Opportunities and challenges women offered and still offer to the churches and the ecumenical movement

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Throughout the twentieth century there was what Pauline Webb, a leading Methodist ecumenist, called ‘a steady infiltration of the ecumenical movement by women and women’s voices’. Women brought challenges and new opportunities to the ecumenical movement and, through the ecumenical movement, to the churches. They still do. The 1950’s and 60’s experienced the rise of liberation movements, among them the secular feminist movement with its characteristically sharp language, pressure tactics and political concerns. Some saw this influence invading the ecumenical movement as a shift from the Church’s agenda to the world’s agenda. Others believed that such a distinction was not theologically or ecclesiologically sustainable. They identified this ‘women spirit rising’ as the work of the Holy Spirit in the world ahead of the Church.

What was bubbling up in the late 60’s was focussed in a conference in Berlin in 1974, ‘Sexism in the Seventies’. Women from all over the world gathered to articulate together what it meant for their countries, their families and themselves that they were engaged in a struggle for liberation- a universal struggle – that brought them together in spite of their ecclesial, cultural and continental differences. They expressed their commitment to end all those things which denied women’s humanity, in Church and world, things that contradicted the creative purposes of God.

The women left Berlin calling on the World Council of Churches to set up a project focussing on women’s experience, staffed by women and culminating in an international conference for women. This plan was significantly changed when theologians in the Faith and Order Commission, the theological arm of the World Council of Churches, called for a theological and ecclesiological study to envision the Church as an equal community of women and men living in its own internal life the values of the kingdom, a community that would be a sign to the world of what God intends for the whole of humanity.

The Community of Women and Men Study began an ecumenical, global reflection by women – and some men -in many regions of the world grounded in their experiences in Church and society. What was heard over and over again was women’s common experience of being shut out of the charmed circle, their experience of oppression and powerlessness, both in the world and in the Church. The liturgical, ministerial and structural life in the churches was all too often experienced as excluding women and dismissive of women’s perspectives. Women knew that this contradicted the biblical teachings that men and women were equally created in the image of God, and equally redeemed in Christ. They clung to two biblical texts: Genesis 1.27 and Galatians 3.28.

From listening to the experience of women from around the world describe their sense of being oppressed and treated like second-class citizens, the Study began to ask sharply what would the Church look like if it mirrored in its own life the wholeness that is the promise of God’s Kingdom? What sort of Church would give to the world a ‘whiff’ of its own possibility of wholeness? The study was not a self-indulgent cry of oppressed women but a profoundly ecclesiological study calling for a radical renewal in the life of all churches. It called for a revision of the language, symbols and imagery the Church uses to talk of God and the people of God, an inclusive language in which women would hear they were fully part of the community of the Church. They began to re-claim the silent, feminine voices in the Bible and the Tradition. They called for more inclusive patterns of lay and ordained ministry; a fairer representation of women in the synods and decision-making bodies of the churches; a more Christ-like exercise of power and authority; a more active engagement in addressing concerns of economic injustice, especially those things that trap women in a web of sexism, racism and classism, and a more inclusive pattern of mission and evangelism. At the centre of the challenges was the plea – your God is too small - God is neither male nor female, neither masculine nor feminine. God embraces and transcends all that we know as male and female, masculine and feminine.

The Community Study was not concerned with a few minor changes to the life of churches. It called for radical transformation and renewal. This was utterly required if the Church was to be a credible sign of wholeness and holiness in the world and a more effective agent for change.

The years of reflection on experience and envisioning the Church as a community of women and men presented challenges and opportunities. It offered a chance to change. Changes did happen: women’s voices began to be heard speaking with greater confidence in interpreting the Bible and Tradition. There were moves to use more inclusive language in the worship of many churches and some churches moved to include more women in the official lay ministry, others began to ordain women the priesthood and the episcopate, while others articulated the arguments for staying with the Church’s tradition of an all- male priesthood. More women were appointed to synods and to international ecumenical conversations. The Community Study did contribute to the re-imagining of the sort of Church God calls us to be. It recognised that the coming together of divided churches to full visible unity required a deep renewal of the life of the

community of women and men in the Church without which there would be no authentic unity. The agenda of the Community Study did result in renewal but it remains still an unfinished agenda.

A Decade of Churches in Solidarity with women followed the Community Study. Its emphasis was less on ecclesiological issues and more on the Church's vocation of service in a suffering world. It exposed the grave impact of the global economy; the effects of racism and xenophobia on women; the dreadful violence against women in different regions of the world and, shockingly, the violence against women and children in some churches. There were missed opportunities. One leader in the Decade described it as turning out to be more a Decade of Women in Solidarity with Women than a Decade of Churches is Solidarity with Women. The challenges and opportunities of the Decade complemented those of the Community Study. Together they showed what sort of Church would be a prophetic sign and effective instrument of the wholeness of God's Kingdom.

Today the ecumenical community is focused on an ecumenism of action, on travelling together on a pilgrimage of justice and peace. Issues of violence against women are being exposed in the starkest of ways: the plight of women and children in places torn apart by war; where women and children leave homes, flee violence, embark on dangerous journeys seeking safety for their children; women trafficked and sold into slavery.

On the pilgrimage women find support from each other as they had done in the Community Study. Women from a number of geographical and ecclesial contexts gathered in Bethlehem in 2010 to listen to the experience of their sisters behind the separation Wall, standing with them and praying with them. More recently at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, a group of ecumenical women organised a public witness event to mobilise faith communities and civil society to work in solidarity to end gender-based violence. Anglican women left the gathering with an increased understanding of gender challenges and the disadvantages faced by their sisters around the world. They realised the importance of forming global relationships to relieve a feeling of isolation and gave an assurance that they would care, pray stand and speak out together. They expressed a conviction that the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015:

are a unique and remarkable platform for action on a vision that affirms our longing as Christians to work for the kingdom of God on earth. They reflect deep biblical themes of mutual responsibility for living well together, seeking the quality of all people created in the image of God, the responsibility to care for God's earth and God's concern for the vulnerable and the marginalised.

Recent years have witnessed 'women spirit rising' in the pilgrimage of justice and peace. Increasingly male church leaders on the global level are forcefully drawing attention to the horrors of gender violence. Pope Francis, the Ecumenical Patriarch his All Holiness Bartholomew, Archbishop Justin of Canterbury, Bishop Jounan of the Lutheran World Federation have made common cause in confronting gender based violence. In March 2017 in Cyprus five leaders of faith Communities – Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian, Maronite and Latin Catholics - stated together:

We re-iterate our common belief that men and women have equal value in the eyes of God. Christianity and Islam condemn violence against women and children. Violence against women and girls, in whatever form, is a contradiction to the will of God and unacceptable in his eyes.

The theological and ecclesiological challenges of the Community Study of the 70's and 80's and those made on the ecumenical pilgrimage of justice and peace may at first sight seem unconnected agendas. They are not. They are aspects of a single agenda brought together in an understanding of the nature of God and God's intention for the whole of humanity, together with and understanding of the vocation of the Church called to be sign of that intention and instrument in spreading the values of God's kingdom of justice and peace. Working for the Church to be an inclusive community of women and men, for God's sake and the world's sake, is inextricably bound up with the imperative to challenge unjust structures and the unfair use of the world's resources. The churches need to listen attentively to the challenges women raise and the opportunities for renewal, for wholeness and holiness to which they point.