United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

37th Assembly

Bible Studies

Theme: Christ is Calling Us: Participating in Suffering and Struggle
Introduction
(by Rev Majaha Nhliziyo, Director, UCCSA Leadership Academy)

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" Psalm 119:105

Whenever the people of God gather at Assembly and other occasions, they always find inspiration from the Word of God. It is therefore an important responsibility to prepare and lead people in the study and reflection on the Word of God.

The following four Bible Studies have been prepared to help the Assembly to reflect more deeply on the theme of the UCCSA, "Christ is Calling Us: Participating in Suffering and Struggle". In the first Bible Study, Rev Maria Guirrengane, looks at the issues pertaining to environmental justice and challenges us to reflect more deeply on our stewardship of the earth as a justice matter that is fundamental for human existence. The second Bible Study, which was prepared by Rev Sindiso Jele, we shall look at the Calling of Youth. This calling shall be taken as a case in point for the general calling of the people of God. In the third Bible Study, Rev Felicia Ramaribana grapples with the challenge of Poverty that women have been saddled with throughout generations and various socio-economic and cultural contexts. And the fourth Bible Study, prepared by Rev Kevin Davy, takes us to the issues of labour and workers' rights in our Southern Africa context. These issues are a daily occurrence and cause of much pain in our countries.

The approach of the Bible Studies is to co-relate “text” with the experience of suffering that human beings and creation live with and which is as a result of lack of justice. As our theme states that our calling as a church is participation in the suffering and in taking up actions that will eradicate injustice which is the root cause of suffering. Each Bible Study session will therefore have time for small group discussions to explore the issues at greater depth by looking at the local and global expressions of the subject under each study.

We pray for the Spirit of God to enlighten our reflections and inspire us to actions that will result in justice flowing like an everlasting stream in Africa.

"To God be the Glory"
Focus: Our Environment (By Rev. Maria Guirrengane, Secretary, Mozambique Synod)

Scripture Reading: Psalm 8:1-9

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. 2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. 3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; 4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? 5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. 6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, 7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. 9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The theme of the UCCSA since 2011, consists of calling every member of the denomination to participate with Christ in suffering and struggle for the cause of humankind. I thank God because Christians and none Christians are committed to preserving the environment and its species including the human race. Such attempts are made by some Christians and non-Christians alike. According to Psalms, God made the universe and gave it to humans take care of and protect it. As we can imagine the higher responsibility given to human beings to care and protect the universe, is not to be taken like a mere task. It means that people now have the power to save as well as to destroy whatever is under their dominion. I am talking about the lives on the surface of this planet. How do people react to this situation of responsibility? How should we react? Such questions have been rarely asked in Christian teachings and preaching especially in the UCCSA.

For the central themes of Christianity have been the dramas of the creation and fall, of salvation and fulfillment in a rather narrow “other-worldly” sense. This narrow understanding of salvation is more concerned with how one can escape suffering and struggle and takes no responsibility for the world or creation. It is a self-centred approach to
creation and leaves no room for inter-dependence between humanity and the rest of creation.

However the Psalmist reminds us that "the earth and the its fullness" has ceased to be merely a subject for human curiosity, artistic imagination, scientific study or technical conquest. It has become a question of profound human concern since the survival of all creation is inter-dependant on the whole created order. We make desperate attempts to escape its seriousness. But when we look deep into the minds of our contemporaries, especially those of the younger generation we discover a threat that permeates their whole being. This threat was absent or just not high on our agendas a few decades ago. It may well be that we are living in such a moment, and that our relation to the earth and the universe will, for a long time become more important. We, as members of the UCCSA family, must take seriously this issue of the protection of the environment by including the theme/conversation in our teaching and preaching. We should remember that we are part of humankind and can also play an important role in changing minds of those who are destroying the ozone layer and therefore putting life on the planet at risk. Jesus Christ surrendered his life for humankind and we as his followers should be committed to social, economical, political and environmental justice. May God strengthen us through the guidance of the Holy Spirit now and forever more until we succeed in this struggle for life for the whole created order.

Questions:

1) What does the passage instruct human beings' responsibility as?
2) What does it mean to 'have dominion over'?
3) Identify some social and economic activities that are a threat to the survival of creation, including humanity?
4) What is your understanding of "justice in the environment"?
5) Suggest ways in which the church can participate in the struggle for justice in the environment.
Focus: The Call of Youth (by Rev Sindiso Jele, Johannesburg, Central Region, South Africa Synod)

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 1:1-19

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD." Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a branch of an almond tree." Then the LORD said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it." The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north." Then the LORD said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the LORD; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you.
Introduction

The road from Maputo to Mafikeng has been dominated by the theme 'Christ is calling us: participating in suffering and struggle' it is against this background that I make this reflection, focusing on the Youth of the UCCSA. The assumption of the theme is that all of us, male, female, rich, poor, we had this calling (priesthood of all believers) to participate in the mission of God (Missio Dei). The notion of calling, as used in the middle ages, (Latin word for vocation=call or calling), was understood to mean a call to the monastic life, "leaving the world behind." Those who did not go to the monastery were considered second-rate Christians, who lacked commitment. This notion was abolished by the Reformation and redefined, we are no longer called to leave the world (world in the study must be understood to mean the real sphere of our responsibility and activities), but serving God within our everyday world.

As we reflect on the call of Jeremiah and focusing on the Youth of the UCCSA, we need to define our mission within this paradigm where Christianity is not only defined by the western intellectual scholarly but has attracted African definitions. The gospel is understood within our own context. (examining the gospel in the light of our own (Youth) world view then adapting the message, encoding it in such a way that it becomes meaningful to our social, economic, religious and political space.

The Text

Jeremiah was a priest by birth and a prophet by calling, his prophetic ministry spanned for a period of forty years (c. 626-587 BCE) in the Southern Kingdom. After the death of Solomon the kingdom of Israel split into two rival kingdoms as the Northern tribes declared independence under Jeroboam I. The Southern tribes, though smaller, remained with Jerusalem as their capital. The divided kingdoms were of no match to the big "super powers" of the day, Assyria and Babylon respectively and it was a matter of time before, firstly, the Northern kingdom/Israel fell to the Assyrians and then later, the Southern kingdom/Judah fell to the Babylonians. It was during the crisis that led to the fall of Judah and her exile in Babylon that young Jeremiah (his name means God found him) received his call. Indeed when God calls, God has a plan for somebody. Two things attract our attention in the reading of the call of Jeremiah: first he never saw God only heard the voice. He uses the visionary language "the word of God came to me (v1), the word of God said to me (v4). But the reading of v9 suggests that there may have been physical contact with God 'he stretched his hand and touched me...'. He stands in conspicuous contrast to his predecessor (Isaiah 6:1) and his successor Ezekiel (1:1). It is important to realise that the prophets drew their authority from what God said and did to them. As a church, Youth in particular, we draw our missionary authority from
our interaction with God. God moulds Jeremiah 18 he is a divine potter. (see chapter 18). God “finds” the raw material in the young Jeremiah and shapes him into an instrument or vessel for God’s purposes of serving and saving God’s people.

The call of Jeremiah must not be understood as the arbitrary caprice, but it was the execution of the Divine task of a God whose fore-knowledge directs the whole course of human history. Jeremiah does not refuse the call, like all of us, but he gives an excuse to the practical activities of the prophetic mission, to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5, cf. Isaiah 44: 24; 49:1.). Though his mission was set before his birth, he tries the excuse of being too young to be the spokesperson for God. One wonders what the UCCSA youth are saying today about God’s calling? Some of the excuses include reluctance, or a sense of unpreparedness, misgivings and fear of an unknown future. At times this question is brewed within a certain ecclesiastical context. Do we as a church (UCCSA) listen to the wisdom of the youth?

Application

The youth we have in the church nowadays are not only exposed to the Sunday pulpit sermons but to an oversupply of sermons on the public media. As a church we must redefine calling in the context of the socio-economic and political set up. Allowing the people to explore to other modes of ministry rather that to focus on ordained ministry.

What do we learn?

This question calls for individual, churches, regions synods to make assessment. The answers we give are a reflection of our context, what can we learn from the story that can help us to fulfil the divine task. God asked Jeremiah ‘what do you see’ and Jeremiah said he saw a branch of an almond tree. At times we don’t see what is before us. We need to realise that the beginning of the ministry is just before us and our surroundings. What is it that you see in your local, regional, national and international context?

What can we confess?

This is a question of being honest to ourselves and to God; admitting your inadequacies and excuses for not responding to the call of God. We always have reasons of not doing the work of God. Sometimes we fail to take the gospel to the neighbourhood, to the poor, widows, to the rich and powerful politicians and economic playmakers simply because we think we are young or inexperienced and unfit for such a task. In other words we have limited the call of God to certain people like the clergy who also have limited the call to maintenance ministry.
What are can we be thankful of?

We need to thank God that though we are not perfect, God promises to mould and shape us for the task of God’s Mission in our context. In as much as we live in the world with economic melt-down, political uncertainty about the future, God never said we will be insulated from the suffering. Like Jeremiah, God shall ‘fortify us, make us strong like iron pillars.” Though we are not perfect we have been called for the perfect and divine task.

What can we pray for?

Tradition describes Jeremiah as the ‘weeping Prophet’. In prayer we present our requests and wishes about our struggles to God because we trust that God will “find, accept, and mould us as vessels to bring about justice in our world. The social and economic ills of our time which are the root causes of suffering, can only be eradicated a culture of justice. How can we make the gospel “fresh” today to all people everywhere?
Bible Study Number 3

Focus on Women and Poverty (by Rev Felicia Ramaribana, Moderator, Lephoi Region, Francistown, Botswana Synod)

Scripture Reading: Ruth 1:1-22

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. 6 Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. 7 So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. 8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. 10 They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." 11 But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, 13 would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." 14 Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and...
your God my God. 17 Where you die, I will die--there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" 18 When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. 19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" 20 She said to them, "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. 21 I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" 22 So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. (New Revised Standard Version)

INTRODUCTION:

I would like us to reflect and mirror real life issues of our time. Our theme “Christ is Calling Us: Participating in Suffering and Struggle” calls us to reflect and stand against any evils that promote inequality, injustices and inflict pain that deprive others the fullness of life and render them sub-human. As such, the theme calls us to engage the Bible prophetically in such a way that we contribute to an order which promotes equality, justice and restore dignity and selfhood hence a resource for transformation. I would like us to discuss in buzz groups factors that impinge upon women’s economic capability and in the process socially displace, disempower, impoverish and economically disenfranchise them. What are the issues that make people suffer and disempower them?

Setting the Scene- Current Situation of Women

It is of no doubt that poverty stands out as the fundamental social affliction of our time and thus the most significant challenge. Poverty deprives society of its full human capacity, strips people of their dignity, and harms them psychologically and physically. It is without question a “threat to life and it continues to deny people the fullness of life”. While poverty affects human beings of both genders, women are the most vulnerable social group to poverty worldwide. Rural women are the poorest of the poor and the most economically marginalized. Patriarchal systems, such as cultural norms and values have been seen as contributing factor. Some cultural norms and values ensnare women, relegating them to subordinate positions as dependants and minors. Patriarchy therefore tends to deprive women of their agency - or at least
minimise it - and renders them helpless in the face of economic crises. Moreover, disempowering cultural norms often impinge upon their ability to overcome the negative socio-economic circumstances in which they live. Patriarchy has thus contributed to women's economic disenfranchisement. For example, women are traditionally confined to the domestic sphere, and as such they do not have the same opportunities as their male counterparts to improve their economic status and so their living conditions. Patriarchy therefore tends to deprive women of their agency - or at least minimise it. Patriarchy has thus contributed to women's economic disenfranchisement. As a result, they are severely affected by national/international economic crises such as the current global economic downfall. Women must therefore be encouraged to employ greater socio-economic agency in order to survive inspite of economic systems existent in Southern Africa that do make profits matter more than people.

The question that we need to grapple with is why are women among the poorest if not the poorest? We must not be content with the fact that women are among the poorest, but rather we must search for the causes and further probe the bible for the liberating and positive motifs that can be used for empowerment. Reading the Bible in this manner may help us to use it as a resource for survival for those who are suffering and struggling and consequently it would help us rekindle and reflect on our covenantal and justice ethos.

Socio-Economic place of women in the Israelite society

The Israelite society which is patriarchal in outlook defined and confined women in terms of men they are attached to, therefore the Israelite women derived their identity from men and as such that portrayed them as sub-human. The father was considered as the family head and his wife’s master (‘the ba’al’). This clearly indicates that the Israelite society was patriarchal in nature. The father, as the family head, had absolute authority over his wife and children. The married woman was therefore her husband’s possession, which suggests that the system rendered her a minor. The husband was the provider, while the woman’s place was in the household. Women did not have any economic rights per se; their rights, if any, were secured and safeguarded by the men to whom they belonged. Furthermore, land was the most important economic commodity but Israelite law deprived the majority of women of the opportunity to own land. These factors disenfranchised and impoverished women, particularly childless widows. Without men their future is futile and bleak.
Women’s agency as depicted in Ruth

Rural women in our countries (Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe) face similarly disempowering conditions as did women in ancient patriarchal societies, including that of ancient Israel. The economic plight of disenfranchised women in ancient Israel - especially that of the widows - is addressed by religious law, for example Deuteronomy 10:18, 24: 17-21, 26: 12-14 and Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22. It is also demonstrated beautifully in the book of Ruth (henceforth Ruth). Ruth tells a story of bereft women in a patriarchal society and as such economically disempowered and deemed hopeless. Further the book, details the ways in which Ruth and Naomi - two rural, disenfranchised widows - overcame the patriarchal constraints of their society in order to secure their socio-economic well-being. The story of Ruth relates the strategies employed by the two in overcoming the strictures of patriarchy and ensuring their economic survival. The death of their husbands strips them off their identity. The book defines people in terms of race, class and religious ideologies. Further, the book presents us with linguistic contrast; death is paired with life, men with women, famine with plenty and emptiness with fullness.

For this Bible Study, I find it germane to probe this book for strategies which may ultimately facilitate increased socio-economic agency amongst poor women and empower them.

Ruth 1: Returning Home

The story begins with a time designation and it is set during the time in which the judges ruled, a “period characterised by violence, apostasy and tribal war”. The story is set in Bethlehem which literally means the house of bread, ironically the house of bread is suffering famine and it is this very famine that forced Elimelech and his family to emigrate to Moab to seek food (1:1). The text states, ‘a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons’. The woman is defined by the man in her life and her relation to the sons is not mentioned-“the name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi”

As it was the norm in the patriarchal culture, the family is being led out of Bethlehem by a man. It holds true that it was his responsibility to find security for the family but his initiative brought calamity. The family was successful in its quest for food, but not in its quest for posterity. It

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1 Ruth refers to the book whereas Ruth refers to the character.
turned out all wrong, instead of getting life as it was their motive, the family got death. The plan they had ended up providing short term sustenance instead of long term. First Elimelech dies and it ironic that parental role is transferred to the mother- and "she was left with her two sons" (1:3).

The three women, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah were bereft of their husbands (1:4-5) who were the source of their economic wellbeing and as such they are left with nothing in the land of Moab. Loss of life befell males and events took a downturn toward women. As per the patriarchal ideology, wellbeing is attained and experienced through man. In losing the male head, Naomi and her daughters-in-law lost security and self esteem; although some would argue that Naomi was quite confident of her next step- perhaps even her daughters-in-law). The women had to act in order to ensure their survival. Without men's counsel, Naomi out of her own initiative and enterprise, takes charge and independently decides to return to Bethlehem in search of food and to re-start life. (1:6-7). The very poverty that drove them to sojourn in Moab is driving them back out of the land of Moab. While the text does not explicitly state that they were poverty stricken, but it suggests they left Judah due to famine (1:1), hence poverty. Their return to Judah is initiated and motivated by what Naomi has heard-"for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food" (1:6b). Additionally, the length of years they stayed in Moab allows them to have built some form of wealth and because the men in their lives were dead and their wealth could not be sustained, that gave them some more reason to return to Bethlehem. For these reasons they needed to secure a stable future for themselves.

The three widows left Moab for Bethlehem; however Orpah gave up the fight when their mother-in-law persuaded them to each remain in Moab, whereas Ruth insisted on going to Bethlehem with Naomi. Ruth acts against the will of her mother and refuses to be dissuaded; she defeats the Israelites patriarchal ideology which alludes to childless widows returning to their father’s houses. It is therefore in this context that in 1:19a we are told "So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.” We are told nothing more than that, we are left to guess that the journey was tiresome and long and possibly dangerous. The Hebrew word (two) indicate to us that they walked on their own, accompanied by no male companion for safety. Despite all odds, of how tiresome the journey was, motivated by their urgency to transform their
undesirable situation, they tirelessly and courageously journeyed through the Jordan River until they reached Bethlehem.

When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, the women ask, indirectly for it is not clear whom the question is directed to, is this Naomi? (1:19b). There is a bitter exchange from Naomi, 'do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me' (1:20). (NB Note the play on words between the name Naomi which means “pleasantness” and Mara which means “bitterness” in Hebrew) Because of the afflictions which have beset her, Naomi is struggling with identity and as such she switches her identity. She further reiterates her sense of loss in saying, “I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”(1:21). She blames her affliction on Shaddai and proclaims emptiness over fullness and death over life. Naomi in her bitter exchange with the Bethlehem women fails to acknowledge the presence of Ruth.

In the wake of the moment, the narrator reminds us that Naomi is not alone but with her Moabite daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab (1:22a). The narrator forecasts life over death and fullness over emptiness. All is not lost. The two came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest (1:22b). The book began with famine and the two women, Naomi and Ruth arrive during harvest time. Could Ruth's presence and barley harvest be a sign of fullness and life?

**Conclusion**

Many women today face the same situation that Naomi and Ruth faced. Their rights are trampled upon through culture, tradition and circumstance. This kind of treatment is inhuman and it strips them of their dignity and as such they are reduced to less than nothing. Naomi and Ruth went through adversity but they lived each day with hope. Hope kept them going. While the duo did not make any changes in the structures but they took control of their destiny. The two women were agents of positive change, they took own initiative in patriarchal society. In the midst of intolerable patriarchal structures, the duo found means of survival, through innovation, intelligent action and dexterity; Ruth and Naomi strategically devised coping mechanisms, **notwithstanding the argument that Ruth gave herself or was set up to give herself up sexually in order to survive?**

Ruth and Naomi can be heralded as exemplars of an impressive range of traits and values worthy of emulation\(^4\) and as such women, who find

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themselves in same situation as that of Ruth and Naomi, can use them as model of empowerment in their endeavour to improve their lives. Indeed, the two are inspirational models of women's socio-economic agency. Women can emulate the survival tactics these women employed so as to transcend patriarchal mindset which portrays women as dependent on men and incapable of bringing about their wellbeing.

The two, Naomi and Ruth, intelligently and independently, without the aid of a man acted out of their own initiative. As widows and women with no children, they knew that nobody was directly responsible for them and as such they had to act. They took initiative in planning to leave Moab for Bethlehem where they have heard that the lord has remembered his people. While the text does not explicitly state that they were poverty stricken but it makes it evident that they left Moab out of their own enterprise. Their action subverts patriarchal perception that “women cannot act independently from men.”

Questions for group discussion

A. What are the pertinent questions and issues for the church that this story raises for our Southern African context today?

B. What are the manifestations (signs) and causes of poverty among women in your locality?

C. Make practical suggestions for the church in the struggle against poverty among women?

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5 Masenya 2004:51.
Bible Study Number 4

Focus on migrant labour system and workers' rights in Southern Africa (by Rev Kevin Davy, Cape Town, Peninsula Region, South Africa Synod)

Introduction

The migrant labour system is one of the major ways in which the five nations of the UCCSA, South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe are connected. A system born during the period of Colonialism as a means of obtaining labour for the then newly discovered Diamond and Goldfields in South Africa. During the mid to late 1800's, Africans in South Africa were driven from the land by means of hut taxes and other means, forcing them to seek wage labour on the mines. By means of agreements with other colonial powers around us, such as the Portuguese in Mozambique and Angola, the English in Zimbabwe and Malawi, and the English in Botswana, the colonial and post colonial powers of the Union of South Africa and the Apartheid regimes, obtained more labour from these countries. The agreement was based on a principal of 60% of the salary of the migrant worker was withheld and was paid directly to the colonial government in exchange for their labour.

This system was refined under the Union of South Africa and even more so under the apartheid Regime. Within South Africa the Native Reserves, which covered only 13% of the land were created to house the African population. Under Apartheid this system was further tweaked in the form of the creation of the Homelands as a so-called permanent homeland for African people. The underlining aim of these homeland/reserves was to act as dormitory areas from which cheap labour could be drawn without taking responsibility for the basic living needs of these people. The Homelands system, together with the Pass Laws, ensured that only African people with government permission were allowed in the ‘white’ towns and cities, thus cutting thousands of men from their wives and families who could not join them in the cities and on the mines. The effect on family life, morality, and material well being was devastating to say the least, the effects of which we are still experiencing today with the growth of urban informal settlements, the HIV AIDS pandemic and general degradation associated with poverty and unemployment. The
migrant workers of other countries were no less affected in the same way. Their position however, improved as their home countries such as Botswana, Malawi, Angola, Mozambique, Angola and Namibia achieved independence and thus exercising more influence and power over the conditions under which their workers were contracted.

The migrant workers of South Africa had to wait a little longer for their liberation. Stripped of all rights as citizens, workers and family men, they were and still are amongst the most vulnerable and exploited segments of the workforce.

However, the new post apartheid situation has thrown up new challenges and difficulties for migrant labourers in South Africa. Although having advanced a great deal in terms of securing their rights through the union giant of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the economic downturn in the world and its threat to jobs on the mines has thrown the industry into turmoil. It appears that a combination of strategy from mine bosses and the middle class status of the old mineworkers, the employment of new cheaper younger labourers as a cost saving measure, creating conflict between the older entrenched workers and the younger workers. With the migrant labour system being abolished, workers are now flocking to the mines, setting up informal settlements with their families in atrocious conditions and being recruited by the unscrupulous mine bosses at low wages. The mining companies are cutting costs once again by not taking responsibility for the physical reproduction of the workforce, ignoring their atrocious living conditions. Marikana was a consequence of this conflict, with all its tragic consequences. The tragedy is that the real advances in migrant workers' rights gained over hard years of sweat and toil and struggle should now be under threat from a new unemployed class from rural areas, casualties of the failed homeland system, the children and grandchildren of the former generation. The question therefore is what is the role of the Church in the lives of these workers who come from our various constituencies? What is the role of the Church towards the various role players in this system, the older entrenched workers, the younger workers, the mine bosses, and the government. We will look at the Bible to see what it has to say about a situation as ours in particular with respect to workers' rights.

We will look at the following scripture passage: Isaiah 58:1-11

_Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins._

2
Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. 3 “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? 6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. 11 The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

(New Revised Standard Version)

Questions for group discussions:

I. What is the social, political and economic situation of the people to whom the text addresses itself.
II. What is the text saying about this socio-economic situation?
III. What does the text say about workers rights?
IV. What are the similarities and/or differences between the situation in the text and that of Southern Africa today?
V. What actions can we as the UCCSA undertake to address this situation individually and collectively in our respective synods, at all levels of the Church? (Please be very practical in your suggestions)
After each group has completed, the big group will reconvene and report backs will be taken from each group. A collective report back will be compiled and presented in the plenary.