

The Ecumenical Margins

Society for Ecumenical Studies

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Ecumenism of the marginalised

The Revd Jean Mayland, Secretary for the Community of Women and Men in the Church and then Co-ordinating Secretary for Church Life at Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 1995-2003

People are marginalised for a whole variety of issues including race, colour and poverty. Others are far more competent to speak of those issues than I am. I wish to speak of people who are marginalised for different reasons. I want to begin with five short stories or vignettes.

Story One

It is October 1999 and my secretary, Anne van Staveren, and I are in York for the launch of a book published by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), entitled *The Courage to Tell*. It tells the stories of survivors of sexual abuse in their own words and is illustrated by pictures from a wall hanging made out of squares of material, which they have embroidered to illustrate their journey and their hope. First we attend a service in York Minister to celebrate ten years of Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse (CSSA). Then we move over to the Choir School for the launch of the book.

At the launch we are overwhelmed by the pain and the anger of the survivors against the Church. In their pain they hang on to God – but the Church, they feel, has failed them totally and marginalised them completely. Clergy have failed to give adequate pastoral care and, what is even worse, some clergy have actually themselves abused those who have come to them for help.

Story Two

It is late autumn 2000 and I walk through brightly lit streets and past elegant hotels in London's Hyde Park area, searching for the church in the vestry of which I am to meet a group of gay Christians and talk with them about Churches Together in Britain and Ireland's position on the issue. Our position is, of course, that we do not have a position, although we agreed as staff that there should be no place for homophobia in the Church and we see our role as helping the Churches to handle their differences on this issue as lovingly as possible. When I find the church and the vestry, I meet with a band of sad, depressed and in some ways frightened men. As the evening goes on, they tell me of their pain, their love of God, their clinging on to the Church and yet their experience of being marginalised and rejected. One tells me that he had been a churchwarden, but after the Revd Tony Higon (when a member of the General Synod of the Church of England) had carried his private member's motion condemning homosexuals in General Synod, he had resigned from that office, feeling rejected. Other stories were similar - sincere Christian men who believed that their commitment to their partners was acceptable to God, but not acceptable to the Church. Somehow these men had held on to worship and the sacraments, as well as on to God. The sense of rejection and marginalisation, coupled with the faithfulness to the Church and the love of God, made me want to weep; but it also made me angry with the Church.

Story Three

It is Dublin, June 2001. Women from all over the world are gathered for the First International Conference of Women's Ordination World-wide (WOW). Although the origin of WOW was ecumenical, and this still remains the vision of WOW, at this moment in time it is mainly working towards the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Tradition. There were women present from other Churches but the majority were Roman Catholic women. Again I was struck by the love of God, the loyalty to the Church combined with terrible pain and almost palpable fear. Sister Joan Chittister (one of the main speakers) and Sister Myra Poole, one of the main organisers, had been threatened with excommunication if they attended the Conference. Joan was backed by her

Order and came and spoke passionately and prophetically. Myra was not supported by her Order and struggled painfully with the issue for weeks. We assured her of our prayers and our support whatever choice she made. The Conference began and Myra was not there. "She'll never live with herself," I thought; but I understood her terrible dilemma. On the second evening there was a panel of women from developing countries whose fees and travel money Myra had raised. As the evening ended, Myra walked in and the whole place went crazy. Myra wrote afterwards that by the time she left for Dublin, she was nearly paralysed with fear. We all wrote letters of support to Bishops and Cardinals and in the end the Vatican climbed down and a press release was issued by the Pope's press spokesman:

"While the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life had thought the Sisters' participation 'inopportune' because of the possibility of outside manipulation, the Congregation never considered taking disciplinary measures."

In her book Myra Poole comments,

"It is interesting to note that there was no formal communication of this decision to those Superiors who had been advised to put both Sisters under 'formal obedience'. All concerned only heard through a press release!"(1)

Story Four

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales have agreed areas of ministry which are open to women, but they have not provided training and finance. Roman Catholic women plan to run a training course in York with the help of a lecturer from that city. They plan to train for the ministries now open to them, but hope and pray that one day those ministries may include priesthood. Peter Stanford, former Editor of *The Times*, attended the first meeting as a speaker and wrote about it afterwards in *The Tablet*. He was struck by the atmosphere of fear and the threats, which a number of the women present had received. He commented on the Pope's ruling that the issue of women's ordination was not even to be discussed:

“The effect that such a gagging order is having on the Church was all too visible and all too painful at York.”(2)

He said later in the article,

“In an open tolerant society that firmly believes men and women to be equal, the Church cannot try to silence its critics in this fashion without suffering consequence.”(3)

Story Five

A trust fund was planned to pay for the training. It was to be called the Theresa of Lisieux Fund and the launch was planned for 1 October 2003, St Theresa of Lisieux Day. The place was Vaughan House, near to Westminster Cathedral. As we welcomed those arriving for the meeting, I was on the door. The atmosphere of fear was again palpable – fear that protests may be made that the fund was for purposes not countenanced by the Bishops. The fear was to some extent justified. The next year the annual meeting was banned from Vaughan House and was held in the American Church in London.

An ecumenism of Fear and Pain

These marginalised groups share an ecumenism of fear and pain together with a love of God and in most cases an amazing loyalty to the Church. They also share an ecumenism of neglect and misunderstanding – even from and by church leaders who should know better. At the Forum of Churches Together in England in July 2003, Cardinal Murphy O’Connor and Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, stood together in the platform. Cardinal Murphy O’Connor said that they had both suffered recently from bad publicity, he about sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church and the Archbishop about the nomination of a gay priest as a bishop in the Church of England. They both commiserated with one another. I was furious. I thought, “How dare you? You are both feeling sorry for one another. Have you no idea of the suffering of those who have been sexually abused, or the mental and spiritual anguish of gay people marginalised for their sexuality?”

A shared sense of being a problem.

Women and gay people always seem to be seen as a problem by Church leaders. They are a problem because they are seen to cause division within and between churches. Women priests have for years found themselves labelled as an “ecumenical problem”, rather than as people with skills and possibilities. Gay priests also suffer because of people’s opinions of them, while their pastoral gifts and sensitivities are ignored.

Be honest in our ecumenism

These people from the margins challenge us to be honest in our ecumenism. The official Roman Catholic Church castigates the Church of England for having women priests and gay priests and married clergy. All these are said to be serious obstacles to unity. Yet, if the truth were acknowledged, the Roman Catholic Church has many gay priests, many priests who long to be married, many priests who have partners and children, and many women who have an urgent vocation to the priesthood. These issues are issues for all the Churches and we should be absolutely honest about it.

The Anglican Communion is struggling with the issue of gay priests and bishops and the blessing of the unions of gay people. At least it is trying to be honest; and, on the day after the Windsor Report on the issues of homosexuality was published, *The Times* newspaper in a leader congratulated the Communion for its honesty:

“The schism in the Church, between conservatives from Nigeria to Australia and liberals throughout the West, mirrors divisions in wider society. That the Church reflects such debates is ultimately a matter for celebration, not condemnation or despair.” (4)

Within the Anglican Communion, some of the African Churches have threatened to break away. A grouping has been formed within the Church of England to press the need to hold together in its differences and be an inclusive church. Aptly enough, it is called “Inclusive Church”. On the day of the launch of the Windsor Report, it issued the following statement:

“The Archbishop of Nigeria , Peter Akinola , has said two people cannot walk together unless they are in agreement. Inclusive Church disagrees fundamentally. We are totally committed to celebrating the Anglican tradition of inclusion and diversity, which is the gift and grace of the church.”(5)

There are deep differences on these issues in and between the Churches. Our ecumenical task is to find a way of walking together, while having these deep differences. The differences involve people – vulnerable people and hurt people - and they challenge us to make our ecumenism real.

Hold together traditional ecumenism and new issues from the margins

The traditional issues discussed in unity talks between the Churches are those of baptism, Eucharist and ministry, use of the Bible, Church tradition and liturgy, etc. There is, however, a whole new raft of issues being raised by Christians on the margins which need to be held together. These issues include those we have already mentioned: women, sexuality, diversity, sexual abuse, etc.

At the end of *The Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women*, Dr Janet Crawford wrote an article in the special edition of the *Ecumenical Review*, in which she commented on the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Women’s Desk. She described them as working on parallel lines without ever meeting. She was well qualified to write , as she had served as a member of the Faith and Order Commission and had also worked for a time at the Women’s Desk, preparing for the Sheffield Conference and analysing the results of the Study on the Community of Women and Men in the Church.

She pointed out that, at the inaugurating Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam in 1948, women insisted that “the question of women’s place in the Church was a theological and ecclesiological issue, that

it had to do with the very nature of the Church and their membership in the body of Christ.”(6)

She demonstrated that the Faith and Order Commission had worked on a whole range of issues, but had consistently failed to face up to, or even to recognise, the impact of these matters on women and had never encouraged the inclusion of women’s perspectives on ecclesiology. The concerns of women expressed during *The Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women* had no impact upon the deliberations of Faith and Order. Meanwhile the Women’s Desk had been following theological issues on a parallel track and had faced up to the issues of women throughout the world, including those of ordination.

Janet concluded:

“When will women's ecclesiological questions and challenges be reflected with full seriousness in the ecclesiological studies of Faith and Order? Or will there continue to be two ‘ecclesiological streams’ within the ecumenical movement, a ‘women's stream’ and a ‘Faith and Order stream’? Present indications are that Faith and Order is planning a consultation on *Ministry and Ordination in the Community of Women and Men in the Church* in 2002. This consultation, hoped for since the end of the Community study, called for since at least 1984, and first mooted in this form in 1989 - more than ten years ago! - may provide an opportunity at last for the two streams to flow together and to contribute together to the understanding of *koinonia* and, finally, to the unity and renewal of the Church.”(7)

(We are still waiting for this consultation to be held. It is now 2005.)

The failure of the World Council of Churches to give unequivocal support to ordained women surfaced at the end of the Women’s Gathering in Harare, which marked the close of *The Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women* and took place immediately before the WCC Nairobi Assembly.

On this occasion, failure was shown even by the Women's Desk. In the final statement of the gathering, there was a sentence which read:

“We recognize that there are a number of ethical and theological issues, such as the ordination of women, abortion, divorce, human sexuality in all of its diversity, that have implications for participation and are difficult to address in the church community.”(7)

Ordained women complained that they were tired of being considered an “ecumenical problem” and asked for this reference to be removed. It was not. I protested vigorously to Aruna Gnanadason, the staff member at the Women's Desk. She said that the sentence was there to please the Orthodox. I was very angry, especially as I knew that the Orthodox woman on the drafting group was herself personally in favour of the ordination of women and had only been putting forward the “party line”. Aruna promised me that the Faith and Order Commission and the Women's Desk were going to arrange a special consultation on the Ordination of Women. As indicated above, I am still waiting!

The unity of the Church and the renewal of Human Community

To be fair to the World Council of Churches, efforts have been made to hold together some of the traditional issues of ecumenical dialogue with newer issues that affect the lives of people today. In 1990 they published a report, entitled *Church & World - The Unity of the Church for the Renewal of Human Community*, which attempted to do just that. When the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland held a consultation on issues of unity at the Quaker Centre at Woodbrooke in October 2001, the Bishop of Bristol made reference to this report. He said,

“The way ahead must ensure that these two facets of the World Council's agenda and the agenda of all the ecumenical instruments are kept together.”

The Consultation, however, did not decide to take these issues forward. Instead they chose to have a new investigation of issues of Initiation. This is a very important issue, but so are those of women and gay people, etc.

In the new structure which is being proposed for CTBI, the issues of the marginalised are likely to have an even smaller place; and so it is vital that groups such as the Society for Ecumenical Studies raise the issues of Christian Unity for the Edges of Church and Society.

A new vision for the Church

Perhaps the most vital contribution, which those at the edge of the Church offer to us all, is a new vision of the Church. The Movement for the Ordination of Women in its campaigning for the ordination of women called for a new vision of the Church – one that was round and inclusive and enabling, instead of a hierarchical pyramid which crushed initiative. Along with this was to go inclusive language in worship and a recovery of the expression of the feminine within the being of God. Sadly, some of this vision and idealism has been lost and some women priests have turned out to be as authoritarian and traditional as their brothers. The positive aspect is the fulfilment that the vision of a new Church needs to be realised by men and women of like mind working together. The campaign for women bishops has revived the longing for a different kind of Church and has caused the issues to be re-visited.

Roman Catholic women seeking ordination are not eager to be ordained into the Church as it is. They want a very different kind of Church. Myra Poole and Dorothea McEwan wrote as follows in their book, *Making All Things New*.

“As the nature of the Church is not only institutional, but prophetic and mystical, the author’s preferred model of Church is the more fluid concept of the mystical body of Christ. This model has the potential to incorporate the two primary models of Vatican II, that of the People of God and the Church as a Servant, dynamised by the scriptural vision of the Church.” (9)

They conclude:

“The examples in the preceding chapters of women training and being ordained, of women preaching and running priestless parishes, of musicians appointed as music ministers, have led to a much wider interpretation of ministry.

Their work is about ‘Making All Things New’. The welcome they get is the encouraging sign that beyond Church-as-Institution the Church-as-People-of-God is living and breathing.”(10)

Commitments and Dreams

Two poems which have inspired and do inspire me are, first of all, the statement made at the end of the WCC Assembly at Harare and, secondly, a poem written by a priest in the Diocese of Sheffield used at the final worship service of MOW in Sheffield. He later died of AIDS and his poem was used as part of the worship in Durham Cathedral during the Conference which in Britain and Ireland marked the end of *The Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women*.

Our Ecumenical Vision

Jesus Christ, who has called us to be one, is in our midst!
As Christians from every part of the world, we give thanks
that the triune God has drawn our churches closer together
in faith and life, witness and service.

We celebrate the 50th anniversary of the World Council of Churches –

‘a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God
and Saviour
according to the Scriptures
and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling

to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'

Receiving the legacy of those who have gone before us:

We are drawn by the vision of a church

That will bring all people into communion with God and with one another,

Professing one baptism,

Celebrating one holy communion,

And acknowledging a common ministry.

We are challenged by the vision of a church

Which will express its unity by confessing the apostolic faith,

living in conciliar fellowship,

acting together in mutual accountability.

We are challenged by the vision of a church

That will reach out to everyone,

Sharing,

Caring,

Proclaiming the good news of God's redemption,

A sign of the kingdom and a servant of the world.

We are challenged by the vision of a church,

The people of God on the way together,

Confronting all divisions of race, gender, age or culture,

Striving to realise justice and peace,

Upholding the integrity of creation.

Affirming anew that our task is to embody, here and now,

The vision of what God's people are called to be:

We journey together as a people freed by God's forgiveness.

In the midst of the brokenness of the world,

we proclaim the good news of reconciliation, healing and justice
in Christ.

We journey together as a people with resurrection faith.

In the midst of exclusion and despair,
We embrace, in joy and hope, the promise of life in all its
fullness.

We journey together as a people of prayer.

In the midst of confusion and loss of identity,
we discern signs of God's purpose being fulfilled
and expect the coming of God's reign.

Therefore, this is our vision for the ecumenical movement:

*We recommit ourselves in this 50th anniversary year to strengthen the
World Council of Churches*

as a truly ecumenical fellowship,
fulfilling the purposes for which it was founded –
to the glory of the triune God.

This is a wonderful commitment, which it pays to read over and over again. One feels that if only the Church in Britain had taken it to heart after the Assembly and had tried to pattern its life on it, the situation for the Churches in these islands might be very different today. Instead they have behaved in an opposite direction. They have weakened and undermined ecumenical co-operation, turning in on themselves and withdrawing funding from the ecumenical instruments. Instead of caring about the issues of those at the edge, they have condemned gay people who wish to live together in a sexual relationship, re-emphasized the fact that ordained women are an ecumenical problem – albeit perhaps a provisional one - and failed to provide adequate pastoral care for those who have been sexually abused. The Churches have approached the government for exemption from human rights legislation in

areas of employment and for this have been condemned by the Trade Unions. Some of us feel very ashamed of this.

When I was interviewed for the post of co-ordinating Secretary for Church Life, I quoted the Harare statement and said that I would seek to help the Churches to work together on seeking unity in baptism, eucharist and ministry, but also in reaching out in service to those at the edge. Some of those interviewing did not seem all that keen, but they did appoint me! It was, however, an enormous struggle to get the Churches to consider issues of sexual abuse and sexuality issues. The resistance came most strongly from the large hierarchical Churches and the decision to do work in this area was only initiated with help from the smaller Churches and groups, such as the Quakers. We did manage one consultation on issues of sexuality, albeit a very painful one. With great help from the Methodist Church, we also produced an excellent report on issues of the churches and sexual abuse, entitled *Time for Action*. We maintained links with ordained women and considered the theological issues bound up in violence against women – where the record of the Churches has not been good.

Why stay in the Church?

Sometimes people say, “Why stay in the Church when it is so oppressive and wrapped up in its own divisions and failing to reach out to the edges?” One answers, “Because with all its faults it carries the tradition, which over the centuries has fed and nurtured millions of people.” This tradition is capable of renewal and there are people trying to renew the Church and trying to reach out. It is better to stay in and try to change the Church than to leave and go off in despair. We still need to be able to dream our dreams and, having dreamed, to get down to nitty-gritty action to help to make the dream a reality. Here is my dream, as it was Simon Bailey’s, and I invite you to make it yours:

*I'm dreaming about
a church of sensitivity and openness
a church of healing and welcome.*

*I'm dreaming about
a community of friends that celebrates differences and diversity and
variety,
a community that is forgiving, cherishing, wide open.*

*I dream of
women and men who minister life and laughter and love;
of men and women who minister healing and harmony and hope;
of women and men who minister to each other and minister to the
crying needs of a world that hurts.*

*I dream against the rough climb still to come,
against expectation
against pessimism and despair;*

*I dream, I dream of the clear panorama of the vision of light
Right at the top of the mountain.*

Notes

1. Dorothea McEwan and Myra Poole, *Making All Things New*, Canterbury Press p. 78
2. Peter Stanford, *Viewpoint - stop this witch-hunt*, The Tablet 27 September 2003, p. 2
3. Ibid.
4. *Don't ask, don't tell*, Leader in The Times, Tuesday 19 October 2004
5. Web site of 'Inclusive Church', <http://www.inclusivechurch.net>
6. Janet Crawford, *Women and Ecclesiology - Two Ecumenical Streams*, The Ecumenical Review, January 2001, World Council of Churches
7. Ibid.
8. Letter published at the end of the Women's Gathering in Harare to mark the end of the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women, *Your story is my story, your story is our story*, April 1999, World Council of Churches, p.92
9. Dorothea McEwan and Myra Poole, op.cit. p. 173
10. Ibid. p. 179