ECUMENICAL FORUM OF EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WOMEN
FORUM OECUMENIQUE DE FEMMES CHRETIENNES D'EUROPE
ÖKUMENISCHES FORUM CHRISTLICHER FRAUEN IN EUROPA

EFECW News

Special Edition
June 2016

But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

The coming downfall and the utter collapse of the northern kingdom are two major themes in the Book of Amos. The nation of Israel, because it "sells the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals" and because of the many other instances in which it violated the principles of justice, is doomed.

The theme that runs through all of the material is one of protest against the social injustices that prevailed in northern Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. Along with this protest is the warning that Yahweh will surely punish the nation for violating the demands of justice. The punishment will be nothing short of captivity by a foreign power and the end of Israel's national existence.

As Amos pondered the situation that prevailed in northern Israel, he began to have dreams and visions. He was convinced that Yahweh was a God of justice.

After a time, Amos reaches the point where he can no longer keep quiet about his dreams. Addressing a group of people who have gathered at the place of worship known as the Bethel sanctuary, he declares that Yahweh has this to say to them:

I hate, I despise your feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. . . . Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel?

Several passages in the Book of Amos, especially in the last chapter, indicate that the Israelites will return from captivity and will be happy and prosperous in their own land. Furthermore, the type of restoration that is indicated in the closing chapter of the book is not the kind that one would expect from Amos since it indicates material prosperity rather than a moral transformation.

What Amos said to us? Maybe that *"our lives begin to end, the day we become silent about things that matter"* (Martin Luther King Jr.), and that having a positive outlook on life is a crucial part of finding inspiration. In some news and paragraphs, you could feel inspired reading about the vastness of our universe and our unique place within it, or you could feel overwhelmed and depressed at the insignificance of it all?

Marijana Ajzenkol, EFECW Coordinating Committee

From Solidarity to Accountability

"… Let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5,24)

How can justice, cultural diversity and sensitivity go hand in hand?

Context

The World Council of Churches (WCC) Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women 1988-1998 offered space for women to share their spirituality, their daily suffering and their talents. Now almost 20 years after the closing of the Decade (Harare Festival 1998) it is time for recommitment and rededication to the goals of the Decade – yet an unfinished agenda for the churches.

And it is in this light of the upcoming 20th Anniversary of the Decade that the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women is starting a reflection process on the achievements in our churches. But it is necessary to focus also on the discriminatory structures and practices in churches and society today.

Introduction

"Let us remember all those women who have faced the unknown in faith and fear with courage.

We give thanks:

- For all those women who have dared to step forward and lead,
- For all those women who have challenged the stereotypes of society and risk standing alone."

Looking back

What were the aims and purposes of the Decade?

1. Empowering women to challenge oppressive structures in the global community, their country and their church.
2. Affirming – through shared leadership and decision making, theology and spirituality – the decisive contributions of women in churches and communities.
3. Giving visibility to women's perspectives and actions in the work and struggle for justice, peace and integrity of creation.
4. Enabling the churches to free themselves from racism, sexism and classism; from teachings and practices that discriminate against women.
5. Encouraging the churches to take actions in solidarity with women.

What were the four main issues of the Decade and related calls to the Assembly?

1. Women and economic justice
2. Violence against women

3. Racism against women
4. Participation of women in the life of the church

Here is a selection of the final Decade demands according to the four main issues:

Ad 1. Women and economic justice

... We urge our churches...

- *to declare poverty and all its dehumanizing consequences a scandal against God*
- *to unmask the economic forces of death and destruction*
- *to name the oppressive global economy, the liberalization of markets and the accompanying cut-backs in social and welfare services as enemies of God ...*

Ad 2. Violence against women

... We call to announce to the world, that violence against women is a sin.

... Let our initiatives include

- *exposing all sexual abuse, especially by those in positions of church leadership*
- *eliminating all biblical and theological justifications for the use of violence*
- *denouncing female genital mutilation, sex-tourism and trafficking of women and children.*

Sending Forth and Blessing

"The spirit and work of women and men flow like water, like never-ending streams,
Envisioning new relationships, where every voice is heard,
Challenging rigid and violent traditions,
Supporting each other and moving towards God's promise of shalom.
Let us journey with the Spirit.
We ask for God's blessing as we face the future.
May God, the deep ocean of Truth move us forward,
May God, ever-flowing Love empower us,
May God, life-sustaining Spirit energize us and grant us joy. Amen."

Ad 3. Racism against women

... We declare that fullness of life in Christ and Christ's prayer for unity require

- *that no race be valued over another*
- *that churches in the name of Christ challenge all acts of ethnic cleansing, caste atrocities, xenophobia and genocide*
- *that racism and ethnocentrism are against the will of God and have no place in God's household.*

Ad 4. Participation of the women in the life of the church

... We hold firmly to the vision of a human community where the participation of each and everyone is valued, where no one is excluded on the basis of race, sex, age, religion or cultural practice...

... We call upon our churches to initiate

- *training for women, men, girls and boys in how to live as just communities of women, men and children*

- *liturgies, gender and language policies that confirm and affirm all who participate*
- *policies that promote a balance of gender, age and race in leadership positions and roles, and honour people's cultural identities.*

From Harare 1998 to Busan 2013

Just Communities of Women and Men

Building just communities of women and men is a priority in all activities of the World Council of Churches as it sets out on a **Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace** in response to the call from the WCC 10th Assembly in 2013 in Busan.

The experiences, perspectives and participation of both women and men are equally needed for the transforming renewal of church and society. Just gender relations are essential as we respond to climate change, build an economy of life and promote just peace and human dignity.

Training to reflect, empower and develop

Ecumenical theological education and leadership training are keys in this process. This includes reflection on what justice and peace entails for women in dehumanizing situations – refugees, trafficked and sexually violated women.

WCC training programmes empower religious women to use United Nations advocacy tools for women's rights and gender justice. Their voice is strengthened by networking between Christian women's organizations and those participating at the annual sessions of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

A gender advisory group involving representatives from member churches has been set up to develop a gender justice policy for the WCC and to provide gender expertise to the general secretary.

But where are we now, almost twenty years after Harare?

Bringing back into our mind what church leaders committed themselves to during these global WCC Assemblies, also feelings of hope, trust and even enthusiasm come back.

Nevertheless we have to be even more attentive to all our sisters who suffer hidden pain of isolation, economic injustice, restricted participation, racism, religious fundamentalism, ethnic genocide, sexual harassment, HIV/AIDS, violence against women and children, bombing of their homes, displacement, exploitation as refugees, exploitation as care workers.

It is in this context and strongly related to the message of the Forum's 9th General Assembly in Tinos in 2014 that the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women encourages its members to look for reflections and examples of implementation of the Harare and the Busan results in their churches and countries. But moreover it is to encourage them to identify the present challenges and to develop jointly effective strategies to step forward on our pilgrimage of justice and peace, on mutual agreement of cultural diversity and sensitivity.

Hannah Golda and Gabi Kienesberger, EFECW CC members

Sources:

a. Celebrating the Decade. Worship Resource. The World Council of Churches, Geneva. The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women 1988-1998.
b. https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do
c. http://www.efecw.net/activities/general-assemblies.html

There is a lot to gain in this world for women!

***Religious journalism is male-dominated in The Netherlands*.**

(During EFECW CC meeting in Huissen, NL, we had a lively discussion with Sr. Holkje van der Veer)

My name is Holkje van der Veer. I am a Dominican Catholic sister and I am 55 years old.

My profession is social worker, I specialized in clerical-theological social work.

Due to my health (I have Marfan syndrome, which is a genetic disorder of connective tissue) I had to turn away from paid work. I used to be the youth pastor in a youth centre that I founded myself in our monastery in Zwolle and I worked at student ministry at a college in our town.

At the moment I am an active member of the Dominican centre in Huissen, my function is to facilitate groups that come to the centre for reflection and contemplation, I also am a contributing author for several magazines. I am editor for three Christian based magazines and in the past three years I published two books. My first book is called "Verlangen als antwoord" (Longing as an answer) and it tells the story of my way towards Dominican spirituality and how I practice this in everyday life.

A German translation of this book has been released in May 2016: Sehnsucht als Antwort. Mein Weg mit der dominikanischen Tradition http://www.st-benno.de/shop/sehnsucht-als-antwort.html

The name of my second book is "Veer-kracht" (Resilience), pun intended, about living a life with an extraordinary body. I talk about how my body and its physical status has taught me mildness and how to accept imperfection. It shows my thought process about how our body determines how we view the world. Our modern day culture focuses on the physical, on health. It is of utmost importance to have the perfect looks, to be strong, to be sexy. It is my own experience how it feels like to be different from this norm. In my book I am exploring how resilience is the way to accept our vulnerability. I explore a more relaxed way to cope with imperfection. With less struggle, so we can stay more open to and more connected with ourselves, with the power of faith and a strong sense of community and connection with each other.

Now that I am writing more, I get involved with the media. I noticed that many religious writers are male. Also journalists who focus on religion are quite often male. For one year now, I count the number of articles written about books from male versus female authors. The ratio male

versus female is 8 to 2. I was in shock. I never was a real feminist, but this tallying exercise made me realize that there is a lot to gain in this world for women!

I also noticed that the vast majority of journalists focusing on religion is male. When my books get coverage in newspapers or on other media, 80% of the journalists or interviewers are female.

As I said before, I am a Dominican sister. My congregation consists of roughly 65 sisters. The average age in my congregation is above 80 years. One other sister has the same age as I do, the others are much older.

The average age of Dominican brothers is also high. Only one brother joined the congregation during the last 30 years.

Even then, at a time that our Dominican order celebrates its 800th birthday this year, there are signs that the times, the culture, are changing. At this moment, six young brothers (about 40 years old) joined the monastic order. In September, another young fellow, around 20 years of age, will start his preparations to join.

This poses questions to us as women. According to age old tradition, roughly one third of Dominican brothers and sisters is male, and two thirds are female. The question lies ahead of us, for life as a Dominican sister.

Since my second book is published and my first book has been released in Germany, the following problem is filling up my mind: How can we open new ways to facilitate a Dominican way of life in The Netherlands?

An answer to this and more questions can be found by contemplating our own identity and in searching for creative, novel answers.

Sr. Holkje van der Veer OP

The Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women – Cyprus Branch

Introducing the hosting team of the next National Coordinators' Meeting

The Cyprus Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women is a branch of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women (EFECW). The initiative for the creation of the Cyprus branch started in September 2008, by Mrs Sara Vorskanian and a group of women from the Armenian Church. During the next years other churches joined the Forum: the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, the Maronites' Church, the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church. The Cypriot Forum is a non-profit organization and all its members work on a voluntary basis. In 2010 a Steering Committee, consisted by representatives of all the participating churches, was formed to coordinate the activities of the Forum.

The main aim of the Cyprus branch is to give Christian women who live in Cyprus the chance:

- To get together and develop cooperation networks in order to tackle the various social problems that exist in our country
- To exchange perceptions, experiences and good practices regarding our presence, as active members of our churches
- To participate in the different European actions that concern their life and activity as women within the church

- To participate in activities that promote respect towards human rights and the values they are based on
- To cooperate with other organizations (governmental, NGOs) that deal with women's issues in order to assert the Christian perspective to these problems
- To develop and participate in training activities that foster their role in the different sectors of activities within their parishes (catechism, charity, worship)

Until now the Cypriot Forum, supported by the central EFECW as well as the local churches, has initiated a number of activities at local level:

- Lectures on the development of family in contemporary times and on facing and preventing violence in society (in coordination with the University of Nicosia) (2010),
- A panel discussion on fasting in different traditions (April, 2011),
- A project sponsored by the Fellowship of the Least Coin (FLC) and Ruth Epting Fund (REF) including a three-day seminar for women who deal with children and the youth in local churches (training of women with lectures and relevant workshops), cooperation of women for the application of methods in different churches and feedback meeting, production by the participant women of a handout with relevant material for the churches (November, 2011)
- A two-day seminar on Empowering Women to serve their churches (2012)
- Christmas concerts and Concerts of Religious and Ecclesiastical music (Annually)
- Social events to get women together in order to be informed about the Forum and share their experiences as active members in their churches (Annually)
- Participation in the World Day of Prayer (Annually)

In addition, it has been represented in meetings on European level e.g. the National Coordinators' meetings.

With God's love and the blessings of the local churches, the members of the Forum contribute in their own way in the effort of sustaining peace and solidarity in Christ, in a multicultural society.

We are looking forward meeting in person with the EFECW National Coordinators in Larnaka, at the end of June!

The Republic of Cyprus

Cyprus is an island of 9.251 km^2 (3,572 sq. miles), extending 240 km (149 miles) from east to west and 100 km (62 miles) from north to south. It is situated in the far eastern end of the Mediterranean (33° E, 35° N), at the crossroads of Europe, Africa and Asia, and in close proximity to the busy trade routes linking Europe with the Middle East, Russia, Central Asia and the Far East.

Population

956.500 (December 2012 Census)

Official name of state: Kypriaki Democratia (Greek), Kıbrıs Cumhuriyeti (Turkish), Republic of Cyprus (English)

Independence Day: 1 October

Cyprus' currency: Euro

Cyprus gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1960. In 1974 Turkey invaded Cyprus and occupied 36.2% of its sovereign territory. A ceasefire line still runs across the island and cuts through the heart of the capital, Lefkosia (Nicosia), dividing the city and the country. Although its northern part is under foreign occupation, the Republic of Cyprus is internationally recognised as the sole legitimate state on the island with sovereignty over its entire territory, including the areas occupied by Turkey.

Cyprus is an independent sovereign Republic with a presidential system of government. The constitution provides for separate executive, legislative and judicial branches of government with independent powers. The President is both Head of State and Government.

Cyprus maintains very good relations with a considerable number of countries and has always been a dedicated supporter of human rights, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States, and a strong advocate of international peace and security. Its geographic position enables it to play a role both in the Eastern Mediterranean region and within the European family.

On 1 May 2004 the Republic of Cyprus became a full member of the EU. Accession to the EU was a natural choice for Cyprus, dictated by its culture, civilisation, history, its European outlook and adherence to the ideals of democracy, freedom and justice. However, the application of the EU laws and regulations (the acquis communautaire) is suspended in the area under military occupation by Turkey, pending a solution to the occupation and forcible division of the country.

Please support:

The Fellowship of the Least Coin (http://www.flc.net.ph)
and the **Ruth-Epting Fund** (www.efecw.net)

Thank you for reading our newsletter! Follow us also on www.efecw.net and facebook. Please make our newsletter more informative and inclusive by incorporating news/ info from you:

info@efecw.net