

Female theologians discuss peace-building

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Do women have a special role in promoting peace and reconciliation? The answer from nine women from seven countries is a convincing 'yes'. They are all theologians who take part in an international course in Jerusalem to study women's roles in peacebuilding, exchange experiences and learn from each other. The programme gives rich opportunities for meetings with groups and individuals from different religions, thus offering an added value to their weeks of study.

In Nagaland, India, 98% of the people are Christian. They have been fighting for independence ever since 1947, with the only result being internal conflicts. The women started a campaign, 'Shed no more blood', and the killings have been reduced. An old tradition in Nagaland is the so-called Phukhareila. When a woman gets married to a man from another village she moves there and is supposed to be a mediator. If the villages start fighting, she goes to the battlefield and makes peace. All initiatives from authorities in the society and church, where all are men, have failed. Now the men ask the women to make peace and to use the old tradition. 'Only women can help', they say. It is a challenge and an opportunity for the women.

This is told by Eyingbeni Humstoe, who is a Baptist and student at Trinity College in Singapore, and active in women's movements for peace and reconciliation. She is one of nine theologians from seven different countries who attend the international course at the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem, during nine weeks in autumn 2006. The course is run by the Church of Sweden. The aim is to give further education and create networks and possibilities for mutual sharing. This year's theme is 'Women's roles in promoting peace and reconciliation', and only women are invited. The women are either students or teachers at the institutions and/or are involved in work for interfaith, peace and reconciliation in their churches. Some of the women are ordained, some will be ordained when they have completed their studies and some have other vocations in the church. The participants are expected to bring back their newly gained knowledge to their institutions and churches, and to make use of their experiences to promote peace and reconciliation.

Patriarchal hierarchy

To be in Jerusalem is very special in many ways, and to see the well-known holy places from the Bible and all the pilgrims is a touching experience. We also see heavily armed soldiers stopping Muslims from entering holy places. We see the wall, the uprooted olive trees, the museums of the genocides of the Armenian and Jewish people, the inequality between men and women, the patriarchal hierarchy in the religions, and that puts us all directly to the problem. The people in this world are crying out for peace. Women have special gifts, but they are rarely recognised, and the male culture and values are so strong. We often explain violence by saying that poor, marginalised and frustrated people don't see any other possibility than to fight and find their identity in gangs and criminal groups. Who are among the poorest people in the world? The women and the children. How many of them are criminals and members of violent groups?

Almost everyone in the group talks about the submission of women. There are laws and traditions where women don't inherit and where it is a catastrophe to have only girls, and therefore a necessity to remarry or to adopt a boy for the inheritance. The violence against women is also everywhere, and on top of that they are often blamed and punished.

Religion is often a part of a conflict or used as a reason, but can the religion also be a driving force for the solution? The women, once again, answer yes. That is a reason for being here, to learn more about the religions, meet people and learn from one another. The group meets representatives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam to learn about their history and the present situation of the three religions. In encounters with interfaith groups, peace organisations and

individuals, we meet different people and hear their stories. We listen and discuss. We visit groups in the villages and in the cities. We study Sarah and Hagar from the different perspectives of the three religions.

Dr Helene Egnell, a pastor in a local parish of the Church of Sweden, is our guest lecturer for a week in December. She deepens our knowledge about female approaches to interfaith dialogue, which is the subject of her dissertation. Our experience, as well as Helene's research, says that in general it is easy for women to talk when they meet and to discuss at a woman to woman level. When we walked in Old Jerusalem some of the women stopped and talked to other women over the barriers of language. Simple conversation about children, food and clothes. Smiles and laughter. We look forward to many more encounters.

Empowerment and marginalisation

Are women different concerning peacemaking? Emeline Endossi, a Lutheran teacher from Makumira Theological College in Arusha, Tanzania, answers yes: "The first priority for a woman is her children. Will a woman start a war that kills her children? Many men also love their children, but when it comes to conflict they lose sense and think it is best to show their strength. Women think it is best to live and nourish the kids. If women were in power and if men listened to them, we could often solve the situations without violence."

Power is, of course, an important factor in peace and reconciliation and has to be considered during our course weeks. Over and over again, the subject of women as marginalised people comes up. Women have great possibilities to work for peace and reconciliation but are limited by dehumanisation and illiteracy. The Circle of Concerned Women Theologians is a pan-African association of women who study the role and impact of religion and culture on African women's lives. It empowers female theologians to interpret the Bible from a women's perspective and to bring the message to illiterate women, who are often trapped in a male culture that dehumanises them. Bridget Masaiti, a Methodist from Zambia studying at the School of Theology in KwaZuluNatal, South Africa, is a member of the Circle. She told us about her own empowering, and how she was able to go to her family and make peace and reconcile with her mother.

Globalisation is a factor that creates a growing gap between rich and poor, and also stirs up conflicts. People get displaced because of the construction of dams, highways, luxurious houses and industries. The displaced people never receive the advantages of this but instead lose their meagre property and their dignity. This is a serious problem in India. Margaret Kalaiselvi, a pastor in the Church of South India and a teacher at Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, and Percis Peters, a pastor in the Methodist church and a student at Gurukul Theological Seminary in Chennai, see this as a growing basis for anger among young people.

The violent games and films people play and watch also foster a culture of violence and of dehumanisation of "the other". "The other" can be a rich person, a woman, someone of another cast or someone from another religion. The Indian government is doing a lot to promote peaceful coexistence, but it is not enough. Although the Christians are in the minority, they can play an important role. Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary has a theme for the work: "Living faiths in communities" towards gender justice.

The leaders and their sensitivity to the context are important. Deborah Garcia, a Baptist and teacher at two theological seminars in Managua, Nicaragua, is engaged in the education of leaders at several levels. They work with the understanding of new paradigms and the globalisation process to be able to promote peace in a society deeply injured by wars, and now threatened by strong conservative movements in both society and church.

Dangerous criticism

Dehumanisation is coming up all the time. Mariefe Revollido, a teacher at Aglipay Central Theological Seminary of the Philippine Independent Church, also mentions this. The Philippines have been exploited by colonisers and still experience an unjust society with a lot of corruption and violence. To criticise the rulers and to defend the poor is dangerous, and her husband is under threat. A bishop has recently been murdered, because he followed the motto 'The church must be with the people'.

The dehumanisation and the otherness is very evident in the Holy Land. Just walk around in the streets or pass a checkpoint, and you will see it. Just listen to people on both sides talking about 'the other'. All of us feel the anger as we see the uprooted trees and the dividing wall especially in Bethlehem, where it will soon strangle the whole town. We are back again to the question of power and how it relates to peace and reconciliation. Another question is how to convert the anger into a peaceful force.

Safà Abu Assab, a Moslem Palestinian, talked warmly about Ramadan as a tool for peace and reconciliation. During Ramadan people ask for forgiveness and try to sort out problems. Safà uses to invite neighbours for breakfast or Iftar, the breaking of the fast, during Ramadan. It is a way of seeing each other, to share and become friends. It is a good way of preventing conflict, and the meal is important in the three religions. In December the group will celebrate Hanukka and Christmas with an interfaith group that meets regularly at STI.

The Swedish participant, Karin Aldén, studying theology in Lund to become a pastor in Church of Sweden, diocese of Stockholm, sees that she is very privileged, living in a rich and peaceful society, but that the ministry of reconciliation is ongoing, as conflicts are always present where at least two people are together.

During eight weeks the women work with their new impressions and experiences. An intense process has already started in the group and we discuss the issues of power, marginalisation, empowerment, human rights and how they relate to women, and their role as religious women to promote peace and reconciliation. One moment we think we have understood something, but suddenly someone gives another perspective, and we have to re-think. 'It'll never be the same person?', said one of the participants. Everyone is of course aware that there are conflicts among women, too, but we have to focus on the rich possibilities in the 50% of humanity.

The Church of Sweden runs this course because of the ministry of the Church, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:18: 'All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.' The religion should be a tool for peace and reconciliation, and this course focuses on the special role of women. These women will not put their new experiences in a drawer as a good memory. They will go on working with all of their possibilities for a just society, and for peace and reconciliation.

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