

“Much in Common – Women and the Interfaith Journey” (Where are the women in interfaith dialogue?), *Australian Mosaic*, issue 2, Autumn 2003, 18-19.

by Trish Madigan op

Where are the women in interfaith dialogue? This is the question that always arises when one sees an interfaith event portrayed in the media – whether it is a world meeting of religious leaders in Assisi or Mr Bob Carr’s ‘Unity in Adversity’ gathering held in Government House in Sydney in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. About 15 members of the Women’s Interfaith Network attended the latter meeting after some swift negotiation from members of the Network. But as we found ourselves in a sea of male invitees from various religious and ethnic groups we were aware that, if we had not taken an initiative ourselves to request an invitation, there would have been few, if any, women present. It would have been helpful to hear some women speak among a long line – up of male religious leaders, but this was not to be. However it was encouraging to have some of those present approach us to ask who we were and to say how pleased they were to see us there.

The question – ‘Where are the women in interfaith dialogue?’ soon leads to the more general question ‘Where are the women in their respective faith and ethnic communities?’ Although women often have strong and active networks among themselves they are often marginalised, excluded and ignored when it comes to official roles and public profiles. Women nearly always lack voice and visibility in the public arena, and unexamined custom and theological collusion conspire to make sure it stays that way. The public lack of recognition of women’s contribution in their religious communities is one of the scandals of our time. As English scholar Ursula King points out in a 1985 study ‘Women in Dialogue’ [Heythrop Journal XXVI] in order to be truly human we have to be truly inclusive and bring together the insights of both women and men. Androcentrism takes male examples and practices as the norm and many men do not realise that that their understanding of humanity is one-sided because it is male-defined. Now, through the various women’s movements, society in modern times is being called to a new wholeness in relationship in which humanity will be able to see with its ‘two eyes’, which includes the particular experiences, insights and gifts of women as well as those of men.

It was to begin to move to address the situation of the absence of women in interfaith dialogue that women of several faith traditions in Sydney took an initiative in 1999 to form the Women’s Interfaith Network. The ‘seedbed’ was a forum organised by the Committee for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference held in Sydney in August 1999 as part of their Jubilee celebrations marking 2000 years of Christianity. A conscious effort was made by this Committee to include youth and women among the official invitations. At this gathering it was the Jewish and Muslim women leaders, Mrs Josie Lacey from the Executive Council of Australian

Jewry, and Mrs Aziza Abdel-Halem from the Muslim Women's National Network of Australia, who proposed that the women present should keep on meeting.

Monthly gatherings were organised. At first we concentrated on getting to know each other better personally and learning more about our religious heritage. For the first 18 months we added to our number filling in gaps where a particular religion was not represented and held our monthly meetings at different locations of significance to each religious tradition. For example we visited the Jewish museum in Darlinghurst, a Buddhist monastery in Chatswood, the Baha'i Temple in Mona Vale and a Catholic religious order in Turrumurra. In this way we learned where each member of the group was 'coming from' as we were welcomed by and in each community and experienced something of the life situation of that community.

All the time we ourselves were becoming better known. In July 2000 women from WIN were invited to lead an interfaith service at the 'Building Bridges' National Conference, jointly organised by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Commission and the Australian Catholic Migrants and Refugees Office, held in Sydney. The participants were deeply moved as seven women recited prayers from their own traditions.

By March 2001 when we had grown to a group representing eight different religions (Aboriginal, Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Zoroastrian) we felt we were ready to officially launch our group and chose to do this in the Jubilee Room of Parliament House with Dr Rachael Kohn, Executive Presenter of the ABC's 'Spirit of Things', as moderator. Official invitations were issued to 10 official representatives from each faith tradition. This event was reported in The Australian of 23 March 2001.

At the launch Dr Kohn, commenting on what women bring to interfaith dialogue, said 'We are gathered side by side as women of different faiths and cultures. Because we are women of faith and spirituality we have much in common. I hope that in the future we can show that religion need not be yet another barrier between people. Rather it will help build greater tolerance and understanding of differences and the realisation that we all are one'.

Recognising that religion is often believed to be a source of 'backwardness', of intolerance and violence and that it can be manipulated by the unscrupulous to their own ends, Dr Kohn went on to say 'Looking afresh at our traditions is an essential responsibility in the business of keeping them vital, meaningful and accountable, not only to the community of believers, but to the society which has given us the freedom and the space to carry out our traditions unmolested and unencumbered'.

Sr Mary Crespi noted: It is important to me as a woman to enter into this network. Our world order does promote violence –the quest for power over others – competition, intolerance of difference, economics over people, dualism, bureaucracies that depersonalise relationships. There is a tendency to destroy opposites rather than integrate them. And because religion invokes the most powerful of all, the Divine, it readily becomes the focus of violence. The results of this are destruction and elimination of life; powerlessness and the loss of hope in turn breed further violence. I believe this can only be overcome by breaking the cycle and integrating our differences.

Part of the journey for the women of the interfaith network has been to learn the discipline of dialogue. It is clearly not enough to enter into a dialogical situation confirmed in the ‘correctness’ of one’s own views and with either the idea that it is important to ‘win’ an argument or convince others of the truth of one’s own viewpoint. To this end we have studied Leonard Swidler’s ‘Dialogue Decalogue’ – the Ten Commandments of Interfaith Dialogue and drawn up a Constitution which is offered as a resource for others wanting to form dialogue groups.

Many interfaith groups begin with the aim of wanting to engage in some actions together and very quickly move into the political or justice areas. Women’s dialogue seems to favour a different entry point into dialogue. The WIN women, out of their own experience of sharing in dialogue, have decided that it is their faith which they most treasure and want to share and to this end have been developing resources to assist with this. As a result a small booklet ‘Sharing Faith’ is made available to all who might value it as a resource. It suggests sharing on topics as varied as ‘Women in our Scriptures’, ‘Well-known Women of our Faith Tradition’, ‘What Being a Woman (of my Faith Tradition) means to Me’

Already there have been many enquiries from women around Australia from Townsville to Perth, requesting information on how they can begin a WIN group in their own neighbourhood.

What many women have experienced through WIN is that, in the process of really being open and listening to how another woman understands her faith, they learn much and find their own faith enriched. As Venerable Chris Roberts expressed it: ‘I began to realise that when you think you have an open mind it doesn’t mean it is open. How do you know what you don’t know? If we judge through our own interpretation of how we think things are and not how they really are, it can lead to prejudice and segregation.On a personal level I have begun to admire and respect the women themselves and have learnt a lot more than I ever thought I could through them. I now go to WIN meetings with questions instead of answers’.

As Rachael Kohn observed: ‘No one today can watch the news and not realise how precious and rare our gift is. We owe our society much more than just

being good Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus.....We owe to the whole society our commitment to produce harmony, understanding compassion and above all a great and deep respect for human life and dignity. If we do not, then who will?

[WIN is now officially registered with the World Conference on Religion and Peace Women's Organisations. For more information contact Norma Anet , ph (02) 9744 8710, <anet@compassnet.com.au> or Sr Pauline Rae, ph (02) 9488 8844, <paulinemrae@hotmail.com>]