

Report on the Secondment of the Project Officer on Human Dignity and Reproductive Health at the World Council of Churches (WCC)

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Secondment Overview

As Project Officer on Human Dignity and Reproductive Health, the purpose of my role is to create and implement a framework through which the WCC can address issues related to reproductive health.¹

Summary of September 6 — Present

- **Orientation:** Since starting on September 6, I have had orientation meetings with key internal departments including HR and Communications. I meet weekly with my supervisor, Dr. Manoj Kurian, to discuss the context and shape of the project further. I have worked to understand the WCC's history and operations by reading through the exhaustive resources available on the WCC website. I am also in touch with the WCC archivist, researching the WCC's existing literature in the areas of human sexuality and reproductive health. WCC materials on these subjects are limited and primarily focused on HIV reduction and prevention, and so I am also reading through other international organizations' SRHR resources. As I read, I am compiling a live bibliography of existing reproductive health materials and programs in religious contexts for my reference and also to eventually curate a public WCC resource library.
- **Partnerships and Networking:** I will report to and work with the WCC's recently formed Commission on Health and Healing, which will meet as a commission for the first time at the end of October 2023. I am currently working with my supervisor to develop an additional, external reference group consisting of theologians, medical professionals, and public health professionals with relevant expertise. To that end, I have joined the WHO Faith Network and now attend their monthly meetings to foster deeper collaboration with other religious institutions working in public health.
- **Staff Planning Days:** On October 1-8, I attended the WCC's Staff Planning Days (SPD) in Geneva, Switzerland. The week was beneficial in a number of ways. Each day, staff from core WCC departments and projects gave a report on their latest achievements and goals for the upcoming year. Every morning started with a Bible Study, led by select staff members, and there were ample sessions for staff community-building. For myself, attending SPD in-person provided a crucial opportunity to network and meet colleagues. Outside of staff meetings, I met one-on-one with select colleagues to learn about their responsibilities and gain a better

¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) defines reproductive health as a "state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes." These matters include, for example, eradicating obstetric fistula, increasing access to menstrual products and appropriate facilities while menstruating, and providing adequate information regarding the reproductive system and processes to young people.

sense of whose work will be most relevant to this project.² It was an opportunity to understand workplace dynamics and staff culture. During SPD, I also participated in the spiritual life of the organization and helped to lead Morning Prayer.

Potential Project Challenges

- Given the stigma surrounding reproductive health issues in most contexts, one foremost challenge I see will be to convince some member churches of the relevance of this work to the WCC's values and of its unique importance in the scope of other issues. I feel challenged to be clear, precise and simple about the project's goal of centering human dignity in the context of reproductive health in order to mitigate confusion and fear.
- The WCC is in a season of great transition. Significant changes are happening within its activities, in staff structure, in finances, and in their physical office space (the WCC is preparing to move to a newer, smaller office location during the Spring of 2024). Many colleagues are busy learning to adapt to such transitions and have warned me that given my remote location, it will be difficult to garner colleague's attention and collaboration, at least in the coming months.

Project Relevance

*Sex Education*³ is a British show which explores issues related to sexuality and reproductive health. In its latest season, the show depicts God as a black woman who calls one of the queer characters to pastoral ministry. Since its release in late September, the latest season has received over 13 million views. The popularity of shows like *Sex Education* demonstrates the desire from this generation to engage issues of sexual and reproductive health in meaningful, dignifying ways. Many churches and religious institutions have already created programs which uplift theologies and practices addressing these difficult issues. The WCC is well-positioned to make these resources more accessible. Of course, the goals of reproductive health in the global context are not limited to comprehensive sexual health education. Reproductive health at the level of the WCC is intersectional and contextual; it is about addressing both gender and racial inequality, as reproductive health issues primarily affect women in the global south.⁴ For Christians in wealthy countries like the U.S., addressing reproductive health issues is a form of gender and racial reparations. It is a form of *repairing* past injustice inflicted upon women by patriarchal Christian regimes. For the WCC to partner with Week of Compassion through this secondment represents an important step for both groups' futures and a necessary change for God's justice to manifest in the world. I look forward to bringing more structure and clarity to this project as the year unfolds.

² Positions held by these colleagues include: Program Executive for Human Rights and Disarmament, Program Advisor of WCC-UNICEF Partnership, Interim Program Executive for Youth Engagement, Program Executive for Peace Building, Program Executive for Just Community of Men and Women. I also held informal conversations with other colleagues, such as the Program Executive for Overcoming Racism, and the program Director for the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism who are likely to be helpful partners

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/article/best-tv-shows-netflix.html>

⁴ In 2020, "almost 800 women died everyday due to preventable causes related to childbirth and pregnancy." 95% of these deaths occur in low income countries. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/maternal-mortality>