

INCLUSION, DIGNITY AND JUSTICE IN HUMAN SEXUALITY



**MOBILIZED RELIGIOUS LEADERS
ARE WELL PLACED TO MOBILIZE
FOR COMMUNITY AND NATIONAL
TRANSFORMATION TO PROMOTE
SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTH RIGHTS FOR ALL**

**REVEREND PHUMZILE MABIZELA, EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR, INERELA**

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, SANERELA joined the Interfaith Dialogues on sexual and reproductive health and rights and religion in Southern Africa. SANERELA is the South Africa Network of Religious Leaders Living with or personally affected by HIV and AIDS. SANERELA participated in the development of three interfaith briefs on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV) and teenage pregnancies and engaged in a faith-based campaign to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.

Appreciating the central role of religious leaders in addressing Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), SANERELA held national inter-faith dialogues on human sexuality, gender diversity, inclusion, dignity, and justice in four of South Africa's nine provinces - Kimberley, Mpumalanga, North West and Gauteng. SANERELA's membership is diverse, drawing from African Traditional religion, the Baha'i faith, diverse Christian

denominations, Hindus, Muslims and others. It was established in 2006 and registered as a Non-Profit Organization (NPO) in South Africa in 2007 and was also registered as a Non-Profit Company (NPC) in 2017. SANERELA seeks to empower religious leaders through education, knowledge and skills to live positively, becoming symbols of hope and agents of change who will help eliminate stigma and discrimination within their congregations and communities.



SANERELA is an interfaith network of over 600 religious leaders – lay and ordained, women and men – who are living with or personally affected by HIV. SANERELA empowers its members to use their positions within their faith communities in a way that breaks silence, challenges stigma and provides delivery of evidenced-based HIV prevention, care and treatment services. It embraces a positive approach towards human sexuality. Instead of avoiding the topic of sexuality, SANERELA seeks to promote dialogue on SRHR within faith communities as part of its commitment towards HIV prevention. It is also committed to the promotion of “sexuality competent” faith communities. These are communities that are able to address sexuality in general¹ and enable their members to enjoy SRHR.

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ON SENSITIVE ISSUES, TALK ISN'T CHEAP -- IT TAKES REAL COURAGE TO PRY OPEN TOPICS NAILED SHUT

ARVIN OLASKY

Human sexuality and gender diversity are key components of the discussions on SRHR. This is a contested area of discussion within South African faith communities. There is recognition that different South African faith traditions approach lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) identities differently. However, exclusion, discrimination, and violence prevail. This has contributed to the marginalization of LGBTQI+ people in South Africa, and high levels of violence being perpetrated against them. For example, a survey by the South African rights group Out² found that half of black respondents knew people who had been killed because of their sexual orientation.³

SANERELA has therefore implemented a series of advocacy activities to engage heterosexist religious orthodoxy and practices and challenge religious institutions, through theology from different faiths, to be more accepting of sexual diversity. This campaign comprised three main components. First, SANERELA implemented three interfaith dialogues with 84 faith leaders in Northern Cape, Mpumalanga and North West provinces in the Republic of South Africa. Dialogues with religious leaders helped to create safe and inclusive faith spaces for LGBTQI+ communities.



The inter-faith dialogue space sought to reflect on the current programming practices on human sexuality and gender diversity. These reflections brought together religious leaders, civil society organizations, LGBTQI+ pastors and other key stakeholders. Discussions focused on current programme strategies, identified gaps and proposed new ways of building safe church communities that are inclusive and recognise the inherent dignity and worth of

all people, particularly the LGBTQI+ communities. The approach recognises the human dignity of all persons and views humanity as one body. Sacred scriptures were used to discuss marginalisation through Contextual Bible Studies. The shared stories of lived experiences helped to breathe life into otherwise far-removed sexuality issues.

Second, it broadcasted a one-hour show on human dignity and LGBTQI+ people with Reverend Nokuthula Dhladhla and Bishop Nhlapo on Radio Teemaneng. This community radio stations reaches about 100,000 listeners across the Northern Cape Province. Third, it included an advocacy meeting with the Senior Management of the Galeshewe Police Station including the Station Commander and Community Policing Forum members from two clusters in Kimberley to discuss GBV.

SANERELA used FOCCISA's and Global Interfaith Network's tools and materials including the One Body Material from FOCCISA, 'Hearts Set on Pilgrimage' and the Sodom and Gomorra material

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AS RELIGIOUS LEADERS WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO BRING ABOUT POSITIVE CHANGE AND BE AGENTS OF HOPE. WE MUST STOP USING RELIGION AS A TOOL OF OPPRESSION AND USE IT AS A MEANS OF GRACE AND TRANSFORMATION WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES

**REVEREND NOKUTHULA DHLADHLA,
SANERELA**

created by Soul Force.

This campaign resulted in significant outcomes:

- Discussions have deepened tolerance, acceptance and behavioural change amongst religious leaders towards members of the LGBTQI+ community. Some religious leaders have gone so far as to create safe spaces in their own churches for LGBTQI+ persons. Some examples include the Word of God Church and the Church of God of Prophecy, both independent churches in Soweto, Johannesburg in South Africa as well as the Holy Life Ministry in Swanieville, also in Johannesburg.
- Religious leaders have gained greater awareness of how scriptures and sacred texts can be used more inclusively.



TOWARDS A LISTENING AND ACTION-ORIENTATED FUTURE

The COVID-19 lockdown was a major challenge as it curtailed the reach of the programme. Furthermore, the issue of LGBTQI+ is divisive and needs to be handled with a lot of sensitivity. However, religious leaders are learning to read scripture through lenses of justice, mercy and compassion and are now better placed to lead in social transformation. More dialogues need to be held especially in the rural parts of South Africa and more religious leaders need to be trained on issues of gender and sexuality.

Participants have observed more mindful attitudes in whether interpretations of scripture are destroying or honouring God's creation.

- Positive conversations amongst religious leaders and LGBTQI+ people have enabled all parties to listen and journey together.
- Many participating places of worship are now being used to spread a message of love rather than hate.

SANERELA participated in a series of interfaith dialogues on women's rights and gender equality facilitated by Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano. On that occasion, 12 faith organizations from seven countries in Southern African countries 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. 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 the inspiring results documented in this case study.

CONTACT US

South African Network of Religious Leaders Living With or Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS (SANERELA+)

Cnr Rabie and 4th Avenue North, Fontainebleau, Randburg, 2032

Tel: +27 11 792 7029

Fax: +27 11 792 6533

Website: www.inerela.org

Faith to Action Network

Peter Munene

Email: petermunene@faithtoactionnetwork.org

Mobile: +254 722 443 306

Website: faithtoactionnetwork.org

ACT Ubumbano

Zanele Makombe

Email: zanele@actubumbano.org

Mobile: +27 71 575 9336

Website: www.actubumbano.org

ACT UBUMBANO

