

The Church and Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa
In service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace

GENDER: WHERE ARE THE WOMEN IN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE?

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1 Introduction

Let me begin by stating the obvious: Women constitute at least fifty percent, and often more than that, of the adult members of their faith communities. It goes without saying (one would expect), that if for sociological as well as theological reasons interreligious dialogue is seen to be valuable and necessary, women can and must be involved in it, in all its forms and at all levels. This is particularly so in a political or geographical area which is inhabited by people of different religions. I feel confident in asserting that, be it in Africa or beyond, women actually *are* involved in dialogue at all levels. However, to look at whether and how this involvement is equal to, similar to or different from that of men, and where and how it might need to be improved is the aim of this presentation.

I would like to admit from the outset that although I am a missionary who lives in and loves Africa and I am convinced of what I say, I feel slightly uneasy about giving this presentation. This is for three reasons: I am a European speaking about Africa, something which, as is made very clear by Binyavanga Wainaina in his satire titled *How to Write About Africa*, is not always advisable.¹ Secondly, I will speak about concrete concerns which women in Africa experience; thus I am leaving myself open to being labelled a Western Feminist who wishes to usurp African traditional social norms and cultural traditions. Thirdly, I am a Christian and thus any mention of discriminations suffered by Muslim women could be interpreted as a form of religious superiority and prejudice on my part. I recognize the justification for each of these possible reactions to my presentation. I also acknowledge that my few years experience of Africa, which is mostly of Nigeria, constitute a limitation in my authority to speak. However, I hope that my observations, which are the fruit of genuine concern, diligent research, and attentive listening, may be of help in the dialogue which must take place or is already taking place both between Muslim and Christian women in Africa and among women as well as between women and men within the Church.

I will take the topic under discussion in three broad steps: first I will highlight some points that are important to hold in mind when we talk of ‘Women’ and more specifically women in Nigeria;

¹ This article is easily accessible on the internet; suffice to google the author’s name and title of the article.

then, I will mention concrete forms of dialogue which are actually happening in Nigeria, particularly in which women or women's concerns are involved and I will make some observations about them; and lastly, I will propose ways in which women's involvement in interreligious dialogue could be improved.

2 Women:

2.1 Are not one homogenous group

Firstly, it is important to keep in mind that women are not one homogenous group. As well as religion, culture and ethnicity, other factors such as geography, education, exposure, social status, and so on, all influence how women relate to themselves and to others, including how they are involved in or even wish to be involved in religious or interreligious dialogue. Obviously then, Muslim women, representing various cultures, societies, classes, ethnicities and perspectives, no more form one homogenous group than do Christian women or women of any other religion.

2.2 Are used as a Symbol of Religious Identity

Secondly, to remind ourselves that 'woman' is often used as symbol both of a group's religious identity and of a religion's supposed superiority or inferiority to another religion. The piety of a Muslim man is seen by the fact that his wife is wearing correct hijab. The picture of the silent Muslim woman, perpetually a victim, feeds the notion of Western or of Christian superiority. Meanwhile, the truest evidence of the superiority of Islam and of Christian immorality is the uncontrolled interaction of men and women in the public space and the immodest dress and supposedly promiscuous behaviour of Christian women. Such generalised notions about woman are the justification we find for our prejudices about the other religious group. Consequently, efforts to eliminate discriminations against women or to promote women's access to justice are more often met with the call for cultural or religious autonomy than for cultural and religious dialogue.

2.3 Are organized in Women's Faith-based Groups

Thirdly, in Nigeria there are vibrant women's organizations in virtually all faith communities, such as the WOWICAN, FOMWAN, CWO, NCWR, ZMK, MU and the WMU². These organizations are all organized at parish/local, diocesan/state, and national levels. Their membership

² Women's Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria (WOWICAN), Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Catholic Women's Organization (CWO), National Council of Women Religious (NCWR), Zumuntar Mata Katolika (ZMK - Catholic), Mothers' Union (MU – Anglican Communion), Women's Missionary Union (WMU – Baptist).

in these organizations plays a strikingly important and influential role in women's lives. Christian women consider membership in a faith-based group as almost mandatory. The Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN) is gradually making membership of a religious women's association common place for Muslim women also.

2.4 Share many common concerns

Fourthly, Muslim and Christian women face many common concerns. In Nigeria, both North and South, there are many educated and economically independent Muslim women just as there are many educated and wealthy Christian women. Equally, poverty, illiteracy, financial dependence, vulnerability, lack of decision making authority in the home and in the larger community, lack of opportunity, denial of inheritance, domestic violence, divorce, infidelity, polygamy, early and forced marriage, lack of collateral, inadequate health care, inability to know or to assert one's legal and civil rights, enormous and unnecessary suffering in case of widowhood, and so on, are experiences well known to many Muslim as well as to many Christian women.

2.5 Find that religion and culture are often impediments to women's rights

Fifthly, although injustices suffered by women cross the religious and cultural divide, it has often been observed that culture and religion constitute the greatest impediments to the promotion and protection of women's rights. While Islamic discourse has been and indeed still is used to give divine authority to many forms of injustice suffered by Muslim women, it is customary law, cultural norms and traditions, which provide the framework that justifies such discrimination suffered by Christian women.³ Rather than confront or seek to transform such cultural traditions, the Christian message and the witness of Christian practice has often times served to reinforce them.

2.6 Realize that they need a religious framework to protect women's rights

Sixthly, organizations which seek to protect women's rights in Nigeria have today realized that secular discourse alone does not suffice for women to be able to access their constitutional rights; customary law as well as sharī'a law must be negotiated.

Muslim women in Nigeria, as in many other parts of the world, supported by some male as well as female Islamic scholars, today use Islamic arguments to show that many practices in Muslim

³ Leading Nigerian women activists have said that some cultural and religious beliefs have been practiced for so long that they are embedded in the societal perception almost as legal norm 'such that the laws of the land and international instruments which protect the rights of women, are flagrantly infringed in the guise of these age-long beliefs.' See Kaduna Gender and Development Forum (KGF), *'For the health of women, for the health of the world'*, 2005, available at www.leads.org.

society which discriminate against women and are oppressive reflect cultural malpractices or cultural prejudices rather than Islamic truths. Using such discourse, instead of relying on secular decrees or on UN Conventions, Muslim women know that there is greater possibility that their arguments will be acceptable at the local level and that their efforts will be successful.

For the most part, Christian women in Nigeria continue to rely on secular discourse to protect women's rights. However, at local level, culture, tradition and community forms of authority are the ultimate determining voice. Thus, activists recognize that government legislation and treaties to promote women will more possibly be effective at grassroots level in Christian communities if they are supported by a Christian framework. This does not mean twisting Christian teachings to support abortion in the case of rape or other such proposals which are wholly contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium; however, it does mean looking courageously, with humility and sincerity, at how the Church's preaching or practice might actually support patriarchal cultural norms that do in fact infringe on women's just rights. In the words of Rose Uchem, a Nigerian Catholic Religious and theologian, there is need for 'a deeper level of inculturation which is attentive to social and gender justice; in other words, inculturation coupled with liberation.'⁴ The growing number of African women theologians, organized in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (CAWT) and the African Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) can be of great help in this respect.

2.7 To confront women's concerns must be done intra as well as interreligious

Seventh and lastly, although sincere and humble dialogue ad intra the community concerned is required to change a dominant religious interpretation and practice if this is seen by women to be a cause of injustice and suffering, interreligious dialogue is also necessary.

In Nigeria today Muslim women are relying very much on a codified shari'a system so that their rights as Muslim women will be respected. However, the issue of shari'a is problematic and it can and has furthered the divisions between Muslims and Christians in the region. Thus, while intrareligious dialogue in each respective believing community is required, it is also important that there be interreligious dialogue. Indeed, it is often from an interreligious forum, that is, through listening to others as they describe how they see us, through hearing how others confront problems similar to those we ourselves face, that we find the courage and even the tools to enter into dialogue with our own community.

⁴ Rose Uchem, *Beyond Veiling: A Response to the Issues in Women's Experience of Subjugation in African Christian Cultures*, Snaap Press Ltd., Enugu 2001, 57.

2.8 The Church has committed itself to making every effort!

Repeated references were made during the recent African Synod in Rome to the discriminations, injustices and marginalisation that women suffer in African society, cultures and even in the Church. In its closing message of the Synod, the African Church expressed its support of efforts to promote women's dignity and rights in society. It is to be supposed and hoped that this support or commitment when put into practice will bear positive fruit in the lives of all women, be they members of the Catholic Church, Christians, Muslims, adherents of African Traditional Religions or whatever.

3 Interreligious Dialogue with a focus on Women

It is important to distinguish between formal interreligious dialogue which often involves experts and religious leaders, and the practical informal dialogue of life which involves everyone. This 'dialogue of life' between Muslims and Christians takes place daily in Nigeria as people interact in the market places, schools, hospitals, places of work, and so on. In truth this form of dialogue is the most important since here people get to know one another personally as human beings and friendships are formed. In fact, especially among the Yoruba in the West, it is not at all unusual to find Muslims and Christians in the same family. The dialogue of life is somewhat limited by the ethnic nature of the two faiths in the North of the country and the largely separate lives there of the two faith communities, the latter not helped by the fact that in recent years, due to the series of violent sporadic riots in the region, people have moved to live in areas increasingly segregated along religious lines. It must be noted however that, although there have been riots and although there is still great hurt and mutual distrust just below the surface ready to erupt defensively at the slightest instigation, most of the time Muslims and Christians in Nigeria live together in peace and harmony and interact with mutual respect at all levels of daily and professional life.

In Nigeria, government bodies, academic institutions, NGOs and faith bodies have all organized formal encounters between members of the two faiths. Although only a small percentage of the population has participated in these encounters, they are often influential people, religious or political leaders and leaders of civil society bodies and of non-governmental organizations. Women have usually been included.

3.1 Of Religious Leaders

The top-level official structure of Muslim-Christian dialogue in Nigeria is the Nigerian Interreligious Council (NIREC). This was established by the leadership of the two faiths, with the strong support of the government, in Sept. 1999, as the country prepared to return to civilian rule.

Its initial objective was how to address the incidents of religious conflicts in Nigeria. According to Archbishop John Onaiyekan, the President of CAN who, together with the Sultan of Sokoto, the President of NSCIA,⁵ is co-chairperson of NIREC, ‘much of the action of NIREC takes place in high level channels of consultation which are often more effective than clamorous press statements.’⁶ Since 2007, NIREC meets quarterly in different states of Nigeria, with the aim of bringing its witness and its message to the grassroots and to motivate the formation of NIREC State commissions. It is also now more committed to seeking ways of working together concretely on common challenges, particularly on questions of social welfare, good governance and promoting the positive impact of religion in public life.

NIREC consists of 25 members from both faiths who are appointed by the leadership of CAN and of NSCIA respectively. At the moment, there are two Muslim and two Christian women in NIREC, showing a slight improvement since its initiation and at least a token effort to be more inclusive. The reason few women are members lies in the fact that both CAN and SCIA have to devise ways to ensure representation of the various Christian and Muslim groups: few groups will choose to send a woman to represent them. However, it is to be hoped that in recognition of the fact that women, by virtue of their not being men, are not the overall leaders in any religious community but they are the leaders of women’s organizations in each community, some affirmative action is needed to create the possibility for a quota of women in this important high level forum. This could be to introduce the requirement that of the 25 from each side at least five be women or it could be that the number of representatives from each faith body be increased to thirty to include at least, but not necessarily only, five women.

A second form of dialogue of religious leaders formed at national level is the Nigerian Chapter of Women of Faith Network, an affiliate of the World Conference of Religions for Peace. This is still very much in its infant stage. It was inaugurated in September 2008 during a five day encounter of twenty-one women religious leaders. The event was organized by the leadership of the Nigerian Council of Catholic Women Religious (NCWR). Since its inauguration, only one other meeting has been held, in Jan. 2009, of a small working committee. At that meeting a Strategic Plan of Action was put together. Here, it was felt that the Women of Faith Network must work closely with NIREC at national and state levels if it is to be successful. This reflects the relationship at continental level where The African Council of Religious Leaders (ACRL), which is generally comprised of men, collaborates somewhat with the leadership bodies of the African Women of Faith Network. Future

⁵ Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA).

⁶ Unpublished paper given during a presentation at a book launching in Dublin, July 2009.

developments in this regard in Nigeria are pending. Let us hope we will soon see some concrete action.

The International Women's Coordinating Committee (IWCC) of the Women of Faith Network has adopted a Global Women of Faith Network Plan of Action, 2007 – 2011⁷. This Plan is a framework for activities to build and consolidate the capacity of women's faith-based groups throughout the world to advance peace and promote justice and harmony in their particular society. The four priority themes which have been opted for as areas for interreligious action are: network building of women's faith-based groups at local, regional and global levels; building peace and advancing shared security through the unique strengths and mediation of women's faith-based groups; averting violence and transforming conflict through the strength and the resources of women of faith; and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment so as to combat issues of human poverty and poor health of which women are the greatest victims.

Another important global interreligious network of women is the Women Faith and Development Alliance (WFDA) which focuses on development and seeks to unite the moral authority of women's groups, faith groups and development communities to reduce global poverty through the empowerment of women. Under the auspices of the Women Faith and Development Alliance, what is known as the Interreligious Breakthrough Commitment, a commitment to address the Millennium Development Goals to empower women, promote gender equality and end global poverty, has been signed by many interfaith organizations and religious leaders, including the African Council of Religious Leaders, and the Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa. This organization, the Women Faith and Development Alliance works in close partnership with the Women of Faith Network.

Personally I am convinced that, if as Church in Africa we are to assume the commitment expressed at the Synod to eliminate discriminations suffered by women in Africa, we must give our full support to the Women of Faith Network, or to any such effort that involves bringing women's faith-based groups together in sincere and active dialogue. Working with and through women's well-organized faith-groups, such as FOMWAN or the CWO, will be much more effective than working independently or through NGOs.⁸ However, it must go beyond meetings of leaders and

⁷ To view the detailed Global Women of Faith Network Plan of Action 2007 – 2011, see www.wcrp.org/initiatives/women/plan.

⁸ It has been observed that while NGOs contribute actively and positively to the work for peace and the promotion of women, because most of their funding comes from foreign donors they are not as effective as they might be. As well as being suspected as western-agents, the lack of local commitment constitutes a difficulty. Secondly, the analysis of cultural and religious beliefs, which is necessary if the greatest obstacles to women's promotion are to be removed, will

reach down through these faith-based groups to very local levels. It is up to these groups to take interreligious dialogue as a priority; it is up to us as Church, and particularly to the women's organizations of the Church, to invite and show the way for women of other denominations and faiths to assume this commitment.

3.2 Of Interfaith NGOs

Some Interfaith NGOs have been established with the specific aim of bringing people of the two faiths together to jointly tackle some common social concern. Forums of religious leaders and of faith-based groups, such as those I have mentioned above, have achieved important results and have, I believe, the greatest promise of achieving grassroots transformation. However, what I have experienced of concrete forms of dialogue in action has so far been at the initiative of NGOs.⁹

In numerous forums to analyse the conflicts in Nigeria, poverty has been identified as one, if not the major, root cause. Another observation made at these forums is that a dialogue of action is more fruitful than theological dialogue between the majority of Muslims and Christians. As a result, while a few years ago these Interfaith NGOs spent their energies and funds on forums where people could analyse the conflict, they now concentrate on projects that bring people together in a concrete social action to overcome their poverty.

One example is the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IFMC), also known as the Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum. This NGO is based in Kaduna but works in many parts of the country and its directors, a Pastor and an Imam, are known far and wide. At the initiative of this NGO, groups of Muslim and Christian women known as peace or change agents, work together in four areas of Yelwa Shendam¹⁰, Plateau State, an area that experienced a lot of ethnic/religious violence during the 2002-4 crises. The project includes four steps: a trauma counselling workshop for women of both faiths that were directly affected by the violence; followed by a 3-day training programme to empower women to cope after their trauma; then another week in entrepreneurship and Need Analysis; then the decision to start a joint interfaith cooperative of rice milling and groundnut

undoubtedly be much more effective if it results from reflections done within women's faith-based groups rather than by NGOs.

⁹ For example: in Kaduna there is the WIPNET branch of WANET – this is the Women in Peace Network, an affiliate of the West African Network for Peace. The Islamic Counselling Initiatives, based in Jos, has brought women and youths together for trauma counselling and for some recreational activities which help women to overcome distrust and establish friendships across the religious and ethnic divides. The Strategic Empowerment Mediation Association (SEMA) based in Kaduna, concentrates on peace building but is very sensitive to involving women, including young women, of both faiths. Inter-Gender, based in Jos but active also in Kaduna, was very active until 2005, and achieved great results in bringing women of faith together, not only in women-only forums but it also ensured equal participation of women in any interfaith initiatives it organized.

¹⁰ Yamini, Yelwa, Damshe, and Wase.

processing. At present there are forty women (twenty of each faith) in three of these four areas of Plateau who are engaged jointly in the economic venture of rice milling. In Wase, the fourth area, women have been trained but the mill has not yet been installed. In Kaduna, forty Muslim and Christian women from each one of three troubled areas¹¹ have been trained together but the interfaith cooperative is not yet operating. I cannot vouch for how successful these ventures are or will be but at least they are another example of how women can be and are involved in an interreligious dialogue of action.

The Africa HIV/AIDS Faith Initiative was founded in 2001 to educate people in Africa about AIDS, speak out against the stigma often attached to the sickness and to provide support networks as well as care for people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. It seeks to involve Muslim and Christian leaders in raising awareness and promoting, through their churches and mosques, a change of behaviour so as to stop the spread of this disease. In November 2002 the Interfaith HIV/AIDS Coalition of Nigeria was officially endorsed with religious leaders from both CAN and the NSCIA.¹² A board of trustees consists of five Muslims and five Christians representing the central religious authorities; all ten are male. However, the working advisory council of sixteen members includes some women from both faith communities. The coalition has verified, as no doubt Sr. Pauline will explain to us, that women are more vulnerable to the virus because of biological, social and economic factors and that women are laden with the extra burden of caring for their relatives who suffer from the virus. Through this coalition and others concerned with health issues, such as the African Forum of faith-based organizations in Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS (FORUM), women from diverse faith-based groups come together to strategize and discuss the spread of the disease among illiterate or poor women in particular. These interfaith coalitions on health issues are a positive and unthreatening form of interreligious dialogue in action. They have brought Muslims and Christians involved in health care together in their concern for a common cause of suffering. These are also interfaith coalitions in which women of both faiths, representing their faith communities, are particularly involved.

3.3 Of NGOs committed to the promotion of women's rights

Other NGOs exist were set up not as specifically interreligious or even specifically religious but rather with a secular vision and aim: to support and protect women who are suffering unjustly, to

¹¹ Kakuri, Rigasa, and Ungwan Shanu

¹² Rev. Kaine Nwashili, 'The Beginning: Presentation on Interfaith HIV/AIDS Coalition of Nigeria and The Balm in Gilead INC (Africa HIV/AIDS Faith Initiative), presented at the Zonal HIV/AIDS Coordinators Training, 19th–23rd July 2004, Luchia Hotels, Kaduna (Papers of these workshops/seminars are available at the Interfaith HIV/AIDS Coalition/Balm in Gilead office in Lagos).

help women be aware of and to access their rights, and to overcome gender discriminations in society.¹³ The first point to be made about these NGOs is that they are in fact interreligious in their founders, their leadership, their membership and in their activities. Muslim and Christian women (and men) work together in these NGOs and in all their initiatives, workshops, seminars or other events, they have brought women of the two faiths together. The second point to observe is that all the discussions on conflict or women's rights include some form or degree of theological dialogue as well. Most of these NGOs have seen the need to employ or seek expert advice from Islamic lawyers as the best way to help Muslim women access their rights. The women who participate in these NGOs are generally women of faith.

An important point needs to be made here and that is that while in the West secular feminism developed parallel and even in opposition to religious discourse, in Africa this is not the case: African women, by and large, refuse to separate the secular from the sacred. I have rarely if ever, met a person in Nigeria who completely separates secular from religious discourse. Indeed, globally today, more and more religious feminists, of all faiths, see that there is a need to move away from severe secularism. An ever-increasing number of people are becoming aware that human rights cannot be considered without some ethical and moral basis. I believe that today's Feminist theology and Islamic Feminism, particularly that which is developing in Africa, must be seen as attempts at bridging that gulf between secular and religious-based discourse to improve the status of women while upholding the ethical and spiritual guidance which religion provides.

During the recent Synod and in its final message, rejection was voiced of Western or foreign poisonous ideologies which the Synod felt were most concretely seen in some gender theories such as that expressed in art.14 of the Maputo Protocol. It was felt that this gender theory is today being imposed on Africa under the guise of tackling poverty and women's vulnerable position in their societies, but instead is actually usurping traditional family and religious values. There may indeed be a lot of truth in this and undoubtedly precaution is needed. As the Synod message so rightly says, it is important to support UN and other efforts to promote women's rights with 'wide open eyes of faith' (par. 25, Synod Message). This is indeed what Muslim women in Nigeria, through FOMWAN, and also what many feminist theologians are doing today.

However, while Islamic feminism has entered into secular discourse in Nigeria, Christian theological feminism has not although undoubtedly their efforts may have influenced secular

¹³ Women in Nigeria (WIN), Women's Aid Collective (WACOL), BAOBAB, Gender Awareness Trust (GAT), International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Impact for Change for Women, and numerous other NGOs bring women of both faiths together as they seek to support women and protect women's rights.

policies just as they have influenced greater openness and awareness in the Church. By and large, in Africa as in many other parts of the world, Christian feminist theology remains on the margins of mainline discourse. The challenge remains for us as Church to open our arms much wider to listen to and give serious consideration to the insights of our African feminist theologians so that the so-called Western gender theory will not usurp African values but that it will be the Gospel message which will illuminate us as we seek to fulfil our promises towards women made at the Synod.

3.4 Of Specific Faith-Based bodies

Religious bodies are also involved in organizing formal dialogue forums. The Anglican's Project for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) has a woman's wing which no doubt is active in many parts of the world but personally I cannot speak of any significant fruits which this may have produced. The Association for Christian Muslim Mutual Relations in Nigeria (ACMMRN) was established in 1993 by the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCCN). This organizes annually a three or four day interreligious conference of Muslim and Christian religious scholars. The conferences are well attended by professors of religious departments from universities and theological schools from around the country. There is always a relatively good representation of women among the participants but as Speakers women have been few and far between. This is not original to Nigeria; at official interreligious encounters or meetings of not only religious leaders but also of religious experts and scholars, it is very rare to find an equal representation of men and women among not only the participants but also the paper presenters. In fact, it is not uncommon at all to see photos of participants in interreligious dialogues where no woman is present and even more common to see lists of speakers which are entirely male! Is it possible that even today there are no women scholars in religion or no women who are actively engaged in the field of dialogue? I should hardly think so. Even if they are not in such prominent positions in their religious communities, which they cannot be given the patriarchal nature of religious bodies, efforts must be made to invite women as paper presenters and as participants.

The Catholic Church has in the various dioceses or ecclesiastical regions of Nigeria organized some Muslim-Christian dialogue seminars or conferences. In every diocese there is a Director of Interreligious dialogue just as at national level there is the Director and secretary of the Dialogue and Mission department. For some unfathomable reason, these are all ordained priests, hence male. Perhaps the most concrete involvement of the Church in interreligious dialogue is through the health, education and other services it provides. Often times it is Religious women who are directly involved in providing these services which are made available to all people without distinction. In

fact, many Religious are inserted in quite rural areas in Northern Nigeria and other parts of the country, as indeed throughout Africa, where they share life, in mutual respect and appreciation, as neighbours with their Muslim brothers and sisters.

The Christian Association of Nigeria, the body through which Muslim organizations are in most direct and official contact with Christians, is basically male. In fact, the constitutions of CAN state that only ordained men of a certain status can form part of the leadership team.¹⁴ However there is a Woman's Wing of CAN (called WOWICAN) organized at national as well as state levels. Being a wing of an organ that is male in its mainstream and in its central leadership is not an idea that convinces many women any longer. At a meeting in Jos in November 2004, Christian women leaders expressed their lack of conviction at the idea of being a wing within CAN. They said that women's voices and concerns are not really represented in CAN just as women of different Christian denominations are not really united in CAN. Hence, they felt there was a need to form a Federation of Christian Women's Associations of Nigeria, following the example of their Muslim counterparts. Some Catholic women have also spoken of the need to form an ecumenical body of Christian women's groups, again referring to the example of FOMWAN, so as to better confront the problems women face in society. However, at national level, this does not yet exist.¹⁵

4 Proposals towards women's greater involvement in dialogue

The Synod, disappointingly not in its concluding message but in its interventions and propositions, has recognized and condemned injustices that are experienced by women in Africa and has expressly committed the Church to doing something to transform this situation in the light of the Gospel. With the recognition and commitment made, I would imagine that many bishops will return to their dioceses anxious for concrete proposals as to how to go about implementing this proposition. Hence, I suggest some ways in which I believe the Church can together with Muslims assume its commitment and responsibility to be at the service of justice towards women in society, can serve the reconciliation of men and women and enable women to be more involved in reconciliation at all levels in society; and can empower women to better assume their role as Mothers of a culture of peace in Africa:

¹⁴ *Constitutions of CAN*, Art. 14, b–c.

¹⁵ 'Unity among Christian Women in Nigeria: a Positive Ecumenical Approach against the Social-Political Ills of Our Society' in *Women Echo*, magazine of the NCCWO, 9th Edition, July 2003, 64–65: 'What should be uppermost in our minds right now is the formation of a strong national body of Christian women of Nigeria to enable us work out modalities for solving our societal problems. After all, our Moslem sisters have now formed themselves into a body they call the Federation of Moslem Women of Nigeria [sic.] ... Isn't this enough challenge for the Christian women of Nigeria? The decision now is ours to make.'

4.1 Adequate Numerical Presence of Women

In any interreligious commission of religious leaders, ensure women are numerically adequately represented. This is an insight that stems from acknowledgement of Catholic anthropological teaching: men and women are equal and complementary, equal in so far as they are human persons, and complementary in so far as they are men and women; they are ordered to one another with two different bodily ways of being human, ordered to communion. Men are not normative or superior; women are not auxiliary and inferior; rather they are complementary. Hence, it is important that both men and women be adequately represented in any agency that is discussing reality and taking decisions for both men and women. A second reason why it is important that women are adequately represented in all interreligious commissions is because witness speaks louder than words. We can use fine words to tell Muslims that men and women are equal in dignity, but if we do not witness to that through a practice that makes obvious that we consider women's voices and perspectives to be not only valuable but necessary, we can hardly expect them to believe us.

4.2 Attention to Women's Concerns

There are concerns that are particular to women and it is important that these concerns be part of interreligious dialogue forums, particularly of religious leaders since it is their voice which is heard and carries greatest authority. When development policies are being drawn up in proposals for a dialogue of action, when problems relating to family in contemporary society are being discussed, when access to political seats is being debated, when the use of funding is being decided... on all of these issues as on so many others, women's interests and perspectives can differ from those of men. On many occasions in Nigeria, at interfaith workshops and meetings, women have lamented that women's voices, rights and interests have continued to be ignored in peace building efforts and other governance processes in their communities. It is interesting to mention here that in 2002, a Kaduna Peace Declaration was signed by eleven Muslim and eleven Christian religious leaders. Women, organized in a workshop under WIPNET (Women in Peace Network) had drawn up a Peace Agreement around the same time. However, they were advised not to publish it but to consider themselves included under the one signed by their male religious leaders. The content of the two declarations is quite different and could in fact have complemented one another rather than ignore one in deference to the other.¹⁶

¹⁶ Both declarations are published as Appendix in Kathleen McGarvey, *Muslim and Christian Women in Dialogue: The Case of Northern Nigeria*, Bern 2009, p. 412 and 433.

4.3 Abandon the notion of Women's Wing:

As stated above, the day is gone when women can be considered a wing, alongside youth and children, to the main body. If only ordained ministers can be admitted to a leadership body, such as is the case with CAN, a body which exists as an ecumenical body and which is the main organ of dialogue with non-Christians, this ruling may need to be examined.

4.4 Begin with our own Community:

It is important that, if we want to be of service to justice for and with women of other traditions, we must begin with women in our own community.

4.4.1 Review the impact of our teachings and practices on the life of women

Recognising that religion and culture constitute major obstacles to women's development, as local Churches let us review the impact of our religious teachings and practice on the life of our people. To do this, there is need to create forums in the diocese where women can dialogue with the bishop and priests on their concerns. The forum can invite women to speak of how they feel religious teachings and practices influence their situation in their families and wider communities: does the Gospel message as taught and witnessed to in the Church allow them to know the fullness of life, the full dignity of a child of God, the liberation of the Gospel message? It is important to listen to women since 'the foot that wears a shoe knows best where it pinches'.

Some obvious examples include the absence of women catechists; the insistence that a woman must cover her head in church; the teaching that a man is the head of a household and a wife is to submit to her husband; the lack of women appointed to leadership positions in the church which do not require ordination; the punishment given to parents of young women who marry non-Catholics; the relative non-interference in the church in questions of female genital mutilation and widowhood rites; and so on. What do these and other practices say to women and about women? Do these teachings and practices give the notion that men are more suited for mediation and for leadership, as indeed even the message of the recent Synod would seem to suggest¹⁷. Courage and humility are required for a sincere inculturation especially when this is not only about introducing African songs and symbols but actually about challenging long standing cultural norms.

¹⁷ Cf. Par. 26 of Synod Message where men are addressed and exhorted to be better formed and organised in Catholic Associations so as to play leading roles in society. Compare this with par. 25, addressed to women, which endorses many efforts being made by secular groups to promote women's rights, warns women to be wary of foreign and poisonous ideologies on gender and sexuality, and speaks of women assuming 'appropriate roles' in the Church.

Many women have quite a low self-esteem and have truly internalized such cultural notions as the higher value of a male child, the need for a son to take a second wife if the first does not give birth to a male child, the need for a woman to undergo the widowhood rites, the need for female genital mutilation, the need for women to remain in the background. It is often said that women are women's worst enemies. Hence there is need for the Church to organize workshops for women to free them from such socializing, raise their consciousness of women's issues, and help them grow in an awareness of church teaching on the dignity of woman. To help with this, the insights and expertise of Africa's growing number of women theologians should be availed of.

4.4.2 Seek to eliminate injustices towards women in the Church

Within the Church itself concrete efforts need to be made to eliminate injustices towards women. This involves taking steps to appreciate and incorporate women's gifts in the Church, appointing women to church leadership positions, and promoting the collaboration of men and women in the church. The document *From Words to Deeds*, drawn up by the US Catholic Bishops' Conference (USCBC) in 1998, makes some very practical suggestions for doing this.¹⁸ I suggest this document be used as a reference point in our Church in Africa as we seek to move from the words of the Synod to actual deeds.

The suggestions made by the USCBC include:

- recognising women's contributions in the history of our local church;
- reviewing our diocesan and parish programmes for gender awareness;
- forming all the faithful, especially pastoral leaders, in the Church's teaching regarding women's equality with men;
- appointing qualified women to positions of Church leadership that entail substantive responsibility and influence;
- ensuring women have a fair representative in all parish, diocesan and national committees; preparing women for leadership roles;
- introducing adequate personnel policies in the Church suitable for employing non-ordained staff, including women religious who are often very inadequately paid;
- appointing women spokespersons for the local church (An excuse often given, which is unacceptable, is that it must be a man who represents the Church because Muslim leaders will not deal with a woman);

¹⁸ Available at the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
<http://www.usccb.org/laity/words.shtml>.

- introducing a system of discernment of gifts as opposed to rigid establishment of roles;
- providing formation on teamwork for bishops, priests, religious and men and women laity.

It is also important to raise awareness of exclusive and sexist language in our liturgies, hymnals, catechetical material and so on. Language is symbolic even if people are not aware of the influence such symbolism has over our attitudes and perspectives.

5 Conclusion

As was clearly testified to during the African Synod, dialogue with Muslims, collaborating together to promote shared values in society, is possible and is effective. The Synod has recommended that efforts at dialogue be increased and that those who have not yet committed themselves to making such efforts begin to do so.¹⁹ Hence, I conclude this presentation with a fervent prayer that the so-called backbone of the African Church, represented by the Catholic Women's Organizations,²⁰ may make more committed efforts to encouraging and enabling Muslim and Christian women together to contribute their portion to the good of humanity. I pray that Church leaders will support women, morally and financially, in this endeavour. However, women and their concerns cannot remain on the margin: hence I also pray that organizers of official and formal interreligious events will endeavour always to be more inclusive of women and thus witness to a sincere appreciation of men and women's being created equal and complementary.

Kathleen McGarvey, ola

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¹⁹ Synod Message par. 40.

²⁰ Synod Message par. 25.