

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Women In The Ecumenical Movement

A Call For Deeper Unity In The Churches

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The first mention of what was described as the necessity to consider the right place of women in the Church is to be found in the account of the first World Conference on Faith and Order which was held in Lausanne in 1927. The six women who were present among 400 delegates on that occasion issued a statement which claimed that this subject was "a question of grave moment and should be in the hearts and minds of all"; and further that the Churches would have to re-examine the relationship between men and women if deeper unity were to be promoted, as the missionary tasks of the Church demanded that all the gifts and talents of its members should be utilised.

1927 is a key date in the Ecumenical story, as well as in the story of women in society in general. Beginning in the 19th century and developing rapidly throughout the 20th, several Christian movements had become aware of the scandal of disunity and were discussing ways of dealing with it. Inspired by a desire to give shape and spiritual energy to the wholeness of the Church, Christians of many Churches were working together. Archbishop Söderblom in Sweden and the Patriarch in Constantinople had appealed to the Churches, in the years following the Treaty of Versailles and the setting up of the League of Nations, to take example from the national governments that were embarking on a mission to establish peace among the nations of Europe. If the secular governments could aim to live in harmony, then why not the Churches? In the post-World War I years too, Women's Suffrage was in the forefront of national and international news. The 20th century was to see further accelerating change for women in Church and society.

Between 1927 and 1948, through the work and interest of Visser 't Hooft, Madeleine Barot, Twila Cavert, Sarah Chakko and many others, a survey was undertaken based on a questionnaire that asked women about their past work, and offered them space to express their beliefs and aspirations about the work of the Church. It was the first time since the Reformation that attention was given to gaining a picture of the life and work of women in the Church as a whole, professional and voluntary, evaluating it and seeing hopes for the future.

Committees of 58 countries sent in extensive memoranda, of from 50 to 100 pages each, along with supporting documents indicative of ability, concern, initiative and devotion. Plans were made to publish the collated results in book form, with Kathleen Bliss as editor; and the subject of women in the Church was put on the agenda for the World Council of Churches Assembly in Amsterdam 1948.

The report on the Questionnaire, which was presented by Sarah Chakko to the Assembly, caused "some negative rumblings among the delegates", because of the independent thinking of the women participants. Sarah Chakko explained in the preface that the place and role of women in the Church was "the concern of the Church as a whole and not the problem of women alone." The Assembly recognised that the Church as the Body of Christ consists of men and women, "created as responsible persons to glorify God and to do His will" and further "that this truth, accepted in theory is too often ignored in practice."

In his inaugural address to the Assembly Visser't Hooft revealed how impressed he had been during the war years in Geneva when he saw the courage, efficiency and versatility of the women who were working among war-time refugees in the general uncertainty of a variety of war-time situations. These observations led him to decide that the gifts and talents thus displayed in time of crisis should be available to the Church. The women in question were educated, widely travelled before the war, and during the war had gained experience of leadership that had developed their self-confidence.

Foremost among these heroic women was Madeleine Barot. From 1948 for 30 or more years Madeleine Barot showed in her life and work for the WCC the result of

her education and training. Before the war in Paris she was a member of an ecumenical circle which helped Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox students who were refugees from Eastern Europe. These students studied the Bible together and were lectured by such notables as François Mauriac, Nicholas Berdyaev, Karl Barth and Yves Congar. From the Sorbonne Madeleine went to Rome as librarian at the French School of Archaeology. Her work in the school involved her in archaeological excavations in Crete, Greece and the Middle East. But she still found time to continue her theological interests at the Angelicum and later at the Gregorian, finding that her Protestantism was no barrier at either university. Residing at the French Embassy put her in touch with the Vatican, where she was keenly aware of the power exercised by the Catholic Church. She recalls being present at a service in St. Peter's when Pope Pius XI was carried into the Basilica on his *sedes gestatoria*. Forced to return to Paris in 1940 Madeleine found that her work among refugees deepened her ecumenical spirit. This work put her in touch with Visser 't Hooft and inspired him to call on her for help with the Ecumenical Movement.

Amsterdam 1948 Answers A Need

The Assembly in Amsterdam, which established the WCC, suggested the setting up of a Commission of men and women which would relate to the general structure of the WCC. This was done the following year, 1949, at a meeting of the Central Committee. An official group was given the title "Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church", with Sarah Chakko of India as Chairman and Kathleen Bliss as Secretary. When the Commission held its first meeting at Bossey, Visser't Hooft warned them of the challenges they were facing:

The significance of the Commission must be regarded in the light of the ecumenical movement which seeks to restore the wholeness of the Church and to work for its renewal. Unless women are given more responsibility in the life of their local Churches that renewal cannot be achieved.... The Commission will need an immense amount of tact in getting its ideas across. We are taking up this work when there is a specific crisis in the relationship of men and women and in the world of women themselves.... Have Christians anything specific to say to this situation ? The Churches

have not said anything helpful on the subject, either separately or together. The time has come to say something extremely clear.... We must spend considerable time on laying foundations now; we must not try to do everything at once.

The main concern was "to turn into riches rather than poverty the differences among theological points of view, and to open up more possibilities of service to women." The women who gathered at Bossey for the first meeting of the Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church had come from many parts of the world. They were women who shared varieties of experience. There were German women, highly trained theologians, many of them ordained, who had served as pastors of large Churches during the war. When the men returned in peace time, the women pastors were no longer needed. Their sadness and bitterness proved distressing to the American women. Indian women told of their frustration when, on the achieving of national independence, women were encouraged to take advantage of educational opportunities so as to help to build up the nation. But there was no place for them in the Christian Churches.

The Commission continued to study the issue of women-in-relationship-with-men. In the course of preparation for the Evanston Assembly it was agreed that the long-term aim of the Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church should be to reach a stage where men and women were working together in the Churches and where women were fully accepted . It was expected that this goal could be reached in ten years if the Commission worked steadily to that end. By that time women would be associating "freely and naturally" with men in Church life and would no longer be a majority group with a minority status.

At this point, still in preparation for Evanston, there was a report from India that women's schools were better than men's, a situation which led to insecurity for women, because men felt inferior to them intellectually. And from Ceylon the Rev. Niles reported that, while women held positions in schools and parishes, there was no demand for women ministers.

These considerations were seen as a danger signal. Anxiety was expressed that the Commission was being regarded as a clearing-house for women's concerns. To make clear that the Commission was not limiting its sphere of interest to the cause of women, it was decided that in the preparation for Evanston in 1954 the aims, functions and composition would be reviewed and a new title adopted: "Department of the Man-Woman Relationship in Church and Society". The appointment of an additional staff member, preferably a man, was suggested, together with other administrative adjustments. The new title as approved at Evanston read, "The Department on the Cooperation of Men and Women in Church and Society". It was hoped that the change of title would "avoid giving the false impression that this was a woman's department."

The Department On The Cooperation Of Men And Women

Just before Evanston in 1953, Madeleine Barot was appointed Executive Secretary to the newly designed Department. In the years following Evanston the work of the Department on the Cooperation of Men and Women in Church and Society went ahead with the leadership of Madeleine Barot. Attempts were made through conferences held at Herrenalb in Germany, at Yale in the U.S. and at Odense in Denmark to discuss and examine the question of cooperation between men and women. At Yale the separation between women's and men's work in the Church was deplored and the ideal reiterated. To bring about the ideal it was stated that women would have to be prepared to take more responsibility and "to be ready to surrender their independence when it became a temptation to power, efficiency and ease." The question was deemed important, because it was believed that the cooperation of men and women as the people of God was essential to the vision of a renewed Church. The work of the Department continued to expand to America, Africa and India. The various areas brought their own problems.

But the real problems for the Department were there in Geneva. While the effects of the work were being experienced and appreciated around the world, Madeleine Barot believed that the relationship with the WCC administration had prevented any satisfactory development of policy. Developments within the WCC caused rumours about amalgamation, even elimination. These matters were discussed at a meeting of the working committee in August 1960. In response to the suggestion of Dr.

Eugene Carson Blake that the Department should be amalgamated - therefore eliminated - two members of the committee agreed that, when cooperation would have become an accepted principle, the department would cease to have a function. After much discussion, consultation, deliberation, it was agreed that as this situation did not obtain the department should maintain its identity and be strengthened.

In the following phase, from August 1960 until the 4th Assembly at Uppsala 1968, the work of the department continued to be intensive, efficient, and wide-ranging geographically. Its areas of interest were concerned with the family and marriage, changing sexual conditions, divorce, celibacy, sexual attitudes and practices. Contacts with the International Labour Office and the United Nations on social problems, especially those connected with the employment of women, proved fruitful. The secular organisations shared their resources and expertise and recognized the valuable insights which the department could offer, as representing lay movements around the world. It is important to note that now in 1998 this cooperation still obtains among the Women's Groups, religious and secular. In this country we have the WNC and its link with the UN, where there is valuable cooperation especially in the implementing of the Beijing Action Plan.

Meanwhile, before the Uppsala Assembly in 1968, Madeleine Barot resigned and a temporary replacement was found in Rena Carefa Smart from Sierra Leone. She had been associated with the ecumenical movement since Amsterdam and had been a prominent member of the ecumenical team in Africa that had been set up in 1958. Later she recalled her views on the status of the Department, as she had seen it on her arrival in Geneva in 1966. She spoke frankly and directly of how disconcerted she felt, when she realised that the department was seen as "as an appendage to the WCC," a "step-child", not structurally but "in terms of the people working in other departments":

There was an underlying current of unease because of the realisation that, if we really do our work well and get through to the policy-making people, there would be some radical changes made.

This unease, as found by a newcomer, bears out what Madeleine Barot had felt. It was admitted by all that the position of women in the Churches and in society was unsatisfactory. On the one hand their talents and gifts were spoken of appreciatively as being vital to the promotion of the well-being of all. But the sense of "unease" continued to prevail. To identify and describe this unease was not attempted. But looking back over the story of the Department as it had developed one found clues. At the opening meeting in Bossey in 1949, members were advised that they would "need an immense amount of tact in getting their ideas across." The title of the Commission as had been suggested at Amsterdam in 1948 was changed at Evanston in 1953, as the Commission was being regarded as "a clearing-house for women's concerns." The change of title, it was hoped, would "avoid giving the false impression that this was a women's department." We shall see how Philip Potter as General Secretary of the WCC was later prepared to bite the bullet. Meanwhile, however, another factor intervened to give a new impetus to the situation of women *vis à vis* the WCC. So far no mention has been made of Roman Catholic women.

An Approach From The Vatican

Pope John XXIII had set up the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in 1960. He had approved the delegation of official observers to the WCC 1961 Assembly at New Delhi and had invited Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants to delegate observers to Vatican II. In 1964 17 women had been admitted to the Second Vatican Council as auditrices, in response to a plea from Cardinal Suenens when Pope Paul VI had admitted 13 lay men as auditors. These women, leaders of international Catholic organisations, took an active part in Council commissions. This group was destined to be given a new mission in the Church. Monsignor Willebrands, Cardinal Bea's Assistant and later his successor as Head of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, made a surprise visit to Geneva 1964-1965 to consult with Madeleine Barot. He is quoted as saying,

I am perturbed. Women should also be following these questions. Catholic women should begin to understand that something is happening in this area. They should be in contact with you, the Protestant and the Orthodox women. How can we do this?

Madeleine Barot's response was to remind the Monsignor of the new ground that had been broken by the admission of the women at the Vatican Council. She suggested that a useful group with whom to take the first step would be these women observers. Consequently 15 women from the WCC met 15 Roman Catholic women at Vicarello near Rome in the Autumn of 1965. A programme was arranged for them which is described by the Protestant women with deep appreciation. Father Tom Stransky, an adviser to the Vatican on the Lay Apostolate, gave them an account of the Council. Lukas Visscher, a WCC observer at the Council, gave the group his reaction to the Council. Visits to the Secretariat for Unity and to an open session of the Council were sources of inspiration and encouragement. It was as if all doors in Rome were open to the women.

They discussed together the position of their respective Churches with regard to the role of women. The Protestant women felt very welcome in Rome. For them the highlight was their attendance at the Mass which concluded a session of the Council, though they also record their experience of sadness at being unable to share fully in the celebration of the Eucharist. An official statement, authorised by the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, describes this meeting as the first of a series that involved a "widening network of women". Madeleine Barot's experience at the WCC was availed of, when she was invited to give "innumerable talks" in Catholic circles. In their turn, the Protestant women appreciated the contact with their Catholic counterparts. In 1987, as she approached her 80th birthday, Pilar Bellosillo recalled her experience of the Vatican Council in general and of the ecumenical experience in particular in a Spanish Catholic journal. As President of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations in 1965, Pilar was one of the auditrices at the Council. In 1987 she brings to mind again the delight she felt as she came to realise that the restoring of the "lost unity" of the Church was one of the aims of the Council. She mentioned that for the first time Rome was entering into dialogue with other Christians. More importantly, Rome was prepared to share the blame for the fact of division. She rejoiced that the message was one of "communion" rather than "return".

Remembering her first meeting with the Protestant women, she said that fear of possible controversy and confrontation was uppermost. As she described her surprise at what in fact happened she launched into a series of exclamations:

What a surprise! What an experience of real dialogue, of respect, of liberty!
What stimulation to deepen our common faith! What a discovery of Christian values which we Catholics had forsaken! Not only did we find agreement on the main points, we also developed a deep friendship. We found ourselves very close, but also very distant - brought close together by the Spirit but separated by the institution.

The group became known as the Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group . As such they met at Cret Berard in Switzerland in the Summer of 1966. To spread the interest, a questionnaire was devised, its replies collated and summarized and the results examined at the first Women's Ecumenical Conference held at Taizé in the Summer of 1967. This meeting was primarily a reflective experience. Time for prayer and worship was aided by participation with the Taizé community. The Conference theme was, "The Christian Woman, Co-artisan in a Changing Society". This theme was used as the basis for a set of 12 recommendations, published by the Conference which were intended to serve as guidelines for future ecumenical dialogue. These recommendations included an emphasis on the importance of praying together, mindful of established occasions such as the Women's World Day of Prayer and the Church Unity Week, while it was hoped too that new occasions for praying together could be found. Among other practical suggestions , the importance of education was recognised, a review of teaching methods and of some of the books used in religious education was considered. Open-mindedness in the approach to ecumenism in school, home and parish and advice for School Chaplains were also mentioned. And of course collaboration between men and women was considered to be of vital importance to ecumenical dialogue. It was stated very clearly in recommendation no. 9 "that women could make a more positive contribution to the mission of the Church, if they were more readily and generally admitted to membership of the various bodies responsible for formulating decisions on the life and work of the Church."

Following the Taizé meeting the Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group was set up officially . Ten women were invited to form the group: five from the Protestant and other Churches, and five from the Roman Catholic Church. They were given a mandate and terms of reference by the Joint Working Group of the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church. The meeting of the group in Rome in 1970 included an audience with Pope Paul VI, who expressed interest in the aims of the group, encouraged them by emphasising "the importance of women, not only in the home, but in society generally and in the Church". He noted that many situations would require their joint study, situations to which they would bring their specific witness.

A Spirit Of Caution Is Experienced

A conference entitled "The Image of Women in the Mass Media" was held in Vienna in June 1971. The next project undertaken by the Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group was the planning of a world conference on "Women's Role in Peace Education" to be held in Nicosia, Cyprus in May 1972. At this time a "spirit of caution" was sensed at the Vatican, as a result of which the Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group ceased to exist, in a climate where enthusiasm for ecumenical projects was on the wane. The Catholic women claimed that the decision to withdraw the mandate of the group was based on financial considerations, mentioning the oil crisis of 1973 and the inflation scene. But the group was disbanded before May 1972.

Reflecting on the short life of this group of women, one might say that its call into existence was even more astonishing than its sudden demise. For the first time a group of women worked, prayed and planned together in an ecumenical context, formulating guidelines and principles, organising conferences on topics of ecclesial and social interest, developing a style of procedure. The group seemed full of promise and was gathering momentum on the European scene. Perhaps the example of what the Liaison Group had been was a factor in inspiring the setting up of the next major ecumenical event, in which women were the organisers and the sole participants.

Sexism In The Seventies

The conference entitled "Sexism in the Seventies", which was held in Berlin in 1970, constituted a complete departure from the WCC policy that women and men should work together to bring about recognition of the full humanity of women in the life of the Church. In his opening address to the conference Philip Potter, then General Secretary of the WCC, made clear his recognition of the need for this change of direction.

It may well be asked, "Why this consultation for women only?" I am ashamed to say that this was absolutely necessary at this stage in history. While the WCC has always emphasised the cooperation of men and women in Church and society, there is no doubt that women have not had the chance to speak clearly, fully and radically to the whole Christian community.... We have discovered in the struggle against racism that only the racially oppressed can really liberate themselves, and in the process they will help towards the liberation of their oppressors. This is what women are realising all over the world today, especially as progress in realising their rights has been slower than that of all other efforts at achieving human rights.

Philip Potter's survey of the history of the WCC and women revealed that he understood that the time had come for the "radical questioning of the structures of discrimination against women", because, despite the work of the WCC from 1948 to clarify theological thinking, "it cannot be said that the cooperation of men and women in Church and society has become a reality", "the emphasis on women though important was inadequate." He concluded by hoping that the consultation would be an ecumenical act which would lead to "achieving a fuller humanity as women and men".

Dr Pauline Webb welcomed participants, telling them of the stir at the WCC offices when the title of the Conference was published. A male colleague was heard to remark, "Why in heaven's name is the WCC running a conference on sexism? Isn't there enough trouble in the world already?" Dr Webb's response was to declare that the Conference was being held in heaven's name, the wholeness of the gospel, the good news that God created male and female in the divine image.

An important outcome of the consultation was the firm proposal that the forthcoming Fifth Assembly of the WCC at Nairobi in 1975 should give special attention to the concerns of women. A recommendation from the Assembly brought about a major ecumenical programme, that would help Christian women to live out their faith in the gospel. This would be an "action-education programme to combat sexism in the context of world-wide efforts to attack the web of oppression, by which both men and women are dehumanised." The resulting study was brought to a conclusion at a memorable Conference in Sheffield in 1981 and its results continue to be experienced at many levels.

Another result of "Sexism in the Seventies" and the Nairobi Assembly was a meeting convened by the Sub-Unit on Women in Church and Society, which led to a Consultation of European Christian Women in Brussels in February 1978.

In its turn this consultation led eventually to the setting up of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women. This was to be a conference of women from all denominations and Churches, who would work for stronger cooperation of men and women in the Churches and society. Collaboration with the Women's World Day of Prayer would be sought, as would affiliation as a women's department to the Conference of European Churches. Membership of Catholic women was hoped for and this was facilitated through negotiations with the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations and with the European Bishops Conference.

The Forum is now an active organisation that has developed strong links across an expanding Europe. Can it be seen as a development of the Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group?