



ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF NATAL SAFE CHURCH PROCESSES AS A RESPONSE TO GBV



COVENANT IS ENTIRELY UBUNTU-SHAPED – WE FIND OUR HUMANITY THROUGH THE HUMANITY OF OTHERS – WE FLOURISH THROUGH PROMOTING THE FLOURISHING OF OTHERS...

ARCHBISHOP THABO CECIL MAKGOBA

In 2019, the Anglican Diocese of Natal joined faith organizations from seven Southern African countries to dialogue on religion and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV) and teenage pregnancies. They co-created three interfaith briefs to serve as discussion papers in their communities. The Diocese of Natal's Gender Ministry was asked to present an overview of their work to date as a case study, which was included in the Brief on GBV.

After sharing the interfaith briefs with members of the Diocese of Natal's Bishop's Chapter, the Gender Ministry opened discussions amongst its members about how to use the briefs to strengthen their work and harness these to support existing programmes which focused on the creation of Safe and Inclusive Churches that are free of gender-based violence (GBV).

The work plans that emerged focused on two key priorities:

- Strengthening the Diocese's involvement with the Safe and Inclusive Church Commission and mobilising its leadership to commit in writing to its core protocols.

- Undertaking diverse activities to break the silence on GBV and its underlying theological drivers and begin to shift the accepted narrative amongst ordinary parish members as well as the leadership.

The Southern Africa Province of the world-wide Anglican Communion was established in 1870. Now named the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, it has grown to 28 dioceses in six countries (Angola, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa) and on the island of St Helena. The church has a diverse membership of approximately 3.5 million people, speaking many languages and representing many cultures and races. The Anglican Prayer Book is currently available in nine of the region's languages and there are about 2,000 ordained clergy ministers in about 1,000 parishes.



There have been various resolutions at a number of Anglican Communion Conferences in which the vulnerable circumstances of women and children were recognised. At the Lambeth Conference in 1988, member churches were asked to make an intentional effort to work toward eliminating abuses affecting women and children¹ and a global research study on the extent of the problem of internal abuse across the Communion led a number of Provinces to introduce Safe Church, with the first Safe Church

conference of the Anglican Communion being hosted by South Africa in 2018.

In February 2019 the Bishops of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa signed a Charter for Safe and Inclusive Church, in which they committed themselves to a Programme of Action to promote a culture of safety and inclusion amongst all its people, organizations, institutions and places of worship, and through ongoing education and training to equip all who minister to prevent the occurrence of abuse and create spaces where justice and restoration can take place.

In 2018 and 2019, a Commission was established that led to a roadshow across the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) to better understand human sexuality in a holistic manner and open conversations about what is required of the Church. As members of the Church shared their stories, it became clear that the issue of safety was a priority across the board, especially in countries where one's sexual orientation could lead to arrest and detention. Cases of paedophilia and other forms of GBV in the church, including in South Africa, forced some introspection and led to the broadening of the brief of Safe Church in Southern Africa to include the concept of inclusivity. This was launched under the name "Safe and Inclusive Church" Commission. It is the only Safe Church Commission that has extended its brief in this way in the world-wide Anglican Church community.

BECOMING LOVING, SAFE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

With greater awareness of GBV developing within the Church, the signing of the Charter for Safe and Inclusive Church became a natural next step. The Archbishop has sent a directive to all bishops to work towards all their ordained clergy signing a personal commitment to the Safe and Inclusive Church Protocols.

The Diocese of Natal Gender Ministry embarked on a signature campaign in 2021, beginning with face-to-face meetings with all clergy. The Charter is to be signed by both lay and ordained leaders rather than parishes, to ensure individual commitment to transformation and inclusivity. Signing of the Charter is being followed up with mandatory police clearances to ensure that every leader working with members of the Church including youth and children has no history of abusive behaviour. This partnership between the Church and the criminal justice system is essential in ensuring that all human rights are upheld and there is consistent application of the law beyond the policies of the Church.

The Charter also empowers the Church to investigate and discipline internal cases of abuse which the criminal justice system could otherwise dismiss for lack of evidence. It also complies with South African law including the Sexual Offences Act and aspects of the Children's Act 38 of 2005.

Of a total of 135 clergy, 103 have thus far signed the Charter and committed to play their part towards the creation of safe and inclusive communities. Through their trainings with the clergy, the Gender Ministry has shown how, while the church would never condone the more obvious violence like rape and murder, we as



"We, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa are people of God.

Recognising that all people embody the spirit of God that needs to be nurtured and brought into the fullness of life. We recognise and acknowledge that our places of worship and learning have for many caused untold pain, hurt and harm, and have left individuals and families deeply scarred... We recognize that a culture of safety and inclusivity needs to be grounded in our theological understanding of who we are as people of God. This understanding informs not only our approach to "being in the world, but not of the world" but also must be manifested in how we "do" Church. We therefore commit ourselves to being a people called to manifest the saving and unconditional love of God. We will promote a culture of safety and inclusion in parishes, church organizations and institutions by theological education and ongoing training to help all ministers prevent the occurrence of abuse. In addition, we commit to boldly confronting the systemic factors which create the context of abuse. We recognize that prevention is better than cure. As such we commit ourselves to taking the necessary steps to create a culture of safety and inclusion..."¹²

leaders are actually unaware of how we condone and normalise abusive behaviours which then lay the foundation for more violence and abuse. The clergy were asked the questions: "To what extent are our teachings laying the foundations and actually making it possible for rape/corrective rape to occur?²³ What is it about the way we do what we do that allows abuse or sets up structures of inequality that make it possible for abuses to occur?"

SHIFTING THE DISCOURSE AMONGST ORDINARY PEOPLE

The Diocesan Gender Ministry has grown from a small body of specialists to a diverse group of women and men from diocesan organizations, parish members, clergy spouses and clergy. It obtains its mandate from listening to what is happening on the ground in people's lives as shared by members of this group. At the same time, the Lay Canon sits on the Diocesan Chapter, a senior advisory body to the Bishop (or Vicar General in his absence) and engages (together with other senior leaders who are members of the Gender Ministry and Chapter) in ongoing advocacy in Chapter processes. The fact that the Lay Canon is an

appointee of the Bishop and sits in Chapter means it works with the Bishop's authority.

The Natal Diocese's Gender Ministry has also made use of modern technology to build a strong team in spite of COVID-19, and break the silence, undertaking the following actions.

- It began in June 2020, when the Lay Canon hosted two online meetings with over 30 clergy and other concerned people after a clergy couple were both murdered in what was purported to be a case of intimate partner violence (IPV) and revenge-killing. This has led to a parishioner-driven Gender Ministry that has engaged in activities as prioritised by its members. The Ministry accounts to the broader Diocesan Council, and also uses that platform to mobilise engagement in its activities and encourage all ACSA members to report abuse and where needed, to support survivors effectively.
- A weekly Men's Bible Study to discuss GBV and other issues was launched on WhatsApp and to date has more than 70 participants (though it meets monthly now) and a bible study group was initiated on Zoom for women clergy.
- It is creating a 6-minute video to break the silence on domestic violence and rape in the Diocese and publicise channels of support for survivors of violence (and also men who recognize that they need help).

The use of multi-media tools with a wide reach, such as the video on social media and the WhatsApp Contextual Bible Studies to discuss issues such rape brings these matters closer to home, which makes it harder to normalize GBV as 'the way the world is'. In addition, the diocesan Gender Ministry is in the process of developing a Computer Application (App) in support of the work of Safe and Inclusive Church across the Province of Southern Africa. The Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD)-based reporting and basic information platform will provide safe free reporting on all cell-phone networks with a call-back function, ultimately across all 28 dioceses. This easily accessible App will also provide guidance to assist in equipping clergy and lay leaders as first responders in cases of GBV incidents.

THE JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES BEGINS WITH A STEP...

Attitudinal and transformative change takes a lot of sustained effort to achieve. Some of the interventions have not received as much buy-in and enthusiasm as anticipated and there has been some resistance from clergy who were uncomfortable with the discussion on issues of sexuality. However, the Gender Ministry steering committee of 12 remains committed, consistent and convinced of the importance and value of the work that they are doing. Taking the patriarchy, gender and GBV conversation away from a blame-game to a structural level has helped to shift attitudes and garner improved engagement from male clergy. There still exists many contradictions between Christian beliefs, culture and traditions which will require further courageous conversations and interrogation to highlight and build on the positive aspects and work through the problematic ones, in the Diocese's efforts to truly become a network of safe, inclusive 'loving communities'.⁴

REFERENCES

1. *Charter for Safe and Inclusive Church*, <https://anglicanchurchsa.org/safe-church-guide/>
2. <https://anglicanchurchsa.org/safe-church-guide/>
3. *Corrective rape, also called curative or homophobic rape, is a hate crime in which one or more people are raped because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity (Wikipedia)*
4. *'Loving Communities' is the slogan that summarises the Mission of the Diocese of Natal since 2017.*

The Anglican Natal Diocese participated in a series of interfaith dialogues on women's rights and gender equality facilitated by the Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano. On that occasion, 12 faith organizations from seven countries in Southern Africa declared, "We can no longer be silent as we are called to uphold human dignity for all creation." Coming from Bahai, Christian, Muslim and Traditionalist faiths, they developed

three Interfaith briefs on sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy. y They also identified opportunities in engaging more effectively within their faith communities. The Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano supported their action plans through micro-grants and technical assistance, contributing to many inspiring results like the ones mentioned in this case study.

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