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INTRODUCTION

RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IS A
TASK THAT REQUIRES MUCH
MORE FROM US THAN THE
SIMPLE DESIRE TO DIALOGUE;



we need to know the best methods for this to take place and generate good results.

In order to contribute to the existing survey of strategies and tools for dialogue to happen in the best possible way, the Global Interfaith Network (GIN), in partnership with HIVOS, has produced this toolkit that is the result of a project that unites LGBT+ and allied religious leaders and activists.

GIN is a key player when it comes to the intersection of faith and inclusion, recognition and dignity of sexual and gender minorities in Global South contexts. It also has a sound network of relevant faith leaders and activists, and specific expertise and experience. HIVOS, together with partners, has started to work on religion and SO/GIESC for the past couple of years ago. Based on these experiences, we have developed this toolkit to achieve a change in attitude among religious leaders, leading to greater social inclusion and, in some contexts, policy change, to support LGBT+ people of faith and allies.

We have interviewed ten religious leaders regarding their success stories of inclusion and dignity of LGBT+ persons in faith communities. These leaders were chosen from various religious traditions, such as Judaism, Old Catholic of the Americas, Methodist, Traditional African, Roman Catholic and Islam. Some of these people are part of the LGBT+ community and others are allies of the cause. The plurality of religious expression, gender identity and sexual orientation of the interviewees allowed for a diversity of answers to be collected, resulting in nine core strategies to foster dialogue between religious leaders and LGBT+ people regarding LGBT+ issues and human dignity.



BACKGROUND

As our society evolves, it considers dialogue increasingly important in conflict mediation, in order to create a more just, equitable and sustainable existence.

DIALOGUE IS THE EXCHANGE OF PERCEPTIONS;

it is the sharing of understandings, which, although diverse, have a common basis in humanity. In this sense, dialogue with and between religious leaders is a fundamental tool in the structuring of the world. Religious leaders influence public opinion because their viewpoints have an impact on notions of morality.

Consequently, religious dialogue on the inclusion and promotion of LGBT+ people has an influential impact on society at large; it has the power to change the course of history through alliances and

commitments that safeguard human lives. Dialogue implies action. The action of these allies reconfigures religion itself, allowing it to be a space to not only think about life, but to defend life in its entirety.

Agents of faith become agents of justice, promoting human rights. However, some religious leaders across the world incite hatred and violence against LGBT+ people, causing many LGBT+ people to view faith as an enemy. In addition to discrimination and condemnation of religion, many religions still consider sexual orientation and gender diversity as a disease and try to "heal" individuals with "conversion therapy" or "gay healing".

THEREFORE, IT IS AN ETHICAL IMPERATIVE TO ENGAGE IN RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE ON ISSUES INVOLVING THE LGBT+ COMMUNITY.

In the face of degrading and condemnatory religious discourses and practices, we need a counterbalance of people speaking out for respecting human dignity and for the common good. Dialogue involves more than not promoting hate speech. It means actively promoting a discourse protecting human dignity. The LGBT+ community can play a central role within the dialogue between themselves and religious communities, opposing religious intolerance. But the LGBT+ community also needs fearless religious allies.

BECOMING AN ALLY IS PART OF A JOURNEY, which begins with dialogue but also includes fearless action. This journey has already been taken by many religious leaders, whose contribution to the dialogue affects more and more people. Join the ten religious leaders and activists here in this toolkit, who want to dialogue with you, allowing you to find in them the main tools to become a fearless ally and engage with religious leaders in your own life.



STRATEGIES



1. WE ARE PART OF THE HUMAN COMMUNITY



IMAM DR. LUDOVIC-MOHAMED ZAHED:

We don't need to invent a new Islam ... but from within Islam we find plenty of arguments that after 20 years of studying Islam and discovered when I was over 30 years old, I discovered that they are effeminate men, masculine women, transgender identities that are quoted in our cultural and also religious texts.

FR THOMAS NINAN:

... still something outside our society, they haven't yet realised that LGBT+ are part of them, in many of the religious communities, and they have not realised that it has always been part of them, these are their own children out there, that realisation is still to happen...



In many parts of the world religious leaders and faith communities still imagine LGBT+ people as alien, as outside of their 'us', in part because for years, people have hidden their divergent sexuality and gender for fear of condemnation and non-acceptance. One of the starting points of any dialogue is to realize that LGBT+ people are not strange or weird but are in fact already members of their communities and faith groups, and families. This is revealed through an acknowledgment of human history and contemporary quantitative research.

The acknowledgment of the existence of LGBT+ people is a place where dialogue can begin, considering that many religions not only deny their existence but condemn it.

2. BE SELF-AWARE, AUTHENTIC, BE YOURSELF



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DR. HUGO CORDOVA QUERO:

A fearless ally should address, at the forefront of the discussion, the issues of power and control (within religion).

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UCHENNA SAMUEL NOBLE:

I came to church one day and the assistant pastor was all about, if you are gay you are going to go to hell, you need to stop that rubbish it is not the life, and all that. You know I got highly offended but I kept my cool. Next Sunday the senior pastor came to church and probably maybe some persons reported what the assistant pastor had said. Before he began his sermon he said that he needed to make some important announcement, that irrespective of our backgrounds, sexually or otherwise, that everyone is welcome, that it is left for the spirit of God to convince people within their heart the right way to go. You know I felt relieved and I felt a positive message coming from a pastor from such a prominent denomination.



OPENNESS TO DIALOGUE REQUIRES US TO

only recognizing our privileges, but also our insecurities and fears. A dialogue that addresses such intimate issues needs to reflect honestly on the doubts that go through the conversation. After all, the subject of sexuality speaks not only about the other, but also about ourselves, because the subject covers every one of us. Addressing issues relating to LGBT+ people implies being willing to talk about pain, difficulties, but also the joys of being

able to reconcile faith and sexuality. It is only possible to engage in dialogue if everyone concerned is able to show up as who they really are - and this means that we need to create spaces that are as safe as possible. Both LGBT+ people and religious leaders have fears and concerns about these conversations – LGBT+ people fear being victimised, and religious leaders are often concerned that they will be attacked - so both groups need spaces which allow them to bring their whole selves, and be vulnerable.

3. TELL STORIES



them on a very human level rather than on a practical level; we discuss a lot of life stories with them, we show them people sharing their life stories around faith and religion ... just talk to them saying that has happened to me, this is what religion has done to me even though after that I am saying that I believe in religion, I think it puts some very powerful statement in front of them and it helps them understand us better, and it helps us at least start a dialogue with them.

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DR. LIZETTE TAPIA-RAQUEL: There is a term that we use in our church, holy conversations...it's a Methodist thing, and so when we talk about LGBT+ issues we talk about it as holy conversations, that we are constantly in dialogue with each other, that we are constantly in dialogue with God, that we are constantly in dialogue with ourselves...I think that just to keep the conversation going is enough... because for as long as this is something that we talk about...then perhaps we can find ways to create safe spaces for everyone, just by talking about it."



LGBT+ PEOPLE HAVE STORIES. They are not just numbers or statistics and they are not a homogeneous community. On the contrary, they have individual histories that mark them as members of sexual and gender minorities, and many are also people of faith. Religions also have stories; stories of resistance throughout the centuries, of struggle for justice, narratives that show the human search for the Sacred. However, religions have also told other stories, stories of prejudice, fundamentalism, rejection, condemnation and silencing of lives that tell stories religious authorities have not wanted to hear. In the process of dialogue, we tell these stories (and find that many religious leaders also have stories about gender or sexuality that they have hidden) because storytelling is a fundamentally human phenomenon. It is part of what makes us human - how we make sense of ourselves and our lives - by telling stories, and in the telling and hearing of stories we come to see that we are like each other, we recognise that we are all human.

4. EMPATHY AND COMPASSION FOR OTHERS

DR. HUGO CORDOVA QUERO:

We need to create a relationship (with our dialogue partners) because gender and sexuality are only one part of what a person is. We are more than that. We have many other areas in our lives that are important. So I think that the best way is to foster friendship, to know each other, to share experiences beyond the topic ... we need to be able to foster community and communion to be able to talk about painful situations that we are dealing with.

DR. FIKILE VILAKAZI:

You turn up and you do all other things that are being done, to show that you really love this God that you are talking about. You're not just creating a case of being understood when actually you can't be understanding of other people. It's actually buying into each other's struggle. We are together because we need each other... that is the fundamental principle of sustenance... in the principle of ubuntu, we believe that a face-to-face conversation carries a lot of power because I can look into your eye, you can read my lips, you can feel my heart, you can feel my energy and we therefore connect as human beings... we belong to each other, we are a human race, we need to embrace and hold together.



THE PROCESS OF DISCOVERING THE OTHER REQUIRES

EMPATHY. Our tendency is to understand empathy as a feeling and, if it is a feeling, we have no control over it. But empathy requires rationality because it implies putting ourselves in the other's shoes. What if I were LGBT+? What if I were expelled from a faith community's religious experience precisely because I was LGBT+? And this should also go both ways. The LGBT+ person should do the same empathic exercise, by asking, for example, what if I were straight and misunderstood the issues

at stake or faced other forms of discrimination and oppression? To put ourselves in the other's place, we first need to know the other, then we need a compassionate desire to understand the other. The knowledge and understanding of issues around sexuality and gender allows us to perceive humanity in each of us. Humanity with its limits, with doubts, but, above all, with an enormous desire to put love into practice.

5. IDENTIFY COMMON GROUND



IMAM DR. LUDOVIC-MOHAMED ZAHED:

Sometimes, just talking together, drinking coffee or praying together is already such a huge opening because for them it's like 'wow, they are muslims like us'; the more you put energy in dialogue, the more you'll have people putting energy in for bidding any initiative towards peace, inclusive interpretations of religiosities.



It's possible only if there's genuine, true love, and true love leads to concern of life realities. If we can agree to do that I am sure we can overcome all blocks with genuine love, which can lead us to a common platform for dialogue...people can just listen to each other, and understand perspectives.



THE STORIES THAT WANT TO BE TOLD CAN HAVE A LOT IN COMMON WITH OUR OWN LIVES. There is always something in common between two people, even if it is just that: the fact that they are people! The humanity of each one is the common ground for honest dialogue to take place, because when we recognize our humanity, we also recognize our weaknesses, our limitations, our unknowns. And even in our faith traditions, we will often find common ground: human dignity is a common value, shared by everyone, both within religious traditions, and often even across the boundaries of faith. Such an encounter with the other can be something wonderful, because where we imagine there are only differences, there can also be similarities. A simple invitation for coffee can mean a radical change of perspective, because between conversation and coffee, empathy is born.

6. DRAW PARALLELS BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

DR. LIZETTE TAPIA-RAQUEL:

In my own life as a woman I have experienced oppression, you know, I've been silenced.....the oppression I have experienced as a woman, even if I grew up in a good family, I still felt as if I was not fully celebrated as a full person, in the other institutions, like the church, the educational system...and so my becoming a fearless ally for LGBT+ persons comes from my own struggle as a woman. And so for me... our shared oppression must become a shared struggle.

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DR. NONTANDO HADEBE:

The church leaders had just come out of dealing with issues related to HIV and AIDS and HIV and AIDS brought onto the church agenda issues of sexuality, and those were very difficult issues to discuss, and so part of responding to HIV and AIDS was to talk about sexuality. So there already is a context in which church leaders have spoken, have openly spoken about sexuality, and so, therefore, it becomes much easier to bring into that conversation issues related to LGTB+ as a development, a greater understanding of the big picture of sexuality.

GUSTAVO MICHANIE:

Many times the LGBTIQ+ collective thinks that their only struggle is for the diversity of sexual issues and I believe that the real power of this collective that has marked history that is taken as a reference in many other discriminated groups is to understand that there are many more people who are suffering some kind of discrimination, whether it be by skin colour, place of birth, social class, physical features, height or weight, I think that the LGBT+ collective must also open up this field of work more and think that these achievements that we are making over the years are a struggle that belongs to many people.

don't face the same issues, such as being part of sexual or gender minorities, we are invited to see our own struggles in someone else's story. Human rights violations are all too frequent. Many of us have had our own rights violated - because we are women, foreigners, immigrants, black, indigenous people. How many of us have experienced a denial of our humanity within the context of our religious journey, maybe because we are not part of a mainstream religion or because our

beliefs are outside traditional doctrines? Systemic violence caused by intolerance affects not only LGBT+ people, but also every person and even leaders who put themselves at the forefront of fighting for human dignity. Many religious leaders are also people who have experienced some form of oppression, and when we recognize our experience of oppression in someone's else's life, then we can move forward together to make sure we do not, any longer, oppress anyone.

7. SUSTAIN THE CONVERSATION WITH RESILIENCE

DR. FIKILE VILAKAZI:

...that is the power that dialogue has carried for us over the years, that we began to see each other as human beings, and we began to also understand from that place of the heart that actually we all feel God the same way."

PEARL DARAWULLA:

I don't think that cultural change can happen in a day, I don't think that a conversation in a day can change their viewpoint about these things; and especially I think ... any person in power always feels that what they are doing is right, so they don't even want to hear the other person's perspective ... so I just want to put forward what the community feels ... and leave that question open for them to ponder upon.

more, to be open to change, and to failure and rejection. A key tool in the process of dialogue is patience to know for sure that nothing will change overnight, but that if we keep on talking, then they just might. A conversation can change the direction of our day, but the continuation of the conversation can change the direction of our lives. Religious traditions are based on continuity, and so they sometimes resist change, but as human beings we are all changing all the time, and this is especially true for those of us who have embarked on spiritual journeys, we live lives that are constantly transforming, as we become closer to our God. Conversation opens the way, but it is also worth looking at bibliographies on the subject, meeting with other religious leaders, and realizing how religions have discussed issues related to the LGBT+ community. This whole process requires persistence and also patience. Listening patiently creates the space for a more honest dialogue.

8. DEVELOP SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

PETER ODONGO:

Religious leaders who are not sensitized are often unaware of the toxicity of what they say from the pulpit, once they are sensitized they become more aware of what they say and they are more deliberate in terms of the diversity of the people who are in those churches.



GUSTAVO MICHANIE:

Well, a lot of these dialogues are about... how you provide space and learning. These leaders or these religious communities often have a hard time breaking the ice about what activity or how to deal with it. The best way is to learn and make mistakes, because many times we think that they are making mistakes from another side, so they are discriminating against us, and the best thing is to accompany them in this learning process, to accompany them so that they can also understand that diversity is within their own communities, within their own people, who are people of faith with a sexual orientation that so many of us fear.



9. BUILD SOLID ALLYSHIP

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IMAM DR. LUDOVIC-MOHAMED ZAHED:

We need leaders, not only persons but organizations; we need to structure that, and we need training, material, food for thought.



CC

FR THOMAS NINAN:

One day at a time, one person at a time, rather than one church. People are more comfortable listening to each other at a personal level, and I believe those personal level understandings will make a change in the long run. Win more friends, genuine friends...they will make a ...say it at some point, in their own space."

One of the key strategies for creating the possibility of dialogue is to identify, in advance, individuals who may be open to engage in dialogue, and then to work with those individuals to build relationships, to build a group of people who can support you. None of us can do this alone. The process of dialogue creates the desire not only to understand more but helps people to walk this journey with us. Dialogue is not a solitary process; it is relational, and it impacts the community. It is important for religious leadership to understand their influence and the impact they can make. Religion is still an instrument for building the perceptions and the ethics of a culture. Within the communities of faith there are influential leaders who can impact other peoples' life journeys by opening to the other and embracing differences. This type of leadership has the ability to impact people in such a way that new allies to the LGBT+ cause can be formed.

CONCLUSION



THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES...

Dialogue is a moment of openness that does not end when the conversation ends. The conversation between religious leaders and LGBT+ people is not a single conversation, but a dialogue under continuous construction. The interviews that helped to produce this toolkit revealed the importance of understanding LGBT+ issues as a process, and thereby, the dialogues require time and patience.

Many untold stories exist within faith communities, eagerly waiting for an opportunity to talk openly about sexuality and gender and all that this entails – fears, insecurities, doubts. Giving people a chance to be heard means contributing to the reconciliation of faith with sexuality and gender. The role of each religious leader in this process is fundamental for this reconciliation to happen – as positively as possible.

This is the fearless ally LGBT+ people of faith are looking for - leaders involved in dialogue who are impacted by reality and who are, therefore, proactively standing within the complexities of life, promoting a culture of inclusion that respects and cares for human dignity.



DR. LIZETTE TAPIA-RAQUEL:

God is bigger than any imagination of God that we have, and so we need to liberate God, to liberate ourselves as a people, I think. Liberation... is something we should keep on talking about in pursuit of life and dignity for all, not just the LGBT+ persons but all persons.





DR. NONTANDO HADEBE:

Let us not transform our scriptures into weapons of destroying other people, let us not make the church space, the receiving of the Eucharist, participation in the church, to be a place where we discriminate against people created in the image of God. We don't own the church, it is Christ's church, we need to open the doors to every single person who believes in Christ.



RESOURCES



TOOLKITS

Interfaith LGBTQ Toolkit: resources to empower Michigan faith groups to strengthen their welcoming, advocacy and service on behalf of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LBGTQ) (Michigan Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Network with a grant from the Community Foundation f or Southeast Michigan) https://www.uujustice.org//wp-content/uploads/2019/04/LGBTQ_Toolkit_Final-1.pdf

ALL IN GOD'S FAMILY – creating allies for our LGBT Families (Institute for Welcoming Resources)
http://welcomingresources.org/AllinGodsFamily.pdf

HEARTS SET ON PILGRIMAGE – preparing LGBTI people of faith to participate in dialogue with religious leaders (Positive Vibes, FRI, FOCCISA and GIN)https://www.gin-ssogie.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HSOP-v2.0_sample.pdf

FAITHBOOK: A Guide to Faith and Spirituality for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans People (The Lesbian and Gay Foundation)

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjQt4Cdg-nqAhWVWc0KHY_NAC4QFjABegQlBBAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fkhub.net%2Fdocuments%2F5392312%2F0%2FFaithbook%2B%2BA%2Bguide%2Bto%2Bfaith%2B%2526%2Bspirituality%2Bfor%2Blesbian%252C%2Bgay%252C%2Bbisexual%2Band%2Btrans%2Bpeople%2F261e83c7-9e82-44ae-92ed-6ffe8df0aa22%3Fversion%3D1.0%26download%3Dtrue&usg=AOvVaw1LI-NW4ASnQuJ3OfJkYP8r

DIALOGUE FOR TRANSFORMATION – a toolkit (Inclusive and Affirming Ministries) http://iam.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Dialogue-Manual_WEB.pdf

ALL IN GOD'S FAMILY: a Jewish Guide for Creating Allies for Our LGBT Families (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute of Welcoming Resources) http://welcomingresources.org/KolBmishpachatElohim-4.pdf

CELEBRATING GENDER AND DIVERSITY - a toolkit on gender identity and trans experiences for communities of faith (The United Church of Canada) https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/trans-kit_2019.pdf

TRIBAL EQUITY TOOLKIT: Tribal Resolutions and Codes to Support Two Spirit and LGBT Justice in Indian Country (Native American Program of Legal Aid Services of Oregon, the Indigenous Ways of Knowing Program at Lewis&Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling, the Western States Center, the Pride Foundation, and Basic Rights Oregon) https://graduate.lclark.edu/live/files/12737-tribal-equity-toolkit

LA LIBERTAD RELIGIOSA Y LAS PERSONAS LGBTI – cuaderno para el diálogo sobre los Derechos Humanos en El Salvador https://staticl.squarespace.com/static/5784803ebe6594ad5e34ea63/t/57ce05052994ca4d3c1f2b ff/1473119508238/cuaderno-para-el-dialogo_cristosal-final.pdf

RESOURCES



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Progressive interpretations of gender diversity and sexuality – a guideline to understand the human body and God (Christian-Islam) (Gaya Nusantara Foundation) https://drive.google.com/file/d/lhapKc1P_paODiXQ7viN-KYZQBQpY6IPD/view

Islam, sexual diversity and Access to healthy services (APCOM Foundation)
https://www.apcom.org/sites/default/files/discussion_paper-islam12.pdf

DIALOGUE IS A MOMENT OF OPENNESS that does not end when the conversation ends. The conversation between religious leaders and LGBTI+ people is not a single conversation, but a dialogue under continuous construction. The interviews that helped to produce this toolkit revealed the importance of understanding LGBTI+ issues as a process, and thereby, the dialogues require time and patience.

Many untold stories are within faith communities, eagerly waiting for an opportunity to talk openly about sexuality and all that it entails – fears, insecurities, doubts. Giving these people a chance to be heard means contributing to the reconciliation of faith with sexuality. The role of each religious leader in this process is fundamental for this reconciliation to happen the most positively possible.

This is what the fearless ally LGBTI+ people of faith are looking for - leaders involved in dialogue who are impacted by reality and, therefore, are proactively standing within the complexities of life, promoting a culture of inclusion that respects and cares for human dignity.



THE GLOBAL INTERFAITH NETWORK

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