

The Persistent Voice

**Addressing issues of gender and justice
across the globe and working towards the
full partnership of women and men in
ministry.**

March 2010

In This Issue

As the Persistent Voice staff gathers, our stories emerge from thoughts, questions, interests, and events we discuss together. In a way none of us can quite describe or understand, many of our issues explore a single theme from many perspectives. In this issue, we share stories of transformation which takes place when we truly listen one another into speech. May our voices speak to you. As always, we invite your responses, stories and participation in the conversation. Please share your voice with us:

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Blue

Abigail Letsinger, WTS M.Div Junior
This poem was composed as part of a collaborative project for the Loehe Chapel. It was displayed alongside paintings by three artists reflecting Advent themes, including the color blue.

You.
yes YOU.
do you care about what you're reading?
Are you moved?
Are you called?
Are you inspired?
To act.
To think.
To never. Stop. Fighting.
You know, don't you
that this is all you get?
Look up.
Yes, now.
What do you see?
Really see?
Don't be afraid of the honesty that lives inside.
It all comes out in the end.
Say something.
SAY SOMETHING.
Anything.
You didn't say anything, did you?
pity.
Be heard.
Be great.
Let someone in.
let go.
This is supposed to be about blue.
And in a way it is.
Do you see it?
You turn that shade
holding it all in like you do.
Exhale.

Interfaith Dialog as a Covenant of Friendship

Norma Cook Everist, WTS Professor of Church Administration and Educational Ministry

Women of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths have been meeting in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area regularly in Women's Interfaith groups since 9/11.

They recently shared their stories of dialog at the annual international meeting of the Religious Education Association in Dallas .

In dialog, they said, the point is not to use the method of interrogation, but to first of all create a trustworthy environment and become friends.

"God created us to be in dialog with each other," one woman said. Another said that "God is deeply at work in every woman's life, empowering her and invoking faithful responses of service across faiths."

The Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women agreed that the mystery of God is wider and deeper than each alone had imagined. Each of the three faiths includes tenets of love of God and neighbor, and this is their pathway to friendship and working together for peace.

Three Episcopal women started a faith club book. Three from each faith, covenanted to first get to know each other and to know about each other's religion. Beyond the book club they invited each other to participate in events of shared interest. They asked themselves, "Do we really want to find out about each other's faith?" They often felt they didn't have enough information about each other to really dialog, so they needed to learn. One woman said, "I can't expect the other to believe what I do, but I can be curious without judgment and with an open heart that only God can give."

Sometimes they reached such difficult places they had to acknowledge that they just "didn't want to talk anymore for now." There was sometimes fear.

Two different groups were represented in the presentation in Dallas . One started by bringing a newspaper and tearing it apart and asking participants to study their piece and talk about

what they found. They also created a sacred space so that each could ask any question she wanted to pose to the others.

One group said that they began by having the first couple of meetings open and then asked people to commit for a least six meetings. "So we built trust in the midst of fear," one woman said, "It was hard at times. I kept searching for a reason not to go but after each meeting I thought 'How could have I have missed this?'"

The groups continue and deepen years later.

Sometimes a small leadership team meets to plan so that the larger meetings go well, particularly when the topics became inflammable. They were also called to action when some mosques had hate crimes committed against them. They talked and studied, and became involved in acts of justice and would often close by lighting a candle and saying prayers together.

Now they feel they have moved beyond stereotypes of each other's faiths. A Muslim woman said, "I can't talk about Jewish people without thinking about my friend, Sue." They celebrate each other's holy days. They have also built a covenant for ongoing dialog. But world events continue to challenge Jews, Christians and Muslims talking together, such as the invasion of Iraq, and various crises in the Middle East. The dialog group had to say that some issues seem impossible to solve. Working for peace and understanding is hard! It is hard, and even painful, but hopeful. Through their commitment to one another and to sacred listening and humility they gain renewed energy to take the next steps for themselves and the next generation.

Copenhagen as a Call to Live in God's Economy

Erika Uthe, WTS M.Div Senior

Erika was in attendance at the Copenhagen Global Climate

Change Summit through a scholarship from Iowa Interfaith Power and Light as part of a January independent study course.

The argument is ongoing: was Copenhagen worthwhile? worthless? Did Copenhagen achieve what it needed to? Many have asked me, "Was it worth it to go to Copenhagen?" My answer is simply, "yes." Even though I didn't get to actually attend the summit for more than 8 hours, even though I spent almost 2 days waiting in line, even though the results of the negotiations were disappointing, Copenhagen was not altogether a lost cause. Stories were told there, and voices were heard. In the midst of delegations walking out and groups attempting to storm in, one message rose up loud and clear: something needs to be done and it needs to be done now. Copenhagen may be over, but this is only the beginning. Now we can, both as a faith community and as citizens of the United States, tell our elected officials the kind of legislation we want passed. In the wake of health care reform, financial reform, and national security, climate change is easily lost to "more important" issues. Health care, finances, and employment are all very important, but if there is no land to live in, no food to eat, or water to drink, none of those things really matter. There are scores of quotes and teachings on creation and its beauty throughout the history of humanity. One of the most poignant quotes I have found recently is:

Only when the last tree has died, and the last river has been poisoned, and the last fish has been caught will we realize that we cannot eat money. ~ Cree Indian Proverb

The truth of the matter is that the financial incentives to be more energy efficient pay off in the long run. Once renewable energy is available on a large scale, once we as consumers press our business and manufacturers to use more efficient technology, and once we have taken to heart the need to transform our economy into energy

efficient and carbon positive, we will see the financial benefits. But these financial benefits are merely a fringe benefit.

The root of the transformation to energy efficient and carbon positive is the mandate from God to steward creation. We have been entrusted with a precious gift, one that, by the grace of God, sustains all life with its resources. There is already enough food on the planet to ensure that all are fed, yet many starve. There is tremendous potential for renewable energy from wind and solar power, yet many are still in the dark. There are enough ecosystems to support billions of species of plants, animals, and insects, yet our biodiversity is shrinking at an alarming rate. There is plenty of land available on which to live, yet there still exist climate refugees because the land has been raped and pillaged so much so that it can no longer sustain life. We research new technologies, spend money on more costly systems, and protect our environment because it is what we are called to do.

Love of God, love of neighbor. This is God's economy. Whereas we are accustomed to an economy in which one person's gain is another's loss, God's economy ensures that when one person gains, the other gains as well. By loving and caring for creation, which is itself our neighbor, we also care for our human brothers and sisters. By ensuring that all of creation has equal chance of thriving and succeeding in life, the livelihoods of those who depend on the ocean for fish, the ground for plants, the wind, water, and sun for power, all of creation thrives all the more. Let us join our voices together as one and call for better use of our land and natural resources. Let us call for better and more advanced technology so that God's creation is better stewarded. Let us love our neighbor in word and deed, just as Christ has loved us.

Increased Feminization of the HIV and AIDS Epidemic in Africa

Mamy Ranaivoson, Former LWF Africa Regional Coordinator of HIV and AIDS and WTS M.Div. Middler

These comments and the facts which follow come from a presentation Dr. Ranaivoson gave during a Lenten Soup Supper sponsored by the Center for Global Theologies at Wartburg Seminary.

There is no question that girls and women are now at the center of the global HIV/AIDS epidemic. Twelve million young people between the ages of 15 and 24 are living with HIV and AIDS. More than half of all new infections affect young people, with over 6,000 becoming infected every day.

In Africa 60% of people living with the virus are women. In 1985 it was 35%. Worldwide the numbers of women and men affected is now equal. The cruel irony of equality for women, particularly in the developing countries, is that this equality is for the wrong reasons. It is not due to equality in life economically, socially, and educationally, nor the access to reproductive information and health services, but because of women's lack of power over their own bodies.

It is disturbing that marriage is now as risky a place for young girls to be infected with HIV as the single state, particularly in Africa, where men are typically older than their brides. Men have likely had many other sexual partners before the marriage and have been exposed to HIV. In marriage women will never negotiate the use of condoms for two reasons: one is the desire to bear a child and the second is that to negotiate condom use would suggest a lack of trust and fidelity and might put them in jeopardy of violence.

Even in the man's world some cultural practices such as the expectation of men to be knowledgeable and experienced about sex, to have multiple partners, and to prove their manhood are deadly practices that are putting men at greater risk of being infected by HIV.

As a church we are active in providing care to those sick and dying of AIDS. However, the discomfort of the churches in talking about sex, particularly among the youth, has hampered the fight against this scourge. The statistics for HIV infection among young people support the figures that many young people have sex at younger ages.

Facts:

- Puberty is occurring at earlier ages.
- The age of marriage is generally rising.
- Unmarried youth have the opportunity for sexual activity.
- 80% of these women infected with HIV/AIDS were faithful to their husband.

Social and Economic Reasons:

- Women's socialization to accept pain and discomfort
- Vulnerability of younger women/adolescents
- Social pressure to bear children
- Lack of sexual knowledge or ability to reveal knowledge; low level of education
- Women's dependence on men for economic support
- Economic decline in countries contributing to women exchanging sex for material support as a survival strategy
- The subject of sex considered taboo; people don't often talk about it
- Socio-cultural patterns which dictate that decision-making about when, where and how to have sexual relations are made by the man
- A Patriarchal culture which has heavily influenced the legal systems, governance structures and value systems that uphold the unequal status of girls and women
- Social norms dictating that females defer to males.
- Male youth having been enculturated to believe it is a sign of manhood to be able to control relationships.
- Females being brought up to believe that

males are superior in all spheres of life and should be the masters of sexual relationships.

- Men being encouraged to be promiscuous - including within marriage - women expected to remain "pure."
- Lack of HIV and other factors adding to the problem such as wife sharing, wife exchanging with land or cattle, dowry payments, and polygamy.

What can we do?

Large proportions of the people in Africa are still HIV Free. We must prioritize our actions and target:

* Youths programs

- Young people need life skills such as critical thinking, decision making, communication, advocacy skills and changes of behavior.

* Women's programs

- The call to empower women has never been more urgent.

- We must act now to strengthen their capacity, resilience and leadership.

- There is a need for school based programs in which women and girls are full participants

- legal and policy frameworks need to change to support women's rights to economic independence (including the right to own and inherit land and property).

Book Review: *Left To Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* by Immaculee Ilibagiza

Jo Kinnard, WTS M.Div Middler

A riveting account of the events of the Rwandan Holocaust as seen by someone who experienced it first-hand, *Left To Tell* forces the reader to ponder the nature of human brokenness, the meaning of faith, and the enduring power to forgive. The author relates the developments of the Tutsi-Hutu conflict and its impact across the country. Friends become enemies, families are slaughtered, and

those who survive live through horrendous experiences – watching their homes burned, and their families raped and hacked to pieces. They somehow escape the same fate because they are able to find a hiding place through the agency of a benefactor.

Immaculee and seven other women hid in a tiny bathroom for several months in complete silence, with meager rations and no comfort before they were able to escape to the safety of a French liberation camp. They were almost found several times. The man in whose house they were concealed had to take considerable risks to get food to them, without the knowledge of the other occupants of the home. They had no privacy, no essential feminine products, and had to wait to use the flush at the same time that the occupants of the bathroom on the other side of the wall flushed. The author, who was raised Catholic, relates her conversations with God during this time, and her progression from feelings of hate and anger towards the Hutu to feelings of forgiveness.

The book raises many questions in the reader's mind, the foremost being: How is it that some are able to reach a place of forgiveness sooner than others, and how does one ever recover from a nightmare such as the Rwandan Holocaust?

Poetry

On February 10th, the Persistent Voice hosted a poetry reading event at Wartburg Seminary. These poems were among those shared. A creative writing group has formed and is meeting weekly. A second poetry reading is scheduled for April 19th. Feel free to share your creative writings to be shared with our readers and/or at that event!

After Talking to a Soldier Returned from Iraq

Kalen Barkholtz, WTS M.Div Senior

The little girl is the only place to begin.

She is standing, arms crossed,
blocking every doorway.
She wants something from me.
I think to step around her, but like a playground
bully her straight arm rises and meets the door
frame.
Her hair is black and her eyes are deep.
"Don't make an angel out of me," she says, "and
by the way, I'm not a little girl."

Maybe she's not an angel, and maybe she isn't
little anymore but her hair does fall like water, a
dark river over her shoulders and her eyes, they
do ask for something more.
But she's a real girl with dirt under her fingernails
a mouth full of teeth and a big loud laugh she
wishes she could hide.

"Tell them about my name," she says.
She has a name, I don't what it is,
but I can tell you, it jangles
like a pocket of coins, like a charm bracelet.
Her mother loves to say it
out loud, more than necessary
especially when she scolds her daughter, when she
shows her the quick smart way of being a woman.

"And why are you using present tense? I'm in the
past.
Tell them about the American soldier,
tell them about my arm,
the dark wet shapes of blood on the ground.
Tell them about the translator and the chaos, tell
them about the boy's shaking hands, tell them
about my mother crying and choking on tears, tell
with words the awful sound of a human animal's
heaving and gasping for breath.
Tell them about the daughters and sons
I'll never have, the beautiful books
I'll never read, my dry bones, the dust in my
skull."

Little girl, I don't know how to tell your story.

"You have to. I am every poem worth writing. Do

not leave me untold."

God is Love

*Mary Grace Winsor, 3rd Grader at Bryant Elementary School ,
Daughter of Steven Winsor, M.Div Middler*

God is Love.
God is Peace.
God is something anyone could dream.
God is something anyone could reach.
All you have to do is pray.

Parade

*Barb Simon, WTS Administrative Assistant to the President &
Personnel Director*

A joyless day - gray, misty, dull to match my
mood.

My car stares down others staring back,
their headlights on in mid-afternoon
where black asphalt and steely cement
intersect at the stop light.

From the curb steps a nine-year-old girl
with straight blonde hair
and gangly arms and legs
that stick out of a pink sleeveless dress
like licorice whips.

Beneath her scabby knees, her clunky brown shoes
march in the crosswalk.

She clasps an orange and red art-class
bouquet in front of her.

My windshield wipers wave at her once, twice,
and the smile that plays on her lips
jumps to mine.

Act as if it were Impossible to Fail

*Jason Richbourg, WTS M.A. 2nd Year, with Youth, Culture,
Mission Concentration*

I live and breathe.

I exist to the ones I love.
One thinks I'm not safe.
Another thinks the world is after her.
An old man could care less.
A woman cares deeply.

So don't tell me there aren't any people
Who love and cherish me.
Because there is a married couple who knows me
well.
A sage who has instilled in me wisdom.
A hip bartender who keeps my cup flowing.
A passerby who greets the morning.

All of these and many more are my siblings.
They've spun many tales for me.
A kid with the wildest of imaginations.
Grandparents who've traveled the world.
Myriads of strangers exchanging peace.
Politicians I've only seen on television.

I awaken my inner DJ.
Outpouring my sophisticated jazz.
She sings in agony.
He sings to forget.
We all sing the tune of bliss.
They sing for a brighter tomorrow.

Don't say to me I cannot dream...
Dream of impossible things
For someone is researching a cure.
Another is managing conflicts.
A writer paints a novel.
An orchestra haunts the soul.

Where O where is love?
Does hope have any wings?
Isn't this man seeking justice for all?
Why is she mending their wounds?
How do they negotiate the terms?
Is you for real?

A single fortune cookie...
Wrapped in gilded foil.
She'll never stop running.

He's not giving in.
Their voices shall speak.
And I will act as if it were impossible to fail.

Baby's Breath

Corrine Denis, WTS M.Div Senior

suckling done,
your body curves
still womb-like
cuddling into Mommy.
head hangs heavy
arms draped over shoulder
tiny fingers twitching
tummy full and satisfied.
Suddenly—
the sound of a star's subtle twinkle
the sigh of summer sun
the soft whisper of snow kissing lashes...
baby's breath

Early Morning Walks

*Norma Cook Everist, WTS Professor of Church Administration
and Educational Ministry*

I miss taking walks with my father
Now that I am of the age
when I wake at early dawn,
summer dawn.
I take long walks during the cool of the day.

My father woke early,
smoked a camel
read the paper;
I don't know what he thought about.
I wasn't allowed to get up that early.
Sixty years ago he died
before I was yet a woman,
He was still my daddy.

I don't know what we would have talked about.
should we have taken long walks at dawn.
We live at different times

in different worlds
having different conversations.
I don't so much miss him,
as miss never having had him
to talk together
on early morning walks at dawn.

It's silent
And so it is,
so silent.
That was long ago.
Would we know each other now?
Would we walk together?
I have no idea.
Yes, yes, I think so.
I think we would have walked,
perhaps silently together
some early days at dawn.

And so I'd rather be alone,
at least for this morning hour.
The rest of my day is so blessedly full
of people, ideas,
creativity, responsibility.
I run, always three things at once.
Why the hurry, why the hurry?
Like some unknown race
to complete the course he didn't.
But who sets the course?
I have no idea.
So, I must walk and enjoy the gait.

Two days before he died
I noticed how he walked.
And I thought,
"I shall learn to walk like he walks."
But that was just a glance,
At my father
Sixty years ago.

Persistent Voice Staff

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