



## **REPORT**

### **Interfaith Pre-conference of the ILGA-World 2016, Bangkok, Thailand.**



#### **Introduction**

Building on its previous experience of co-hosting an interfaith pre-conference at ILGA World, the GIN leadership, with the support of OSISA, ARCUS, FRI and ILGA, co-hosted a day long Interfaith Pre-Conference on 28 November 2016 at ILGAWORLD2016. Its theme was “Spiritual Power is political Power”.

It has become unquestionable that the religiously skilled and faith convicted voices of the LGBTI movement provide a unique and necessary ingredient to advance its liberation in the face of a growing religious intolerance masterminded by religious leaders in many countries. These religious leaders have been behind national policies as well as at International high level meetings, that censor and harm LGBTI people, their families and communities.

The interfaith pre-conference at ILGA World ultimately provides a safe and healing space for LGBTI persons of faith to meet others, learn, share experiences and build collective strategies to engage with religious leaders from faith conviction about LGBTI issues.

#### **Preparation and facilitation**

The preconference was prepared and facilitated by Ymania Brown (Samoa/Australia), Jan Bjarne Sødal (Norway), Reverend Jide Macaulay (Nigeria, UK). All are members of the Interim Steering Committee of the Global Interfaith Network for People of All Sexes, Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions (GIN).

In addition, Elizabeth Kerekere-Kararanga (New Zealand) and Koko (The Philippines) played an important role in the facilitation of the day-long event.

#### **Participants**

The pre-conference drew together over 73 registered participants and many others walking in. The participants came from different regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, Asia, Latin America, the Pacific and Australia. Among them, those already engaged in religious dialogue, came with rich experiences to share from the context of their regions.

## Highlight of Activities

### A. Entrance

The programme started with a magnificent grand entrance led by Elizabeth Kerekere – Kararanga following the inspiration of the Maori elders’ spiritual gathering. The ululations and the music led people as they gathered into a circle around an Altar set in colorful cloth, green flowers and lit candles in a manner providing spiritual healing and inspiration. While a background meditational music was played, ranging from Gregorian Chants, Chants from the Greek Orthodox Liturgy, Japanese Masterpieces for Shakuhachi, Buddhist Drums, Bells and Chants from Tibetan Monastic Chants and The Shaman's Drum (With Randy Crafton), the Lead Facilitator Ymania Brown welcomed all to the spirit space and invited participants in her words “Welcome to our space, please come in and leave your mark on the sheets provided – a word, some words, some art that you use for yourselves”.



**B. A tribute to Jacobus Witbooi (May his soul rest in power - RIP)**

The spirit space provided the right place and moment for LGBTI people of faith gathered to pray in memory of an LGBTI activist and staff of Pan Africa ILGA who died of malaria while preparing for the ILGAWORLD2016 Conference.

The facilitation gave the floor to Pan Africa ILGA Board representatives who shared about the life of Jacobus and his work. The participants held a moment of silence and prayer in his memory. May he rest in power.

<http://ilga.org/jacobus-witbooi/>



## A TRIBUTE TO JACOBUS



- 1988-2016
- Rest In Peace
- Rest In Power



**C. Religious Dialogue is possible**

The facilitators led the participants in an open discussion to “Describe a positive LGBTI Religious Dialogue moment” and “Deconstruct how it happened and why it happened”. Volunteers shared their respective experiences followed by a “Q & A” session from the participants.

**D. Invitation to Document our Stories**

An open invitation was given to volunteers to sign-up and share their stories, lived experiences through recorded videos, podcasts on the following issues:

- Stories of religious bigotry causing human rights violations
- Speaking Faith-Based Pro LGBTI Messages

An emphasis was given about the need to tell our stories, stories that educate and impact our audiences.

### **E. Solidarity Fishbowl**

The facilitators Michael Adey, Jide Macaulay and Jan Sødal guided the participants in fishbowl style conversations about solidarity across many power lines and identities. Learning and sharing best practices on supporting each other, making the invisible visible and to be our authentic selves.

The following questions guided the conversations:

1. How can people talk across differences in a respectful manner that genuinely invites in all our full selves and our different ways of knowing and working?
2. Where do power differentials commonly erase or silence people, and how can we work in solidarity to resist that?
3. What are the systems that undermine solidarity, equity, and empowerment (North/South, East/West, People Of Colour/White, Women & Trans/Men, Poor/Rich etc.) and how do we resist them and remain in solidarity?
4. What are the lessons learned from this conversation about building alliances or coalitions that can endure the systemic oppression of the world and the oppression that shows up interpersonally?
5. What are lessons learned about best practices that will keep this kind of conversation open and going so that we continue to educate ourselves and sustain our relationships and work?

An open invitation was given to participants to share resources that can help our LGBTI advocacy work.

### **F. Sacred Translation of Human Rights**

In groups formed according to ILGA's World Regions, participants were asked to discuss the following questions:

1. What is the most powerful faith based language that makes human rights relevant where you live?
2. What are your hopes for UN strategies with respect to faith?

After a rich and engaging discussion in groups, the group representatives shared their findings in plenary and the following transpired.

#### Group 1: ILGA Oceania

Q1 – What is the most powerful faith based language that makes human rights relevant where you live?

- It is crucial to speak in one's own language when talking to ones' faith based leaders
  - LGBTI people have always been part of the indigenous cultures

- Human rights language is often problematic in community-based cultures where it is seen as an import. It makes sense when there is a recognition of cultural inbuilt respect to human rights.
- Issue of place in family (for young people) or church (if they go) in order to engage on these issues. It is important to get people or allies who will be listened to and who will discuss these matters in a representative manner.

Q2 – What are your hopes for UN strategies with respect to faith?

- There is a strong need to look at non-western frameworks by experts in the field
- Hate speech within religious contexts despite legislation is often present and one needs to question why religions get such power and what we can do about it.

### Group 2: Latin America

Q1 – What is the most powerful faith based language that makes human rights relevant where you live?

- Human Rights terms often used have no translation or even meaning, in certain local contexts. There is a need to be strategic and creative to talk about human rights without mentioning words that conflict with culture or local understanding.
- When discussing about the Church, there is a need to distinguish the hierarchy from the “people” and their everyday work.
  - There are allies on the ground and some LGBTI people are part of the Church
  - Some religious leaders have been killed based on their identity and their fight for Human Rights.
  - Need to respect and understand each other and give privilege to dialogue.

Q2 – What are your hopes for UN strategies with respect to faith?

- The UN can also be very problematic as it does not take into account local cultures, just like colonial powers post 15<sup>th</sup> century.
  - There is a need to push them into dialogue, in different sectors of work.
  - There is a need to deconstruct the myths behind religious organizations, the UN, NGOs in the political and economic arenas.

### Group 3 – Asia

Q1 – What is the most powerful faith based language that makes human rights relevant where you live?

- The following terms are used in local contexts:
  - Dignity of Life - in the Philippines
  - Concept of a universal church – Catholic meant as universal church, all inclusive, representing God’s love
  - Unity in diversity – in Indonesia (multiplicity of religions, with no one dominating the other)
  - Dignity – in Thailand
  - Mercy – in Hong Kong

- Concepts are already there but we need to revisit religion and create space for universal love
- And there can be problems with translations and interpretations
  - E.g. in Islam, many different interpretations
- In everything, we must be united – all religions are about love

Q2 – What are your hopes for UN strategies with respect to faith?

- UN must:
  - Go back to human dignity, harmony and peace
  - Revisit local concepts, especially languages
  - End violence, engage with local communities and not just talk/dialogue
  - Be in direct contact with religious groups and leaders, treat them as friends and stakeholders in the LGBTI community

#### Group 4 – North America

Q1 – What is the most powerful faith based language that makes human rights relevant where you live?

- This group's discussion focused very much on the new administration
- They expressed the need to question the election of Trump, seen as a 'dictator' and 'white supremacist'

Q2 – What are your hopes for UN strategies with respect to faith?

- We need to ask the UN to make the US government more accountable

#### Group 5 – Africa

Q1 – What is the most powerful faith based language that makes human rights relevant where you live?

- The Use of words, sayings and phrases about dignity, respect, authenticity, Ubuntu, love your neighbour, and "All are made in the image of God" is another translation of human rights that need to be used when talking about human rights and LGBTI people.

#### Group 6 – Europe

Q1 – What is the most powerful faith based language that makes human rights relevant where you live?

- Alter as a concept: language as an alter where different languages, cultures and religions can meet and be brought into one platform, creating a positive space on which to build upon
- Freedom of conscience, for e.g. in Orthodox Church, more important to follow conscience than religious teachings
- Human dignity, does not work everywhere

- Priesthood: we all have it, so it is about equality and against hierarchy
- Revelations: they are ongoing, absolute divine being is still saying something to humanity, even today
- UK Equality Act as an example of bringing faiths and SSOGIE issues together (sexual orientations and faiths are characteristics protected by law under this Act)
  - Gay cake story where Jewish bakery did not want to bake a cake for gay wedding: gay cake won after going to court (SSOGIE won over faith)
- Peace and love as the essence of the meaning of Islam and other religions (7 Jewish Values)
- Multiplicity of interpretations of religious texts e.g. Sodom and Gomorrah
- Multiplicity of faith/religious concepts to be brought in

Q2 – What are your hopes for UN strategies with respect to faith?

- Need for less bureaucracy at the UN
- Dialogue of sincerity must be created within the UN
- There are multiple entry points within the UN which can be used (in different departments, agencies, individuals)

In closing this activity, the lead facilitator Jan asked the audience to send to GIN more materials and resources to GIN's two program managers, Victoria & Thomas. It is GIN's area of interest to document these dynamics, to share them and make them available widely to its membership.

#### **G. Spirit Space - Closing ceremony**

The day-long event was concluded with a heartfelt blessing ceremony where participants brought oil, water, soil from all corners of the world. These elements were used to pray for and bless one other.

Participants requested more of this spiritual practice to be embedded in every LGBTI conference programming around the world. It provided healing, wholeness and strength for all following ILGAWORLD2016 Activities.

