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OUR VOICES

ems women's network



ENGLISH

HUMAN SEXUALITY AND GENDER PERSPECTIVES



Evangelical Mission in Solidarity

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**Dear women, dear sisters in the international EMS Women's network,**

OUR VOICES has been published now for 25 years and continues to offer a platform for the women of the international EMS Fellowship.

This year many churches worldwide celebrate the 500th Anniversary of Reformation.

German Protestant Kirchentag gatherings and celebrations in Berlin and Wittenberg in May took place under the theme "You see me."

What do we see? Whom do we see?

The current issue of OUR VOICES draws your attention to "Human Sexuality and Gender Perspectives". You are invited to look closer and perceive diverse facets and unusual perspectives.

During the Women's Pre-Conference of EMS General Assembly in Stellenbosch, South Africa, in December 2016, Rev. Phumzile Mabizela from Johannesburg took a closer look on HIV/AIDS and sexual minorities. Delegates of the General Assembly share their impressions.

Biblical protagonists such as Vashti, Hagar and Philip show us an astounding view on a new way of handling violence and approaching minorities.

And as usual, every year the celebrations of World Day of Prayer continue to be a strong bond between all EMS member churches. Mails and photos have been sent to us from Cameroon, South Korea, Lebanon, South Africa and Ghana. The liturgy of World Day of Prayer 2018 comes from Surinam. Here our sisters from the worldwide Moravian Church will be especially involved.

Gender perspectives – and what about when it comes to leading positions in the church? From two churches we learn what the ordination of women can mean: The National Evangelical Synod of Syria & Lebanon (NESSL) is the very first church in the Middle East which ordained the first woman only some weeks ago. In Cameroon women pastors have already experienced 25 years of women's ordination and celebrated this silver jubilee in 2016. Congratulations and God's blessings, dear sisters!

With cordial greetings from Stuttgart


Gabriele Mayer, PhD
EMS Gender Desk – International
Women's Network
July 2017

Stepping forth in faith

Phumzile Mabizela, woman pastor and executive director of INERELA+, an international network of religious leaders – both lay and ordained, women and men – living with, or personally affected, by HIV.

Speech (shortened) at the Women's Preconference of the EMS General Assembly in South Africa 2016



Looking back

In December 2003 a groundbreaking workshop that was supported by UN-AIDS was held in Namibia.

The consultation identified a number of theological themes relevant to this task: God and Creation; Interpreting the bible; Sin; Suffering and Lamentation; Covenantal Justice; Truth and Truth-telling; and the Church as a Healing, Inclusive and Accompanying community.

Churches are still grappling with these issues. A lot of progress has been made in the health sector in terms of responding to HIV. As we all know there are different traditions within the religious sector. The difference in theologies and teachings has divided the faith community. However, issues like HIV have taught the community to transcend the differences and focus on how they could serve and save communities.



The mainline churches are more advanced when it comes to their grasp of epidemiology and critical enablers of the epidemic. Issues like gender inequality, poverty, apathy are our worst enemies. Most of the seminaries have integrated or mainstreamed the HIV and AIDS discourse into their curriculum. There is a lot of academic work that has been done on HIV. The challenge is getting all these resources to our pews, temples and synagogues for the benefit of all members.



Pentecostal churches have a different take on this issue, the issues of faith in God and miracles take centre stage. This informs the way they respond to sickness and healing. The first issue which they seem to have misunderstood is the fact that HIV is a virus, not a curse or punishment from God.

The Pentecostal movement has grown rapidly all over the world. The issues of the importance of faith in God in order to benefit from all of god's blessings, have brought about a lot of confusion.



The Buddhist and Hindu communities have been more accepting of people living with HIV (PLHIV). The focus has always been on quality of life. I found their responses quite refreshing. The focus was not on the persons behaviour or past but on improving their lives. I feel this made them more receptive to tools like condoms. The Hindu community also is more advanced in terms of their attitudes towards sexuality.

Other institutions like the Catholics, were in the forefront of making medication available long before it became available in most government centres.

African Traditional Practitioners have been very instrumental in promoting the spirit of care and acceptance in the context of HIV. Lots of mistakes have



Personal impressions from the Women's Pre-Conference in Stellenbosch



It was the first EMS General Assembly for me and the first Women's Pre-Conference as well.

I was especially impressed by the openness and sensibility with which we women got into a conversation with each other on topics which are controversial or even a no-no in our countries, societies, churches and also in our personal environment.

I felt an atmosphere of appreciation and respect towards the participants and the cultural background of the other.

Katrin Klöpfel ☰



Something that really interested me was to listen to the interchange between Moravian church and Reformed Church participants coming from different contexts. We had the opportunity to listen how some decisions in favour of the unity of the church hurt and cut opportunities of development of people from the same church that were in LGBTIQ relations (Lesbian Gay Bi Transgender Intersex Queer).

Listening carefully to the emotions coming out in a safe space allowed the emergence of different points of view and opinions.

For me, the post thoughts of the journey were: "To whom do I give authority to live the life I want to live?"

Josefina Hurtado ☰



I was deeply impressed by Phumzile's thought-provoking witness. She is a strong advocate for sexual minorities due to her personal involvement, her expertise and fearless commitment.

Some statements which were especially moving because they are valid for all of us:

"God does not make any mistake; so accept us as we are."

Do not forget: "All people have their dignity because they are created in the image of God."

"Culture and Religion are strong forces in Africa. How can we make them to life-promoting forces?"

"The church should be a healing, inviting and accompanying community."

Dorothea Schaupp ☰

The value of time

Mega Kambase Sambo, 33, is a Reverend Candidate from Gereja Toraja (Toraja Church) from South Sulawesi, Indonesia, working as Secretary of Ecumenical and International Partnership Department in Toraja Church, currently in Germany for an internship in press- and public relations work.



I feel so excited and honored that I could join the EMS Women's Preconference, it was my first time. It was really wonderful to experience how discussions on burning issues became possible in a safe space with sisters from different countries and background, i.e. culture, education, age, experiences.

These differences did not separate us but made us even stronger. Such experiences help to complement one another and give support.

What deeply touched me was the reflection on Genesis 19:1-11 during the Bible study group. We used the Bible Sharing Method from South Africa, which was new to me. It helps to share and express yourself freely. This Bible Passage is one of the "controversial" passages that was often used to exclude or discriminate other people.

AIDS patients or HIV positive people, victims of human trafficking, migrant workers, refugees, people in poverty, many of them lost their lives because "we" criminalize them in the name of religion, culture, etc.

In my opinion the words of God should be used to unify, glorify and share love, not the other way around

I also experienced the close relationship between the women, a feeling of sisterhood, when we all listened to the keynote speaker Rev. Phumzile Mabizela.

She is such a wonderful and inspiring person, a strong woman, a role model. With her openness and positivity,

she encouraged me and all the participants to be proactive, break the silence, stop the stigma and provide prevention and care for people with HIV/AIDS and/or take action with regard to other issues like gender inequality, poverty, apathy or any kind of injustice and discrimination that happens in our place or church.

Reverend Phumzile's inspirational speech was a strengthening experience for me. I will especially reflect and share with youth and women from my church the part when she mentioned the value of time and how we should treasure every moment that we and others have:

"To realize the value of

... ten years: Ask a newly divorced couple.

... four years: Ask a graduate.

... one year: Ask a student who has failed a final exam.

... nine months: Ask a mother who gave birth to a stillborn.

To realize the value of

... one month: Ask a mother who has given birth to a premature baby.

... one week: Ask an editor of a weekly newspaper.

... one minute: Ask a person who has missed the train, bus or plane.

... one-second: Ask a person who has survived an accident.

Time waits for no one. Treasure every moment you have."

Author unknown ≡



iThemba Lam – My Hope

Katharina Goodwin, member of EMS Women's Advisory Board, took part in the Women's Pre-Conference as a delegate of the Moravian Church and visited iThemba Lam, a Shelter and Resource Centre for LGBTIs* in South Africa.

The theme of the Women's Preconference to last year's EMS General Meeting in South Africa was "HIV/Aids and Human Sexuality". Part of the program was concerned with the problems of sexual minorities. In this connection we were invited to visit iThemba Lam (My Hope), a shelter for young people, whose families have turned them out for being homosexual. It is situated in Gugulethu, a township 15 km outside Cape Town. Poverty is a big problem here and the crime rate is high. How, I asked myself, can a "low-key safe house" offer protection to troubled youngsters in such a neighborhood? And how, I wondered, has the local community reacted to the shelter?


Bulelwa Panda, the manager, met us in the small yard of the shelter and showed us around. On the ground floor there is room for meetings and a small office. The posters on the walls and the pamphlets lying around propagate a philosophy of change. The aim is to build "faith communities that are welcoming and affirming: where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people can participate fully and be strengthened in their spiritual, psychological and sexual identity". An impressive vision, I thought! On the first floor there are several bedrooms, but we did not meet any residents. They do not stay for long, we were told, the aim being to reconcile them with their families or, if this is not possible, to help them find a job and a place to stay, so that they can fend for themselves.



First (historical) shelter which Bulelwa shared with up to 20 persons.



Today's entrance to the shelter

I was deeply impressed by all I saw and heard in iThemba Lam, and I very much hope that it will continue to be a safe place for those that need it as well as an agent of change in the community. 



In the church yard where 300 persons receive a free meal daily.

Joint Action Against Violence

International Women's Consultation of Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck (EKKW), Germany in Johannesburg in October 2016

Participants came from Estonia, Germany, India, Kyrgyzstan, Namibia, Republic of South Africa

It is a sad reality that women are still exposed to violence in countries all over the world. Numerous women are discriminated, humiliated and mistreated either physically, emotionally, mentally and verbally.

In order to consider the causes for such violence, 14 female representatives of churches of six countries (India, South Africa, Namibia, Estonia, Kyrgyzstan and Germany) gathered for a meeting in South Africa from 3rd to 11th October, 2016. The Protestant Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck invited representatives of her partner churches in these countries to the women's consultation. For the first time it was an inter-disciplinary consultation including women from eight different professions.

It was also for the first time that they were joined by representatives from the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau and her partner church in India.

The consultation began with an excursion to a church-run project in Pretoria which provides shelter for women who suffer from violence and encourages them to free themselves from the spiral of violence.

The members exchanged their knowledge and experience of the situation of women in their home countries and in their home churches in a Christian Retreat Centre near Pretoria. The subjects dealt with were the causes for violence on the one hand and, the way, politics and society deal with such violence on the other. Another important issue was the question how the churches react to violence and how it can be evaluated

from a biblical and theological perspective. Therefore, the women shared bible texts, in which women are presented as victims of violent acts. In common prayer sessions and services, they encouraged each other to no longer suffer violence against women but rather search for ways to overcome it. The motto for the consultation from Psalm 30:11 "You turn my crying into dancing" was the guiding idea. A look at the latest history of South Africa, which became tangible at the occasion of an excursion to the Freedom Park in Pretoria and the Apartheid Museum, encouraged the participants to believe that non-violent ways out of injustice and oppression are possible.

Insights gathered from the consultation:

- Violence against women is a common problem all over the world – nearly 1/3 of women have experienced some form of violence one time or another in their lives.
- One of the main reasons for violence is poverty – thereby endangering women towards prostitution, human trafficking and child marriages. In some cases, families use their girl child for earning quick money.
- Some cultural practices and deep rooted traditions also add to violence – such as Lobola, dowry, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, child marriages and bride kidnapping.
- In many countries women suffer discrimination and stereotypes like – the glass ceiling, difference in wages, double workload at home and work.



Photo: Silvia Scheffer

- The role of education is crucial in empowering women to be self-reliant and be survivors instead of being victims.
- Women have to stand up for each other whereby they can help her sisters succeed instead of following the "pulling her down" syndrome.

- Sexual harassment and rape in church is a shocking reality, yet kept under cover.
- Gender balance in all positions, including leading positions in the churches is needed.
- To effectively address the problem, churches should cooperate with other churches ecumenically and with the society as a whole.

Recommendations by the participants to their Churches:

- Address the issue of violence against women and girls.
- Create and increase awareness of violence against women at all levels of the church. Special programmes are needed (Sunday School, youth, confirmation, etc)
- Invest more resources towards this end
- Not to justify violence with theology or Bible interpretation, but to support non-violence theology (Sermon on the Mount)
- Pastors need to openly address violence and harmful traditional practices, thus providing women a safe environment for them to share their stories without the fear, shame or condemnation.

If these recommendations are followed, the women are on the right path of being self reliant and it is then that their crying can turn to dancing! ☺

Women in Ministry – Yes Sexual Harrassment – No

Women's Pre-Conference at the Lutheran World Federation's 12th Assembly, in Windhoek, Namibia, in May 2017

German Pastor Ute Hedrich, Institute for Mission, Ecumenism and Global Responsibility of The Evangelical Church of Westphalia, reports:

For a long time it had not been clear whether the question of genocide in Namibia would be on the agenda. Martin Junge, General Secretary of Lutheran World Federation emphasized that he was very glad that Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) has taken the step towards a public apology and said:

„I want to promise you here in this assembly that there will be a statement on genocide together with the German churches.“

The topic of the Assembly „Liberated by God's Grace“ is inseparable and not to be understood in a hierarchical or patriarchal way.

The strong statement of the Women's Pre-Consultation clearly shows the vital items:

Women's ordination

82% of women theologians are ordained in the Lutheran Church. Steps towards full equality between women and men are to be sought.

Violence against women

The very clear statement of the Women's Pre-Conference:

„Male clergy abuse female clergy, men in congregation abuse women and girls in church and sometimes church leaders refuse to address the

problems. Domestic violence must end. We call for an end of sexual harassment and sexual violence in all church structures, by which women are forced to engage in sex for church leadership roles.“ ☺

Women in Ministry – An Impetus or a Hindrance to the Gospel?

25 years women's ordination in Cameroon

Yele Marceline Lambiv (M.TH.) is pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) and took part in EMS Bible Reading Project.



Unlike some churches, the PCC ordains women into the ministry of Word and Sacraments. Why should the issue of gender roles in ministry still be raised? How do current debates about gender roles at home and in church fit into these broader trains?

Twenty five years of ministry have not been without its own strengths and challenges. Both married and unmarried women have enjoyed the largesse of the PCC through training, development and even appointments into different posts of responsibilities. Despite their public functions, women ministers are expected to perform the traditional roles of women in society, like in Cameroon and in Africa as a whole. These women have been involved in holistic ministry, balancing life, work and family. What does silver, the celebration of twenty five years of ministry imply for Women Ministers in the PCC, Africa and the world at large?

The text of Luke 10:38-42 shows that Jesus was conscious of these roles and did not overlook them. A reading of this text is healthy for the church and necessary for her witness in a post-Golden Jubilee era. The de-marginalization of women is important for effective communication of the Gospel. Equally, a serious biblical case can be mounted for doing away with any restrictions against women in the church all together.

Attention needs to be drawn to PCC, a trail blazer, that have decided to ordain women for the past twenty five years, to make them aware of the extent and nature of the biblical based debates raised against women leadership by some churches and individuals. The statement made by one male minister that, 'the day a woman becomes the Moderator of the Church I will put down my pastoral robe and resign', shows an example of the traditional restrictions.

In the text of Luke 10:38-42, Martha and Mary represent two groups in the debate on gender roles. This debate has not been settled till date. Martha represents a woman in a particular society, who try to preserve culture, a conformist to hierarchical gendered roles. Mary on the other hand revolts and charts a new course for her life. She stands for equality of men and women in salvation, as well as opportunity to hold every office and play every role that exists in Church life.

In a culture where most public voices are male like the Jewish culture, a woman stood no grounds to learn. Mary was expected to play the matronly role of providing hospitality to guests, not becoming a disciple. She sat at Jesus' feet and to Martha's dismay, Jesus endorsed Mary's choice of discipleship thus, supporting women's ministry. Liberating Mary from traditional roles was surely a reversal of law by Jesus, which could be embarrassing and prob-

ably scandalous to contemporary rabbis, who excluded women from listening in the synagogues.

Some have questioned why Jesus who often showed himself to be counter-cultural designated only men, as prominent disciples, when he was indeed counter-cultural in advancing the status of women, (Luke 8:1-3; Luke 10:38-42). Jesus did not directly change every detail of his culture, he chose his closest workers most strategically for the culture he intended to reach first, (Jews), but it is striking that Jesus accepted women as disciples, endorsed women studying the scriptures, affirming women's personhood and equal value before God, going beyond all conventions. (Beck and Blomberg, 2001:60). This acceptance set the stage for women to have instructional roles and assume leadership in the church.

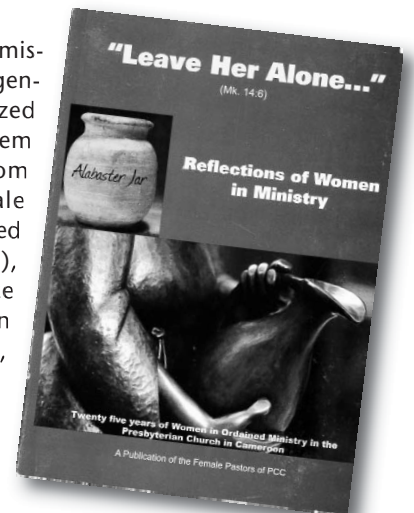
However, Martha's hospitality cannot be ignored as she provided an open home, a warm loving welcome to the itinerant preacher. This was important considering the long distances they needed to cover in the course of their preaching. Similarly, women Ministers of the PCC have balanced ministry and hospitality. The heavy demands of ministry are complimented by their roles as mothers, wives, home makers, care givers, nurturers etc. The few women who have attained some appointed hierarchically dictated roles have impacted the larger society positively. It is therefore obvious that, there is no limitation on women holding the highest religious offices in the church.

This serves as a challenge to church systems that claim to be faithful to Jesus' life and mission, yet they are fundamentally distorted by patriarchal structures and sexist

attitudes and practices. Jesus' mission wasn't gender bias, it was gender inclusive. He revolutionized the lives of women offering them what was totally different from their usual treatment in a male centered world. Jesus condemned double standards, (John 8:1-8), exclusion, (Luke 8:1-4; Luke 10:38-42), and saw no limits on women's God given destinies, (Luke 10:42).

The biblical story of Mary and Martha therefore, shows us something special about Jesus' ministry. It also shows that church leadership that goes beyond gender stereotyping models after Jesus. It equally means that the dignity of men and women cannot be negotiated, and so public perceptions on women will change as more women assume leadership functions within the religious sphere.

Jubilee is therefore a celebration of God's welcome of female Ministers as full human beings in his own image. It is the celebration of women called and equipped, for them to lead others to eternal life, thus breaking the discrimination against women. The ordination of women by the PCC is acknowledgement that women are endowed with strengths and capabilities, and that they are indispensable for the growth of the church and the Gospel. Jesus attitude shows that the ministry of women is an impetus and in no way a hindrance to the Gospel. ☺



Photos: EMS/David Bethel

Yele (2. from left) during morning prayer of EMS Bible Workshop in Abokobi/Ghana in April 2017

A big step for a small church

First ordination of a woman in the Middle East

Katja Dorothea Buck is a journalist and editor in chief of Schneller Magazine.

Who would have thought that Tripoli of all places would go down in modern church history?!

In the past few years, the second largest city in Lebanon was the scene of repeated bloody skirmishes.

And of all places it was the small Evangelical Church of Tripoli where Rola Sleiman was ordained as the first woman pastor in the Middle East at the end of February.

This step was long overdue. For decades, it is not only the Protestants in Lebanon and Syria who have discussed whether women should be admitted to the office of pastor. This question has also arisen in Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, in fact all over the Middle East where female theologians study. Here it is not only a matter of formal gender equality, it also affects employment opportunities. In general, highly qualified female theologians – and there are quite a few in the Middle East – are only deployed by their churches to do children and youth work.

And in all the churches in the Middle East, even the Evangelical churches, it has always been men who have lead the way. It is by no means easy to find a majority among them to support the ordination of women. Every female theologian between the Euphrates and the Nile has heard the counter-arguments all too often. It is not written in the Bible. Or: women have a totally different role to play in society than men. And Ecumenism is always a favourite card that is played. In particular many church leaders feel that a woman pastor would not be taken seriously by Orthodox or Catholic colleagues. Women and men who stand up for the ordination of women always come up against the reproach that they would divide their church.

A particularly bitter pill to swallow for many protagonists was that, of all things, the Arab Spring, which all of a sudden sparked off discussions about gender equality and democracy everywhere, served hardliners as a clear-cut counter-argument: in troubled times, there were far more important problems to solve than the discussion about women in the office of pastor.

Finally, at the end of January, a majority decision was reached by the men with voting rights at the NESSL. Promptly five weeks later, the Church invited Rola Sleiman to become ordained. Since 2008, she had already been more or less playing the role of pastor at the small Evangelical church in Tripoli. That was when the pastor had emigrated to the USA and the parish, where Rola Sleiman herself originates from, feared to remain without a pastor. The resolute woman who studied Protestant theology in Beirut simply started, without asking too many questions, to organise parish life and to preach and became female minister to about 30 families in the parish. Word soon reached the ears of the Church Office in Beirut that she was very much appreciated by her parish.

At the end of March, the NESSL ordained the second woman pastor. Najla Kassab is currently responsible at the Church Office for the sector of Christian education. She has gained an international reputation as a distinguished theologian.

It remains to be seen the extent to which the decision at NESSL will affect other Evangelical churches in the Middle East. But the ordination of Rola Sleiman was celebrated by the women's organisations in Lebanon. She was applauded as "number one role model" at the International Women's Day at the beginning of March. ☺



Ordination service of Rev. Rola Sleiman

Photos: NESSL/Sleiman by kind permission of Schneller Magazine 2/2017

Vashti refuses to come

'No more Silence' – The Voice of the Voiceless

Rev.JM Sharath Sowseelya, Presbyterian in Church of South India is doing PhD at present at the University of Heidelberg, Germany for a semester exposure.

Photo: EMS/private



Vashti refuses obedience! She refuses to come at her king's and husband's command! She does not want to be displayed.

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold.

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.

Ester 1, 10-12

King Ahasveros commands Vashti to appear and display her beauty to his guests who were princes and nobles from all realms.

The king's intention was to show off his wealth and power and he wanted to display the beauty of his wife Vashti as his status symbol, as one of his possessions. Her role as a wife is to be 'obedient' and 'pleasing' yielding to the stupid desires of a husband.

The story of Vashti can easily be translated into the present day context. The majority of women and girls in India are exposed to discrimination and disadvantage in family, society and working life. Too many become victims of domestic violence, brutal rape also within marriage, dowry and honour killing, caste-based discrimination.

Queen Vashti stands out as a powerful woman with self-respect and dignity in a context where women are expected to present themselves solely objects for the enjoyment of men. Vashti is a feminist hero who successfully opposed the legitimized unjust structure. She did not remain silent and yield to the patriarchal structure.

The feminist reflection of Vashti appears as a new paradigm as the suitable response of women towards the present day context. Can this Bible verse yield freedom for more gender justice today? Vashti by her disobedience, elegantly, exposed the content of the Bible as the basis for liberation and equality. Empowered by this understanding of the truth, no woman should remain silent. Women should take Vashti as a model and they should raise their voices against patriarchal dominance, injustice and violence and stand up for their rights. ≤

Dignity for Hagar

“You are the God who sees me.”

Gabriele Mayer, PhD, Women and Gender Desk and Intercultural Education Unit at the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity.



Where does the passage chosen as the slogan for the 2017 Kirchentag come from? What is the reference to the passage and at what time did this experience of God take place? The background is a dramatic family conflict. God promised a child to Abram and Sarai but they were still childless in their old age. As a result Hagar, Sarai's personal slave girl, became a surrogate mother, a common practice at that time. At that time children could have several mothers – a biological mother and a social mother – and they grew up in a large patchwork family, larger than many would care to accept today. But many questions remain the same. Who belongs to such a family? Who would it include?

From developmental psychology we know that young children who are shown no attention or see no human face fall sick. Studies of mirror neurons show how even babies react to loving looks and can respond with their own resonance. In the same way the smile of toddlers is one of the greatest experiences of happiness for contact persons.

But let's return to the desert situation which took place in what is now Syria: Hagar is pregnant and feels her body growing. At the same time, in the eyes of her mistress, she loses her value and her respect. Values shift and rivalry grows rampant. Sarai feels humiliated – and humiliates Hagar who then flees into the desert.

A coloured slave, pregnant, a refugee, is asked where she comes from! According to Hebrew tradition and laws a run-away slave had to be granted protection. Perhaps this was the source of Hagar's courage to confide to the unknown messenger without hesitation that she had run away from her mistress Sarai.



Jürgen Ebach reproduced the Biblical text taken from the first book of the Bible in this form. In his opinion the angel of the Lord receives the chance to reveal his message because of Hagar's silence. What else could she have said when her main concern at the time was only to survive? Only after the third revelation did she realise what was actually happening here and she asked herself, am I not now looking at God who sees me? Genesis 16:13 is the first time in the Bible that a refugee, a coloured woman, puts her experience of God into words and gives God a name.

In my attempt to find a parallel between Hagar's story and our context, one question repeatedly arose and stood fiercely in the way: who does this experience of God belong to? Are we entitled to hear it for ourselves? First of all it requires us to change our perspective on things. Most of us readers are not Hagar and other than those who are struggling for survival, we belong more to the elite like Sarai and Abram, and justifiably so. Despite many a concern for the future, we live on the sunny side of life in Europe when compared to world-wide standards. In 1993, Delores Williams realised a basic experience in black women who have been deprived of their rights in "Sisters in the Wilderness" and developed her womanist theology. We must first listen to their voices and respect them.

But we also know the longing for God to turn his attention to us, to hear that His blessing is directed at us – as spoken at the end of every worship service. But then it is also the benevolent eye of God which we long for and which pushes us to look at the world around us. "Where is your brother, where is your sister?" Part of this task is also to cast a critical eye on our entanglement in unjust situations and on our privileges. And that takes courage .¹

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The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." 11 And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin." So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?"

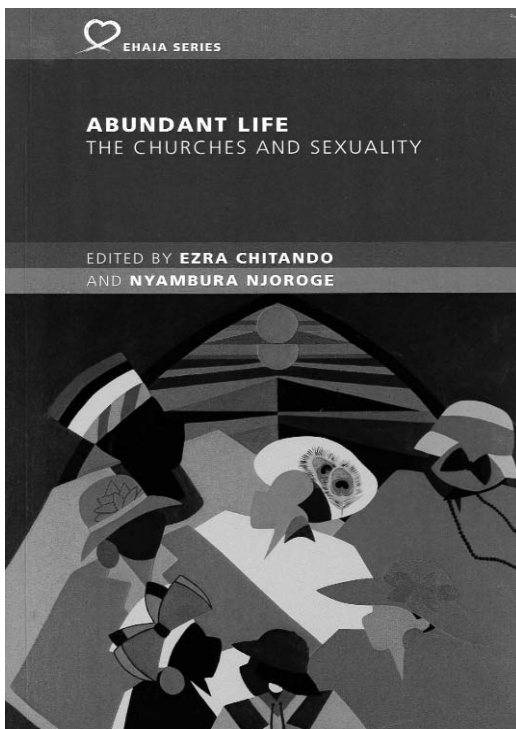
Genesis 16, 7-13



Philip baptizes an eunuch

Acts 8:26-40

Biblical reflections by Ayoko Bahun Wilson and Godson Lawson from Togo



In EHAIA SERIES of WCC Ezra Chitando and Nyambura Njoroge published "Abundant Life – The Churches and Sexuality", 2016 Geneva.

Two theologians from Togo wrote the following article on Acts 8, HIV/AIDS and sexual minorities.

This passage from the book of Acts is most often used to illustrate one of the mandates of the church, which is the mission and obligation of the early church to go out of Jerusalem and share the good news of Jesus Christ.

When looking at the characters of the text, however, their function and their social and religious status, one quickly realizes that the story also calls for breaking barriers while inviting people from the outskirts of the Christian faith.

The identities that the evangelist Luke gives the neophyte candidate, in this instance for baptism, are very revealing.

1. The person in question is an eunuch, certainly an important social status but physiologically disqualified from accessing the services and rituals, especially the assemblies and priesthoods, as outlined in the Mosaic law. Isaiah at his time had tried to re-establish the rights of eunuchs. He said:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree.

... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Isaiah 56: 3-7

Isiah's prophecy already reflected his awareness of the discrimination and stigma that were applied to eunuchs by showing compassion and calling for greater tolerance and openness.

2. The person in question is therefore a non-Jewish Ethiopian whom modern historiography has assimilated to Kushite tribes or inhabitants of the city of Meroe. Because of their bravery and fearlessness toward mercenaries in the wars in the region, they were considered as formidable enemies to the armies of Israel and their God. They suffered from the prying eyes of the Israelites. The two people lived permanently in reciprocal contempt and fear.
3. The place where the scene took place reflects the reality of the desert. While a geographical location, it also refers to a situation where people are left abandoned, deprived of the assistance and protection of others, especially of friends and of relationships. In this text, the desert can be understood as a time and a theological theme that calls for solidarity of each to his brother or sister; a meeting and experience place in the manifestation of salvation given to all in Jesus Christ, a best place of mission.

The consequences of infection have created, without a doubt, many deserts in the church, where men and women live in a bruised, imprescriptible desert, unaided, prostrate on the bank of despair, and without hope. The courage of the church in integrating the concerns of sexual minorities can only happen through the following sound approaches:

○ Restoring communication.

The restoration of communication will strengthen relationships between all strata in the defense of common interests and to reduce stigma and discrimination against sexual minorities.

It requires the virtues of simplicity, the ability to listen to others, trust in oneself and others, and the desire to work together against the common enemy, which is HIV. Restoration of communication will rid the religious communities of all doctrinal and cultural slag, particularly arrogance. Briefly, this is to create an open and generous community.

○ Otherness: a source of wealth.

"The atmosphere participates in several envelopes that dress, constrain and protect the individual" (Albert Jakubowicz, 1996).

Sexual minorities use their perception of the social environment as "well-being or not at ease," as a reference point to which they must adapt if they are not to be subjected to gossip, rumours, and social stigma. They identify values, weigh them, assert their determination, or exclude themselves from them. In most cases, the individual comes to the same result: misunderstanding.

Taking into consideration the positive values of otherness helps to provide opportunities for adaptation and social integration of sexual minorities beyond sexual difference or sexual orientation, its purpose is to bring sexual minorities in their openness to others and to the other, in his or her relations with all other humans.

HIV infection requires the church to embrace an ethic that takes full account of the specific person, with his or her values, life plans, hopes, and in other words, an ethic that takes account of the whole person.

○ Visit social deserts.

There are many communities of frustrated people living in solitude and waiting to be recognized simply as a human beings. These people sometimes leave churches and feel abandoned and ostracized. Like Philip, the deacon, churches are called to seek and find within themselves these arid places in the different constituted groups.

○ Creation of specialized listening centres and chaplaincies.

From all diaconal activities, listening centres and chaplaincies occupy a strategic place in churches. The multifaceted nature of HIV infection calls for the creation of real structures to meet the spiritual, religious, and social needs of sexual minorities, especially in the areas of access to care and treatment.

These chaplaincies also serve as family mediation space for counselling and support. The confidentiality must be strict to avoid exposing sexual minorities.

No doubt, HIV infection is at the heart of the church in Africa today. It grows like an octopus whose ramifications are difficult to control, posing new challenges to society, culture, and especially the faith of the church.

This requires a great deal of courage from religious institutions to meet these challenges. In situations of infection people still seem to be left stranded without possibility of psychosocial support.

But the gospel sends us:

»The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.«

Luke 4:18

What we must not forget is that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals are part of so many families, and are part of the human family, the family of God, and, of course, the African family.

The church must hear their cries rising increasingly and act with justice and compassion to ensure that their sexual and reproductive health rights are upheld. ☞

NEWS FROM EMS WOMEN'S NETWORK

GHANA

Rev. Rebecca F.A. Abladey, Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) writes:

To the glory of God, the Annual World Day of Prayer was celebrated on March 3rd, 2017 among many Churches in Ghana especially the Women's Fellowship within the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Presby/Methodist United Church and other Churches.

I had the opportunity to observe the Ga West Presbytery Women's Fellowship praying intensely for global issues, churches and considering the socio-economic challenges in Filipino as well as other places affecting women mainly.

The Christ Congregation Women's Fellowship mobilized other women in the congregation to act in a drama the situation of the Filipino women. After the drama, the question of "Am I being unfair to you?" was reflected upon by the congregation putting Mathew 20:1-16 into context.

Members provided some items like rice, vegetables and fruits to demonstrate the hardworking labour of women in trade and other agricultural areas. These food stuffs were donated after the programme to some of the sick members. ☺



SOUTH KOREA:

Hyunjoo Hwang from Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) sent the following photos:



LEBANON:

Liaison woman Wadia Badr, "Helping Hand Association" at National Evangelical Church of Beirut (NECB) reports:

The World Day of Prayer (WDP) was celebrated on March 3, 2017 at the Near East School of Theology (NEST), where members from different denominations and congregations in Beirut, speaking different languages (Arabic, German, French and English), gathered together to pray and sing with the women of the Philippines on the theme: Am I being unfair to you?

Two women from the NECB, Dr. Renee Ghattas and Mrs. Samia Boulad, are on the Lebanese committee of the WDP and shared in the preparations for this day. Dr. Ghattas is also a member of the Schneller Board at the NECB.

Dr. Ghattas gave in her speech different examples of unfairness in the world around us and affirmed that in order to build and sustain a just society and community, it is necessary to help each other and practice compassion, love and care for one another. She concluded by saying that God is fair to us but: Are we fair to God and His commandments?

The Lord's Prayer was sung during the service by a Philippine sister and little bags of rice were distributed by two young women (wearing Philippine costumes) as a symbol of bringing hope to this unfair world. Finally, Philippine sweets were served. ☺



CELEBRATING WORLD DAY OF PRAYER IN CAMEROON – AN INTERVIEW WITH MARGARETE DINKELAKER

Margarete Dinkelaker lived and taught wives of students of the Theological Seminar in Kumba/Cameroon.. Together with her husband, Dr. Bernhard Dinkelaker, did they share their lives with the campus community for several months 2016/2017.

Margarete, how did you experience this year's preparations for the celebrations of World Day of Prayer (WDP) with the liturgy prepared by women from the Philippines?

Due to the political tensions in South West Cameroon our travel to Cameroon was delayed three times. Originally I had planned to read the liturgy together with the students' wives before the celebrations. I had wanted to learn the songs with them and learn more about the situation in the country. But everything turned out quite differently.

We arrived only a few days before WDP but we managed to buy liturgy booklets just in time. The colourful cover and inspiring information on the artist and the country made me curious. Unfortunately, due to the fixed weekly programme of the women's group there was no time left to look closer into the country context of the Philippines and the challenging topic of "Justice".

On March 3rd at 1pm we met at the seminar to drive to Kumba City without knowing exactly when the service would start. After some time of searching and waiting we arrived at the Catholic cathedral at 2 pm. The church was still empty. During the following hours we rehearsed the role play, decorated altar and front area and at 4 pm an elderly priest started to preach for quite a long time.

Gradually, more and more people entered the church and finally about 1.000 women filled the benches. After some time the official WDP Committee opened the service. This preparation team consisted of 30 women who represented the diverse denominations in Kumba. They were easily recognizable by the WDP uniform that they all wore.

How did you personally experience the service?

In this region of Cameroon Pidgin English is spoken but the liturgy was printed in English. Thus, for many women it was a real challenge to follow the spoken and written texts.

Additionally a heavy rain fall just at the beginning of the role play disturbed us – rainy season had begun at March 1st. The noise of the rain on the corrugated roof made it almost impossible to hear anything.

The women had asked you to teach them the music. What about the melodies from the Philippines?

The songs for the service had been chosen from Cameroonian tradition, popular hymns, songs of praise which were familiar to all the women. We didn't sing any songs from the Philippines – this would have required a lot of practice.

Were there any special liturgical elements or symbols used during the service?

During the collection all the women moved to the front dancing. After this every woman received a small rice sachet to take home. Another beautiful gesture was that the pieces of cloth which was used for the uniforms of the different women's groups had been knotted together and formed a long ribbon – a symbol for the connectedness despite denominational differences: Presbyterians, Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, women from the Apostolic church...

The WPD service had been prepared by women from different denominations. Similarly, they also organised a meeting to evaluate the WPD service. The women of our congregation also met and had a somewhat critical wrap-up. Many didn't like the long sermon of the priest. But there were mixed reactions to this criticism as it seems that some people find it difficult to comment? people in authority. On the other hand, they strongly criticized themselves for not having brought along some bread for the shared meal as the other groups had done.

Thank you for the interview, Margarete!

The interview was done by Gabriele Mayer. ☺



Photos: EMS/Dinkelaker

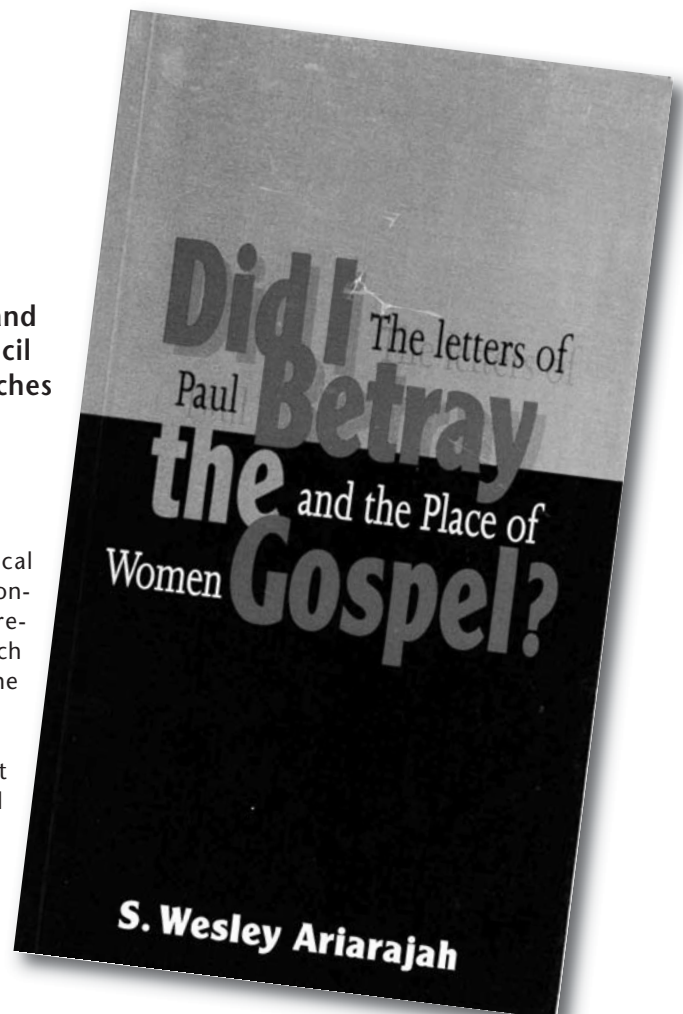


S. Wesley Ariarajah: Did I Betray the Gospel? The letters of Paul and the Place of Women.

The author is a Methodist minister from Sri Lanka and former deputy general secretary of the World Council of Churches during the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998).

Team visits around the world at the middle of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women have disclosed concern, uncertainty and sharp disagreement in many places regarding the Bible's teaching on the place of women in the church and the relationship between women and men. Central to the debate are several passages in Paul's writings.

This is a bold and imaginative effort to shed light on what Paul wrote in the first century by asking how he might respond today if invited to offer advice on issues arising in these mid-Decade visits. The four imaginary letters focus on the context and implications of the controversial passages from the New Testament epistles, ordination of women to the ministry, violence against women and ways of interpreting scripture to discern God's will.



Galatians 3:28

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

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Articles identified by an author do not necessarily reflect the editors' opinion. Copies or reprint welcome, please indicate EMS source.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully
and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

Psalms 139, 13-17



Evangelical Mission in Solidarity