

World Day of Prayer – a global ecumenical player in intercultural understanding

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Abstract

Women's World Day of Prayer (WDP) is a global, international ecumenical Christian movement initiated and carried out by women in more than 170 countries and regions. The origins of WDP date back to the Christian women's movement in 19th-Century USA and Canada (Hiller 1999). The movement is symbolized by an annual day of celebration – the first Friday of March – to which all people are welcome. The service for this celebration is written by a different country each year and women of that country become the focus of the world's prayers on the day itself, which begins over the islands of Tonga in the Pacific and continues across each continent. In 1994, women of Palestine were invited to write the WDP service. The result was significant clarification of the political situation and reduction in prejudice towards Arab (Palestinian) women, who had been mostly seen as part of a terror campaign against Israel. On a theological level, unconditional support for Israel had been considered the duty of Christianity because of the Shoah and the history of antijudaistic stereotypes. The controversy that surrounded the preparations for WDP was documented by WDP Germany (Dt. WGT-Komitee 1995). Research on the controversy and the underlying conflict was carried out only by women who were involved in or connected to WDP (Bechmann 1993).

An academic analysis of the WDP approach to the annual preparations reveals a highly complex communication structure involving political, religious, spiritual, and gender issues and their practical implications. This structure has emerged from a policy of allowing interested women to participate in complex processes of learning and understanding, while at the same time being the agent of that process. WDP is a model for cross-cultural and interreligious competence, and lays a solid foundation for the acceptance of "others". WDP's effective and simple, yet multidimensional structure of interpretation is not (and could not be) the result of purely theoretical considerations. Instead, it has grown organically from the life and faith of individual women in a global movement.



Preliminary Remarks

The introduction into this congress named religion as not working, not contributing enough to interculturality. In introducing women's World Day

of Prayer (WDP) I hope I'm able to show how WDP is a practical and research orientated movement and its religious spirituality can function as tool for interculturality.

The movement of WDP has its roots in Christian based mission movements of the 19th century. Let me say clearly that I'm **not** talking of a fundamentalist movement or understanding the term "mission" as including superiority and depreciation of other faith traditions and religions. The understanding of "mission" underwent a deep change and this also has to do with the praxis of women's mission. The change goes from

- mission for the sake of one's own religion or confession to
- mission for the sake of universal solidarity with all, while still rooted in one's own spirituality. The history of WDP will show this development clearly. In the following paper I'm introducing first in short terms the women's movement that is World Day of Prayer and its spirituality, then pointing out the most relevant historical occurrences. On the example of WDP 1994, when Palestinian women wrote the texts for the service of WDP, I explain the process of intercultural work. Finally I'm discussing the connection between research and practice on the example of WDP.

One remark on my personal background: I'm presenting a global movement. I'm taking the local examples of WDP Germany. From 1989-1999 I worked as an Executive Director of WDP Committee of Germany and I'm still partly involved, so I know the work very well.

1. World Day of Prayer – a short introduction into an Ecumenical Global Christian Women's Movement

World Day of Prayer (WDP) is an ecumenical global Christian women's movement. It is initiated and carried out by women in more than 170 countries and regions. The origins of WDP date back to the Christian women's mission movements in the 19th-Century USA and Canada (Hiller 1999). WDP is celebrated by an annual celebration on the first Friday of March each year - to which all people are welcome.

The texts for the ecumenical worship service of WDP are written by women of a different country each year. The women of that country become the focus of the world's prayers on the day itself.

For example, the texts for the service on the first Friday in March 2009 were written by women of Papua New-Guinea (PNG). As every year the International Committee of WDP distributed the texts through the National WDP Committees all over the world. These Committees are translating and spreading them all over their country. There is not one central service, but women celebrate this prayer in thousands and thousands local communities around the world on that special day, the first Friday in March. Thus, on that day, this special prayer of the women of Papua New Guinea went round the world.

Motto: Informed prayer – prayerful action

The movement's motto is "Informed prayer – prayerful action".

"Prayerful action" means on the one hand that the offering collected during the service is generally used to support women's projects, especially in poor countries. Since 1975, e.g. the German WDP Committee financed 5600 women's projects with a sum of 53 million €. But "prayerful action" is not only about collecting money but also about learning of women's main concerns. And prayerful action also addresses political, social, gender, and economic issues in order to support women on all levels.

"Informed prayer": Empowerment and spirituality

The motto of "informed prayer" empowers women in various respects. First of all the women of the writer country are empowered to tell their story. It is important to allow the voices of the marginalised to be heard, to have a say in research, and to tell their stories as they want. During the conference (cAIR) the research project on gypsies and travellers in Ireland also presented this main principle. WDP has similar experiences. When women who are engaged in working together ecumenically are called to write the service for the world community of WDP this is a challenge and an empowerment to express their belief, their hopes and their concerns. And their belief, hopes and concerns are taken up by women all over the world.

What does this empowerment mean to the women who constituted the WDP Committee of Papua New-Guinea, writer country 2009? They described their experiences in a letter that they sent later in 2009. The WDP Committee of Papua New-Guinea had an audience that included the Head of State and the Governor General of PNG as well as a news conference with the Deputy Prime Minister of PNG about WDP and the day was declared a public holiday in Bougainville.



The women wrote: *"Perhaps the most powerful part of being a writer country was the opportunity for us to tell our stories. Through the narration of our lives, we learned that we do not have to be afraid or ashamed of standing up for and speaking about our rights. WDP has given us confidence and trust in God to speak up for truth and to empower one another. Being able to share our experiences with women around the globe filled us up with even more courage and strength, encouraging us to move forward with our work for peace. ... We will never, ever forget the experience."* (WDPIC Journal 2009, 3).

The spirituality of a "journey to the other"

WDP women at a local level now take the texts of the writer country as the basis for their own WDP-celebration. In order to faithfully do that, the worldwide network of women has to start a "journey" to a mostly foreign world. Such a journey requires a certain spirituality. The women are committed to listen intensely to what their sisters will say—in effect they hear the women of that writer country into speaking (Nelle Morton 1985). To write and read the text is treated like a face to face dialogue. Instead of being able to directly ask questions, the women begin their own creative process and this is the "journey to the other". The background of what is heard is deepened: The history of the country, the economic situation, cultural items, women's issues, and special situations – whatever approach to the country is of interest. Women in most countries conduct workshops and publish articles and resource materials, they use music, slides, and they search for women of the writer country in their own context. New media enable even more women to start the research. Studies on selected Biblical texts deepen understanding of contextual theologies in different social situations (Bechmann 2001). In this way, WDP empowers all participating women. But women are not only interested in the facts of a country, but in **the perspective of the writing women on what goes on and how they see themselves** – and often this cannot found in the internet. Not to speak of the many

women who don't have any access to the internet until now. The digital divide is the new sharp line of inclusion or exclusion of the globalized world.

2. History of WDP – a Christian Women's Mission Movement on its Way Towards Ecumenical and Intercultural Understanding

Women's Mission Societies in the 19th century

The origins of World Day of Prayer date back to the beginning of the 19th century in USA and Canada, when women started to encourage one another in personal prayer and organized themselves in women's mission associations. Especially women of the Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Anglican Church were engaged in Home Missions and in Foreign Missions. Their self-organization met strong opposition and caused controversy from the male dominated churches. In 1895, a day of corporate intercessions for mission was initiated by the Women's Auxiliary of the Anglican Church of Canada. Women were concerned for the appropriate *support for women and children*. Their *vision of Christian unity* included different cultures and races! *Study was everyone's responsibility*. Since 1900, women organized publications, summer conferences, study days and courses about the lives of women in other parts of the world. Joint Committees worked with immigrants. Women could study biblical foundations. In a context of little higher education for girls and women this "diaconical" (Christian social service) and educational work was the women's interpretation of mission. The leading women of the missionary societies were engaged in research and provided teaching materials through study books and theological literature.



Helen Barrett Montgomery (1861-1934) became a favourite author of annual mission study books. Her book "Western Women in Eastern Lands", in 1910, addresses the history of the Women's Missionary Movement and also offers in in-depth-analysis of it. It sold 50,000 copies in only

six weeks.

The First World War was a shock. In 1916, Caroline Atwater-Mason wrote about the relation of mission and peace. She concluded that both are inseparable which was taken up by women. The acquired strength in crossing borders and working with women of different countries, cultures, social classes and denominations shaped their attitude towards "the other" women.

World Day of Prayer came into being in 1927

In 1927 the women of North America distributed the worship service to many countries. The response worldwide was enthusiastic and the participation was seen as a bond of unity among women. In 1928 – the World Day of Prayer's theme was **Breaking Down Barriers** - the World Day of Prayer Committee stated:

*"It is with deep gratitude that we recognize the growing power inherent in our World Day of Prayer. The circle of prayer has expanded literally around the world. We have learned the great lesson of **praying with, rather than for, our sisters of other races and nations**, thus enriching our experience and releasing the power which must be ours if we are to accomplish tasks entrusted to us."*

"Praying with, rather than for, our sisters of other races and nations" is the decisive sentence. This insight and attitude empowers women to raise their voice, tell their story, speak out and take a stand on its own. Women of WDP expressed such an attitude in the midst of colonialism, racism, and after a disturbing First World War! A letter from one of the southern states of the USA stated, namely: *"Such programs as 'Breaking Down Barriers' are helping us a great deal to a better interracial understanding and to break down the barriers which hinder our fellowship in Christ. To women who have limited knowledge of other races and nations, the day has awakened consciousness of a great world of need beyond their own borders and of themselves as a part of a great world sisterhood."*

Two years later, Helen Kim of Korea was the first woman outside of the United States to write the order of worship for WDP 1930.

WDP during the Second World War

For Walter Benjamin, a Jewish philosopher who died in 1941 during his flight from the Nazis, the extreme situation is the point where truth comes to light. Therefore the years of the Second World War can be seen as decisive for WDP and its spirituality. In **1941**, an interdenominational movement, now known as Church Women United, was given the responsibility for WDP within the United States. In **1942** three women from countries at war with each other, but who at that time lived in the USA were asked to write the text for the World Day of Prayer service. They were an American professor who had lived in China and was forced to leave, a German pastor's wife who had been detained in a camp and a French woman who was without news from her family.

In **1943** for the first time a white and a black American woman, Dr. Georgia Harkness, professor of theology in Illinois, and Sadie Gray Mays, social worker from Atlanta wrote the WDP service

together. Both women had been involved in the work for peace.

In 1947 in Berlin, an American and a German woman organized together an ecumenical and bi-lingual service, attended by about 600 German women. Despite the official non-fraternization policy after World War II. American and British women participated, including Mrs. Clay, the wife of the American Commander in Berlin. The theme "Make Level in the Desert a Highway For Our God" had an intense connection to the devastations around and opened up hope.

Women who were active in WDP were also involved in founding the World Council of Churches 1948 in Amsterdam.

The International Committee of WDP (WDPIC) was formed in 1968. Since then the International Committee has met when representatives of National/Regional Committees gathered in different areas of the world. Nowadays around 200 women from all over the world attend these Quadrennial Meetings and together discuss and decide on themes, writer countries, and central issues of the WDP Movement.

It is from these roots that World Day of Prayer has taken its present shape (for any historical details and sources see Hiller 2006).



Presentation of women that played an important role in WDP Committees around the world during the International Committee meeting.

At first sight the task of listening faithfully to other women's voices might seem easy. But as the history shows, this was and is a task that needs deep spirituality. Imagine women whose countries have been in war, or women who have been divided for centuries through denominational or political borders. I would like to show the important impact of the principals guiding World Day of Prayer for crossing political and intercultural borders on the example of WDP 1994.

3. WDP 1994: Go, See and Act - written by Palestinian Christian Women

Palestinian Christian women were commissioned to write the texts for the WDP service for 1994 with the theme: Go, See and Act. Especially in Germany this service had massive political implications. It is

necessary to point out the German context in order to make understandable the problems on one hand and the importance of the principle of faithfully listening on the other hand which was the basis for overcoming stereotypes and prejudices.

In Germany, at that time Palestinians were mainly seen as part of terror against Israel. People did not even really know the story of the Palestinians or the Palestinian churches. Many had never realized that Palestinian Christians even existed. After the catastrophe of the Second World War and the Shoah it was impossible for Germans to have "normal" relations to the newly founded state of Israel in 1948. The shame about the Shoah was followed by support for Israel that was unconditional in many respects. Later the military branch of Fatah shaped the image of the Palestinians. Germany, although different in East and West, and the Middle East were and are a complex and difficult subject.

This unconditional support for Israel was also true for the Christian and especially the Protestant churches in Germany. After the war theologians had tried to analyze and overcome the presuppositions that led to anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Theological anti-judaistic stereotypes had led to the persecution of Jews throughout many centuries. Unconditional support for Israel was thought to be the duty of Christianity.

With this background in mind the women of WDP were asked to listen faithfully as they did every year to the story of the Palestinian women. For many women this definitely was a challenge. At the first session of the preparatory workshops conducted on the national level the women were asked to note three keywords that they had in mind when hearing the words "Palestine" or "Palestinians". You may not be too surprised about the result. Hardly any woman had written a positive keyword on her slip of paper! A Palestinian woman theologian had been invited as a speaker. And so we pinned all these negative keywords on the wall and there appeared a wall of prejudices and ignorance about the political situation, culture and history, life as minority in plurality and so on. The women were not familiar with the details of the conflict although the Middle East conflict was constantly present in the news. The women knew little or nothing about the impact and conditions of occupation, the different situation of Palestinians in Israel, East Jerusalem and the Westbank – and so on. I have to make a long story short.

It was a challenge for the women to work on the background of Palestinians in order to understand and make the text of Palestinian women their own. The text called for justice and peace and described the situation of Palestinian women as *via dolorosa*, where some of the women actually lived, and the hope for restoring life. This could *only* be done by

faithfully listening and educating themselves about the details of the conflict. The women worked very hard to understand this very complex and difficult situation, to reflect as German women on the shameful part of Germany within the conflict, to assume responsibility *and* to hear the cry for justice and peace – for Palestine as well as for Israel. Women's organizations invited Palestinians; they journeyed to the Holy Land, they changed the "normal" course of a journey or a pilgrimage to Israel and visited also Palestinian refugee camps, Christian communities, women's projects. This process was supported and encouraged by the beginning of the Peace Process in the Middle East. Then in Germany a storm of protest broke out.

Church leaders, church boards and committees on all levels, politicians, Christian-Jewish groups and persons from Israel tried to prevent women from listening faithfully to the words of the Palestinian women. Letters, articles, discussions, preconditions for women to celebrate in the church building were formulated, alternative texts were distributed for free in the thousands, even text forgery happened. And at the same time the conflict was brought to the level of spirituality. Are Palestinian Christian women allowed to express themselves with the lament of Psalms which are Jewish prayers?

WDP is celebrated decentralized in the local communities. The women in the parishes and regions had to deal with all these protesters – and they had to be educated enough on the subject to stay firm and to be able to refute accusations. The long lived spirituality of WDP enabled women to persist in this time of pressure. The women went into discussions, defended the right of Palestinian women to speak for themselves, and later said that they were deeply touched when they eventually celebrated the service faithful to the Palestinian women. From then on Palestinians got more presence in church contexts and were more heard in Germany. And German Christians spoke of double solidarity: for Israel and the Palestinians, realizing that Palestinian people are victims of the present situation.

5. Research and practice of WDP

WDP: A research orientated women's movement

I called World Day of Prayer a research orientated practical movement. This can be seen from the beginning of the history of WDP as well as in the practical work until today. Research is at the heart of WDP and this kind of research starts with faithfully listening to other women. *Praying with, not praying for!* The leading women of the different Mission Societies were educated and worked as educators. Women were successful authors. Helen Barret Montgomery, Caroline Atwater-Mason – others could be added. They wrote theological books and study books for the women at the local level on the

ground. The theological reflections on the relation of mission and peace during the First World War weren't addressed only at women! The same is true for the relation of mission and women's issues and the role of women in churches. World Day of Prayer itself was and is an educational process. The motto of "informed prayer- prayerful action" is a call to research on all levels.

Research concerning WDP is only done through WDP-active women

As much as WDP is a research orientated women's movement surprisingly there is a lack of academic research by universities concerning WDP. My thesis is: A practical women's movement is not considered relevant for research interests. This is a gender issue. Nobody was interested in research about WDP except women who have been and still are involved in WDP *and* in the field of research. The German WDP Committee co-financed the research project about World Day of Prayer 1994 (Deutsches Weltgebetstagskomitee 1995) and the research of the history (Hiller 1999/2006 also provides literature for the early time until 1960). Women worked on the spirituality of WDP movement (for example Bechmann 1993; 1998; 2001; 2003; Lienemann-Perrin 2003; Rieck 2007) and on implications of special WDP years (for example Bechmann 1993; 1995; 1998. For details see the literature list).

One main acknowledgement took place: In 2002 the Faculty of Catholic Theology of Tuebingen (Germany) gave an honorary doctorate to Helga Hiller for her research on the history of WDP and her contribution to the movement of WDP. The honorary doctorate was also understood as a recognition of the World Day of Prayer movement of a whole.

There are many topics which still require in-depth-study through further academic research, such as the history of the WDP Movement, the theological as well as practical contribution of women, the change of the understanding of "Mission" and many other topics. One other possible field of worthy future research is: to analyze how this kind of spirituality is able to develop such strength and how this can contribute to interculturality. In order to be successful in crossing borders of any kind an intrinsic motivation of people is needed. Any "must" will not be sustainable especially in times where interculturality is needed but is costing something. How can people develop intrinsic motivation? Spirituality is a dimension that can reach people at a deep level. World Day of Prayer has a long history in motivating women to work for peace and justice for all people. It may be helpful to analyze processes and guiding principles of WDP in order to learn from this movement and to indicate what direction future engagement should take.

Some final conclusions

In short I'm trying to indicate what processes of WDP can be identified as tools for interculturality:

a) Respecting other's dignity

The first step is the attitude to respect others and acknowledge their dignity. This attitude is rooted in the spirituality of an unconditional readiness to accept the perspectives of foreign women. It is the attitude of solidarity. This is basis and presupposition where dialogue has to start.

b) Laying open the options and aims of dialogue:

This dialogue is successful because the *options* of those who are involved are laid open. Women opted for prayer and action not only in favour of women but *together* with them, and they opted to work for freedom and justice. This was their understanding of mission, which they rooted in their Christian faith. Women joined the movement because their own identity was respected and even considered to play a significant role in the process.

c) Common activity leads to a better self-estimation in relation to others

Working together relates one's own and the foreign perspective without menacing one over the other. This brings one's own perspective into consciousness and it can be recognized in its own value but also in its own relativity. This healthy self-limitation leads to a self-estimation that is not lived at the expense of others, but defined and developed in relation or relationships to others.

d) A model for intercultural and interreligious dialogue

These ecumenical processes of recognizing and valuing cultural and religious diversity could be a model for processes that are necessary for an interreligious dialogue at the global *and* the local level

An academic analysis of the living practice of WDP reveals a highly complex structure of communication involving many issues as well as their practical implications. The movement's implications can be compared with similar models based on other mediums for interculturality which we have experienced throughout this conference. Applied sciences are related to practioners' work. The spirituality and practice of women's WDP should be considered one of these applied fields of practice.

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