

PRAXIS

Newsletter of the WSCF Asia-Pacific Region
No. 1, January - April, 2007



Perspective

- 2 Basic Definitions of Sexuality
6 Sexuality – A Feminist Issue?
Sunila Abeysekerain
10 Attendance at the UN 51st Commission on the Status of Women
Annabel Dulhunty
12 Women's Clinic to Support Women's Reproductive Health
Yasuko Ako

Faith Reflection

- 16 A Life-and-Death Erotic Love in the Song of Songs
Christina Wong Wai Yin

Women's Space

- 19 A Letter to a Friend

Solidarity News

Movement News

Regional News

P R A X I S

is the newsletter of
World Student Christian Federation
Asia-Pacific Region

Regional Office:

Unit 1-2, 18/Floor
280 Portland Street Commercial Building
Mongkok, Kowloon, Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 23852550 Fax: (852) 27823980
Email: wscfap@netvigator.com
Web Site: www.wscfap.org

Inter-Regional Office:

The Ecumenical Centre
5 Route des Morillons, 1218 Grand-Saconnex
Geneva, Switzerland
Tel: (41-22) 7988952 Fax: (41-22) 7982370
Email: wscf@wcc-coe.org
Web Site: www.wscfglobal.org

Editorial Team:

Ms. Necta Montes Rocas
Ms. Wong Yock Leng
Ms. Wong Yick Ching

A n n o u n c e m e n t

**Welcome to the new
Regional Women's Coordinator,
Sunita!**

Sunita hails from Orissa, India and is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of India. She has a Bachelor's degree in Education and Diploma in Development Studies from United Theological College in Bangalore, India. She has served as SCM India's National Study Secretary for Women's Desk from 2002 to 2005 and became a member and president of a local unit of SCM India in Orissa from 1995 to 1996, General Committee member and Executive Committee member of SCMI National Executive Committee from 1995 to 1997. Sunita has also participated in Trainer's Training for Women (TTW) and Women Doing Theology (WDT) of WSCF AP in 2000 and 2003 respectively.

We wish Sunita the very best in her tenure with WSCF AP and she will also find this opportunity as a time to learn, grow and journey with the SCMer in Asia Pacific!

The cover image, *Kapiti*, is an artwork of Fionnaigh, an SCMer in New Zealand

The issue of Sexuality seldom finds itself a hot seat among the programme or discussion agendas in WSCF AP or the SCMs. Perhaps it seems a very personal issue or an issue that would raise not only eye-brows but controversies when it is deeply explored. Or perhaps our 'moral' and 'faith' socialisation has miscomprehended the scope of this issue, having little inkling that Sexuality covers more aspects than just diverse sexual orientations or sex-role attitudes, but also the pertinent question of 'identity' that profoundly affects the understanding and acceptance of our very own existence.

Whatever the reasons are, this issue of Sexuality deserves more of our awareness and recognition. Our varied sexual orientations should emphasize on 'how' does one have a relationship with and not of 'who' does one have a relationship with. Our sexuality is our connection to God who has created a diversity to be appreciated, loved, respected and celebrated, an abundant life that has no room for oppression, judgmental values and moral persecutions. Our sexuality is a journey in our spiritual search which should not be defined by an androcentric interpretation of what it means.

Although this issue of Praxis may not cover all facets of Sexuality, we hope the expressions found in the articles and artwork will generate profound and challenging reflections, discussions as well as the courage for us to deal with this issue in true honesty and an open, warm, caring heart.

My heartfelt thanks to all the contributors, and to the Regional Women's Committee members - Annabel, Nariko, Nina, Christina, whose shared vision greatly helped and motivated each other in the brainstorming process for this issue of Praxis and for the Regional Women's Programmes. Also thanks to Fionnaigh for her reflective artwork. I have selected one of her works as the main cover, Kapiti, which she says "is of a sunset over an island and it was a hopeful artwork as it is just like the day dying away so that something new can begin". Fionnaigh has sort of been going through a bumpy ride these days, and I guess, many women SCMerS (and men too!) are as well, in their search and contemplation on the issue of Sexuality. Let us be brave with endurance and perseverance because someday, we will reach our destination, and something new will begin.

Enjoy the read!

Yock Leng

Out-going Regional Women's Coordinator



Basic Definitions of Sexuality

Basic Definitions of Sexuality¹

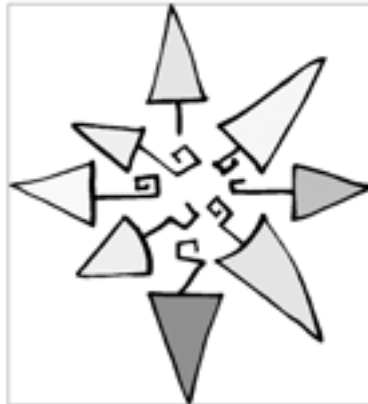
- ⌘ Ovary: The female organ where the eggs are made. The ovaries are found inside the abdomen at the ends of the fallopian tubes which carry the eggs down to the uterus.
- ⌘ Ovulation: The time at which the ovaries release an egg, usually in the middle of the menstrual cycle.
- ⌘ Hymen: The thin membrane that partly covers the entrance to the vagina.
- ⌘ Vagina: The female genital passage which leads to the uterus.
- ⌘ Orgasm: The climax of sexual arousal.
- ⌘ Female orgasm: The female orgasm begins as a build-up of sensations around the genitals. Before orgasm there is a feeling of tension, when all orgasm is felt as a series of rhythmical muscular contractions – first around the outer third of the vagina and spreading upward to the uterus. Each woman has a different threshold of sexual response, and this can vary during a lifetime. Some women may have one very intense orgasm at a time, while others may have a series of varying intensity. All female orgasms depend on clitoral stimulation

- achieved either indirectly (sexual intercourse) or directly (when clitoris is rubbed with fingers or during oral sex). Some women climax easily from indirect stimulation, while others need direct stimulation. Some women have never had an orgasm either alone or with a partner. The reasons for this are various and include simple lack of knowledge and a fear of insisting that their partner help to satisfy them. Therapists advise women who have never had an orgasm to explore their bodies and find out about their sexual responses through masturbation, either manually or by using a vibrator. Once they begin to have orgasms, they can communicate their desires and appropriate techniques to their partners.
- ⌘ Male orgasm: During the male orgasm, the sperm which has mixed with seminal fluid is forced into the urethra by the prostate gland. The muscles around the urethra give a number of rapid involuntary contractions forcing the semen out of the penis at high pressure. Three or four major bursts of semen are followed by weaker, more irregular contractions.
 - ⌘ Masturbation: Self-stimulation of the sexual organs.

Some Definitions of Sexuality are²:

“...the entire range of feelings and behaviours which human beings have and use as embodied persons in the world, expressing relationship to themselves and others through look, touch, word and action. It includes the combination of our gender (identity and role) and sex (anatomy and physiology) and is co-extensive with personality.” (Joan H. Timmerman’s *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth*)

“...the personal power to share (physically, psychically, and spiritually) the gift of sharing self. Sharing involves giving and receiving – not giving and getting.” (Roberto and Mary Rosera Joyce)



ality of human beings comprises a broad range of behaviour and processes, including the physiological, psychological, social, cultural, political, and spiritual or religious aspects of sex and human sexual behaviour. Philosophy, particularly ethics and the study of morality, as well as theology, also address the subject. In almost any historical era or culture, the arts, including literary and visual arts, as well as popular culture, present a substantial portion of a given society’s views on sexuality. In most societies and legal jurisdictions, there are legal bounds on what sexual behaviour is permitted. Sexuality varies across the cultures and regions of the world, and has continually changed throughout history.

Human Sexuality

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. For more information, surf to:
www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/human_sexuality

human sexuality refers to the expression of sexual sensation and related intimacy between human beings, as well as the expression of identity through sex and as influenced by or based on sex. There are a great many forms of human sexuality (sexual functions). The **sexu-**

A large variety of books, educational websites, and local education/ support/ social organizations exist for various forms of sexuality.

Scope of Human Sexuality

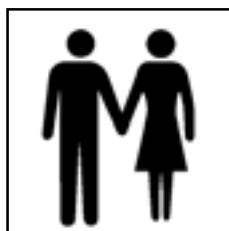
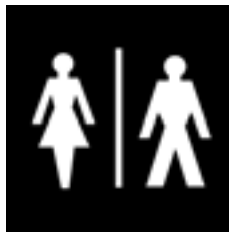
The term *human sexuality* covers a very wide range including:

- The physiology (or actual biology) of human sexuality, and sexually-related aspects of how the body works.

¹ Extracted from “Transforming Attitudes Towards Sexuality – a module for Asian women”, pg. 14 & 15. The module is published by Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 2002.

² Ditto.

- ☑ Who and what people are sexually attracted to (Sexual orientation).
- ☑ How we see ourselves, which may differ from the physical form we have, i.e., personal identity (Intersex, transsexual).
- ☑ How we come to choose the sexual choices we make (Environment, choice, and sexual orientation).
- ☑ How humans act in seeking sexual activity, and with sexual partners, and the scope of sexually oriented behaviours (Human sexual behaviour).
- ☑ The psychological significance of sex, which may be related to its emotional effects, its physiological effects, or tied up with other psychological aspects, such as power, control, or the need for security.
- ☑ Sex and its relationship to social structure, thus sex within marriage, religion, morality and the law.
- ☑ Arts and media depiction of sexuality.
- ☑ Sex education.
- ☑ Social norms, traditions and rituals related to sexuality.
- ☑ Understanding of sexual activity outside those norms (see Paraphilia).
- ☑ How society judges where lines are to be drawn, what constitutes unacceptable conduct, who is vulnerable to its abuse, and how they are protected or violators dealt with.
- ☑ Research into human sexuality (such as the Kinsey Reports).
- ☑ Sexual positions.
- ☑ Safe sex.



Physiological Aspects

Human sexuality can be influenced by hormonal changes in the development of the fetus during pregnancy. Some hypothesize that manner of expression is largely because of genetic predisposition. Others hypothesize it is because of personal experimentation in early life, and thus the establishment of preferences. A less divisive approach recognizes that both factors may have a mutual role to play. Human physiology and gender makes certain forms of sexual expression possible.

Sexual dysfunction addresses a variety of biological circumstances whereby human sexual function is impaired. These manifestations can be in the form of libido diminution or performance limitations. Both male and female can suffer from libido reduction, which can have roots in stress, loss of intimacy, distraction or derive from other physiological conditions.

Performance limitations may most often affect the male in the form of erectile dysfunction. Causes of this may derive from various forms of disease pathology including cardiovascular disease, which can reduce penile blood flow along with supply of blood to various parts of the body. Moreover environmental stressors such as prolonged exposure to elevated sound levels or over-illumination can also induce cardiovascular changes especially if exposure is chronic.

Sexual behaviour can be a dangerous disease vector. Safe sex and monogamy are relevant harm reduction philosophies.

Social Aspects

Human sexuality can also be understood as part of the social life of humans, governed by implied rules of behaviour and the status quo. Thus, it is claimed, sexuality influences social norms and society in turn influences the manner in which sexuality can be expressed. Since the invention of the mass media, things such as movies and advertising have given sexuality even more ability to shape the environments in which we live. Some see sexuality as distilled (often into stereotypes) and then repeatedly expressed in commercialized forms.

Gender identity is an aspect of human sexuality that can be affected by one's social environment, and different social environments can have specific attributes they associate with each sex, such as certain types of dress, colours, behaviours. A common example in Western media could be the portrayal of a little boy in blue shorts and a white T-shirt playing with a toy truck, while a girl is shown in a pink dress playing with a doll.

Sex Education

Sex education is the introduction of sexual topics within an educational context. Almost all

western countries have some form of sex education, but the nature varies widely. In some countries (such as Australia and much of Europe) "age-appropriate" sex education often be-

gins in pre-school, whereas other countries (notably the USA) leave sex education to the teenage years and even the late teenage years. Sex education covers a whole range of topics from "where do babies come from?", contraception, abstinence, signs of sexual diseases, and the social and psychological implications of sexual relationships.

Cultural and Psychiatric Aspects

Human sexual behaviour in most individuals is typically influenced, or heavily affected by norms from the culture in which the individual lives. Examples of such norms are prohibitions on sexual intercourse before marriage, or against homosexual sexualities, or other activities, because the religion to which the individual's culture adheres forbids such activities (see taboo). Sometimes, if not most times, such culturally induced behaviours do not reflect the natural sexual inclinations of the individual.

Those who wish to express a dissident sexuality are often forced to form sub-cultures within the main culture due to various forms of oppression or repression. In other cases, forms of sexuality may develop into a fetish or alternately develop as a form of psychiatric disorder or paraphilia.





Sexuality – A Feminist Issue?

Sunila Abeyssekera, a single mother, is a women's rights and human rights activist for 25 years at the regional and international level in Sri Lanka.

(This article originally appeared in Women in Action [1:1999], news-magazine of Isis International – Manila, www.isiswomen.org)

Sunila Abeysekerain

The control of female sexuality is a critical element of patriarchy. In primitive societies, once the connection between reproduction and the male was discovered, the need to “own” and “control” the woman’s reproductive capacity as well as the fruits of her womb became an integral part of male “being.”

At times one senses that there was also a fear, sometimes an awe, of female sexuality and fertility, in many communities, through time. This is obvious when one looks at a range of traditions, cultural practices, customs and religious injunctions that address the need to keep women under male control. The portrayal of woman as the Madonna and as the whore created a dichotomy which we still see reflected in works of art, literature, the cinema; the creation of stereotypes of the “good” woman as opposed to the “bad” woman. The bad woman is usually the one who is free with her sexuality, and sometimes with her “sexual favours”; she is “sexy,” while the “good” woman is chaste, virginal, and asexual.

In more recent times, the discussion about sexuality has become focused on alternative

sexual practices. In some fora, speaking about sexuality has become synonymous with speaking about lesbians. Yet, in actual fact, the concept of sexuality encompasses a wide range of sexual behaviour and practice that is “alternative” to the dominant mode. It could include homosexuals, gays and lesbians; but certainly also, from the point of view of the struggle for sexual self-determination and sexual autonomy of women, this category could include single women, widows, celibates. Some of these women have been “prohibited” from having sex by the state, by religion or by the community - on the basis that they are too young, too old, married, unmarried, virgins who must guard their hymen since it is the most valuable object they possess. Some could be women who have decided not to have sex with men, and others could be women who have decided not to have sex at all. All of them are women who defy mainstream sexual codes and patterns of behaviour and are therefore particularly vulnerable to punishment. Sexual transgression is a heinous crime in most of our societies today.

I have recently been working on the issue of the reflection of female sexuality in the Sinhala cinema. I am developing the thesis that in this

cinematic genre, there are only four alternatives open to a woman who dares to transgress the boundaries of community taboos about sex: She can go mad, she can commit suicide, she can be killed, or she can join religious orders. In film after film, I watch endless women going mad, killing themselves, being killed, or becoming a nun. The penalty for expressing one's sexuality is most severe.

What constitutes sexuality? Sexual practice, certainly. Sexual preference. Who you have sex with, and how. Sexual desire. Sexual pleasure. How you derive sexual pleasure and what your sexual fantasies are. What you dream of when you dream about sex. Who do you find "sexy," and why.

The tension between pleasure and danger is a powerful one in women's lives. The exercise of our sexuality can be pleasurable, a joyous exploration; it can also be fraught with guilt, repression and sanction. The negative side of our sexuality is that which victimises us, which makes us vulnerable to all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, such as rape and incest and bondage against our will. This vulnerability makes us aware, sometimes too aware, of the potential dangers of exercising our sexuality. The threat of sexual attack is one of the most powerful tools of control of women in contemporary society.

This element of danger has terrible consequences for us as women. We grow to fear our own sexuality. We learn to deny our own capacity for pleasure. Why is the female orgasm so mysterious, and why is it so elusive for some women? Why does it evade so many women

for all their life? Is it because our bodies have been so well trained and our minds so well fettered that we simply cannot experience that moment of climax, of absolute abandonment?

Because our sexual desires are so well hidden and so cleverly masked by social norms and "acceptable" forms of behaviour, they lie deep in our psyche, emerging only in our dreams. We fantasise about sex but most of us would never admit it, not even to ourselves. Because "good" women don't do THAT! Oral sex was a taboo subject a century ago. Today it is quite an accepted part of sexual practice. Anal sex is perhaps still a bit dicey; after all, sodomy remains on many of our law books as a criminal offence. Gay and lesbian sex is titillating to the nonhomosexual; the numbers of so-called straight (heterosexual) people who enjoy gay and lesbian erotica is revealing in itself. How many of us harbour a desire to have sex with someone of our own sex, or to have sex in what would be to us, in our own context, an unorthodox way? Most disturbing to many of us is sado-masochism in sex. Hurt? Pain? We seem incredulous, but indeed pain and pleasure are also quite intimately connected sensations. Bondage, beating, tantalising, using "mild" forms of torture -are these "allowed" forms of sexual behaviour? And what about that most thorny question of all? What about pornography? Why has the production and reproduction of images of sexual behaviour become a globally marketable commodity? All these are issues related to our own perception of sexuality.

The other critical area of discussion relating to sexuality is the way in which certain types of sexual practice and behaviour are privileged over

others, by social and cultural norms that are based on the acceptance of certain forms of social and economic stratification and hierarchy. For example, sex within marriage is sanctioned by the law, therefore by the state, and also by religion and by the community. Sex outside marriage is still taboo in many societies; the nuclear family remains the norm as does the belief that sex must of necessity be for procreation. The idea of sex for pleasure, of sex unrelated to, and independent from reproduction is still an outrageous one for many communities, although the development of contraceptives in this century has for the first time in human history created a space in the human existence for nonprocreative sex. The premium placed on virginity, the condemnation of premarital and extramarital sex, as well as the criminalising of certain forms of sexual practice including homosexuality, all point to the difficulties experienced by us and by our societies in accepting and appreciating the variety of human sexualities that are around us and are an integral part of those we live with and love.

Within the women's movement, the issue of sexuality has been a difficult area of discussion. Feminists who were ready to challenge many stereotypes and to defy the norms of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family, were, at least right up to the early 1980s, reluctant to take on issues of sexuality as a part of our own agenda. Part of it was, perhaps, self-interest. By the mid-1980s, we had achieved a certain degree of acceptance and recognition that we didn't want to endanger by raising troublesome and controversial issues. We wanted some space in which to enjoy the fruits of our

labour. We feared the backlash from the conservative and right-wing groups who viewed unfettered sexuality as an aberration, as flying in the face of God. We didn't want to be called lesbians. We wanted to enter the mainstream as legitimate actors in the male world. In our desire to break the glass ceiling, we forgot many of our sisters - the one who were as oppressed by class differences, by racism, or by compulsory heterosexuality as they were by patriarchy. Our theoretical and conceptual understanding of patriarchy extended to an understanding of the ways in which it interacted with other axes of power such as capitalism and various ideologies of racial or ethnic supremacy. However, it didn't really include any deep understanding of differences within and among women. Our belief in sisterhood and solidarity proved to be very deceptive.

Our inability to really evolve feminist ways of dealing with difference, whether it was between women and men, or between women and women during this period of our history has created certain divisions among us that are very visible and problematic even today.

In 1984, Carol Vance asked a series of questions:

- > are male and female sexual natures essentially different or the product of specific historical and cultural conditions?
- > has women's sexuality been muted by repression, or is it wholly different from men's?
- > does the source of sexual danger to women lie in an intrinsically aggressive or violent male nature, or in the patriarchal conditions that socialise male sexuality to aggression and female sexuality to

compliance and submission?

- > how can male sexual violence be reduced or eliminated?
- > how does the procreative possibility of sex enter into women's experience of sexuality?
- > should feminism be promoting maximum or minimum differentiation in the sexual sphere, and what shape should either vision take?

These questions remain valid even today, fifteen years after. In fact, in a world in which we face the AIDS epidemic, the development of movements for gay and lesbian rights, the visibility of homosexuals in many modern societies, whether with sanction or without it, many of our assumptions about sexuality and sexual practice are being challenged in a very fundamental way. We are being pushed to consider the issue of difference within the feminist movements worldwide, and to deal with it. Our right to sexual autonomy has been recognised and hotly debated in international fora such as the Fourth World Conference on Women.

Today, we live in a world where it is accepted that there are various forms of family; it is accepted that women and men have reproductive and sexual RIGHTS to engage in sex free from discrimination, coercion and violence; it is accepted that many diverse forms of sexual practice can coexist harmoniously if there is tolerance and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.

It is in this spirit that the feminist movement must continue with its dialogue on sexuality, building bridges with lesbians and other women who live lives of sexual nonconformity and are marginalised and ostracised because of their courageous choices.

Glossary:

SEXUALITY: A technical spectrum of biology, experience, psychology, behaviour, society, ideation. The spectrum starts with the more social, shades imperceptibly into the psychological and lastly becomes biological; gender role, sexual activity, sensuality, sexual orientation, fantasy, pleasure, desire, gender identity, reproduction. (Muriel Dimen 1981, 66) Source: Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: A Feminist Dictionary, 1992.

LESBIANISM: A woman's choice to give women primacy in her life - emotionally, personally, politically. (Rita Mae Brown 1976, 90) Source: Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: A Feminist Dictionary, 1992.

HETEROSEXUALITY: A sexual feeling for a person (or persons) of the opposite sex, a feeling experienced and enjoyed by some women and some men. Source: Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: A Feminist Dictionary, 1992; sexual feeling or behaviour directed toward a person or persons of the opposite sex. Source: Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 1996.

HOMOSEXUALITY: A sexual feeling for a person (or persons) of the same sex, a feeling experienced and enjoyed by some women and some men. Source: Amazons, Bluestockings and Crone: A Feminist Dictionary, 1992s; sexual desire or behaviour directed toward a person or persons of one's own sex. Source: Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 1996.

Achieving Gender Justice:

Attendance at the United Nations 51st Commission on the Status of Women



Annabel comes from Australia, SCM and is currently one of the Regional Women's Committee members in WSCF AP.

Annabel Dulhunty

For the first time, the WSCF Interregional Women's Programme sent a group of WSCF women to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the United Nations from 24 February – 9 March 2007 in New York City. I attended with WSCF representatives from Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

The Commission on the Status of Women brings government representatives to meet annually to debate and decide on a set of 'Agreed Conclusions' around a given issue each year. This year the theme was 'Violence Against the Girl Child'. Issues that were present in the 'Agreed Conclusions' included trafficking, the commercial and sexual exploitation of women and girls, sexual and gender based violence as war crimes, addressing the impunity of violence against women and girls, the economic exploitation of girls including through child labour, problems faced by girls from vulnerable and marginalised groups such as refugees and indigenous girls, child marriage and traditional harmful practices.

In addition to government representatives, over 1500 non-governmental organisation (NGO) participants registered for the 51st CSW. The

role of NGOs, such as WSCF, in this process was manifold.

Firstly, NGOs lobbied government representatives to adopt language in the 'Agreed Conclusions' which NGOs felt was strategically important – as for instance suggesting that factors of economic exploitation, globalization and the responsibility of both Northern and Southern countries be addressed in regards to child labour and that governments ratify relevant International Labour Organisation Conventions and Treaties.

Secondly NGOs were able to provide an alternative witness to governments through disseminating information on the situation of women and girls in their countries and through providing case studies and recommendations. NGOs therefore conducted 'Parallel Events' which were held throughout the two weeks of the CSW.

Thirdly NGOs were able to network and group together either thematically or regionally to strategically plan advocacy after the event of the CSW. This advocacy was generally based around lobbying governments to uphold the Agreed Conclusions or to make governments

more responsible and accountable for certain issues of concern.

WSCF was able to contribute in each of these ways. WSCF joined a coalition named Ecumenical Women 2000+ which aimed to link together participants with a faith based perspective. Together we met regularly to discuss how we responded to the 'Agreed Conclusions', what issues were of particular concern to us and how we would lobby our government representatives to take up our issues of concern. We all brought together different issues such as trafficking, honour killings and economic exploitation which we could then highlight in regional and thematic caucuses with other NGOs. Through this coalition, WSCF formed a network and fellowship with participants who shared a common passion for gender justice and socially aware faith who are desirous to work together with WSCF to attain these ends in the future.

WSCF also hosted our own 'Parallel Event' entitled 'Young Women Say No to Violence' where we spoke about the issues concerning gender justice that each of our SCMs face and the measures that we are taking to address this, such as through the Regional Women's Programmes, highlighting examples such as Women Doing Theology.

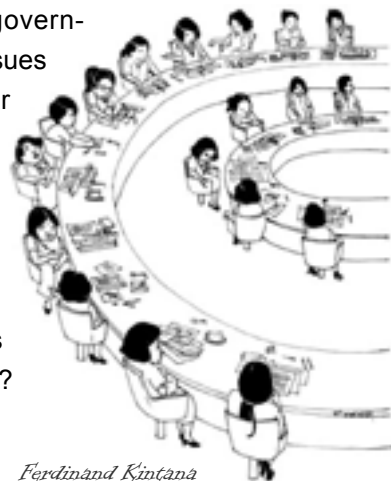
Personally I found the breadth and depth of the issues discussed moving and at times overwhelming. A complex myriad of gender injustices were witnessed, with former child soldiers speaking about their experiences, hearing about various war crimes committed against women to try to achieve genocide and learning more

about the second most highly profitable industry in the world – that of human trafficking.

Whilst at times these issues appeared separate and disjointed, I believe that the WSCF was able to play a role in the CSW by declaring that these issues were not in fact disconnected but were part of a uniform system of oppression and exploitation under which patriarchal society operates by.

We were able to provide a voice stating that only by opposing all forms of gender discrimination and exploitation of all persons, where we view each and every woman, man and child as an authentic subject, and not as an object of profit or personal gain, can we combat these gender injustices from the ground up. Whilst it is important to address each and every issue on its own account, noting the legislation, precedents and government actions, essentially we must also determine and strategically work against the structures of oppression that exist within our societies, within our SCMs, within our churches and within every facet of our personal lives if we are to truly gain gender justice.

Therefore I felt that whilst we were effective lobbying governments on specific issues that we took particular interest in, in our group of Ecumenical Women, I believe that we were most effective in asking the question that at times was overlooked: Why?



*Ferdinand Kintana
ISIS International Manila*



Women's Clinic to Support Women's Reproductive Health

Yasuko is currently a staff in the Women's Center of Osaka and a counsellor at Haru Women's Clinic.

Yasuko Aki

The Need to Talk about “My Body”

It was experiences in the three encounters in the early 1980s that made me think of working with women's health problems. I was working at a union at that time and it was always one of our top priorities to gain rights regarding menstrual and maternity leave. However, our discussions only focused on issues relating to the social systems and not on women's body or health. For instance, we spent time discussing about menstrual leave, but never talked specifically about “my own body” or the importance of menstruation to women's bodies. Personally, even after I experienced abortion and childbirth, I was still having a hard time relating to my own body and consulting with medical treatments in obstetrics and gynecology.

My first encounter was the case of the Fujimi obstetrics and gynecology clinic.¹ When I was collecting signatures for a case of medical malpractice, people asked me why women went to such a clinic. In this case, it was not the fault of women who went to the clinic which happened to have bad doctors. It could happen to other women like me. The case happened in

Tokyo and although I have no direct contact with this clinic, I was wondering what I could do to help them from Osaka where I lived.

The second encounter was a protest for the amendment of the Eugenic Protection Law.² Yuriko Ahino, Yuriko Marumoto, and Yumiko Jansson have a movement against the amendment of the law, and in the meantime, worked on promoting better understanding among women about our own bodies.

Thirdly, after the Women's Conference held in 1975 in Mexico, the Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was submitted to the United Nations. Issues relating to gender roles such as household sharing, became topics that were openly discussed. However, issues related to women's bodies, such as birth control and abortion, were still topics that were widely neglected. I wanted to talk specifically about “my body” among issues of women's body, and to know more about my own body.

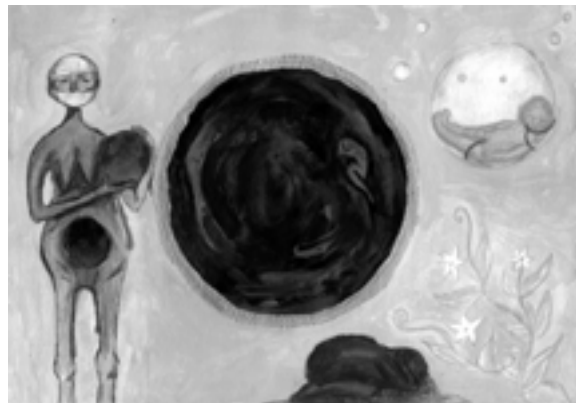
In 1984, about 20 of us gathered together to establish a clinic for women and to learn more

about women's body and our gynecological organs. At that time, the only available information on women's body came from overseas in translated forms, so there was a need for a center to provide information in Japan. As a first step, we decided to provide a place to have study, discussion-groups and also to provide a telephone consultation service.

One of the issues that we wanted very much to study and discuss was abortion rather than childbirth as abortion was the most common experience among us. There was a movement started by Ms. Ashino and others to socialize the abortion issue through a movie by Gail Singer called "Abortion Stories from North and South". However, there was almost no opportunity to discuss or write about our own abortion experiences. Why do we have to suffer so much? Let us share our experiences. This is how we came to publish the book called "Abortion-Message from Women" with funding raised from supporters. This book sold well and was a breakthrough in the discussion of abortion issues.

Health is an Integral Aspect of Women's Lives

The three major issues that people call us for consultation are: menstruation, medical care in obstetrics and gynecology, and sex. Those people who call for the former two issues can be divided by their age. Women have menstruation until late 40's or early 50's, and even after that, they need to have regular medical checks on their gynecological organs and often require operations for ovarian tumours or other causes. Some women hesitate to visit obstetrics and gynecologists especially after the menopause which could lead to worsening of any illnesses.



-
- ¹ A case of Fujimi obstetrics and gynecology clinic: In 1980, a chief director of the Fujimi obstetrics and gynecology clinic in Tokorozawa-city in Tokyo diagnosed healthy women as raving uterus cancer or fibroid and conducted unnecessary hysterectomy operations without a doctor's license. The director was acquitted on a charge of inflicting bodily injury. A civilian action was filed by sixty-three victims against the clinic in 1981, and the trial was concluded in 2004 with the Supreme Court's decision to dismiss the appeal by four doctors of the clinic. The address of website for "Victims of Fujimi obstetrics and gynecology clinics" is <http://higaishadoumei.com/>
- ² The amendment of the Eugenic Protection Law: The amendment of the Eugenic Protection Law, which included illegalization of artificial abortions for economic reasons and adding a clause for selective abortion of a disabled fetus, did not pass the diet in 1970's but became active in 1982. The law was partly amended in 1996 to delete line specifying the purpose of the law stating "preventing the birth of defective descendants", and presently it is called the Maternal Protection Law. WOMEN'S ASIA 21 Voices from Japan No.17 Summer 2006.

The vaginal prolapse caused by the weakness of the sphincter muscle is also a problem. Patients become upset to see a portion of the vaginal canal protruding from the opening of the vagina, and some even try to push it back by themselves, rather than being able to ask for help. Since this is the beginning of the aging society, it is especially important for our telephone consulting service to promote women to talk more freely and openly about “body and sex.” We receive phone calls from women of all ages on sex problems, and they ask us why they have to put up with having sex against their will.

From the experience of interacting with women through the telephone consulting service, I realized that we do not consult only on issues of women’s body but also on women’s way of life. Those women, who were constantly worrying about their daughters’ breasts being so small or the shapes of their vaginas being different from other women, cannot accept the idea that their own bodies are unique and different from others. They look at their bodies through the point of view of a socialised female gender role.

Since 1990’s, women’s centers with consulting services became available all over Japan. However, I think the basic problem remains that important issues of women’s body are often separated from other gender issues. We have been thinking how women can live a fruitful life and our focus happens to be on the women’s body issue. However, women’s total well-being including sex-and work-life.

When we talk about health, we tend to focus on the aspects of exercise and relaxation. However, it is also an important barometer of one’s health to know about menstruation conditions. For instance, the menstruation stops when you lose 10 kg of body weight, and this is a signal from your body. For women to live independently, I think it is one of the most important health managements to think about how we associate with our own body, work, and sex. Unfortunately, we were not educated to do so.

The Necessity of Financial and Social Support for Women’s Health

Many women, who visited obstetrics and gynaecology, call us when they are not convinced by the doctors. Women do not usually visit obstetrics and gynecologists too often in their life time, thus, it is an unknown world for them. It usually takes only three minutes for a medical examination, and the examination results given by the doctors with specialist terminology are difficult to understand. It creates an even more difficult environment for patients to ask question than other clinics. For instance, when you are told



By Fionnuala

that you have a fibroid, you cannot judge how bad the condition is or if the operation is your only choice. For people in the medical institute, you are just one patient among many others, but for a patient, it is a matter of one's life.

Through our long experience with the telephone counselling service that we had established, we thought of an idea to open a clinic as a part of the health support center. In this clinic, we organized a team of doctors, medical assistants, counsellors, and receptions to work on a holistic medical care for women. For example, a young pregnant woman could ask for advice in this clinic to think through her own future and decided if she would prefer to have a child or get an abortion. We are fully aware of the danger of being in debt as a result of running this clinic, but we hope this clinic can be a place where a woman can consider health in the context of her whole life, even as a career woman.

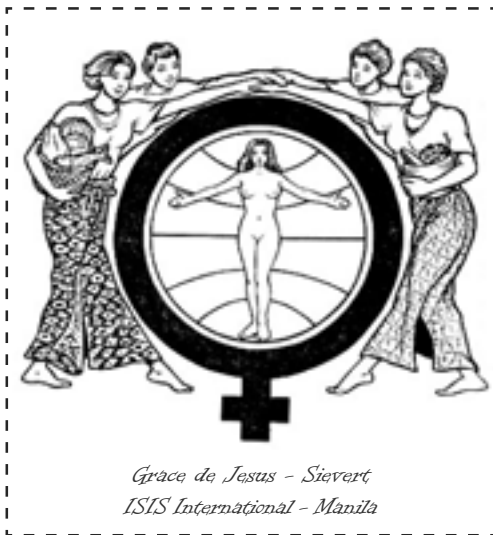
Although there are many cases of post-natal syndromes, there are only a few support systems for women's healthcare while there are many support systems for newborn babies in Japan. There is financial support for the treatments of incurable illnesses such as collagen disease from which many women suffer. However women who are suffering from ill-

nesses are nothing but familiar scenario of a traditional household in Japan an extremely

fixated gender roles where the husband has a job and the wife stays home, only in this case, the wife stays at home because of her illness. If we were to view this situation from the gender equality point of view, if a wife has an illness that prevents her from having a healthy physical, mental and social life, there should be a support system for

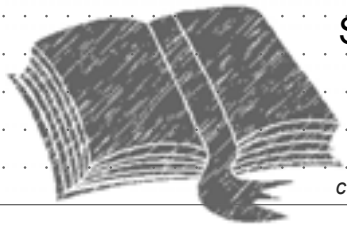
her living situation as an individual. If we were to consider our bodies from women's point of view, we should claim that we have the individual right to be healthy regardless of marital status (single or married) or job status (part-time or full-time). Currently, women in the Japanese society are divided by marital and social status.

Reproductive health rights mean that the physical, mental and social health of women is considered to be an important issue of women's health in their whole life. We want the government to be more actively involved in this concern. Each of us could spend our own money to go for massage treatments for health reasons, but this will not help all other women to become healthy. We need to work harder to establish a social system that allows every woman to be financially supported in order to live a healthy life.



Sermon:

A Life-and-Death Erotic Love in the Song of Songs



Scripture: Song of Songs 8:6-7

Christina is an active senior friend of SCM HK and currently the Executive Secretary of Hong Kong Women's Christian Council.

Christina Wong Wai Yin

When I discussed 2006 sermon arrangements with the Blessed Christian Minority Fellowship¹, I knew that I would have to study a particular book from the Bible in each month. As I work for Hong Kong Women Christian Council and have an interest in feminist theology, I hope to provide a feminist interpretation of the Bible. Therefore, I have chosen to talk about *Song of Songs*. However, when I try to think about what message to share with the congregation, I have found it very difficult. I have never heard of a pastor using *Song of Songs* as a sermon. Should I talk about the godness of sex, enjoying sexual desire, or how to have sexual pleasure? How many of us here are younger than 18 years old as today I try to share a very sensitive topic in our Chinese culture?

Most of the time in Church Bible study classes we use spiritual interpretations to understand the words and sentences in the *Song of Songs* as the love between God and the people. All the sexual connotations are made spiritual. For example, in *Song of Songs* 1:15, pastors understand "Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves" as eyes looking up – eyes that look at God. Traditional theologians feel that *Song of Songs* signifies

the love between Christ and the Church, as they consider (actually a lot of believers as well) that the Old Testament's value is only in verifying Christ's redemption. This misses the Jews' experience of the faithfulness of God and their encountering with God. In fact, the Jews experience God's salvation and covenant as they struggle together as a nation.

I think the *Song of Songs* is a praise song about erotic love. A lot of churches or ministers think that it is not appropriate to give a sermon about such intimacy between humans. They shudder at the thought that God might want to talk about sex! As many of you have foundations in faith and are open to differing theologies, I challenge you to take off the chastity belt and join me in exploring the *Song of Songs*.

It is not just the churches today that do not know how to handle the *Song of Songs*. Church history tells us that it was a controversial inclusion in the canonical process of the Hebrew Bible. The reason for this is simple; there is not a word on God's works. In short, *Song of Songs* is a poem in Hebrew and praises erotic love and sexuality. Where is God in it? It is not an easy question to answer.

1. Pursuit for erotic love is human nature.

The first message that I would like to bring out is that, human sexuality is part of God's creation. Sex is a basic instinct. There are many animals and plants mentioned in the Song of Songs. For example, a dove is the sign of love between man and woman. Apples and raisins in ancient West Asian cultures were used as love symbols in the worship of the god of love. They are also aphrodisiacs and symbols of orgasm (2:5-6). Pomegranates and myrrh trigger sexual desires. Apart from plants and animals, the whole book is filled with scenes of spring and natural beauty and even describes the couple enjoying sex in the wilderness! For instance, verses 16-17 in Chapter One read, "Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely. Our couch is green; the beams of our house are cedar, our rafters are pine." (1:16-17). All these examples illustrate the theme of creation, that all things in heaven and earth are created by God. Love and sexual relationships are part of God's creation.

2. Erotic love is our inborn desire, but it also implies the costs of desire. Love has the power between life and death.

There are a lot of passages with sexual metaphors. There are mutual praises for each others' naked bodies between the lover and the beloved. There are three passages where the woman's body is praised by the man (4:1-5; 6:4-9; 7:2-10) and the man's body praised by the woman (5:10-16). The woman's breasts are, not surprisingly, as the focus of the man's praises.

Song of Songs is not a book presenting Plato's love which separates the spirit and the body. It is a book about love in spirit and desire for

bodily connection. *Song of Songs* graphically expresses the pinnacle of love between man and woman – sex!

I have to mention that *Song of Songs* breaks the notion that the man should be proactive and the woman passive in sex. Woman takes initiative to pursue her desire for intimacy. Statistically speaking, 53% of the book is expressed in the female tone, while only 34% of the book is expressed in the male tone. The female voice in the book is passionate and direct, expressing desire for her lover and hatred of his departure. Apart from the expressions of love, the man has no other voice. *Song of Songs* seems to be the woman's love history. She even initiates sex, not once, but over and over again. Feminist theologian Phyllis Trible claims, "The Song of Songs redeems a love story (that of the second Genesis creation account) gone away."

The most touching part of the book is when, at the same time as expressing her desire for love, the woman also expresses the genuine loss of self entailed in the experience of eros. This is a kind of interior soliloquy which expresses the loss in the deepest part of her heart. Let's see the illustration of the Scripture: *Song of Songs* 3:1-4; 5:2-8.

Some biblical scholars believe that the repetition of these two verses is not necessarily genuine narrative, but pseudo-narrative. While the structure is the movement from calm alertness booming into anticipation (5:2, "I slept, but my heart was awake...") to the physical ache of

¹ The Blessed Christian Minority Fellowship is the only gay church in HK.

desire on the verge of fulfilment (5:4, “my beloved thrust his hand into the opening, / and my inmost being yearned for him”) to the retrospective realization of the inevitable emotional cost of erotic love (5:6, “My soul failed me when he spoke”). The reflection of the bride is that love and desire brings hurt. Apart from NRSV translation, a Biblical scholar Tod Linafelt translates this verse literally from Hebrew, “I nearly died when he spoke.”²

The book mentions the power to hurt by love and sex. Love makes us delirious, excited and passionate, but at the same time can make us feel lost. Of course, this is not the total loss of self that constitutes death, but it is loss nonetheless, the feeling that a piece of one’s self has gone missing, that one’s life-force has been compromised by being bound up with another. Some even consider love as suicidal. This is the cost of love.

“I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me.”(7:10) – it implies that the individual who desires love has to pay the price of love. Even the beloved admits that she is sick with love. In verse 5:7 it described those who block her from the city walls. We may understand these as limitations arising from social boundaries, but it can also be a metaphor for the physical harm on the body. The fear and thread from love lie in the fragility and hurt from life experiences. This does not mean that we should avoid love and desire, but that we should be aware of the complexities of erotic love, which is a matter of life and death. Song of Songs let us see the dynamics and mutuality of erotic love, which leads our own subjectivity or sense of self has been challenged, divided, fragmented.

I have spent a lot of time talking about love and sex as a basic instinct, as part of the creation of God. If traditional faith or biblical interpretation is negative towards body and sexuality, *Song of Songs* suggests that body is created from God can eat and drink, and have love and sex. This body is holy. In response to the verse today, passion and erotic love are parallel with death, with very strong power. It is like God (Isaiah 42:2) as it is not threatened by death or fire or floods. Love is not only a substitute for God and the Dead of God. Song 8:6 and 7 suggest that Love displaces not only God but Mot, “Death,” and the primordial personified waters of chaos subdued by God.

As I said, the *Song of Songs* which is talking about erotic love is a great resource for us to develop Eros Theology, because in Eros theology contains we see the following elements:

- the stressing of mutual and equal relationships;
- the acceptance that our body and our desire for love and sex propels our lives;
- the empowerment of God for us to build right relationships;
- the breaking of social institutions that hinder us in building equal and just relationships, such as the marital system.

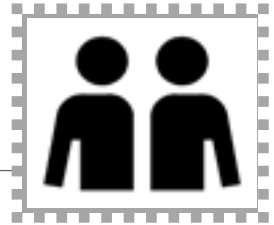
For our audience I must mention the limitation of *Song of Songs* is that it is only about heterosexual love and hence limits the diversity of human sexuality. I would understand this is a limitation from the social situation of the time.

² Tod Linafelt, “The Arithmetic of Eros,” *Interpretation* 59:3 (2005), p.256.

Note: Acknowledgement to Jennifer Chan for the translation of the article and Simon for editorial work.

Who Will The Church Journey With?

*A letter to a friend,
penned by a LGBTIQ activist from Taiwan*



It was a gloomy weather on the day the Gay Pride Parade was supposed to take place¹. I have been worried that this long-awaited event would be unexpectedly disrupted by the potentially bad weather. I held a silent prayer requesting for cool yet not rainy sky for such is an ideal weather to enable a comfortable march without the perspiration that would make me feeling exhausted all over.

I did go to the parade even though I was harbouring a fever for the past three days. My heart longed not only for the weather to stabilise but also my physical body to become well again so that I could finish the march along with everyone, without much trouble. How about you? What were your observations on the day's event and the march? What are some of your reflections?

Of course, this parade could not escape from the fate of persecution! More than a month ago, a group of religious people held a strong view that they disagree with such kind of parade, and particularly, those from the Christian churches who reiterated the viewpoint that "...same-sex marriage is a mistake, and homosexual behaviour is against the morality of nature....please do not make Taipei City in becoming the next Sodom and Gomorrah, cursed by God".

Such expressions are not a total surprise, isn't it? It is a fact that homosexuality is not on the agenda of discussion in mainstream churches, as it is also an infrequent mainstream subject for discussion in the society. The mainstream churches must be puzzled and infuriated on the audacity of the Taipei City Municipal government in using public funds to host this Gay Pride Parade when this subject should not even be publicly addressed!

There were a lot of discussions along the march, and inevitably, the constant nagging reminder from the religious people on the 'sins' of homosexuals as they repeatedly try to prove these sins with the two ancient biblical texts of Sodom and Gomorrah. Well, as you were in Kyoto at that time, you have no opportunity to witness the other voices during the march, that is, those who supported this parade and their expressions and reflections. However, while making a statement disagreeing with the objections raised by the religious groups, they have also come to a dilemma, that is, the dilemma of forming a logical and reasonable retort on the so-called "church teachings" expounded by the religious groups who perceived "church teachings" as the authority in human morality.

¹ The LGBT Parade of Taiwan started out in 2003 and the Taipei City Municipal government publicly supported the 4th LGBT Parade in 2006. However, this demonstration of support led to a strong wave of opposition from many Taipei City Municipal senators as well as the Christian leaders and organisations.

You know, since Eva left, I have stopped dwelling into this dilemma. Well, you should know that it is rather fruitless to continuously oppose the mainstream religious discourse. And as for those supporters of Lesbian & Gay Movement, many of them are good supporters in the concept but in reality, when they meet with a lesbian, gay or any persons with a different sexual orientation from them, there is an involuntary display of fear or anxiety, you can say it is a form of “homophobia”! Moreover, while those who said they have accepted homosexuals, are perhaps just curious about this issue.

I honestly do not care so much about if this issue is being accepted by people or the debates that go with it because lesbian and gays do exist. They exist in front of you but what we experience today is just discourses, debates, arguments yet we ignore their existence, pain and struggles.

“Sin” is the usual entry point for any form of opposition by the mainstream religious people, stating hundreds of examples of the mistakes committed by homosexuals. And supporters of lesbians and gays do not seem to have much creative approaches to counter these oppositions except to play along the lines of “Sin”. At the end of the day, they always receive a ‘good beating’ in any debates or discussions!

No matter how those lesbians or gays in the parade who openly display or continuously hide from their own sexual identity, ultimately, they need to face up to their own love, anger, loneliness, pain, joy or the life they aspire.

You know, everyone desires for a honest and sincere love when it comes to love, desires, sense of security, or happiness, this is a common need, be it heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals etc. In addition, I am sure sexual identity is not a matter for those who truly seek a sense of peace

and serenity in their life. For those who are fond of making issues out of the lesbians and gays, be they oppositions or supporters, they have neglected those important yet basic aspects of human longings. And perhaps justice or rights for lesbians and gays would be achieved in the midst of all the debates, but when will we be able grasp the fact that Jesus’ life and teachings centers on these important yet basic aspect of human longing – love, peace and serenity? Are we able to use another angle to connect a human’s spirituality with religion that closes the gap of human alienation and gives power to the attainment of peace?

When Eva revealed her sexual identity, she had to leave the church as it constantly engaged in all these unnecessary debates. From that day onwards, I realised the might of such invisible powers that could ‘kick’ a devoted Christian who had grown up together with the church, out of its circles, when the sexual orientation is a matter of concern. I asked myself, what are the main concerns of the church? What do they value? What do they provide to the church-goers? Or ultimately, the million-dollar question is: what kind of church do I want to belong to? What kind of journey do I want to take on in this church?

What you, Kate, and I long for, is a religion that inspires personal growth, maturity, a true sense of spiritual peace and serenity. So, does it matter if there are those who oppose or support?

I need to return to my own strength from within. I have been relying on outside factors that define my strength, power and existence that deter me from finding out my own inner powers. If that is so, I am no different from a boat floating aimlessly in the vast ocean....

*Your friend,
Little Rice*



The Singapore government will soon be reviewing its Penal Code which has not been reviewed in 20 years. One of proposed amendments to the Penal Code is on Section 377A¹ which outlaws sex acts between men will not be repealed but laws that criminalise anal and oral sex between opposite-sex couples will be repealed.

The National Council of Churches in Singapore (NCCS) has commended on the government on this stance, and in its statement release, it says: “We are aware that the proposed amendment to delete section 377 PC but on the other hand retaining section 377A PC may be controversial in some quarters. Nevertheless, we consider homosexual acts to be sinful, abhorrent and deviant, whether consensual or not. The NCCS commends the Government on taking a clear, unequivocal and bold stand of neither encouraging nor endorsing a homosexual lifestyle and opposing the presentation of the same as part of a mainstream way of life. At the same time, we do not condemn homosexuals as the Bible calls us to hate the sin but love the sinner. Given that section 377A PC criminalises homosexuality whether done private or publicly, we are of the view that a similar prohibition ought to be enacted in respect of lesbianism, considering that lesbianism (like homosexuality) is also abhorrent and deviant, whether consensual or not.”

In response to the NCCS’s statement on the proposed amendments to the Penal Code, the Free Community Church and other NGOs in Singapore have issued statements objecting to NCCS’s call to criminalising lesbian acts and advocating the retention of Section 377A. Below is the statement released by the Free Community Church*.

¹ Section 377A of the Penal Code (PC) provides for a 2-year jail term for “any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person.”

* **Note:** The Free Community Church of Singapore “affirms that all individuals are persons of sacred worth and created in God’s image. Given the discrimination that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) persons still face in society, our Church affirms that same-sex relationships are consistent with Christian faith and teachings, when lived out in accord with the love commandments of Jesus. Instead, it is discrimination based on sexual orientation and homophobia that are inconsistent with Christian teachings.” The FCC welcomes all LGBT persons to its family. For more information on the FCC, please surf to www.freecomchurch.org

The Free Community Church expresses shock and dismay over the National Council of Churches in Singapore's feedback to the Ministry of Home Affairs, published in the March 2007 issue of The Methodist Message, commending the retention of S377A of the Penal Code, and further calling for a similar criminalisation of lesbians.

In particular we strongly object to the NCCS feedback in the following respects:

- 1 It is outrageous that an organisation, purportedly representing members of the Christian faith, is calling for the criminalisation of an entire group of people – the lesbian and gay community. The reality is that the gay and lesbian communities contribute significantly to the well-being and development of Singapore and we should allow them to live their lives in peace.
- 2 While as Christians we can preach our moral values, we should not seek to impose our point of view by advocating our view be made law that governs a secular state that includes non-Christians in a pluralistic society. This is tantamount to trying to impose Christian values onto non-Christians, not to mention that there is, in reality, no consensus regarding homosexuality even among Christians ourselves.
- 3 By its statement the NCCS undermines the very love commandments of Jesus who, at every point of his life, fought against the marginalisation, condemnation and oppression of minorities. Why is it that similar pronouncements have not been made of divorce or adultery, against which Jesus had much more to say?
- 4 The NCCS view not only undermines the Singapore Constitution Article 12(1), which states "All persons are equal before the law and entitled to the equal protection of the law", it also undermines the Christian belief that all human beings are equally persons of self-worth created by God in God's image.
- 5 The reality is that societally and globally, homosexuality is no longer viewed as unnatural by most legislatures except those that (i) have carried over the Christian ethos of the British Empire or (ii) are theocracies. Almost every secular legislature in the world no longer criminalizes homosexual acts between consenting adults. Today, homosexuality has been accepted by sociologists as a sub-culture.

In its 8 Nov 2006 press release, the Ministry of Home Affairs revealed that the approach to amending the Penal Code is, amongst others, "to update its provisions so that they remain relevant and effective in view of societal and global changes". With this aim, the government has made the initial step in proposing to repeal S377, abolishing the crime of anal and oral sex when carried out by heterosexuals in private. NCCS' call to further criminalise lesbians (never before included in this section of the penal code) is a retrograde step and a regressive move backwards.

To deny this, the Church neglects to take seriously its task of doing theology, being critical, constructive and contextual, re-thinking God anew in the ever-changing contexts of every generation that leads to justice for all God's people.



SCM Aotearoa is looking forward to an exciting year with a new national programme titled "Exploitation: Challenging the New Slaveries". This programme will cover exploitation of the environment and of people, particularly sex-tourism, climate change and relating these with the insights found in the bible. SCMA believes that people and the environment deserve to be treated with care and respect, and that everyone should be given an equal deal. With this programme, SCMA wants to raise people's awareness and try to promote a conscious and compassionate way of living in the world.

The unit in Otago (led by Kate and Summer) recently ran the second hand book sale for the entire university. This was a massive effort with just a handful of people. They have also been leading the way with their programme, which will include topics like "How did Jesus treat people marginalized by his society?", "How do people in New Zealand contribute to economic

slaveries and how can we stop?" and "What NZ, and the UN say about human rights and how slavery contravenes this".

The Canterbury unit has welcomed Rachael Soja as their convener, along with Jean Kite who also convenes our National Coordinating Group. Canterbury members are working closely with young people from a local Presbyterian Church and have created a discussion group which covers issues that are important to SCMA. They will be focusing on the environment and theology in the first half of the year and will be hosting the National Conference in July.

The Auckland unit is revitalising with the support of Rev. Leigh Neighbour, SCM's first Regional Development officer, and Catherine and Megan O'Callaghan who are both active members and Catherine is the women's officer of SCMA. SCMA is optimistic that SCM Auckland will grow this year despite the difficult conditions.

GKMI (SCM Indonesia)

GMKI recently concluded its National Congress on 5-13 November 2006 in Kupang, and a new set of national executive officers has been elected to serve the Movement. The Movement has selected Goklas Nababan as General Chairperson and Naftali H. Jarin as General Secretary.

Prior to the actual meeting of the National Congress, GMKI conducted a series of workshops as a lead-on to the Congress. Among the various workshops was the Women's Programme which was attended by young women SCMerS, as well as women's organisations which are networks of GMKI. The Women's Programme saw inputs of Women's Movement in Asia Pacific, Women in Public Sphere, Women in the Public Sphere, Women and Culture Determination, Empowerment in the Perspective of Gender in GMKI and Women Leadership in GMKI.



Australian Student Christian Movement

National - ASCM bi annual executive meeting was held in Brisbane in January at the Australian Catholic University. This meeting was a time of shared reflection, worship, prayer and song during which SCMer from all active states met to facilitate the business and life of ASCM. This meeting was the first carbon neutral meeting of the ASCM with a resolution being passed to purchase carbon offsets to neutralise the carbon emitted by our air travel to the meeting. By buying the carbon offsets from a local not-for-profit, volunteer based, community organisation we have ensured that enough trees are planted to facilitate the dendrosequstration of the carbon emitted by our air travel which is one of the primary causes of global warming. Preparations are also underway for ASCM's next national conference on the theme of *Habitat* to be held during Perth in June/July 2007. JG, the national Magazine also continues to be produced regularly. The most recent issue was on the theme of *Heroes*.

Australian Capital Territory - The branch at the Australian National University in Canberra attracted wide interest from students following their annual Orientation Week activities on campus. A welcome dinner was held at the house of a local SCMer and attracted a large number of people, including many joining the ASCM for the first time. The ACT are also preparing to celebrate the World Day of Prayer for Students this year as is the tradition of their branch and the WSCF.

New South Wales - The Sydney SCM branch is a cross campus branch involving students from the University of NSW, the University of Sydney and the University of Technology, Sydney. The branch meets monthly for dinner at the house of a local SCMer and attends various events of interest organised in Sydney. Recent events at-

tended by Sydney SCMer include the Survival Day Celebrations of the Indigenous Gadigal Tribe held on Australia Day, a national public holiday that commemorates the invasion or settlement of the first Europeans in 1788. SCMer also attended a weekend retreat on the gospel of non violence lead by John Dear SJ.

Tasmania - The ASCM minutes secretary continues her involvement from Tasmania. She is currently completing her PhD and is the only SCM student in Tasmania at this time.

Western Australia - The ASCM is meeting regularly at three universities in Perth; Murdoch University, The University of Western Australia and Edith Cowan University. The organisation of SCM activities throughout the branches is assisted by a dedicated staff worker, Clare Schultz who meets regularly with the students throughout the branches to keep them in touch with local events of interest to SCMer. The WA Area Council is also hosting the 2007 national conference and has been busy planning and preparing for that.

Victoria - There is loose network of SCM friends and interested students operating in Victoria. Their energy and commitment allowed the National Conference Day and July General Committee Meeting to be held Melbourne last year following WSCF AP - SCM Joint Women's Programme.

Queensland - The SCM in Queensland has recently employed a new staff worker Caroline Loader who has been working hard to build a branch community of students in Brisbane at the Australian Catholic University. The Queensland Area Council hosted the January executive meeting and organised professional development training for ASCM staff and office bearers at the meeting.

Sam Kobia's Lecture in SCMI

Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of World Council of Churches gave an input to the SCMI on "Youth Envisioning Ecumenism - Youth Revitalizing the Ecumenical Movement in the Indian context" in early February 2007.

Dr. Kobia challenged the young people of India today to reflect on the meaning of church and young people in the 'post-colonial' era. Young people's role in the society and church today is critical as they need to critically analyse the current trends of globalisation that might hinder gains made from any de-colonising process in the global South. In this 'post-colonial' era, there should not be a complacency that the relations of domination are behind us and both church and society are facing trends similar to those of colonisation with the influences of neo-liberal globalisation, and India has witnessed the real threats to life caused by water privatisation, big dam projects, domination from corporate business and new agricultural technologies. In addition to economic globalization, cultural globalization continues to affect the identities and agency of young people around the world.

The 'post-colonial' era hence has tremendous effects of identity, and the pride and empowerment on young people from the global South is eminent. Dr. Kobia thus challenged the church and the society that young people need to be regarded as (and indeed claim space as) main stakeholders and assets NOT as liabilities in the church and society. Young people represent potential and hope for change and revitalization. It is the role of each young generation to pose the challenging questions and bring change for the better. This is not only true for the society and political institutions but also for the churches.



Student Christian Movement of India organised a Bible Study Workshop on "Re-Reading the Bible" at SCMI Programme Centre, Bangalore on 1-4 March 2007. 45 students and senior friends from all over the country attended this workshop, with Rev. Dr. Dhyanchand Carr, Rev. Stephen Sundersingh and Rev. Dr. C.I. David Joy as the resource persons.

The programme was designed to help the students to take one-step ahead from the existing traditional understanding and interpretation of the Bible and interpret it from the socio-economic, political and cultural realities of our society, making it more relevant and significant for the people. In the process, we had few input sessions on: Introduction of the Bible, Underlying Principles of Re-Reading the Bible, Tools for Re-Reading the Bible and The Bible and the Society Today. There were also two exposures to reflect the two extreme realities of the urban setting; the slums and the big malls to enable the students to see the vast contrast of wealth. The students also learned to contextualise the Bible through Bible Studies, so that they may be able to develop Bible Studies on their own with the above perspective in mind. Three intensive Bible Studies focusing on the issues of Domestic Violence, Untouchability and Poverty and Wealth.

Regional Women's Committee Meeting

and

Standing Committee Meeting

18 – 24 February 2007

Hong Kong



6 young women from the **Regional Women's Committee (RWC)** met on 18-20 February to evaluate, strategise, envision and implement the Regional Women's Programme (RWP) for the next couple of years. After 2 full days of brainstorming, the RWC envisioned that the RWP needs to:

- > aim to create a space where human relationships are nurtured.
- > aim to develop each other's spiritual formation in a spirit of sisterhood.
- > empower women to recognize their rights and wisdom to interpret and do theology.
- > aim to create a platform to respect the diversity of sexuality.
- > continue the formation and development of women leaders in SCM.
- > conscientise women and men about power relations in SCMs, church, WSCF and society.

The RWC also recommends that:

- > To include discussions about power relations in all regional programmes (for example in the Women's and Men's caucuses in regional programmes such as SET, SELF, ASYG, HRSP).

- > At the Regional Committee Meeting (RCM), each National Representative present should report on the women's programme or the status of women's activities in their country SCM in the National Report.
- > Formation of a Women's Network which includes former RWP participants, women senior friends, resource persons who are keen to be connected to the RWP.
- > If a National Movement wants to nominate its woman SCMer to the RWC, they should send their RWC candidate to the RCM so that there is an opportunity for RWC candidates to meet and begin strategizing. This also ensures equal gender representation in the RCM.
- > In the event that there is no Women's Pre-Assembly in the GA, the RWC and RWP need to express their concern and ensure the possibility of a Women's Assembly.



The **Standing Committee (SC) Meeting** was held immediately after the RWC Meeting on 21 – 24 February. The SC envisioned the direction for WSCF AP in the next few years. It believes that WSCF AP needs to:

- > Engage in biblical/theological reflection to strengthen the distinctive theologies that SCM is expressing.
- > Encourage the movement character in the SCM spirit by supporting national movements to relate to senior friends better and to devise concrete ways to get support from them.
- > Explore the Global community by developing resources from participants who attended the global programmes.
- > Secure viability and refocus on the Senior Friends Support Group and the need to strategise for ways to ensure property security for regional staff.
- > Work on women and gender and to focus on power relations in programmes and other related areas.
- > Act boldly for fullness of life that calls for more effort in making more proactive position and stand.
- > Enhance visibility of WSCF by establishing new relationships and maximising the usefulness of the website, additionally, enhancing the CCA joint programmes.
- > Leadership formation that focuses on SET/SELF programmes, Bossey partnerships and developing a manual or SCM Handbook on leadership skills and movement building.

There is a heavy line-up of programmes in 2007 to meet the visions that the SC sets for WSCF AP, and it includes:

- 1) School for Ecumenical Leadership Formation (SELF) Programme – 2007 SELF will

be a joint programme with CCA. As SELF is a leadership training programme for second-line leaders in the movements, the participants are required to possess understanding on pertinent issues that will be covered in the SELF modules such as ecumenism, globalization, feminism, environment, human rights and Christian theology. SELF will take place in the first week of September in the proposed venue of Sri Lanka.

- 2) General Secretary/ National Coordinators' Meeting (GS/NC) – The SC decided and recommended that the next GS/NC Meeting will take place in Bangkok on the first week of 2007 December.
- 3) Human Rights Programme – The HRSP in 2007 would be a Human Rights Defenders workshop which is scheduled to take place in July 2007 in the Philippines. It will be held in conjunction with the International Solidarity Mission (ISM) which is scheduled a week before the HR workshop. The ISM is a fact-finding mission comprising of several key organisations that work on the HR issue.
- 4) Human Rights Internship Programme – This year's HRIP will focus on the theme MIGRATION to coincide with the overall programme theme of WSCF. This intern will learn about the migration issues from the sending and receiving point of view and aiding the host organisation in its work.
- 5) Human Rights Coordinator – As there is only one application for the position of the Human Rights Coordinator, the SC decided to extend the application till the end of March 2007.
- 6) Regional Women's Programme (RWP) – There will be Women Doing Theology on the theme of Sexuality in November 2007, and 2 RWP-SCM Joint Women's Programme.

National Coordinators' Training and Core Team Meeting 5 – 11 February 2007, Manila, Philippines

9 National Coordinators of EASY Net in countries of Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Japan, Korea, Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and Myanmar participated in this important **National Coordinators' Training** held from 5 to 10 February 2007 in the Philippines. The National Coordinators' Training aimed to assess the 5-year life experience of the National Ecumenical Team building, and provide a venue for the National Coordinators to share their stories and struggles when building the ecumenical network in their respective movements. Additionally, it served to enrich the National Coordinators' understanding of the ecumenical partnership and cooperation in the midst of living in today's realities. Also, the National Coordinators' Training is a time for the National Coordinators to help make plans for the impending Asia-Pacific Students & Youth Gathering (ASYG) in 2008.

For 4 days, the National Coordinators learned on the Foundations and History of Ecumenism, Challenges and Prospect of the Ecumenical Youth Movement, a Panel on Beyond Ecumenism and Interfaith Cooperation with speakers from the Islam, Hindu and Secular communities. The National Coordinators also had a time for National Reporting which they shared on their experiences and struggles in EASY Net work within the respective National EASY Nets. At the end of the Training, the National Coordinators contributed very helpful ideas and perspectives to the EASY Net Core Team as it prepares for the ASYG in 2008.

As the National Coordinators' Training concluded, the **Core Team Meeting** was held for 2 full days. The pertinent issues on the agenda

were the Asia Pacific Students and Youth Writing Workshop (APSYW) and the ASYG 2008.

The Core Team decided that the APSYW should serve as one of the preparations towards ASYG 2008 and hence, the theme needs to embody a wide range of issues pertaining to young people. The APSYW decides to raise the question of "Where are we" amidst the myriad of situation, conflicts, confusion and oppressions that many young people find themselves in. Moreover, this question highlights the role of youth in social transformation and their capacity to rise above their situation and lay their prophetic voice in the fast changing world. The following themes were suggested:

- ⇒ Youth in the Changing World
- ⇒ Youth Mapping Up their Lives in the Changing world
- ⇒ Talitha cum "Rise up my Child"

A concept paper will be followed through and the final theme will then be decided. However, as the budget for 2007 is tight, the Core Team decides that the APSYW will not be a regional programme, instead, it will call on all the National EASY Nets to contribute to the resource book of the APSYW that includes the articles and artwork.

With the ideas and perspectives gleaned from the National Coordinators during the training workshop, the Core Team brainstormed on the ASYG 2008 preparations. The possible hosting countries could be India, Taiwan or Korea, depending on the total budget, funding possibilities, availability of facilities as well as the logistical necessities. This will be decided in July.

WSCF Global Team Meets in Geneva



The WSCF officers and staff met at the Inter-Regional Office of WSCF in Geneva, Switzerland from 8 to 14 February 2007. The seven-day meeting included discussions and sharing of the Federation's programme plan and activities for 2007, visits and meetings with ecumenical partners and groups based in Geneva, worship and bible studies on the theme Migration, training and inputs on topics relevant to the work of the staff.

Highlights of the formal meeting were discussions on the future of the Ecumenical Assistance Programme (EAP) and WSCF relationship with EED, reports and sharing from all the staff, WSCF governance and issues related to staff/personnel led by the officers, plans for the Migration Programme and global programme, the Exco Meeting in June 2007, preparations for the General Assembly in 2008, and the proposed WSCF fund-raising strategy prepared by SCM Canada senior friend and consultant, Robert Brukner.

The group met with WCC General Secretary, Dr. Samuel Kobia, and youth staff, Natalie Maxson, where possibilities of joint efforts and cooperation were discussed to highlight the role of young people in the ecumenical movement in the WCC. A visit and discussion with Bossey Ecumenical Institute Director Fr. Prof. Ioan Sauca was likewise organised, where the group joined the dinner and cultural evening prepared by the students of Bossey Institute. The group also met with staff of the World Alliance of YMCA at the John R. Mott House to compare strategies for movement building and discuss ways for future cooperation in the regional level. A dinner was also organised with members of the Investment Advisory Group (IAG) and newly elected Centennial Fund President, Werner Gebert from Germany to introduce the members of the IAG to the Federation.

The bible studies were led by Thomas Wieser (WSCF historian and archivist) and Boudewyn Sjollem (first director of WCC's Programme to Combat Racism.) The bible studies focused on four thematic areas of Migration, namely; experience of being a stranger (Exodus 12 and Luke 9), hospitality-inclusive community (Leviticus 19, Hebrew 13 and Genesis 18), mobility vs. security (Luke 12 and 14), and vision of the one humanity (Ephesians 2 and Revelation 21). A one and half day session on archives training was led by Martha Lund Smalley, Yale Divinity School Librarian and Curator to assist the staff in organising and dealing with WSCF record and archives currently located in the regional offices.

Another highlight of the meeting was the ecumenical worship celebrating the Universal Day of Prayer for Student (UDPS) at the WCC Center led by the WSCF officers and staff and the youth interns of WCC on 12 February. The worship was attended by staff and personnel of WCC and other ecumenical groups and NGOs in Geneva.

WSCF AP Quarterly

APRIL

16 - 25 WSCF AP visits China in Amity Easter Tour in China
Beijing, China

4th week SCM Timor Leste Women's Programme
Dili, Timor Leste

June

1 - 9 WSCF Executive Officers Meeting
Alexandria, Egypt

18 - 22 Human Rights Workshop
Manila, Philippines

23 - 28 International Youth Solidarity Mission
Manila, Philippines

4th week Australia SCM National Conference
Perth, Australia

July

2nd week KSCF Women's Programme
Manila, Philippines

4th week Women's Pre-Meeting in Summer Seminar of Student YMCA Japan
Tozanso, Japan

SCM Aotearoa National Conference
Aotearoa New Zealand

August WSCF Inter-Regional Programme, "*Migration*"
Mexico