ecumenical dialogue had to change. Realizing that the weighted-vote procedure created an ecumenism of "big churches vs. little churches," in 1996, the CCC abandoned voting, adopting an ethos whereby all member churches stood on an equal footing of witness. It created a forum table at which consensus could be sought, but divergences frankly acknowledged with respect. In a Forum of Churches, the participants needed fidelity to their own church's tenets but also attentive listening to the views of others.

After several years of choosing topics on which consensus was certain, it was clear that forum would not be valid until the churches could respectfully weather sharp disagreements. In 2002, it was decided to engage the topic of same-sex marriage. At that time, the legal question was before the Canadian Ministry of Justice, a few churches had begun blessing such marriages, others were opposing, and many were in a process of discerning. A roundtable was held for the Governing Board with presentations by the United Church of Canada (UCC), the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC-NA), and the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). All presenters explained their churches' positions: the UCC "for," based on Christ's equal concern for all humanity; the CRC-NA "against," on scriptural grounds; and the OCA "against," based on tradition and iconography. No consensus was possible or expected, yet all were heard equally. There was admiration for the earnestness, clarity, and Christ-likeness of each position, and the three presenters spontaneously hugged each other!

This outcome satisfied the CCC, showing that doctrinal diversity did not prohibit ecumenical unity within the forum. It frustrated the media, who wanted Christian truth to be black and white. Enlightened preaching on this outcome encouraged Christians to humbly respect one another's sincerity, recognizing that truth allows a process of discernment.

National Council of Churches in the Philippines. In 2014, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) started an HIV-related project that included education on gender and sexuality as one of its components. This sparked the fire to start the ecumenical platform's discourse on human sexuality vis-à-vis the churches' actions, inactions, and misactions.

The position was strengthened in 2015 at the 24th General Convention, when NCCP released "Create Safe Spaces for Understanding Human Sexuality," a statement that affirmed that humans are created in the image of God, thereby imbuing them with dignity, and that human sexuality is a gift from the creator and must be affirmed and celebrated.

Thus, the General Convention called its church members to (1) create safe spaces to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity, (2) develop biblically-based and theologically sound materials on human sexuality, and (3) draw persons of different sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) into the church, where they can share their gifts and graces.

Since 2016, education and training on gender and sexuality has been conducted. Clergy, women, and young people are given orientation on the ecumenical perspective on human sexuality and discussion on SOGIE. The NCCP module on Women's Formation Course and the SAVE Toolkit, published by the International Religious Leaders Living with and Affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA+) are the resource materials used for gender and sexuality discussions.

The council is also producing a curriculum on gender and sexuality for children and young people. This is a response to the mandate of the General Convention to develop biblically based and theologically sound materials on human sexuality. The framework of the curriculum focuses on three major themes: (1) understanding and affirmation of sexuality as a gift from God, (2) valuing diversity and different sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions, and (3) living out the values of inclusivity, solidarity, and respect.

Furthermore, a National Consultation on Gender and Sexuality was held in 2017 to provide representatives from member churches, partner seminaries, and institutions the opportunity to hear from different experts and resource speakers on

issues related to human sexuality, particularly on LGBT issues. The consultation also gave the participants an opportunity to showcase the efforts of their respective churches to engage with issues that face the LGBT community. Moreover, the consultation provided a safe space for the LGBT community from NCCP member churches to share their stories, struggles, and hopes.

The consultation focused on how the ecumenical community can embody love, celebrate diversity, and pursue justice in the light of the struggles of the LGBT community. The NCCP's journey to understanding human sexuality has opened doors for partnership, collaborations, and friendship with the LGBT organizations, communities, and allies.

The ecumenical learning has become meaningful and significant because of the engagement of the members of the LGBT community. To date, at least five out of the ten NCCP member churches have LGBT-affirming statements that recognize and affirm that all are created in the image of God. The council, as a conciliar body, continues to face challenges in this undertaking. Nevertheless, it will continue to uphold the value of respect, solidarity, and collective learning.

As the NCCP approaches its 25th General Convention in November 2019, with the theme "Lifting Up Our Voice without Fear," the ecumenical community is challenged to amplify the voice of the poor, marginalized, and discriminated against. It will continue to promote and uphold the sanctity and dignity of every human being, a life where every person is respected, protected, celebrated, and lived to the fullest. It will continue to call for the whole inhabited earth to create safe and hospitable spaces where every person can live without fear of exclusion and condemnation.

7.2.5 Regional ecumenical organizations

Latin America Council of Churches (CLAI). The topic of human sexuality has been an ongoing challenge and demand for the leadership and faith communities of the Latin America Council of Churches (CLAI). It has been difficult to deal with, owing *inter alia* to the various confessional traditions that coexist, in addition to the situation in each of the 20 countries that have comprised the CLAI since its establishment in Oaxtepec in 1978.

The first CLAI programme, the Pastoral Care of Women and Gender Justice, did pioneering work with such taboo subjects in Latin America and the Caribbean as machismo, sexism, broken relationships, institutional violence, and sexual and reproductive health, among many others.

CLAI has continued to contribute to public outreach efforts and networking with civil society and intergovernmental bodies as a credible witness to its Christian vocation, ecumenical presence, and inter-religious endeavours. For example, between 2008 and 2015, it emphasized sexual and reproductive rights, focusing on awareness-building and training aimed at new leaders and grounded in local, national, and sub-regional realities. This led to preparation of the training guide for churches and ecumenical bodies, which came together with the convening of the consultation on "Churches and Sexual and Reproductive Rights," held in Havana, Cuba, in 2013. The agreement signed with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reflected a potential strategic alliance to achieve this goal.

At the recent Summit of the Organization of American States (OAS) held in Lima, Peru, CLAI participated in the "Coalition on Religion, Beliefs and Spirituality in a Dialogue with Civil Society." Together with other networks originating in sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTIs, theological seminaries and universities views were expressed on the basis of common identities and liberating actions. Concrete requests for the OAS member states were drafted with a view to demystifying and tearing down the fundamentalist, conservative stereotypes that threaten the committed work of faith-based organizations (FBOs) and have spread visibly across our continent. Faced with this reality, there is an intention to relaunch the debate with member states, civil society, and FBOs, with special emphasis on human dignity, where sexual diversity and gender issues can be dealt with urgently and without moralizing prejudices.

Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). HIV and AIDS has been a special focus of the Christian Conference of Asia's programme priorities. Several skill-building and advocacy programmes have been initiated by CCA to address concerns,

as well as to build an HIV- competent church and community in Asia. In order to effectively respond to HIV and AIDS with the member churches and councils, CCA is continuing a journey of building the capacity of its members to become inclusive and relevant for people living with HIV and AIDS through the Action Together to Combat HIV and AIDS in Asia (ATCHAA) programme.

CCA acknowledges the importance of addressing the vulnerabilities of HIV and AIDS in the community. Women, youth, commercial sex workers, and men having sex with men are more vulnerable to HIV transmission. It is in this context that CCA organized a conference held 15-18 August 2018 to address human sexuality and reproductive health and ensure the practice of safer sexual behaviours.

As part of the ATCHAA initiatives, CCA with experts in the fields of HIV and AIDS, human sexuality, and reproductive health came together for a consultation to understand the subject better, and also to discuss various strategies for the churches and congregants to address the issue. The objectives of the consultation were:

1. To develop strategies for positive dialogue with churches and their members on human sexuality and reproductive health
2. To understand and advocate for prevention strategies for HIV transmission in relation to human sexuality and reproductive health
3. To collate and disseminate best practices in creating a conducive environment for dialogue

It is hoped that best practices on engagement on human sexuality are documented for dissemination, that strategies for deeper engagement on the topic are established, and that churches make plans for action on prevention, care, and support for vulnerable communities.

Besides the recent consultation, as of now, the CCA has not made a public statement on human sexuality as such, nor has it initiated a conversation at its assemblies.

Other regional ecumenical organizations. For the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC), issues of human sexuality have not been a priority, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, although there is a programme to address family life and gender justice.

It is some years since the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) addressed the issues of human sexuality, since it is such a sensitive issue and not all the churches are ready to engage in discussion of this. Further, there are other priorities due to the political situation in the region. There is a hope that theological institutes will address this in future.

For the member churches of the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), human sexuality is a taboo subject, and so it has not been an item on the PCC agenda. However, issues of human sexuality have been discussed in some churches, though no formal documents have been written to guide the churches in their own discernment.

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) has, according to its general secretary in correspondence with the WCC Reference Group, deliberately avoided discussions on these issues.

7.2.6 Seminaries and theological institutes

A number of theological institutes have developed programmes to open up discussion of issues of human sexuality. They may provide resources that could help some churches and councils to address these issues.

Jakarta Theological Seminary. For many years it has been clear that there were always people in the seminary community, both students, staff, and lecturers, who had a different sexual orientation. However, they remained in the closet. Concern was expressed at this time about the risks of unsafe sex that members of the community might get involved in. In 1993

students were sent to a gay community in Jakarta as part of their field work in the hope that they could learn about what it meant to be gay or transgender and how this could be understood in the light of Christian faith.

In 2008, the seminary started to explore the possibility of bringing up this issue in a public conversation. There was concern about possible rejection by many. It was therefore brought up in the context of the celebration of World AIDS Day. This was followed in the next year by a book launch on woman's sexuality. The following year an LGBT Week was organized.[206] These initiatives have spread to many more activities, such as Peer Educators and Peer Counsellors' Camp, International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, Biphobia, and World Suicide Prevention Day.[207]

Many churches, and most in our environs, are still very much against LGBT persons and consider them to be sinners. Therefore, this work requires a very careful approach. Approach has been made to the local churches, and the work is conducted together with the Association of Theologically Educated Women in Indonesia. It has been found that it is easier to work with and through women because it has been evident that they are more able to empathize with LGBT people, and their attachment to family life makes them better understand what struggles and challenges LGBT people have to face.

Senate of Serampore College. Some 54 colleges in India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are affiliated with the Senate of Serampore College, which was founded in 1818. The college has prided itself on emphasizing contextual theologies. The bachelor of divinity curriculum was revised and accepted in 2010. The new curriculum evolved in recognition of the context in which the college exists, and it was designed to provide skills and tools to the student in understanding the same with a view to efficient ministry to the people of their community. Additional courses were developed to meet the challenges of the church in society. In the wake of HIV and AIDS, and the awareness that sexual issues had been taboo subjects in Indian society, the general secretary of the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) emphasized to the Senate registrar the need for a course on human sexuality. During the review of the curriculum in 2010, the course on human sexuality was introduced under the Theology and Ethics cluster in hopes of better equipping candidates for the ministry to address these issues. However, the lack of resource materials for teaching and other required coaching tools have dented the interest of theology teachers and the candidates to some extent. In this respect the NCCI in conjunction with the Senate of Serampore College is working toward revising the syllabus and developing appropriate methodologies.

University of Kwa-Zulu Natal—the Ujamaa Centre. The Ujamaa Centre was initiated in 1985 as part of the School of Theology at the then-University of Natal (currently known as University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, UKZN) in South Africa. It is a non-partisan, non-denominational centre for community development and research that supports capacity-building on development and good governance in church and civil society through theological education. Its aim is to ensure rigorous participation of all citizens in social transformation.

The Ujamaa Centre is committed to working with communities of the poor, the working class, and the marginalized, using biblical and theological resources for social and individual transformation. At the heart of the Ujamaa Centre is the concept and practice of praxis. Praxis involves an ongoing commitment to the cycle or spiral of action-and-reflection. The Ujamaa Centre works prophetically with the Bible and theological resources to bring about liberation and abundant life for all (John 10:10).

The primary concerns are those sinful structures which trap and keep people oppressed and marginalized, including economic systems, which maintain a rich elite and leave the masses in poverty, and patriarchal systems, which sustain male privilege and power and keep women subservient and subject to various forms of gendered abuse.

In the early 1990s, various women's groups invited the university to undertake Contextual Bible Study (CBS) with them. While a range of work was done with them, it was the Tamar CBS that generated the most resonance with women. "If

206. "LGBT Week at Jakarta Theology Seminary, *her lounge* (blog), 17 November 2011, http://herlounge.blogspot.com/2011/11/lgbt-week-at-jakarta-theology-seminary.html.
207. See, for example, the work of the International Association for Suicide Prevention, https://www.iasp.info/wspd/pdf/2013_wspd_activities.pdf, sv Indonesia.

this story is in the Bible, we will not be silent," women declared. It was soon discovered that it was not only gender-based violence about which women would not be silent. The same women's groups in KwaZulu-Natal were the ones who spoke about HIV and AIDS. A woman from one of the church-based women's groups from Edendale Hospital in Pietermaritzburg sought support for those who were being sent from the hospital "to go home and die."

Working with women who were HIV-positive was a significant development for understanding and work on sexuality. HIV-positive women began to talk more openly about their bodies and their sexuality through CBS work. They also began to draw men into their HIV support groups, and slowly men too began to talk about their bodies and their sexuality. Thus, the gender work expanded to include work on "redemptive masculinities." The plural was important, as men talked about "other ways of being a man," including gay masculinity. The silence had been broken now by men.

Through gender work, HIV work, and work in search of redemptive African masculinities, there were many resonances with that of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. This provided additional sites and resources for local communities to work on sexuality. This work fed into the postgraduate programme on gender, religion, and sexuality in the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at the UKZN.

But the most significant development came through partnership with the Pietermaritzburg Gay and Lesbian Network. The invitation was to explore the relationship between religion and sexuality. Through this partnership, a range of community-based CBS work—including specific projects which brought together local clergy, including clergy from African Instituted Churches (AICs) and those from the Gay and Lesbian Network—was developed. This work has been truly transformative, working within local languages with a diverse range of clergy and members of the LGBTIQ community. CBS work has had a significant effect. It is clear that there have been changes in perceptions, attitudes, and practices among clergy and a renewed sense of dignity, affirmation, and inclusion among African LGBTIQ Christians.

Through this local work the Ujamaa Centre has been invited to form partnerships with other Africa-wide projects on African sexuality, using CBS resources forged in other local contexts across the African continent. The Tamar Contextual Bible Study Campaign, initiated by the Ujamaa Centre, has become a global tool to deal with gender-based violence.

The work on human sexuality has come full circle. Most recently, the focus has been on the context of violence against African lesbian women. Throughout work on sexuality there has been a constant request to undertake work on hate crime, the so-called "corrective" rape of African lesbian women. It is clear that currently there is a growing backlash against African women who are seen to represent the limits of patriarchal control.[208]

United Theological College of the West Indies. The United Theological College of the West Indies (UTCWI) was established in the 1960s with the merger of Protestant theological colleges in Jamaica and the participation of some Protestant denominations in other Caribbean countries.[209] Human sexuality was a topic in some courses in the curriculum, for example pastoral care and counselling, Christian ethics, and psychology. A major focus began in 2004 with establishment of UTCWI as a Centre of Excellence for HIV and AIDS education, specialist counselling training, and advocacy to end stigma and discrimination.

In the light of the data indicating that the Caribbean had the second-highest prevalence in HIV infection, behind sub-Saharan Africa, it was deemed important that Caribbean church leaders have specialized training to equip them to respond to the high prevalence of HIV in the region. An experienced master trainer in the Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) method being used by the Ministries of Health in the Caribbean was recruited. An ecumenical approach to the intervention saw the establishment of a committee consisting of UTCWI, the Anglican Diocesan HIV and AIDS Committee, and the Webster Memorial United Church Counselling Centre. Since 2004, all UTCWI students received training in VCT, and the programme also provided VCT training for congregations and other seminaries in the island.

208. https://srpc.ukzn.ac.za/news/2021/02/ujamaa-centre-hosts-annual-eudy-simelane-memorial-lecture/.
209. For more information on UTCWI, see www.utcwi.edu.jm.

The VCT training provided an opportunity for seminarians to confront their own sexuality, preferences, and biases, and to explore the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to provide counselling to persons of varied sexual orientation and sexual practices. The UTCWI Board of Governors in 2007 approved a collaborative venture to discuss the nature of pastoral care to the gay community. The conference included clergy in congregational ministry and the UTCWI community, the local bishop and other representatives of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), the Jamaica AIDS Support (JAS), and the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians All-Sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG). Church leaders were sensitized and workshops were held.

With statistics indicating higher rates of HIV infection among young women and men who have sex with men (MSMs), a link has been established between reluctance to access facilities for testing, high rates of infection in these populations, and economic, social, legal and cultural factors related to sexuality. While mother to child transmission of HIV has practically been eliminated and there has been an increase in condom use, HIV infection rates remain high among young women—linked with economic factors and gender-based violence—and among MSMs because of stigma against MSMs and legislation that makes incarceration of gay men possible.

Jamaica Praying: A Handbook for HIV and AIDS Sensitive Liturgies and Sermons was an important resource issued by the college.[210] The college also conducts research among graduates of UTCWI and other seminaries who had been trained in VCT to assess the use made of the VCT training on the church, pastoral care, and the LGBTIQ community, as well as the link between sexual and gender-based violence and HIV infection. The college also continues to provide VCT training to end HIV infection, stigma, and discrimination, and to wrestle with the pastoral and ethical considerations in providing pastoral care with the LGBTIQ community in the Caribbean context.

Drew Theological School. At Drew Theological School (Madison, New Jersey, USA) students come from divergent racial/ethnic, theological, denominational, and national backgrounds. In the face of widespread ignorance of sexuality, bitter conflicts in faith communities and families, as well as shameful abuse and violence, the Theological School has developed a firm commitment to incorporating sexuality as a vital part of Christian theological education. The school is a United Methodist-affiliated graduate school, and the United Methodist Church is currently experiencing a painful, deep divide over issues of sexual orientation, equality, and inclusion. There is, therefore, a particular responsibility to create spaces in an academic context that directly address this conflict and equip the students to offer much-needed constructive leadership to the church and the broader society.[211]

The approach of the school includes ongoing opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom. Students engage a wide range of Christian ideas, traditions, and leaders that enable them to communally address issues of sexuality across theological, cultural, and political boundaries that so often cause them to harm, silence, and fear one another. In the classrooms, for example, the curriculum in required introductory courses includes scholarly resources on queer biblical hermeneutics, sexuality education in Asian American Christian faith communities, clergy sexual misconduct, theo-ethics of disability and sexuality, and the Magnificat and African American poor single mothers. There are also elective courses entirely focused on sexuality and religion with more in-depth discussions of Christian faith and topics such as sexual reproduction public policy, sexuality education for youth and young adults, and sexual abuse of children.

Beyond the classroom, community discussions have been organized, such as an open forum series on homosexuality and the church, facilitated by a retired United Methodist Church bishop. Attention to issues of sexuality in the liturgical life of the Drew community is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the school's approach. This includes Christian music, prayers, preaching, and communion liturgies that explicitly affirm God's love for God's diversely embodied human creation as well as entire chapel services focused on Christian faith and sexuality on themes such as sexual violence against women, sexual orientation (led by LGBTQ student group leaders), and living with HIV and AIDS. Finally, in developing a new master of divinity degree curriculum, the faculty have begun a more deliberate and comprehensive plan

210. Mary Hills Kuck, ed., *Jamaica Praying: A Manual for HIV and AIDS* (Jamaica: United Theological College of the West Indies, 2015), at: https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/201cjamaica-praying201d-2013-a-manual-for-hiv-and-aids-has-been-launched.

211. For discussion of the pedagogical challenges, see Kate Ott and Darryl W. Stephens, "Embodied Learning: Teaching Sexuality and Religion to a Changing Student Body," *Teaching Theology and Religion 20,* no. 2 (April 2017): 106–16.

for incorporating a Christian faith commitment to sexuality/gender justice alongside and in conversation with Christian faith commitments to environmental, racial, and interfaith justice concerns.

In sum, the core elements of sexuality education for seminarians that are being developed include: (1) equipping students to provide inclusive Christian leadership that supports targeted, hurting people and just communal relations; (2) providing intersectional Christian resources that acknowledge intersectional aspects of individual and communal social identities (such as those of race, sex, and class); (3) generating creative, healing, and affirming spiritual vitality through the practice of Christian liturgical arts.[212]

7.3 Some lessons from the churches' conversations on human sexuality

The lessons learned emphasize the importance of churches, Christian world communions, national councils, regional ecumenical organizations, and theological institutions finding ways of engaging in conversations and providing safe spaces of grace for these conversations, on the pilgrim way of justice and peace. It is clear that WCC member churches are involved in discussions in a variety of ways through their Christian world communions, regional ecumenical organizations, and national councils of churches. It is anticipated that they will bring into the discussions of the WCC the insights and experiences gained through their discussions in the other ecumenical instruments. The accounts given in this chapter have offered examples of mutual accountability as churches and ecumenical instruments have told the story of their attempts to discern the will of God. They have been seeking to discern the signs of the times, to offer space for dialogue, and to develop practices of pastoral care.

In all instances there has been evident a wrestling with scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The churches have been seeking to find appropriate ways to open up discussions on issues of human sexuality. Some have adopted consensus modes of decision-taking. Many have been responding to government initiatives and directives. In some churches, groups formed within the church have produced discussion materials and have engaged in advocacy on behalf of persons of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics.

Politics, power, and contradictory and selective interpretations of justice. To understand the whole picture, it is important to recognize other factors which have also shaped the debate and attitudes to persons of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics. For example, it is important to realize how "money talks." All over the world, powerful transnational alliances are active. They serve either "conservative" or more "liberal" agendas. Where money, financial power, or ecclesial threats dominate church relations and partnerships, conversation in the safe spaces of grace for honest dialogue and mutual learning is rendered impotent and impossible.

In some cases, churches have allied themselves with civil society groups to champion the upholding of "traditional" values. Globally, several mainline churches align themselves with civil groups and movements for mobilizing Christian citizens to defend themselves against the so-called "homosexual propaganda" and "gender ideology," which is said to be imposed on them by new legislation or policies of international institutions like the UN and others. Although the churches find themselves working with the UN and its agencies on issues of justice and peace, they find it difficult to do the same when it comes to gender justice and justice for sexual minorities.

Practical approaches to facilitate conversations on the pilgrim way of justice and peace. In nearly every context, it is evident that politics, including church politics, and the concerns and needs of the grassroots operate in different ways. The concerns at the grassroots are sometimes completely different from those at the political level of leadership. It may be asked how far, when it comes to issues such as family, homosexuality, and reproductive rights, are the main concerns of people in their daily lives reflected and responded to in the various political agendas.

It is clear that the churches have found and continue to find great difficulty in responding to the challenges posed by issues of human sexuality. Unfortunately, this situation has limited the scope for individuals and the community to engage

212. For more on Drew Theological School, see https://www.drew.edu/theological-school/.

in discussion and dialogue on issues related to human sexuality in the framework of the values of our faith. This has serious implications for the ability of individuals and communities to lead holistic and full lives. A key factor for those churches that have addressed human sexuality successfully has been the recognition of the interconnectedness of the issue to various facets of the life of the community and the addressing of human sexuality in a holistic manner.

Facets that have played a vital role in promoting the myriad positive examples include the following:

- Overcoming HIV and AIDS
- Overcoming sexual and gender-based violence
- Transformative masculinities and femininities
- Eliminating female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Overcoming harmful traditional practices, such as FGM, child marriages, widowhood cleansing, ritual sex, dowries
- Promoting child-friendly churches
- Promoting comprehensive, age-appropriate, value-based sex education for children and adolescents

These approaches have been effective only because they have been based on the Bible and have been addressed through contextual Bible study. It is also obvious that all churches are challenged and asked to sharpen their approaches to issues in pastoral theology and counselling which might be answered in different ways, according to their context. Members of all churches are wrestling with these issues of human sexuality and inclusion, and are seeking moral, ethical, and spiritual guidance. These wider issues of a responsible pastoral theology remain on the agenda of all WCC member churches and are worthy of being shared in safe spaces of dialogue. Such dialogue might also include churches not in membership of the WCC.

8. Creating Safe Spaces of Dialogue: Faith in God's Transforming Love

This document is not a WCC policy document or statement. It is not intended to offer final conclusions to discussions on issues of human sexuality. Instead, it presents indications as to how the matters have been addressed and might be addressed in the member churches. It is clear that discussions in churches and councils have arisen from a variety of factors. These factors include changes in popular understanding, state law, responses to HIV and AIDS, pastoral care of those subjected to violence because of their gender, and the advocacy of those whose human rights have been violated or ignored. On some occasions, discussions have been initiated because a member church of the same or another ecclesial tradition has taken a stance which has been felt to go beyond the tradition's ethos and belief. In some cases, methods of Bible study have led to questions as to the understanding of issues of human sexuality then current.

Clearly there is no unanimity as to the positions adopted and stances taken on these matters. As they have sought to discern on these issues, the churches and councils have explored scripture, tradition, and learning from experience and reason. How then can churches and member churches of councils live with the different stances within and between them?

In the introduction to this document, there is a quote from the Programme Guidelines Committee of the 10th Assembly of the WCC, held in Busan. The background of the quotation is a response to the issues raised during the ecumenical conversations, business sessions, and other presentations regarding the challenges that issues of human sexuality pose to WCC member churches and their constituencies. For the sake of emphasis and to highlight its importance to this document, the assembly recommendation is repeated here:

> *Being aware of divisive issues among churches, the WCC can function as a safe space to enter into dialogue and moral discernment on matters which the churches find challenging. Examples which have been heard strongly in this assembly include questions of gender and human sexuality. Controversial issues have their place within that safe space on the common agenda, remembering that tolerance is not enough, but the baseline is love and mutual respect.*[213]

The World Council of Churches provides a space for taking common action and for deliberation on issues which affect the life and witness of the member churches. Thus, a Reference Group on Human Sexuality was established.

Since the assembly in Busan in 2013, many churches and faith communities have been troubled when searching for understanding and wisdom on issues of human sexuality. The member churches of the WCC have called each other to share their insights and to continue to walk with churches challenged by these issues.

The programme subcommittee of the WCC executive committee, meeting in November 2015, noted that an important aspect of the work of the Reference Group on Human Sexuality was to create safe spaces of dialogue around this sensitive issue. They also said that another significant act is to have a "space for grace." The programme subcommittee recommended that the Reference Group focus its work on creating safe spaces as "spaces of grace." The Reference Group worked with this recommendation for a number of years, but after extensive discussions it became clear that "grace" was understood differently by different churches and traditions. While "grace" had been a major theme at the World Conference on Faith and Order in Edinburgh (1937), where different understandings were explored, there has not been an international multilateral ecumenical dialogue on this locus since then. The Reference Group decided therefore to explore further the understanding of "safe spaces of dialogue" where there was consensus.

Many expect the WCC to provide safe spaces of dialogue for sincere conversations on these issues of human sexuality. Such conversations on the pilgrim way are, as the author of the Letter to the Ephesians noted, to be undertaken with forbearance: "with all humility, and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love" (Eph. 4:2).

213. L. Senturias and T, Gill (Eds.) *Encountering the God of Life: Official Report of the 10th Assembly,* (Geneva: WCC, 2014), 247.

The strategic objectives of the WCC, and therefore of the pilgrimage, include engaging each other in theological reflection and formation, building relationships of trust and understanding, and communicating in inspiring and innovative ways the work done together in and for the world. The expectation is growth toward an ecumenically responsible theology of human sexuality, and a strengthening of pastoral approaches for inclusive communities.

8.1 Safe spaces of dialogue

Throughout this document, the language of "safe spaces" has been evident as a recurring motif. The provision of such a space was one of the major contributions of the WCC through the Bossey Seminars held in 2001, 2002, and 2003. These seminars provided a safe space for the discussion of issues of human sexuality, and they have provided a model for engaging in dialogue on these issues.[214]

All three seminars were introduced by a meditation on the theme of pilgrimage. In terms of methodology, the seminars were facilitated by a professional mediator from outside the WCC (a member of the Religious Society of Friends). She tested the consensus of the group throughout each session in order to allow for development to take place. At the beginning of each seminar, all the participants were invited to make a contract of confidentiality, attentiveness to the process, and honouring the others' convictions.

Through Bible studies, personal stories, and insights from tradition and contemporary understandings, and moderated by the mediator, the attitudes of many participants changed, so that a more inclusive community formed despite persistent differences of opinion. Again and again, churches, councils, and theological institutions have testified to the importance of discussing matters of human sexuality in such an environment. The seminars were a laboratory for testing and refining ways of engaging in discussions of issues of human sexuality.

8.1.1 The Bossey seminars (2001-2003)

The Report to the WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre from the then Reference Group on Human Sexuality gave the following account of the seminars held at the Ecumenical Institute, Château de Bossey**:**[215]

> *The first seminar (July 2001) invited a broad range of participants from various regions to share their cultural, local, and global perspectives on human sexuality. The participants expressed the view and the experience that the best kind of theology emerges out of reflection on real life experiences in addition to sacred traditional theology. The degree to which individual participants were able to reach openness and vulnerability determined the quality of shared reflection and theologizing. Many participants experienced the pressure of their local culture very strongly. The interaction of culture with practice, faith, and scripture was an enduring concern. Human sexuality, it was clear, was not simply the matter of same-sex sexuality, as had often been suggested in ecumenical discussions. Rather human sexuality was seen to be very basic to all human beings and affected them often at points of extreme vulnerability.*
>
> *Personal stories of pain, guilt, celebration were shared within a confidential sharing space in the seminar. People spoke of their lives of engagement with infidelity, failures of sex lives in marriages and relationships, identity questions, and a panoply of other experiences, as well as celebrating the joy of sexual congress. These experiences could not be categorized along the lines of gender, orientation, and culture. They were marked by openness, and became encounters with sacred humanness. Traditional sexual ethics were seen to be inadequate to deal with the new world in which the people of God find themselves. A new practice and theology of sexuality were deemed to be necessary. Such was needed to reclaim the theology of the body and to practice pastoral care with approaches more appropriate for the varied sexual expressions and experiences.*

214. For an account of the seminars, see WCC Executive Committee Gen Pro 05: "Terms of Reference for the Human Sexuality Reference Group—Annex Background Document on Churches' Response to Human Sexuality," https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/churches-response-to-human-sexuality.
215. https://archived.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2006-porto-alegre/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/churches-response-to-human-sexuality.html.

Regional experiences were shared. In sub-Saharan Africa, widespread concern was expressed concerning patriarchal cultural structures, gender differentiation and the violation of women's human rights, particularly in relation to the cultural ritual control of women's sexualities, and violence against women. It was noted that for many African women "the marriage certificate is a death certificate." Sexual networking, polygamy, and other sexual practices spread HIV and AIDS like wildfire through the continent. The use of condoms was a continuing, hotly debated church issue. In Asia, colonization led to the massive repression of traditional expressions of sacred sexualities. Globalization was seen to promote the commodification of the body, particularly of women and children, giving rise to issues of injustice. In North America and Western Europe, post-modernity has a huge impact on sexual practices. Debates on homosexuality dominate church discussions. There is a deep sense of the pain of family estrangement and rejection for persons who are homosexual and transgender. Violence against women, the abuse of children, and rising divorce rates were seen to be major problems. In all regions, it became clear, churches are in a situation of silence and shame about issues of sexuality, and sexuality exclusive to marriage is a fundamental challenge for the churches.

The second seminar (April 2002) dealt with the summary and analysis of church statements on issues of human sexuality collated by the international reference group. The general secretary of the WCC had requested churches to send their statements on issues of human sexuality. The request explicitly asked churches to send their current statements, but not to write new statements for this purpose. The statements under review identified the issues and the approaches with which the churches were struggling. The participants at the seminar discovered the gaps between church statements and the lived experiences of members. Most of the statements received came from churches in the North. Two inputs on confessional perspectives were given by the Finnish Orthodox Church and the United Methodist Church in the USA. While various forms of life in communities were celebrated, the challenges concerning human sexuality varied in different communities—monastic communities, mixed marriages, marriages within the traditional faith communities, and lesbian and gay communities. There were painful moments created by the hardening of church positions on human sexuality. Other issues and responses presented during the seminar were the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Africa, the responses of non-governmental organizations, and sexual abuse among clergy or church leaders, and a church response from New Zealand.

The third seminar (April 2003) focussed on Bible studies. Three central themes were used in the study of the Bible—the body of Christ, pilgrimage, and the Holy Trinity. The study of the Bible and the sharing from different ecclesial perspectives provided a lively entry point in identifying issues on human sexuality that had previously not been explored. These arose in the awareness that family structures or patterns are changing. There are an increasing number of mother-headed families in which the male role has become irrelevant. More people would like to remain single, or get married but not raise children. In Africa, because of AIDS, families are being left in the care of grandparents and even children, as parents die of AIDS. In Europe and North America, gay and lesbian communities would like to raise their own children through adoption or through children they have brought from previous relationships, or through in-vitro fertilization. Other issues identified were persons with disabilities and sexuality, polygamy, extra-marital and pre-marital sex, homosexuality, abortion, and contraception. The participants affirmed the importance of sharing stories and challenged the prescriptive and normative models of engaging in discussion on issues of human sexuality. They affirmed the nature of theology that is provisional, that shows signposts along the journey of life, and that is not prescriptive. Also evident was a felt need to explore the nature and witness of the community as counter-cultural.

The Bossey seminars provided a space which enabled respectful conversations. These drew on a variety of experiences—personal, cultural, and ecclesial; a variety of theological approaches; and the insights and work of international agencies and non-governmental organizations. There was no intention on the part of the WCC to reach consensus on issues of, and approaches to, human sexuality. The seminars provided a safe space for learning and for sharing the experiences of churches as they sought to wrestle with issues of human sexuality.

In the Bossey seminars, it was clear that the safe space of dialogue is where one receives the other unconditionally, in the presence of God, with all their differences, deficiencies, and strengths as a fellow sojourner in this life.

When the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches began its work, it first explored the nature of dialogue:

> *Dialogue means a conversation but a conversation with an aim: to discover the truth. All dialogue involves an exchange, an interplay between speaking and suggesting on the one hand and listening and receiving on the other. Dialogue is therefore the opposite of monologue. . . . The ecumenical dialogue is not an end in itself. It is not an academic exercise. Its aim is to grow together in koinonia.* [216]

As Peter Neuner noted, when reflecting on the nature of ecumenical dialogue: "Understanding means changing ourselves—in a fusion of horizons. I emerge from a dialogue changed from what I was when I entered it . . .. In dialogue I cannot predict how and in what direction this change will take place. Dialogue is therefore always hazardous." Neuner goes on to explore dialogue as a "fusion of horizons."[217]

The ecumenical movement has been the space for dialogue throughout its history. In the first instance, that dialogue involved churches stating their understanding of a particular topic. The commonalities in understanding were then identified, and the remaining differences provided the agenda for continuing work. However, while this is an essential first phase in dialogue, it became clear that this was less dialogue and more an expression of monologue, or, as Peter Neuner noted, "two-way monologues." He goes on to note: "We are all too easily tempted to accept the other only within the limits of our own horizon."[218] Such a comparative methodology dominated ecumenical discussions at the World Conferences on Faith and Order in Lausanne in 1927 and Edinburgh in 1937.

The comparative method of dialogue—a necessary first stage of conversing—was superseded by a cooperative method emphasized at the World Conference on Faith and Order in Lund in 1952, where the churches committed themselves to what became known as the Lund Principle:

> *Should not our churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other churches, and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep difference of conviction compel them to act separately?*[219]

Dialogue thus became a space where churches brought to the conversations the insights of their traditions, and together they began to adopt a cooperative methodology.[220]

Dialogue is not monologue. It is not a situation or space in which one looks to hear only one's own voice. Dialogue is a space of intense listening to the other. It is a place of sincere listening,[221] and through the encounter with others, perceptions and attitudes are changed.

Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and Ireland, in his book *To Heal a Fractured World*, has offered valuable insights that form the basis of a culture of dialogue:

> *There is a strange and lovely detail in the construction of the sanctuary. The holiest item of its furniture was the ark. It contained the holiest of objects, the tablets on which were written God's word, Above the ark were two figures, cherubim. The Torah says that "their faces were turned to one another" (Exodus 25:20)*[222]

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216. Joint Working Group, *The Nature of Dialogue* (1967). A Second exploration of the theme was undertaken by the Joint Working Group see http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/jwg/e_jwg-info.html.
See also *Joint Working Group, Eighth Report, 1999-2005* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006), Appendix D: "The Nature of Ecumenical Dialogue," 73–89.
217. Peter Neuner, "Interchurch Dialogue," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement,* 2d ed., ed. Nicholas Lossky, et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 320.
218. Neuner, "Interchurch Dialogue," 320.
219. Oliver Tomkins, ed., *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order, Lund 1952* (London: SPCK, 1953), Vol 52, p 20.
220. See Kuncheria Pathil, *Models in Ecumenical Dialogue* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1981).
221. For an account of ecumenical dialogue, see Alan Falconer, "The Challenge of the Culture of Dialogue," in *Ecumenical and Eclectic: Essays in Honour of Alan Sell,* ed. Anna Robbins (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 205–21.
222. "The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings. They shall face one to another: the faces of the cherubim shall be turned towards the mercy seat" (Ex. 25:20).

> *The sages say that they were like children, or, in another interpretation, that they were entwined like lovers. It was between the two cherubs that God spoke to Moses. God speaks where two persons turn their face to one another in love, embrace, generosity and care . . .. When we open our "I" to another's "Thou"—that is where God lives. We discover God's Image in ourselves by discerning it in another. God lives in the between that joins self to self through an act of covenant kindness.*[223]

Conversation and dialogue are not simply modes of stating one's own ideas and positions, but involve a transformation in understanding, which emerges from face-to-face encounter. As Cardinal Walter Kasper has noted, "We not only have encounter, we are encounter. The other is the limit of myself: the other is part of and an enrichment to my existence. Dialogue thus belongs to the reality of human existence. Identity is dialogical."[224]

To enter such a place of dialogue requires a certain disposition. In his famous interview with Olivier Clément, Patriarch Athenagoras identified this as the spirit of Christ: humility, dispossession of self, and the disinterested welcome of the other. The underlying disposition is evident in the Philippians hymn (Phil. 2:5–11)—a *kenosis,* a self-emptying, a life of transformations.[225] Such a mode of being emphasizes the being of each Christian as interdependent through seeking to have the same mind of Christ. In the report "What Unity Requires," the 1975 WCC assembly in Nairobi emphasized that ecumenical commitment means that each church involved in the dialogue "aims at sustained and sustaining relationships with her sister churches."[226] It is a commitment to continue in dialogue, no matter the difficulties. Through this, each is transformed in the process of dialogue. The language of dialogue and conversations on the pilgrim way point to relocation, to moving and changing and becoming new; they are about transformation. Where Christians really embark on the pilgrimage journey together in safe spaces of dialogue, they may experience the grace of God transforming them in ways not planned for and not foreseen.

8.1.2 A community of dialogue

Human sexuality is seldom discussed in a forthright manner. There is a need for openness and a non-prescriptive approach, which promotes open discussions to prepare the ground for positive transformation. The ecumenical movement has striven to secure safe spaces of dialogue in faith communities to address critical issues. To address these issues with any degree of helpfulness, churches and communities need safe, trustworthy, and nonjudgmental spaces where there is mutual accountability. The safe spaces also need to be consistent, inclusive, and dependable to discuss and act on the key issues. We aspire that every congregation be transformed as a part of God's household, where the lonely are welcome, where the trampled find dignity and solace, and where the excluded discover a sacred and safe family and community.

Faith communities and churches are mandated to be sacred sanctuaries of trust and confidentiality that provide physical, psychological, and spiritual safety. In such a space Christians and churches are recalled to the commandment of our Lord: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (John 15:9–10). Such a commandment entails loving the other in their otherness while rejoicing in being bound together through and in Jesus Christ.

It is a place where one is without fear, shame, or intimidation. It is a situation where one can step outside one's own comfort zone and where the integrity and dignity of each person is respected. A non-judgmental space where one is accepted as one is. Where a person is seen beyond one's actions, where one can be honest and where the truth is spoken with love. A space for restoration and positive transformation.[227]

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223. Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (London: Continuum, 2005), 54.
224. Walter Kasper, "The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue," *Ecumenical Review* 52, no. 3 (March 2009), 293.See also Konrad Raiser, "The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue: Proposal for a Study," *Ecumenical Review* 51, no. 3 (March 2009): 287–92.
225. See section 5.5 in this document.
226. David M. Paton, ed., *Breaking Barriers* (Nairobi, 1975; London: SPCK, 1976), 60.
227. See C. Campbell, M. Skovdal, A. Gibbs, "Creating Social Spaces to Tackle AIDS-Related Stigma: Reviewing the Role of Church Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *AIDS and Behavior* volume 15, (2011) p 1204–121). Our notion of safe spaces of grace was developed from their "six features of supportive social spaces."

8.1.3 Features of safe spaces of dialogue

It is essential that these spaces have the presence of knowledge and skills regarding human sexuality and related issues. They also facilitate critical dialogue and debate on the topics. The space provides the possibility to deepen and clarify the understanding and the theology, with flexibility to interrogate dogma and moral norms, and with the view of encouraging social action. There is also the possibility to deepen and clarify behaviour and identities facilitated in a nonjudgmental environment where there is a building up of self-esteem and self-worth.

It is evident that safe spaces do not work on their own, nor form themselves automatically. To become operative and trusted as a safe space, each church needs facilitators for safe spaces of dialogue on human sexuality. These safe space facilitators or Ambassadors of Common Learning on Love and against Violence need to be properly trained and prepared in each church on both the national and diocesan, presbyterial, or superintendence level.

The space gives individuals and the communities a collective ownership of the challenges and the responsibility for contributing to its solutions. The space taps into the individual, group, and community strengths, which could be mobilized to overcome barriers and challenges. The space is also marked by key qualities, such as trustworthiness, and is one that keeps confidentiality. It is also a space where members feel they are listened to, accompanied, supported, and mentored, and that does not make one more vulnerable. The space has strong links with potential support agencies in the public and private sector outside of the community, bridging or linking social capital.

The safe spaces of dialogue are also characterized by inclusivity, with the ability to bridge across power gradients, creating the space for all to participate and contribute irrespective of all potential markers of difference. They link and connect between groups within the faith community with a possibility to influence transformation across the community. In all this, it is critical to be aware of power dynamics and differentials that could smother the safe space: for example, women-men, minority-majority, and resident-migrant.

An example of a "safe space of dialogue" in action is the Contextual Bible Study movement, which gave birth to the Tamar Campaign initiated by the Ujamaa Centre at the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.[228] (See chapter 7.2.6.) The Contextual Bible Study (CBS) of Tamar's rape (2 Sam. 13:12–18) disrupts our collective silence on violence against women and brings about transformation and effective solutions. This study eventually developed into a campaign against gender and sexual violence. The Tamar Campaign helps churches to address sexual violence and violent models of masculinity. This grassroots initiative has been very effective in South Africa and has spread to other countries within Africa and to other continents.[229] Several WCC programmes—including Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy; Just Community of Women and Men; and ecumenical theological education—have embraced the methodology with great impact.

8.1.4 Safe spaces of dialogue

8.1.4.1 Family spaces are where equity, safety, and the sacredness of relationships are promoted and sustained, and abuse is prevented. The story of Tamar's rape, where King David's daughter, Tamar, is violated by her stepbrother, Amnon, reminds us that the family as a safe space cannot be taken for granted in any society, even today. But a family space where children are cared for, spiritually and physically protected, mentored, educated, informed, and accepted unconditionally can be a space which is safe, empowering, and trustworthy. Open, informed, and timely discussions in the family of human sexuality in the context of our faith go a long way in sustaining family safe spaces.[230]

8.1.4.2 Congregational spaces are where traditional and innovative systems, principles, and practice are in place to promote discussion of the issues involved and actions to be taken to address challenges. These could be youth, women's, and men's groups, Sunday schools, religious schools, or seminaries. These could also be denominational, interdenominational, or interreligious spaces.[231]

228. Manoj Kurian, Passion and Compassion: The Ecumenical Journey with HIV (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016), 75–77.
229. Gerald West and Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela, "The Bible Story that Became a Campaign: The Tamar Campaign in South Africa (and Beyond)," *Ministerial Formation* 103 (July 2004), 4–12.
230. Kurian, Passion and Compassion, 62.
231. Kurian, 61.

For congregational spaces to be developed and maintained, it is imperative that those who are the custodians and guides of this space are adequately trained and equipped. In Indonesia, the Pasundan Christian Church, a member church of the WCC, is encouraging all its congregations to address the issue of human sexuality in a holistic manner and to be inclusive of members of transgender communities, and those of different sexual orientations.

Le Lab in Geneva is a church community that was initiated by the Protestant Church of Geneva, stimulated by the presence of members from different sexual orientations. The church, which began as a fellowship of three persons, has grown into a congregation of 40 people, over a period of two years.

8.1.4.3. Community spaces are where systems, principles, and practices are in place to promote discussion of the issues involved, and actions are taken to address challenges. These are where critical, perhaps even hurtful, concerns can be freely discussed and considered, without fear of repercussions. A community safe space is where people are able to fully express themselves, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or unsafe on account of sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, religious affiliation, age, or physical or mental ability. They are places where the rules guard each person's self-respect and dignity, and strongly encourage everyone to respect others. The other essential pillar of success is the engagement of the affected populations and people in the margins of the society as an integral part of the safe spaces of dialogue.

Since 1995, Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) has worked as a catalyst for transformation, addressing challenges to open minds by raising diversity awareness, opening hearts by creating safe spaces for dialogue encounter, and opening doors with committed change agents who work faithfully for greater acceptance and inclusion of LGBTI people within faith communities in Africa. It has offered people on the margins, who find themselves excluded and rejected, to be supported, to integrate sexuality with spirituality as a gift from God, and to witness with agency, as affirmed by mission from the margins, to the rest of the body of Christ.

As a non-governmental organization (NGO) and as a faith-based organization (FBO), IAM is an example of people on the margins coming together as community to continue the journey on the pilgrim way, to not give up or lose hope amidst so much hardship. In 2018, IAM participated with other role players and members of the Global Interfaith Network for People of All Sexes, Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions (GIN-SSOGIE) to produce and successfully pilot the *Hearts Set on Pilgrimage* curriculum that equips people on the margins for dialogue with religious leaders in their faith communities.

8.1.4.4 Ethical and theological spaces are where the analysis, teachings, practice, dogma, celebrations, spirituality, worship, and liturgies provide the possibility for the issues concerned to be addressed. To address the issues, churches in this space seek to discern, on the basis of an exploration of the Bible, tradition, reason, experience, cultural wisdom, and contemporary insights (as has been discussed in chapter 3 above). Theological institutions also provide this vital space for theological analysis, and publications compile key thinking that promotes this process.[232] The Jakarta Theological Seminary in Indonesia has been dealing with human sexuality in a forthright manner since 1993. An optional programme on human sexuality exposes the seminarians to a holistic understanding of the topic, with the possibility for community interaction, theological reflection, and the opportunity for deeper study and engagement. Each year, half of the 250 theological students are exposed to the programme. (See also chapter 7, section 7.2.6.)

8.1.4.5 Governance and leadership spaces are where awareness and experience on the issues will enhance the possibility that decision makers and those in the various hierarchies will introduce policies that are conducive to the promotion of safe and dynamic spaces in faith communities, thus promoting healthy, informed, and balanced societies.[233] A significant example of how the governance and leadership spaces bear fruit is from southern Africa, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, which we have noted above (see chapter 7, section 7.2.1.).

232. Kurian, 61.
233. Kurian, 60.

8.2 Forbearance: living with difference on the pilgrim way

Throughout *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way,* the situations of different churches and ecumenical bodies as they confront issues of human sexuality have been enunciated. It is clear that in many instances, different stances have not been reconciled. How then do churches live with difference? How do they maintain fellowship while being deeply divided on issues of human sexuality?

Some have drawn on an understanding of "reconciled diversity." Another approach which has been suggested is that of "constrained difference," described as a "critical, constantly renegotiated space which is corrected by our sometimes different, sometimes similar understandings of the 'substance of the faith.'"[234]

Throughout this document, the theme of safe spaces of dialogue has been evident. Lest one is lulled into a false sense of comfort within such spaces, it is important to emphasize that such spaces are conflictual. They arise because of disagreement, often on matters which are fundamental. The emphasis on the importance of providing such safe spaces has been based on the experience within the WCC of seeking to discuss issues of human sexuality. It has been clear that unanimity on these questions has not been achieved and is elusive. Deeply held convictions are passionately held and argued. In some cases, churches have wrestled with questions of human sexuality for decades without coming to any agreement. How then can churches seek to live with difference while continuing to engage in discussions on these issues?

An important biblical orientation for these situations of enduring conflicts and divergent attitudes is offered in Colossians 3:12–14: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourself with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

For as long as there has been a church there has been disagreement and division in it. One such source of division focussed on the inclusion of those who were different. For the Ephesians, the church became diverse in membership when it attracted non-Jewish converts. The entire Letter to the Ephesians, from its initial hymn to the activity of God, Father, Son and Spirit, is an extended sermon on unity and reconciliation. Toward the end of the letter the author emphasizes that the practice of unity is an essential expression of the vocation to which every Christian is called "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2–3).

Another source of division in the early church centred on theology. In the Colossian church, teachers of an alternative theology had infiltrated the church, contesting the Pauline understanding of Christ's divinity and humanity, and appealing to gnostic ideals which urged an excessive asceticism and rejection of the material world. The Letter to the Colossians is passionate in its opposition to this intrusive theology and in response, emphasizes that the church should put on the mantle of Christ by embracing the way of the beatitudes.

To live with divergent, passionately held convictions, the constant theme in the letters of the New Testament is that of forbearing with one another, as in Christ God forbears us (Rom. 3:22–25). [235] It is this attitude which is to govern living with difference. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected on the nature of Christian community, in his *Life Together*, he placed at its heart the service of forbearance.[236] While some may assume that the appeal to forbearance is an attempt to delay inclusion or to retreat from decision-taking on matters of social justice, James Calvin Davis, in his study of this theme, has asserted:

> *[Forbearance] invites us to be dogged in our conviction while remaining open to the possibility that we might learn something from people with different beliefs. It invites us to be persistent in our commitment to what is right and true while perfecting the art of listening to others. It affirms our dedication to principle while encouraging us to empathise with others, imagine how the world looks from their point of view and discern the best strategies."*[237]

234. Defined by Ian Torrance, who was responsible for the term in the Church of Scotland Theological Forum report of 2017, in a letter of clarification.
235. We have drawn extensively on James Calvin Davis, *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2017).
236. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996),100–102.
237. Davis, *Forbearance,* 166.

Clearly forbearance is not a strategy for prevarication, but a commitment to a way of living which holds divergent views in tension while seeking to resolve issues. As noted earlier, Jesus' commandment to love invites Christians and Christian communities to celebrate their bondedness in the love of God and to respond to the grace of our Lord. The church is called to present a model to societies of how to live with disagreement. It calls for the establishment of safe spaces of dialogue. It is here that continuing conversations on the pilgrim way can occur.

8.3 Challenges for the World Council of Churches

Here are six issues or challenges that the WCC faces in further conversations about human sexuality:

Any WCC conversation on human sexuality will raise the issue of marriage and weddings and thus bring to the fore the different teachings of our member churches about what constitutes marriage. For example, the Orthodox believe that marriage is a *mysterium*. Similarly, the Roman Catholics believe that marriage is a sacrament, while many Protestant churches hold the view that marriage is an ordinance. Contextually, many churches find themselves in situations where the contract of marriage is a matter undertaken by the state and where the regulation of couples' coexistence can be in the form of civil partnership or civil marriage. The challenge for the WCC member churches is to open a conversation on the nature of marriage sensitive to confessional and contextual diversities.

Throughout this document, attention is drawn to the impact on the discussion of issues of human sexuality by new technology and social media. The Reference Group has not been in a position to examine the implications of this phenomenon but is aware that this affects nearly every aspect of the life and work of the WCC and the member churches. The challenge for the WCC and the member churches is to open a discussion and examination of the impact of modern technologies and social media and of the opportunities these offer.

It has been clear that the WCC and the member churches enjoy relationships with the UN, its agencies, and non-governmental agencies, through membership in these bodies. The WCC is in a privileged position to learn from and to contribute to the work and insights of these bodies on behalf of the member churches, particularly in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The WCC as an organization, when faced with sexual abuse and harassment at its own assemblies and meetings, has adopted Procedures in Case of Allegation of Personal Integrity Violation (Reg. II 5.03 and Reg. VI i.01). The intention of this is to address any issues of bullying or sexual impropriety. The regulations are enshrined in the WCC practice and procedures and follow the laws of the Canton de Genève with respect to sexual harassment. They establish processes for complaints and their investigation and note the penalties for acting in ways which demean others. The constant challenge to the WCC secretariat is to create the environment of respect and trust.

It has been important that the WCC adopted consensus decision-making as its policy. This is intended to ensure respectful debate and an ethos of forbearance. An aspect of the adoption of consensus is to raise the question when there is no full accord of whether the minority are content that the majority position is enacted. The aim is to enable continued conversation on difficult issues through consensus and to "create a reconciled, respectful community conducive to the humanity of all."[238] For this constant vigilance is needed.

On our journeying on the pilgrim way, it has been clear that a number of churches are not yet involved in the conversations on human sexuality. While this document offers the background, foundation, and stories of some member churches and associated councils of churches, the challenge remains to embrace mutual accountability, where each church is involved because of the common calling to witness for justice and peace.

238. *When Christian Solidarity Is Broken: A pastoral and educational response to sexual harassment* (Geneva: WCC, 2006), 2, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/a-pastoral-and-educational-response-to-sexual-harassment.

8.4 Challenges for the churches

8.4.1. Wider pastoral concerns in the changing landscapes of family life and human sexuality

It is obvious that all churches are challenged and asked to sharpen their approaches to issues in pastoral theology and counselling which might be answered in different ways. But—most importantly—they have to reflect an approach which implies careful listening and biblical and theological discernment by all concerned since members of the church (and many people of goodwill) are wrestling with these issues and seek moral, ethical, and spiritual guidance from the churches.

These wider issues of a responsible pastoral theology of human sexuality remain on the agenda of all WCC member churches and beyond. They are worth being shared in safe spaces of dialogue also with churches beyond the WCC membership, as this field of pastoral theology is not yet equally advanced and developed within and between WCC member churches. Wider issues of a pastoral theology of human sexuality, which might demand another major and second study from the WCC at a later stage on "family life, human sexuality, and pastoral theology," include the following:

a) Preparation of young couples for family life and marriage, including issues related to a loving partnership in human sexuality

b) Ethical considerations concerning premarital sexual experiences of young adults and youth (including education on human sexuality for young people)

c) Human sexuality in family life relating to openness to procreation and ethics of family planning and contraception

d) Human sexuality, faithfulness, and coping with experiences of difference of intensity of sexual urge between partners

e) Human sexuality, family life, sickness, and aging (how to cope with changes due to sickness and aging)

f) Human sexuality, infidelity, broken families, and processes of healing

g) Human sexuality, the "marital duties" and incidents of violence, incest, or forced sexuality

h) Changing forms of family life, role models in terms of dignified human sexuality for children, and the rights of children to stay protected from sexual abuse

8.4.2 Growing toward an ecumenically responsible education and theology of human sexuality

In many cultural environments, people refuse to talk about sex and aspects of sexual health. Many people fear that more open talk about sex and sex education will result in a corresponding increase in promiscuous behaviour. Research has convincingly revealed that education about human sexuality and health in general, particularly with children and young people, does not result in increased sexual activity but, on the contrary, leads to protective behaviour. The church has a responsibility to minimize the vulnerability of children and young persons to protect themselves from sexual predation, sexually transmitted diseases, and risk-taking behaviours. School education and a supportive family, and a faith community that is open to discussing human sexuality in an open and informed manner, in the framework of one's beliefs, have a major contribution to make toward this goal. The responsibility of the church in facilitating sensible, well-resourced education and equipping children and youth with the ability to make sound moral decisions is the most effective way of achieving responsible moral behaviour. While there are a range of views on what should be included in sexuality education, and what the term encompasses, there has been a strong international commitment to promoting the provision of sexuality education among young people.

Churches are in an enviable position to teach about human sexuality and to offer resources for learning, as we have seen in our discussion of safe spaces of grace. The strong bond between members of congregations can offer support and encouragement to children as they come to terms with their sexuality. Churches can also provide spaces for counselling when church members and others face difficulties, physical and psychological abuse, and the demeaning of their humanity.

Faith-based comprehensive sexuality education offers an opportunity to reclaim the gift of healthy and holy sexuality.[239] It is a way to honour sexuality as a gift from God integral to human personhood, offering a holistic understanding that acknowledges the ways in which sexuality is integrated throughout our whole lives and across the lifespan of our existence. So many people have been harmed by judgment and silence, and this means there is a clear vocation for the church to engage: to be that place of healing and reconciliation where God's people can discover or rediscover the deep spiritual connections with their sexuality at every stage of life.

A holistic, faith-based comprehensive sexuality education enables God's people to ground their understanding of human sexuality in the core values of their faith, and to get beyond the aspects of biology or the mechanics of the reproductive system, to explore the ways in which sexuality intersects with the whole of life.

The church is in a position to play a central role in creating safer spaces where age- and developmentally appropriate information may be shared, and education can happen. This role is undergirded by core values that cut across everything that happens in providing comprehensive sexuality education. It begins with the essential value that every person as a child of God is bestowed with worth and dignity that human judgment cannot set aside.

Other important core values include mutual consent and the right to receive appropriate information about sexuality.

The baseline is that people of faith, faith leaders, the church and its institutions are called to stand against rhetoric and behaviour that stigmatizes, encourages discrimination, or incites violence against individuals and groups of people because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. At the same time, it is equally important not just to stand against harm, but to be engaged in promoting health and wholeness concerning sexuality.

Comprehensive sexuality education is part of a preventative approach to sexual harms such as sexual and gender-based violence and the reduction of HIV, both holistic areas of expertise and experience of the ecumenical community. Faith-based comprehensive sexuality education may help people through better understanding and clarification of their values, safeguarding and protecting them by providing accurate information, and offering opportunities to practice putting Christian values into action. Such education can provide a further resource for churches and communions as they participate in conversations on the pilgrim way, and as they develop, share, and provide pastoral resources for their communities.[240]

8.4.3 Toward a renewed way of being church

The issue of human sexuality has been strong on the agenda of some churches, while not on the agenda of all churches. Some churches have had intensive learning processes on reconsidering their teachings and ethical positions on human sexuality, also involving dialogue with vulnerable people affected. Some churches have also had important ecumenical dialogues with other churches to discern their way forward on these issues. In some situations, issues of human sexuality have evolved from a moral issue, causing emotional debates and controversies in ecumenical relations, into a real church-dividing issue which is sometimes even highly politicized. In some cases, this has led to embittered polarization. Some churches have reacted by remaining silent; some have chosen battlegrounds focussing on sexual orientation and gender identities. Other churches have found ways of living with difference, and still others have reached consensus.

In the light of such deep and painful divisions between and within Christian churches and church families, how might churches continue to journey on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace?

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239. There are several guides and resources for responsible and holistic human sexuality education developed by Christian churches in their particular cultural contexts. See for instance, *Our Whole Lives,* a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum co-published by the United Church of Christ (USA) and the Unitarian Universalist Association of Churches.

240. Examples of such resources include: the UCCP curriculum on gender and sexuality; the Senate of Serampore College curriculum on human sexuality; "Churches and Sexual and Reproductive Rights," from the Latin America Council of Churches; Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania training; material from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians; EHAIA-TEE modules on human sexuality and masculinity and age-specific HIV education from the Russian Orthodox Church.

The recent Faith and Order document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision,* emphasizes that the church is a communion of unity and diversity. The challenge of the pilgrimage is the way in which such diversity and internal pluralism are embodied. Churches and church families have in the face of such diversity sought ways of maintaining unity in the bond of peace.

Churches and religious congregations are inherently pluralistic. Differences of theological positions on human sexuality need to be acknowledged, and diversity affirmed on the pilgrimage together. Theological claims cannot be imposed as a truth by sidelining the historical, cultural, and emotional formation of the other. The challenge for churches is to allow space for deep listening to all voices.

Even where churches disagree on certain ethical points and moral positions, there is no need to cease dialogue or to break off relations, as the safe space of dialogue allows us to keep in fellowship with each other and remain open to each other. The Spirit motivates us not to close our hearts over against each other, even if we fundamentally disagree with each other, as God still is at work within and between us. A core principle of the ecumenical fellowship of churches is their decision to "stay together" despite all that conspires to divide them.[241]

It is important to integrate into and emphasize the vision of a church that grows toward perfection, toward deification, as partaking in the life of the triune God, while also stressing that the church falls short of that vision. The constant cry *Kyrie eleison* acknowledges failure and shortcoming. Failure sometimes offers more creative, cooperative, and surprising ways of being in the world, even as it forces the church to face the reality of *simul justus et peccator*—her own dark sides of life, love, and lust. Those on the margins can remind the whole church of the requirement to make room for its failure to be truly inclusive and to reflect God's true creation. This requires of the church a humility, and a humble relationship with the world.

As the invitation to the WCC Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace states, the churches have called each other "to work together in a common quest, renewing the true vocation of the church through collaborative engagement with the most important issues of justice and peace, healing a world filled with conflict, injustice and pain."[242] This is done on the basis of accepting the genuineness of other communities as they seek to live out Christian discipleship in their specific context.

The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace is a spiritual, transformative journey that always and essentially presupposes the fellowship given through faith and baptism in Jesus Christ.

It is Christ's love that moves the church and the world to reconciliation and unity. May it be so.

241. "Message," First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam,1948, in *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches,* ed. W. A. Visser't Hooft (London: SCM, 1949), 9.
242. *An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace* (revised), WCC Central Committee, 2–8 July 2014, Geneva, Switzerland, https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2014/an-invitation-to-the-pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace.

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