

The United Church of Canada
Affirm United/S’Affirmer Ensemble
The Partner Council of the United Church

Global LGBTQTwoSpirit Dialogue: Report to Global and Ecumenical Partners

The Global LGBTQTwoSpirit¹ Dialogue, recommended in 2016 by the United Church Partner Council, was held in November 2017 on the shores of Lake Couchiching, on the territory of the Chippewas of Rama First Nation near Orillia, Ont., north of Toronto. About 40 LGBTQ people, Two Spirit people, and straight and cisgender allies from across the church and around the world met for four days. For some, the event was a chance to share personal and institutional stories of overcoming marginalization and promoting inclusion; for others, it was an opportunity to advance efforts to protect the rights of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in all parts of the world; for everyone, it was a profound spiritual encounter.

The dialogue was co-hosted with the United Church by Partner Council and Affirm United/S’affirmer Ensemble and involved participants from Philippines, Korea, Lebanon, Zambia, Kenya, Uruguay, Colombia, Cuba, Jamaica, the United States and Canada.

During the three decades that have passed since The United Church of Canada officially welcomed “all persons regardless of their sexual orientation” to be welcome into membership in the church and to be considered for ministry, the church has walked in respectful dialogue with global, ecumenical and inter-faith partners. In the past decade, as debates over civil rights of people whose sexual orientation or gender identity differed from that of surrounding societies, partners asked the United Church about its own experience. What from that experience might be useful in different contexts?

In July 2016, the Partner Council of the United Church took time to get to know some of the people who led the process of change in the 1980s and since. After a series of workshops at the General Council Office in Toronto, and then a weekend spent with participants in the annual conference of Affirm United/S’Affirmer Ensemble in Ottawa, the council called on the United Church and Affirm United to hold a consultation and a series of regional workshops with partners to expand understanding of the issues and the people they affect.

By mid-2017, a planning team made up of United Church staff and volunteers was in place. Two very experienced facilitators were in place, along with a team of chaplains and worship leaders. As the planning process unfolded, it became clear that this event needed to be rooted in best

¹ Acronyms denoting people of all sexual orientations and gender identities continue to evolve. We chose this version for this event, understanding that in other times and places (even within this report) we might use other variants. International movements usually use LGBTI. Affirm United/S’Affirmer Ensemble uses LGBTQ+. A longer version—LGBTQQIA2S—can be understood to be inclusive of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual (and/or allies), and Two Spirit. Two Spirit is a term many First Nations adopt to identify those in their communities who in other contexts might be said to be LGBTI or non-binary.

practices of **decolonization**.² We would practice here what is talked about in truth and reconciliation efforts underway among First Nations and settler/newcomer populations—and not do so in a tokenistic way.

Participants sought to focus on the role of churches in understanding and supporting the human rights of all who face discrimination and persecution because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They sought to learn about more about how the journey toward full inclusion is being lived out in different contexts. They found opportunities to share stories, build community, and integrate strategies into our collective and individual work for human rights and inclusion. **They heard about “intersectional” identities**—the ways in which our multiple ways of describing ourselves, or the ways that others perceive us, act together.³

Strong leadership by Two Spirit participants rooted the consultation in the on-going journey of reconciliation between First Nations and settler populations and in the practice of decolonization. Two Spirit participants led the group in sunrise ceremonies and in less formal evening gatherings. They shared teachings about Two Spirit identities and about on-going struggles to recover from dominant-culture efforts to destroy Indigenous identity.

Two Spirit participants guided the group in the **lighting of the sacred fire**. It had snowed the night before, and the temperature had fallen to about –10C. But the sun shone, prayers were offered, songs were sung and the fire that would accompany us throughout the coming days was lit.

They also led the group in a **Talking Circle**, a traditional way for First Nations people to meet each other and to resolve problems. Here, the intention was to strengthen participation by all. It was a way to share personal and institutional stories.

² **Decolonization:** KAIROS (the Canadian coalition of churches working together for justice and peace) “is committed to truth, healing, and reconciliation for the past, and Indigenous justice for the present. We support an active process of **decolonization**—ourselves, our communities, our churches, and our country—building just and respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and contributing towards the recognition of Indigenous peoples as distinct peoples and nations, with rights to land and self-determination.” See: www.kairoscanada.org/what-we-do/indigenous-rights

Decolonization:

- Restores Indigenous world views
- Restores culture, language and traditional ways
- Replaces Western interpretations of history with Indigenous perspectives on history

Definition adapted from: www.ictinc.ca/blog/a-brief-definition-of-decolonization-and-indigenization

³ **Intersectionality** is a theory and an approach that seeks to examine how various socially and culturally constructed categories, such as gender, class, disability and other axes of identity, interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality and oppression. Intersectionality holds that the classical conceptualizations of oppression within society, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and religion-based bigotry, do not act independently of one another. Instead, these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the “intersection” of multiple forms of discrimination.” From the **ACT Alliance Gender Justice Policy (June 2017)**. *The United Church and many of its partners are members of ACT, a global alliance of church-based relief, development and advocacy organizations.*

Participants learned about various issues of security in different contexts. For some, participation here could threaten their employment; for others, it could jeopardize their personal security in their home contexts. For those reasons, it was agreed not to share photos taken of participants during the consultation, and (with few exceptions) individual names will not be used in this report.

In the evenings, the worship team invited everyone to explore a variety of spiritual practices. Designed to give participants an opportunity to be inwardly contemplative and yet still share each other's presence, the stations gave participants opportunities to explore a variety of devotional practices, forms of prayers, art, and participate in developing liturgy that was used at other moments throughout the gathering. Among highlights: being anointed with glitter.

The group launched into deeper exploration of **intersectional identities**, linking individual identities back to wider communities and examining systems of power, privilege and oppression. Four people led off the conversation. Some comments:

- A lesbian minister from Latin America spoke of what happened in her local church (which had more-or-less welcomed people whose sexual orientation was different from the majority) when Trans people began to join the LGBTI group. The group's willingness to welcome Trans people led eventually to creation of a new church.
- One person from Canada, usually perceived as male and gay, shared their journey of self-reflection: What does it mean to question the gender binary? What happens when you discover grey areas, middle ground, perhaps a continuum of gender identity? What happens when we begin to take apart, for oneself, the social construction of gender? Who am I, when I consciously take away the roles and attributes imposed on me because I was raised male?
- A Two Spirit person who was adopted out of his Indigenous community and into a missionary family spoke of his adult journey of reconnection with his Native roots.
- A Canadian participant of East Asian background who does not identify with either pole of binary gender identity spoke of their experience of multiple intersectional identities. There is a need, they said, "to be aware of the presence of power (how it can be fluid, covert/over, layered, and always contextual) in the ways in which we build community and relationships, and be willing to use an intersectional approach as a tool to widen our sense of others so that their humanity is fully held—not to diminish others or render them to be simply their political identities."

The group also looked more deeply at **language and identity**. As a diverse, multilingual and multicultural group, participants struggled with language. Not everyone in every culture, language, time and place talks about sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in the same way. Language is an entry into story-telling—and vice versa.

On two evenings, members of the United Church Partner Council shared reflections on the work of the consultation. (Texts are available on request.)

Also on both evenings, the worship team invited everyone to explore a variety of spiritual practices. Designed to give participants an opportunity to be inwardly contemplative and yet still share each other's presence, the stations gave participants opportunities to explore a

variety of devotional practices, forms of prayers, art, and participate in developing liturgy that was used at other moments throughout the gathering. Among highlights: being anointed with glitter. **For more information about the process, please see:**

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RMSvZqpnGU8Z7DIRkhpRz1BDQEIs8OgQv5FPZSHgYlg/edit>

The group also took time to explore **biblical and theological questions**. In different contexts, what are some of the ways found to counter “death-dealing theologies?” As in the previous day’s discussion of intersectional identities, four people led off the conversation.

- A Trans woman who is a theologian and minister shared her reflection on the story of Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (see Acts 8:26-40 and Isaiah 56:4-5).
- A leader of an ecumenical ministry carried out in a context where religion is frequently used against LGBTI people said: “The church is called to be prophetic and radically hospitable.”
- A gay male Canadian church leader noted a cultural and media tendency to imagine just two groups: the anti-LGBTI religious right and secular LGBTI activists. Progressive religious voices tend to get lost. “We need to get conversations going between LGBTI activists and ‘good’ religion,” he said. He and others are working together to develop better ways of working to confront religious-based homophobia and transphobia, and to strengthen dialogue and partnership across borders and among religious organizations. Create space within structures like the Parliament of World Religions (which will meet in Toronto Nov. 1-7, 2018) for a “love and inclusion” stream.
- A woman who is a straight ally and teacher of theology in a context where religion is often used against LGBTI people spoke of the need to “look beyond the moment” to build “leadership for the future.” (A source of support for her is the work of the African-American womanist theologian Linda E. Thomas.) She also pointed to the need to create space for dialogue in existing ecumenical structures. She reminded the group that the government of the United States has long advocated use of fundamentalist religion to subvert progressive movements such as liberation theology in Latin America and the Caribbean (ie, the “Santa Fe” documents in the Reagan era, and the Powell Commission report on Cuba in 2004).
- In response to the panel, two participants named the use of the phrase “gender ideology” by conservative forces to undercut progressive work on gender justice, including equality of women and men, and to suppress LGBTI issues. Those forces had their most decisive impact in the October 2016 defeat of the Colombian peace plebiscite, but they are also strong in other parts of Latin America.

Participants worked in self-selected, “open-space” style groups for action planning on diverse themes.

Here below is a **summary of the recommendations** presented by the small groups:

a. General perspectives

- **Support “South-south+ north” collaboration** [emphasize need for south-south collaboration, with support from north]
- Work to create more spaces for international gatherings to **listen, share ideas and resources** to deepen understanding of other contexts and challenges
- Work in ways that are **intersectional** and which manifest solidarity with parallel struggles: ie, the need to support legal action against pastors accused of sexual abuse while at the same time opposing violence against LGBTQ people, supporting human rights, and working toward full inclusion
- **Support leadership and capacity-building.**
- **Protect human rights defenders** of LGBTI rights, notably from faith-based organizations

b. Ecumenical and interfaith spaces

Use existing ecumenical and interfaith spaces to create areas for dialogue on LGBTQ rights and inclusion, such as:

- the “love and inclusion” stream in the Parliament of World Religions that meets in Toronto Nov. 1-7, 2018;
- the Global Ecumenical Theological Institutes (GETI) organized occasionally by the World Council of Churches;
- the WCC’s Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) in March 2018 in Arusha, Tanzania.
- Open parallel spaces for theological education on LGBTI issues such as occasional workshops in seminaries, strengthened support for chaplaincies.
- Connect with ecumenical processes (World Council of Church, World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Student Christian Federation, etc.). WCC has a Working Group on Human Sexuality (which in turn has a reference group on LGBTQ issues; the WCRC meeting in India (can press them on basic issues such as opposing violence)
- Lift up issues of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in ecumenical gender justice work: Use the “wobble” room, the space at the edges, to introduce broader discussion around gender justice so as to include LGBTQTwoSpirit issues.

c. LGBTQ coalitions

- Build on work from the Global Interfaith Network of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) from 2012 meeting in Sweden: http://www.gin-ssojie.org/documents/Interfaith_Preconference_ILGA-2012.pdf
- The United Church of Canada and Affirm United/S’Affirmer Ensemble should continue to participate in the **Dignity Initiative**,⁴ including its work on religious-based homophobia and transphobia.

⁴ The Dignity Initiative is a network of organizations and individuals from across Canada that encourage a stronger Canadian voice on human rights issues facing LGBTI communities around the world. The initiative has the twin

d. Indigenous and African traditional spiritualities

- Could we explore connections between Indigenous Turtle Island and African traditional spiritualities and the impact of colonization?
- Support work towards an Indigenous Two Spirit consultation within Aboriginal Ministries

e. Refugees

- LGBTI people seeking refuge in Canada: sponsorship, advocacy with the Canadian government re secure funding and adequate staffing.

Additional Information:

Celebrating Gender Diversity A Toolkit on Gender Identity and Trans Experiences for Communities of Faith

<http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/trans-kit.pdf>

Moving Toward Full Inclusion: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The United Church of Canada

<http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/full-inclusion.pdf>

For copies in other languages (to date: Spanish, Korean and Chinese), please contact:

justice@united-church.ca

Affirm United/S' affirmer Ensemble

<http://affirmunited.ause.ca/>

Note especially resources related to "Affirming Ministries" program:

<http://affirmunited.ause.ca/affirming-ministries-program/>

objectives of strengthening solidarity work by Canadian civil society groups and Canada's foreign policy. commitment to the realization of human rights for LGBTI people internationally. See www.dignityinitiative.ca/en/ Church in Mission Unit staff and Affirm United volunteers participate in Dignity Initiative.