




CHAPTER FOUR

“Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” on Matters of Human Sexuality: African Women’s Missiological Perspectives

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Abstract

This chapter responds to the question: What is the authentic African voice when it comes to responding to the challenge of human sexuality? It highlights the development of the debate and of discourse on this issue over the years, considering the historical phases of these as they have occurred between the ‘Western churches’ (mother churches of African churches) and African churches. This is achieved by assessing the influence of the early and modern missionaries in shaping the discourse on human sexuality and by capturing some of the responses of African scholars of religion, theology and biblical studies; by engaging with “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way”, the World Council of Churches (WCC) document on matters of human sexuality; and by suggesting how the churches in Africa can create safe spaces for genuine, informed conversations about human sexuality, conversations that are broad and heal divisions within and between churches.

Introduction

As the World Council of Churches (WCC) prepared for its 11th assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, from 31 August to 8 September 2022, it was anticipated that one of the topics

that would divide the churches attending the assembly would be that of human sexuality. In the minds of many, human sexuality equals homosexuality. The theme of the assembly was “Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity”. Reading the theme with the challenge of human sexuality in mind, one may ask: How are Christians moved by Christ’s love to promote reconciliation and unity in the church and in the world?

The WCC assembly is the largest ecumenical gathering in the world. The WCC is the broadest and most inclusive Christian organisation in the world, with 352 members who represent more than 560-million Christians in over 120 countries. Its membership comprises most of the world’s Orthodox churches (Eastern and Oriental), as well as African-instituted churches, Anglican, Assyrian, Baptist, Evangelical, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Moravian, Old-Catholic, Pentecostal, reformed, united/uniting and free/independent churches, Disciples of Christ and Friends (Quakers). Together, these churches represent diverse positions on human sexuality in a context in which the primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe (WCC Constitution, Article III).

As of 2022, the World Council of Churches (WCC) had 98 member churches from Africa. Africans have a long history in the WCC, although, in 1948, when the council was established, most of them were represented by the missionaries from Europe and North America. Soon, political independence in Africa was coupled with church autonomy from missionary control. During the post-colonial period of the 1950s and 1960s, many churches in Africa sought membership in the WCC in their own right. The political sovereignty they achieved “gave them complete autonomy to chisel their destinies and many of them applied for membership with the WCC. Even the African Initiated Churches (AICs), which were regarded as

separatist or sects, applied for WCC membership” (Kaunda & Phiri 2016:865).

Having a voice in the WCC also translated into bringing an authentic African voice to matters on the WCC agenda. What is that authentic African voice when it comes to responding to the challenge of human sexuality? In relation to homosexuality, which is one aspect of human sexuality, churches from Africa tend to break with the views of their ‘mother churches’, which have taken a stand either to accept gay people as members, or, with regard to church leaders, have taken a stand to bless same-sex unions. Here, I provide five examples: a) The Ethiopian Evangelical Church, Mekane Yesus, cut ties with the Church of Sweden when the latter approved and blessed same-sex Unions. b) When the Episcopal Church in the USA ordained a gay bishop, the Church of Uganda, the Anglican Church in Nigeria, the Anglican Church in Rwanda and the Anglican Church in Kenya cut ties, creating a crisis in the Anglican Communion. c) Splits have also appeared in relations between the Presbyterian Church in the USA and their partners in Africa; d) the Church of Scotland and some of their partners in Africa; and, e) and between the United Methodist Church in the USA and some of their partners in Africa.

The churches in Africa have rejected same-sex relationships on the basis that they are unAfrican and unChristian. This has been echoed by African politicians in Zimbabwe, Malawi, Uganda and Nigeria, countries that have maintained old British laws against homosexuality which have been repealed in modern-day Britain. In fact, most African countries continue to uphold colonial laws against same-sex unions. Such decisions have led to scholars of religion, theology and biblical studies in Africa and abroad questioning statements by religious and political leaders about homosexuality being unChristian and unAfrican.

Scholars from other disciplines in humanities and social sciences have also contributed to the debate. In this chapter, engagement with the topic is limited to a) ascertaining the influence of the early and modern missionaries in shaping

the discourse on human sexuality and capturing some of the responses of African scholars of religion, theology and biblical studies; b) engaging with the WCC document, “Conversation on the Pilgrim Way”, on matters of human sexuality; and c) suggesting how churches in Africa can create safe spaces for genuine and informed conversations on human sexuality that are broad and heal divisions within and between churches.

The Influence of the Early and Modern Missionaries in Shaping the Discourse on Human Sexuality and the African Response.

Ezra Chitando has rightly argued that,

the theme of human sexuality has been a consistently problematic one since the arrival of the Christian faith in Africa. It has generated considerable debate, creativity and controversy. At stake has been whether churches in Africa have been realistic in their engagement with African understandings of human sexuality. Although the more recent debates over homosexuality threaten to dominate the discussion of it in Africa, it is only a fraction of the larger issue. Human sexuality has been an integral part of the story of African Christianity. Across different epochs and geographical contexts, churches have sought to address human sexuality in Africa (2016:993).

Based on this understanding, I attempt to categorise the human-sexuality debate in African Christianity into four phases.

The first phase occurred during the early missionary and colonial period when the description of what constituted acceptable African sexuality was determined by the Western expression of Christianity. For most parts of Africa, this occurred in the course of missionary enterprises of the 19th century when the gospel was brought to sub-Saharan Africa (excluded here are South Africa and Angola as the gospel had already reached those regions in the 15th and 16th centuries). The writings of the missionaries of this period indicate that

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they did not accept African ways of expressing sexuality and aimed to transform them to reflect those of the West. One example of this concerns the initiation ceremonies for Chewa girls and women of Central Malawi.

Although it did not involve the cutting of female sexual parts, these ceremonies were banned by the missionaries of the various denominations who worked among the Chewa. This resulted in resistance from Chewa women as the ceremony was a platform for sexual education which the Chewa valued highly. As a result, the missionaries negotiated the implementation of a Christian version, which was accepted by the Chewa Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic and Baptist churches (see Phiri 1997). Similar stories of resistance relating to issues that concern missionaries and African women are recorded by Nyambura J Njoroge (2000), Esther Mombo (2002) and Rachel Nyagondwe-Fiedler (2005). What was at stake here was the definition an African Christian and recourse to resistance in order to be able to define oneself through cultural appropriation.

The second phase encompasses the post-colonial period when the discussion on human sexuality was framed within the African theological strand of enculturation and indigenisation as a means of achieving African selfhood and identity as both Christian and African. This was the period of the regaining of African identity within the Christian faith by reclaiming African culture; African traditional religions too become sources for theologising. Adriaan van Klinken and Masiwa Raggies Gunda (2012) have argued that it is the theologians of this phase who have influenced the views of current African church leaders regarding the nature of African culture and provide the content of acceptable Christian views on African sexuality. Examples of theological work relevant here include that of John Mbiti (1973, 1990) and Laurent Magesa (1997, 2004, 2005). Their central argument is that, in African culture, as in Christianity, sex is solely for the purpose of procreation. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, in “A critique of Mbiti’s view on love and marriage in Africa” (1993), has argued against this narrow understanding of sex in African culture and in Christianity. She

critiques Mbiti's uncritical use of African culture and religions as tools for creating an African identity. Her critique applies to all scholars who fall within the same category as Mbiti. She has called for respect for the dignity of all God's people as elements of God's creation. Oduyoye's appeal to cultural hermeneutics takes the conversation to the third phase.

This third phase is characterised by an intersectional approach to resisting racism, sexism and homophobia. One could say that African women's theologies are another response from Africa that rejects missionary definitions of what it truly means to be African and Christian. What African women theologians, who are members of the Circle, stand for, and what tools they use for analysis, are well articulated in the publications of Oduyoye (2001) and Musimbi Kanyoro (2002). In "What's in a Name? – Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies", Phiri and Nadar (2006:6) argue that,

feminist cultural hermeneutics has ... been used as a tool to analyse a variety of issues within African culture, including that of sexuality. Although sexuality has been widely engaged in feminist discourse in the West, it is usually discussed in the context of sexual orientation and reproductive rights. In contrast, amongst African women theologians, such issues are discussed in the context of rites of passage, including childbirth (women's sexuality in the context of giving birth), menstruation (purity and impurity laws), circumcision (male and female), marriage (the patriarchal constraints within marriage and the different forms of marriage), and even death (practices such as widow-cleansing).

An examination of the Circle's first publication, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* (1992), reveals a whole section of five articles that address African women and sexual practices, using a broad definition of human sexuality. The articles represent an African feminist critic of sexual practices in Africa, providing concrete examples from specific African cultures and African religions

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(including Christianity). Since then, the work of African women theologians has avoided generalisation, demonstrating an appreciation of the diversity of peoples and their practices in Africa.

Following the 1989 Circle conference – and especially as a result of the choice made to take seriously the growing prevalence of HIV among African adolescents and African women – African women theologians, as individuals, through master’s dissertations, PhD theses, and individual research published as articles or books, have explored the issue of sexuality in greater depth. The list of these publications is too extensive to mention here.

Van Klinken and Gunda (2012:119) have pointed out that works by African women theologians on “gender and sexuality are discussed in relation to the HIV/Aids epidemic, and they have developed into progressive theologies of gender justice” but have not fully explored the issue of same-sex relationships. While this is true, in the same article, Van Klinken and Gunda acknowledge that the work of the Circle is based on the lived experiences of women, which is prioritised. Nevertheless, some Circle members have highlighted that working on the non-medical determinates of HIV has revealed that practices of same-sex relationships are more common than previously thought (Phiri & Nadar 2009).

Musa Dube has paved the way by explicitly inviting church leaders to be inclusive of sexual minorities in their sermons (2003). Mombo (2006) too has challenged the church to be inclusive of sexual minorities. These calls for inclusivity are based on research that shows that it is not true that homosexuality is unAfrican. They are also an affirmation of the solidarity of all those who are excluded by the beliefs advocated by the church and in society. The justice of God is for all people: women, children, people living with disabilities, people living with HIV and sexual minorities. This leads to the next phase, to which I now turn.

The fourth phase focuses on the influence of conservative and progressive Christianity in the USA and

Europe on African theologians, churches and governments. Kapyra Kaoma's (2016) article on "Unmasking the colonial silence: Sexuality in Africa in the post-colonial context" digs deep into this subject – he argues that considerable sums of money are invested in Africa by the conservative evangelicals to influence African churches and politicians on the question of homosexuality.

Following the example of the early missionaries, most of the money is invested in schools, seminaries and universities where formation of the African youth is takes place. Additionally, Kaoma has pointed out that there is also influence from Europeans and American politicians who have withheld aid to some African countries that refuse to change their laws to accommodate the human rights of sexual minorities. This is supported by the research of Van Klinken and Gunda (2012:1) and Van Klinken and Chitando (2021:8). These scholars of religion, theology and the Bible have rightly concluded that homosexuality in Africa has become a site of struggle in the modern-day missionary enterprise.

Desmond Tutu of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa was the first senior African church voice to draw from black theology against racism and link it to resistance against to homophobia. This is well documented in his foreword to *Aliens in the Household of God* (1997), edited by Germond and De Gruchy. I was privileged to listen to his address at the All Africa Conference Symposium in 2012 in Nairobi, Kenya, in which he challenged African church leaders to trust him on the matter of getting rid of homophobia. He promised not to mislead them about this, just as he had not during the fight against apartheid (see the photo in Phiri & Werner 2013, p. xxxiii). At the time, there was no audible comment from the African church leaders in the conference room or outside. However, he succeeded in making them aware that this is an issue which they should address together as an ecumenical body. In fact, nine articles in *Ecumenical Encounters with Desmond Tutu: Visions for Justice, Dignity and Peace* (2021) affirm his influence on the development of the intersection of discourses on race, gender and homosexuality.

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Tutu's thinking is echoed in the writing of other Anglican biblical and theological scholars such as Gerald West, Beverly Haddad, Kaoma and Gunda. Gunda's doctoral thesis – "The Bible and homosexuality in Zimbabwe: A socio-historical analysis of the political, cultural and Christian arguments in the homosexual public debate with special reference to the use of the Bible" (2010) – is the first one of which I am aware that focuses completely on homosexuality from an African perspective. His boldness in writing this thesis has been at a cost though, with both politicians and church leaders repudiating it. Kaoma shares a similar story.

However, such experiences have not stopped the younger generation from focusing their research on homosexuality. I feel honoured to have co-supervised, with Sarojini Nadar, the master's dissertation of Lindiwe Mkasi (2013) on "A threat to Zulu patriarchy and the continuation of community: A queer analysis of same-sex relationships amongst female traditional healers at Inanda and KwaNgcolosi, KwaZulu-Natal". Another youth researcher who followed the same tread is Ntobeko Dlamini, (2021) with "Unheard voices: Stories of LGBTI+ clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa". In this research paper, Dlamini followed discussions of the ordination of sexual minorities in the Methodist Church in sSouthern Africa and highlighted the perspectives of those affected by the churches' negative responses. Here one hears a plea from a young church leader asking the church to respect the dignity of all of its members because who they are is a result of God's creation.

Dlamini's article was part a youth essay completion issued jointly by the WCC and the All Africa Conference of Churches as part of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The article was part of the category of gender justice, which was highlighted on pilgrim team visits to Colombia. The next section highlights how the framework of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace has created a missiological and practical safe space for churches as they journey together on matters of human sexuality.

“Conversations on the Pilgrim Way”

The Busan assembly of the WCC initiated the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace in 2013. The assembly extended the invitation to join the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace to the WCC fellowship, other churches, people of other faiths and people of Good. In 2014, the Central Committee of the WCC adopted a document entitled, “An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace”, which explains that being on a pilgrimage of justice and peace involves participating in God’s mission towards life. It is about foregrounding issues and places relevant to life and the survival of people and the Earth. The document explains as follows:

It is a transformative journey that God invites us to in anticipation of the final purpose for the world that the triune God brings about. The movement of love, which is essential to the triune God, manifests itself in the promise of justice and peace. They are signs of God’s reign to come which is already visible here and now wherever reconciliation and healing are seen. Christians are to partake in these signs of God’s reign and to struggle for them in response to God’s will and promise. The pilgrimage of justice and peace is thus grounded in God’s own mission for the world and the example of Jesus. Following Jesus means meeting him wherever people suffer injustice, violence and war. To experience God’s presence with the most vulnerable, the wounded, and the marginalized is a transformative experience; Alive in the Spirit, Christians discover their deepest power and energy for the transformation of an unjust world, joining with other faith communities and all people of good will as companions on the way (2014:2).

At the same WCC 2013 assembly, the Programme Guidelines Committee affirmed that a number of issues challenging to the churches had been heard at the assembly. These included questions about gender and human sexuality. The committee advocated that these challenging issues can be faced together

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as part of the common pilgrimage. They concluded by saying that “controversial issues have their place within the safe space on the common agenda, remembering that tolerance is not enough, but the baseline is love and mutual respect” (Senturias & Gill 2014:247).

Armed with the above mandate, the then general secretary, Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit formed a reference group on human sexuality in 2014. The Executive Committee approved the mandate for the group in July 2014. A staff working-group under the leadership of Isabel Apawo Phiri was formed to support the reference group. The group submitted its completed document, “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way: Invitation to journey together on matters of human sexuality – A resource for reflection and action”, to the Executive Committee in November 2019.

Due to Covid-19 travel restrictions, the document was presented to an online meeting of the WCC Central Committee only in February 2022. The compromised recommendation was that the document is was received with appreciation “as a resource document for those member churches and ecumenical partners interested in dialogue on issues of human sexuality” (“Conversations”:5). The recommendation was phrased in this way because the churches who did not support the document feared that it would become a WCC policy, and then all churches in the fellowship would be forced to adopt it. This has not been the case with other WCC documents. Member churches of the WCC are autonomous and make their own policies.

For the working group on “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way”, it was a great relief to reach this stage as the work had been confronted with many difficulties since 2014 – from WCC member churches that did not want the WCC to be a platform for a conversation on human sexuality. In an organisation that makes decisions by consensus, it was a huge achievement to have this document accepted, though there had been confusion surrounding the decision process at the February 2022 Central Committee meeting. What is important is that,

in addition to receiving the document for those churches interested in it, the Executive Committee in November 2019 also recommended that there be an ecumenical conversation on human sexuality at the 11th assembly, a decision which the Central Committee approved together with the report of the Assembly Planning Committee. “Conversations on Pilgrim Way: Invitation to journey together on matters of human sexuality” then became the background document for the 11th WCC assembly ecumenical conversation.

Lessons Learnt from “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way”

As unity is a priority in the WCC, the diversity of the fellowship is reflected in important documents of the WCC. This was the case with the composition of the reference group on human sexuality. In addition, the WCC takes seriously the dictum ‘not about us without us.’. Therefore, among in the reference group on human sexuality, there was also the category of experts comprising church people who openly identify as members of sexual minorities. They related personal stories of marginalisation and discrimination within the church. In this way, the group affirmed the agency of the people from the margins. For a group whose members have differing views on human sexuality to have had a sustained dialogue and, over a period of five years, together write and produce a document with which the whole group identifies is no small achievement.

Second, the reference group on human sexuality drew from the mission identity of the WCC, whose foundations are rooted in the modern missionary enterprise of 1910. Over the years, the mission identity of the WCC has undergone transformation as it has responded to the challenges and diverse contexts of a changing landscape. In the context of ecumenical mission, “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” builds on “Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes”, with its emphasis on mission from the margins. “Together Towards Life” was approved by the Central Committee meeting of 2012 and adopted by the 10th

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WCC assembly in 2013. Of particular significance to work on human sexuality is paragraph 6:

Mission has been understood as a movement taking place from the centre to the periphery, and from the privileged to the marginalized of society. Now people at the margins are claiming their key role as agents of mission and affirming mission as transformation. This reversal of roles in the envisioning of mission has strong biblical foundations because God chose the poor, the foolish, and the powerless (1 Cor. 1:18–31) to further God’s mission of justice and peace so that life may flourish. If there is a shift of the mission concept from “mission to the margins” to “mission from the margins,” what then is the distinctive contribution of the people from the margins?

Paragraph 46 provides examples of the categories of people who are discriminated against even by many churches, and it includes sexual orientation:

The good news of God’s reign is about the promise of the actualization of a just and inclusive world. Inclusivity fosters just relationships in the community of humanity and creation, with mutual acknowledgement of persons and creation, and mutual respect and sustenance of each one’s sacred worth. It also facilitates each one’s full participation in the life of the community. Baptism in Christ implies a lifelong commitment to give an account of this hope by overcoming the barriers in order to find a common identity under the sovereignty of God (Galatians 3:27–28). Therefore, discrimination on the basis of xenophobia, racism, classism, casteism, sexism, ableism, ageism or against people on any other grounds such as religion, sexual orientation, language, disability, incapacity, or having a medical condition such as being HIV-positive, is unacceptable in the sight of God (“Together Towards Life” 2012:8).

This quotation spoke directly to and encouraged the reference group on human sexuality, which has faced constant challenge from some WCC members that which said that, according to their faith traditions, sexual minorities do not exist. Denying the existence of a group of people is an extreme form of discrimination, which is completely rejected in the mission and justice agenda of the WCC, as reflected in the mission statement and in the framework of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The reference group constantly referred to its mandate from the 10th assembly that the WCC incorporates a safe space for dialogue on difficult issues and drew from previously approved documents that affirm that, in the WCC, all human beings bear the image of God. The “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” document strongly argues that,

Christians, in all church traditions, believe that all human beings are created in the image of God (Gen.1) and affirm that “Jesus Christ is the one in whom true humanity is perfectly realized.” (Faith and Order Paper 199 2005, 10). Sexuality is recognized as part of God’s good creation, and is integral to human identity and integrity. It is considered a divine gift, intrinsically good, intended by God for humanity to celebrate this divine gift in life-giving, consensual, faithful, and loving relationships. In dealing with such an approach to sexuality, human persons can grow into the fullness of their humanity and divinity.

The reference group on human sexuality was also encouraged to use the Faith and Order study document, “Moral Discernment in Churches”, which is a helpful tool for understanding different approaches and mutual learning among churches from diverse confessional families, as is the case with members of the WCC. “Moral Discernment in Churches” argues that, while there are different pathways that churches use to arrive at ethical and moral decisions, all churches base their discernment processes on the same sources: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. A significant contribution of African theologians to “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” is the inclusion of

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particular traditions of indigenous wisdom, such as the challenge that African women theologians have raised – that it is only wisdom that is life-affirming for all humanity that we need to be drawing from. In this sense, all sources for moral discernment should include a critique from the perspective of those who are stigmatised and discriminated against, as the same sources have been used to traumatise people on the margins. The example below demonstrates the importance of context in moral discernment.

In the case of human sexuality, the various contexts in which Christians find themselves affect how they respond to sexual ethics and norms. For instance, it is normal in Africa for a mother to breastfeed in public, but it is considered less acceptable in the global North. Similarly, an African man may marry more than two wives, yet still oppose same-sex marriages. A Western Christian may accept same-sex marriage but oppose polygamy. The way in which moral discernment is contextual explains some of the disagreements associated with human sexuality in global Christianity. Morality is contextual in most cases (“Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” 2022:19).

This example also demonstrates the importance of study and research to understand the dynamic nature of culture. Culture should not be treated as static as interpretations shift as diverse cultures and religions encounter one another.

Third, “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” builds on years of conversations about and advocacy on human sexuality at the WCC assembly – since the New Delhi WCC assembly in 1961 – and the definition of human sexuality has been broad. Initially, the WCC response was to tackle a broad range of issues on the matter. The New Delhi assembly, for example, indicated that,

the churches have to discover what positions and actions to take in regard to sex relations before and after marriage; illegitimacy; in some cultures, polygamy or concubinage as a social system sanctioned by law and customs; in some Western cultures short-term marriages, or liaisons, easy divorce; in all parts of the world mixed marriages

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(inter-faith, inter-confessional and inter-racial) with the diminishing of caste and class systems and of racial prejudice.... All this, and much else, forces the churches to re-examine their teaching, preaching and pastoral care and their witness and service to society.

The Uppsala Assembly in 1968 also addressed human sexuality, focusing on the 'birth-control' debate, stating that,

family patterns change in different social settings, and Christian marriage can find its expression in a variety of ways. We should like materials elaborating the problems of polygamy, marriage and celibacy, birth control, divorce, abortion and also of homosexuality to be made available for responsible study and action.

The broad approach to human sexuality by WCC consultations and conferences continued up to the Canberra assembly in 1991. Between Canberra and Harare (1998), more focus was placed on sexual orientation, as requested by some WCC member churches as, in a speech in 1995, then president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, openly referred to homosexuals as being worse than dogs and pigs (Gunda 2010:17). At the 1998 Harare assembly, safe spaces were created in which to hold workshops specifically focusing on sexual orientation. It was also in Harare that the Programme Guidelines Committee refocused the conversation from sexual orientation back to human sexuality. In addition, it has been since Harare that one notices an emphasis on an intersectional approach to human sexuality. It was here too that the use of "the shared theological and hermeneutical reflection that has informed earlier ecumenical ethical discussions on issues such as racism" was recommended.

The import of this request is, of course, that the conversation on human sexuality be framed in the same way as the conversation entailed by the Programme to Combat Racism, the focus of which had for a long time been apartheid in South Africa. From Harare (1998) to Porto Alegre (2006), and from Porto Alegre to Busan (2013), the conversation on

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human sexuality was also greatly influenced by sexuality in the context of HIV and Aids and by the human rights agenda of protecting the rights of every human being – which, in religious language, is expressed as the inherent dignity of all humanity.

From the Busan assembly to Karlsruhe (2022), the definition of human sexuality followed the broad-based, circular one of the World Health Organization (WHO):

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors (2006:3).

The advantage of following a WHO definition is that the various aspects of human sexuality are brought together in a manner which shows their inter-relatedness. While many issues are mentioned, it can only prioritise issues based on the signs of our times. This definition is particularly crucial when examining the human sexuality debate on the African continent, a matter to which I now turn.

How Churches in Africa Can Create Safe Spaces

“Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” encourages genuine and informed conversations on human sexuality that are broad and that heal divisions within and between churches. Such a resource is intended not only for WCC member churches but for use by all churches. Churches in Africa should aspire to learn from this document as a church that continues to learn is in tune with the Holy Spirit. The creation of safe spaces in which this conversation can occur in the churches in Africa

is one step forward – the document explains how such safe spaces can be created. A second step is the spirit in which the conversation happens. As described in Ephesians 4:2, forbearance is critical: “with all humility, and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love”. Without adopting this attitude, conversations cannot happen. Third, the document advocates that, no matter our differences, we should not choose to separate ourselves from other churches or from members of our own church. It is important to practise forbearance by staying together in love because Christ demands that His followers remain united.

Finally, “Conversation” challenges all churches and asks them to sharpen their approaches to issues in pastoral theology and counselling which might be answered in different ways. Most importantly, they have to reflect an approach which implies careful listening and biblical and theological discernment by all concerned, since members of the church (and many people of good will) are wrestling with these issues and seek moral, ethical, and spiritual guidance from the churches.

The “Conversation” document has exposed the fact that the field of pastoral theology is not yet equally advanced and developed within and among WCC member churches. This is true for Africa too. A detailed study of the pastoral theology of human sexuality is required to examine family life, human sexuality, and pastoral theology itself.

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