

## **SUBMISSION TO THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION FAITH COMMUNITIES HEARINGS**

I am here to make submission from the women's perspective within faith communities. I am honoured to represent such a large body of people, but need to say that I represent them primarily from the Christian point of view. The group that met to discuss and draw up this submission were all Christians. We were given very little time to prepare this document [4 days] thus precluding us from being as consultative and inclusive as we should have liked.

I should like to conduct a short exercise; will the women who are present here today, as - part of their Faith Communities' delegation to these hearings please stand? It may be interesting to note how many of those standing, if any, will be speaking today and how many have, spoken in the preceding days.

All religions are patriarchal, based on the "rule of the fathers" This was reinforced by the missionaries. The legacy of this tradition is that women remain largely powerless and voiceless. In the Christian tradition, spirituality has largely been the preserve of men. The language of prayer and worship is generally male, the symbols and images of God are male, the scriptures have been used to promote male dominance, the ruling structures of the Church are predominantly male and there is a prevailing male consciousness. This is somewhat of an anomaly, as the congregations are predominantly female.

Women are excluded from Christian religious language. In hymns, liturgy and the Scriptures people are referred to as men, the sons of God or brothers, not to mention the militaristic language commonly used, too. The language for God is predominantly male [Lord, King, Master, Father] Not only do these terms entrench patriarchy, but they are also the terms of the ruling classes. God is presented as a ruling, controlling male. Thus, the male is seen as more fully representative of God than the female. I believe that this male language and imagery has contributed to the Churches' sanctioning of men dominating women.

The early Church shaped much of the Christian thought which we carry around with us today, much of it plainly misogynist. Women are misbegotten males, painted evils and the devil's doorway. The great tragedy is that women have come to believe this of themselves. There is little affirmation, for those women who struggle within the Church structures, from other women. Women need to encourage and support one another as we seek to find affirmation in the Scriptures, 1 Timothy chap 2 verses 11 - 15 is a Scripture used as justification for the denial of the equality of women within the Church, but surely the passage on baptism in Galatians chap 2 verses 27-28 gives another perspective on the position of women within God's kingdom.

The patriarchal nature of Church structures, regrettably, has condoned, encouraged and, in some cases, actively enforced the subjugation of women to men, denying them the realisation of their full potential, not only within the Church, but politically, socially and economically. It is a matter of debate that our new political Constitution grants women more status than any religious one. Our clergy need to be trained in the understanding of the rights now legally granted to us constitutionally, but withheld from us spiritually.

We celebrate the changes that are taking place and acknowledge that women are being ordained as ministers, priests and elders within some of our faith communities. However, it should be noted that there are no female bishops,

moderators or archbishops, so decisions taken with regard to issues pertaining specifically to women remain within the male domain e. g abortion, rape, birth control etc.

Within one denomination, with the ordination of female clergy, despite the fact that this was a majority decision, a conscience clause was introduced. This allowed that no congregant was to feel obliged to

have a female priest within their congregation or to be served the sacraments by a woman.. If a woman was to serve the sacraments, this fact was to be advertised in advance and a member of the male clergy was to be available as an alternative for those who preferred. The offensiveness of this clause is quite breathtaking. One can imagine the uproar that would have ensued if this sort of clause had been instituted when the racial barriers started coming down. There have been reports of sexual harassment of women by male clergy. When these incidents are brought to the attention of other male clergy, they are largely ignored, or hushed up so that the Church is not brought into disrepute. Women have complained that on seeking pastoral care and advice from male clergy with regard to abusive marriages they are often sent back into these abusive and sometimes life threatening relationships, with the command to forgive and live out their faith in a way that would change their husbands. The Church thus endorses the abuse of women in the home, and fails in the pastoral care of these women, often their children too.

Faith communities often support or turn a blind eye, to cultural and traditional customs that entrench suppression and oppression of women. The cry "But it's tradition, it's our culture!" is used to a status quo which men frequently employ when it suits them. The Church was instrumental in bringing about the abolition of slavery. Why is it so tardy in emancipating women? It is a sad reflection on our faiths that, in keeping women in spiritual bondage, men themselves are not fully free.

Our clergy need to be conscientised to the issue of women within the Church. There needs to be a greater sensitivity to the needs, aspirations and rights of women within our different faiths and denominations. Our men need to unlearn many of the things they have consciously and unconsciously learned at their fathers' knees, reinforced by the Churches' patriarchal attitude. Men are discouraged, at every level of their lives, from recognising their own feminine attributes, as though they were something of which to be ashamed or had no worth. "Don't cry, did you ever hear your father cry?" In so doing, they deny themselves the richness and fullness that God has created within us.

It needs to be acknowledged that women often support and sustain their own oppression. They accept, without question or challenge, the view of God's love for them, taught, largely, from a totally biased and subjective theology. They sometimes allow themselves to be co-opted., which often results in them behaving like men, to the detriment of all, as well as the kingdom of God. Patriarchy has been so internalised that women will often vote for men in their absence.

Education systems and curriculae need to be reviewed and revised within our seminaries and religious institutions. Why is God acknowledged as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and never of Sarah, Rachel and Rebecca? The New Testament, with its male Trinity, has denied us all the understanding and experience of the nurturing care of our Creator, and has denied women any same - sex identity with God. Jesus described God as a woman, looking for a lost coin, and as a woman sweeping, looking for the lost. Our Saviour discussed theology with a woman at a well, healed a woman on the Sabbath, listened to women and stayed in their homes, sought the Kingdom with them and received anointing from a woman, rebuking the men who scorned her. On the day after the Crucifixion., it was a woman who went to the tomb, physically weak to roll away the stone, but strong in faith and trust that God would provide whatever was needed for her. It was to this woman that

the risen Christ appeared, with the message "Go and tell the Good News." Ephesians chap 5 verse 22 -24 needs to be in the context of verses 21 and verses 25 - 30, but rarely is. When studying the Scriptures, 3 things should be borne in mind;

- who wrote the passage?
- what was the context within which the passage was written?
- how old was the person writing the passage?

Marriage vows need to be examined and expunged of words that perpetuate the subjugation of women. It is demeaning and degrading to us all if one part of our faith community is oppressed in this fashion.

There exists a classism and racism within the Church that has resulted in a differentiation of the facilities provided for pastors, usually with an urban bias. Though aimed at the clergy, it also has resulted in the suffering of indignities by the spouses [overwhelmingly women] and their children. Lack of adequate sewerage, water and other basic needs are common, especially in the rural areas. Urban areas differentiate between township and suburban facilities, thus reinforcing classism and, inevitably, racism.

The wives of clergy are often exposed to conscious and unconscious patriarchy that would make a weaker person buckle at the knees. While studying, their husbands are accommodated in seminaries, spouses and their children are not, often living in conditions that are simply disgraceful because of poor or non-existent stipends. Little or no training is offered to wives to equip them for the contribution they make to their husbands' ministry. There is little choice in the matter of wives' ministry; the expectation of the congregation, the denomination and the ministers themselves is that wives will participate actively and fully in the life and work of the congregation or parish. Ministers are called, they have a vocation, wives are not recognised for the contribution they make, called or not.

Ministers' wives, often professional people, have little choice in the decision to work or not. Their financial contribution to the family economy often exceeds that of their spouses and is often what keeps the family clothed, fed and educated. Should their husbands predecease them, they lose their homes if provision has not been made to purchase a home prior to his death. Given the stipends most clergy are paid, the chances of that having taken place are usually remote. Newly widowed, and usually with a family to provide for, what support can this woman expect from the Church? Often marginalised and isolated by their position as the wife, and neglected by their husbands because of Church commitments many of them are lonely and depressed.

With the new political Constitution, many young, single, professional women are no longer members of Church groups simply because of the lowly status granted to them within the Church compared with the status they are being afforded in business, commerce and industry. These young women realise they are achieving key positions in secular society long denied them within the Church. Their voices are being heard, finally, and they are making meaningful decisions, but not within the Church.

Although women have had no authority within the Church, they have had a profound influence. Women and women's organisations have made a significant and valuable contribution to the life and work of their denominations, especially in areas concerning family and social issues. Their service has brought no positions of responsibility outside of the domestic. For example, women raise much of the Church funds, but are not in a position to decide how these funds should be allocated. That important decision is made by the male church council. It should be noted that, Gert van Maanen, General Manager of the Ecumenical Development Co-operative Society [the financial department of the World Council of Churches] had this to say, at a conference on sustainable development [SACC April 1996] "Our recovery rate on loans, lending to the poorest of the poor, is 90%, the highest of any financial institution in the world. We emphasise women participation. Women never let their children down; if school fees, shoes and food for their children depend on the success of the business, women will fight for it; their commitment is existential, as compared with men, whose commitment is often more entrepreneurial."

There is a need for true emancipation within our denominations. We need to examine our teaching of the Scriptures to free them of gender bias. Our political Constitution enshrines freedoms expressed in the Scriptures but not applied in practice. Attitudes of male clergy and leaders within Church organisations need to reflect what is written, but not lived out, in our religious lives. If only it was understood that, if any of us remain in subjugation, then none of us are truly free. Women and men were created to co-operate with and complement one another, not to be in perpetual competition with each other. Eve was created from Adam's rib, not from his heel to be trampled on, nor from his head to be over him, but from his side, that we may walk together in partnership, in support and encouragement of one another. If women sound shrill and militant at times, it is because we are not heard and so little recognition of our worth and value as God's creation is accorded us.

There are Faith Communities represented at these hearings whose female believers are not allowed to worship in the same area as their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. They are separated from the fullness and richness of their spiritual and family life, not because of any sin of omission or

commission, but merely because of their gender. They are absolutely voiceless and powerless and suffer denigration and humiliation because they are women. God hears the cries of the oppressed - when will we?

## **A CREED**

We believe in God  
Who created women and men in God's, image,  
Who created the world and gave both sexes the care of the earth;

We believe in Jesus, Child of God, chosen by God, born of the woman, Mary,  
Who listened to women and stayed in their homes,  
Who looked for the Kingdom with them,  
Who was followed and supported by women disciples;

We believe in Jesus,  
Who discussed theology with a woman at a well,  
Who received anointing from a woman at Simon's house  
And rebuked the men guests who scorned her;

We believe in Jesus,  
Who healed a woman on the Sabbath,  
Who spoke of God as a woman seeking a lost coin,  
As a woman who wept, seeking the lost;

We believe in Jesus,  
Who thought of pregnancy and birth with reverence

We believe in Jesus,  
Who appeared first to Mary Magdalen  
And sent her with the message "Go and tell"

We believe in the wholeness of God,  
In whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free,  
Female nor male, for we are one in God.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,  
As she moves over the waters of creation and over the earth,  
The woman spirit of God, who created us and gave us birth  
And covers us with her wings. Amen.