

Shared Mission : From Women In Latin America
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INTRODUCTION

Our question in this Group V is basically, “What is the shape of mission? It is a great privilege to participate in the XI session of the Oxford Institute and to have the opportunity to address that question from my perspective as a Christian Methodist Woman from Latin America¹.

I would like to respond to the above question about the shape of mission today, affirming that we are called to a Shared Mission, both with an ecumenical and a gender perspectives, and from a Wesleyan-Methodist insertion.

I. A GLOBAL AND SHARED MISSION

David J. Bosch, in his monumental work on *Transforming Mission* has reminded us that the theological basis for mission has been ecclesiocentric and soteriological until the first half of the twentieth century. The church was the center of mission and the foundation for mission outside the church was the doctrine of salvation².

One of the most revolutionary concepts, from its first formulation by Karl Barth was the concept of “*Missio Dei*” . The center of mission is not the church but God, a missionary God, a sending God.

The theological basis for mission is not ecclesiology or soteriology but the Triune God. God the Father, creating the world, sending the Son; the Father and the Son, sending the Spirit; the Spirit of God sending the church to the world... As Dr. Bosch puts it, “*Mission originates in the heart of God... it is not possible to enter deeper than that: there is mission because God loves humanity*”³.

A Methodist missiologist from India, Dr. M. Thomas Thangaraj, has taken up and

¹ I had the opportunity to work as a volunteer missionary in Spain, for three years, working with youth in that country at an ecumenical level; then, for one decade, as the Secretary for Women and Children Concerns of the Latin American Council of Churches; and, finally, for six years, as the President of the Methodist Church in Uruguay.

² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigms Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York: Orbis, 1991.

³ David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World*, Atlanta: J. Knox, 1980, p. 240.

developed the *Missio Dei* concept into what he calls *Missio humanitatis*.⁴ Thangaraj detects five forms of mission in the Scriptures: God's mission, the mission of Israel, the mission of Jesus, the mission of the disciples, and the mission of the church. He begins by saying,

*The Bible opens with the missionary act of God in Creation (1:1ff.)... God's creative act is a missionary act... God goes out in a missionary trip... and God's creative act moves on to a sharing act... **sharing creation with humanity**, a humanity created in God's image... to participate in God's mission in the world... **God's mission is shared mission**... shared with men and women, because "male and female God created them..."⁵*

God's mission, then, is global, holistic, inclusive and shared mission.

M. Thomas Thangaraj believes that times have changed so radically that the shape of mission has also to be changed. One obvious fact is religious pluralism in our world⁶. Another is the inter-relationship and the inter-dependence of humans in such a way that we need to reformulate the concept of mission.

In spite of different religions or philosophies of life, all humans are engaged in a "conversation" to face problems and needs which are common to all human beings. This is a "conversation" that goes around the world in the "global village", and takes place in our own communities and neighborhoods. We are forced into this "conversation", as if we were in a "bottle neck."

The essential meaning of mission is "to go" and "to be sent". Mission is not something we do in solitude but "with others". "Mission is relational". Mission is human mission: *missio humanitatis*.

Starting with this understanding of a common mission, a relational mission, the Methodist missiologist points to three attitudes or proper responses to *missio humanitatis*: responsibility, solidarity and mutuality.

1. Responsibility:

"The mission of humans can be viewed as a response of the human to the other... This 'going-forth-ness is not simply a one way street. It also involves a returning-to- ourselves... we come to see ourselves as accountable to ourselves, to others and to the wider context of

⁴ M. Thomas Thagaraj, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1999, pp. 38 ff.

⁵ *Op. cit.* , pp. 124f.

⁶ "If you lived in a representative world village of 1,000, there would be 300 Christians (183 Catholics, 84 Protestants, 33 Orthodox, 175 Moslems, 128 Hindus, 55 Buddhists, 47 Animists, 210 Atheists or without religion, 85 from smaller religious groups), figures of 1994, quoted by Thangaraj, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

human existence”⁷.

“The word ‘responsibility’ is dialogical in character, but it also has the danger of implying that it is something we do **for others**... Human history bears ample evidence of the tragedy of humans taking responsibility for others... arrogating to themselves responsibility for the destiny of their neighbors... Such an assumption... has often resulted in disastrous and highly oppressive consequences (such as the patriarchal tutoring of women, ideological wars and racist legislation, etc....)⁸.

1. Solidarity

So, Thangaraj insists, “*If the mission of humanity is an act of responsibility, it must be done in a mode of solidarity... in relationships that respect the distinctiveness of each person, the interweaving of structural relations, and a willingness to work with and alongside the other...*⁹

1. Mutuality

“*Mission is possible only in a spirit of mutuality... There are no longer ‘missioners’ and ‘missionised’. All are missionaries in a relationship of mutuality... in an ‘open marketplace of human experience and ideas’ in which we can learn from each other... Thus, missio humanitatis, if it is to be a responsible vision, must include a spirit of mutuality both in our interhuman relations and in our relation to the world of nature*” ...¹⁰

According to this vision – concludes Thangaraj-, the mission of humanity is an act of taking responsibility, in a mode of solidarity, shot through with a spirit of mutuality” ¹⁰

And yet, this has to be done from the specificity of our Christian mission, in theological terms of God, Christ and the Church, as Thangaraj himself does in the following

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 49ff. Thangaraj elaborates on concepts of moral responsibility from H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self, an Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, New York: Harper & Row 1963; Gordon Kauffmann, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1993; and William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge U. P., 1995.

⁸ Cf. 1 Cor.14:34-35;

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-55. “Since the advent of liberation theologies in various religious traditions, the word ‘solidarity’ has come to the forefront of discussion” (p. 54). Cf. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s”, in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theology from the Underside*, ed. Susan B. Thistlethwaite and Mary P. Engel (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 31-40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 56ff. This vision is quite close to what Bishop Casaldáliga from Brazil has called “macro-ecumenism”.

chapters on the “*missio ecclesiae*”, and “*a cruciform mission*”.

As I see it, an inclusive concept of mission, as *missio humanitatis*, has to be a **shared mission for women and men**. To be global and holistic, mission has to be gender-conscious, gender-inclusive, *shared mission*.

II. SHARED MISSION IN SCRIPTURE

Let's look at shared mission in the Scripture. The original human mission is gender inclusive, for men and women, participating in God's mission in God's creation together with other God's creatures. In the Old Testament, women are part of the “history of salvation” as subjects of mission. This is evident in the matriarchal participation through successive generations of the people of the Covenant, in the Exodus story, and through all the stages around the Promised Land¹¹.

In the New Testament, this participation becomes particularly visible in Jesus' own mission, in a real “discipleship of equals”, as it has been demonstrated by the feminist hermeneutics in recent years¹². The Gospel of Luke, opens a window to the role of women not only as the object and companions of Jesus Kingdom mission, but as the sponsors of Jesus' mission! (as it says in Luke 8:1-3: “many y other women who provided for them out of their own means”).

1) The Seventy's mission

Let's take the Seventy's Mission in Luke 10:1-12. The text says that “*Jesus appointed seventy others and sent them two by two ahead of him*”. Seventy is a symbolic figure for the mission to the nations. In terms of content, their mission was not very different from the mission of the Twelve: “*to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God*”.

Where did Jesus get such a bunch of disciples to send them, two by two, as part of his mission? Were them all Galileans? Were they all males? The entourage of disciples accompanying Jesus, announcing the Kingdom of God, shows a mixed sample of them: “*he*

¹¹ For instance, in the Age of the Patriarchs (the role of women in the lineage of the Promise), in the Exodus (women in the preservation of the life of Moses, a true “sorority for life”), in the Desert Pilgrimage (particularly Miriam, Moses' and Aaron's sister), in the Pre-Monarchic times (Ana, Débora the judge, Ruth the Moabite), in the Monarchic Period (Hulda the prophetess), and the Wisdom Woman of Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus. In all these instances we can see women as the links in the chain of salvation history. See Carol A. Ressom & Sharon Ringe, Eds. *Women Bible Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992; Alice L. Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988. Beatriz Ferrary, “*Participación de las Mujeres en la Historia de la Salvación*”, monograph, San José: Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana, 2001.

¹² Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, New York: Crossroad, 1984; *Discipleship of Equals*, New York: Crossroad, 1993; Louise Schottroff, *Mulheres no Novo Testamento: Exegese Numa Perspectiva Feminista*, São Paulo: Paulinas, 1995; Suzanne Tunc, *También las Mujeres Seguían a Jesús*, Bilbao: Sal Terrae, 1999.

was accompanied by the twelve, and also some women who had been cured of evils spirits and illnesses..." I ask, Were all these women included or left out of the mission of the Seventy?

Phillips translation of the New Testament has a bold suggestion as subtitle: "JESUS NOW DISPATCHES THIRTY FIVE COUPLES TO PREACH AND HEAL THE SICK!" How about that? The fact that so many of us never thought of women as part of the Seventy, or included in the "two by two" specification, as two women couples, or two- gender couples, isn't it already an indication of our gender-conditioned reading?

One might suspect that probably there was a women connection along the way of Jesus, wherever he went. For instance how did the "public sinner" woman know that Jesus would accept her and her tribute to him?¹³

Catherine and Justo L. González have an interesting suggestion about people healed by Jesus who became his missionaries. It is not casual that Luke remarks that women helping and sponsoring Jesus' mission were those who had been healed by him. Nothing of the kind is said of male missionaries... And yet, who can be a missionary of Jesus but those who have been healed from their sins and their diseases by him?

At this point there is no gender difference in mission. Any true missionary is a "wounded healer", to use the famous Henry Nouwen's description of pastoral work. It cannot escape our notice that this is nothing less than shared mission, both as objects and subjects of gender-inclusive mission.

2) The Betania Home a mission center

Let's look at the Betania Home, or better the Betania Inn, as a center of Jesus' mission. Both Luke and John have something special to say about the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary in Betania, on the way of Jesus, to and from Jerusalem. In Luke 10:38- 42, we have a picture of Mary sitting "at the feet of the Master", "listening to his teaching", which is a clear indication that a woman can be a disciple, whose "good portion will be not taken away from her" (cf. Acts 22:3).

We don't know if these Betania disciples were among the Seventy but it is clear that this friendly and familiar home was a center for Jesus and his disciples. In John 11, a chapter that goes around Jesus' friends, the evangelist uses two Greek verbs (*fileo, agapao*) to express Jesus friendship, companionship and love for Martha, Mary and Lazarus. We have no details about other family members but it appears that this was a gender inclusive home. The two women are both friends of Jesus, besides being his disciples and believers (John 11:27), and

¹³ See again Luke 8:1-3, cf. Luke 19:1-10 on the underlying tax-collectors connection, alerting Zaccheus to anticipate his entrance into Jericho.

they were the instruments for others to believe in Jesus: “After this -says John- many of the Jews who had accompanied Mary and observed what Jesus did believed in him” (11:45).

It was in the same Betania Inn, at a supper given in honour of Jesus (a fareweell dinner?), that he was anointed by Mary in a final profession of faith and commitment, just before his passion (John 12:1-3). In the synoptic gospels the anointment of Jesus by a woman becomes a royal anointment, by which she will be remembered in the whole world for ages to come (Matt. 26:2-16; Mk 14:1-11; Lk 22:1-6).

John Dominic Crossan has underlined the importance of table companionship as the missionary strategy for Jesus’ disciples and future missionaries, according to the detailed instructions about how to receive hospitality and to use it as the occasion to share the good news of the Kingdom and the message of peace (Mk 6:10; Lk 10:5,7; Mth. 10:11- 12). In this sense the Betania Home was a paradigm for mission. And table companionship a paradigm of shared mission.

In our days, we cannot miss the strategical importance of hospitality, and the give and take of table fellowship, as the loccus for mission, the expression of shared mission gender-inclusive.

III. MISSION IN A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

We have been challenged by this Institute to look at mission inside the horizon of a New Creation. Well, a gender perspective cannot pretend to be such a horizon, but certainly, it can be a useful vantage point! With our eyes tended towards the horizon of the New Creation, we may look again at theology, the Bible, the church, liturgy, and mission **from a gender vantage point**, and maybe it can help us to visualize the profile of a shared mission, for women and men.

A gender perspective goes transversally accross any other dimension, be it anthropological, sociological, theological, biblical, ecclesial or missiologial dimension.

For instance, **anthropologically**, from a gender perspective, it is important to take into account our corporality, our bodily condition. We are bodies, as persons, as families, as communities. Integral mission has to include our whole being, as missionaries of the major event of God’s incarnation in a human being.

From a **psico-social** point of view, shared mission in a gender perspective means co-responsibility. Mission, from its origin and execution, cannot be seen and conducted in a unidirectional way -paternally or patriarchally- without participation of others and with others. Shared mission is inclusive and participative.

Structurally, the question of power in the church has to be seen genderwise. It is important to distinguish between “*power upon*” and “*power for*”. The latter is what can be

properly called “empowerment”: to enable the other to exercise his/her own power. Shared mission means a true ecclesial gender democracy.

At the **sociological and ecological level**, shared mission in a gender perspective would mean “mission with the community” and “for the community”, as summarized by M. Thomas Thangaraj, *“mission is the act of assuming responsibility in the mode of solidarity and impelled by the spirit of mutuality”*.¹⁴

In the **theological** field, the gender perspective means the appropriation by men and women of the theological word as subjects in their own right. In the last years there has been a qualitative leap by women, accompanied by some males in the theological world, that made possible “a new intelligence and experience of faith in the midst of a conflictive historical and social reality”¹⁵.

In the field of **hermeneutics**, a gender perspective means adopting the hermeneutics of suspicion and expectancy, such as we have mentioned in relation to the History of Salvation and Jesus Mission, making visible the invisible. However, this is not only feminist hermeneutics, but **gender hermeneutics**, with the masculine and feminine questions and perspectives in the reading of the text and its context. Although, originally, this hermeneutics started as a questioning of patriarchal models of reading.

Worship from a gender perspective is celebrative, assuming and enriching the church liturgy as the celebration of life, bringing to the community worship joys and sufferings, gestures and colours, flowers and fruits of creation, the word preached and enacted, prayers and songs, in a holistic and integrating offering.

Missiologically speaking, then, a gender perspective aims at making effective a discipleship of equals, in companionship and mutuality, “at the feet of the Master”, “sent two by two” in a continually renovated shared mission of men and women. As equals, but sharing, in one body, the differences and specificities of each gender.

1. SHARED MISSION IN OUR WESLEYAN METHODIST HERITAGE

Shared mission has been a distinct characteristic of the Methodist movement, since its origin in the XVIII century England.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁵ Dora Canales, “Importancia de una Aproximación de Género para la Misión y el Trabajo Pastoral con y desde la mujer”, Unpublished paper, CLAI Assembly, Barranquilla, Colombia, January 2001.

A Methodist Uruguayan woman minister, an ordained Presbyter of the Brazilian Methodist Church, today serving in her native country, María Inés Simeone, has studied the subject of the presence and participation of women in Nascent Methodism. She found that Methodist women were real pioneers as “agents of faith” among their own people in a great diversity of activities, such as meetings to pray, to study the Bible, to speak about their problems, to exhort; the organization of new groups; preaching in chapels, houses and the open air; as leaders of classes and societies; in individual pastoral work; in personal service to the needy, in orphan homes, schools for poor people, with prisoners in jails and with the sick persons; and supporting the lodging, feeding and attending the itinerant preachers... They gave their testimony and exhorted...*the sharing in those friendly relations was impressive*¹⁶

*“Consequently –says Simeone-, one could conclude, through what was shown above, that women participation inside the Methodist movement took place with the birth of the movement itself. For more than 250 years (sic) women entered the Methodist societies, to stay, never to leave it... As pioneers and supporters of Methodism they needed great courage to face the consequences of being part of a group doubly discriminated, as women and as Methodists”*¹⁷.

Wesley could recognize these women’s gifts, support and stimulate them, but he could not publicly give them the status of regular preachers, without breaking with the Church of England, undermining his own movement as a renovation of the church and not as a dissident sect. His theology of grace, his understanding of the gospel, fully developed, would eventually flow into an integral and shared mission. But **his ecclesiology was like a floodgate that would contain the running waters for the time being.**

Meanwhile, he had to walk on the rope -with some help from the Scriptures, reason, tradition and experience- to justify the actual ministry and mission of women as “an extraordinary call”, “an extraordinary dispensation of God’s providence”, as he responded to an impressive letter from Mary Bosanquet in 1771¹⁸. This was “against the common rules of the discipline”, wrote back Wesley, but “in extraordinary cases” even “Saint Paul made some exceptions”! (1 Cor. 14:34).

Paul Chilcote observes:

¹⁶ María Inés Simeone, *As Extraordinárias Irmãs Metodistas*, Postgrade Thesis MCR, Instituto Metodista do Ensino Superior, São bernardo do Campo, SP, Brazil, 1996, p. 39. See also Paul Wesley Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism*, Metuchen, NJ/London, Sacarecrow, 1991.

¹⁷ María Inés Simeone, *A presença da Mulher No Movimento Metodista Nascente*, São bernardo do Campo, Facultade de Teologia, 1993, pp. 31-32.

¹⁸ John Wesley, *Letters*, “To Mary Bosanquet”, Londonberry, June 13, 1771. *Obras de Wesley*, T. XIV, pp. 87f.

*The extraordinary cases... appeared to be far less isolated than Wesley ever imagined... the number of women preachers quickly increased. They exerted their influence throughout the British Isles. The floodgates were open*¹⁹.

Thank God! They are wide open in Methodism today for holistic and shared mission. In Latin America, for instance, women are strong and participative, without limitations. Right now in Mexico, Brasil and Argentina we have women bishops, and in Uruguay several times the Presidency of the church was in charge of women, both lay and ordained.

A Guideline for Mission from the General Board of Global Ministries, from New York, in 1986, points to the theological foundation for sharing mission:

"In the Wesleyan tradition, solidarity and cooperation in mission springs from the triple manifestation of preventient, justifying and sanctifying grace, revealed in Jesus Christ and experimented in the heart and life of Christian believers..."

The sending and the receiving of persons in mission has to flow reciprocally along and accross the world, by the grace of God...

Shared mission, then, is mission **from** grace, **by** grace, **with** grace.

CONCLUSION: SHARED MISSION IN LATIN AMERICA TODAY

Our main theme in this Group is “Mission and Globalization”. For us in Latin America, “globalization” is experienced as disintegration of life. This is particularly true for the family, in a process of disintegration or atomization. Not only the “extended family” has disappeared long ago, but the replacing model of the “nuclear family” is going through radical changes.

In some of our countries we have more divorces than new marriages; unwedded couples are common and accepted accross all the ages spectrum; one-parent family - usually mothers substituting for both parents- affects more than fifty percent of the families. This impinges heavily on women, affecting both men and women.

¹⁹ Paul W. Chilcote, *He Offered them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1993, p. 77. The full chapter 6 “Eztraordinary Women for Extraordinary Tasks”, is a must for the training for mission of the laity and the ordained ministry in the Wesleyan tradition. Spanish authorized edition by the Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano, San Joss, Costa Rica, 1995, translation by Otto Minera.

In a situation of atomization of the family, women are the glue to keep the pieces together. Women remain as the overall substitute of former safety networks in society, as in other times of history.

Poverty, suffering, unemployment, violence are gender-inclusive. But by far the burden falls on women's laps. And women are the majority in the churches...

After working for more than a decade with women of all countries and many churches, I have come to the conclusion that there are some things that **we have to do ecumenically**, such as conscientizing and training for mission, in a gender perspective. But I am also convinced that there are other tasks, such as specific mission in a given place, that have to be done **locally and denominationally**. To quote a known slogan: "**We have to think globally and to act locally**".

Shared mission is our paradigm for mission.

Global mission is local mission: "The world is our parish". And "our parish is the world".

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