

## **AND THEN THERE WAS NO FIGHT**

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“I was completely surprised. I prepared for a fight, but that did not happen.” The words of one of the conversation partners at the end of a workshop about same-sex relationships in the church describes the nature and spirit of the conversation that recently took place in Port Elizabeth.

After the decision of the extraordinary General Synod about same-sex relationships, the church council of the DRC congregation of Port Elizabeth Hoogland expressed the need to be equipped as they move towards greater inclusion in the congregation – with special reference to diverse viewpoints on sexuality and same-sex relationships.

Meanwhile the ecumenical initiative Churches for Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) in Port Elizabeth Metropole was established. The organisation works toward the same goal. An invitation was extended to Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) to assist with this process. Hoogland hosted 20 participants that were equipped over three days.

Rev Michelle Boonzaaier and Rev Hanzline Davids of IAM created a safe space for honest conversation and held each participant co-responsible for the space within which they could position themselves and share feelings. As the process progressed participants could reposition themselves.

Each participant was listened to with compassion and respect with enough time for reflection after each session. Participatory activities invited us to be present with our minds and our bodies and to share embodied experiences.

The group was creatively accompanied to reflect critically and appreciatively on language, God images, culture, value systems and the use of the Bible in ethical conversations. The complexity and tension between different poles in the conversation was maintained rather than to attempt to solve or deny diversity.

Participants were constantly reminded of the presence of Christ with the candle flame that lit the middle of the circle around which they sat and spoke. They were one in their diversity in this light-circle of Christ's love– with Him and each other. For this reason the group ended with personal witness, prayer and Holy Communion.

Over the three days participants made new friends, experienced how precious the body of Christ is in her diversity, how the Spirit of the Lord moves them, experienced meaning in speaking about themselves rather than other people and how different viewpoints about same-sex relationships is not something that they want to fight about but rather invites them to compassionate and respectful relationships.

Rev Eugene Malan of PE Hoogland says: I cannot help but wonder what the result would be if every congregation is accompanied through this process. Thank you IAM, for the gospel that came to make tangible. We have moved – towards greater inclusion and celebration of diversity. Thank you that you remain our partners and that you are prepared to be invited by other congregations.