

GENDER INEQUALITY AS AN ENDURING OBSTACLE TO MISSION

by

ROSE UCHEM, MSHR, Ph.D.

(Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu, Enugu, Nigeria)

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing consensus among mission experts about the value of collaborative ministry as one of the current trends in mission today. This is born out of the realization that the missionary mandate of Christ – “Go make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28: 19) – is addressed to all Christians by virtue of our baptism. As the Vatican II document put it, “the church on earth by its very nature is missionary” (*Ad Gentes Divinitus*, No. 2; *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1), and the obligation to spread the faith falls individually on every disciple of Christ. “Missionary activity is a matter for all Christians” (John Paul II, 1990: No. 2, 119). By the whole Church, then, is meant all its members, both men and women, lay and ordained.

Yet from earliest times, Christ has always called from the number of his disciples, those whom he has chosen that they might be with him so that he might send them to preach to the nations. Thus, “the Holy Spirit ... implants in the hearts of individuals a specifically missionary vocation and at the same time raises up institutes in the church to take on the duty of evangelization ... and make it as it were their own special task” (*Ad Gentes Divinitus*, No.23). I belong to one of such institutes in the church – the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary.

Over the years, much of the missionary activities that have been done on behalf of the whole Church have been carried out by missionary sisters and other women religious, also known as nuns or sisters. Yet at a closer look, one finds that these have been mostly in service type, back-stage roles. The clergy, in contrast, have taken centre-stage, monopolizing leadership and policy-making roles. Not that service type roles are not good enough. After all, that is what Jesus asked us to do as Christians. Rather the issue in question is: What kind of mentality has led to such a gender division of labour by which subsidiary roles have historically been left to women and leadership to men in church context? What gender assumptions and theology lie behind such beliefs and practices? My belief is that the unspoken issue underlying the minimizing of women's scope in mission and ministry hinges around the human identity of women. It raises a further question: To what extent do contemporary clergymen accept the equal humanity of women in reality? In this paper, "Gender Inequality as an Enduring Obstacle to Mission," I try to address these questions by narrating selected missionary experiences in varying contexts which illustrate how some women and men have started calling into question and gradually changing some of the practices and myths that keep women in subordinate positions. This is being done not so much by talking as by taking some necessary actions in small steps to bring about change wherever possible, setting precedence and stretching people's imagination as to future possibilities; how humanity can be enriched differently if women were given more scope to exercise their leadership gifts.

In this paper, I share some of my own experiences of stretching boundaries in mission and ministry as a woman in the Church, an African and a missionary by profession in different cross-cultural contexts in West Africa and the United States of America. These experiences which also integrate those of other sisters who have similarly been on cross-cultural mission elsewhere and are currently on mission in our home church in Nigeria reveal a contrast and, in some cases, ambivalence. In some dioceses and in some parishes even within the same diocese, there is much recognition and acceptance of sisters' ministry while in others there is only very little if any room to exercise the kind of ministerial and pastoral leadership they once exercised by way of collaborative ministry in other mission areas. A lot seems to depend on the orientation of the priests and bishops involved and this calls for reflection on their basic understanding of the theology of ministry in relation to the significance of christian baptism. The paper also highlights the challenges African missionary sisters face among their own people within the catholic tradition and explores how these challenges can be surmounted so that the mission of Christ entrusted to the Church may move forward.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND TESTIMONIES

Raised in south-eastern Nigeria, I experienced evangelization first in my home through my parents and the extended family, and later through the school, the local catholic community, and my peers at various stages of my development. As a teenager, I began to feel drawn to contribute to the life of my church community through organizing the choir, and teaching in the Sunday evening catechism classes. After I became a missionary sister, I taught religious knowledge (R.K) as well as science subjects in secondary schools in

Nigeria for four years and in Sierra Leone for three years. Teaching R.K there was rather difficult because the vast majority of the students were Moslems. However they all loved reading the Bible and enjoyed the brief shared prayer sessions we had a few times. I taught full time in the school and facilitated pastoral ministries after school in our catchment parish. In addition to school work, I worked with the women, attending their meetings, being for them an animating and supportive presence. I also worked with the liturgy group. While in Sierra Leone, I came in contact with the ‘Seven-Steps’ method of gospel-sharing disseminated from the Lumko Institute in South Africa, and its spirit of participative leadership. It fitted well into my style of ministry which veered toward facilitating people to foster a personal relationship with God through small group sharing and praying the scriptures in relation to life experiences. In a similar way, I engaged in pastoral activities while I was directress of formation for my congregation in northern Nigeria over a seven-year period, making a total of fourteen years’ experience of pastoral ministries.

Collaborative ministry

Through my involvement, a functional liturgy group was inaugurated in the parish. I say functional because there was only a nominal liturgy portfolio previously and the man who held it simply took care of practical matters such as appointing lectors and other functionaries. I became involved in the mainstream of the life of the parish by attending the parish council meeting. When I felt a sense of where the parish was at, I indicated to the parish leaders how I could contribute in the area of liturgy. Shortly after that, Fr J. K., the curate, a Sierra Leonian, requested me to assist in planning a communal penitential

service for the parish. I gladly accepted and did it. Next, a workshop was planned for the parish councilors, and I was also invited. I happily went and I participated actively. Before then, the understanding of the parish councilors was that all the spiritual matters were reserved for the priest(s), while all the material aspects of parish life were the domain of the laity. Hence the goal of that workshop was to help the councilors to realize that the church was more than the clergy, and that their responsibilities as councilors included inspirational roles. Following that workshop, a number of committees were created, including a liturgy committee. I had made it clear that I had no intention of supplanting the man who was there previously but to collaborate with the group. So he became the chairperson while I was named the spiritual director of the group. At any rate I saw myself as an animator.

Meanwhile, I attracted more volunteers into the liturgy committee, including Sr M. C., an Irish sister from my community who had been following my stories of the developments in the parish with keen interest. Soon we formed a pastoral team: Sr M. C., Fr J. K., Mr J. F., and myself. It was just wonderful! Many great things followed after that. First of all, all those people who had been on the reading roster were invited to attend the liturgy committee meeting. Altogether, we were fifteen in number: lay men and women, two sisters and the curate. The parish priest, Fr M.J.C, an Irish missionary, was quite elderly and did not bother us. The team proposed to the committee the idea of coming together weekly to practice the forth-coming Sunday readings and to reflect on them together. It was not just those scheduled to read but all the members. They agreed to meet every Monday evening to allow enough time for the fruit of the sharing to sink in during the

course of the week. I had successfully done a similar thing previously in a school situation in Nigeria and knew its potential benefits. It makes a group self-sustaining; and provides a forum for the lectors to improve their reading skills and to acquire an increasing sensitivity to all the verbal and non-verbal cues which help or hinder a proper communication of the word of God. Other members offered feedback to the lectors when they finished: first the positive ones, and then areas needing improvement.

Active Involvement in Liturgy

The liturgy group developed and went beyond this. Members showed a high level of commitment. Attendance was very regular, in contrast to other organizations in the same parish. It was quite astonishing because these people were workers who could do with some rest after work. I think there was an in-built motivation in the process. People experienced spiritual nourishment from sharing on the readings and a bond of collaboration also developed within the group. With time, the group felt that one meeting was not enough for them. So, it was decided that Monday would be set aside just for the reflections and for exploring various possibilities for developing the liturgy. Saturday was chosen for another meeting to take care of rehearsals using the microphone. From then on, other things evolved. We aimed at animating the spiritual and liturgical life of the parish by making the Mass more meaningful and relevant to the life of the people. We tried to inculturate the liturgy and actively involve as many people as possible. We did this through various pastoral initiatives generated by the group during our regular weekly meetings.

According as themes lent themselves, we made up introductions to the readings. We invited a volunteer artist to design and produce posters that captured the themes for special occasions such as advent and Lent. By way of inculturation, we sometimes substituted more culturally relevant gestures. On the third Sunday of Advent, we used the traditional three blasts of the Mende chief's horn to signify: 'the Lord is near,' and again at the Christmas midnight mass, to announce the birth of Christ. On some special occasions we organized symbolic gift offerings, which featured dancing, and incorporated commentaries and prayers of the faithful.

Foot-washing

One of the initiatives we took while preparing the Holy Week liturgy during our first year together was to make the washing of the feet on Holy Thursday inclusive. All agreed that we would invite six women and six men to have their feet washed (Uchem, 2001: 216). It fell to me to notify a certain elderly woman who was always at the daily morning mass in the parish. When I finished giving her the message, 'Mama M.,' as we fondly called her, told me: "Sister, woman no be aposulu," meaning by that, "women were not apostles." I clarified with her; and she confirmed that she did not want to have her feet washed. For her, it would have meant going against God's word. Though disappointed I had to respect her in her different space. We then got somebody else and completed our required number, twelve. I have since witnessed many instances of this kind of inclusion in various places in Ireland, some parts of Nigeria and the United States of America; and people's awareness in this aspect is gradually growing.

It was also the liturgy committee that gave impetus for the implementation of the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (R.C.I.A.) in Bo. From the committee prospective facilitators were selected and trained. The whole parish had to be prepared for the change from the old catechism 'question and answer' program to the journey catechumenate program, which was a more gradual process of sharing and initiation of the catechumens into the life of the Christian community. So, by a series of awareness programs presented briefly in drama form during Mass on a number of consecutive Sundays, the R.C.I.A. was explained to the people: its meaning, benefits, and history as well as the responsibilities of the christian community toward the new members. The program was just about to take off in earnest when I had to leave Sierra Leone for another assignment. However, the program was in good hands, indicating the advantage of a team approach to ministry. The program got off the ground very successfully and the group continued to evolve. The team kept me informed of the developments in the parish until the unfortunate civil war broke out in Sierra Leone and I lost touch with them. Nevertheless, the last I heard from them two years after I left was that they were then recruiting and training more facilitators to work with parents for the Rite of Baptism of Children.

Looking back on some of my experiences of mission, one of those I treasure most is participating in a team ministry which empowered lay men and women to exercise ministry in partnership with their priest and in more responsible pastoral leadership roles than merely contributing money. Although there were some challenges along the way, it was a wonderful experience of being church. With this in view, wherever I have lived, I have tried to be involved in the life of the community. My approach has usually been

characterized by inviting myself in. Often, this meant risking rejection, indifference or even opposition, initially; but almost always, appreciation grew with time regarding what I had to offer, and great bonds of collaboration then developed between us. Such was the case also when I lived in northern Nigeria.

Involving the laity in mission

As Candidate Directress for my congregation in Kaduna, I brought into play my usual stance of combining my primary assignment, in this case formation ministry, with an evangelical outreach to my neighbouring community. I reached the people of Kaduna in three major ways: firstly, through an outreach ministry involving the young missionary sisters in training in our neighboring parish of Rigasa; and secondly a diocesan appointment I held as Sister Adviser to the Catholic Women Organization (CWO) in Kaduna Archdiocese. In this way, I had contact with many of the women and shared in their concerns and learned from them as well. The third major way I reached the people was through forming a support group for my community known as the Holy Rosary Associates (Uchem, 2001: 232). These were a group of lay people attracted by the following aims and objectives. To:

- ❖ Share in the mission and charism of our congregation– a unique opportunity to exercise their own missionary calling, following directly from their baptism.
- ❖ Participate in our mission through their prayers and support.
- ❖ Have an opportunity to deepen their spirituality as well as obtain the necessary help to make appropriate Christian responses to the challenges in their life situations.

The associates held their bi-monthly meetings in our house. The first part of their meeting usually lasted about one hour and was devoted to spiritual nourishment. This varied according to the occasion and the liturgical season. For example, sometimes we had mass; at other times, some other devotions; but most times, we had gospel-sharing, based on the 'Seven-Steps' method, with necessary modifications to suit the group. However, whatever we did, we tried to make it creative and nourishing, "juicy" as some of the associates put it. The results were simply amazing. It was a deeply satisfying experience for them. For one thing, we maintained a participative spirit in whatever we did. By participative I mean involving as many different people as possible in roles and responsibilities. The second part of the meeting was the business meeting consisting of the reading of minutes, discussion of practical matters and reports on projects in support of our mission.

No Chaplains please!

Following several instances of disappointments from some priests who failed to turn up for scheduled masses a member suggested that they should ask for a permanent chaplain so as to make it easier for the group to get mass regularly whenever they wanted. I knew that getting a chaplain would not solve their problem and might actually bring in some unnecessary complications. For example, if things did not work out between the chaplain and the group, the group might not easily get a replacement. I was still considering how to put across my thoughts without giving offense when to my relief a young gentleman who had joined the group only a short while before, spoke up: "We don't want any

chaplain!” He went on: “When they come now, they will take over everything. We are happy to relate with the sisters as we are doing now.” Well, that said everything! Nobody added anything; and nobody subtracted. That settled it. As Susan Ross has observed:

Many catholics who have experienced the ministry of women in various capacities ... are beginning to question the wisdom of an all male priesthood and the deprivation of the wider community of the full exercise of women’s gifts (1993: 202).

This is certainly true in my own experience. For instance, on one of the occasions I preached the homily at mass in the United States some Nigerians in attendance exclaimed in amazement: “*Onye si n’umunwanyị a maa chi nata fada?*” (An Igbo expression for: “Who says women can’t be priests?”). In a similar vein, a sister who works on the diocesan justice and peace desk recently shared her experience of a very similar reaction from people. She had occasion to speak in one of the churches in her diocese to encourage people to contribute generously to show a greater commitment to caring for the poor in their parish. When she finished giving her message somebody said out aloud “This person who spoke like this ought to be ordained priest.” However,

while some people accept the new developments [such as hearing a woman’s voice in church] as welcome fresh air, others see it as competition with men. They still see women as “outsiders” to the human enterprise craving admission into the human fold, and ministry, as their own prerogative (Uchem, 2001: 129).

It is becoming increasingly clear to some people that there is no convincing reason for excluding women from greater participation in pastoral leadership. It gets very ridiculous in those cross-cultural mission situations where, evidently, some people are behind the scenes providing all the dynamism in a parish; while there are some others whose role is simply to extend their hands in ritual or to give (or withhold) permissions for anything to happen at all. Such situations in the church undermine the very essence of the missionary mandate from Christ which is directed to all the baptized.

Challenges Facing African Women Missionaries

There are certain challenges facing missionaries everywhere today (Uchem, 1995: 113-125). These include: the changing meaning and practice of mission; justice and peace (in face of so much injustice in our world); interfaith dialogue, inculturation, the rapidly changing world politically, culturally, socially, economically, technologically and so on. In addition, there is the reality of the environmental crisis, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the growing culture of terrorism in the world, and the power driven culture of war, with the resultant mass displacement of peoples. However, there are special challenges which concern African missionaries missioned to African countries. While these apply widely, “there are certain challenges which face African missionary sisters” (Uchem, 2002 a: 7-11), particularly, because of gender-based discrimination in two specific areas: ministry and financial aid.

Ministry

Firstly, there is a restriction of the scope of ministry in which sisters can be involved in most parishes and dioceses in the south-eastern parts of Nigeria. It is a very painful experience to not have free scope to do for and with our own people what we have been able to do for and with other people in cross-cultural mission settings both within and outside Nigeria. Apart from teaching in schools or working in hospitals, some sisters had been engaged in all kinds of pastoral ministry just short of the Eucharistic consecration: serving in the capacity of Eucharistic ministers distributing holy communion in church, bringing communion to the sick and the house-bound, conducting communion services, and preaching the word of God; doing all these things not just when a priest is not available but by way of collaborative ministry. As illustrated earlier, some sisters have been pace-setters and boundary-breakers, pioneering many pastoral initiatives, animating the pastoral and liturgical life of the people; training facilitators for the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (the RCIA) and the basic Christian communities. Likewise, we had been fostering the faith development of people through seminars and workshops on topical issues; preaching and directing retreats for not only youth but also adult groups of men and women in parishes and special prayer centres.

Unfortunately, some of our priests and people are not open to this kind of inclusive and shared ministry between the sisters and the clergy. For instance, in one of our communities, the sisters offered to serve as Eucharistic ministers in the parish, the parish priest refused saying that he was still very strong and capable for the work. Yet, he would sometimes invite junior seminarians to join him in distributing holy communion,

which would otherwise take a very long time because of the long queues of communicants. The irony is that some parishes, including the cathedral parish in the same diocese have sisters as Eucharistic ministers. In another instance, some sisters through the parish liturgy committee proposed that the washing of the feet should be inclusive of men and women. The members of the committee were quite open to the idea and had previously suggested to have altar girls but the parish priest refused. His reason in both cases was that it would mean only a short step away from ordaining women; that he would not mind it if and when the church gave approval but for now he would not want to go ahead of the church in the matter.

Furthermore, in a retreat centre managed by some sisters in another diocese, one day, a priest failed to turn up for morning mass. After a long period of waiting, the community persuaded Sister C. A., one of their members to conduct a communion service for them; and many people from the neighbouring community were in attendance. They were almost half-way through the service when the priest turned up. Sister checked with the congregation if it would be alright for them if the priest just carried on from where she stopped and all agreed. Sister went out to meet the priest and put the proposal before him. He said that he could go away, if they so wished, and come back in the evening to celebrate mass for them; but he would not say 'half mass.' So sister let him and he began from the beginning and went over all the grounds she had already covered. It was a most humiliating experience for Sister, as she reported. Previously, she had been in a variety of mission situations where she conducted services for church communities. It really beats the imagination what kind of belief system and theology of church and ministry some of

the priests act from. Thus, with only very few exceptions, the tendency of most of our clergy is to see the church and ministry as their own property and to view sisters who want to be more centrally involved in the life and ministry of the church as outsiders coming to usurp their 'rights' and 'property.' All this goes on without a thought about how the people might benefit more if sisters became more involved in pastoral ministry than the present arrangement allows. The other challenge sisters face which I want to discuss is the challenge of financial support which is somehow connected to the challenge of limited scope in ministry as just described.

Financial Support

Sisters work mostly in church-owned institutions where they receive not salaries but very little stipends, less than 20% of what they otherwise deserve if paid according to their qualifications or government rates. They could earn enough income to make their congregations financially independent and self-sufficient. Such an arrangement of not getting salaries worked in the past when the missionaries were mainly from the north-Atlantic regions of the world. The expatriate missionaries were supported by their own people and by their national governments. Today, African missionaries, including Nigerians, missioned within and outside their own countries of origin are similarly expected to be supported by their own people. However, many church members simply cannot afford to give such financial support because of their difficult economic situations. That notwithstanding, in many parishes the people are taxed all the same and compelled by all manner of means to contribute to the support of the 'church,' meaning the bishops and the clergy. Some well-to-do church members now take it as their obligation to

support priests and seminarians financially and materially, but unfortunately they do not extend such support equally to sisters and their novices, that is, those in training. Sadly, sometimes, when some of the laity in some parish councils have moved a motion to give financial aid to sisters, some parish priests have been known to block these moves or downplay sisters' financial needs with distorted presentations of sisters' vow of poverty. The same mentality of seeing sisters as 'outsiders' rears its ugly head again around the issue of financial support of sisters in the way some priests negatively influence the attitude of the laity towards sisters.

In previous times, sisters could submit project proposals and receive funding assistance from overseas development agencies but this is very limited now as things have changed very much in recent times. Nowadays, it is very hard to find development agencies that have Nigeria, for example, on their priority list of geographical areas of interest. Even among the few that are open to considering projects originating from Nigeria, there is a presumption that the members of international missionary organizations are well off. Consequently, they give priority consideration to members of indigenous religious congregations. It then means that African sisters belonging to international congregations face a double challenge. One aspect relates to gender and the other, inter-racial dynamics in their struggle for financial independence which is a prerequisite for their autonomy and self-determination as a group. Moreover, contrary to the declared intentions of many development agencies, it is hard to find agencies that are interested in sponsoring projects that focus on structural transformation specifically through the conscientization of women. My wonder then is: If African missionary sisters are not economically and

otherwise empowered but remain in a state of economic dependency on the male clerical system in the church, or on their western counterparts, and “dependency ... means control” (Uzukwu, 1996: 98), how can they be effective agents of structural transformation and empowerment for other women to whom they try to minister? It is indeed very difficult to see the way out of this double bind, and it is certainly a big drawback in the missionary enterprise.

THE PROBLEM

From the foregoing instances on the national and international levels, it is clear that missionary sisters face gender discriminations, which slow down the progress of mission. Yet, the situation is somewhat ambivalent because sometimes opportunities have opened up for some experiences of inclusion in various situations not only outside Nigeria but also within the country, including some of the parishes in the south-eastern dioceses in Nigeria. Nevertheless, it is ironical that most of the restrictions in ministry and discriminations in financial support have happened more in the supposedly ‘more christian’ south-eastern parts of Nigeria than in other places. This is indicative of the extent to which the myths of male superiority and female inferiority and functionality have taken hold of the christian psyche; reinforced by the anti-women sentiments and teachings of many fathers of the church.

As Anne Carr aptly remarks, male headship and female inferiority motifs underlie the invocation of the maleness of Jesus to exclude women from altar ministry. She traces the peak of such “oppressive uses of the Christ symbol ... to Thomas Aquinas who held that

the male is the normative sex of the human species ... and that it is ontologically necessary that Christ be male” (Carr, 1988: 165). Aquinas believed and taught that women were biologically defective, lacking the fullness of human nature mentally, morally and physically; needing to be governed by men and incapable of exercising public leadership in either church or political life (Uchem, 2001: 148). Given this kind of faulty gender assumptions about women’s nature coupled with the demonization of Eve and women in the church’s mission and ministry is not difficult to imagine. Again, considering the importance accorded the works of the fathers of the church in the formation of priests and seminarians, and the numerous incidents of discriminations against women, and the current anti-women attitudes, behavior and sermons of some priests, it is obvious that they are still being influenced by the anti-women teachings of the church fathers. Perhaps, this explains why contemporary churchmen are unwillingness to back their fine pronouncements with concrete actions for change in the assigned secondary status of women. They seem to be guided by a human development model which stresses alleviation rather than eradication of social ills women suffer. Hence, ten years after Pope John Paul II called on Episcopal Conferences to establish commissions to look into matters concerning women in Africa these have not yet been instituted (1995: 124).

Many continue to quote biblical passages selectively to support their belief and practice of male superiority and female inferiority, on the basis of the biblical stories of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis, or rather their male-centered interpretations (Uchem, 2001: 179-190). They take it for granted that men and women are not equal by any means; that

men are pre-eminent human beings and women are secondary, existing for men and not really human beings in their own right. Consequently, the passage about “wives be submissive to your husbands” (Ephesians 5: 21 – 33 and Colossians 3: 18) are still frequently used for wedding ceremonies without reference to Pope John Paul II’s re-interpretation of same in terms of “a mutual subjection of both out of reverence for Christ” (1988: no. 24; Uchem, 2002b: 39-40) which connotes equal partnership in marriage. Therefore, the obstructions sisters meet in the course of their missionary activities are reflective of a much wider issue of gender bias rooted in most cultures of the world and reinforced by the biblical concept of ‘woman’ as ‘helpmate’ to ‘man.’ In my view, this literal biblical notion is the root of the perennial gender inequality in the church, which sustains a certain theology of church, ministry and the human person which projects ministry as the exclusive preserve of the clergy.

In practice, the inherited negative cultural tendencies, reinforced by the biblical myths and the church fathers’ teachings and their attendant functional views about women result in all kinds of exploitation, including economic and ideological exploitation of women (Uchem, 2003). It is quite interesting to compare the missionary experiences narrated earlier with women’s experiences of collaborative ministry in other parts of the world to see another side of the issue to which many do not advert. With reference to the American context, Luke Timothy Johnson put it this way:

“Women are carrying out most of the work of ministry in many, if not most, parishes. The same abuse of power with which the male clergy exploited but never fully honoured the ministerial labours of vowed religious women in

parishes, hospitals, and schools is now being perpetuated in the exploitation of single and married women in local parishes. This exploitation takes place even as such women are denied ordination with the argument that only males can really represent Christ. ... [People] are so happy to see (and to be) women acolytes and lectors and Eucharistic ministers and catechists that they do not yet appreciate how such accommodation simply continues with slight variations the traditional exploitation of women under male leadership (Sex, Women and Church, *Doctrine and Life*, 2004: 541. Ask Adaye for the original citation).

It is very puzzling as to why many priests see ministry as their exclusive right and all other church members as their helpers. This was evident for example when a sister met a priest she had worked with on a team ministry several years afterwards and the priest had the effrontery to speak of how much of assistance the sister was to him. Knowing that most sisters usually get things going in many situations, one could actually ask: Who was helping whom? If it is that even when a woman is the initiator of programmes she is still viewed as an 'assistant,' one can say that it is the 'helper' myth operating again, even in face of contradictory evidence. Something is certainly wrong with that. I, therefore, resonate with the missiological orientation of Bishop Joseph Shanahan, who impressed on our pioneer missionary sisters to resist the missionary priests who demanded subservience and house-keeping roles from them in the early days. "You are missionaries in your own right," he insisted and usually referred to them as his fellow missionaries.

The gender inequality experienced by women, either as clients or as functionaries in the church, causes disaffection between the clergy and the sisters and therefore constitutes an obstacle to mission. Moreover, it portrays the refusal of many of the clergy to accept women's co-equal humanity and instead fosters a functional view of women. It militates against the realization of social and gender justice, which is an integral aspect of the very goal of the mission of Christ in the church and in the world; for "action on behalf of social justice ... is an essential dimension of preaching the gospel (*Justice in the world*, 1971, 6). Therefore, the complex problem of the assigned secondary status of women needs to be addressed and changed in the interest of development, justice, and peace as an integral part of mission, the proclamation of the Good News of Christ.

CONFRONTING GENDER INEQUALITY IN CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND PRACTICE

The goal of mission is for people to experience reconciliation, a healing of their alienations and to have a felt sense of the salvation which Christ has accomplished for all of humanity. This should not just be in fine abstract terms or relegated to an after-life only but is to be translated into concrete life situations (Paul VI, 1975: 29). Salvation needs to be expressed in concrete terms which positively influence our social, economic, political and cultural context which at the moment does not favour all. The Good News has to be really 'good' and has to be 'news'. If it simply mirrors the cultural provisions in our culture, it is no news and it is not good. It has to be a declaration of God's will, and we do know that God's will is for all to have life and to live it to the full (John 10: 10). We find the concrete shape of such news that is 'good' in the gospels, in the form of what

Jesus said and did to and for the marginalized people of his day and we get an assurance and a validation for our own social stance.

Although Christians have for centuries believed that women's subordination was God's ordinance, supported by the Bible, to be maintained in social relations, the evolutionary theory and contemporary biblical criticism challenge the literal biblical interpretations, on which women's subordination is based (Daly, G., 1997) and (Duffy, S., 1988). Therefore, a possible way forward toward implementing gender equality in the area of leadership, for example, is for Christians to:

- 1) Identify those scripture passages which people tend to use to support discriminatory practices against women and re-interpret them in a manner consonant with the good news of Christ;
- 2) Update methods of biblical interpretations especially the creation stories in Genesis chapters 1 -3 and the Deutero-Pauline texts, taking into account insights from modern biblical scholarship, an evolutionary worldview as well as African concept of story (Uchem, 2002c); and
- 3) Include women in leadership and decision-making roles within and outside the church.

To this end, it would be helpful to borrow a leaf from some ecclesiastical communities which have, to a great extent, done away with 'superiorship' models of leadership. They have adopted a participative model of leadership. In this model, decision-making is shared and is not the exclusive preserve of any one person or sub-group. The leadership

post is rotated. This has the potential of bringing us closer to what Jesus originally envisaged when he admonished his first followers: “You know that among the gentiles their so-called rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. You must be servants of each other” (Mark 10: 41-45 paraphrased). If Christian communities, worldwide, should adopt a leadership model of ‘a partnership of equals,’ it will go a long way towards reshaping the human imagination. Such a participative leadership model will recognize the equal humanity and agency of women and men. Leadership roles will be determined not by sex any more but rather by personal charism, leadership gifts and training. A leadership model of ‘a partnership of equals’ will lead not only towards an inclusive vision of theology, Church and ministry, but also a radical transformation of the entire human community.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted an inclusive vision of mission and ministry arising out of sisters’ lived experiences of actively contributing to bring about change in the status quo. Whereas the rules exclude them because they are women, they step forward and include themselves wherever possible until God’s reign comes in full. The paper featured selected stories of sisters’ pastoral initiatives in various catholic communities in different places. The missionary activities aimed at fostering greater laity participation in leadership in the spiritual, doctrinal and liturgical aspects of life in parishes. Some of the stories reflect a pushing back of gender, class and racial boundaries, and a stretching of people’s imagination as to future possibilities.

The primary root cause of gender inequality in the church has been identified as the biblical and cultural notion that women are men's 'helpers' existing to serve men's needs and desires. This, coupled with the anti-women teachings of the church fathers, has reinforced oppressive cultural beliefs and practices against women both in African countries and other countries of the world. Therefore, the integrity of mission and fidelity to the mission of Christ necessitate confronting the inherent gender biases in key biblical texts, such as those cited in this paper and re-interpreting them so as to release the Good News of Christ to transform our world by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Since gender roles are socially and culturally constructed, and learned from generation to generation through the process of socialization, they can also be unlearned. Already, things are beginning to change, though only slowly. No doubt, such a phenomenon as domination and subordination, which took centuries to construct, will also probably take as long to dismantle. For further change to happen we need to look at the attitude of Jesus in the gospels (Uchem, 2001: 198-201) and take that, not our cultures and traditions as guidelines for action. Our call as Christians is to conversion, toward being more like Christ. Men and women need to regard each other more as equal partners and work together as such for their mutual development as persons, for the growth of God's reign in this world.

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