



Report and Recommendations of the Task Group on Identity, Diversity and Dialogue to the WSCF General Assembly in Colombia, March 2015

Our Process

The 2008 General Assembly and the Executive Committee recognised the need for the topic of sexuality and gender identity to be discussed. At the global level, a task group was formed to explore identity, diversity, and dialogue in the context of this specific issue. The task group met in Geneva, Switzerland 15-21 June 2014 to hold a discussion and bring forward a recommendation to the General Assembly to be held in Colombia in August 2014. The meeting included discussion in both small groups and in plenary, lectures from experts, and individual reflection. Through these methodologies, the task group explored such topics as the identity of the WSCF, the secular discourse around human rights and its application to our faithful search for justice, the concept of “the other,” our personal experiences and an exchange of our contexts, theological and Biblical analysis, and the individual and collective consideration of possible recommendations to present to the General Assembly in Colombia.

The group worked together to summarise the nature, process, findings, challenges, and recommendations that emerged from the meeting. The result is this document. We hope that this document is not the end of the process, but an invitation to continue: it is a resource to guide the GA in its decision-making.

We lament that the Africa Region was not able to be represented in this meeting, as a result of visa issues. The task group had previously received a preparatory document from one African participant, although it did not address all of the questions. The task group read and considered this document, understanding that it was meant to be an individual input to the group from his personal perspective. The task group found this document helpful to better understand the broad diversity of views within the WSCF.

WSCF Identity

The WSCF has an ecumenical identity. This means that it brings together numerous movements from various countries, cultures, and traditions of the Christian faith. Through the WSCF, therefore, many people with different ways of thinking, feeling, and experiences of



the world share a common life, including in many movements people who are marginalised because of their sexuality and gender identity.

The WSCF exists to accompany the SCMs in their contexts and struggles. In the presence of the cloud of witnesses that have emerged from the WSCF over the past century, 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 topic and relate to the people especially affected. The WSCF remains committed to pursuing unity and the realisation of the Body of Christ now as throughout its history.

The WSCF has a prophetic, Christian identity. This means that we are called to advocate for justice, liberation, and peace. Continuing dialogue about sexual and gender diversity affirms our commitment to our own identity.

Terminology and Approach

Finding appropriate language to use throughout this discussion has been a challenge. Part of this is because there are not universally understood terms to capture all of the sexual and gender identities people experience. We have also been making the attempt to use accessible language which allows all people to participate in this conversation. When this task group was formed, the language used was LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*), however in the process of learning together we found that these Western concepts did not capture the many other culturally specific identities and experiences.

In this report and set of recommendations, we have chosen to use the terms “people who are being marginalised based on their sexual or gender identity” and “diverse sexual and gender identities”. This includes, but is not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, intersex, asexual, queer, etc. We recognise that these terms are still limiting and insufficient and that we will need to engage in further dialogue on the issue of language and inclusivity.

Throughout the week, we have had ongoing discussions about human rights, civil rights, and justice approaches to work for the dignity, safety, and equality of people being marginalised based on their sexual or gender identity. We have explored their benefits and limitations. As a Christian organisation, we have found it important to explore deeply why we believe a situation is just or unjust. This exploration has involved biblical reflection, theological engagement, and learning from each other’s experiences. We have not come to conclusions on the best approach or approaches, and we recognise the need for further engagement on this issue.



Contributions on Theology, Identities and Community

The group received inputs and shared some theological reflection on the Trinity, to explore the relationships between the individual and the community. Some key points for the group were:

- 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.
- The very nature of God is community through the Trinity. Part of the nature of the Trinity is interrelatedness, as the parts of the Trinity correlate and dialogue with each other. This applies to us too: when in dialogue with each other, there is always a third person present: God. It is good to remind ourselves that we are not alone when we are reflecting on these issues.
- We have to address dualism, as it is in opposition to dialogue and diversity. Dualism means to divide things into binary opposites: body vs soul. This dualist view has led to the demonization of the body and spiritualisation of the soul, and to the idea that sexuality is sinful. This has implications for how we view each other. Since Christianity is Word becoming flesh, then the body and spirit are not separate from each other.

The group also received inputs and discussion around sexuality and gender in different global contexts. Some key points that the group considered are:

- Lesbian, gay and bisexual identities are considered by many to be class related (middle-upper class) or Western. These are often not conceptions coming from people living in poverty or from indigenous groups or communities. 'Queer' is often considered too American (US) in Latin America.
- In some cultures, Transgender people are the spiritual leaders of the community, which is hard for some of us to understand.
- Some cultures and sectors of the population in any country have their own identities and do not want to use lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, because they are alien identities and they cannot identify with them.
- In some places it is dangerous to adopt lesbian, gay, bisexual or any other sexual identities due to very high risk of attack/expulsion from home and/or community: people have been murdered for taking up these identities and claiming rights for themselves or others.

Our Challenge

1. The Federation is founded on diversity, both ecumenical and cultural, so it is natural that we hold different approaches to sexuality and gender identity, as we do with many other issues. In regard to this topic, the differences include strong and painful disagreements. The Task Group believes that we can successfully address and even celebrate this diversity without losing our unity in Christ. The group learnt that:
 - a) Movements' perspectives are based on theology, the Bible, church tradition, and/or society.



- b) Sexuality and gender identity have been interpreted differently in across cultures and history.
 - c) We have a history of grappling with diversity. This is a gift which can help us grapple with our current questions.
2. There are regions and movements that are not comfortable beginning a dialogue at this time, because of the culture, history, faith, laws and/or political developments in their contexts. The group identified the following:
- a) Power dynamics affect our conversation: this includes colonialism, the different power structures in our churches, the relationship between our churches and the state, and between our SCMs and the churches.
 - b) There are fears and misunderstandings on both sides, which arise from not knowing each other.
 - c) Points of difference arise about the relationship between sexuality and gender diversity and sin, family, human nature in the image of God, and the interpretation of the Bible.
3. The Federation also needs more dialogue before it is able to speak with one voice and make any global statement on sexuality and gender diversity. The group would like to share that one of the most difficult areas of discussion was around the ability of the WSCF to take a public stand in various ways for the rights of people marginalised by their sexual or gender identity.
- a) Some group members raised the following recommendations and the group would like to share the deep calling some of the members have to:
Show solidarity with people marginalised on the basis of their gender or sexual identity and take action against discrimination, violence and criminalisation.
Advocate for basic human rights for people marginalised on the basis of gender or sexual identities such as the right to life (not to be killed) to freedom from violence, to shelter/housing, health, education, and livelihood, in the churches and in society. The hope was raised that the Federation could do this on a global level, e.g. at the UN.
 - b) For others in the group, it is impossible to agree at this time that the Federation should take any public action on these topics due to a complex cluster of faith, ecclesiological, and political reasons.
 - c) All in the group affirm personally that any violence against anyone is unacceptable, and that we will begin by addressing this issue internally. Others in the group are perplexed and pained that, this being the case, we cannot simply begin by stating this. All in the group, however, are grateful that deeper understanding between us has already begun and wishes this for the entire Federation.
 - d) We continue to affirm the ability of national movements and regions to work on sexuality and gender diversity, and to advocate on behalf of people marginalised because of their sexual or gender identity.

- e) We understand the disagreement on advocacy and to be able to come to a Federation position about it, more dialogue is needed, and is therefore recommended by this group.

As the General Assembly gathers on the theme of unity, diversity and mission for God's Reign, we hope that the fruits of our dialogue will help you to reach the best decision for the way forward.

We are many. We are one. We are sent out to build God's peace.



(Bossey Gardens: Noah Gillespies)



RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Federation is founded on unity in diversity. We experience that our churches and communities, including our SCMs, around the world are divided in their responses to sexuality and gender diversity. In this situation, the failure to dialogue and listen to one another is causing pain on all sides, but we also have resources to learn from our diversity and grow in unity.

Therefore we affirm the value of and need for dialogue on sexuality and gender diversity and **our major recommendation is that the Federation intentionally continue and deepen this dialogue.**

To this end, we recommend that

1. The IDD Task Group be mandated by the General Assembly to continue as a working group until the next GA in order to further and support this dialogue.
2. All levels of the Federation commit to engage in this process.
3. Members of WSCF meet at regional and global levels for dialogue on this topic.
4. National movements discuss and decide what approach is appropriate for them in their own contexts and at the same time commit to the Federation process of dialogue.
5. The Federation base this process of dialogue in the deeper work of discerning anew our identity, mission and vision-- “examining who we are” by creating clearer conceptual links between our core mandate and our local, national, regional, and global work.
6. WSCF use the following to ensure a fruitful dialogue:
 - a) Academic study
 - b) Bible study
 - c) Exploring the language we use to be sensitive and inclusive
 - d) Explore the power imbalances within the Federation and intersections with marginalisation on the basis of gender or sexual identities.
7. The WSCF source, create and widely share resources to increase our understanding of sexuality and gender diversity. This can include:
 - a) Sharing personal stories and testimonies about diverse sexuality and gender identities in order to dispel myths and misconceptions on all sides.
 - b) Sharing theological perspectives and bible studies/reflections
 - c) Training in dialogue skills
 - d) Information on discrimination based on sexual and gender identities (especially language and terminology in different contexts)
 - e) Ethics, morality, philosophy, justice theory
 - f) Contact to resource people and organisations that can offer expertise
 - g) National movements and regions who are working on sexuality and gender diversity be called upon as a resource for this topic throughout the Federation.



8. All levels of the Federation ensure that people of all sexualities and gender identities are free from violence within our community life and commit to creating safe(r) spaces for people of all sexualities and gender identities.
9. WSCF begin a programme of prayer that calls on the Federation around the world to ask for wisdom, unity, and justice in our approach to and dialogue about sexuality.
10. The Federation communicate externally that we are engaged in such a process and offer learnings along the way as a resource and model for others facing similar disagreement and conflict.