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Towards an Open and Bounded Space¹: A Retrospective of the Second Dutch Ecumenical Women's Synod from an Ecclesiological Perspective

Three women responded to the appeal to act as observer during the second Dutch Ecumenical Women's Synod which was held in August of 1992. I was one of them. We walked around for five days, read papers, took part in conversations; observing how this mixed company of women at the synod, with different positions of power in society and in the church, represented their movement. On the sixth and final day of the synod, we presented our findings.

Much the same as in this article, our story focused on the way in which the woman-and-faith movement aims to shape the ecclesia of women and the incentives that the second Women's Synod provided in this process.

The Observers' Report

"... By way of public conversation and as a profession of love we would like to tell you all how we have lived these past few days. We want to tell you what we do not want to forget. What the work will look like in our opinion. And why should we object to leaving this meeting with new homework!

Mind you, we were not present everywhere; we read the papers, we conducted conversations and looked around: with our eyes. That is the way it is. We saw three tasks for the years ahead. They were all dealt with in the five clusters we worked in this week - learning, celebrating, serving, sharing and the woman-and-faith movement. We will formulate them, visualise them

¹ This was the title of the second Ecumenical Women's Synod. It derives from the description of the women's church by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as a 'bounded open space'. She elaborated further on this notion during the conference 'power-difference-power' in 's-Hertogenbosch in 1988. This paper was published as an article in: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, London, 1993, 332-352.

and we will sing their praises for the sake of Her, who is Merciful and Good. In our opinion, the following three tasks are involved:

How do we let our experiences speak?

How do we want to be a religious community?

How do we compare to other religious communities?

About Our Experiences

We have all known for some time - and that is how we started - that we want to learn, celebrate, share, and, if we must, serve as well, from our own perspective. Our religious gatherings will have to at least be beneficial to us. We want to be able to believe, for, through and with one another, basing ourselves also on our experiences. No longer may our laughter and tears be for nothing, says She, our God.

But then there is the 'prism': through trial and error we discover that this collection of experiences breaks up into many different colours. We discover that, where changes for the better are concerned, women too have very different interests, needs and expectations and that these have to be discussed, have to be fought over, loved and acted upon. But how do we do this: how can we broaden our movement? Do our experiences complement each other? Are the differences in power and helplessness too large and do they stand in the way of collectivity?

Or must we learn to ask different questions that will make the old issues fade? Should we not first focus and narrow our view as much as we can in order to be able to look around? If we zoom in on the life of one woman we can learn to see all the colours of the world. As Doreen Hazel told us even more clearly at the opening: "Also direct your attention to coloured women because oppression is not foreign to them." In our opinion, we will need a funnel in order to focus our view and in order to stop ourselves from going under in multiplicity and pluriformity; in order to distinguish between justice and injustice and between good intentions and political plans. And we may hope that She, our God, will show herself.

Funnel

Sanctuary for women who are unwanted in this world, who have to remain silent in church, but are brought to speak here.

Treasury of justice for those who are dominated according to colour.

Compassion for lesbians or otherwise, heterosexuals or otherwise, with

children or without.

About Our Community

We want it so badly, and confess it again and again, a world without Jew or Greek, slave or free, 'male or female'. Because we are all one in Christ. What makes up our desire for unity, what do we think of, what vision makes us live? Can it be that here too, the old forms and thoughts darken our future; that we inherently and habitually long for a harmonious union?

Of course conflicts are unbearable and hurtful. But why? Unbearable for whom, and who will suffer when there are no conflicts? These have been the questions that were asked these past few days.

Can we find forms, create stories, share visions that do not unite our community, make it uniform. Is our unity allowed to be conflictive? Can we learn, serve, celebrate and share in a tense community, in a 'church-existence', full of new longing?

Wheel

Centre of change and democracy for those who get the short end of the stick politically and economically.

Discipleship of equals where everyone sits around a table, shares food and drink and everything; that which is forbidden in this world but promised in the kingdom of heaven.

About Our Relationship with other Church Communities

We can be brief on this subject:

May our learning, serving, celebrating and sharing be a disgrace for the existing churches, may our gatherings be scandalous to them.

Apple

Let us not lose this:

Put Your eyes protectively upon us, because it is Thee in particular who knows what it has cost women, what it will cost us, to get to where we are today, to rejoice in a new soul and a new body for the world."²

² Included in: *Report of the second Ecumenical Women's Synod 22-27 August 1992*, 40-42. The other spies were Lidy Leussink and Willemien Boot.

What Went Before

An event is not isolated, but forms part of a historic process, and is more easily understood from a historic perspective. That is why I will go back in the history of the Dutch woman-and-faith movement; to the first Ecumenical Women's Synod in 1987.

The first synod took place at the end of a symposium which went on for several days based on the theme of 'woman and power' on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of woman-and-faith work at the Church and World training centre in Driebergen. On the day of the Synod, about forty resolutions, diverse in character, formed the basis for debates and ballots. Decisions were taken about recommendations to official bodies of the church, to political authorities and to the woman-and-faith movement. The first synod was important for the self-awareness of the woman-and-faith movement. First of all, it strengthened the self-awareness of the movement as a movement. Woman-and-faith groups often operated in relative isolation. At the synod it became clear - literally - that the movement was a very large one. It also became a political factor in the church in the Netherlands. In addition, the image of the movement as a homogeneous whole, was shown to be a false one once and for all. Coloured and lesbian women had been pointing out white heterosexism for some time, also within the movement; women on social security emphasised power differences between women as a result of their economic positions. At the synod these issues were dealt with through the agency of those same groups of women and resolutions were adopted by those present that tested oppression in its many forms.

This development was accompanied by a politicizing of the woman-and-faith movement. While until that moment language and liturgy, the position of women in oppressive church structures or religious questions had been the most important subjects in the woman-and-faith movement, political and economic issues such as racism, heterosexism, sexual violence and poverty (in society and church) have been central points on the movement's agenda since the first Women's Synod.

The first Ecumenical Women's Synod showed what vision of the ecclesia the woman-and-faith movement has in mind: an ecclesia for women where spiritual and political matters are on the agenda; where power differences between women are taken seriously and where they, who are unequal in this world, practice a 'discipleship of equals'. This term was coined by Schüssler Fiorenza, who was introduced in the Netherlands in November 1987 with the

publication of the Dutch translation of her book 'In Memory of Her', and it was used by a number of theologians as a political-theological model for the woman-and-faith movement; as such it was recognised and adopted by many women in the movement.

In everyday life it often was difficult to live with the differences and to endure the confrontations. In the years following the first synod difficult and often endless discussions about differences in power were sometimes solved with a pragmatism that is typically Dutch: 'In the end we all stand for the same thing so let us not waste all our energy and time on each other but instead let each of us fight the battle on our own terrain.' The conviction that "that which is done to one member of the community - ecclesialogically speaking - touches everyone"³ seemed in danger of being lost. By the way, the result of this pragmatic attitude was a movement that brimmed over with activity.

Looking for a Tense Community

It was at that moment in history that the second Ecumenical Women's Synod took place. During the preparations for the event there were attempts to find ways to combat the threat of fragmentation that faced the movement (see above). It was clear that the second synod had to emphasise solidarity again while, at the same time, differences should not be glossed over. To this end three steps were taken.

First of all, the synod decided to work on a plan of action for the woman-and-faith movement for the next five years. It was decided that the following method would be used. During the first four days the participants worked out themes in workshops and prepared plans of action. On the fifth day these plans were worked out further and formed the basis for the plan of action that was drawn up. Participating women and women's groups committed themselves to parts of this plan of action. On the final day, the plan was presented to each other and to people who could only attend that particular day and would pass the plan on to their supporters. In addition, it was taken for granted that the synod would be supported from the first preparations to the final day by the groups in the woman-and-faith movement. A core group was established to create conditions in which these groups could prepare and shape the synod together. However, it was inevitable that in creating

³ Will Verhoef, "Will she be there, my sister?", in: *Eighty May Post* 9 (1994) 3, 6.

conditions, decisions were made with regard to contents as well. This regularly caused tension between the core group and woman-and-faith groups around the country. The second synod is characterised by the fact that women have remained in this area of tension and, also when solutions could not be found directly, did not withdraw nor exert their powers. During this synod it became evident that participants wanted to look for forms of solidarity, also in situations in which the atmosphere was not happy and relaxed.

The third step concerned the subject-matter of the synod. With the aid of the advisory committee, which consisted of fifty women, the core group looked for a framework within which it would be possible to work toward a feeling of solidarity among women that does not blur power differences. To this purpose, the core group sought the advice of two theologians from the United States of America: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Delores Williams. Schüssler's concept of women's ecclesia as an open rhetorical space that is bound together by its struggle against multiplying forms of oppression seemed to suit this purpose. In order to make the feeling of solidarity tangible, the group relied on Delores Williams.

Williams argues that, in our attention for everything that is concerned with the justified existence of women, we should not forget what it means to be a 'church' or a 'community'. She uses the traditional functions that the church has in the areas of learning, serving and celebrating to develop activities that create communities, and adds other functions including 'sharing'.⁴

These four functions of the community - learning, celebrating, serving and sharing became the pivots that were to lead to an open and bounded space. That is to say: the fact that women's groups categorised their activities under one of the four functions, might make it possible to look for links between social issues without obscuring their social meaning. Indeed, there were some surprising collaborations as a result. For example, members of the lesbian network 'Verkeerd Verbonden', a representative of the Islamic organization Nisa and the women's group SIEN of the *Basisbeweging Nederland* organised a joint workshop with the title 'Love is multi-coloured'.

⁴ Annelies Knoppers, "A conference for and by women. The ideas behind the second Ecumenical Women's movement", in: *Mara* 5 (1992) 3, 36.

At times it seemed impossible to find links based on the four functions of the community. While the workshops were being prepared, black women discovered that white women were less than willing to consider racism as a matter for discussion. Thereupon they decided to organise their own workshop.

... we had decided at first to stay away, but love is profound, we are here anyway, but now on our own terms. And whether we will have a community depends on you, my white sisters, and not on us. Although our workshop is closed to white women, our hearts are not.⁵

With this decision, they succeeded in getting white women to put the issue of power differences between black and white women on the agenda after all. In the end, a number of white and black women jointly formulated action items.

Learning, Celebrating, Serving, Sharing.

These four functions of the community served to support the search for links and solidarity without glossing over differences. It will be clear that this process was not always easy. Sometimes positions of power were used to force an agreement. Sometimes women wondered in despair whether it would be possible to work together at all. But in general, a feeling of determination to get on with each other emerged during the synod. This revealed itself in the joint development of plans of action; in the mutual support shown during the drawing up of these plans; in the determination to engage in confrontations. Whereas the first synod put the issue of differences on the agenda of the woman-and-faith movement, it was the second synod that made the search for forms of commitment, regardless of power differences, a major point on the movement's agenda. Learning, celebrating, serving and sharing are concepts that did not really come alive for women during the second synod. They were probably too controversial. Opinions were divided as to the use of these concepts from the Christian tradition.

The four concepts met with criticism similar to that which greeted the concept of 'synod' five years earlier. They were said to be too ecclesiasti-

⁵ Doreen Hazel in her introduction "In the name of love" during the opening of the Women's Synod, in: *Verslag* 1992, 13.

cal, too connected with the established churches. Women feared that these concepts would reintroduce the traditional androcentric meanings of community.

Despite this criticism, the concepts were maintained for the same reasons that had led to the choice, five years earlier, to keep using the concept of 'synod'. It showed 'that women are most definitely able to take the initiative to create their own definitions of words'.⁶ By using words such as learning, celebrating, serving and sharing, women again claimed their tradition and the political and theological right to interpret that tradition. To provide an answer to the criticism, it was decided during the second synod to investigate how participants would interpret the four functions of the community: namely learning, celebrating, serving and sharing. This was the true task of the observers whom I referred to at the beginning of this article.

About the World in Our Midst.

During the preparations for the second synod, the question as to how we want to shape the ecclesia of women was formulated as follows: how do we want to give shape to the solidarity among women without glossing over the differences between them? This question was recognised and acknowledged during the second synod as an ecclesiological question for the woman-and-faith movement. An answer was sought during and after the synod. This was not always an easy process; it seemed, at times, like an obstacle course. A number of the obstacles that women were faced with were discussed in this article. The core group of the second Women's Synod wrote in a letter that it sometimes seems that the dialogue in the woman-and-faith movement is more of a conversation about each other than a conversation with the world in our midst, than a conversation in which various options and analyses concerning the injustice in this world are possible, and arguments can take place about adequate strategies and views which can bring about new realities.⁷

But it was during the synod that women also experienced that the ecclesia of women sometimes briefly takes on a shape during the process

⁶ Knoppers 1992, 33.

⁷ The board of the Ecumenical Women's Synod foundation (the core group) in an open letter to the woman and religion movement. *Newsletter Women's Synod*, nr.11, July 1993.

of looking for a community that is full of tension: it takes shape in collaboration, in mutual support, but particularly in confrontations where participants continue to look one another in the face. Women learned and are learning that new questions can break through old dichotomies and reveal new issues. For example, during a conference in February 1994, organised by the committee for 'power inequality between men and women' of the May Eighth Movement, participants managed to leave out of the discussion the question as to whether women should occupy themselves with such structural church issues.⁸ Taking into consideration the practices of women in the discussion about functions in the churches other functions became visible. Shepherds for example: women who call together the community, function as binding forces and exert power whenever social differences threaten to drive us apart. Or the function of prophetesses: women who, for example, lodge complaints against sexual assault in pastoral relations and warn that this type of violence endangers the community.

The second Ecumenical Women's movement has profited because, after a period in which power differences between women were justifiably emphasised, we are searching once again for that which binds us together without losing sight of these differences. The discussions about and the practices of the ecclesia of women have been given new incentives as a result. The task which the name of the second Ecumenical Women's Synod entails: 'Towards an Open and Bounded Space', still determines the agenda of the woman-and-faith movement.

There will be much discussion, struggle, love and action for the sake of a community that will be and is, at times, already tangible.

(translation: Brigitte Planken)

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⁸ The Eighth May movement is a platform for Roman Catholic organizations for the renewal of church and society. A number of women's organizations, the woman-and-faith groups among them, at work in Roman Catholic bishoprics or of Roman catholic origin, are affiliated to this movement.