

NAGYPÁL Szabolcs

Partnership of Women and Men in the Ecumenical Movement

“We intend to stay together.”

(WCC Basis; Kathleen BLISS)

The question of the partnership of women and men in the Church has been connected with the ecumenical movement since its beginnings, because the unity of the Church is always dependent on human partnerships as well.

The words of Saint Paul should constantly be kept in mind: “There is no longer Jew and Greek, there is no longer slave and free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 3,28).

Let us, therefore, examine the most important topics, the key words, the leading initiatives, the fermenting movements and the blossoming institutions of partnership in the movement for the visible unity of the Christian Church.

We start with the ecumenical history of events and institutions. The second part highlights the two topics which stirred the most controversies in the ecumenical movement: feminism and the ordination of women. And at the end we underline potential areas for harmony and reconciliation: marriage and family, including their ecclesiological significance.

I. ECUMENICAL HISTORY

1. WSCF AND THE EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF, 1895) and the World Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA, 1894) have been fertile training grounds for women leaders, such as Ruth ROUSE, or Suzanne DE DIÉTRICH, the mother of the Biblical renewal.

These movements started to liberate the lay forces of Christianity, among them women, and attempted to restore the lost unity between worship and work (the Benedictine rule of *ora et labora*). They also recognized that lay Christians are leaven, salt, and letters from Christ to the world.

As Adrián SLAVKOVSKÝ OP writes: “It is an important step to embrace a certain identity, one’s own place in life, social roles, values and objectives, and it does not necessarily have to lead to the negation of other identities and thus to intolerance among individuals, communities or even larger units.”

Indeed, all members of the Church, because of their common baptism, are qualitatively equal in receiving God’s grace and in realizing it as a new life. We all serve as reflecting mirrors or focusing lenses, to beam light into all parts of the life of the world.

Already in 1923, a study was done by the International

Missionary Council (IMC, 1920) on the place of women in the Church in the mission fields. The women’s World Day of Prayer (WDP) started in 1927 and has been celebrated on every first Friday of Lent ever since.

2. WCC INITIATIVES

After the establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC, Amsterdam, 1948), interest was primarily focused on the life and work of women in the Church. Reflections on the service and status of women in the Church were published by Kathleen BLISS in 1952.

Sarah CHAKKO became the chair of the corresponding commission (later department, and finally sub-unit), followed by Madeleine BAROT, who was the first executive secretary (1955–1966), dealing with the cooperation of women and men in Church and society.

A study of Church unity, directed by Constance F. PARVEY, was undertaken on the community of women and men in the Church between 1978 and 1982, with particular regard to the experience of women.

A conclusive study book on identity, sexuality, marriage, family life, Scripture and Tradition, theological education, worship and ministry, used a peculiar experience-based methodology. This study was evaluated in a meeting at Sheffield in 1981.

A main initiative afterwards was the ecumenical decade of churches in solidarity with women, between 1988 and 1998. The project marked an important shift from solidarity towards accountability. The discoveries of the wide-ranging ecumenical team visits were published as “living letters” in 1997.

Its objectives were to challenge oppressive structures, racism, sexism, classism and all discrimination, by shared leadership and decision-making, theology and spirituality; by giving visibility to women’s perspectives and actions; and through actions of solidarity.

The most recent initiative focuses on being the Church and listening to women’s voices and visions, since 1998. Its objectives are to describe and enhance participation, vision, theological insight, hope, struggle and faith.

It is visible from this short historical overview that the issue of partnership between women and men has been a task in its own right for the ecumenical movement, even though it has at times been coupled with liberations from other oppressive structures.

3. EUROPEAN ENDEAVOURS

Regional endeavours contextualise and inculcate global developments. Among the European initiatives we can enlist the ecumenical forum of European Christian Women, established in Bruxelles in 1978.

Their meeting in Budapest in 1994 dealt with not being afraid, and with the topic of “remembering the future”, in order to work out a theology of human fullness and wholeness.



In the conference for Orthodox women in Agapia in 1976, various women from communist (Second World) countries clearly stated to the other participants that partnership is already a living reality in their countries.

Indeed, from a certain perspective, it was true. The solidarity and partnership of the equally oppressed women and men was one of the few positive consequences of the communist totalitarian dictatorships.

Women and men want to live together in friendship, as allies and partners on the way to liberation. In that light, the women's synod movement (WSM) for change in the XXIst century organised the European women's synod in Gmunden in 1997.

II. FEMINISM AND THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

4. FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Feminist theology is a method of doing theology, entailing a creative re-visioning of what it is to be the Church. It creates networks of shared experience, knowledge and community, by recovering female images of the Divine.

Sexism as a patriarchal and paternal ideology of male supremacy and discrimination against women on the basis of sex was thoroughly studied at a WCC meeting in Berlin in 1974.

This consultation marked a significant shift from cooperation to social and economic justice and the liberation struggle. It demanded a full access and participation in leadership, ordination, inclusive language, the re-reading of Bible and Tradition, and equal opportunities in all fields of life.

As a consequence, inclusive language has been mandatory in WCC since 1981. It depicts women and men as both equally normative. It is important to note that it has been easier to revise language about the worshipping people than about the One they worship, which sometimes tests the elasticity of the Christian faith.

5. ORDINATION OF WOMEN

Women and men are of equal worth and have complementary and essential contributions to make within the community; therefore we should constantly blend female and male spiritual insights.

The relationship between the sexes, as reflecting a divinely ordained order (Herrenalb, 1956), should happen in mutual submission and in common obedience to the authority of the Reign of God.

There are rapidly changing patterns of women-men relationships nowadays (Madras, 1961), and the Christian woman, as well as the Christian man, is also a co-artisan in changing the Church and the society (Taizé, 1967).

The ordination of women is one of the questions where there is no ecumenical consensus yet. Their recognized though not ordained ministry has been present always in the history of Christianity.

The apostolic (mostly the Orthodox and Roman Catholic) denominations do not really have this issue on their agenda. For their positions, they use arguments from the Bible and Tradition, but also from anthropology and even theology.

It was a breakthrough when the (Evangelical-Lutheran) Church of Sweden ordained women in 1960, as a denomination which has maintained the historic Episcopal succession. Another similar milestone was the ordination of the first woman bishop, Marjorie MATTHEWS of the United Methodist Church, USA, in 1983.

The Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion

agreed in 1978 to remain in communion with one another, in spite of the various beliefs, practices and controversies in this matter. But also in the Anglican understanding, the issue still remains a matter of discernment and open reception in the whole Church.

III. MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

6. MARRIAGE AND LOVE

According to the growing ecumenical convergence and tradition, marriage is the voluntary, consensual, mutual, equal, monogamous and holy joining of the life of a woman and a man, based on love, fidelity and companionship and intended to last for the life-time of the couple.

It is at the same time a family (*matrimonium*) and a household (*patrimonium*). Family is a network of relationships established by marriage, birth and adoption. Its two dimensions are the nuclear and the extended family.

Both of them serve as focal points of affection, socialisation and nurturing. Humanity, as female and male, is gifted with the ability of procreation and is called to share in the life of the Triune God.

Therefore, in many (but mostly in the Roman Catholic) pastoral practices divorce (dissolving a marriage because of its failure) seems to be almost the only "unforgivable sin", and the pastoral care of divorced persons there remains largely unresolved.

In dealing with other forms of union, like polygamy (polyandry or polygyny), and homosexuality (lesbian or gay relationship), we should also keep in mind that genuine love, in whatever form, is rare, precious and possibly an indicator of God's redemptive power.

It is usually more effective and constructive to look at issues in the light of Tradition, rather than traditions in the light of issues and topics. Furthermore, in the field of sexual ethics, physical sexual union can be a means of grace in effecting, developing and sustaining the unity of a couple.

7. ECUMENICAL FAMILY CHURCHES

Marriage is a miniature, where unity (uniqueness, monogamy and fidelity), sanctity, catholicity and apostolicity (moving towards others) are present, and so it becomes a model of the uniting grace of God.

The family is the smallest integral unit which can be called Church (*ecclesiola*: small church): "This mystery is a profound one, and ... it refers to Christ and the Church" (Ephesians 5,32).

The Church, on the other hand, is also an extended family, where every member finds a home. If the family is "mixed" in an interdenominational way, then it can constitute an ecumenical marriage and an interchurch family with double belonging and ecumenical membership.

Furthermore, when the members decide to work for the unity of the Church in reconciliation and dialogue, their household (*oikumene*) and local ecumenical partnership (LEP) becomes an ecumenical family church (*ecclesiola ecumenica*).

Since wife and husband are already one body in Jesus Christ, they can effectively prefigure the One Holy Church (*Una Sancta*), and of course the Reign of God. In so doing, they are no longer *fratres seiuncti* (disjoined or separated brethren), but *fratres coniuncti* (conjoined or conjugal partners).

The Association of Interchurch Families (AIF) was established in 1968 to lead ecumenical couples and the Church from competition, through co-existence, to cooperation, and then to commitment, on the way to genuine dialogue and full communion.

Similarly, reflections on interreligious and interfaith marriage and family were made in a joint study document in 1997, emphasizing their role in uniting humankind in a spiritual way as well.

8. PARTNERSHIP AND UNITY

The longest-ever initiative in ecumenical history was conducted on the unity of the Church and the unity of humankind, between 1971 and 1991. It was a Faith and Order (F&O) study on the eschatological promise of the coming Reign of God.

The basic assumption was that the Church is a sacrament, a mystery and a prophetic sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of humankind. In their method of inter-contextualisation, the contexts reciprocally provide the interpretative framework for each other.

They researched unity in today's world (1978), the unity of the Church and the renewal of human community (Lima, 1982), Jesus Christ as the life of the world (Vancouver, 1983) and God's purpose to restore all things into unity in Christ.

The glory of God is humanity fully alive, as IRENÆUS teaches us. The aim of all of us is *theosis* or divination, our human life made God-like in Jesus Christ. Against the politics of death, therefore, we should build the culture of life, reconciliation and healing.

Women and men, too, should be free to live out the gifts which God has given them and to respond to their calling

to share fully in the life and witness of the Church. Women's and men's equal and profound participation, therefore, is not simply a matter of social justice, but also of profound theological integrity.

Suggested Reading

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David BALL

Gender Empires: Personal, Spiritual, Political

I've always struggled with being a man, especially a white man living in a wealthy land.

Ever since I began high school, I didn't fit in with the other boys; they seemed to me so competitive and judgmental. I hated their attitudes towards women, whom they treated as sexual objects. I was never able to understand their lack of sensitivity to the feelings of others, or to justify their glorification of violence. When I started university six years ago, my life was inextricably altered by feminism.

“COURAGE, MY DAUGHTER”

Feminism, as a critical understanding of gender, suggests that the personal is political and vice-versa. For me, the personal, political and spiritual weave in and out of my life as they do in this story, illuminating new realities, revealing pathways of action.

Jesus was a great feminist activist and a fascinating male role model. One day Jesus is in a massive crowd and everyone is clamouring to hear a word and receive healing. The president of the synagogue, a well-respected male, gets his attention first and Jesus sets off with him. Nothing unusual.

Then it gets interesting. A woman who has been bleeding for 12 years, and is therefore ritually unclean, slips unnoticed out of the crowd, touches Jesus' cloak and is healed.

Jesus stops in his tracks. He senses her presence, despite the throngs of people and all the noise and pushing. “Who was it that touched me? I felt that power had gone out from me.” Of course the woman wouldn't dare to ask him for help directly, since she was shameful: an untouchable who risked polluting anyone she touched.

The healed woman falls at his feet. Jesus addresses her in an unusually intimate way: “Courage, my daughter,” he says, “your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

In blessing his ‘daughter,’ Jesus totally subverts the gender system, in which many women were seen as ‘pollution’ to social and religious purity. Since they were considered defiled, they were to be avoided and ignored. By all accounts this daughter should have been invisible in this surging, male-dominated crowd; certainly not vying for the attention of a famous wandering rabbi, or sneaking up on him (Matthew 9,18-22; Luke 8,40-48).

Many see feminism as a dirty word, or as something once useful but now outdated. It is a misconception, however, that feminism is just a women's movement for equality with men. Rather, it offers us a whole new way of understanding our world—a process of thinking about how our world is and should be.

It starts with gender, but it goes much deeper, opening a space for us to question and resist racism, homophobia, and the global Empire we live in as Christians today. The tools of feminist analysis are crucial for men, women and

