



CONCEPT PAPER

WSCF Inter-Regional Leadership Training Program (IRLTP) 2017 on Identity, Diversity, and Dialogue (IDD)

October 31 to November 6, 2017, Bangalore, India

Theme: We Are Not Outside, We Are Inside¹: Building an affirming and inclusive Christian community for justice and peace for people of different sexual orientations and gender identities

In the last few years, there has been an increasing and alarming rate of ‘hate violence’ committed against the life, liberty and rights of members of the LGBTQI community in different parts of the world. More often than not, this can be attributed to the growing influence of religious fundamentalism and conservative views targetting gays, lesbians and transgenders. From Atlanta to Aceh, the universal message put across against people of different sexual orientation and gender identity is clear: people who do not conform to the heteronormative binary standard of sexuality and gender can be subjected to violent attacks, extra-judicial killing, criminalization, punishment and even death. Undeniably, particular religious teachings and theological perspectives coached in discriminatory language have caused tremendous harm and polarization in the churches and religious communities on the question of sexuality and gender. Contradicting interpretations of the Bible and theological discourse amid fast-changing social realities leave faithful members conflicted, questioning and confused.

In reality, the social discourse on gender and sexuality has tremendously advanced in the last decade. Social science research has greatly improved our understanding of *sexuality* and *gender* as socially constructed concepts evolving in human history. Academics and activists from the Global North and Global South have offered perspectives that have helped develop the theoretical framework of studies in sexuality and gender. Drawing from the experience of women’s rights and feminist movements and theorizing, the gay and lesbian rights movement has advanced the rights perspective in calling for an end to homophobia and violence and discrimination against members of the LGBTQI community, foremost being their right to claim their identity and to define their political agenda. In 2006, an international panel of eminent legal and human rights experts adopted “The Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in relation to Sexual

¹ “Open Letter of the European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups to the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church”, Crete, June 2016

Orientation and Gender Identity”, marking a significant step forward for the LGBTQI rights movement.

By providing the most succinct definition of *sexual orientation* and *gender identity*, the Yogyakarta Principles serves as an over-arching framework in working with LGBTQI communities all over the world²: ***All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. All human rights are universal, interdependent, indivisible and interrelated. Sexual orientation¹⁾ and gender identity²⁾ are integral to every person’s dignity and humanity and must not be the basis for discrimination or abuse.***

- 1) Sexual orientation is understood to refer to each person’s capacity for profound emotional, affectional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender.
- 2) Gender identity is understood to refer to each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms.

WSCF’s ecumenical and prophetic identity

The WSCF, as a global community of students, enjoys the richness of the diversity that comes from the many cultures, contexts, and religious traditions it represents. A core part of our mission is engaging in these differences and allowing ourselves to learn from them, as well as discovering the significance of the deep unity we share. As there do come points of strong disagreement among our members, another part of our common work is finding out together how to handle and engage in such controversial issues, which is especially challenging when positions on these issues are deeply held and cause painful differences. One such area of difference and disagreement that has been growing in visibility and importance in the last decade revolves around our understanding of human sexuality, particularly homosexuality. We are not alone in this. Disagreements around homosexuality have been tearing apart churches and Christian communities in many parts of the world for a very long time.

In contrast to the advances in social science research and discourse on gender and sexuality, amongst churches as well as members, movements and regions of the Federation, differences of belief on the biblical and theological imperatives around sexuality and gender identity remain deep-seated:

- Some of us find the notion of LGBT rights to be in conflict with God's revelation to us and see heterosexuality as a normative part of God's creation, while other sexualities are contrary to the will of God.

² The Yogyakarta Principles: Introduction, 2007, page 6

- Some of us, regardless of our personal beliefs, feel unable to openly and publically discuss this topic due to our cultures and relationships with our churches.
- Some of us are unable to do anything other than advocate for the human rights and full inclusion of LGBTQI people, feeling that we are not fulfilling our prophetic role as WSCF if we cannot jointly speak against violence against and for the basic human rights of sexual minorities.

WSCF has an ecumenical identity, therefore we engage with many people with different ways of thinking, feeling and experiencing the world, including people who are marginalized because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. WSCF exists to accompany students and young people in their contexts and struggles, thus we cannot hold in silence the crisis of conscience that now faces the global and local Christian community around the inability to effectively address differences of perspective on this question and relate to the people especially affected. The question of how to relate to the notion of LGBTQI rights is a divisive issue that can lead our national constituencies to question each others' commitment to Christian discipleship and to building God's new world among us. WSCF's prophetic Christian identity means we are called to advocate for justice, liberation, and peace. Continuing dialogue about sexuality and gender diversity affirms our commitment to our own identity. To this end, a dialogue framework that is informed primarily by the Scriptures and enriched by social theories and historical discourse is imperative.

During its 35th General Assembly, WSCF issued a document on Identity Diversity and Dialogue (IDD). However, there was a lack of consensus, particularly on sexual diversity, which led to the resolution to initiate discussion and dialogue among the constituencies of the WSCF to generate a meaningful discourse on sexual diversity. Despite our differences on this topic, the WSCF has a common theological understanding that underlie the difficult conversations around human sexuality, that is, that every person equally bears the image of God. As every human bears the imprint of God, we have no option but to affirm the dignity of all people.

Transcending boundaries through dialogue

The Dalai Lama said, "The reality today is that we are all interdependent and have to co-exist on this small planet. Therefore, the only sensible and intelligent way of resolving differences and clashes of interests, whether between individuals or nations, is through dialogue."³

Dialogue is the foundational element of our vision of the world as one family—*oikoumene* or, in Sanskrit, *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, both meaning "the whole inhabited earth as one family". Through dialogue, we can rise above differences in our perspectives and arrive at a common understanding on the subject of sexual orientation and gender identity. Every individual and community have different experiences based on their identities and contexts. It is important to share and listen to one another's stories in order to understand and appreciate the motivation and interests of other people.

³ The Statement of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the 38th Anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising Day on 10 March 1997, Dharamsala

Dialogue is not only necessary—it is urgent as our society is becoming more violent and fragmented particularly on LGBTQI rights. It is important to dialogue with the young people living and representing diverse contexts. A significant number of young people are grappling with issues of sexual identity. It is therefore imperative to facilitate dialogue among these young people—the decision makers of the future—if we are to build an inclusive community and forge a cohesive social fabric that transcends boundaries and affirms and upholds diverse identities.

The **Inter-Regional Leadership Training Program (IRLTP) on Identity, Diversity and Dialogue (IDD)** is a seven-day global leadership program on IDD that will be held on October 31 to November 6, 2017 in India. Twenty-five (25) young people from Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East and North America are expected to attend the training. The proposed program is intended to create space for youth to explore different ways of dialogue on human sexuality, particularly on homosexuality.

GOALS

The IRLTP's goals are two-fold:

1. To develop a framework for WSCF's dialogue initiative on the subject of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) that is founded on the Christian faith and takes into account SCMs/WSCF's ecumenical practice and prophetic witness; and
2. To help build an affirming and inclusive community by creating space for the LGBTQI and their stories and voices within the SCMs, churches and ecumenical community.

OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the Christian faith imperative and the historical and varied theological perspectives on sexuality
2. To understand the social theories and academic discourse on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) in relation to international human rights law
3. To listen and learn from the experiences of dialogue and advocacy work of LGBTQI rights activists from the Global South perspective
4. To create a space and build a network for LGBTQI within SCMs and WSCF to share their stories, accompany the SCMs in the dialogue process and develop resource persons
5. To explore various forms of constructive dialogue on SOGI among young people, particularly in the SCMs and Christian community
6. To re-read and reflect on the Bible from the experience and perspective of LGBTQI
7. To propose a Dialogue Guide on SOGI for SCMs, youth movements and student groups

8. To develop a Plan of Action on SOGI that can be proposed to the movements and followed-up in the regions

CONTENT AND METHODOLOGY

- **Keynote address** on the theme “We Are Not Outside, We Are Inside: Building an affirming and inclusive Christian community for justice and peace for people of different sexual orientations and gender identities”
- **Thematic inputs and group discussions the following topics:**
 - Topic 1: The Christian Faith imperative and Theological Perspectives on SOGI
 - Topic 2: The Church and the Ecumenical Movement’s historical journey with LGBTQI
 - Topic 3: Social Theories on Gender and Sexuality
 - Topic 4: SOGI and International Human Rights
- **Daily creative worship and bible studies** (4) on gender and sexuality
- **Case study presentations** on human rights and the LGBTQI – regional and country sharing
- **Workshops / focus group discussions (FGDs)** on new and effective forms of dialogue on issues of sexuality and gender
- **Daily journaling** of learning and reflection by participants
- **Storytelling/listening sessions and immersion** with local communities
- **Cultural activities** to celebrate diversity
- **Group work on action planning** and ways forward