

JOURNEY FOR JUSTICE

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THE STORY OF WOMEN IN THE WCC

NATALIE MAXSON



**World Council
of Churches**
Publications

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Natalie Maxson

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FOREWORD

FULATA LUSUNGU MOYO

*PROGRAMME EXECUTIVE,
WOMEN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY*

Journey for Justice is a celebratory story. It narrates how women from the onset of the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches have threaded their experience, perspective and presence into the ecumenical tapestry, giving the search for unity a rich texture of diverse perspectives and a holistic agenda of justice and peace.

The WCC project on Women in Church and Society (WICAS) wisely commissioned Natalie Maxson to tell this story. As a younger woman, her ecumenical experience and vision bridge the chasm between the ecumenical foremothers, whose stories she skillfully paints in this volume, and the young ecumenists whose vision she herself embodies. Throughout her narrative, she highlights the perennial vision of and search for unity as a just community of women and men. And she has continually opened up the story to its broader context in church and society. The search for justice and dignity for every person, as well as for creation itself, has been conceived as part of the nature and mission of the church. So whether they are reflecting theologically or advocating for their rights through agencies like the UN Commission on the Status of Women, women in the ecumenical movement have heard God's call in their lives to an ecumenical journey of justice.

As each chapter unfolds the story of each decade, you will find not only a keen narrative of the crucial, influential, and prophetic work of women in the WCC but also a personal challenge to see all the interlocking dimensions of this search for authentic community, and your place within it.

This book was first composed for presentation at the 10th Assembly of the WCC in Busan, Republic of Korea, under the theme, “God of life, lead us to justice and peace.” It has been revised now for a wider readership and use.

This book project and a related video project would not have been a reality without the meaningful and priceless contribution of so many significant players. Let me mention just a few of these. First and foremost, I thank Natalie Maxson for courageously and with sacrifice accepting the request from WCC Women in Church and Society and profficiently translating the WICAS dream into this tangible and accessible reality. In the video work, Coetzee Zietsman and Marcelo Schneider, you were able to professionally capture the living images and voices of women and men in their reflections for a just community of women and men in a memorable way. The United Methodist Women I thank for being the financial midwives who trusted enough that WICAS would deliver a lively women’s narrative. I am grateful for the WCC Central Committee women’s presidents, 2006-2013: Rev. Dr Ofelia Ortega (Reformed Church in Cuba, Caribbean and Latin American President), Dame Mary Tanner (Church of England, Europe President), and Rev. Dr Bernice Powell Jackson (AMEA, North American President) for their untiring mentorship and guidance to WICA’s projects and programme staff; for all Central Committee sisters and brothers who have always gone an extra mile to support and give guidance to WICAS staff and project; for the critical eye and judgment of sister and predecessor Aruna Gnanadason; for soul sisters within the WCC and in the sister ecumenical organizations

who have always been there to stand and move with WICAS; for WCC Communications, especially Publications; for WCC leadership for their support and encouragement to women in church and society; for our team leader and staff team and lastly but not least for Ms Maria Cristina Rendon, my close ally in the building of a community of women and men: WICAS would not be what it is without your valuable contribution. To all sisters and brothers who have contributed in all manner of accompaniment, I say: we are not yet a just community of women and men in church and society, so let this pilgrimage of gender justice and peace with no violence against women continue, to God's glory and praise! God of life, lead us to justice and peace.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first heard about the WCC when, as a teenager, I heard Marion Best (vice-moderator of the WCC, 1998-2006) speak about the WCC's Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. That memory has stayed with me. The church was an important place where my faith, social consciousness and leadership were nurtured early on. I was privileged to have a friend and mentor in my local congregation, Junior Kunze (who was sixty years older than me), who exposed me to social justice work both locally and internationally. Such experiences and relationships made me realize the church was a worldwide body. Stories of people I met or read about, such as Archbishop Oscar Romero, made a deep impression on me as a young person and have shaped my commitment to justice work. I sincerely pray that each young person would be gifted with such mentors in their life to help them grow.

The ecumenical movement and the people and churches I have encountered since then have had a deep and enduring impact on my life. I thank God for this journey, which has both challenged and inspired me. I am humbled and grateful for all the learnings and experiences, not least of which the chance to write this book. It became a labour of love and an opportunity to give a gift back to the ecumenical family, which has given me so much.

While writing the story of women in the WCC has been a privilege, I want to acknowledge that not every story or perspective has been captured. This recollection is only a thread in a much wider tapestry of stories of women who contribute, each in their own way to their communities and churches. I

want to acknowledge all the women whose stories we don't always get to hear, especially our local leaders and those who may work quietly behind the scenes in our churches and who are so important. In this spirit, I hope we will be open to listening to each other and reflecting on how we are connected in love through the body of Christ.

There are many people I thank and who have made this book come together: First, for my friend and colleague, Cristina Rendon, whose idea it was to ask me to write this book. For Aruna Gnanadason, who tirelessly edited each chapter with wisdom. The women and men who agreed to offer their reflections for the end of this book adding so much richness! For the people who read the first edition of the book at the WCC's 10th Assembly and gave us helpful feedback. For Michael West and the publications staff at WCC who have put this all together. For my friends Syd and Theo in Toronto, who accommodated me while I researched in the libraries; and Gail Allen of the United Church of Canada, who gave me a copy of her thesis. For my sister, Christie, who accommodated me in Vancouver while I did more research in the libraries. For my mom, Penny, who rallied me on with pride. For the community of support from my colleagues at the Naramata Centre. For Patricia Vickers, whose faith, courage and friendship deeply inspires me. For all supportive male allies, including my dear friend Wade. For my partner who patiently and lovingly supported me through the writing and editing process and whose friendship continues to be a source of strength and inspiration. For Fulata, my friend and colleague, who planted the initial seed that this book be written to honour sixty years of women's work in the WCC.

For the women who have gone before me but whom I never got to meet, like those named in this book –their stories and legacies inspire me deeply, and I hope they will continue to inspire others. For all those women, who bear the

teachings of Christ in their hearts and who work to make us one! Finally, this book is dedicated to my two beloved sisters, and to all sisters in the struggle for justice!

Natalie Maxson

1. IN THE BEGINNING: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE FORMATION OF THE WCC (1930S-60S)

Church history begins when a few women set out to pay their last respects to their dead friend Jesus. Church history begins when Jesus comes to them, greets them, lets them touch him just as he had touched and restored them in their lives. Church history begins when the women are told to share with the men this experience, this life they now comprehend, this life their hands have touched. (Moltmann-Wendel and Moltmann, 29)

Women theologians have reminded us of an important moment in the Christian story. It is the witness of the women whose faith, love, and courage brought them to the tomb of Jesus Christ. There they received the angel's message that Christ had risen from the dead! Christ entrusted these women with the message of his resurrection—a message of hope for the early community of followers. It is to this story that we trace our genealogy of women leaders and teachers who have been, without a doubt, the backbone of the Christian community, and this in spite of structures and systems that have too often marginalized and silenced the gifts of women. It is

by the faith and faithfulness of women that the ecumenical movement has grown and the vision of Christian unity been sustained. This book offers a glimpse of the past sixty years of women's involvement in the World Council of Churches.

This first chapter attempts to highlight some key contributions of women during the early years of the WCC's formation. Just as these women were called by the challenges and possibilities of their own contexts and generations, this overview invites us to discern how God might be calling us to respond to the historical moment in which we find ourselves today. We may find both commonalities and differences with our predecessors regarding the role of women in the church and ecumenical movement. Where do you see yourself and your church in this story? Whose voices are missing? How do the challenges from these early years resonate with or differ from our own stories? This chapter attempts to capture highlights of the early work of women during the formation of the WCC. It seeks to honour their leadership and contributions.

WOMEN'S EARLY ECUMENICAL WORK

Early in the last century, a variety of movements and gatherings began to work toward Christian unity; they influenced and led to the eventual formation of the World Council of Churches. Notable in terms of women's involvement is the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), founded in England in 1855, which became a global movement and organization in 1894. (Its male counterpart, the YMCA, was founded in 1844.) The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), founded in 1895, and its national Student Christian Movements (SCM) are other important sources from which many women leaders emerged to form the early WCC (VanElderen and Conway, 21). Another significant movement was the Women's World Day of Prayer, established as

an ecumenical liturgical practice well before the World Day of Prayer (Berger in Puglisi), started with a Presbyterian woman from the USA, Mary Allen James, who in 1887 encouraged women to pray for “home missions.” By 1927 this idea had spread internationally. Until this day, the first Friday in March continues to be observed globally and ecumenically by women who each year remember a different country in prayer (Puglisi, 72).

In this same period, other interdenominational movements and meetings on mission were taking place, culminating in the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference. The idea for a world conference on Faith and Order came out of the 1910 event, based on the assumption that for Christian unity to be achieved, theological and doctrinal issues which divide Christians must be explored and discussed. The delegates at the 1927 Faith and Order conference in Lausanne engaged participants in theological discussion on ministry, the sacraments, the nature of the church, and visions of Christian unity. Of the four hundred delegates in Lausanne, six were women. They made an intervention about the important role of women in the church and highlighted their own underrepresentation at the conference (Puglisi, 73). They asked that churches re-examine the relationship between women and men, arguing that the promotion of deeper unity required it, since the work of the church demanded that the gifts and talents of all its members be utilised (Daly, 1). The position of women in the church was framed as an important theological issue in the Faith and Order Commission bylaws; among its other goals, Faith and Order acknowledges the need to “examine such social, cultural, political, racial and other factors as affect the unity of the church” (Parvey 1988, 496). Women’s involvement in the church and ecumenical movement was thus a theological concern, not just a social one. In other words, who is the church? And who are the people

seeking Christian unity? What is the nature of the divisions that lead them to seek unity? From these contributions at the Lausanne Faith and Order conference, a fuller vision of ecumenism was emerging.

In this same period, ongoing discussions took place among those involved in Christian movements for peace and justice. They led to what came to be known as the Life and Work movement, whose members were concerned about social issues such as poverty and humanitarian needs and how to prevent wars following the horrors experienced in World War I. The Life and Work movement met in a world conference in Stockholm in 1925.

“EVE, WHERE ART THOU?”

After the world conferences of both Life and Work (1925) and Faith and Order (1927) a joint committee was formed to work toward the creation of a World Council of Churches (VanElderen and Conway, 26). In 1934, during this formative time of planning, Henrietta Visser 't Hooft published an article in the WSCF's *Student World* journal called “Eve, Where Art Thou?” She included this article in a correspondence with well-known Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth in which she asked Barth about the meaning of St. Paul's writing on the position of women. This discussion would later be part of a lively debate at the WCC's first general assembly. Reflecting on 1 Corinthians 11, Henrietta Visser 't Hooft wrote:

Look around and you will see everywhere how woman's responsibility to God is impeded and defamed by man's. But has not Christ set us free? Is not everyone now directly responsible to God, whether man or woman? So why should we accept this law? Why should we not conform to the second statement, which certainly has more to do with

the grace of God? If woman were not created for God, then Christ would have nothing to say to her. (Herzel, 160-166)

It is important to note that these scriptural debates taking place early in the ecumenical movement referred to the same questions and texts as the ones taken up decades later in what came to be known as the “Community Study,” about which we will read in Chapter Two, and in subsequent work of the WCC. Suzanne de Diétrich, one of the ecumenical movement’s cherished leaders and scholars, was known for her passion for biblical study and shared it with the students at the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, where she served from the Institute’s inception in 1946 until 1954 (Bria and Heller, 82). In one of her articles, de Diétrich writes:

Are we ready to let our lives, and the life of our Churches and the life of the whole Ecumenical Movement be reshaped by the living Word of God, ready to listen to what “the Spirit says to the Churches”? (de Diétrich, 416)

De Diétrich’s *Rediscovery of the Bible* encouraged students, in a phrase often heard in the SCM and attributed to Barth, to study with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other (Boyd). The book was one of the first to be published by the WCC, in 1942, even before the WCC’s formal beginning (VanElderen and Conway, 7-8).

PRESENT AT THE CREATION

Sarah Chakko, a Syrian Orthodox educator from India, was another influential figure during the formation of the WCC. She reflected on the phenomenon of women taking

up increased leadership in the church during World War II. During a visit to Europe, she wrote:

One is very much intrigued by the concept of “woman” underlying Church and public life in Europe. In a country like Switzerland, which claims to be the oldest democracy in existence today, women are still unenfranchised. Even in countries where women have political rights they are not found in any significant numbers in places of trust and responsibility. In some Churches where women were ordained to the ministry during the war and did serve their congregations effectively, a reaction seems to have set in and women ministers are asked to confine their service to women and children. Socially, while they are cherished and protected, they are often not treated as intelligent responsible persons... The Church in many so called “mission lands” pioneered in women’s education, gave them their rightful place in society and offered them opportunities of service. Many of the European missionary women workers find in these lands greater opportunities for creative service than in their own home countries. (Chakko, 148-149)

Societal changes like the ones Chakko describes about Europe would have been difficult to reverse. Women’s suffrage movements (for voting rights and the right to stand for office) were in the forefront of national and international news in many parts of the world in the early 20th century. Ecumenical history books note that during this period of formation of the WCC, the influence of World War I and II was dominant. The world had witnessed the horrors of widespread violence, ethnic cleansing, vicious forms of fascism, and the atomic bomb. This period was also characterized by emerging national struggles for independence around

the globe, in the many lands where European colonial powers had imposed their own systems of governance, economy, and culture. This colonial reality had undeniably shaped the way many people were introduced to Christianity through missionizing projects; European cultural norms were superimposed on local and indigenous understandings of gender. It is in this era and context that the efforts and energy of many Christians focused on the need for greater unity and cooperation. Through this history, the WCC was born. Key actors consistently raised the concern that this ecumenical endeavour be one shaped by both women and men.

Twila McCrea Cavert was one of these women. She was an American Presbyterian and leader in the YWCA who in 1946 accompanied her husband, Samuel McCrea, the general secretary of the USA's National Council of Churches in Christ, to the Provisional Committee meeting for the WCC. Women like herself, who were leaders in their own right back at home, were marginalized and kept at the outskirts of these conversations. Cavert pushed for women's participation in the creation and work of the WCC. She argued that women's participation should not just be left to women's organizations like the YWCA but be integral to the WCC itself (Jacques, 63). She and others made contact with European women leaders with influence in the churches, such as Madeleine Barot, to start a pressure group (Jacques, 63). Thus the idea of sending out a questionnaire to all churches about women in the church came about. The survey on "The Life and Work of Women in the Church" was sent out and received replies from fifty-eight countries. It gathered data and responses about women's professional life in the church (as laity or clergy) and in women's organizations (Jacques, 64).

Two other important women in the work of the nascent WCC were Kathleen Bliss and Sarah Chakko, referred to earlier. Bliss, from the Church of England, worked for the

pioneering ecumenist J. H. Oldham as editor of the *Christian Newsletter*. She represented Oldham at the 1946 Provisional Committee for the WCC and was suggested by the Archbishop of Canterbury to take part in the survey. Bliss participated in the first pre-assembly women's conference that took place in Baarn, The Netherlands, in 1948, prior to the WCC's first assembly (Conway, 68). At the assembly, she chaired the committee of alternate delegates and wrote the preliminary draft of the assembly's message, including the famous line "we intend to stay together" (Bria and Heller, 38). Sarah Chakko had been invited to attend the assembly as a representative from a "younger church." Chakko protested, explaining that her Syrian Orthodox Church had generations of history in India and challenging the notion that churches outside of Europe were "young communities" started by Western missionaries (Bria and Heller, 57). She received permission from her bishop to attend the assembly and her presence in Amsterdam embodied a truly underrepresented part of the church—female, Orthodox, from the global South—and one that is noticeably absent from the history books of early ecumenism.

At the WCC's first assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, a report on the results from the survey was placed on the agenda at the last minute (Jacques, 64). People at the assembly, including Henrietta Visser 't Hooft and Sarah Chakko, engaged in theological debates with Karl Barth about women in scripture. Barth, who contributed to the Amsterdam assembly, argued that women are equal but subordinate according to 1 Corinthians. The women highlighted Galatians 3:27-28, where Paul writes that women and men are equal in the body of Christ (Parvey, 496). Henrietta's husband, Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft, became the WCC's first general secretary and recognized the importance of these issues. He had been active in the WSCF and worked with theologians like Suzanne de Diétrich (Jacques, 64). At that first assembly, the

Commission on the Role of Women in the Church was created. Sarah Chakko was appointed the commission's chair and Kathleen Bliss its secretary.

In 1952, during her work for the commission, Kathleen Bliss expressed surprise at the lack of theological reflection on the relationship between men and women, aside from the topic of marriage, whereas in other fields an active discourse on gender was underway, e.g., with writers such as Margaret Mead and Simone de Beauvoir (Barot, 153). Barot and Bliss spoke about the need to push churches towards theological reflections on Christian anthropology, i.e., what it means to be human and how gender informs community and church. Bliss's 1952 book in 1952 on the work of the commission, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*, also summarizes the results of the survey (Conway, 68).

Based on the scriptural debates that had taken place at the Amsterdam assembly, a study process was started called "Men and Women in the Church," the results of which Bliss presented in 1954 at the WCC's second assembly in Evanston (Parvey 1988, 496). WCC member churches were asked to describe their teachings "in light of the biblical renewal and of the sociological developments which are emancipating women in a large part of the world" (Jacques, 64). Chakko was sent as an official delegate to the assembly on behalf of her church and noted that, "a woman can work in an official capacity in the Syrian Orthodox Church. There has never been any rule against it, but it has never been done" (Bria and Heller, 57).

The leadership of Madeleine Barot was sought for this ongoing work. She insisted that the commission be made a department, which it became at Evanston. She became the director of the Department of Cooperation Between Men and Women in Church and Society in 1953 (Jacques, 64). The shift in language and titling of this work is significant.

For one, there was resistance to women's participation in the churches and the WCC, and the idea of creating a specific "women's department" aroused anxiety (Daly, 5). On the other hand, the department's title invokes a holistic vision of women and men working together. As Chakko highlighted in her report to the Evanston assembly, the place and role of women in the church was "the concern of the Church as a whole and not the problem of women alone" (Daly, 2). Barot reflects on the notion of cooperation in this way:

Cooperation means that, considered separately or in isolation from one another, men and women are incomplete. They attain their full stature with each other's help. They are not truly themselves except in dialogue, constantly renewed, with reciprocity founded on grace that is the same for both and which implies equal responsibilities. (Jacques, 64)

RESISTANCE AND AGGIORNAMENTO

The first years of the department's work were dedicated to reflection and collecting information from the churches. The work was focused on how the church was spiritually accompanying people through major social changes, including women's involvement in economic and political life. In 1955 the department drafted a declaration at its annual meeting and sent it to member churches with these questions: What are the church's teachings on Christian vocation, mission of the church, service, and various forms of ministry (Jacques, 66)?

The department continued to encounter resistance, the point of contention being whether there was a need for a specific focus on women's perspectives. Some felt that these concerns and questions could be mainstreamed throughout the

WCC's work. As Barot argued, the reality was that women's voices and contributions had been overshadowed throughout a church dominated by male leadership. The first step was to meet with women and get a sense of what their experiences in the church were (Jacques, 66). Barot focused on meeting women in different countries and churches and networking with women's groups.

In 1959, the Church of Sweden approached the WCC when the Swedish government declared its intention to open all public functions to women, including ordained ministry in the church. This intervention was a catalyst for the WCC's theological research in this area (Jacques, 68). Women's ordination would continue to be an important topic for the churches and the WCC.

The Roman Catholic Church is not a member of WCC, but first sent observers to the third general assembly in New Delhi in 1961 after setting up the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in 1960 (VanElderen and Conway, 33). Subsequently, Pope John XXIII invited different Christian denominations to send observers to the Second Vatican Council. Barot was invited as an observer to the last year of the Council (Jacques, 69). Also involved as auditors during the later sessions of the Council were women leaders of Catholic organizations. What emerged was a dialogue group of women, half of whom were Catholics and the other half from Protestant, Orthodox, and other churches. In 1967 an ecumenical women's conference was held at the Taizé community in France. After the conference, the Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group continued the work for some years with support from the Joint Working Group of the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church and became a ground-breaking forum for dialogue (World Council of Churches, 1970, par. b). Barot continued on as secretary of this group after her retirement from the WCC (Barot, 72).

Some findings of the work in these early years were that very few women served on church councils. They were more active at the local level of the church but rarely at the national level except in specialized commissions dealing with youth, mission, and fundraising. Women were not as often involved in mixed-gender groups and activities and were expected to make contributions within women's groups only (Barot, 155). The purpose of this early work, as described by Barot, was to urge the churches towards greater integration of women in church life and leadership. Secondly, the work focused on preparing women for greater leadership and on providing ecumenical opportunities which had often been reserved for clergymen (Barot, 159). The importance of women and men working together, especially as there were few avenues for women to be involved, was emphasized during this early period. The leadership of key women in this period of the WCC's history is significant and set the tone for ongoing efforts that would attempt to widen the dialogue and the circle to involve more women's contributions.