

‘En-Gendering Justice: Christians in Conversation with Buddhists on Religion,
Gender, Sexuality and Power’

Bangkok, Thailand - 26-30 July 2015

(Organised in Cooperation with the International Network of Engaged Buddhists)

Draft Statement

The consultation, a collaboration of the World Council of Churches and Buddhist communities, connected different aspects of WCC’s work namely *Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation* (IRDC) and *Just Community of Women and Men* (JCWM), as well as the *Reference Group on Human Sexuality* - demonstrating the strengths of working in a transversal manner.

This consultation was informed and engaged through the shared insights and experiences brought into discussion by theologians, religious leaders, academics and activists from both Christian and Buddhist religions from 19 countries across five continents. We have been mutually enriched by the experiences, often presented through deeply personal stories, and indebted to the willingness of participants to share.

Participants reflected on the relationship between religion, gender, sexuality and power. The role played by religion in gender socialization was assessed from Christian and Buddhist perspectives using an intersectional analysis. Discussion explored how issues around religion and gender interact with social, economic, psychological and political factors, and produce inequalities and injustices at various levels, including but not limited to race, caste, gender, sexuality and health.

Working together and mutual sharing was the primary methodology of the meeting. The goal of each session was to enable a dialogue on the theme of each with the intention of enabling deep reflections from an interfaith perspective.

The sessions were informative, interactive and dynamic allowing for many voices to be heard on such themes as:

- **Sharing of Interreligious Work:** *The Context of Christian Buddhist Dialogue: Issues and Challenges within Buddhist-Christian Encounter; Securing Ordination for Katoey (Trans) People in Thai Buddhism.*
- **Religion, Body and Power:** *Critical Revisiting of Attitudes to Human Sexuality in the Christian Church and Theology; Recovery of Eros in Christian Theology.*
- **Gender and Social Justice:** *Resources within the Buddhist Tradition that Promote Social Equality and Justice; Use of Christian Scriptures in the Abuse and Commodification of Black Women’s Bodies.*

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- **Religion and Empowerment:** *Impact of Ambedkarite Buddhism on the Empowerment of Dalit (untouchable) women; Theology of God and Sunyata (Emptiness).*
- **LGBTI Issues - Religion and Discrimination:** *Raising awareness of and engaging faith communities in LGBTI Issues; The Work to date of the WCC Reference Group on Human Sexuality.*
- **Religion and Sex Trafficking:** *Christian Initiatives and Sex Trafficking in Kolkata; Sex Trafficking and Child Prostitution in Thailand.*
- **Gender, Sexuality and Health:** *Gender, Sexuality and Power in the case of Chinamwali (initiation rites) in Malawi; Contextual Bible Study: Gender, Sexuality and Health.*

During the consultation, members made two exposure visits. First to the Wat Songdhamma Kalayani in Nakhon Pathom, the first Buddhist temple in Thailand to have bhikkuni (Buddhist nuns with higher ordination). A keynote presentation was made by the Abbess of the temple Venerable Bhikkuni Dhammananda (formerly Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh) who gained higher ordination in Sri Lanka. In sharing her personal story, she demonstrated that courage and wisdom are needed if we are to challenge dogmatic thinking.

A visit was also made to ‘The Well-Urban Training Centre’, a Christian ministry that serves to assist people affected by or at the risk of entering the sex industry. Through this visit and experiences shared in our sessions, we are challenged to collect and share real lived stories that confront us. These stories may make us angry; they might also challenge us to reflect on our own complicity. To what extent are our families and communities responsible in forcing children into sex slavery, for example, or to turn a blind eye, or not even be aware of the factors that lead a child into the trade?

Such experiences call Christians among us to ask where is the omnipresent God in this and the Buddhists among us to recognise that structural violence is caused by greed and craving. This is not just for one religion to respond to and to address. No one religion is superior to the other – and therefore learning is facilitated through interreligious dialogue and action inspired by what is complementary in our faith traditions. In our differences we have something to offer to each other.

We leave with many questions for future dialogue:

How can religion be made relevant for contemporary issues?

How can we create space for allies at the table – those voices we need to travel with?

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How do we engage in a critical and contextual reading and interpretation of the Scriptures, affirming that any interpretation of scripture, tradition and culture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain should be rejected?

How can we be alert to and challenge issues of hegemony that oppress on the basis of gender and sexuality?

How do we share multiple narratives and understandings of self-identity that honour personal story without labels?

How do we respond to doctrines that constrain the richness that interfaith dialogue can provide?

How can we invite the sharing of complementary wisdom and dipping into the wells of living waters – where for example meditation and social action might engage?

How can our religious resources be put together to inform and educate right intention and action?

How do we do our best today so that we can do better tomorrow?

Even as we continue to engage with our Buddhist and Christian wisdoms and take responsibility for individual and collective change, we also continue to be challenged by the African song and concept of “Senzenina” – What have we done? – and what can we do better.