



## New Shared Action (NSA)

The Cevaa officers, meeting in Lomé (Togo) in January 2014, asked the Executive Secretary in charge of the Activities Pole to gather a team of competent persons so that this text on the theme: *“Families, Gospel and Cultures in a changing world”*, could become a tool to be used by the member Churches. This group worked together from 22 to 27 September in Douala, Cameroon.

The mission of the working group was to:

- propose operational ideas that can be used in the different Cevaa Churches or regions
- produce material (Activities) that the member Churches can use to work on the subject
- make the content of this text usable in a practical way in the various member Churches
- present the result of this work to the upcoming Cevaa General Assembly in Senegal.

Following the work done in Douala, the group produced:

1. Three skits
2. *Theological Empowerment*, biblical and information worksheets
3. Modules for handling certain themes
4. A questionnaire for the Churches
5. The annexes

# I THE THREE SKITS

## SKIT 1 The birth certificate

**TEXT:** Luke 2:1-14

**Personages:** **Joseph:** the father; **Mary:** the mother; **Jesus:** the son; **Obed:** the civil officer.

**Objective:** have families and Churches think about how they treat women and girls who are excluded or marginalized in the Church (single mothers)

**Speaker or Introduction or Mulangwedi:** the storyteller

The story of Jesus' birth is quite fascinating. Being born in such conditions for a KING, who is also the Saviour of the world. Mary for whom this is the first child accepts carrying a child whose father she doesn't know, even though she is already engaged to be married. Joseph her fiancé, a carpenter, is not able to build a cradle for his child. God lets it happen. If this story happened now, how would Christians react? What would they have thought of Mary, this "single mother" who is impregnated by another man while she is engaged? Imagine Joseph in front of the Civil Officer to declare the birth of a child for whom he is not the natural father.

**Joseph:** Hello Sir, my name is Joseph, I am here to declare a birth.

Name of the Child: Jesus

Name of the Mother: Mary

Name of the Father: God

**Obed:** And you, Sir, what is your relationship to the child?

**Joseph:** I am his father.

**Obed :** Oh, really? How so?

**Joseph:** Well I was engaged to his mother, then she was impregnated by God.

**Obed:** So why are you the one making the declaration?

**Joseph:** It is a bit difficult to understand. His papa does not live here.

**Obed:** Where is he?

**Joseph:** Well ... that is what I am trying to explain to you: he is in Heaven.

**Obed:** Are you serious?

**Joseph:** Yes, Sir.

**Obed:** In that case, either the father himself comes or the child is declared up there, in heaven.

**Joseph:** That is not possible, sir.

**Obed:** And why not?

**Joseph:** The papa cannot just move around like that.

**Obed:** Look, I would like to understand you, but put yourself in my place. You tell me that you are engaged to a woman, she becomes pregnant due to someone else who doesn't live here, and you are the one declaring the child's birth. I don't get it. How did she get pregnant if the other one is in heaven? If he could come here to impregnate your fiancée, he can also come and declare the child. This all seems fraudulent to me, sir. Are you from here?

**Joseph:** Yes, I am a Judean like David, the king.

**Obed:** So what does he have to do with this?

**Joseph:** The child is in his lineage.

**Obed:** So he has another papa? Or does this mean God is from the same country?

**Joseph:** Yes, that's it.

**Obed:** Then can you give me an address?

**Joseph:** I am from here, but when I arrived for the census, I didn't find any trace of my family. I must also tell you that the child was born in a stable.

**Obed:** Sir, I think that is enough. Come back tomorrow; I will talk about all this with my superior, he will tell you what you need to do.

**Joseph:** Please, sir, I am being serious.

**Obed:** I am too, come back early tomorrow.

**Joseph:** We must leave very early tomorrow.

**Obed:** So you don't live here?

**Joseph:** No, we came for the census.

**Obed:** Then it is simple; you will get a birth certificate from the place where you reside

### **Questions proposed for a discussion about skit 1: The birth certificate**

- 1-If Mary was a member of your community, how would you treat her?
- 2-What do your Church documents say concerning single mothers?
- 3-Is the treatment for single fathers the same as that for single mothers?
- 4-Practically, how does your community manage exclusions and inclusions?

## **SKIT 2: Those who are not like us**

This skit wants first of all to point out the conflicts faced by couples coming from different religions, and then, attitudes held concerning homosexuals. Also make it understood that loving homosexuals does not automatically signify support of homosexuality. The aim sought for in this skit is to encourage discussion on questions in society relative to the family, (intergenerational transmission of faith, parent / child relations, divorce, questions about homosexuality, etc.). It also brings up the problem of tolerance, of acceptance of others and of charity.

**Objectives:** Exchange our viewpoints on questions in society that we wonder about and that concern us. Discover how to positively manage these conflicts that come up in our families and weaken them.

**Personages:** **Mulangwedi:** the storyteller; **Eboa:** the papa; **Iyo:** the mama; **Mbappe:** the son; **Edimo:** the friend.

### **Scene 1**

**Mulangwedi** (the storyteller): Dear ancestors, forgive me for bothering you in your sleep. I don't know what to do, because I am overwhelmed by events... In your time period, we lived in a world where the gods of our clan could be consulted; in our village, spirits of the ancestors immediately exercised justice when a taboo was transgressed... The only one who could conquer was he who was in the right, as we were reminded by the Grand Royalty of Ambiguous Adventure<sup>1</sup>... Unfortunately, that is no longer the case... We no longer have any reference values, we are totally disoriented, our world is collapsing, especially in the very foundations of our families. The weakening of the conjugal tie in couples leads to painful human and material consequences in our society. In your time period, we all had the same tradition and the same beliefs; today we are experimenting with religious and cultural cohabitation, and in certain cases, even within the same family. The proliferation of new Churches and new religious movements leads to divisions within our families. Parent /child relations are leading to more and more conflicts. What can be done to confront these phenomena which for some time have become genuine problems?

We live in a world where everything is changing. We live, it seems, in a globalized world... Travel and the movements of people have created new universes with meeting between and profusion of many cultures. This great planetary village, in which we now live, imposes new attitudes as illustrated by what happened in **Eboa's** family. Listen, ancestors, or rather, look...

### **Scene 2**

**Iyo:** What is this house in which Jesus' name has become a real toothbrush? Through the door, through the windows, someone is shouting Jesus' name in the morning, at noon, in the evening Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.....

We should let this man rest a while; he also needs to sleep to regain his strength.

**Eboa:** Who taught you that God sleeps? Don't you know that God neither slumbers nor sleeps? God is omnipresent, omniscient. Read my Bible instead of reading your half-verses in

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<sup>1</sup> Cheik Hamidou KANE: *L'aventure ambiguë*, Editions Julliard, Paris 1961.

one of your brochures from the “Jehovah Witnesses”. Here! That is why all our problems in this house are because of you.

**Iyo:** On the contrary, you are the problem ever since you joined the revival Churches that shout Jesus’ name, in the streets and everywhere, in order to disturb our neighbours’ sleep, and even God’s. Peace has been lost in this house, forever.

**Eboa:** And you then? What good is your activism? You walk around everywhere, but what have you already changed? You say that you are witnesses ... of whom? Have you already seen him? We are the ones who live out the Gospel, the true one.

**Iyo:** With so much brutality? How sad! How strange!

**Eboa:** Oh, madam who talks without stopping! I want to talk to you about our son’s baptism and you are going in every direction. Could you stop for a second and listen to me?

**Iyo:** Excuse me? What, what mister the shouter, whose baptism? My son will be baptized after having mastered the word of God. That depends on his capacity of assimilation of the teaching that is given. In our church, we are in no hurry to baptize; one must first master the word. It is after that that he will be taken to the kingdom pool for baptism. Was water sprinkled on Jesus’ head? True baptism is to accept Jehovah and live for Jehovah.

**Eboa:** What? Who is this Jehovah? I’m talking to you about Jesus and you answer me with Jehovah? Ok, since you want to “go over my head”, we will initiate this child according to the custom.

**Iyo:** Which custom? Mine or yours? Do you think that I am going to let my child go eat the fetishes that you use in your initiation? Ah no, never.

**Eboa:** Good god, I don’t understand this woman! You don’t want a baptism according to the Gospel, or an initiation according to the tradition, but what do you really want? So let’s baptize him according to the Gospel and give him the chance to choose his own beliefs later.

**Iyo:** What? Never, do you hear me! I say: Never, because that is contrary to the teachings of Jehovah.

### Scene 3

**Eboa:** I have had it! I don’t want to hear anything more about Jehovah here! Since you are the one who wants to dictate the law to me, I decide that this child will be initiated in the tradition and that will be done on his grandfather’s tomb.

**Iyo, surprised:** What? On what? No, no! Under these conditions, I’m going back to my parents’ home

**Eboa:** Unbelievable! I thought that this was our house; since you want to leave it, I will leave as well. *He runs after her, his suitcases in his hands.*

**Mulangwedi** (the storyteller): My dear ancestors, *Tete a buki mba na jinda la minya, nde mba pe na buki mo jene la mambo*: our parents' age gives them wisdom and authority, but today's children are steeped in knowledge thanks to travel...

Time went by, the child, a young student, is open to the world. He studies in great universities, discovers new technologies that he uses. He talks about everything, he discusses with others of his generation. He goes to see other cultures, he travels and meets people. He has answers, he is steeped in experience. One day, he returns: cries of joy, tears of reunion; emotions are high; a new life will begin....

#### Scene 4

**Iyo**: *returning from a meeting of the Jehovah's Witnesses ... A young man carrying his suitcases calls out to her. Turning around, she sees her son: Welcome Mbappe. She sits with her son. While she is looking at him joyfully, an effeminate young man named Edimo will enter.*

**Mbappe**: Hi, Edimo

**Edimo**: Hi, Mbappe. *The two boys embrace each other*

**Iyo**: *She goes out, leaving the two boys. A little later she comes back to her son who is still in the company of his friend.*

**Mbappe**: Mama, I want to introduce someone to you

**Iyo**: Yes, my son! Who is this boy?  
*Mbappe asks his friend to leave.*

**Mbappe**: My friend, mama, and I love him.

**Iyo**: I don't like this boy, he is bizarre.

**Mbappe**: What do you mean, mama! I am telling you that this is someone that I love a lot.

**Iyo**: What? "I love him", what does that mean? A boy who loves another boy?

**Mbappe**: Mama, don't bother me with your ancient stories. Today, the world is open; one must be positive and open-minded.

**IYO**: Open to the world by accepting that my son has as a friend a boy that resembles a woman? Is that what you call being positive?

**Mbappe**: Mama, are you deaf or what? Listen to what I'm saying mama, I am announcing that I love this boy with a real love and we are soon going to get married.

**Iyo**: What? What did you just say? What do you want me to become? And in the neighbourhood? In my community? Everyone's laughingstock?  
*The father comes in as the mama collapses*

**Eboa**: *Surprised, he asks what is going on.*

**Mbappe:** I don't know; it is your wife who doesn't want to understand me!

**Iyo:** Your son here announced to me that he is going to get married with a boy that he loves. Ah! What a scandal! Abomination! What will become of me? Everyone around me will be pointing their finger at me. It is better to die than to live and see this kind of thing.

**Eboa:** Calm down IYO, calm down, I beg of you, because nothing is lost, there are always solutions that can be found.

**Iyo:** This is too awful, what solutions do you think you can invent?

**Eboa:** Don't be negative; life is made up of differences! Remember that the word of God teaches us to not judge. Remember, Iyo, that the difference in cultures constitutes the foundation of life in the world. Accept others as they are and life around you will be easier to handle. It is not because someone displays different behaviours from ours that it is automatically negative – Look at your son and his friend Edimo, they experience a love that we describe as being unnatural; is it a passing phenomena or were they created like this? I don't know; but I think that first of all it is necessary to accept them as they are, understand them, respect them and try to have dialogue, permanent discussions.

Even if for us, their love is a sin, does the Gospel not command us to let the weeds and the good grain grow together? It will be up to the harvesters to make a separation at the time of the harvest. No matter what we think of them, our son is and remains a member of the family.

## Scene 5

**Mulangwedi, the storyteller:** All of these new things unsettle us. What is there to do? My dear ancestors, please don't be angry with me, but I am going to paraphrase their holy book called the Bible which says to let the good grain and the weeds grow together...I think that wisdom commands us to not exclude others because they are different or they have behaviours that we see as perverse or unnatural.

### Questions proposed for discussion about skit 2: "Those who are not like us"

1-Do you know any mixed couples among your acquaintances (inter-confessional, interreligious, etc.)? What do you think of such unions?

2- What do you think are the advantages and inconveniences of such unions?

3- Are there homosexuals in your country, in your professional surroundings, in your Church and in your family? If there are, what is your attitude toward these persons?

4- What is your Church's position, nationally and locally, concerning these persons? Do you approve this position, why, why not?

5-Does being a Christian keep our families from having conflicts? If not, which conflicts are the most frequent ones you see among your acquaintances? In your Church are there structures, tools to help in mediation in order to have peaceful management of these conflicts?

6-According to several sociological studies, intergenerational conflicts are common. How do you see this in your environment (country, professional context, community and family)? Do

you have access to means for managing them? If not, what do you propose for handling them in a positive way?

### SKIT 3 Skull worship: culture (traditional) and the Gospel

The majority of Christians today think that culture and the gospel are compatible. The Bible gives several examples that testify to the fact that the Word of God takes the context of the person receiving it into account. If, for example, we look at the mystery of the incarnation, it can be affirmed that “God became a Jew to speak to the Jews”. To other peoples as well, God must identify with them through elements in their context in order to speak to them. The word of God must be available to them, thus the necessity of taking each one’s culture into account. However, the question being asked and which up to now has no answer, is that of knowing how far to go in taking the culture or the context into account?

**Objective:** This skit has one principal objective: encourage discussion and reflection in order to discern which elements of *each person’s* culture can be compatible with the Gospel and which ones are not! In other words, which elements of our culture can communicate the Gospel and which are the ones that need the light of the Gospel?

**Personages:** **Kamga:** the father; **Magnie:** the mother; **Ma’ro:** Kamga’s mother, **Tagne** and **Kamdem:** the children; the visitor

**Scenario:** Kamga, Magnie and the children (Tagne, Kamdem) are a family. Kamga, the father, is attached to his tradition while Magnie, the mother, does not give it much importance. Under the orders of Ma’ro, his mother, Kamga must go to the village with his family for the skull ceremony to conform to the tradition. Magnie is firmly opposed, because for her these are diabolical practices.

**Scene 1:** Kamga is on the telephone with his mother. She tells him the date of the rites for his father’s skull.

**Kamga, picks up the telephone that doesn’t stop ringing:** Hello, hello, yes hello, ah! Mama, is it you? I’m listening, *after a short time*, ooooooh! Already? All right, I will arrange my schedule. *Another short time of listening.* No, mama, I cannot come with my whole family. My wife will not accept that, you know her. Her principles, we can’t change them. Especially since this rite takes place on a Sunday. I will come by myself. *A short time of listening.* Fine, fine! Ok I will try to convince her.

*He hangs up the telephone and talks to himself.* Magnie is very difficult, what is to be done? In any case, in our patriarchal society it is the head of the family who decides.

**Scene 2:** Kamga and his wife Magnie

**Kamga:** Come here, Sweetheart, I have something very important to tell you, sit here. *After having complimented her on her hair style, he attacks the problem:* Since my papa died, it has been raining on his skull and this is not good.

**Magnie:** What does that mean, it is raining on his skull?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is a traditional rite among the bamiléké in Cameroon. After the head of the family is buried, he must take his appropriate place among his ancestors, that is, in the family’s “house of skulls”, where those of his ancestors are already located. Thus, he will be “sheltered from the heat and the rain”. This means exhuming just the skull, leaving the body in the tomb.

**Kamga:** We must go to his tomb to remove his skull and place it in the house of skulls, otherwise we will be cursed. I even think that malediction is already following us because our first son has been trying to get his diploma for four years, without success. And recently you were the victim of a traffic accident. Those signs are precursors of a malediction if we do not carry out these rites.

**Magnie:** Malediction, benediction, everything that ends in “-tion”, I want no part of! I am not going anywhere and my children even less so!

**Kamga:** At any rate, you have been informed. Next Sunday everyone goes to the village for these rites. I say so.

**Magnie:** We are not going anywhere, and furthermore the Church does not accept such practices.

**Kamga:** So you’re talking about the Church, we’ll just say I’m not a member of this Church. And in addition, no text of the Church forbids this practice.

**Magnie:** That’s true! The bylaws and constitution of the Church do not mention this practice. But I say that we are not going anywhere.

*Days have gone by and Magnie has not changed her opinion. Finally Kamga goes to the village by himself. After the rites, he comes back home and there is so much tension that they are heading toward a divorce. One day, a visitor arrives and talks with the children while the parents are absent.*

### **Scene 3:** The visitor and the children, Kamdem and Tagne

**The visitor:** Hello Kamdem, hello Tagne. How are you?

**Kamdem:** I cannot say that we are doing well, uncle.

**The visitor:** Tell me if there is a worry.

**Tagne:** Uncle, it isn’t us. It’s papa and mama. They are going to divorce because mama refused to participate in the skull ceremony organized by our paternal grandmother.

After talking with the children, the visitor decides to wait for the two parents. He succeeds in organizing a meeting in which each one can express what they think.

### **Scene 4:** The visitor and Kamga, the father, and his wife, Magnie

**Magnie:** As for me, I have no problem with my husband. I simply said that I would not go to the village for the skull rites for his father. I reproach my husband for being involved in these traditional practices when the Church is not agreed with them.

**Kamga:** My wife thinks that she knows God better than everyone and can refuse for no good reason a ceremony that my whole family organized.

**The visitor:** Ok. Magnie, in this story you are wrong for not having known how to explain your reasons to your husband in order to convince him. You acted like everything that comes

from our cultures has no value and merits no reflection. And you, Kamga, don't you know that the book of Deut. 18:10-11 forbids this: *“let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead”*?

**Kamga:** But precisely, I didn't do any of what is said in this verse!!! I think that my wife and you have not really understood the real sense of this rite! Am I going to consult my father? I am just going to unearth his skull and nothing more! Furthermore the Bible that you quote is the same one that I read. In the book of Genesis 50:1-13, it says that 40 days after the death of Jacob, Joseph and his brothers went back to Canaan to bury their father following his instructions. Before dying, my father asked us to unearth his skull and place it in the house of skulls where those of his ancestors are located. In addition, I only unearth the skull, while Jacob's children carried their father's whole body after he was embalmed. Who is respecting the Bible more than the other?

**The visitor:** Kamga, what do you believe? At the resurrection, your father will come out without his head and it will be your fault. Listen, I'm not saying that we shouldn't respect his final wishes. But do try to be realistic.

**Kamga:** Exactly! It is because I am realistic that I must do this rite in order to avoid maledictions on us.

**The visitor:** You don't have to worry. Ecclesiastes 9:5 says that *“the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward and even the memory of them is forgotten.”* Your father no longer has any power over you. When someone is dead, he no longer has any power. The power of protection is found in the one who is living. Why do you still want to make sacrifices? – after you have unearthed your father's skull, then you will have to buy the goat and the chicken that will be killed. You will be asked to drink this blood and to anoint your whole body with it in order to have some kind of protection – even though Christ did that for us once for all.

**Kamga:** You are right, that is ridiculous. I think that I did it by imitation without trying to understand what it meant. However, I must point out that the Gospel doesn't just sweep the culture away but enlightens it. At the same time, it is important to me. I am only a link in the chain between generations and I cannot take it on myself to break the link that unites my children to their ancestors.

**The visitor:** My brother Kamga, it is good that you learn to discern among our traditions those that are in agreement with the way that you have chosen, that of the Church, the body of Christ. And you my dear Magnie, learn to explain the merits of your positions in order to convince your husband. My dear friends, you are too wonderful a couple to hear you talking about divorce. Every time that problem about traditions come up, I advise you to step back, to analyze and pray in order to have the necessary understanding before deciding together. Then, together you can decide on the position to take, case by case, concerning cultural questions.

**Magnie:** Thank you for your advice. I understand that there certainly are cultural aspects that I often rejected for no reason. My husband must often even make authoritative decisions, knowing that I am often stubborn and don't want to understand. Darling, forgive me and I promise that I will tell you what is behind my thinking on questions of traditions. I will also listen to you, so we can reassure each other that our practices will not offend God.

**Kamga**, *turning toward the visitor*: Thank you, brother. I understand what you are saying. I am convinced that the Gospel should enlighten my culture and that there are things in my culture that are not compatible with the Gospel. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to discern them. That does not mean that my culture is necessarily opposed to the Gospel. *Turning toward his wife*: Darling, forgive me. It is dumb that we got angry over this. In principle these things should not be able to destabilize us. From now on, I will try to understand better before getting involved in certain rites.

**Questions proposed for discussion on skit 3: The skull worship: Culture (traditional) and the Gospel**

- 1-Do you know mixed couples among your acquaintances (inter-confessional, interreligious, etc.)? What do you think of such unions?
- 2- What do you think are the advantages and inconveniences of such unions?
- 3- Does being a Christian keep our families from having conflicts? If not, which conflicts are the most frequent ones you see among your acquaintances? In your Church are there structures, tools to help in mediation in order to have peaceful management of these conflicts?
- 4-How do you reconcile your Christian faith and your cultural tradition?
- 5-Do you participate in the traditional rites and ceremonies of your family, clan, tribe or ethnic group?
- 6-What do you think of the cultural traditions of those around you (in the family, the couple, the community, the country)?
- 7-Does your cultural tradition include expressions, stories, proverbs, counts, legends that ridicule, downgrade or valorise those of others?

# I. Worksheets of Activities that are Theological, biblical, and informative

## **Theological Empowerment sheet: Jesus also had a family and a culture**

### **Introduction**

Why do we give so much importance to the family and to the couple in the Church? This is a real question. As it turns out, we can easily have divergent conceptions of God, of Jesus Christ, and of salvation without excommunicating each other, but then say that we are ready to leave a Church if it decides, for example, to bless the union of homosexual couples, or of couples that did not have a wedding following the local custom.... This situation leads us to raise these questions here among us, in the framework of a multicultural community, the Cevaa.

Of course, in this framework, our conceptions of the family, the couple, marriage, because they are marked by our cultures, will be very diverse. The goal is certainly not to try to harmonise them, but rather to articulate each of them in light of the biblical text. It is this diversity which leads us to take a position different from those of natural and creational theologies which hold that there is only one concept of the family chosen by the creator. *“Universality cannot be expressed through unity of morals. Natural Law risks masking under a false objectivity the pretention of a particular culture to impose its views on all the others”* writes E. Fuchs

We will look at the vision that the Gospel has of the family using 3 texts: **1/** The first page of the New Testament which, right from the start, shows Jesus as part of a family, **2/** the text in Mark 3 which shows us that Jesus widens our conceptions of the family and **3/** that of Mark 10 where Jesus introduces significant changes in relation to the Old Testament.

### **Matthew 1:1-17**

*Groups of 15 or 20 persons maximum (otherwise form small groups for discussion of the questions being asked).*

*Length is variable depending on the activity. It could be one long session or two shorter sessions. If the leader chooses to have everyone talk, it can last much longer since, when they are talking about their family situation, the participants could have much to say!*

*1 - The leader tells or has some tell some stories of family dysfunction: betrayal, stories about inheritance, marriages that were problematic.*

It is important for the leader to point out that the Gospel does not start by describing the socio-political or religious context of the country that would welcome the Christ, but by the story of a family: a genealogy.

*The leaders can ask the participants to talk about this remark by telling why they think it was done in this way.*

*2 - Have the text read out loud by one of the participants. During the reading, each one chooses a personage whose story he knows somewhat. Then, in taking turns, each one tells what he knows of the life of his personage (You can go around the circle twice if the group is small). In this way you should be able to see easily that Jesus' family was far from morally perfect...*

*3 - You can then, together, look for, note and discuss the "engenderings" in the genealogy that are outside of social or biological norms. For example:*

- *Abraham marries his half-sister Sarah, they need to have God change their names and give them back to each other through Abimelek (My Father King) in order to be able to engender*
- *Jacob, Rachel and Judah*
- *Judah, Tamar and Perez*
- *Boaz, Ruth (descendent of Lot) and Obed (somewhat as was the case with her ancestor Lot, Ruth made Boaz drunk so he would give her a child).*
- *David and Beth Sheba*
- *Zerubbabel: Zerubbabel is one of those people for whom we are not sure who is really his father. Biologically he is the son of someone named Pedaiah. But he is almost always called the son of Shealtiel who was really his uncle. Along with many other ancestors of Christ, Zerubbabel thus shows us a Messiah whose inscription in a human genealogy is not necessarily biological. The real paternity is not always the one you think it is...*
- *Of course, Mary and Joseph...Finally, their experience is somewhat similar to that of certain members of Joseph's genealogy...*

*The leader ends this part by asking the following question: "do we know of similar cases in our families"?*

*4 - You can continue the same exercise with the descendents of David that were unfaithful or anonymous: For the author, there is no shame in having morally questionable people in one's genealogy (one can find kings such as Ahaz) along with many who are anonymous, those "people of no importance".*

*How can we make room in our families for those who have "messed up their life" or for those who reject our values, our faith?*

*5 – The leader calls the participants' attention to the fact that the number of names in the genealogy is not correct. There is one fewer than what is said in the text. There is an empty space.... There is a hole. What do we put in there? Get the group to talk about this open space. Are there also "holes", secrets, in our family histories?*

*6 – What lessons can we learn after studying this text, for ourselves, our family, our Church and our society today?*

### **Mark 3/31-35: “my mother and my brothers are....”**

*Activity meant to show our diverse circles of belonging. For example, you can draw circles on a piece of paper (family that lives under my roof, family in a wider sense, colleagues at work, ethnic group, village (or street), Church, nation...) in noting specifically what I do in one circle or another. The results can be grouped together on a writing board.*

**Objective sought:** *Help the participants understand that having several areas of belonging is obvious and cannot be denied. The problem arises when someone concentrates the essential part of their activities in only one of these circles – especially, as in our present concern, the biological family– and then neglecting all the others.*

**Present the subject:** The leader introduces the activity by remarking that Jesus was part of a family, but he doesn't want this family to close in on itself. For him, the family is not the ultimate reality. He came to open our families to a much larger dimension: the family of God's children.

#### **First step**

*Underline and discuss the unbalance that this can provoke.*

Questions to discuss:

- *To what extent do we question our conceptions of the family in the name of the Gospel?*
- *Which natural solidarities should be put into question in favour of other, wider forms of solidarity?*
- *Can we apply this text to ethnic, national, denominational solidarities?*

#### **Second step**

- *How can we, within the Cevaa Community, practically live out our diverse memberships, without having them be in conflict with each other?*

### **Mark 10:7-9 and Gen 2:24: Let man not separate what God has joined**

The question of divorce for Christians remains a quite sensitive subject. In several Churches, divorce is formally forbidden. The divorced man (or woman) is purely and simply excommunicated. Some couples are thus required to live together even when, on both the physical and affective levels, there is no longer any tie between them. Some women (and sometimes men, as well) suffer conjugal violence; when they confide in their pastor, he has them believe that this is a test that God is giving them. In other Churches, this question is avoided, the Church taking no action against divorcés, even though the rules of discipline prescribe exclusion. Still other Churches do not have, in their rules of discipline, measures of exclusion for situations of divorce.

This activity also takes up the question of the supposed superiority of the man (male) over the woman (female). The subject of couples without children is also mentioned.

**Objective sought:** The objective sought for in this activity is to bring the participants to not be attached to the letter of the word of God, but rather to its spirit, which cannot encourage the

physical or moral suffering of a human being. Help them understand that even Jesus accepted divorce under certain conditions.

### **First step**

*Read the texts read by the Civil Officer during a marriage in your country and discuss their differences from the text in Genesis, often read in churches at the time of a marriage.*

### **Second step**

*Compare the texts of Genesis and Mark*

*“A man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” Gen 2:24 and “A man (human) will leave his father and his mother [and be united to his wife]<sup>3</sup> and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate.” Mark 10:7-9.*

*Make a table with two columns with the two texts across from each other so that the differences are visible.*

The first difference between these two texts introduces an important notion, which is equality between the man and the woman. Where Genesis affirms: a man will leave his father and his mother, Jesus says the human (anthropos) will leave his father and his mother. Some manuscripts as well as some translators have recopied the whole text that is in Genesis perhaps thinking that Mark made a mistake when quoting the text; they put back in the words “and be united to his wife” which no longer mean anything since we are talking about humans and not about the male. This distance from the parents which means leaving childhood and adolescence in order to construct one’s own life with someone else is no longer reserved only for the man but for the two of them equally. Before, the woman went directly from domination of her parents to that of her husband. With Jesus, she is called to the same liberty as the man.

Jesus also adds a phrase to Genesis: “So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate”. The first part of the phrase insists on the profound unity of the couple. The second was certainly added by Jesus to avoid having women repudiated too easily by their husbands. But, since then, this text has been turned into a law forbidding divorce...

### **Questions to discuss in a group**

*(If the group is larger than 15 persons, sub-groups can be formed)*

*How do we live, or how do we want to live, the principles brought out in the text in Mark through the differences that Jesus introduced in relation to the text in Genesis: movement toward man-woman equality in the couple and limits put on divorce? Here it is also possible to handle the question of remarriage for divorced persons.<sup>4</sup>*

*How, in addition, can we interpret the fact that Jesus says nothing about procreation (even though in Genesis God says: “Be fruitful, multiply...” 1:28)?*

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3 - the words in brackets are absent from some New Testament manuscripts.

4 Of course, other biblical texts can be used here, such as 1 Cor 7:3-4

Jesus assumed the right to establish a partial rupture with his tradition, even though it was biblical. He does not reject his culture, but, because of the Gospel, brings modifications to it. Like him, we don't need to completely reject our traditional conceptions of marriage and the family nor our legal texts, but we can be asking questions about elements that we would like to modify in our customs and our texts.

*Imagine that you are members of parliament mandated to modify the text read by the Civil Officer. What would you change? Do this in groups. Sharing the results on a board will allow for discussion.*

### **To go even further,**

Of course, this biblical study can be completed with numerous other texts. It is only a small beginning, a small grain to let germinate....

## **Theological Empowerment worksheet: Families in a changing world**

### **Objectives:**

- Make it understood that the notion of family and its structure evolve, in the Bible as well as in society.
- Help communities understand that mutations in families are not necessarily negatives; they can become opportunities.

**Material:** Large sheets of paper or paperboard; sheets of paper and pens, the Bible. Also prepare photographs or symbols representing the family in various contexts. Collect information about other forms of families (polyandry, polygamy...)

**Introduce the theme:** *in sub-groups of three to five persons*

1. How do you define the concept "family"?
2. Are there many models for the family, and if so, what are they? (mention the various family models that you know)
3. How many persons make up your family?
4. What is the purpose of the family or what is its role?

### *Sharing*

### *In plenary*

The document prepared by the Cevaa Council defines the family in this way: *"nuclear cell of society, the family is a legal institution that regroups persons united by ties of marriage, bloodlines, adoption and eventually due to a pact. In Africa, the family is a community of persons who are related. As Christians, for us the family is also a divine institution whose basis is Mankind (male and female) called to multiply (Gn. 1:26-28) or simply to live together (Gn. 2:18-23). The term "family" can also indicate a group of persons having the same ideal*

*or working toward the same objectives. It is in this sense that the community of believers can be referred to, for example (Lk. 6, 12-16; 8, 19-21).”<sup>5</sup>*

- Are you satisfied with this definition? Why?
- What would you add to or take away from this definition?

***Understand the theme:***      *Introduction in plenary and work in sub-groups*

For Christians who depend on the texts of Genesis 1: 27-28; 2:18-24 and certain other texts in the NT, the ideal family is Christian; some even talk about the “holy family”. However, some researchers affirm that there is a myth surrounding the notion “Christian family”.<sup>6</sup>

1. What do you think of this affirmation?
2. Are there texts in the Bible that confirm or contradict this assertion? If so, mention them.
3. Compare the various texts and say what you think (one can also propose certain texts that present the polygamist and monogamist family in order to show how the notion of family has evolved).
4. Do you think that homosexuality is a form of the family desired by God? Why?
5. What do you think of peoples who practice polygamy or polyandry?
6. Do you think that persons who live alone (without a spouse or children) are a family? Yes? No? Why?
7. What attitudes do your Churches have toward children born outside of marriage?
8. In Jesus’ genealogy (Mt. 1:1-17), we find women who are foreigners and who have led an immoral life, but they are Jesus’ relations. What commentaries does that inspire you to make?

***Study the theme more deeply:***

Read the different biblical texts that make up the “family codes”: Eph 5:21-6, 9; Col. 3:18-4, 1; 1Tim. 2:8-15; Tt 2:1-10.

1. What do you think of the division of roles in the family by the apostle Paul?
2. Are there specific roles for each member of the family in your culture? Is this division similar to what is said in the above “family codes”?
3. Can our present society apply these “family codes” without difficulty? Why?
4. We experience family realities of great diversity depending on each one’s cultural context but also great mobility due to rapid mutations, more or less imposed. In your opinion, what is the influence of globalization on the family?

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<sup>5</sup> Proposal of the “Working Group on the new Shared Action”.

<sup>6</sup> For Michel Serres in a recent issue of the magazine “Esprit”, the holy family does not exist. He affirms that for almost 10 centuries, Christianity saw nothing sacred or holy in marriage.

5. How can we compare our experiences, our ideas and our conceptions about the family respecting the extreme diversity of the realities that we are facing, all while trying to discern what the Gospel wants to question?

## **Theological Empowerment Worksheet: the Gospel in a changing world**

### ***Objectives:***

- Help them understand that interpretation of the Gospel can be controversial, thus the necessity of realizing that the Word of God precedes, transcends and goes beyond the Scriptures that testify of it.
- Understand why there are different interpretations of the biblical text and why the biblical text itself is sometimes different from one book to another.
- Help them see that a plurality of readings or interpretations of Scripture is not necessarily something negative, but can be a source of mutual enrichment.

***Material:*** Large sheets of paper or paperboard; sheets of paper and pens, different versions of the Bible, including Roman Catholic Bibles and ones from the Greek and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches (if possible), in any case provide photocopies of the different canons of Christian Bibles.

***Introduce the theme:*** *In plenary and then in sub-groups of three to five persons*

- For you, what is the “Gospel” and where is it found? In other words, is the Gospel found only in the NT?
- Do the Scriptures contradict each other? Tell why. (each one reflects individually, then shares his/her reflection with the others in the sub-group)

***Understand the theme:*** *Introduction in plenary and work in sub-groups*

In the traditional Bible (Protestant Bible), there are a total of 39 books that are the same for Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox. However, Catholics add some supplements to them (the books of Esther and Daniel and 7 books called “deuterocanonic” or “apocryphal”), leading to a total of 46 books. There are still other additions in the biblical canons of the Orthodox Churches. In addition, the sequence or classification of the books varies from one canon to another.

1. Why do you think that the number of books varies from one Bible to another?
2. Why do you think that the classification of the books varies from one Bible to another?
3. Read the biblical texts that talk about the following themes:
  - The signification of the Sabbath (Ex. 20:11; Dt. 5:15)
  - Marriage with foreigners is forbidden, and yet several servants of God (and not minor ones) married foreigners without receiving a reproach from God (Ex.

34:15-16; Neh. 13:26; Rut. 1:16; also note the marriage of Abraham and Keturah (Gn. 25) of Moses with Sephora; Joseph and Asnath, etc.)

- The relationship between faith and works (Ja. 2:14-26)
- Women's place in the Bible

What do you note? How do you understand the various texts and how do you explain these differences?

***Study the theme more deeply:***

Religious divergence has often been, throughout history, at the origin of conflicts causing the death of believers at the hand of other believers, defending their conception of faithfulness to God. As we are reminded by a Cameroonian philosopher and theologian, to “fail the faith” *in the past was the height of apostasy, which meant going from a Roman confession to any Protestant denomination. Movement in the opposite direction, in the eyes of the opposing party, was the abomination of desolation (...) The resulting inculcated faithfulness was of a military nature. It was based on the demonization of the other one, the certainty of possessing the truth, edgy in an infantile manner about a body of axioms and sentences, about the taboo that forbade examining the principles and goals underlying the actions of the party that one serves, and their general consequences*”.<sup>7</sup>

With these words, Eboussi reminds us that not very long ago, Catholic and Protestant Christians, in the name of faithfulness to their God, fought each other, massacred and mutually excluded each other, each accusing the other of not being a true believer. Today, in the ecumenical era, most Christians – but not all – accept each other. It must also be mentioned here that in a certain period, Jews were massacred and discriminated against by Christians. Some even said that Jews had been rejected by God in favour of Christians who have become the “new chosen people”. Today, fortunately, all of that is over, Christians and Jews accept each other mutually.

1. What do you think led to this change of attitudes?
2. Why do you think that Christians can fight each other in the name of the same Gospel that they say they preach?
3. Relations between Jews and Christians are no longer the same as they were in the past. Do you think that relations between Christians and Muslims, for example, could change someday? Why? How?
4. In your particular context, what difficulties do you face concerning interpretation of the Scriptures?
5. The Gospel is announced with great diversity depending on the context. How can we respect other ways of reading or interpretation of the Gospel, even when we do not share them?

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<sup>7</sup> EBOUSSI BOULAGA, Fabien : *A Contretemps. L'enjeu de Dieu en Afrique*. Paris, Karthala, 1991, pp.15-16.

6. How can we reconcile theological approaches that are divergent within a community of action and sharing like the Cevaa?

## **Theological Empowerment Worksheet: Culture in a changing world**

### ***Objectives:***

- Make it understood that culture is not static. Every culture evolves.
- Make it understood that all cultures have values and defects.

***Material:*** Large sheets of paper or paperboard; sheets of paper and pens, the Bible.

***Introduce the theme:***            *In sub-groups of three to five persons*

The document prepared by the Cevaa Council defines culture in this way: « Culture is all of the customs that characterize a people. According to UNESCO, culture is “*all of the distinctive traits, spiritual and material, intellectual and affective, that characterize a society or a social group. It includes, in addition to arts and letters, ways of life, fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.*” In other words, culture is a system of beliefs and customs edified on a base of implicit postulates that people build up concerning themselves, the world around them and the ultimate realities that constitute their identity. In this sense, culture fashions and communicates the Gospel; it engenders other values as a function of time and space.”<sup>8</sup>

1. Are you satisfied with this definition? Why?
2. How would you, personally, define the concept of “culture”?
3. In your opinion, what is culture for?
4. Do all cultures have the same value? Yes? No? Why?
5. Are Culture and the Gospel compatible? Yes? No? Why, in your opinion?

***Understand the theme:***        *Introduction in plenary and work in sub-groups*

Since every human society has its particular identity, how can the Gospel be received in a particular culture without losing its substance?

If it is true that a diversity of cultures exist in the world, can it also be said that a diversity of “cultures” exist within:

- a family?
- a religion, denomination or local community?

If the answer is positive, what can be done to arrive at a peaceful cohabitation of “cultures” within a family, a religion, a denomination or a local community?

### ***Study the theme more deeply:***

Ignored or asked in the wrong way for a long time, the subject of cultural research in the Church, which regroups differing Christian families, is now seen as a pressing imperative.

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<sup>8</sup> Proposal of the “Working Group on the new Shared Action”.

In your opinion, how can these families be brought to live together?

Carry out a two-step exercise:

**1<sup>st</sup> step:** With the help of a survey within your community (at the national, regional or local level), describe the actual state of your community, using the tool “wheel of development” (attached to this document).

- Note the aspects or domains in your community that function well
- Also note those that do not function as you would like them to.

**2<sup>nd</sup> step:** Tell what you are going to do concretely in order to correct the aspects or domains that are weak.

## **Theological Empowerment Worksheet: Family and violence**

**Objective:** Re-centre reflection on the signification of the notion of family, as desired by the Creator from the beginning of creation.

### **1 The situation**

Evil, committed by the first humans (Adam and Eve), follows us and little by little takes us farther away from God’s will. Because most people no longer have a fear of God. Today some decide to lead a life of disorder, without God, or to just worship him with their lips, without conviction. Truth has become very rare in our societies. This leads to the dysfunction that we see in certain homes. Violence in all forms has become common in families.

*After noting the situation, the leader asks the following question: What can be done to remediate this situation?*

Just like Nicodemus, we need a new birth, regeneration. We need to hang on tightly to a new source, Jesus-Christ. Since we live in the flesh and its works dominate us, God’s Spirit pulled back and sin has not ceased to multiply. Some Christians have thus lost their identity and very few of them regret having offended God. This situation is the result of this disobedience of the first Adam. But the new Adam, Jesus, opened a new path. From our side, we need to straighten the slope with the aim of preparing a future generation that will be more attentive to the rules set by the Creator. We need to come back to the source: God.

### **2 What is the new vision of a humanity that seeks the face of God?**

In our time, God wants new worshipers whose hearts will be cleaned of all filth. Worshipers who accept each other, in spite of cultural differences, in order to worship God in spirit and in truth.

#### **➤ What does God say about the family?**

*The leader has someone read the texts in Gn. 1: 27 – 28 and Gen. 2: 24*

*After the reading, the leader asks the participants to give examples that illustrate some dysfunctions seen in families today.*

Some people have gone away from God's order by inventing new dispositions: free love, unfaithfulness, divorce, homosexuality and all forms of individual wilfulness that have ruined families and homes.

*The leader asks the group about the link between dysfunction of the family, divorces and family-related violence that we see (Violence against and abuse of children and women: sexual, bodily). Discussion.....*

*In groups, note the problems faced by Christians today in the area of education of children.*

*In plenary all the most important aspects will be shared with the goal of, together, finding approaches and solutions for life and joy in the family.*

### ➤ **The Christian family**

A Christian family is a family in which the two parents truly belong to the Lord. It is more than a simple, helpful refuge against evil. There, genuine love is experienced.

*After all this, the leader again starts the discussion by asking this question:*

- Does a genuine Christian home exist in our time?

*The leader lets participants react by sharing their experiences on this subject.*

*Then he uses these examples:*

Bethany, the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus (John 11).

The home of Aquila and Priscilla where meetings of Christians are organized for a local assembly (Acts 18).

*After these texts are read, the leader asks this question: What constitutes the basis of a Christian family?*

Ideally, Christian homes should be open homes where it is possible for those who don't know the Gospel to discover it. They should be places where sin is banished, where pardon is experienced and where everyone lives out humility. It is here that the Lord is given the place that he should have and all the members of the family work together according to God's will, where love is known and poured into hearts. It is also here that the Word of God is read and put into practice. This is where the atmosphere of heaven is breathed. Such homes receive "heavenly light" (Ex. 10: 23).

### ➤ **Marriage**

An institution planned by God (Genesis 1: 27-28; 2: 24).

God gave man a helper who corresponds to him (Gn. 3: 12; Pr. 18: 22; 19: 14).

*What must we do to live out these principles described in Genesis?*

Ideas of answers:

- Marry in the Lord or receive a blessing on the marriage.
- In light of all that is happening today, we have the right to wonder if we are willing to live as God commands.
- In the couple (man and woman) there is a wealth that should be revalorized. Each member of the couple must return to the source, the Gospel.

➤ **And when problems arise?**

God's will is to have among his people true worshipers who come from families that avoid violence in any form and yet, in many families, violence exists.

*Are you familiar with cases of violence in families? (for example, use news articles in trying to cover all kinds of violence: conjugal violence, violence against children, genital mutilations, forced marriages, sexual abuse, corporal punishments.....)*

*What can be done to solve these?*

Ideas of answers:

- ✓ Don't get away from the Scriptures;
- ✓ Keep God's commands (see Proverbs 6 :20-23);
- ✓ Remain attached to the solid trunk, Jesus, while accepting others in their diversity
- ✓ Seek to apply the fundamental rule of the creator's law which is love.

*Ask the group about violence generated by the various relationships that one can have with one's culture (rapport with traditional religions...etc.). In order to do this, suggest some cases of possible tensions in a family due to opposite approaches to these questions. Why does that often lead to violent conflicts?*

*Then, the leader proposes reading Galatians 3: 28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all **one** in Jesus-Christ".*

*Question to discuss: what does it mean to be Jewish, Greek (thus, different)... and "one" at the same time? How do we combine the diversity of our cultures and unity in Christ?*

*Does that mean that we need to abandon our original culture in order to be Christians?*

*Let the group discuss*

Some elements to help come up with answers:

As Christians, even if we have been called and chosen out of the world, we continue to live in the world, thus, among different persons who have various cultures. Sometimes, some Christians are sandwiched (taken hostage) between their ethnic culture and their Christian

faith. First of all, it is important to understand that as those born again, our main reference is now the Gospel: “if someone is in Christ, he is a new creature. The former things are passed away; behold, all things have become new” (see 2 Cor 5: 17). This implies that from now on it is the Word of God that determines our life. Our identity as Christians transcends our cultures without denying them. Before being Americans, Cameroonians, French or Beninese, we are Christians.

What determines our identity as men and women before God is this new life not our culture, but this new life does not, however, take us out of our culture (“they are not of the world... I do not ask you to take them out of the world but to protect them from the Evil one”, John 17/14-15) The Word will become our reference point in life and relations with our traditions can be experienced in a new way.

### **Biblical worksheet: the lost child    Luke 15:11-32**

Today, some families face the problem of children who leave their families to live on the streets. They are known as “street children”. Sometimes, some of these children decide to return to rejoin their families.

In this case, many questions come up:

1. Is the family ready to welcome such a child who decides to return home after having passed much time on the streets?
2. Are they ready to reintegrate the child into the family, without revenge?
3. What is the Church’s role in working with street children in order to bring them back to a peaceful life and again benefit from their rights as a family member?
4. How can the cultural differences and abuses resulting from the place where they were living be managed?
5. How can this Bible study help us to:
  - Bring back into families (nuclear or Church) children who have revolted against their families?
  - Prevent such cases in our family?

This pericope is a text that can lead to reflection; the goal is not to learn all possible lessons from it, but to apply it to the context of families that can experience the case of children who revolt against their families or, simply, to avoid such cases from happening. This can be done through a Bible study that we are proposing.

### **Outline of the Bible study**

1. Song + prayer+ reading the indicated passage
2. Reading is done silently first of all, then out loud
3. Mime the scene in groups of 10 persons for 10 minutes
4. Share ideas:
  - a. Who are the main personages in this story?
  - b. List the bad things that this child did.
  - c. What did he remember that could lighten his blame or let him be forgiven?

- d. List the different things the parent did after learning his son had returned
- e. What was the older son's reaction when he returned to the house?
- f. In all of this, for what reasons should this parent be congratulated?
- g. What does this teach you about the family?
- h. What does this teach you about our Christianity?
- i. Closing prayer

### **Biblical worksheet: Concerning marriage, the Gospel according to Paul 1 Corinthians 7** Bible study

In the first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul handles several concrete questions: Christians going to law courts, abstaining from foods, etc. and also marriage. It was the Corinthians themselves who had written to him on this subject (7:1). Unfortunately we do not have the formulation of their questions. We must be satisfied with the apostle's answers.

*In order to imagine the Corinthians' situation and the differences and proximities with ours, a group activity could be, before reading the text, to ask each participant to take the time to examine himself in order to bring out questions he asks about his own marriage or that of those close to him. Then, in a second step, without forcing anyone, those who would like to share some questions, certitudes or perplexities, can do so.*

*Then, these current concerns are set aside in order to read 1 Co 7 out loud. Everyone tries to put themselves in an attitude of receptivity, as though hearing the text for the first time. In this way, one doesn't just hang onto what one knows or believes, but can be surprised, upset, or comforted.*

#### **Who is speaking?**

In no other text so much as in this one does Paul go to the trouble of specifying in whose name he is speaking. All at once, his answers have a different status. You can start by going through the whole text and noting these precisions (it is good, it is better; I exhort, not me but the Lord; I say, me, and not the Lord; this is my judgment, but I think I have the Spirit of God; this is an opinion and not a command, etc.).

*These observations can help start a discussion: when Paul takes the responsibility of advancing something in his own name is it, because of experience or conviction, that he is sure of what he is saying? Or is it because he himself is trying to understand more clearly something for which he does not have a direct affirmation from the Lord? He thus remains in his rightful place, conscious of the risk he is taking in saying something.*

#### **A translation?**

Can we see the apostle Paul as a translator? He who competed with his brothers in faithfulness to the Jewish tradition of his fathers was stopped in his tracks through the pure choice of God. This is how he describes it in the epistle to the Galatians (1:10-23). God revealed his Son through him. God revealed himself in his Son, in the intimacy of his person. With only one goal: that he would proclaim the Gospel among the nations. A leap then, from the most singular to the most universal, from the deepest interiority within a human being ("there is neither Jew nor Greek"..., Ga 3:28) to the widest horizon (the world).

Here, Paul translates the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean, for the communities in cities of the Mediterranean basin where the Greco-roman culture covered over ethnic particularities. So, he must do pioneer work. In the page of 1 Co 7, we see him doing the work of reflection, theological and pastoral construction.

*From this, the question can be asked: how can we envisage our faithfulness to what the apostle says? By using his responses and applying them in our cultural contexts, which would aim at faithfulness to the content of his speech? Or by making the same effort of theological*

*construction in light of our current situation? In this case, faithfulness to the very act of translation. Or perhaps, can the two be combined?*

For each category of persons (married couples, single people and widows, separated spouses, spouses of non-believers, father of a young woman, or her fiancé), Paul expresses an opinion or gives an exhortation. These must be observed with attention in order to perceive the finesse of his pastoral attention.

*How, in each case, does he understand the relationship between a man and a woman? Submission? Equality? Reciprocity? etc. And how is this relationship clarified by the link between God and his human creature?*

### **The value of a person**

But, in order to really dig into this examination of the text, it is important to remember the value each person has in God's eyes. Paul was careful to point this out in the verses that come just before this chapter (6:12-20). There he talks about the body (*sôma*, in Greek), the word is used eight times: thus he insists on it. Can one establish a correct relationship if one despises the value of the body, one's own and that of others? The body, differently from the flesh which is dust and returns to dust, represents the person.

For Paul, and he is probably opposing the Corinthian customs on this point, human love and sexuality are not like the path of food in the stomach; they do not just involve an organ. The whole person is involved. Since every human being has an inestimable price in God's eyes, the power of God over that person increases his/her value even more.

*How does the text describe this value? (body reserved for the resurrection, member of Christ, temple of the Spirit...).*

From this perspective, one can understand the affirmation of the proverbial wisdom in the first phrase, inscribed as overriding the whole passage (v. 12): "everything is permissible for me but not everything is beneficial; everything is permissible for me but I will not be mastered by anything".

This first declaration from Paul asks the essential question: *How to experience genuine liberty? Perhaps it would be good to re-read all of 1 Co 7 with this question open in our thinking and in our heart. How to remain free, without making this freedom an idol and without become enslaved to it, even unconsciously? How can this be translated into our traditions?*

Thus, for the woman, leaving to her husband the responsibility of authorizing her to exist (v. 4), and in the same way, the husband to his wife, is that not protecting each one against the risk of becoming a slave to him or herself, or to an image of oneself? The risk of trying to become the more powerful one is thus in reality undone by this Paulinian exhortation.

*You can try to find in the text how the apostle goes about putting each one back into his/her correct place (look especially at v. 5-7; v. 16; v. 36, etc.). And apply it to our current cultural ways of living.*

Apparently, it is Paul's constant concern that human beings occupy and assume their just position. He summarized this in the epistle to the Romans (1:25): sin, fundamentally, is to worship the creature in the place of the creator. We then observe a passage, at the heart of 1 Co 7, where Paul fundamentally works at preventing this error. Furthermore, in this he is thinking of each individual and is not longer talking about particular categories. We see this in v. 17-24. Eight times he repeats the term "call" (Greek root *klê*, as in the word ecclesiastic); we already saw it in v. 15, thus 9 times, in addition, a tenth one with the term "churches", literally "convoked communities" (v. 17). Just as elsewhere in this passage Paul takes into account circumstances and individual cases, here he brings out the deep singularity of any member of the Churches. He descends right to the root of the faith and becomes quite radical. His whole exhortation thus expresses a tension maintained between the effort to adapt the

Gospel to the most diverse human conditions and a reminder of the absoluteness of this Gospel, its exteriority in relation to us. Any human faithfulness is thus guarded from the temptation to occupy the place of origin or of ultimate meaning. It cannot auto-justify.

*How then to live today, within our own cultures, and without thereby justifying any established order, based on this fundamental affirmation that there is no human situation which cannot be reached by God's call? How can we maintain the sovereignty of the grace of God, and the liberty it gives to belong to Christ no matter what the circumstances?*

*You can try to exercise your imagination a bit: a free man, who has received the call to belong to the Lord within his standing as a free man, and who is invited to remain free, what consciousness does he have of his liberty when at the same time he hears himself called a "slave of Christ"? (v. 22)? Just as for a slave, called in his standing as a slave and invited to not be concerned about this standing, how does he understand himself when he hears himself called the "freedman of the Lord"? In the end, are social relationships preserved or transformed as each person in the community commits his personal and social being to exercising freedom in Christ? For Paul, differences (Jew: circumcised or uncircumcised; Roman: slave or free man) have become indifferent in light of the power of the calling: how can we live as a community, without this becoming a justification for selfishness, the separations that life creates between persons, between peoples, between continents?*

### **But, what hour is it that leads Paul to speak in this way?**

With a lovely image, that of a boat which, arriving near a port, folds its sails, Paul mentions the time in which he lives. We are on the threshold of the End, very near the entrance into God's port, into his ultimate rest. The eschatological vision thus modifies all behaviours. Paul does not envisage conditions of personal life or of society for the long term. However, this return of Christ did not take place in history as was expected.

*Where are we situated today, twenty centuries later? Is this an outmoded perspective? Are Paul's recommendations on this subject thus invalidated? Or is the tension between two regimes in time what constitutes the Christian faith: on one side, our participation in history and its chronology (its chronos, in Greek), and on the other side kairos, the chronology of our new life in God, our death already behind us and our resurrection already engaged because of Christ's (and as we know for any birth, there where the head has already passed the body can do nothing but follow...)?*

In this fragment of text Paul describes this way of living before the horizon of God's timing with the words "as if they were not" (5 times in v. 29-31, have a wife as though having none, mourn as if not mourning, using things of the world as though not engrossed in them...). The expression, a strange one, suggests a paradoxical position: assume a position without ever making a final claim on it. Be committed without making it an absolute. Perhaps even be able to risk living with the temporary because of knowing that the ultimate is kept for us in God.

*How can we translate into the practices of our own culture this injunction to act in this world knowing that it is temporary while God will remain? Perhaps in our right hand not knowing what our left hand is doing? Or...?*

### **Paul's worry is that believers not worry**

The end of time is seen, in apocalyptic literature, with difficulties, and even distress; it then requires a total availability that daily worries do not allow for. Paul is afraid that Christians could be caught between concerns for their family and God's concerns, that pleasing those near to us and pleasing God will not be possible at the same time.

*How, in our times of difficulty, even sometimes in real distress, can we hold firm without being torn? How can we assume our responsibilities for God and for our family in a way that is decent and unshakeable? With a resolute heart and a mastery over our own will? (v.35-37).*

This page from Paul about marriage asks questions that are never resolved once for all. Probably, as long as we are alive and in a community, we will always be asking them. The ultimate response is also found in God, but we take the risk of responses that are approximate, temporary, in discussion among us, building community.

**Informative sheet: Organize an intercultural meeting: The meeting of differences – Exchange of gifts.** Inter-religion, inter-tribe, inter-culture, inter-church meeting...

**To introduce reflection and dialogue about mixed-marriage families we refer to the document from the Cevaa Secretariat.**

“These are realities, situations to look at, to observe, to take into account and ones with which Churches must live. Consequently it is not a question of “finding solutions” to “problems”, but of developing a posture, an attitude of exchange, welcome and dialogue. These “problems” can then become a source of enrichment if the Cevaa Churches are ready to question their own beliefs or habits. In reality, we should be inspired by Jesus’ posture developed in many intercultural meetings (with the Samaritan, the Pharisees, the Syro-Phoenician woman, tax collectors or others (Mt. 15:21ss; Mk. 7:24ss; see Document of the New Shared Action working group.)

**Some testimonies from mixed couples gathered from Mauritius Island plunge us in the concreteness of experience**

Couple 1: Catholic husband –Hindu wife

“We didn’t have any questions beforehand. We celebrated our marriage in the Catholic Church. The children are Catholic. My wife wears a sari for Hindu festivals and we cook everything. There is no criticism. »

Couple 2: Tamil husband - Catholic wife

“We share everything, we celebrate all the festivals. We also had 2 wedding ceremonies, Catholic and Tamil. The children can’t tell the difference, they like both religions and cultures. We are very happy like this. »

Couple 3: Muslim husband – Hindu wife

“They were married as Muslims, have children with Muslim names, but separated. Wife and children leave due to demands of the Muslim religion and culture.”

Objective: *Training in the intercultural*

This involves

- 1- Encouraging dialogue among cultures in order to change the way they look at each other
- 2- Creating places for exchanges and meetings between the different cultures in families, in Churches and in society.

3- Promoting living together in the Church so that each generation finds its place  
The goal of this exercise is MEETING others in order to listen and to become aware of one's prejudices, to learn to eliminate them because they are barriers to healthy communication. This means creating relations based on verifiable information in order to widen one's horizon.

Concepts to be considered for a meeting between different groups: identity, the reality of life/the worldview, ethnocentrism.

- identity: it is important for a Church or a group inside or outside of it to describe and specify its identity. We will be comfortable learning from others when we are first of all comfortable with ourselves.

- the reality of the life/worldview. The group is invited to define its representation of life and of the world. It establishes its concept of God, of humanity, of history, of good and evil, of salvation.

- ethnocentrism: the group verifies what position it takes in relation to others: Do we have ways of describing others? Do we have hard criticisms? Why do their behaviour or their ways seem strange to us? This means realizing that our prejudices are often based on misunderstandings and a lack of information (Furthermore, too often the reference is only in ourselves! Our EGO).

Some steps that we propose:

- a) First of all, the exercise is done just with one's own group (youth, women and other groups in one's community).
- b) Then the exercise is repeated up to part 3 for other groups that are invited.

*[each person sits down or stretches out and meditates]*

1. Recognize who I am/who we are, understand our past experiences.

*The leader invites everyone to begin a process, taking his/her time.*

- Go back as far as possible into your past, bring up the loveliest moments that remind you who you are
  - How do you see yourself?
  - With whom do you see yourself? Are you happy?

*A moment of silence*

- Remember the best memories of this moment.
- Who are you? *[1 or 2 persons can share if they so desire]*
- Which are my/our convictions that are strong and non-negotiable?
- Here are the important points in my story, the important values:....., and....., and.....
- What gifts do I have to offer others?

2. a. Forget yourself in order to welcome others
- b. Set your faith aside, or your emotional attachment to your culture.

*A moment of silence*

Go back to what you remembered about yourself; look at it from a certain distance.

- I am of the .....faith and I cherish my culture, BUT now I am thinking of others.....I forget myself.... I think about: *a friend/a parent/a colleague....I think about their faith....their culture....their way of living...of thinking....of dressing, etc.*

I appreciate the framework of my life/faith/culture, and now I place it there, aside, in order to listen to others.

**3. Meet with another group in a context of peace:**

Proposals: a garden - a spacious courtyard - a welcome centre for young people - a beach.....

The goal of this session is, above all, to listen to others tell about their own experience based on questions 1. In order to listen better, don't hesitate to ask for clarifications. Ask questions about their vision of life, about what gives meaning to their lives. Be curious about their way of seeing God, Christ, humanity, etc.

*Discussion*

*After they leave*

**4.** We slowly take up our convictions again and we evaluate our culture/tribe/way of living/ faith, in relation to what we have discovered. [We meet together again among ourselves one more time for a discussion about our experience of meeting with others.]

It is the crossroad of our convictions with the new discoveries, using the questions:

- Do I feel ready to accept others as they are? To be open to sharing and/or testimony?
- Can I love them with their differences? What do we have in common? About what are we definitely in disagreement?

Comparison with the Gospel in order to widen the perspective

A) Begin with the religious values that can be seen as common among the various groups that you met.

**Love** is the basis of our faith, what place does it hold for the others that we just met? Mention the biblical texts that illustrate it.

**The personal and intimate God.** What practice is there for those having this conviction? A total absence, or a slight presence that will give me the opportunity to talk to them about God and the Bible?

**The Holy Spirit.** Have we seen the work of the Holy Spirit in their community? Is there an imprint of God somewhere in what we have heard?

B) Coming to the person of Christ.

Did they mention the name of Jesus or of Christ and who is he for them?

And we, who is Jesus for us, how do we talk about him?

## **Informative sheet: Islamic-Christian couples**

### ***Objectives:***

- Weigh the reality and the challenges of intercultural / interreligious couples
- Measure the elements of convergence and divergence in Christian and Muslim approaches toward marriage and family
- Propose ideas for accompanying couples involved in such a union.

### ***Introduce the theme***

#### **1 The challenge(s) of intercultural / interreligious marriages**

Sign of our changing world, wherever different religious and cultural communities coexist and meet, mixed marriages tend to multiply in our societies. In addition to mobility that favours contacts outside of the traditional circles, this evolution comes from the fact that the choice of a spouse has become the affair of young people themselves and no longer that of the family.

As soon as one talks about interreligious marriage, especially Islamic-Christian ones, there is no lack of warnings, due to the difficulties faced by numerous mixed couples, overcome by some and leading to divorce for others. Many people think that Churches should discourage such unions, especially in light of several biblical passages (Ex. 34:15-16 and Dt. 7:1-4, particularly).

In fact, it is not just the religious communities that face such questions, but families first of all who are asked to make room for a new member with his/her culture, values and convictions. Some could be tempted to pressure for conversion, especially when children are born.

**Activity:** After a general presentation, just as in the preceding activity, have the participants contribute their testimony about their experience in the realm of intercultural and/or interreligious marriages. As much as possible try to have real experiences, happy or unhappy, having, if needed, gathered brief authentic stories in advance, to avoid the trap of generalizations and prejudices.

### ***Understand the theme***

#### **2 The meaning of marriage in Islam and in Christianity**

On the Muslim side, marriage is a benediction willed by God (Surat 30, 21) and every Muslim that has the possibility has the duty to get married; the goal of the couple is procreation, sexual satisfaction of the spouses, collaboration in the education of the children and good understanding between the spouses called to love and respect each other. Marriage is a mutual legal pact of union, validated by a dowry due to the woman, sealed in the presence of two witnesses, by the agreement between the fiancés (or the woman's legal tutor). It is often accompanied by a contract specifying the rights and duties of the spouses (monogamy, place

of residence, rights of the woman, clauses for divorce, etc.). In parallel the Koran affirms equality of the man and the woman before God (Surat 33, 35) and the pre-eminence of the man over the woman (Surat 4, 34) particularly in the area of inheritance, legal testimony or children's education. In the case of an impasse, and after having sought conciliation, the union can be ended by divorce before a judge or unilateral repudiation by the husband.

On the Christian side, marriage is a benediction of the Creator who encourages the man and the woman to have children and to carry out their responsibility over the whole earth (Genesis 1:27-28). Even if the patriarchal family model is predominant in the Bible, the Song of Songs is entirely consecrated to love between a man and a woman, parable of the love between God and his people. Jesus validates marriage by commanding, concerning divorce, that "Man (humans) should not separate what God has united" (Matthew 19:1-12). The apostle Paul insists on the love that the husband and wife owe each other mutually while giving man the premier place and making celibacy legitimate. Sign of God's love, Christian marriage is a life-long covenant, until separation by death, and divorce is a concession to hardness of heart, which is not recognized by the Catholic Church, for which marriage is a sacrament.

As much on the legal as the theological level, Muslims and Christians have a different conception of marriage. For an Islamic-Christian marriage, it can be noted that according to the Koran, the Muslim tradition authorizes it in the case of a Muslim man marrying a Christian woman but forbids it when it is a Muslim woman marrying a Christian man who does not become Muslim. It remains that, in addition to principles, there is the social reality and the cultural imprint which mark the way that marriage is practiced and experienced in real life.

**Activity:** After pointing out the principles underlying Muslim and Christian marriage, make a list of the various elements that constitute marriage and family life (choice of spouses / role of the spouses' families / commitments / ceremonies / relation between spouses / education of children / conditions for divorce). Using this list, make a comparative table with 3, respectively 4, columns: civil marriage / traditional marriage / Christian marriage / Muslim marriage, so that you can write down the characteristics of each type of marriage.

### *Deeper study of the theme*

In a third step, we propose forming two groups that must formulate concrete proposals beginning with ideas indicated below concerning, first of all, preparation for the celebration of an Islamic-Christian marriage and then, receiving and accompanying the Islamic-Christian families. It would be good for each group to write out its proposals for a final discussion.

### **3 A- Preparation for a religious marriage**

Many young candidates for an Islamic-Christian marriage have their project rejected by their families, their friends or members of their religious communities. They find themselves facing questions for which they have not been prepared; some live together without getting married, others opt for civil marriage with no religious benediction, still others want to have a celebration in the two traditions, Christian and Muslim. As soon as they knock on the door of a church, they have to find someone ready to listen to them and orient them.

- 1) What qualities do you think are essential on the part of the pastor: *attentive listening / knowledge of Islam / contact with Muslims / awareness of the experiences of interreligious couples / presentation of the essential points of the Christian faith / class of preparation for marriage / etc?*

- 2) What are the questions that, in your eyes, should be brought up: *relations with the respective families / each one's religious commitment / their knowledge of the other one's religion / the values they share / the dowry / monogamy / faithfulness / the couple's projects / statute of the woman and of the man / education of children / etc.*
- 3) What are the major difficulties that such a couple will face: *expectations of their respective families / prejudices and social pressure / respect for the religious practice of each one / religious education of the children / personal evolution of each one / managing disagreements / causes for divorce / etc.*
- 4) For a Muslim marriage, it means preparing a marriage contract. What are the clauses favouring the wife that should be included: *each partner's right to practice his own religion / the wife's freedom to have a professional and social life outside of the home / the possibility for the children to have a double education, Muslim and Christian / the wife's right to divorce in case of polygamy / etc.?*
- 5) If a Christian celebration is planned, what points need to be decided on: *welcoming the Muslim partner and his/her family with respect for their tradition / inclusion of Muslim texts / choice of biblical texts together / formulation of promises / intervention by an imam or someone close to the Muslim family / choice of a shared prayer / etc.?*
- 6) Knowing that Islam forbids a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man (Surat 5, 7), the couple only has the choice between exclusion from the Muslim community for the wife or conversion, formal or sincere, of the Christian man: what do you think of such a situation which is contrary to the Charter of Human Rights?

### 3 B- Welcome of and accompaniment for families

Whatever the marriage arrangements, the Christian community should not lose interest in the lives of its members, knowing that every home, interreligious or not, is based on the union of two personalities each of which has its history, its interests and its own expectations and will find itself confronting the hazards of life. How can your Christian community accompany the progress of homes where one or more of the members are not Christians?

- 1) Opening and awareness of the community: too often the mixed couple finds itself marginalized and the Muslim spouse feels like a foreigner. What can be done to correct this state of affairs? *Remember the importance that the Bible gives to welcoming the foreigner, from the Law of Moses (Leviticus 19:33-34) up to Jesus' teaching, who identifies himself as a foreigner (Matthew 25:35 and 43). Encourage better knowledge of Islam / organize a meeting with Muslims / etc.*
- 2) Pastoral care for mixed couples: at a time when the traditional family is being questioned and we observe the increase in divorces, it is important for Churches to develop or increase the attention given to couples and families, among whom mixed homes are a particular case: *training in pastoral accompaniment / offer of conjugal consultations / activities planned for families / etc.*
- 3) Listening to mixed couples: each couple must find its equilibrium, taking into account the origins and the expectations of the two spouses. Over time, the question of the identity and origins of each one can become a source of tension. It is then important for the couple to find an outside ear, attentive and sympathetic, to help them overcome their difficulties: *what can be said when one of the spouses evolves to the point of strengthening his/her religious attachment or, on the contrary, converts?*
- 4) The question of the children and their religious identity comes up sooner or later as

soon as Islam considers that they must be Muslims. *What name should they be given? Will the child be baptized? The boy circumcised? Will they have the freedom to choose their religion after an education that is Christian as well as Muslim? Will they be obligated to choose the father's religion in the place of the mother's, or vice versa? And if the couple doesn't give them any religious training?*

- 5) Family pressures are another source of tension: each family has expectations, legitimate or abusive, concerning the young couple, who then experience a conflict of loyalties leading one or the other of the young spouses – more often the young wife – to make concessions, and who is thus confronted with the question of knowing how far to go without denying herself: *participation in family rites? Attend the partner's religious community? Not mention her own convictions or, on the contrary, display them? Require reciprocity or risk provoking clashes?*
- 6) Separation and divorce are always a personal and family drama marking the end of love and of a shared life that has become a source of misunderstanding, confrontations and rifts. When all attempt at conciliation becomes vain, when there is clear cheating and abuse of power, divorce can be the ultimate possibility of saving the moral or physical integrity of the disunited spouses. Whether at the time of the divorce or in the process of reconstruction for the Christian partner, pastoral accompaniment and solidarity of the Christian community are required more than ever.

### Reference documents

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<http://www.relations-catholiques-Muslims.cef.fr/mariage-islamo-chretien/preparation-dun-mariage-islamo-chretien/>

The French website of the group of Islamic-Christian families contains much information experiences to download

<http://www.gfic.net/Pub4/Accueil.asp>

## **Informative sheet: Can we talk about homosexuality in the Cevaa Community of action and sharing?**

### **1 The situation**

To answer this question, we will discover the different points of view on the question within the Cevaa. Far from creating unanimity, the question divides us, on the same continent as well as on different continents.

Thus, in the Africa region for example, two viewpoints, non-exhaustive, come out starting from the same findings: homosexuality exists, but opinions then diverge when it comes to handling it concretely.

- ❖ **In some countries**, the existence of homosexuals is recognized. They have recognition and have the possibility of showing themselves and organizing parades. But in the Church, they are not talked about and above all we don't want to talk about them. The Church does not give them a place, for moral and ethical reasons.
- ❖ **In the Churches**, the existence of homosexuality is flatly denied. It is seen as a deviance imported from the West. Because laws refuse them an existence and for moral and ethical reasons, they don't show themselves and they are not talked about. The EEPT for example just made a decision on this subject: "*The 22nd Great Synod condemns homosexuality and lesbianism in the Church because they constitute an abomination for the Word of God and for tradition and affect our dignity*".

In Europe, several governments recognize rights for homosexuals, but there are also countries where the rights of homosexuals are not recognized. These divergent positions are also visible in positions taken by Churches in Europe. Generally, taking a position in favour of rights for homosexuals is probably facilitated by legislation in European countries that give homosexuals the same rights as heterosexuals. Some examples:

- ❖ **Switzerland (Canton of Vaud):** "The Synod [2013] adopts the principle of a rite for same-sex couples benefitting from a legally registered partnership." In other words, the Eglise Evangélique Réformée of the canton of Vaud proposes a benediction for homosexual couples recognized by the law.
- ❖ **France UEPAL:**  
UEPAL has the following position. Referring to the documents previously produced, particularly "Church and Homosexuality", UEPAL decides the following:
  1. Homosexuals have their place in the community the same as everyone else does;
  2. Pastoral ministry is open to homosexuals;
  3. The decision to bless homosexual couples is suspended for a period of three years (2014-2017).

### **France the EPMa'ohi:**

1. Homosexuals have their place in the community the same as do all other members.
2. In spite of the fact that French law authorizes unions of persons of the same sex, the EPMa'ohi decided to not adapt Church rules in line with the civil law.

In light of what precedes, we must conclude that the question of homosexuality is far from creating unanimity within the Cevaa Community. For this reason we think that it is important for this question to be discussed openly in the Cevaa, not necessarily in order to arrive at a shared position, but so that the arguments given by each one are heard.

### **2 Position of the subject:**

The question of homosexuality can be asked in the framework of a dialogue between partner Churches, in the following way:

One should not try to avoid the issue by saying things like “that doesn't exist in our area” or yet “at any rate, we are opposed”... Admitting the existence of homosexuality, without necessarily affirming or wanting to impose one's position, seems to be a good beginning for sincere discussion.

In a second step, each party should clearly state its position, with total liberty, frankness and in truth and in love.

A third step, after the first two, would be to have a discussion remembering each one's dignity: in the Church we are all God's children.

Because there are different opinions on the question, we want to make the following point:

Favourable opinion: it doesn't bother anything and everyone has the right to do what they want;

Negative opinion: it is not allowed and it is against nature, thus condemned and so there is very strong opposition;

It is also necessary to take into account the nuances that exist between the two positions noted above. There are not only the “for” and the “against”. There are many more positions than we often imagine. As an example, some favour recognition of homosexuality, but categorically oppose the possibility of allowing homosexuals to adopt children. In the same order of ideas we can mention those who accept or refuse Medically Assisted Procreation.

Contrary to what one might think, these differences are found in the Church as well as outside the Church. There is thus no frontier between the “sacred” and the “profane” in this domain. However, radicalization, total and categorical refusal is much more accentuated in Africa than in the West.

### **3 In order to continue reflection:**

- Is homosexuality a concern for you? For your Church? For your country? Should it be talked about? Justify your answer.
- Is this a question tied to human rights?
- Can one/ must one justify it or not using biblical texts?
- Is the question of homosexuality being discussed in your context?

## **Informative sheet: Dialogue of faith: Peter moved by the Holy Spirit.**

### **Introduction:**

The Acts of the Apostles transmits five discourses of Peter inspired by the Holy Spirit. In this sheet, we invite you to look at the third in which Peter answers the Sanhedrin, Judaism's supreme authority at that time, and at the fifth with Cornelius a Roman captain and his family.

### **Acts 4:8-12**

Peter and John are arrested in the context related in verses 1 and 2. Led before the Sanhedrin that interrogates them, Peter pronounces this discourse found in verses 8 to 12.

- Specify who are Peter and John's interlocutors?
- How do you understand the question asked of the Apostles?
- Where does Peter get his assurance?
- How does he construct his discourse?
- How do you understand the phrase in verse 12? *There is no other name under Heaven given to men so that they can be saved*
- Have you already heard it? In what context?
- Have you already used it? In what context?
- Share in the group concerning this verse.

In this text, as in many cultures, the name is the same as the person. Pronouncing the name of God is not permitted in Judaism. For the first Christians, the name of Jesus was invoked for baptism or for a healing, and it is because of this that there is a conflict with the Jewish authorities: they cannot accept that one could heal in the name of Jesus.

In contrast with Acts 4 where the interlocutors are Jews, the text in Acts 10 presents a Greco-Roman family.

### **Acts 10: 34-43**

Discover the events that precede Peter's discourse (beginning of chapter 10)

- The life of Cornelius and his family
- The appearance of an angel to a non Jew
- Sending messengers from Cornelius in order to meet Peter
- Peter's vision inviting him to eat impure foods

## **Modules for handling certain themes**

### **Module 1 What does the Bible say about relations with other religions?**

Since the Bible is the main reference for Christians, it is important to study what it says about relations with other peoples and what we can learn from it for today. For a first orientation, see sheet 2 in the annex (see "Christians and religious diversity ...".)

First of all, make as extensive a list as possible of biblical texts where it is question of other religious beliefs and cultures. With the Bible open, you can take advantage of the participants' knowledge, as well as using available biblical concordances and biblical vocabularies.

Based on this and depending on the participants' interest, the group could follow any of the 3 following possibilities:

A) Biblical study following the usual methods for a biblical text envisaged from the angle of relations with other religions; in reality, if rejection of other traditions is dominant, there are also other passages that merit attention: especially the Canaanite high priest Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20), Naaman the Syrian (II Kings 5), Ruth the Moabite woman, Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan (John 4), Paul's discourse in Athens (Acts 17:14-34).

B) A comparative study of Jesus' acts and words in relation to Jews and "pagans", in order to bring out the basis of his behaviour and his convictions on this subject and to find teaching for our own engagement with members of other religions.

C) Discussion about the apparent contradiction between Peter's words given in the book of Acts of the Apostles (4:12): "Salvation is found in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" and 10:34-35: "I now see how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right", with the concern for finding an articulation between exclusivity and inclusivity of salvation in God.

## **Module 2: What do we know about the neighbouring community?**

The objective is to move progressively from a declared ignorance or a theoretical knowledge, often encouraged by the "one says that" of prejudices, to direct acquaintance based on texts, testimonies and experiences. The choice of the tradition (Muslim community / traditional religion / new religious movement often called a cult / agnostic humanism / etc.) will depend on the context and the practical possibilities.

A) First of all, make a list, in the form of a table, of all that you know or think you know, positively and negatively, and questions that you ask about the teaching and practices of the chosen tradition. Be careful to specify for each one the origin of the information (official text / scientific article / testimony of a member / personal experience / article in the press / rumour / etc.) and the degree of confidence it can be given. Based on this, make a list of questions to ask and points that you would like to see developed.

B) To be as inclusive as possible, the inquiry is to be done on two levels: first of all, the study of available documents (written or oral): foundational, doctrinal, liturgical texts, stories, reports, historical analyses and sociological inquiries) and then, personal interviews and observations:

- interviews with leaders during a visit and, whenever possible, attending the community's prayer or a meeting
- interviews with members of the community in the framework of the neighbourhood, the workplace or the family
- interviews with persons outside of the community: specialists, journalists, declared critics

C) A synthesis of results obtained should make it possible to distinguish at least three levels in the tradition in question:

- the normative level of sacred texts and of teaching by recognized authorities
- the popular level of everyday life with its accommodations
- the social level of the presence, behaviour and actions of believers in society.

At the end of this process, it would be good, as a verification, to go back over the documentation that was gathered and to inform the members de la community in question of the results obtained through which a relationship of confidence can be established.

### **Module 3: Organize an interreligious meeting**

It is never without hesitation, mixed with apprehension and curiosity that one launches into a new experience, so we think it is useful in this module to propose a sort of *checklist* of points to handle in organizing a first interreligious meeting. For a meeting that is specifically for interreligious prayer, you can refer to the list set up by Martin Burkhard in the conclusion to his contribution (see "Christians and religious diversity")

- **The interlocutors:** above all, it is necessary to agree on the interlocutors for the meeting: the community (s) with which you want to have a relationship, the same for the persons, in order to obtain their preliminary agreement. The meeting can be bilateral or multilateral.
- **The type of meeting:** there are essentially three types of meetings: an invitation where welcoming them aims at creating a climate of confidence, a visit for getting to know the other better, finally, a shared project in relation to the socio-political context. In every case, you will be careful about community rules, especially concerning dress and food.
- **Place of the meeting:** the place chosen through mutual agreement influences the spirit of the meeting: a room usually reserved for worship and prayer, a room belonging to one tradition or the other, a neutral room for a discussion with a social connotation, an open space in the case of a public gathering.
- **The objective of the meeting:** schematically, one can indicate 5 overall orientations that do not exclude: get to know each other / set rules for good relationships and mutual / better understand each other's teaching / be jointly involved in a social

project or a humanitarian cause / be together in a context of prayer or of a religious ceremony.

- **The speakers:** the choice of persons (leaders, clergy, teachers, social workers, etc.) greatly influences the orientation and what happens in the meeting. Be careful to avoid the juxtaposition of monologues and to leave time for questions from the public!
- **The public:** decide together on the desired public, of publicity about the project, which religious and political authorities to invite and the place of the medias. It is important to prepare the concerned communities well so that such meetings do not become the reserved domain of a few specialists!
- **Follow-up:** so that the meeting is not short-lived, it is necessary to plan an evaluation meeting with all of the organizers, to insure reports in the press and within each community and to share this experience with the other Cevaa Churches.

## **Questionnaire to the Churches**

### **Activities and biblical training in your Church**

1. What does your Church do to give biblical training to its members and what method is used?
2. Is there Bible study training for the various groups in your Church (women, men, youth, children...)
3. Does your Church have someone in charge of Theological Empowerment or biblical training?

### **Accompaniment and training for the families in your Church**

4. What are the main problems faced by families in your society and your community at this time?
5. Is there a special catechesis for families? If not, what places and occasions does your Church use in order to train the family?
6. What is the content of training aimed at families in your Church (mention the important aspects)
7. How do Christians react to this training (acceptance, reserve, reticence, rejection, criticism...)
8. Are there cultural factors that keep your Church from proposing teaching/training for families?
9. Is training proposed for couples who want to marry religiously (blessing on their union)? If not, how do you prepare couples that want to have their union blessed (Which documents and biblical texts etc...)?
10. Are there laws in your country promoting equality between men and women?
11. What does your Church do to promote equality between men and women?
12. Is your Church concerned by intra familial violence? If so, how?
13. What does your Church do to protect children from abuse in all its forms including paedophilia?
14. Does your Church accept a blessing for couples of persons who are not members?
15. Has your Church developed pastoral care in order to support the progress of families and couples in crisis? If so, what?
16. What is your Church's position concerning those living as concubines or non-married persons with children?
17. What is your Church's position concerning those who are divorced and/or remarried (are those who are separated and/or remarried of special concern in your community)?
18. What is your Church's position concerning persons who live alone (without a spouse and without children)?
19. Is the union of persons of the same sex recognized by civil law in your country?
20. What is your Church's position concerning a union of persons of the same sex?

21. What is your Church's position in relation, on one hand, to the Government (if the union of persons of the same sex is recognized on the civil level), and in relation to the persons involved in this type of union?
22. Is there an accompaniment proposed to homosexuals in your community?
23. According to you, when does a marriage begin:
  - After the official engagement
  - After the traditional ceremony in the family
  - After the signature of the civil document, or
  - After the benediction by the pastor?

**To continue further:** Here are some themes that Churches can use to continue the reflection

1. What is the statute of the Scriptures in your Church?
2. How do you refer to the Bible when resolving questions that come up in society and in the Church?
3. For example, why do you think that there are four different versions of the Gospels?
4. Are there divergences in interpretations of the Bible in your Church? If yes, how is that seen and how do these different interpretations coexist in your Church?
5. Is the contextualization of the Gospel a reality in your Church? If not, why is it not practiced? And if yes, how is it done?
6. What is the relationship between the Gospel and culture in your particular context? In other words, are the Gospel and culture compatible? Why?
7. Does culture influence the understanding or the interpretation of the Gospel?
8. What attitude do you have concerning your neighbour's cultural tradition (in the family, the couple, the community, the country)?
9. What influence does globalization have in the development of your community?
10. According to several sociological studies, intergenerational conflicts are common. How are they seen in your context (country, professional world, community and family)? Do you have the means of managing them? If not, what do you propose for handling them in a positive way?
11. In your surroundings, do you know any mixed couples (inter-confessional, interreligious, etc.)? What do you think of such unions?

# The wheel of my community

Name:

