

**SENATE OF SERAMPORE COLLEGE**  
**Seminar On Religion, Gender and Human Sexuality**  
**Theme: Nurturing Together the Growth of an Inclusive Community in**  
**Theological Education**  
**Date: August 27-31, 2024, Venue: Senate of Serampore College**  
**Report of the Seminar**

**Rationale of the Seminar**

Gender and human sexuality affect everyone and are thus a core human rights and justice issue. LGBTIQ+ is a profound dimension of exclusion and marginalization in communities. Therefore, there is a need to reorient theological educators on gender and sexuality to embrace gender justice as a core value in theological formation. Eventually, this theological reorientation on gender and human sexuality will reorient curriculum content and teaching processes.

Realizing that theological education can play a key role in convening critical conversations and building an inclusive community, the Senate organized this seminar for theological educators on religion, gender, and human sexuality. The theme was “**Nurturing Together the Growth of an Inclusive Community in Theological Education,**” which is adopted from FTEAP theme. This is the second time the Senate organized for theological faculty from August 27-31, 2024, at Serampore. We express our deep gratitude to FTEAP for funding this important program, and FTEAP has also been a pillar of strong support in this journey. As mentioned, this is the second year that FTEAP granted the fund to organize this programme and the Senate of Serampore College is indebted to FTEAP for financial support.



**Participants**

Thirty-four participants – faculty from selected colleges and seminaries, officers of the Senate, and resource persons – attended the seminar to properly understand the intersectionality of religion, gender, and human sexuality and to conscientize the teachers on LGBTQIA+. The following is a comprehensive report of the Seminar proceedings:

### **August 28, 2024 (Day 1)**

The seminar began with the morning devotion led by Dr. Kiheigumle Ntang, faculty of New Theological College (NTC), Dehradun. She reflected on Luke 4:18-19, on the Nazareth Manifesto of Jesus, where she stressed the psycho-social well-being and healing that is inclusive, wholistic, and transformational, which we must embrace to nurture the inclusiveness in theological education.

Then, the Registrar, Limatula Longkumer, comprehensively introduced the seminar and its objectives, followed by introducing the resource persons and participants' self-introductions. The Registrar stressed that through this seminar, we can learn, unlearn, relearn, and shake our traditional understanding of human sexuality. Dr. Longkumer highlighted the critical role of theological colleges and seminaries in embracing gender justice as a fundamental tenet of theological education where teachers can play a crucial role.

**Presentation 1:** The first session was on the biblical perspective, which was very thought-provoking and critical. Dr. Rosy Zoramthangi Ralte, Assistant Professor at Aizawl Theological College, presented a paper on “Biblical Interpretation on Gender Identity and Human Sexuality,” and Rev. Dr. J. John Vijaya Raj, faculty from Concordia Theological Seminary, Nagercoil, moderated the session. Dr. Rosy pointed out the abuse of biblical texts by interpreting from the hetero-normative perspective, and she cautioned to have gender sensitivity while reading the Bible. Based on the original Hebrew text, the word “Adam,” is a non-binary, non-patriarchal, non-gendered, ‘first-human’ who is an androgynous, genderless, sexless, unique, and undivided being in Genesis 1:26. Contemporary Christians rendering of “Adam” as a ‘male’ is ascribed to modern western Christian biased reading. She called for a non-gendered, de-patriarchal, non-rigid interpretation of God so that the Bible does not become a licensed transgressor for LGBTQI+. Dr. Rosy called for the celebration and acceptance of human sexuality and refrained from detesting the otherness of the other.

**Presentation 2:** Shreosi Ray, Senior Program Officer, SAPHO for Equality, Kolkata, shared on the topic, “Lived Realities of Self and Engaging with the Lives of LGBTQI+,” and Dr. Moakumla Longkumer, faculty from Allahabad Biblical Seminary, Allahabad, moderated the session. This session was a very touching and moving one as Ray shared the lived realities of the LGBTQIA+ people, their plights, struggles, exploitations, discriminations, and stigmatization due to heterosexual cultures and normativity. Ray further clarified various aspects of sexual orientations with three short video clips, homosexuality, intersex, queer, transgender, bi-sexual and asexual. Ray called for inclusivity, acceptance, equality, and equity by critically analyzing binary social structure based on binary division of heteronormativity, misogyny, sexism, hegemonic masculinity, and various shades of patriarchy that perpetrate in schools, colleges, and offices.

**Presentation 3:** The third session was led by Bishop Geevarghese Mar Coorilos on the topic, “Human Sexuality and Theology – Some Reflections,” and Dr. Tsuknungrenla, faculty from Clark Theological College, Mokokchung, moderated the session. Bp. Coorilos pointed out that human sexuality and sex have to do with the human body, but this body is the centre of discriminations. It is the sacredness of the body, the totality of being, and the capacity for relationships unaffected by power. Apophatic tradition, which in the Hindu religious tradition is expressed as *neti-neti* (not this-not that) form, is taken as an approach to express the being, the *ontos*, and *ousia* of God. This

is incomprehensible to the human intellect, for which none can claim exclusive knowledge of what God is and is not. The Bishop warned of the shallowness of being moralistic in deciding right and wrong. Furthermore, the concept of Trinity, which is equal, community-oriented, and sharing (Genesis 18:1-2), in addition to reiterating James Nelson's idea of the divine as androgynous serves as an epistemology to derive the notion of human sexuality. Human sexuality is theological anthropology, human God-talk, of humans created in the Image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), a non-discriminatory text. It is *en route* (evolving) and eschatological towards a body theology that is crucified, resurrected, and in the process of realization. Bishop concluded that the idea of sex-sexuality-gender is a continuum, and discussion involving human sexuality must meticulously study the intersectionality of caste, class, gender, religion, politics, etc.

**Presentation 4:** Dr. Chenijan Patton, Assistant Professor, Serampore College, presented “Body Theology: Narrative on Human Sexuality and Gender Justice,” and the session was moderated by Dr. Saliba Kollannur, faculty from MSOTS, Ernakulam. He questioned the sexual normativity of heterosexuality, the binary of men-women, and pseudo-sexuality. He pointed out that the binary division of sexuality derives from the dualism of body and soul, material and spiritual, male and female based on Cartesian dualism. Dr. Patton's body theology eulogizes Rudolf Otto's understanding of *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans* relating to the human body, which is holy, mysterious, awe-inspiring, and wholly other. This entails a body of God theology grounded in the Image of God calling for humanization and theology of gender justice beyond the normative confine of procreation.

#### **August 29, 2024**

The second day started with the morning devotion led by Rev. Dr. K. Lalchhuanawma, faculty from Aizawl Theological College, Mizoram. He based his reflection on Galatians 3:24, which calls on Christians to oneness in Christ irrespective of race, class, sex and gender.

**Presentation 5:** Following the devotion, Ms. Mary Chang led the first session on the topic “Bridging Gender Sensitivity in Cultures,” and Rev. Nebu K. Varghese, faculty from VJVP, Faridabad, moderated the session. Chang stressed the social construct of gender and the need to bridge the gaps of exclusivism by deconstructing and reconstructing. She pointed out that hetero-cultural normativity is a dominating force that excludes the “other” diverse sexuality. A group discussion followed based on her presentation. The groups' discussions affirmed that respecting diverse human sexuality beyond the constraints of the male-female binary, gender sensitivity must start from home, schools, and the church. The groups affirmed that “Human Sexuality and Inclusive Community” courses should be compulsory in BD studies.

**Presentation 6:** This fascinating session clarified many misconceptions about diverse human sexuality. Dr. Ranjita Biswas, Consultant Psychiatrist, spoke on the topic, “Understanding the Physiological and Psychological Aspects of Diverse Human Sexuality.” Dr. Otoka, faculty from Witter Theological College, Wokha., moderated the session. Dr. Biswas observed that sex-gender-sexuality is non-linear and non-heterogeneous due to its diverse and evolving understanding. She argued that sex is not gender, and gender and sexuality are not the same. Sex is biological that which is appended in the birth certificate by observing external genitalia (penis or clitoris), but also internal (ovary or testes), reproductive (testosterone or estrogen of male and female

hormones), and among others. But sex and sexuality are diverse and complicated, and it goes beyond external genitalia that we need to understand from physiological and medical perspectives.

**Presentation 7:** This session specifically focused on the church and ethical concerns. Ms. Glory Yasudass, faculty from Karnataka Theological College, Mangalore, moderated the session. Rev. David Blessington's presented the paper on "Ecclesial and Ethical Challenges for Building Inclusive Community." David stressed that the Church, as ecclesia, the people of God, is an inclusive community amidst the challenges posed by hetero-patriarchalism and hetero-normativity. The so-called sacred spaces are more exclusive for people of diverse sexual orientations. Blessington reiterated J. Moltmann's idea of the eschatological and messianic fellowship of freedom and a free society of equals. He acknowledged Susannah Cornwall's sexchatology as both now and future, not utopian *telos*. The search for an inclusive community is a mandate given to the Church to reach out, exemplified in the work of Pope Francis blessing same-sex couples. He called on queer hermeneutics that is queer-friendly using liberating hermeneutics and praxis of change.

**Presentation 8:** Finally, this session focused on theological education. Rev. Dr. Swarup Bar, a Professor at Bishop's College, Kolkata, presented a paper on "The Role of Theological Education on Gender and Human Sexuality," and Dr. Pranay Bin Hayal, faculty from Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur moderated the session. Dr. Bar appealed for a perspectival change in shaping and re-shaping the theological worldviews of human sexuality that have been neglected thus far. There is a big gap between theological academia and Church practice regarding the human sexuality issue. He underlined the necessity of transitioning from an interdisciplinary approach to an intersectional approach, thereby addressing multiple layers of class, caste, gender, patriarchy, class, etc., or networks of oppressive structures. In this venture, he also focused on lay education and non-formal and grassroots theological education.

### **Review of the Seminar**

Day 2 ended with a review of the seminar by pondering on these questions for discussion:

#### **1. What are the ways and suggestions to overcome challenges and obstacles of teaching gender and human sexuality in theological colleges/seminaries?**

**Group 1:** Suggested overcoming the challenges and obstacles of teaching gender and human sexuality by expressing the need to conscientize the importance of learning human sexuality, avoid prejudice or bias, encourage open conversation, train theological educators on this subject, call for a more comprehensive understanding of this subject and its intersectionality, and also make the course compulsory in BD studies.

#### **2. Suggest ways and means to integrate gender and human sexuality into the theological curriculum**

**Group 2:** Suggested syllabus revision according to the changing contexts; incorporating human sexuality as a required paper and field exposure; and multi-disciplinary approach from medical, psychological, social, legal, and lived experiences.

### **3. Suggestions for the churches to become an inclusive community**

Group 3: Re-reading the Bible contextually to deconstruct males' hegemony and sexual bias. Suggested churches to organize informal fellowships and youth fellowships, conduct awareness programs, and develop skills and engage in social engagement within the community. Also, inclusive creative worship should be inculcated, which provides space and opportunity for themes such as lived community within the Church circle.

The review of the seminar concluded with assurance from the Registrar that these suggestions and observations would be looked into and attempts would be made to incorporate human sexuality as a mandatory subject in BD studies.

#### **August 30, 2024 (DAY 3)**

On day 3, the participants embarked on a field visit to **SAPPHO for Equality, Kolkata**, to learn from the practical realities of the diverse LGBTQIA+ community. **SAPPHO for Equality Center** was established in 1992 as a temporary shelter for skill development and livelihood that caters to the needs of diverse sexual orientations. The interactive learning called the "Human Library" approach was adopted. The participants were divided into four groups and listened to the stories of the inmates. Most of the people sheltering in the Centre are either driven out of their homes by their parents or run away because of physical torture and stigmas at home due to coming out openly about their sexual orientations. The participants were moved, touched, and empathized with them by the painful life experiences shared by the LGBTQIA+ people. It was indeed a transforming moment for the participants.

After the interaction session, the Registrar reflected on the profoundness of visiting SAPPHO as a human library of lived experiences. Following this, personal experiences about the seminar were shared, after which the program officially ended.

We thank all the resource persons and faculty from the affiliated Colleges for their active participation. We express our thankfulness to FTEAP for financial support and accompaniment, without which we would not have conducted this important program. A special thank you to Dr. Pamhor Thumra, faculty from Allahabad Bible Seminary, for meticulously recording all the proceedings of the seminar.

Limatula Longkumer, Registrar