

Mennonite World Conference

A community of Anabaptist-related churches

www.mwc-cmm.org

News Service

September 16, 2009

Editor's note: This news package features two stories about women theologians who are finding ways to support each other. Latin American Women Theologians held their first transcontinental gathering in Paraguay in conjunction with the Mennonite World Conference assembly in July 2009. They hosted women from Africa and North America for part of the gathering. Some of the African women theologians participate in the "Sister-Link" program described in the second story. The writer conducted a "virtual round table" through interviews over a period of months.

Women theologians hold 'spiritual festival'

Asunción, Paraguay - "A great spiritual festival glorifying God" is how Martha Basualdo from Paraguay described the first transcontinental gathering of Latin American Women Theologians* (LAWT) held July 13 and 14 in conjunction with Mennonite World Conference's Assembly 15.

More than 130 women from 16 Latin American and Caribbean countries, six African countries, Canada and the United States met at the Iglesia Cristiana de la Paz and the Mennonite Brethren Bible Institute in Asunción. They also held seminars, workshops and discussions during Assembly 15.

The theme for the event, conducted primarily in Spanish with English and French translation, was "Jesus' liberating message for women and men." Ofelia García from Mexico, said in the opening session, "Getting to this point has meant challenging boundaries.... There is still a long way to go, but we are prepared. And we are not alone." She noted MWC's support.

Alix Lozano, church leader from Colombia, led the opening Bible study. In small groups, participants studied New Testament passages including women and talked about reading the Bible from women's perspectives, not simply repeating what has sometimes felt like a "male model" and has contributed to discrimination. Ideas included designating a day to pray for Latin American women and proclaiming the years 2010 to 2020 "The Decade of Women."

The second day included more women from Africa and North America. Elizabeth Soto from Puerto Rico and the USA led a Bible study on "Called of God to serve with power." Rebecca Osiro from Kenya spoke on "The great commandment for families." In her response, Ofelia García from Mexico cited Jesus' new model of the family, the need to relinquish individualism and to respond to the needs of others.

The gathering did not exclude men bringing greetings. Joren Basumata from India and Matiku Thomas Nyitambe of Tanzania along with out-going president Nancy Heisey brought greetings from the MWC General Council.

"This is a time of joy and relationship building," said Heisey. "These meetings are good news for the global Mennonite world."

Basumata, who said he came to show solidarity with the women, compared them to biblical women "who served the Lord in singleness of heart."

"We are still afraid of being led by women," confessed Nyitambe. "If you visit my congregation, you will see that women are leaders.... We have not ordained them [but] we are discussing that possibility." He credited Nancy Heisey's visit to his country with helping to change the thinking of the male leaders, showing them that women can take on positions of responsibility.

Three women – from Guatemala, Congo and the USA – braided together three ribbons as a symbol of unity and fellowship before this gathering concluded.

The women approved a declaration developed from participants' contributions. It called on women to take leadership roles in their churches, to denounce injustice, proclaim hope and assume lifestyles that speak for the values of the kingdom of God.

The declaration stated that Anabaptist women and men constitute an interdependent community and it proposed dialogue to foster equality. It called for discernment, unity, the liberating practice of Jesus and re-reading the Bible through the eyes of

women. It also listed ways in which women would support each other in using their gifts.

“Our meeting with Latin American sisters encouraged me,” said Nellie Mlotshwa from Zimbabwe. “Our prayer and wish to be fully involved in the work of the kingdom was also theirs, we discovered.”

At a special evening celebration, the women honored Milka Rindzinski of Uruguay for her lifelong service to Latin American women. Recognition was also given to Olga Piedrasanta (Guatemala) and Linda Shelly (USA).

Latin American and African women theologians offered afternoon workshops throughout the MWC assembly. Under the theme, “Women theologians in partnership: creating liberating independence,” Mama Swana Sidonie told of her informal theological work in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Sylvia Shirk from the US explained the 4-year “Sister Link” between African Anabaptist Women Theologians and Mennonite Women USA who also give scholarships to women in various countries who are studying theology.

A seminar facilitated by Basualdo, Lozano, Garcia, Sandra Campos (Costa Rico), Gladys Siemens (Brazil), Olga Piedrasanta (Guatemala) and Linda Shelly (USA) described the history of the LAWT movement and its current progress. Campos is a recipient of an MC USA scholarship.

Iris de Leon-Hartshorn, MWC Executive Committee member, described how the LAWT had helped inspire women in the USA to hold a theological gathering of women of color in their country.

Elizabeth Herrera from Costa Rica hopes her enthusiasm to work harder for peace, unity, love of neighbors and to strengthen work with women in the community is contagious. She summarized: “I am more committed and willing to perform the tasks the Lord has entrusted to us, to give thanks for the grace I received and to be a multiplier of the wonderful teachings we experienced.”

**The term theologian is used in the broadest sense to include all those who have studied or are studying biblical, theological, religious or pastoral courses. In select cases it includes women without formal preparation but who are involved in a pastoral role.*

Ferne Burkhardt

MWC news editor with files from Milka Rindzinski, Uruguay; Patricia Burdette and Linda Shelly, USA

Photos available on request:

1. Latin American women join together in “a great spiritual festival glorifying God” at the first transcontinental gathering of Latin American Women Theologians. (Photo by Linda Shelly)
2. Not knowing that she and Linda Shelly would also be honored by the women present, Olga Piedrasanta (right) presented flowers and a plaque to Milka Rindzinski (left) in honor of her lifelong service to Latin American women. (Photo by Linda Shelly)
3. Alix Lozano (left), a church leader from Colombia, and Rebecca Osiro (right), a theologian-pastor from Kenya. (Photo by Linda Shelly)
4. Latin American women connect with their African sisters on the porch of the Iglesia Cristiana de la Paz. Left to right: Sérilir da Silva (Brazil), Gladys Siemens (Brazil), Rebecca Osiro (Kenya), Swana Sidonie (Congo), Ana Lucia Paula Soares (Brazil), Godelive Tshikay (Congo), “Fifi” Pombo Madikela (Congo), Valéria Ivarenga (Brazil), Ngombe Kaja (Congo). (Photo by Sylvia Shirk)

African and North American Sister-Link partners find mutual support

New York City, New York (USA) - Partnership with African women theologians? “I thought it would be enlivening, interesting, and valuable,” said pastor Nina Lanctot, who embraced the opportunity in 2005. “It was harder than I anticipated,” she said. The deepening political and economic crisis in the homeland of her Zimbabwean partner, Sibusisiwe Ndlovu, often made it impossible for the two women to communicate.

Theologian Malinda Berry saw powerful potential in the partnership called Sister-Link as a way to live as a global Christian. “It also provides moments of transcendence, and helps relativize problems.... We could have conversations that disrupt colonial patterns!” she said of working with her students.

Professor Mary Schertz's Sister-Link partner is Kenyan theologian-pastor Rebecca Osiro, “It’s clear to me that I have opportunities women in Africa have not had. This is a way...to say, ‘I’m privileged and I know it,’ and to care about other women in other settings,” Mary reflected.

The three women, along with five other American and Canadian Mennonite women seated at an imaginary round table were discussing a unique Sister-Link, sponsored by Mennonite Women USA. The partnership had been difficult, the obstacles formidable. But the rewards deepened their understanding of their sisters’ reality and profoundly inspired their faith.

From 2005 to 2009, the North American women each pledged to pray for an African sister and to build friendship with her across geographic distance and cultural difference. The eight Africans were the leaders of African Anabaptist Women Theologians (AAWT), a continental network of women from Mennonite World Conference churches which formed in 2002 to promote women’s ministry and theological training. The AAWT group had invited international partners to support them.

The North American women were African American and white; pastors, Bible and theology teachers; and leaders in denominational women’s advocacy. Each brought the unique perspective of her life experience.

The North American women noted the obstacles to good partnerships. They reflected critically on past partnership models using the writings of AAWT leader Mama Swana Sidonie of Congo, and Botswana theologian Musa W. Dube.

Rhoda Keener described the challenge she faced in the partnership as a North American white woman. “We want equality, but we don’t know how [to achieve it]” she said. “Our wealth and white skin feel like blocks.”

Linda Gehman Peachey helped raise scholarship funds for African women studying theology. “We can’t get away from colonialism,” she lamented. “The fact that we in the U.S. and Canada are providing funds is one dynamic in the partnership. But the decision about who gets the funding is made in Africa.”

The eight women around the table reflected on the biblical story of a shouting Canaanite woman who pleaded with Jesus to heal her daughter (Matthew 15:21-28). Jesus’ initial attitude toward this woman of a different ethnicity was less than gracious, but at the end of their encounter he healed her daughter and applauded the Canaanite woman’s great faith. Some North American women saw themselves in the attitudes of Jesus, the disciples, or the privileged children at the table. Others identified with the shouting mother and her suffering daughter.

Said Regina Shands Stoltzfus, “Shouting is what mamas do when there’s something at stake. The story is here to let us know Jesus is about healing whoever will come.” Keener noted that even though we don’t know how to cross cultural divides, the friendships formed through Sister-Link supported her. “When I was in Congo, the women gathered and prayed for me one evening in French. I don’t know French, but I felt God’s presence.”

Mary Mae Schwartzenruber said of her Sister-Link partner, Mama Kadi of Congo, “After a pastoral visit when she feels overwhelmed, Mama Kadi gets on her knees with her head on the floor. She begs God, kneeling as this woman did. When she visited [our congregation], she threw herself on the floor in the midst of a circle of adults. Since her visit in October 2007, I have prayed many times this way, and God has been faithful.”

The group reflected on Mama Swana’s hopes for a new model of partnership based on clear expectations, shared information, and opportunities for women. The North American woman wished for greater language and cultural competence, for increased passion in prayer, for economic justice between their continents, and for more times in one another’s presence.

“White women in the United States and Canada who do partnership with women of color in other countries need also to partner with women of color in the US,” said Shands Stoltzfus. True partnership with African sisters, noted Michelle Armster, would mean “owning the power and privilege and then being willing to give it up...and believing that by giving it up one is richer.”

Amidst the challenge of managing their privilege, participants around the table found true riches in the Sister-Link. Schwartzenruber’s words echoed Jesus’ response to the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:28. “Mama Kadi is an inspiration, a faith model. I say, ‘Mama Kadi, great is your faith.’ My prayer is, ‘Let it be done for you as you wish.’”

- Sylvia E. Shirk

(SIDEBAR: participants)

- Michelle Armster, co-director of office of justice and peace building at Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), and co-pastor at St. Andrew United Church of Christ, PA. Her partner was Kelemu Tefera, Ethiopia.
- Malinda Berry, systematic theologian teaching at Goshen College, IN, while completing her doctorate at Union Theological Seminary, NY. Her partner was Hellen Bradburn, Tanzania.

- Linda Gehman Peachey, director of women's advocacy at the national level for MCC. She supported the AAWT scholarship fund.
- Rhoda Keener, executive director of Mennonite Women USA. She gave oversight to the Sister-Link program and consulted with AAWT leaders and with Tim Lind of Mennonite World Conference .
- Nina Lanctot, pastor of Florence Church of the Brethren / Mennonite Church, MI, and assistant director of the Engaging Pastors program at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS), IN. Her partner was Sibusisiwe Ndlovu, Zimbabwe.
- Mary Schertz, professor of New Testament and director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies at AMBS. Her partner was Rebecca Osiro, Kenya.
- Mary Mae Schwartzenruber, pastor of Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, in Ontario, Canada. Her partner was Mama Kadi Hayalume Beatrice, Congo.
- Regina Shands Stoltzfus, pastor-professor-theologian, teaches at Goshen College and is completing a Ph.D. at the Chicago Theological Seminary, IL. Her partner was Nellie Mlotshwa, Zimbabwe.
- Sylvia Shirk, pastor of Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship, NY, was partnered with Mama Swana Sidonie, Congo.

Mennonite World Conference is a communion (*Koinonia*) of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness.