



FAITH MOVEMENT FOR GENDER JUSTICE

Southern African faith leaders' symposium on faith and gender, Harare, April 2016

Introduction to the Side by Side Faith Movement for Gender Justice by Revd Terrie Robinson, Co-chair, Side by Side Inception Group

Why Side by Side: Faith Movement for Gender Justice

How and why did Side by Side emerge with all its audacious hope and its determination to gather faithful people to the task of transformation for gender justice?

Just over a year ago, representatives from about seventeen international Churches, ecumenical networks and mission and development agencies met near London in the UK to look at the theological imperative for gender justice. Those who took part decided that since we shared a vision of equal power relations between women and men, and since we could travel further in our efforts for gender justice if we travelled together, then we should begin working towards a joint commitment and an action plan for moving forward together.

An international Inception Group was formed to get things moving. And things have been moving along. More faith-based organisations have become involved in the Movement. We have our Side by Side logo that you can see on the screen. The logo features two candles, side by side. They represent light which is such a strong symbol of our faith. They represent women and men working side by side, all of us working side by side in a movement for gender justice. As time goes by we are hoping to work side by side with leaders and organisations of other faith traditions who also want to do something about gender justice. So we think it's a good logo and we hope you like it.



The Side by Side website has been built so that we can communicate more effectively and gather resources in one place. Please do explore it, and think about signing the Side by Side pledge while you are there. And the movement has a Facebook page and a Twitter account (details in hand-out leaflet).

One of the priorities of Side by Side is to encourage and to build the capacity of church leaders to take a lead in mobilising their communities to tackle gender injustice. This Regional Workshop for Southern Africa is the third of a series of Side by Side Regional Workshops.

The first Regional Workshop was for Latin America and the Caribbean last year. It was held in Brazil and the planning group there decided to go straight to an inter faith approach. The second one was

in Nairobi for East Africa and Eliud will be able to tell us more about that. At some stage we want to have a faith leaders' workshop in Europe. As yet, there is no region in the world that has got gender equality right.

Scripture and theological reflection

Theological reflection on gender is going to be an essential part of Side by Side's activities. We need to reflect theologically on gender because we are people of faith and we need to ground our work for gender justice in Scripture. We need to be able to show that gender justice is all part of the human flourishing that God wants for us – God's daughters, God's sons.

In Scripture, the story of God and humankind is a story of relationship, and longing for relationship: God's costly seeking of relationship with us; our seeking of relationship with God; our relationship with one another. And the quality of our relationship with one another is not seen as somehow disconnected from the quality of our relationship with God. Walking humbly with God is spoken in the same breath as doing justice and loving kindness.

From ancient times, there has been a profound belief that 'God created humankind in the divine image ... male and female he created them. And yet women and men have become trapped in distorted mythologies around power. We have to take some responsibility for that.

It has to be said that religious people have quite a history of perpetuating oppressive attitudes towards women. We have misused Scripture and the traditions of our faith to feed into a theology which devalues women; which perpetuates silence around violence and other injustices against women, which sees women as inferior beings whose word isn't worth very much and who are not fit for authoritative roles.

We can't let that go on. In a spirit of repentance and in faith, it's time for us to look at Scripture again and reclaim its positive and often subversive nature – reclaim it, preach it, teach it and embody it - so that we, as people of faith, are never known as the ones who held gender justice back.

This is what the theologian Susan Durber says in Christian Aid's theology of gender 'Of One Flesh':

"To reflect before God on gender ... is to think about what it means that we are male and female. It is to ask what it would mean to experience our being gendered as gift rather than danger, a source of life and hope rather than oppression or fear, as something to be received gratefully from God, rather than experienced as a source of strife."

That's a great place to start.

Side by Side's ambition is enormous! Because the positive empowerment of women and the positive empowerment of men to live and work in just relationship requires nothing less than a transformation of individuals, and a transformation of cultures, and a transformation of all our communities. It means looking through the eyes of girls who are valued by their families and communities as less than boys. It means looking through the eyes of women whose voices and contributions and needs have been marginalised, or the billion women in our world who have experienced sexual or gender-based violence.

This is Side by Side's working definition of gender justice:

Gender justice refers to:...a world where everybody, women and men, boy and girls are valued equally; are able to share equitably in the distribution of power, knowledge and resources; and are free from cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression, and from violence and repression, based on gender."

This is what we're looking for and the good news is that we're not starting with nothing. A huge amount has already been achieved and we must allow that to encourage us.

A number of international instruments have helped.

- Since 1979 we have had CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.
- In 1995 the Beijing Platform for Action flagged up 12 key areas of concern where urgent action was needed to ensure greater equality between women and men, girls and boys. It's been an important benchmark and accelerator of progress.
- During the 15-year time span of the Millennium Development Goals, significant and substantial progress has been made in meeting many of them. There have been improvements in healthcare and health. We're told that the number of people living in extreme poverty has halved... But it has to be said that progress has been uneven, particularly for women and girls.
 - Most girls are now enrolled in primary school, but at secondary level, girls are more likely to be out of school than boys.
 - Every day that passes, 38,000 girls are coerced into early marriage¹ and are more likely to become pregnant before their bodies are sufficiently mature for safe delivery of their babies. In fact, complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second highest cause of death for 15-19 year-old girls globally.²
 - Female genital mutilation affects more than 125 million girls and women alive today.³
 - Women make up two-thirds of the world's human trafficking victims.⁴
 - Research by the World Health Organisation has shown that one in three women experience physical or sexual violence.⁵
 - We have seen again and again how sexual violence against women and girls is used as a tactic of war and how conflict exacerbates gender based violence and inequalities that persist long after the signing of peace agreements. Even so, in recent years women have comprised fewer than 4 per cent of signatories to peace agreements and less than 10 per cent of negotiators at peace tables.⁶ It's no surprise then that out of some 585 peace treaties

¹ Plan International, 2014

² World Health Organisation, 2014

³ World Health Organisation, 2014

⁴ UNODC

⁵ World Health Organisation, 2014

⁶ 1992 to 2011. Source: UN Women

drafted over the last 20 years, only 16 per cent of them contain specific references to women.⁷

Now we are entering the era of the Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs, which are binding on all our countries.

We have SDG 5 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' as a stand-alone goal and this time it has a more searching group of indicators for success. It includes targets to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including trafficking, and to eliminate all harmful practices such as early or forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

So where do faith communities fit in with all this? Our nations have signed on to all manner of conventions and protocols. 139 national constitutions now include guarantees of gender equality. In 150 countries women now have equal rights to own property. Many countries have National Action Plans for tackling sexual and gender-based domestic violence.

The thing is, people have to catch up with all those things. In our communities, changes to gendered social norms have lagged behind changes to national legislation and the signing on to international protocols and conventions. It is still the case that customary law and old habits and entrenched harmful attitudes frequently predominate over state laws. Protocols, conventions, legislation are only worth something if there is the will of the people, if there is awareness and transformation in our cities and towns and in our remote rural areas, in our villages and in our homes.

This is where we come in as people of faith. Because we are in every community. Because people listen to faith leaders. Because we are in a great position to be challenging harmful cultural norms and practices. We can teach life-bringing alternatives and we can model different ways of dealing with one another. We can be the transformation we long to see.

This is all our work. Seeking gender justice isn't "women's work". We need to correct that paradigm. Men and women need to work for this in a spirit of partnership and mutuality. In fact, it's by working together that we actually model the outcome we long to see.

One of the present realities in our Churches and in other faith traditions is that most faith leaders are men. We might say that the low representation of women at leadership level leaves a predominantly male leadership with a particular responsibility for standing in solidarity with women.

It's so good to see so many men participating in this workshop. We need male gender champions; brave and faithful men who will be agents of change among their peers and in their communities.

I sincerely hope that this Workshop will inspire and equip you to create opportunities in your own contexts for local church leaders – ordained and lay – to reflect on the challenges and achievements around gender justice and how we as disciples of Jesus Christ can work for transformation. So often, when we provide such opportunities, we find that we are pushing against an open door and outcomes can be really very positive.

⁷ 'Gender and Peacebuilding: Why women's involvement in peacebuilding matters', Kathleen Kuehnast, 2015, <http://www.buildingpeace.org/think-global-conflict/issues/gender-and-peacebuilding> accessed 28 February 2016.

Faith leaders have enormous potential to influence their communities. UN agencies and NGOs may come in, run a programme or two, and then leave. But faith leaders remain with their people and have an on-going leadership role and influence. You know your people and you know their local culture, so you are in an authoritative position to question cultural traditions and practices that do harm, that burden or diminish women and girls. Or that burden or diminish men and boys! Gender stereotypes can be oppressive no matter who we are!

There is a growing resource of all sorts of different types of material to help us on this journey. These two days will be a great opportunity to share what you know about, what works, and so on.

So on behalf of Side by Side's Inception Group, I thank you, sincerely thank you, for being here. You are a blessing to the Faith Movement for Gender Justice and my prayer is that during this Workshop the Holy Spirit will strengthen you with fresh energy for the work ahead and for seeking a coordinated approach towards gender justice in your own contexts and in your region. Side by Side needs you so that this Faith Movement for Gender Justice doesn't grow weary, and more than that, so that it gains momentum and awakens the imagination and commitment of millions. Amen.