The First African Dialogue on Christian Faith and Sexuality

A Conference
Held at Stellenbosch
2 - 5 November 2009

Hosted by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM),
in partnership with The Rainbow Project of Namibia (TRP)
CONTENTS

Foreword and Opening 1
- Pieter Oberholzer

Acknowledgements 4
- Madelene Isaacs

Introduction of Dialogue as Method 4
- Judith Kotzé

Devotion - Why do we need Dialogue? 6

Introduction to Why We need Dialogue 8

Faith Challenges 8
- Comments, Questions and Answers 10

Cultural Challenges 11
- Comments, Questions and Answers 13

Human Rights Challenges 14
- Comments, Questions and Answers 15

Dialogue Principles 16

Indaba groups - Stumbling Blocks 17
- Plenary Discussion on Stumbling Blocks 21

Devotion - How Do We Journey Forward? 22

Indaba groups - Stepping Stones 24
- 1. Sharing Stories of Hope 24
- 2. Identifying Stepping Stones 28

Devotion - Journey with Hope through Africa 31

Epilogue 32

Appendix
Letter of Support to Uganda i
Feedback from Participants ii
Resources iii
Follow-up iv
Foreword
by Pieter Oberholzer
Director of IAM, South Africa

This report is a narrative of the proceedings of the 1st African Dialogue Conference on Christian Faith and Sexuality held from 2 – 5 November 2009 at Stellenbosch, South Africa. It was attended by 77 participants from the following countries: Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The conflict around homosexuality and Christianity has become one of the most divisive issues within churches worldwide and especially in Africa. IAM has been working for the past 15 years in South Africa, and partly in Namibia, in an effort to stimulate dialogue and make churches more welcoming towards their gay and lesbian members.

In many African countries homosexuality is a crime and in a few you can get the death penalty for being gay. Many religious leaders believe that homosexuality is un-African and un-Christian and homosexuals are worse than dogs and pigs (the words of Robert Mugabe and Sam Nujoma). In South Africa 80% of the population would like to see the rights of homosexual people revoked.

The words of Desmond Tutu in The Washington Post, March 2010, remind us of the severity of the situation: A wave of hate is spreading across my beloved continent. People are again being denied their fundamental rights and freedoms. Men have been falsely charged and imprisoned in Senegal, and health services for these men and their community have suffered. In Malawi, men have been jailed and humiliated for expressing their partnerships. Just this month, mobs in Mtwapa Township, Kenya, attacked men they suspected of being gay. Kenyan religious leaders, I am ashamed to say, threatened an HIV clinic there for providing counselling services to all members of that community, because the clerics wanted gay men excluded. Uganda’s Parliament is debating legislation that would make homosexuality punishable by life imprisonment and more discriminatory legislation has been debated in Rwanda and Burundi. These are terrible backward steps for human rights in Africa. Our lesbian and gay brothers and sisters across Africa are living in fear.

Since the Conference, the situation in Africa has been getting worse. In the wake of a continent-wide upsurge of homophobia, with Zimbabwe’s leaders Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai being the most recent to put their voices to it, gay Christian activist, Victor Mukasa and I were chased away like lepers from a consultative meeting on homosexuality held on 16th March 2010 in Malawi. We were attending on invitation of Secretary-General Canaan Phiri of the Malawi Council of Churches (MCC), who attended the 1st African Dialogue Conference and organized the MCC event.

The relevance of IAM’s dialogue cannot be measured. Requests from individuals from the rest of Africa have been constantly streaming in. The letters and acknowledgements from participants in the appendix of this report speak for themselves.
The initiative for this Conference actually started in The Netherlands. The Interchurch Development Corporation (ICCO) has been a funder of IAM since 2003. In 2007 the Ugandan Council of Churches made a condemning, homophobic resolution that troubled ICCO. IAM was then approached by ICCO to participate in a dialogue that would hopefully assist them in determining their future involvement in Uganda. In June 2008 a three-day Expert Meeting was held in Utrecht and attended by 24 people. Half of the delegates were from The Netherlands and the others from Africa. IAM left this meeting with the vision of hosting the 1st African Dialogue Conference on Christian Faith and Sexuality.

In February 2009 IAM hosted a smaller Conference on the Evil of Patriarchy, attended by South African theologians and LGBTI people. This was in preparation for the 1st African Dialogue Conference. IAM has been addressing fundamentalism in religion as one of the obstacles in the church. The second largest obstacle, if not the biggest in Africa, is patriarchy. Patriarchy and fundamentalism coupled together are a barrier for us to really network in churches.

IAM believes the need for dialogue between churches and their gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) membership is crucial for the credibility of the church. With this Dialogue Conference we brought together different visions, different feelings, and differences in values. We succeeded in deepening our understanding of the issue and explored the possibilities for dialogue.

IAM has been in partnership with The Rainbow Project (TRP) of Namibia for the past five years. We are grateful to have found partners in this liberation movement that recognized the value of addressing the spiritual needs of LGBTI people. Because TRP was planning a similar conference we agreed to work together on this 1st African Dialogue Conference.

Cape Town, 1st April 2010

Opening
by Pieter Oberholzer

For our friends who do not know, the acronym LGBTI stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people and we will be using this term throughout the Conference.

The fact that you are here is by the grace of our Lord. IAM took the responsibility of inviting the clergy to this Conference and TRP invited the LGBTIs. I want to highlight that in our welcoming letter we mentioned that there are many dignitaries among us, very important persons; a Presiding Bishop, Bishops, retired Bishops, Professors, Doctors, a Parliamentarian from Malawi. As the format of this Conference is dialogue that is based on equality we have chosen not to use these titles at this Conference. We hope that you do not take offence. We will all be called by first name.
What binds us together is not our sexuality – we are having this Dialogue Conference because of our faith. Faith binds us together. At IAM and TRP we believe in our conviction, our belief in Jesus Christ, and that it is sinful to exclude other people. We have not invited the clergy here to convert you to think the same. We know that there might be people here who think it is sinful to include gay people in churches. The 1st African Dialogue Conference is not going to be a fight or a war, it is going to be a space where we can be ourselves and respect one another.

I have heard someone say, I am scared to speak to clergy. I wish I could sit at a table where there are no clergy. No such luck! In each group we have equal numbers of clergy and LGBTI people represented. At this Conference we are not going to be scared of one another. What makes the 1st African Dialogue Conference a first in Africa is that IAM and TRP want to show the world how people of faith, be they lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex, questioning youth or straight people, can be Christians who are open about their sexuality. We are at this Conference to learn from one another how to deal with the issue of sexuality with respect, compassion and love. It is my wish that we will succeed in that.

The challenge for us during the next two days is to show respect and grace, to embrace diversity and to celebrate the gift of our sexuality.

Some of you might have come to the Conference to find answers. I must apologize in advance that there will be no dogmatic answers. Some people in the Indaba groups might share their dogmatic views or their church doctrine but what we prefer you to do instead is to share from your heart with one another – to share from your heart your fears and hopes as a united family of God.

IAM has found a way that we think is the Biblical way. Jesus Christ never preached in a dogmatic way. When he spoke, he spoke personally, compassionately and with empathy, bending down to the person lying in the dust and looking them in the eye. This is the way of DIALOGUE and also what we hope to achieve during the next two days. We have found a way that works and that is not debate.

Therefore my prayer for us and for this Conference is that everybody attending will leave as we left ICCO in June 2008, filled with hope and the knowledge that we are not powerless in the face of this big challenge and polarization happening on our continent. Sexuality does not have to be a divisive issue amongst Christians.

I again want to acknowledge all of you for accepting our invitation. There are 77 participants from 13 African countries and donors from The Netherlands and the USA; you have all travelled far. This is a risk to many of you, especially our LGBTI friends. Some of you can be imprisoned and if the Ugandan law goes through some may even be killed for being who you are. I want to acknowledge you for having the courage to be here. I want to acknowledge the clergy who are here; who have the courage of maybe meeting for the first time face to face, a person whom you perhaps had always thought was not really accepted in the Kingdom of God and to see in their face the face of a fellow brother or sister. I want to acknowledge you for coming all the way to Cape Town. It takes courage to face one another in vulnerability.
Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to welcome you to this historic event. The 1st African Dialogue Conference on Christian Faith and Sexuality on African soil.

It is a continued challenge to secure funding for religious programs in the LGBTI community. We are therefore grateful to our sponsors, the Inter Church for the Development Corporation (ICCO) and the Open Society Initiative (OSI). Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) and The Rainbow Project (TRP), thank you for making this groundbreaking work possible. We acknowledge and welcome all the participants of the 13 African countries. We also sincerely welcome special delegates from the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the Arcus Foundation. Arcus is not on board as funders yet, but we want to acknowledge them for their proven concern about faith and value issues within the LGBTI community. My final welcome goes to the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) of South Africa, we would like to acknowledge your presence and welcome you here as a participant.

Often, when we discuss sexuality, homosexuality and Christianity, we encounter a lot of conflict, antagonism, and fear of the unknown, even disgust.

When IAM and TRP said that we want a Dialogue Conference that brings Christianity and sexuality together, we said, LET’S DIALOGUE. By the grace of God we have the contributions of funders that help us to be in this space, so that we can do something different. We are not expecting that within the next 3 days you will suddenly be converted to understand sexuality in all its dimensions. After this Dialogue Conference you will go back to the same countries you came from, you will have the same congregations, faith communities, families and the same work places.

What we are hoping for in this next couple of days is for all the participants to learn, through experience, and to do something different and we call it DIALOGUE. I will now read what the difference is between DIALOGUE and DEBATE so that you can recognize which one is familiar to you and that you would choose naturally. I suspect it would be debate more often than dialogue.
DIALOGUE

- Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.
- In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.
- In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.
- Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant’s point of view.
- Dialogue reveals assumptions for re-evaluation.
- Dialogue leads to introspection of one’s own position.
- Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.
- Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
- In dialogue, one submits one’s best thinking, knowing that other peoples’ reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.
- Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one’s beliefs, so that you are there to encounter, to experience and meet.
- In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.
- In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.
- Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.
- Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.
- Dialogue remains a process; it is open-ended.

DEBATE

- Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.
- In debate, winning is the goal.
- In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its argument.
- Debate affirms a participant’s own point of view.
- Debate defends assumptions as truth.
- Debate leads to critique of the other position.
- Debate defends one’s own position as the best solution and excludes other solutions.
- Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
- In debate, one submits one’s best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
- Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one’s beliefs.
- In debate, one searches for glaring differences.
- In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.
- Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship, and often belittles or deprecates the other side.
- Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.
- Debate implies a conclusion.
We are asking you to enter this process with your whole being. In the fifteen years that IAM has been working in this field, we have come to agree that when you work with faith communities the preferred method is dialogue. DEBATE DOES NOT HELP US. There is a place for debate in public spheres; there is a role for activists to break new ground: all this is fine, but when you go into faith communities our experience has taught us that the most effective way to work is through dialogue. Dialogue is the choice we are asking you to make for the duration of the Conference. Commit yourself to choosing dialogue as we engage during these next couple of days.

We want you to know that dialogue does not happen by itself. It needs the dialogue space to be a SAFE SPACE. This room can be perceived as physically safe because we don’t have people with guns coming in, so in some ways it seems to be a beautiful, safe space but inside ourselves we also need to make our spaces safe. When judgment surfaces, or apathy surfaces, or denial surfaces, or our tiredness surfaces, we want you to make the space inside of you safe, and to say that for the duration of the Conference, I shall commit, I shall choose dialogue, I shall take the risk and I will make it a safe space when I am working in the Indaba groups. I shall make eye contact with the people sharing in my Indaba group and not just stare at the facilitator, even if it is in the afternoon session.

There are a couple of skills we would want you to practice:
• Share from personal experience. Practice sharing from your own story.
• Practice listening. Listen so that you have an encounter of being with the other as they share. Do your best to put yourself in their shoes, despite your differences.
• Practice the skill of conflict management when necessary.
• Support each other.
• Integrate what you experience here into your life - take it with you and practice it always.

With dialogue we are on a journey of hope.

Devotion
Why do We Need Dialogue?

By Dr Sarojini Nadar

Senior Lecturer & Program Director of Gender and Religion at the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Reading from Mark 27: 24 – 30 and Matthew 15: 21 – 28

Reflection
The following struck me about dialogue in these passages:
The one in need is the one who initiates the dialogue. In this case the woman in
need of her daughter’s healing initiates the dialogue. But her initiative is met with two challenges. The first challenge she meets is the disciples who tell her to go away. You could picture the disciples as the bodyguards of Jesus. They decided who could see Jesus and who couldn’t. Certainly a woman – and a Gentile at that – and a foreigner should not be out in public and should certainly not be shouting at a man. The second challenge, and this is a strange one, is that she meets Jesus as a challenge. Jesus too almost tells her to go away. Matthew’s account says: *I have come only to the lost sheep of Israel.* In both Mark’s and Matthew’s accounts she is told that she and her people are dogs, *I have to give the food first to the children, not to the dogs.* So she is a dog.

The initiator of the dialogue, this woman, does not end the dialogue when she is challenged. Often we’re very quick to end a dialogue if someone says, *that’s part of my culture,* then the topic is closed. The woman responds in two ways. With regard to the first challenge, she ignores the disciples’ rebuke. We need to choose our battles. In her case there is a bigger battle – the healing of her daughter. She takes up Jesus’ assertion that she and her people are dogs and she inverts it. She uses it for her benefit. Jesus calls her a dog and she says: *Okay, even if I’m a dog, dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table.* She takes something that is negative and turns it into something positive.

Critical dialogue can have long-lasting effects right into our very own century. *We do not presume to come to your table merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness but in your great mercy we are not worthy so much as to gather the crumbs under your table.* Does this sound familiar? The Anglican Eucharistic prayer which points to grace is in memory of this woman who fought for inclusion through critical dialogue. How dare we use the prayer, as long as women, people of differing sexual orientations, foreigners, people with disabilities, etc. are glaring in their absence from the table? Critical dialogue forces us to re-evaluate our biases. Oppression is always linked – racism is sexism is class-ism is homophobia. Consider the various ways in which this woman is excluded. She is excluded because of her gender, she is excluded because she is a Gentile, she is excluded because she has a daughter who is sick, she is excluded because she is shouting in public, and she shouldn’t be in public. She is excluded on so many levels. She is excluded from the table where children are eating and she is meant to eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Gender, ethnicity, religion – where does exclusion stop? In the 1960s we were opposing interracial marriage. Why? We said we’re just protecting the sanctity of marriage. In 2000 exactly the same is said when we oppose gay marriage. It is the same thing. On what basis do we base our oppositions? They are based on the same biases – racism is sexism is class-ism is homophobia.

Dialogue is not always an agreeable exchange; it must be critical. The critical dialogue in this passage is what leads to transformation and that’s why I gave you two versions, Mark’s version and Matthew’s version. Mark says, *for saying that, your daughter has been healed,* Matthew says, *it is your faith that healed your daughter.* Look I don’t want to dichotomize these two things. Both are equally important.

But, for saying that, Jesus accepts the challenge and changes His mind. By saying that, she provided the challenge – the critique – in the dialogue that changed Jesus’ mind and one wonders, is this the beginning of dogmatism? Because even the dogs then are welcomed into the Kingdom.
Introduction to Why We Need Dialogue

The following speakers address the question of why we need dialogue in Africa among theologians and LGBTIs, from Faith, Cultural and Human Rights points of view. They give us an introduction to the various aspects, and in doing so form the background for dialogue discussions.

Faith Challenges

By Mbuyiselo Stemela

He is a Methodist Minister, currently doing a PhD on Land Reform in Pretoria. Mbuyiselo is married and the father of two daughters.

My introduction will touch on faith challenges: the challenges that face us in dialogue when it comes to issues of sexuality, especially issues of homosexuality. They are:

• Religious fundamentalism, where people are entrenched in their positions and they don’t want to move.
• Literal interpretation of the Bible and homophobia that seems to be condoned by Biblical interpretation, thus justifying prejudices against people who have a different sexual orientation than yours. Stating that God is against such people, referring to LGBTI people.

These challenges in our faith communities hinder us from moving forward to discuss and deal with sexuality and sexual orientation in a more effective and progressive way. I hope this introduction will stimulate dialogue.

Religious Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism refers to belief in a strict adherence to a set of basic principles, often religious in nature. The term religious fundamentalism has been generalized to mean a strong adherence to any set of beliefs – any set of beliefs in the face of criticism or unpopularity that has by and large retained religious connotations. Fundamentalism occurs in religion when people believe in their doctrines in such a way that they don’t want to shift; when people don’t want to think; when people say, this is it, we cannot change it, this is a given. Richard Dawkins has used the term to characterize religious advocates who cling to a stubborn, entrenched position that defies reason, argument or contradictory evidence. Since Scripture is viewed by them as a literal revelation of God, fundamentalists believe that no person has the right to change it or to disagree with it. So says the Lord, full stop. This then becomes a challenge when issues of sexuality, more even, issues of homosexuality, are discussed.

When people say we cannot change it, it has been like this for centuries, let us stick to what we know, dialogue becomes impossible. Fundamentalist arguments regarding strict observation of religious laws may lead to an accusation of legalism in addition to exclusive-ism in their interpretation of metaphysical beliefs. This is a stumbling block in our dialogue. We need to move forward, addressing the issues of LGBTI people.

Literal Interpretation of the Bible

Christianity can be roughly divided among denominations on the basis of their view of the Bible, their views towards women, their views on homosexuals and other sexual
minorities, as well as other controversial topics. The three groups are mainly the conservative wing, a progressive wing and thirdly, a mainline group of denominations whose beliefs lie between these other two wings.

There are basically two approaches to the Bible, which have different assumptions. These are the typical conservative view and a typical progressive view. The typical conservative view believes in the literal interpretation of the Bible, that the Bible was written by authors who were mechanically inspired by God. The Bible is seen as without error, so everything that is in Scripture is okay.

The typical progressive view believes that the Bible was written by authors who were inspired, while not surrendering their own cultural, religious or historical background and that it is important to look at the context.

We have to understand that inevitably the literal interpretation of Scripture leads to homophobia. When you look at our communities where there is serious violation of Human Rights, of people looking at homosexuals and labelling them as such people, degrading, not giving people respect because you are such people, it is condoned by their literal interpretation of Scripture. In the literal interpretation of the Bible there are six Scriptures that are used as ammunition against homosexuality: Genesis, Leviticus, Romans, 1st Corinthians, 1st Timothy and Jude. Those are the Scriptures that people use and they literally interpret those Scriptures as condemning all homosexual behaviour, as condemning people to hell. People believe those Scriptures.

Let us not only discuss homosexuality, let us move on with it so that we are all able to live freely.

Faith Challenges
By Kapya Kaoma

A Zambian currently based in the United States of America working on the portfolio Africa and the US with LGBTI justice issues for the organization, Political Research Associates.

In my research I wanted to explore the relationship between American evangelicals and the churches in Uganda, Nigeria and Kenya. What kind of resources are they using in influencing gay politics in the world? We came to realize that most of those countries are influenced by the American evangelical voice. Most African theological or Bible schools are run by evangelicals. So you might criticize them, but they provide most of the resources that our African brothers and sisters have used for their development. They are making an impact and we should appreciate that.

If you are following the issues concerning Uganda, the respected American evangelical, Rick Warren, has a voice. Warren speaks and Africa listens. Even people you don’t expect to have an audience with your President are given this audience. Every evangelical minister or pastor or evangelist who comes to Africa ends up in the State House drinking coffee with your President. American evangelists, whom people in the US discard, can address Parliament in Africa. Africans give them so much respect and they represent America. But I want to tell you that not every American evangelical is opposed to LGBTI
issues. In fact, if you follow these issues, some of them have been called left evangelicals because they are addressing LGBTI issues.

When our brothers and sisters from America come over here, they do not understand some of these issues and some of them say we want to teach Africans how to love. Look at this man, he is so intelligent but he is arrogant, exposing his foolishness. To our African brothers, we think that everything that comes from America is the gospel. Most of the literature coming from America is in the context of the American cultural wars. The people in America are fighting their own issues. When they dump them in Africa, we pick up those issues without asking what is going on?

I can assure you that there is not much commonality between African evangelicals and American evangelicals or conservatives.

What about dialogue? I believe that unless we understand the other person who is informing my brother, or you understand my background, we cannot engage in any meaningful dialogue. We can talk but if you don’t know about me it will be difficult for you to dialogue with me. What I am challenging in Africa is to start understanding what it means to belong to the Christian Right in America. This is a movement, if you don’t understand it – it has its own political agenda. This political agenda has been exported to Africa.

The interesting thing about the homosexuality debate in Africa has to do with the way it was brought to us. Our people knew that there were people who could not just get married, and we had names for them. These people still belonged to the community of Africans. We never threw them out. When we brought in the new laws that came with colonialism, we said homosexuality is against the order of nature. We didn’t even have a word for it. Today the campaign to discriminate against LGBTIs has come again from the Western world; we Africans did not start this battle. Are we fighting our battle or are we fighting an American battle?

Comments, Questions and Answers to Mbuyiselo and Kapya

- I really needed this because Islam, Christianity and African religious traditions agree that the importance of the human being is to have children. Each one of us, in our original language, when a man is married, the word that they use, what does it signify? In my language the word means to fertilize and for a lady being married means to be fertilized. You cannot separate children from marriage.

- Dialogue is hindered not only by interpretation of the Bible, which is either the literal interpretation or the contextual interpretation. The real question is actually how to create spaces where people who have different ways of interpreting the Scriptures can come together and feel safe around each other to say this has been my journey, this is the understanding I came to and then be open enough to be touched by the other. The journey with the Bible is the challenge of being affirmed in your faith to say even if we differ, if we interpret Scripture differently, I don’t deny that you are a follower of Christ. We start there. Part of the challenge of the diversity in how we interpret the Bible, is how to come together and make it safe for us to say, I trust that you are journeying with God and let me hear you and listen to you.

- Sometimes we hold onto culture even though the gospel challenges us to think and act differently. Sometimes it is easier to say - our culture says - and that was the response that we saw in the gospel, but faith can also move us to another point.
The word homophobia was mentioned several times and phobia means fear, and for me the opposite of fear is faith. I wonder how much our emotions are brought into this. Where does this fear come from? Fear leads to terrible actions. It leads to discrimination. It leads to killing. But where did it come from? And the opposite is to rather just stay with faith.

Perhaps a helpful way to pose the question in regard to the Scriptures – not necessarily liberal or fundamentalist or literal or contextual – that isn’t the area of the first question – perhaps a helpful way would be to ask God the question first, Dear God, how do you want us to understand, approach and interpret these Scriptures which have come down to us? That is the question and that question all wrestle with, with respect.

Language can be a barrier. In the presentations, the terms evangelical and fundamentalist were used interchangeably. These terms are not the same. I want our speakers to clarify those terms. Are liberal and progressive the same? If we are going to engage in creative dialogue, I think we need to clarify these terms. I may be an evangelical, but I am certainly not a fundamentalist.

Cultural Challenges
By Masiwa Ragies Gunda
An Anglican from Zimbabwe, doing his PhD in Germany on Biblical Theology, specializing in Biblical interpretation of homosexuality in Zimbabwe. Ragies is married and has children.

The Challenge of Culture in itself
Christian leaders are fond of saying, Our culture does not permit A, B, C, and D. But what is this, our culture? Our culture is never defined. By our culture do we mean pre-colonial African traditions or do we mean colonial culture coupled with Western Christian values or do we mean the confusion that characterizes most post-colonial African communities?

If you wanted to be sophisticated as an African, you had to do things the way White people were doing things. It was a mark of sophistication. It became our culture. So when I listen today and hear Robert Mugabe say, Homosexuality is un-African and I look at his person, he is British in dress and speaking like the British. What is our culture? These are some of the issues, which further highlight that we stand at a cultural crossroads, which is why I am arguing that culture is our greatest challenge.

Most African states today are actually modeled along Western political traditions. On what basis do African states acknowledge the equality of men and women, even if it is only on paper? Is this a pre-colonial tradition that we have re-discovered, that men and women are equal? What is the basis? Is it not part of our contemporary culture that I look at my fellow sisters as equal to me? What is the basis for African leaders who refuse to make way for new leaders? So we are at a cultural crossroad. We use Western cultural values when they suit us and we revert to pre-colonial African cultural values when they suit us. We want to have our cake and eat it. Culture, for me, is the greatest challenge that we have today.
The Challenge of Patriarchy

Patriarchy perverts most African communities today, but it is both blatant and subtle in its operation. Culture and colonization have weakened some pillars of patriarchy, particularly in the job market. Women and men can apply for the same job if they have the qualifications; the most competent will get the job for the same pay. Patriarchy has been weakened in some ways.

Sexuality remains as the last bastion and pillar of the patriarchal system. Patriarchy, under the guise of our culture, will fight to defend itself, particularly when it comes to sexuality. Women remain tradable stock under the patriarchal system perverting our communities today. Who puts a value on a woman when she has been married? Who negotiates for the value to be lessened?

Finally, patriarchy, like dictatorship, requires its victims to defend and justify their marginalization and deprivation. For me taboos are patriarchal instruments and they are also challenges to dialogue. A taboo is a prohibition excluding something from use, approach or mention because of its supposed sacred or invaluable nature based on social customs or religion. There are inconsistencies in the manner in which sexual taboos are used in most African societies. There are certain taboos that apply to women and not men. We know of some communities that still practice virginity testing for girls and not for boys. It is also important that we begin to think of looking at taboos as manipulated to serve the interest of the patriarchal system. Why do they suppress, oppress or inhibit women more than they do men? Whose interest are taboos serving? Sexuality is governed by a set of taboos. Some dating back centuries, others newly created.

The following are taboos:

• **Silence in Sexuality**
  
  You don’t talk about sexuality, you just do it. The language of sex is silence. In Africa sexuality is only a means to and end. To achieve this, it is clear that procreation has been the central argument against all other non-procreative sexual practices and relationships.

• **Western Cultural Imperialism**

  Beware of Western cultural imperialism. This warning is what I call a newly created taboo. Central to this taboo is that what is in the West, Europe and North America cannot also be African. If there is something that is happening in Europe and America, it cannot also happen in Africa. Africans cannot and will not think for themselves. This is one of the newly created taboos. If you’re an African woman and you say that you ought to be respected as a wife, it means that you have been mentally colonized because you are not supposed to think, you cannot think, or will not think for yourself.

• **The Bible has become part of African Culture**

  The Bible is no longer a foreign document in Africa; it has become part of African culture and it poses its own challenges. According to the Bible, and I speak as one of those Africans, African culture is more godly than Western culture, so why should Westerners tell us what to do?

Finally my question to all of us today, that I also think we must continue asking is: is it true that in Africa, as pre-colonial Africans, colonial Africans and post-colonial Africans, we think and agree that sexual difference is sexual deviance?
Comments, Questions and Answers to Ragies

- I wonder in many cases if the problem is not Christian culture. What is perceived by us as Christian culture is not so Christian at all. African culture has a more holistic understanding of humanity. I think therefore, not putting the sexual against the spiritual, I wonder if we should not look very seriously at what came to us as Christian culture via colonialists and missionaries, and question whether that is Christian. Does it help us to be whole as human beings or does it split us up into millions of pieces because that’s what the Greek dualists did?

- Another threat that same-sex marriage poses to the traditional marriage is that the gender roles fall away, but we want to keep the hierarchy. Who is going to walk the bride down the aisle? Who is the bride? Who is the head of the home? We can say that same-sex marriage levels the playing field; there are no more gender drills or virginity tests; who is going to wear white; who owns the bride? These are patriarchal issues in marriage. So it is not only about procreation, it is about maintaining the hierarchical roles in marriage.

- Patriarchs wrote the Bible in a patriarchal way. When we speak of African culture, we include many groups and cultures in Africa. The White Afrikaner and the Black are no different in the way they uphold patriarchal values as part of Africa.

- The Bible does not talk about sexual orientation. It talks about certain atrocities that have nothing to do with homosexual orientation. Homosexual orientation when it is used today means an emotional, spiritual, physical attraction and the longing to be with a person of the same sex. When the Bible speaks, and this is from a contextual interpretation, it speaks in certain places of homosexual acts and misconduct that have no reference in our mind to homosexual orientation. Yes, the word that we use in this dialogue has no bearing or foundation in the Bible.

- Sexual orientation does not only refer to homosexuality, we all have a sexual orientation. When we talk about orientation it is correct to mention emotional, spiritual, physical and mental attraction to a person. It can be of the opposite sex or the same sex.

- I think the idea of saying - the Bible says - can be misleading. What we ought to look at is - what does God say, what would Jesus do?

- In some African cultures, if a person is younger than some of the people present, that person would not be able to make any comments. Talk about issues around sex and sexuality is among your peers, and also your own gender. So already speaking in this context some people might be challenged culturally. What is common to the continent and perhaps the world is this whole thing about a culture of silencing sexuality. It has caused major problems for young people growing up. Who do they talk to about discovering who they are as sexual beings? The culture of the home is that you don’t talk about these things. This causes endless problems not only for them coming to terms with themselves but around issues of HIV Aids and sexual behaviour.

- The whole idea of inclusiveness as a point of departure is so important. We hear that people are saying that the African traditional way is more holistic and less dualistic; more inclusive. In the Indaba groups let’s take it as a challenge, focusing on how we can change the minds of people to go back to inclusiveness as a way forward, as Jesus did, accepting and not condemning.
I think within most African cultures sexuality was discussed openly. It was when the missionaries descended upon us that we stopped talking about sexuality. Sexuality was in our songs, in our stories, and there were structures within our cultures where these issues were discussed openly. Christianity has disempowered our ability to talk about sexuality.

Inclusiveness is not the same as uniformity because being inclusive does not mean we should be all alike but we should accept one another despite some differences, to me this is important when we talk about inclusiveness.

Human Rights Challenges
By Madelene Isaacs

The extent and intensity of violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Africa are ever increasing. The extreme violence perpetrated against especially lesbians in South Africa, is a clear example of how, even when legislation recognises the rights of LGBTI people, this violence is still perpetrated on the families of LGBTI people and the community in which they live. Most of these crimes are committed in the name of religion and culture. Across Africa, the level of violence and discrimination against LGBTI people, though varying in degree and intensity is facilitated either through the lack of laws protecting the rights of sexual minorities, or through legislation that in no uncertain terms criminalises homosexuality or homosexual conduct.

Sub-Saharan Africa
In 1996 South Africa was the first African country to include explicit protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation in its Constitution. In 2006, the same country extended marriage rights to same sex couples. The brutal violence and murder of lesbians, especially since 2006, clearly shows that the same barriers that hamper the attainment of full constitutional rights for LGBTI people in other African countries are still at play in South African society.

Legal Situation
In the majority of these countries, colonial-era laws still penalize mostly male homosexual conduct. Namibia and Zimbabwe still retain the Sodomy Law from the Dutch Colonial era. Zambia and Botswana also have provisions on their penal code that criminalize carnal knowledge against the order of nature - with severe prison terms. In countries like Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania LGBTI people face imprisonment from eleven years to a lifelong prison sentence.

Challenges
• State-Sponsored Homophobia - Repressive laws, coupled with homophobic rhetoric, have an absolutely damning and negative effect on the ability and capacity of LGBTI people to organise, express and create visibility, to claim their rights and access the same.
• Religious Fundamentalism - Religious fundamentalists, in their public condemnation of LGBTI people and their rights, give a green light to the person on the street to express their prejudice and homophobia in horrific, intolerant ways.
• Culture
  In this context, sexual and gender non-conformity is portrayed as un-African, allowing atrocities such as ostracising from families and communities and even violence.
Middle East and North Africa
All countries in the region criminalise homosexual behaviour between men, and in some instances women, except Israel and Iraq.

Legal Situation
In countries like Egypt and Morocco, where LGBTI people face the death penalty, a new upsurge in the arrest of gay men started in 2007. Marches of thousands of people against immoralities are taking place, which shows signs of a moral panic that goes beyond just the enforcement of laws. Similar atrocities occur in Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where the death penalty also prevails against homosexuality.

Patterns of abuse include crackdowns or clean-up operations, arrests and torture of LGBTI people.

Challenges
• Civil Society Under Severe Attack
  Human rights organisations especially, suffer harassment, bureaucratic restrictions and even surveillance and arrests.

Comments, Questions and Answers to Madeleine
• What happens to those of us who come from countries that violate Human Rights, where same-sex behaviour is still punishable by death? Will the church participate in that death? Will the church give the last rites? What is the church’s stance? How we react depends on our theology – what we understand by sin and what we understand by retribution, punishment of sin, and the punitive measures that we will take against sinful behaviour.

• The challenge is that there are no dialogue partners. The church is there, and they speak a lot, but Christian LGBTIs are silent and invisible. The initiative for dialogue starts from the needy; it is clear that LGBTI people of faith are the needy. Yet that is not ultimately true because I think the church is in dire need of opening its doors and embracing LGBTI people with compassion, so there is a need on both sides. The question remains, why is the church silent on Human Rights?

• I have been to countless meetings about gay rights on the African continent. I want to say that this is probably the most important of all the meetings I’ve ever been to because it brings together so much of what is absent. It feels very often that there are two conversations going on and that they never come together. I am part of the conversation about Human Rights. That is the conversation that I am comfortable with and the language that I know. I don’t really know a faith-based language and it intimidates me a little bit. When I look around the room and I see who is talking and who is not talking, I think that there are a lot of people who feel intimidated. I am conscious of the fact that young people are not speaking and that LGBTI activists are not speaking. It takes an enormous amount of courage to be a young, LGBTI activist. Every single message is one of exclusion and damnation, exclusion from family, school, workplace and church. Part of the reason that I do this work and that I am so excited about the 1st African Dialogue Conference is because of the potential of this work here. I’ve been in a number of places where young activists have been together, and it makes no difference for an American activist to talk about Human Rights; it is another thing when Africans are talking among themselves and say, this
is okay. One moment when that was transformative for me, was in Nairobi when a Bishop said, you don’t have to choose between being gay and being a Christian. You could have heard a penny drop in that workshop because it opened up space in the most extraordinary way. So my appeal is for people who are coming from faith-based communities, who have a lot of experience, to please acknowledge your power to exclude and you’re potential to include. This power is huge and it is transformative.

Dialogue Principles for Indaba\(^1\) Groups
By Judith Kotzé

What I ask of you is to practice being fully present even if you don’t understand everything, even if you get tired, frustrated, and judgmental, to take a breath and stay with the process. I heard what the people who work in the field of Human Rights have said. That what you are experiencing here, as vulnerable as it is, is that THERE IS HOPE if we can really manage to dialogue.

We ask everybody who participates in dialogue on Christianity and Sexuality to:

• **Practice Active Listening not just with your Head but with your Whole Being**
  Allow the sharing to touch you. Please don’t go into a defensive attitude of, I have heard that before; he is talking too much; this is typical clergy language so I am going to shut down.

• **Practice Sharing from Personal Experience**
  A lot of our input this morning has been about what we think and what resides in our heads. In the Indaba groups let’s share from our personal experience and include our hearts - that which we have personally experienced and felt.

• **Consider Yourself as Equal to Everybody Else**
  It is not somebody else’s job to make you feel equal in value. We ask you to practice and to claim your equality. Even if in your journey you have not had so much exposure, or feel shy or stutter when you are speaking, know that you are equal. Claim your equality and practice it. Practice - I am equal to my pastor, I am equal to my homosexual brother and I am equal to my straight sister.

Goals that we aim for in the Indaba groups:

• **Experience Dialogue**
  How do you know that you are dialoguing? If you choose it, if you experience the place as safe inside and outside, if you are practicing skills like listening and sharing your story and managing conflict; and if you integrate support. If you keep reaching for this, you will experience dialogue.

• Today the goal is to **identify and prioritize stumbling blocks for dialogue** in Africa on Christian Faith and Sexuality and to give feedback to the group.

• Tomorrow the goal is to **find and identify stepping stones for dialogue** in Africa on Christian Faith and Sexuality that can encourage us on this journey of hope. Find and listen to the stories of hope, find resources and report back to the group.

• When you share in the plenary group session you need to share two things: (1) how did you experience dialogue? What touched you? What do you think and feel about dialogue? (2) Give us the prioritized stumbling blocks today and tomorrow give us the prioritized stepping stones.

---

\(^1\) An **Indaba** is an important conference held by the men of the Zulu and Xhosa peoples of South Africa. The term comes from a Zulu word meaning business or matter.
Ground rules for dialogue:
• Time limit: we allow three minutes per person to share.
• Do not interrupt while others are speaking.
• If you don’t hear or understand something, raise your hand and ask for clarification.
• Speak from the “I” position. For example, I saw, I feel, I think. Try to avoid presenting your views as if they represent everybody’s view in your community. It is your personal point of view, not necessarily that of your community.
• Please keep your cell phone off during the Indaba groups.
• Keep confidential what is shared, for example: somebody might share something very personal in the Indaba groups like being raped, tortured, and scared of my community shunning me if I come out as a pastor for an inclusive church. If this happens, please keep confidential what is shared within the group. You may share the story in the plenary feedback session but if you do, do not identify the person, so that it remains a safe space.

**Discussion in Indaba groups**

**Stumbling Blocks to Dialogue on Christian Faith and Sexuality**

The following stumbling blocks were identified and prioritized in six Indaba groups. Four Groups had fourteen participants, two groups had thirteen. Clergy and LGBTI people were equally represented in the groups, where possible. Dialogue facilitators were appointed for each group and given helpful tools at a meeting before the dialogue session started. The Indaba on stumbling blocks ended in feedback from the different groups in a plenary session.

1. **The Church**
   • **Rules and Dogma** – The church is a stumbling block with its rules, dogma, hierarchy, and in its - God says and God thinks - ways. Church doctrines vary from denomination to denomination. Churches as a rule find change is too difficult. The lack of exposure to anything that is different from what is believed; the lack of willingness to learn or accept new ideas and ideologies are stumbling blocks.
   • **Traditions and Rigid Hierarchy** – There are structures or systems within the church and these hinder dialogue because they are often rigid and hierarchical in their setup. The lack of ability to talk about spirituality, sexuality and Scripture in a holistic way is a stumbling block. Churches avoid dialogue on the issue of homosexuality.
   • **Misuse and Misinterpretation of selective Scripture** – Is the Bible from Genesis to Revelations a consistent document? How do we read the Bible – literally or contextually? The different interpretations of the Bible are a stumbling block because people interpret the Bible to suit their agendas. The Bible was used to support slave trading and to oppress women and is now used to condemn homosexuality. Some clergy abuse their authority and knowledge of the Bible when they use debate for Bible bashing and condemning. They do not take into account that some people might not be so knowledgeable in regard to the Bible. Talking about sexuality is considered taboo, and when people link sexuality to Scripture it becomes shaky ground that people avoid rather than talk about. This is why the 1st African Dialogue Conference is so important.
• **Condemning Messages by the Church instil Fear rather than Courage** – Most of the teachings of the church are oppressive and negative. The teaching on sexuality and marriage has at its heart double standards for heterosexuality and homosexuality. The church believes that it has a monopoly on love. LGBTI sexuality is reduced to genitalia.

• **Holiness versus Humanness** – There is a misconception that homosexuality is a choice. Most churches have the preconceived idea that it is a choice and the LGBTI person is choosing promiscuity over a life of holiness. Mostly, clergy do not acknowledge or treat LGBTI people as human and part of the church.

• **Prejudice and Ignorance on the side of the Clergy and LGBTI people** – There is ignorance in the LGBTI community and in the church in general. Discrimination by the church and congregation against the unknown is common. On the part of the clergy there is selective listening. On the part of LGBTIs there is a lack of visibility in churches because feedback suggests that when LGBTI people do go to church, in most cases they become ostracized. Nobody is learning and moving forward. Clergy may not want access to information about LGBTI issues and LGBTI people are ignorant themselves. The church does not acknowledge that God can speak to individuals despite their sexual orientation.

• **Stigmatization, Generalization and Labelling** – Stereotypes and stigmas prevail that LGBTI people are promiscuous. What we hear from the pulpits is mostly negative because of a lack of knowledge and so we hear about *promiscuous homosexuals or the abomination*.

• **Lack of Resources, e.g. Gospel of Inclusion, Christian LGBTI People's Stories** – Churches lack the gospel of inclusion. We need to hear the stories of LGBTI Christians in our churches in order for us to better understand. Clergy lack counselling skills on the issue of same-sex behaviour and relationships.

• **Loss of Confidence in Clergy to maintain Confidentiality** – LGBTI people feel that they cannot confide in their clergy because they don't trust us. When LGBTI people confide in us they are scared that their stories might end up in newspapers or that clergy will use the pulpit to denounce their sexuality as demonic and evil.

• **Lack of Spiritual Maturity on the part of LGBTIs and Clergy** – In order to have the courage to tell our stories to each other and really listen, both parties need maturity. Addressing and handling the LGBTI issue needs maturity.

2. **Lack of Information and Knowledge**

• It was generally felt that there is limited literature, a lack of research on LGBTI issues, and a lack of openness for dialogue on issues of sexuality. There is a lack of willingness on the part of the clergy to accept new ideas or ideologies, a lack of exposure, and a lack of counselling skills. All these factors hinder knowledge: *when you don't know about something it is easy not to engage with it*. So if we don't engage, it is because we don't know.

• **On Sexuality and Sexual Orientation** – LGBTI communities are not educated and lack knowledge. Some of the LGBTI people in our group learned for the first time at this Conference of the acronym LGBTI and what it stands for. LGBTI people should learn about themselves and understand their sexuality before they expect clergy to understand it. Clergy should also educate themselves and learn about the misconception that homosexuality, LGBTI, is a choice.

• **Limited Literature and Lack of Research** – Limited literature and the lack of research on LGBTI issues impact both clergy and LGBTI people. Assumptions about sexuality are limiting and carry double-standards.
• Lack of Safe Space for Dialogue on Issues of Sex and Sexuality – We also refer to the actual gospel of inclusion, to include LGBTI people and all the marginalized groups. We need to hear the stories of LGBTI Christians.

3. Culture

• Myths of Culture – All these negative connotations create stereotypes that overflow into family life because the church is a very high and trusted place. The family fears being excluded from the church. We say this is not permissible in our culture but in the past there were many ways to incorporate those who were different form us into our community. In the old days difference was not treated with so much fear but today it is a barrier. Whether you are from church or from the traditional tribe, the perception that LGBTI issues are from the West is a hindrance.

• Family Attitudes – Families keep the problem to themselves until there is a need for confrontation. In some cases the family and community make fun of LGBTI people.

• Negative Attitudes towards Sexuality and Sexual Orientation – The way in which we grow up in our culture and religion is a stumbling block. In our culture we cannot ask questions in regard to sexuality; it is considered a taboo area. It was highlighted in our group that LGBTI people are not comfortable with clergy, or clergy with them because of socialization. Church leaders are important and you need to behave in a certain way when you are with them. In church, people come from different backgrounds that present different challenges. Negative attitudes from both sides make dialogue difficult.

• Violence and Threats towards LGBTI people – No Safe Spaces - Violence is a threat to dialogue, if you have a different opinion you will be hurt.

• Hostile Traditional Laws – We have different languages in my country. I don’t know anybody who allows homosexuality, and we don’t even have the language to describe sexual orientation. We have very harsh politics in our country. Homosexuality is seen as a very serious thing. For instance, I am going back to my country after the Conference and I don’t know if I will be arrested at the airport as I go back. We have a system in my country which we call jungle justice. They take you into the open, the streets, the market, they take you there and kill you and nothing happens to these killers. In my country you dare not show that you are homosexual, because they will beat you to death, and it wouldn’t take two seconds.

• Enforce Institutional Systems, e.g. State, Church, School, Education, etc. – The complex system of prejudice which has at its heart silencing and splitting of sexuality and spirituality is enforced by institutional systems. LGBTI people lack the courage to step out of systems and embrace humanity, diversity and sexuality as gifts from God.

4. Self-Stigma

• Self-Hatred and Stigma on the part of the LGBTI Person – Issues of sexuality are sometimes linked to self-hatred and self-stigmatisation, and for people of faith that is a serious stumbling block. As LGBTI people we could be our own stumbling block. Lack of resources and self-development tools is a stumbling block, as well as a lack of Bible Studies that are not judgmental.

• Internalised Homophobia – We have internalised homophobia because there is extensive denial from the environment that we grew up in, that we are sexual and loving people. We keep ourselves in prison.

• Excessive Attitudes or Lifestyle – Some of us, as LGBTI people, have an excessive attitude or lifestyle that can alienate people.

• Live in the Faith Closet – Many LGBTIs live a lie rather than celebrate their sexuality because of their fear of rejection.
• **Choose Non-Engagement** – The church does not include me, therefore I will close my life to the church and not go back there again.

5. **Lack of Safe Spaces for Dialogue**

• **Lack of Understanding in regard to LGBTI Issues and the Complexity of the Issues**
  It is difficult to find a safe space in church when there is no understanding on the part of the clergy for the LGBTI person or their issues. If we as LGBTI people can advocate for safe spaces it would also allow the woman whose husband is abusing her to have a sense of safe space, so it has a broader meaning and includes more than just LGBTI people.

• **Lack of Information and Resources** – People choose what they want to hear and learn. There will be no safe spaces for meaningful dialogue if there is selective listening and people resist learning.

• **Family and Family Home are Unsafe** – Not many LGBTI people can raise the issue of homosexuality within their family or at home. It is painful to know that there is no safe space for LGBTIs even in their family homes.

• **Cultural Spirit of Silence** – Cultural and spiritual silence creates unsafe spaces for any sex talk. The African culture does not talk about sex. In some instances there is funding from the West to stay silent in regard to sexuality, e.g. evangelical churches that shun homosexuals as demonic and condemned by God.

6. **Misconception and Misrepresentation of the Media**

• **Negative Media Coverage, if any** – Stereotyping by the media and others is a big reality. It involves family and church because the stereotype is what we have grown up with.

• **Lack of visibility in the media.**

7. **Anger**

• **Towards God, Authorities, the Church and Self** – The issues that LGBTI people face in church make them angry at God and the church. Church leadership, on the other hand, might be angry because they have to deal with unanticipated issues of homosexuality. Families might be angry at the church, the media or because they are ostracized for their child’s homosexuality.

8. **Fear**

• **Of Rejection, Stigma, Discrimination on part of the LGBTI Person** – We find that we are all part of a system and this system is shaped by lack of courage; the legitimate fear of stepping out and embracing humanity, diversity and sexuality as gifts from God. We find that to be a stumbling block.

• **Of Government Instruments on the part of LGBTI People and Clergy** – Both clergy and LGBTI people fear Government in regard to LGBTI issues. If the laws are opposed to LGBTI issues church leaders who take a lenient point of view or are accommodating or do not report LGBTI people are viewed as accomplices in crime.

• **Of Conflict with Church Leadership on the part of Clergy** – Clergy also fear being in conflict with the church leadership. Some of the church leaders even fear that by participating in the 1st African Dialogue Conference they will be shunned. When they go home, they don’t know how they will be perceived. All this fear keeps church leaders from empathy and opening up and it keeps LGBTI people from opening up.

• **Of Division in the Church if Controversial Issues are Introduced in the Church** – Fear of dividing the church is a stumbling block because it is believed that when you introduce controversial issues, the church might split. So it is better to let sleeping dogs lie and keep controversial issues at bay.
• Blackmail, Loss of Jobs, Violence, Corrective Rape, Sodomy and Death
• Family Dishonour

9. Laws
• No recognition of Human Rights of the LGBTI Person
• Legal Systems of Various Countries – In all the countries in our group except for South Africa, LGBTI behaviour is criminalized and same-sex marriages are taboo. In South Africa same-sex marriage is recognized on paper but the practice on the ground is still not supported.
• Hostile Laws which include Persecution, Prison, Violence and Death
• Lack of Legal Protection
• Lack of Claiming LGBTI Personal and Constitutional Rights

10. Language
• Language – Variance versus Deviance
• Inaccessible Language, Terms and Terminology – At this Conference we are trying to create an environment where we will be understood as LGBTI people. In most of our communities it is difficult to understand sexuality, sexual intercourse and sexual orientation. Before we go out there and address these issues in the church environment and expect to be understood, we need to understand it ourselves. We need to reach down to the language of the people who we want to understand us. We need to speak their language. If we come and speak about lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex sexuality it might hinder the process. Nobody gets these big words. Therefore they ignore LGBTI issues. We need to speak a language that people understand in order for us to be heard.

Plenary Discussion on Stumbling Blocks
• The key thing that stood out for us was that this was dialogue. It wasn’t about what your stand is and what my stand is but it is about what do we say.
• What I have discovered here is that although I might not have been a supporter of LGBTI issues, coming to this Conference with tolerance and listening to others’ stories has benefited me. I have heard stories that I have never heard before from the other side and it is very important. I love that I came here.
• I would like to thank God for the opportunity to be here in this space. For the first time in my life I have felt that this is a safe space for me. I have not been fighting. I have not been debating with anyone. I really learned a lot, especially that dialogue is really important. For most of my life as a pastor I have been discriminated against because I was the youngest pastor, a woman, Black and short. For the first time ever nobody has made me feel like I just want to run away. This is a new experience for me.
• What I have learned from this group today is that I have to continue to love the people of God unconditionally. As I go back to my country I am definitely going to simulate the spirit of Christ in our nation and accommodate our fellow LGBTI brothers and sisters. I believe there are definitely going to be solutions because Jesus is able.
How wonderful that people are talking without knowing each other. In our group we had a lot of clergy and they did not have a lot of knowledge, some had never met homosexuals in their lives. Suddenly here we are and we are talking to one another as people and as Christians. If we can meet each other for the first time, accept each other, I have hope for the future. At this 1st African Dialogue Conference something amazing is happening. As a father I discovered that my son was gay. I prayed that he would change but I now realize that might not happen. When I was asked if I could celebrate his sexuality, I answered that I am not yet there, but maybe I will be by the end of this Dialogue Conference.

I have learned so much. This gathering is really a place where we can build a future of changes and lay a foundation to reach the world on these particular issues. This is a dialogue that is very serious and it is good and well handled. In the groups we shared our stories, our emotions and our compassion. There is a problem and there are solutions but we are also looking for the way forward. I believe that the power of the Holy Spirit will guide us.

I came here prepared with all the debates in my mind like one big ice statue. This ice statue just melted away in the love and compassion of dialogue.

Devotion
How Do We Journey Forward?
By Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela
CEO of the KwaZulu Natal Council of Churches

Reading from John 8: 1 - 11

Reflection
On our tables we have little stones. Let anyone who is among you without sin be the first to throw a stone. Today we want to break away the stumbling blocks we talked about yesterday into smaller stones. As we do that I would like to invite you to take one stone and just hold and keep it in your hand. We are not going to stone anyone today. In the text that we have just read, we don’t even know the woman’s name. We don’t hear anything about the person she was committing adultery with; I am assuming it takes two to commit adultery. She could have been with a tree, with a stone, with a woman, with a man, I don’t know. Leviticus 20: 10b says that both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death, both of them. The Scribes misquote the Law of Moses. They say people like this should be stoned while the Law of Moses says that both of them should be stoned. Does this sound familiar?
Jesus realizes that the Scribes and the Pharisees are trying to trap Him and according to Gail in the Woman's Bible Commentary, Jesus’ focus is not on the woman alone but is evenly divided between the Scribes and the Pharisees and the woman. When the Scribes and Pharisees brought the woman to Jesus they dehumanised her, turning her into and object for debate and discussion. Jesus does not single out the woman as a sinner but rather, the text identifies all the characters as in need of and receiving an invitation to new life.

We need to rectify this destructiveness of our teachings and practices in our churches. We have judged, we have discriminated, we have despised, and we have pitied LGBTI people. We have used the very symbols of hope - like the Bible - to condemn people. Today we are going to use the stones that were used to put people to death as stepping stones. We are going to claim them and use them in a constructive way.

We have dismembered the body of Christ using the very stones we have in our hands. We have undermined some parts of the body. LGBTI people are part of the body of Christ. The church is the body of Christ and we are all members of this body. It is important for us to promote the spirit of inter-dependence and show the world how important we all are for the wholeness of the body.

We must share our suffering and also share our joy. There is a lot of pain here today; people have shared their stories and all their experiences that they’ve gone through in their countries. We as the body of Christ should feel that pain together with them. We have used stones to dismember the body of Christ. Today I want to invite you as you hold this stone in your hand, I want you to feel it and think of all the reasons and the stones we have used to discriminate, to reject, to condemn, to label, to threaten, to stigmatise LGBTI people. Think of the stones - if you are a member of the LGBTI community - which you have used to stop yourself or hinder yourself from engaging in any kind of dialogue. Today we can use the same stones to bring about life and healing to the body of Christ again.

Let us bring our building and stepping stones to the front. I have two baskets here. What I would like us to do as you feel the stone, is to transfer all your attitudes, all the words that you have said in the past that brought about pain in the lives of people, and claim them as a tool that we are going to use to rebuild and reconstruct an inclusive community; a community that acknowledges the importance of every single member in the body of Christ. The same tools that we have used to destroy this body, we can also use to rebuild and reconstruct. Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to stone her. I’d like to invite you as you bring your pain, all the negative things that you have done to people, LGBTI people, bring that stone and say a quiet prayer as we sing softly. Reclaim that stone and say, I am going to be an agent of transformation from today onwards. The very stone I have used to cut up peoples’ lives, I will use to build a place that will welcome all into the Kingdom of God.
Discussion in Indaba groups

1. Sharing Stories of Hope as Stepping Stones

The Indaba groups found stepping stones and shared stories of hope, to empower them. Participants found stepping stones to supported them in their countries, to journey with hope with their sexual orientation and faith communities.

We can use the Bible to Liberate or to Kill – Zimbabwe

I counselled my sister who was having a hard time in her marriage. She wanted a divorce. I told her that the Bible does not allow divorce. She told me that she respects my position as a priest and that she would live by my guidance. She also said you might find me dead one day. I answered her, better to die than to divorce. I left my country to go to school in another country. At school I received a phone call telling me my sister had been killed. That changed me. I made a promise on that day that I won’t use Scripture to kill; I will use the Bible to liberate. My fellow Christians, we need to know that we can kill or liberate.

Finding my Way Back to the Church – Nigeria

In the 90s and early 2000 I was an active member of a Pentecostal church and involved in a group called Pastoral Care. This group had cooked and cared for the pastors and visiting clergy. Someone drew my attention to the fact that I was the only male in this group and that it was a kind of feminine role that I was fulfilling. This did not stop me. I love cooking and just enjoyed myself. In the late 90s I took part in a television documentary called Black, Bent and Beautiful. When the documentary was produced I was silhouetted because of fear that my story would go back to the church. I was recognized despite the fact that I talked behind the shadows. In 2000 I was outed in church and excommunicated. In 2001 a group of South Africans visited my country. I volunteered to host some of them in my home. They told me about the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). The moment I heard the word church I responded that I was done with church but that I still had a relationship with God. They wanted me to join them in church but I was not ready. When they went back home they left the address of the pastor and the church for me. My story of hope is that these visitors helped me to reconnect with the church. For me this is a stepping stone to find a community where love reigns. Love is always in the church but sometimes as LGBTI people we don’t find it, we don’t see it because love itself becomes invisible. This is my story of hope because I had lost faith in the church - not in God - and wanted nothing to do with church. Eventually I did go to the MCC and met with their pastor. He did not just welcome me that day, he really included me. I remember him saying, welcome home and ever since then I never left the church again. Today I am still a member of the MCC. I think if we can help other LGBTI people find their way back to church, that would be a story of hope. LGBTI people are almost as if in a maze and we need to help them find their path back home. Church is home.

Self-Affirmation – South Africa

I am a Dutch Reformed Minister who was fired from the church because of my sexual orientation. It was a dire time in my life and just before the church came to a decision to fire me, I was asked to preach at the Good Hope Metropolitan Church (GHMCC). For the first time I could access the power of affirming myself by claiming full Scripture and starting to use Scripture to say, if Scripture says that we’re created in the image of God, then I am claiming that I am created in the image of God too. In my case I was a gay man. I was created in the image of God. This is a very powerful place to access; that self-affirmation as a stepping stone, to assert who you are and that you are created by God. Whatever anyone else says is not as true as if you truly listen to what God says.
Finding Like-Minded People and Organizations – Namibia

Until I met up with IAM, I was a very cynical person. I thought nothing of the church and had a very antagonist attitude towards preachers. The self-loathing I felt I projected onto the church and my pastor. Maybe this Conference is the place where I can apologize for that. My meeting with IAM opened up possibilities for me. I was someone who wanted to be very close to God. I wanted to be a missionary but because of my sexual orientation this was not possible. There are not many organizations that believe in including dialogue and getting people together to talk and listen to each other’s stories. I just want to stress again the importance of finding like-minded people and organizations as stepping stones and support on our journey.

Knowledge and Information Helped me to Understand my Sexual Orientation – Namibia

A few years back I met two people from TRP. Back then I did not know where to get information about sexual orientation. Not only did TRP bring me clothes to their office, they gave me information and education about my sexuality. I was a Roman Catholic then. One of the priests called me to his office and asked me if I was gay. I felt empowered by the information I got from TRP and answered yes. He questioned me and told me that to be a gay Christian is not accepted in the Roman Catholic Church and asked me to leave the church. This is still a very emotional story for me to share. When I decided to come out of the closet, I thought everything with everybody would be fine. Going back to the Roman Catholic Church was not okay. I shared everything with my family afterwards. My sister advised me to go to the Lutheran Church. I went with my Dad and Mom to the church and spoke to the woman pastor. She listened to us. I can now say that I am a gay Christian and a member of the Lutheran Church. Although the pastors accept me, some of the church members have difficulty with my sexual orientation.

Create a Safe Space

I want to pick up from the church as a stumbling block and turn that into a stepping stone. Last night we agreed that we are the church. In our spaces and parishes as pastors, ministers and priests we can start to create a safe space for all. I know that this is a very delicate and difficult thing to do but we can start with it as a stepping stone. I remember when I was a full-time minister in a congregation, when I called people for the Holy Communion, I would use the words right of admission is not reserved, and this became our theme for our church. I know that some of the pastors here are scared to even use the word gay but it is important that we create safe spaces, in which we can say, welcome lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex people. It is important that we start a dialogue within our congregations and move forward. I think we should create safe spaces wherever we are, spaces of comfort, and that we should not only wait for Conferences like this one to do it.

Education and Knowledge came to me through Story-Telling – South Africa

The biggest stepping stone for me was when Pieter and David Russell from IAM came along and spoke to us as newly ordained priests. As ordained priests who were about to go out, we had been given many tools. Then Pieter and David shared their stories and that is how I believe we start making a difference. In listening to their stories, both of them equipped me with a lot of things that I had not even thought of. Their sharing made me curious. If we look at the church and ask ourselves, how do we start bringing in change as people who are coming out of seminaries or even in training within seminaries? Education and knowledge were some of the things that were highlighted, and that has made a very big difference to me.
Story-Telling Changed Me – Uganda

It is so sad. As a minister in the church I feel so bad that we can diminish other peoples’ humanity and stop people from coming to church. People do not want to see us in church, they want to see God. I was fortunate to be part of some research in Uganda and the moment I heard the life-stories of LGBTI people, my life changed. Story-telling forces people to attach to you and that is one of the reasons I am here at this Conference. Some of the pastors here claim that the 1st African Dialogue Conference is the first time that they have come into contact with gay people. Most of these pastors hear about LGBTI issues but they do not know the person. If a gay person can talk to these pastors and tell them about his/her love for God the pastor will get to know the person behind the label of gayness. In other cases it is also true that some churches will still say that we do not have gays in Africa.

Discern and Use what is Appropriate within your Context

I thought a stone was just a stone. Then I realized you have soft stone and you have soap stone, and you can do lots of different things with stone. I want to plead with all here today that we do not have a blueprint that will apply to all throughout the African continent. When we look at stepping stones, we need to look at different stepping stones for different countries and environments in which we find ourselves. Let us share in general here with the prayerful hope that we will take what will be the most appropriate for us to use in our context.

Dialogue – Lesotho

As far as I know the issue of homosexuality is not out in my country and it has never been discussed in the churches or Government. I am a pastor and maybe my situation differs from that in your countries but I am sitting with the question, how? How to address this issue in the different hierarchies in church and Government? We do not have gay people coming out in my country. For gay people to come out would be a new thing; something we do not know about. To pass on information, I want to know to whom, how and when? It is a delicate situation and should be handled as a delicate situation. The 1st African Dialogue Conference empowers me and gives me hope that people with different points of view can sit together and talk; that if it can be done here, maybe it is possible in my country too.

Share Information with Your Family

As LGBTI people we need to stay in the process of dialogue with our families. My family home is not just a place where I go to sleep at night. The morals and values I have, I learned in this home. We need to share the information that we have in regard to LGBTI issues with those we love and with those who love us. Trust your family without first thinking of the shame your sexual orientation will bring to the community. More times than we think, our families will accept us.

We are all Created in the Image of God

I was raised in the Lutheran Church and came out to my family as a lesbian. My pastor and family decided that they had to pray for me because I was demonic. I was kicked out of my home, had to fend for myself and re-start my life all over. I knew inside that I was God’s child and I knew that I had to find a place where I could worship God. At one time I would sit outside and worship by myself, read the Bible and sing. I tell this story to highlight that LGBTIs don’t always run from churches, they get kicked out of churches.
Self-Acceptance – United States

What I found in my experience of being involved in the gay and lesbian community full-time and being a lesbian is that it’s very difficult to share, whether with a pastor or our family because we do not like rejection and we do not like confrontation as human beings. The risk of being rejected by our family, pastors, colleagues and friends is daunting for a gay or lesbian person. As LGBTI persons we need to know ourselves, and for an LGBTI person that is self-acceptance. One has to almost work through that process of self-acceptance before one feels comfortable within oneself. As gay and lesbian people, we need to feel comfortable within ourselves and know who we are. Once we can be honest with that, the shame of being an LGBTI person is taken away. Remove the shame that comes out of the stigmatisation of who we are. We ourselves are ashamed of ourselves with internalised homophobia. So the shame needs to be removed and once that is done then one can say I’m okay. Then we will have the courage to begin to share and be confident in our sharing.

Believing and Knowing that God loves Me just as I am

Most of us live under the pressure of lying about who we are; who our partners are. We have just adapted to lying as LGBTI people because it is easier than the truth. I want to be free because I accept myself and believe that God loves me. This is a Dialogue Faith Conference and believing that God loves me just as I am is a stepping stone.

Knowledge

The courage that I got was through my teacher. She was lesbian and she encouraged me to speak out in class and be a leader. I am from an extended family and from mixed race. My stepfather was the stumbling block between my mother and me. He would scold about homosexuality. My mother is a Christian and she accepts me as gay. As my stepfather learned to know me, he learned to accept me.

Break the Silence – Democratic Republic of Congo

In our country the LGBTI issue is not raised publicly, in the church or at the grassroots level of the community. We are trying to break the silence around issues of sexuality at the grassroots level so that people can get information and we can raise awareness of the issue and start talking publicly. When we meet in the Synod I am trying to get this issue on the agenda. We are just beginning in our country to create awareness around the issue of homosexuality.

Embrace Diversity – South Africa

I realize that there are people who are different from me and that it does not make sense to reject diversity, because that is how God created us. The more a person understands the integrity of creation and that God loves us equally, the more you realize that you truly have no right to judge anyone. It is a realization also in our journeys of faith. As you mature in your faith you realize I should be an agent of transformation and I have no right to exclude anyone.

People and Circumstances Differ

I teach theology, and listening to all these stories I think one benefit is that all the stories are different from each other. So there is a need for open dialogue. One should not necessarily think that you know what the other’s story is about, because there are different circumstances and different people. When somebody comes to me with a problem the first thing I do is to treat that person as a person so that they feel respected and are able to share their stance. What we experience at the 1st African Dialogue Conference is a good thing; dialogue is a good thing.
Resources can serve as Stepping Stones

See appendix for available resources

Discussion in Indaba groups

2. Stepping Stones to Dialogue on Christian Faith and Sexuality

The following stepping stones were identified and prioritized in the Indaba groups. The stepping stones include feedback from the different groups.

1. Stepping stones in the church

- Scripture can be used in a Liberating Way – the Bible is a Book of Hope – The Bible has affirming texts about the love of God for us, and it is also a very positive tool. We need to discern when the Bible is being used to condemn, and whether we agree with this. The Bible is a very powerful symbol in Africa. It is the only book in one’s own language and often the starting point or common denominator for a discussion or for going into dialogue with other Christians and people. Reclaim Scripture with others, be witnesses, be missionaries, be role models; this takes courage. It is not easy but the outcome is being human. Choose the right time and dialogue model to discuss LGBTI issues. We are the most important agents for transformation; we cannot expect that only from Government and the church. Overall the Bible talks about love. Use the Bible as a book of hope. Christians believe that the Bible is inspired by the Spirit; Paul talks about the Spirit of the Bible as giving life. If we use the Bible like this, it will create a safe space for dialogue. When it comes to the interpretation of the Bible, there is always a divide; we can cross this divide with dialogue and understanding. The truth of the Bible must be told in love.

- Stay in the Process of Dialogue – Be open to education and not scared of it. We have to address the whole theology of sin. What is sin and what is redemption? We must not narrow sin down to sexuality because many times the church picks only on sexuality as sin. Sexuality should be a continuing topic in our churches.

- Preach in Tolerant and Accommodating Tones and Refrain from Judgment – The church that alienated the LGBTI should start preaching in a tolerant tone. It should refrain from judgment and become more inclusive. There are some people who do not have space to worship in their churches; we encourage these people to seek fellowship with like-minded and open-minded people. We need to stop bashing each other; the church and the LGBTI community should respect each other.

- Be Inclusive – Get people involved and put the LGBTI issue on the agenda at grassroots and Synod levels. Form partnerships between LGBTI organizations and the church. Be an inclusive church that focuses on spirituality and theology that includes the other side. Dialogue with and support parents struggling with their LGBTI children’s sexual orientation. Practice unconditional love, inclusive love, as Jesus has for us. When we interact as we did in the 1st African Dialogue Conference some of us begin to understand what inclusiveness means.

- Acknowledge the Contextual Interpretation of Scripture – Scripture holds messages of liberation. We need to understand and interpret Scripture. We need to reclaim Scripture with others. We are witnesses to others, of who we are in the eyes of God. Bring back contextual Bible Studies to the church and make it applicable to people who are marginalized.
• The LGBTI Community should continue to Respect the Church and Both Parties Stop Bashing Each Other – Do not wait for the other to initiate dialogue. Initiate it yourself and start building relationships. If I wait for people to come my way, I am not doing my part. Reach out to others.

2. Education and Training

• Explain Basic Concepts and Facts so that All People Understand Sexual Orientation.
• Clergy – Educate us as clergy. We don’t know what LGBTI stands for and we don’t understand what homosexuality is about. Distribute material about homosexuality and where possible adapt the material to local situations.
• Culture – Reclaim Original Beliefs and Blessings – In our culture we need to reclaim original beliefs when they are healing. In some African cultures, before Christianity, being born gay or lesbian was regarded as a blessing. We want to tap into that concept of African culture again; to reclaim the blessing that we are.
• Story-Telling – LGBTI people need to tell their stories. This opens the doors for people who are ignorant. Case studies and research on LGBTI stories are needed. Story-telling is important for healing. Use personal testimonies and story-telling of LGBTI people to educate and empower. We need to name and shame the injustices and perpetrators in our stories. Communicate the humanity of the person so that we have common ground; we are all human beings telling our stories, breathing the Divine into our personal experiences.
• Distribute Material and Resources As Widely As Possible – We need affirming literature. Libraries should have books on homosexuality on their shelves. We need to engage one-on-one with people. We need to redefine masculinity and femininity.
• Share Resources – Adapt material to suit local situations in the various countries.
• The Curriculum in Theological Colleges needs to Include LGBTI issues to Sensitise and Educate future Church Leaders
• Mainstream Sexuality into the School Curriculum, e.g. Life Orientation.
• Conduct Research and Produce a Documentary that Dispel Myths on LGBTI Issues.
• Human Rights Training – is needed.
• Awareness Campaigns for Self, Family and Media – Education about LGBTI issues should be a priority and considered a process.
• The Use of Inclusive Language – Invent an African language to help people understand, have descriptive terms, and compile our own dictionary because sometimes people still struggle with what homosexuality is. Have inclusive language and Scripture that all of us can relate to. Include different illustrations that are not just hetero-normative.
• Media – There is a cry for training to increase our capacity as homo- and heterosexuals. We need to have more skills. Produce our own media and use the media. We need to understand our own culture.

3. Network and Support System

• Church – Network with people at grassroots and Synod levels.
• Family – Parents of LGBTI people need to come together and discuss the issues they have around sexual orientation. They need to form support groups. Parents and family of LGBTI people can share their stories and educate each other.
• **Community** – There is a cry for networking. We do not want to be influenced by what is foreign to our context. How do we network within our local communities? How do we share resources and our various gifts? How do we draw support from the support groups? We recognize that this dialogue is just the beginning of this journey.

• **With Professional People** – Invite professional people, doctors and psychologists who can explain some of the same-sex issues to support groups, meetings, and your home.

• **Identify LGBTI Role Models, Supportive Icons and Patrons.**

• **Form Partnerships with IAM and other LGBTI Organizations.**

4. **Create Safe Spaces**

• **Support Groups** – Support groups that meet regularly are a stepping stone. If you do not have support groups in your particular denomination link up with support groups from other areas. Create support systems within churches and faith communities. Create informal spaces, safe spaces, spaces for people to come out; maybe even spaces for financial support. Identify people who will support you on your journey.

• **Integrate Sexuality with HIV-Aids Conferences and Workshops** – It may be difficult to meet on LGBTI issues in some countries but we can package LGBTI meetings under HIV-Aids and other meetings, knowing that LGBTI people will be present.

• **Unveil Biases, Prejudice; Challenge Stereotypes and Hetero-Normativity.**

5. **Self-Knowledge**

Self-knowledge is a stepping stone. If you know yourself it is already a step in the right direction. Self-knowledge includes self-acceptance, self-realization and the ability and capacity to disclose your sexual preference.

• **Self-Acceptance and Self-Realization** – We need to live by the virtue of hope, affirm people for who they are, claim our rightful place in the church, and regard everyone as equal to us. Self-acceptance to love yourself, claim your sexuality and see yourself as a blessing. Believe in God and in yourself; have faith. Challenge stereotyping. Show solidarity with and commitment to marginalized people, particularly as Christians. It is our faith that we are all created in the image of God.

• **Awareness about sexuality** – Awareness about our sexuality is another component of self-knowledge. You need to know your sexuality so that you don’t doubt yourself and deny yourself. Believing and knowing that God loves me as I am. This will give you the ability to have the faith and courage to share who you are. Get out of the closet. We need to be the transformation agents in order to change stereotypes.

6. **Laws**

• **The Bill of Rights in South Africa** - Is a stepping stone that we look forward to in other countries.

• **Address Political Parties that Influence Legislation.**
Devotion
Journey with Hope through Africa
By David Russell

Reading from Acts 10 and 11

The Holy Spirit Empowering Us For Change – Peter and Cornelius

Peter’s dream: A voice said to him Get up, Peter; kill and eat. But Peter said, Certainly not, Lord. (Acts 10:13f)

Peter with Cornelius and family: You yourselves know very well that a Jew is not allowed by his religion to visit or associate with Gentiles. But God has shown me … (Acts 10:28)

Peter reports to the Church at Jerusalem: It is clear that God gave those Gentiles the same gift that he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ; who was I then to try and stop God … When they heard this, they stopped their criticism and praised God. (Acts 11:17f)

Always transforming, always enabling, always at work and here you are. We can smile and wonder and rejoice in the way God comes and does His work through the Spirit. God throws us wonderfully, transforms us unpredictably. There is Peter, so sure of what the church teaches, so sure of what is right and what is wrong, so sure of his religion, so sure of its teaching. So when he has a vision, God draws him into this vision. God brings his vision upon him unexpectedly. And God says to Peter, kill and eat these things. And he says, certainly not, Lord. Do you say that to God sometimes? I hope you don’t. Certainly not God! I am not going to do that because it is against my religion. God says to Peter, don’t tell me what the truth is Peter, I am telling you. Peter says, no God, that is not my faith that is not what I was taught. God says, hey Peter, I’m telling you. The Holy Spirit empowers us for change. The Holy Spirit is at work. The Holy Spirit will do what the Holy Spirit will do. Thank God! Praise be to God. We are here to let the Holy Spirit do the Holy Spirit’s work. That is all we want. That is our commitment.

The story continues and Peter meets up with Cornelius, a party that has come to fetch him, he is in a daze what on earth is happening now? I am sure that you had some of this experience here at the Conference, what is happening now? I did not expect this. Then Peter is invited into the Gentile’s house. No, this is too much. I am not allowed to go in there, this is not my religion. Somehow the Spirit has started to work and Peter follows an inner instinct, an inner Spirit, an inner intuition. I must flow with this. I don’t know where it is taking me but I am going to trust God to lead me. He goes into the house and he says, you know, I’m doing all this wrong, we’re not supposed to be here, you know. It is not my religion to be with you, you are all infidels, and you’re dirty. Peter may not have said this but he might have felt it. So the story goes on.

Then what happens? Peter starts talking about faith and the Spirit comes down on him. He doesn’t know how to handle that either. The rejected ones also receive the Spirit. Why not? Just as much as anyone else we all receive the Spirit. The Spirit touches us all. The Spirit is in each of us. Don’t dare say that the Spirit is not in each of us; don’t judge another one about the presence of the Spirit.

Then Peter has to go and report to the church authorities. What do the church authorities say, yes he is an authority in himself but he is accountable, hopefully first to God, you know what the Spirit has been doing. He comes and tells them all about this and he says after telling them, who then was I to try and stop God? It is happening; it is happening
and we thank God that it is happening. Let’s just pause and pray and sing and thank God for the empowering Spirit that works in us as the Spirit works in Peter and Cornelius.

We are going back to our countries, to realities that are sometimes painful and harsh. Here we find strength and we are talking about stepping stones. We go back very small – few in a big sea of people – to hostility and barriers. If we think of the mustard seed, the Kingdom of God seems very small. The Kingdom of God, says Jesus is within you.

I want to greet you all as fellow mustard seeds; you are going to go back as mustard seeds and that is fine because of what God can do with a mustard seed, that seems so small and weak, and it is. God is doing it as God did with Peter, God does with you. It is amazing and it is true.

Epilogue
By Pieter Oberholzer

What excited us was that, although dialogue only really has effects in the long term, we saw changes taking place during the 1st African Dialogue Conference. Participants moved from a place of fear to a place of empowerment and hope. LGBTI individuals were initially fearful because of their history of rejection and persecution by the church or church-supported Government laws; were apprehensive of their fellow clergy participants; and on the other hand some clergy admitted that they have never been introduced to LGBTI Christians.

Everyone experienced dialogue as a way to tackle the challenges we are facing regarding sexual orientation and faith. We listened to the stories and testimonies of painful and challenging journeys that touched us all, without fear of rejection and condemnation. Dialogue offered us for the first time the hope of a journey that can bind us together as fellow Christians, rather than divide us.

At the end of the three days the participants came to the following conclusion:

We affirm and call upon fellow African Christians, especially the people of Uganda, to engage in dialogue in finding a way forward, together. There is a great need for safe spaces for dialogue within faith communities. We need to listen more deeply to the diverse journeys fellow Christians on our continent are finding themselves on regarding their spirituality and sexuality.

We believe God has gifted us with both sexuality and spirituality as aspects of our humanity. It is our duty and responsibility, as members of the same body of Christ, to affirm amidst our diversity and differences that all of us are made in the image of God. We are equal in value and thus deserve to commit ourselves to this process of encounter, listening and sharing.

We trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding us through dialogue to find our way forward, even in the face of so much fear, anger, pain and even hatred.

The participants signed a letter of support to the community in Uganda (included as appendix i). Many feedback letters were received from participants, indicating the value the Conference added to their understanding of how to deal with this sensitive dialogue (excerpts included as appendix ii). IAM and TRP shared the resources they can provide to assist in further dialogue (included as appendix iii).

Finally we are so grateful to see that the 1st African Dialogue Conference on Christian Faith and Sexuality showed immediate results in the form of numerous initiatives that have started in various African countries (summary included as appendix iv).
Appendix

I. Letter of Support

We submit this letter to this press conference for the notice of the wider public in the hope that the South African Council of Churches and worldwide Christian Bodies will give it their serious attention:

A CALL ON CHRISTIANS TO OPPOSE THE BAHATI’S HATE BILL WHICH HAS BEEN TABLED BEFORE THE UGANDAN PARLIAMENT

“Every day millions of Christians pray to be spared from being put to the test. This prayer is especially applicable for Christians everywhere in regard to the ‘anti-homosexuality bill’, which has been put to parliament in Uganda, by Member of Parliament Bahati. This extremely unpleasant proposed bill targets not only lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people but also Human Rights and HIV/AIDS prevention activists and people in positions of trust and authority. While some in the church are backing and propelling the bill, other Christians face a challenge to the principles at the heart of their faith.” This statement reiterates why all Christians everywhere should not support this HATE bill:

• The bill breaks rather than builds the family. It makes family members ‘spies’ of each other rather than ‘keepers’ of one another. It turns parents into prosecutors of their children and siblings into accusers of one another.

• It makes everyone suspicious of any kind of affection in case it is interpreted as intent to commit homosexuality.

• It undermines and totally dispels the place of compassion, understanding, and love within the Christian Faith.

• It totally undermines the pivotal role of grace in the Christian Faith. “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us …” The work of salvation was done for us before we were aware of it or even accepted it. God’s gift of love was not dependent on our identities or sexuality or even willingness to acknowledge the gift. It was just given. The church has the duty to exemplify this understanding and demonstration of love.

The same Scripture that are being used to persecute and demonize LGBTI people are very clear on the duty of all Christians to bear with one another’s differences – to be tolerant, to desist from judgement, and to practice the golden rule where we give others the treatment that we would have.

God calls on all of us to act with compassion, not to call for unfair treatment and oppression of those with a minority voice. God calls on all of us to build family, not to tear it apart by sowing seeds of discord, hatred, suspicion and intolerance. God calls on all of us to understand and appreciate our differences not to use these to oppress one another. Even if you think that homosexuality is a sin, we call upon you to oppose this bill.

Some people think that being homosexual, we are sinners but many people know that we are children of God created in God’s image. Whatever you believe, we call upon you to appreciate that Bahati’s bill is not about any of this; it is not even about homosexuality. It is about politics. It is about hate. It is about intolerance. Among its draconian and hate-inciting provisions, the bill proposes that:
• Any person alleged to be homosexual would be at risk of life imprisonment or in some circumstances the death penalty,
• Any parent who does not denounce their lesbian daughter or gay son to the authorities would face fines of $2,650.00 or three years in prison,
• Any teacher who does not report a lesbian or gay pupil to the authorities within 24 hours would face the same penalties,
• Any landlord or landlady who happens to give housing to a suspected homosexual would risk 7 years of imprisonment, and

Similarly, the Bill threatens to punish or ruin the reputation of anyone who works with the gay or lesbian population, such as medical doctors working on HIV/AIDS, civil society leaders active in the fields of sexual and reproductive health, hence further undermining public health efforts to combat the spread of HIV.

II. Feedback letters from Participants

• Nigeria:
My testimony is plentiful, I am appreciative to IAM and TRP, I am thankful for the presence of my father and for the love we shared in the celebration of my birthday, I am gratified for the emotions and joy, the vulnerability that was so invigorating. Now it made sense when Jesus said, those with me are my brothers, my sisters, my mother and father. I pray that we would continue to find the space in our hearts to dialogue wherever we are and trusting God until every stumbling block are removed to make stepping stones. More grace more power.

• Malawi:
Upon return to our country we would love to host a similar event here in Malawi before the end of the year in partnership with the Malawi Council of Churches, and others. Look forward to hear from you soon. Shalom.

• Botswana:
I really learned a lot at this worship especially been Christian and a gay man. I’m reading your pamphlets and it helps me to cope with my situation as a gay Christian. It is my prayer that one day by the grace of God and IAM’s assistance we in Botswana will also enlighten LGBTIs about Christianity and Homosexuality. If by any means you can help us it would be a pleasure for us to welcome you here.

• South Africa:
What a powerful Conference organized by IAM - a Conference that was the beginning of a long journey towards bringing together the church and LGBTIs through Dialogue. Thank you for your amazing un-ending effort to bring this Conference, the first of its kind, into being and for inviting me. While I know you have held many Conferences before, this is truly the first of its kind.

to say that this Conference was a success is an understatement. It was more than that, it brought people together, changed views, and in the midst of everything even changed the lives of many that attended. This was certainly obvious in the group work, where people felt a safe space to share stories, many stories came with tears of great torment and deep struggle, especially people from some other countries. Thanks to organizations like IAM this journey has started for many.

It was wonderful that such a Conference could safely be held in S.A. and could be a platform for other countries to have a voice in such a forum. Pieter and Judith, thank you for that. I know you are both humble, and I have never seen you try to
take credit, but please allow the praise, as I know in talking to many people that this Conference has touched many lives, and made a difference to many people and truly is historic not simply because it is a first of its kind, but also because it is paving the way for transformation and liberation in many areas, both geographically on this continent and on a very personal level in helping the LGBTI community in this struggle of knowing that God loves us all regardless of our sexual orientation.

I have received at least five or six emails from different people I connected with at the Conference and have made new friends, all who have said what a great success this Conference has been. Many of us walk away from Conferences with some extra knowledge that we take with us, hopefully. But this Conference did more than that; it brought a spirit of reconciliation to people right there. People can surely not be the same after this. This was not just a Conference presenting papers this touched people at all levels, emotions were involved, people making decisions about their faith walk for their future, fathers and their children publicly reconciling to one another, this was all evident here.

Thank you also for all the amazing resources that you have developed to help people on the Journey of Hope.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank all those that were instrumental and the affiliate organizations that helped with this Conference, like TRP and any others I might not have mentioned. Thank you.

• Letters of appreciation of friends who could not attend:
  Your report gives much hope. Not only am I pleased to hear that LGBTI people could find a safe space to express their experience of this journey, but you have also identified possible stepping stones for the ongoing dialogue. Well done.
  Rev Ecclesia de Lange (Methodist Church, Cape Town)
  It was wonderful to read your Press Statement and report of the success of your Conference in Die Burger. Congratulations, very good News!
  Prof. Christo Lombard, Department. of Religion, University of the Western Cape.

III. Resources for Dialogue

All the resources that IAM has available developed in Africa to empower and enhance dialogue:

• Brochures:
  ◦ Human Sexuality Why Christians Should Talk About It?
  ◦ Human Sexuality and the Bible.
  ◦ My child is gay – a parents’ story

• The Bible Studies:
  ◦ Journey with God on the anti-gay texts in the Bible.

• Booklets:
  ◦ Homosexuality and the Bible.
  ◦ The Bible and Homosexuality, What is the Spirit saying to us? Written by David Russell
  ◦ Slavery, Homosexuality and Women – text in context, discerning the message and meaning of the scripture. Written by David Russell
• DVDs:
  - Created in the image of God, a DVD on life-stories of LGBTI people.
  - Ter will van ons Kinders, (For the sake of our Children) a DVD with sub-titles on life-stories of LGBTI parents and their children.
  - There Comes a Time: a Methodist documentary on same-sex marriages
  - Forgotten Survivors produced by TRP on the violence and harassment of LGBTI people.

• Reports and Manuals:
  - The Evil of Patriarchy in Church, Society and Politics, a report on the rejection of masculine hierarchy and repression; it focuses on a new masculinity and femininity.
  - A Counseling Course on experiential learning and skills training for LGBTI people on how to be a Level One Counselor.
  - Journey of Hope – a course on integrating your sexuality with your spirituality.

• Book:
  - Miriam Dancing - by Elise van Wyk– the stories of 28 gay women who share their journeys.

IV. Initiatives since the Conference:

• Malawi:
  - The Centre for the Development of People (CEDEP), who has been IAM’s partner in Malawi since 2008 was inspired by the 1st African Dialogue Conference and contacted their network of clergy. They plan a follow-up Dialogue Conference in Malawi for October 2010 with the assistance of IAM. This will include LGBTI members from Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi, who have asked IAM for assistance.
  - Malawi Council of Churches (MCC), March 2010: Rev Canaan Phiri, Secretary General of the MCC, attended the Conference. He was inspired with the level of dialogue, openness and understanding. Rev Phiri invited Pieter Oberholzer and another participant of the IAM conference, Victor Mukasa to attend a consultative meeting on homosexuality, organised by the MCC. He wanted to introduce an element of dialogue at this consultation. Rev Phiri said, “Through your personal witness you must explain to the delegates what LGBTI means from a Christian perspective. Right from the start on the 16th March Rev Chrispin Baloyi, in his Spiritual reflection, started talking about sin is toxic and deadly, and sin can be enviable but death is the consequence. This set a tone of condemnation that made the invited guests from South Africa feel uncomfortable.

Rev Phiri was saddened by the fact that his colleagues did not share his feeling that dialogue with us could be helpful. Pieter Oberholzer and Victor Mukasa remained outside for the next session while the Council deliberated whether they could allow the foreigners to influence the process. We were not asked back again.
Conclusion: Rev Canaan Phiri should be thanked for his inspired effort to create some element of dialogue at the past MCC proceedings. Hopefully he will remain a good ally to the LGBTI movement in Malawi and also to IAM who hopes to continue our working relationship with him. We have passed on resources to him that he can distribute at his own discretion to those willing to dialogue. We can only hope that the Board of MCC would allow him some freedom for this discretion.

It is not just religious conservatism and fundamentalism that played a role at this MCC workshop – there is a great need, now more than ever, for an independent African research (like the Kinsey report and others) that does not come from the West, to prove the stereotype assumptions of the clergy wrong. This is a slow process that goes hand-in-hand with general education and development levels, and the emancipation of lay people against the powerful position of the church leaders in Africa (that no longer or hardly exists in the West).

Fortunately there have been clergy participants within the MCC who were saddened that dialogue did not take place. Some of them contacted us and asked that IAM come back and help them with the process in Malawi.

• Namibia:
IAM plan to host a Dialogue Conference with concerned individuals in the second half of 2010. LGBTI participants from Zimbabwe, Botswana and Lesotho will also be invited.

• Lesotho:
Four participants from Lesotho attended the Introduction to Dialogue Workshop in order to take dialogue further in Lesotho. This Train the Trainers Workshop is part of follow up in partnership with KwaZulu Natal Council of Churches (KZNCC) and Pietermaritzburg Network.

• Kenya:
The Centre for Research and Innovation for Change (CRIC) organised a Conference on Exploring Stepping-Stones; Sexual Identity and Gender Equality from 27th April to 1st May in Nairobi, Kenya. Pieter Oberholzer was invited to give a paper on the Theological Basis of Inclusivity. Three of the 1st African Dialogue Conference participants were present and one of them introduced the principles of dialogue learnt at the IAM Dialogue Conference.

• Other:
Since the 1st African Dialogue Conference IAM has had requests from clergy from Mozambique, Nigeria, Uganda, and Namibia and from LGBTI members from Rwanda and Burundi to assist them in the processes of dialogue and/or for resources.

The Other Sheep Organisation in Rwanda wrote: Thank you so much for forwarding to me this press statement. I would have loved to be with you during this meeting. I would like to request your support to us – as the Rwanda Parliament is busy criminalizing the LGBT issues in the new bill. Here in Rwanda and DR Congo, lot of people are considering homosexuality as un-Christian, Un-African, un-natural and even as a taboo. These people need to be educated on sexual orientation. Your prayers or any kind of support are of great help. IAM will include representatives from this organization in the Dialogue Conference to be held in Malawi or Namibia.

We realize that the need to work with those who trust us in these countries and to translate all resources to their situation is very important.