

Report of Stirring the Waters – Regional Consultation for Europe

Montreux , September 22-24, 2004

Under the auspices of the Lutheran World Federation Desk for Women in Church and Society (WICAS), about 26 participants from member churches and partner organizations from Europe and North America gathered in Montreux, Switzerland from Sept. 22 to 26, 2004.

Each morning the consultation began with a bible study and worship focussing on 'Water for Life, Healing Water, and Water for Peace'. Expert presentations were shared on processes and effects of privatization of water, theological and ethical dimensions, need for a global campaign on water along with a few global initiatives undertaken by faith based agencies like the Bread for the World and the World Council of Churches. Representatives from two of the LWF field offices in Europe highlighted the ways of working with local communities. These were followed by discussions, relationship building and strategy sessions.

A summary of the presentations are outlined below:

- Water instead of being a public good is turned into a commodity by private enterprises. International financial institutions among others are pushing for liberalization, deregulation and privatization of public services, including water. There has been changes in our a progression in the way we hold and regulate water first as a common good, then as a public good, and now water as a commodity that can be privatized. There is danger of regional and international wars/disputes competing for water. Water is tamed, domesticated, and used for its energy and for its life-giving and life-sustaining quality. This is frequently exploitative, disrespectful and abusive.
- Christian faith and biblical values can inform the way water issues are addressed to challenge such exploitation. Scripture testifies that water is a very precious element in God's sight. God uses water sayings to speak about Godself as a God of grace, justice, and loving kindness. Water was with God before time and it will flow forever from God beyond time.
- It is important to create spaces where understanding of water as sacred can be experienced in worship and where telling of stories can be exercised. This is one of the effective contributions churches can make. Another contribution is for each of us individually and as Church to practice life-style changes. From these experiences, advocacy for those without voice will be strengthened and energized. This advocacy will find expression in the diakonal, political and educational service of the church in the world.
- We acknowledge the need and right of all creation to water. Within the human community, the need and right to water challenges us to respond to water scarcity, pollution, its commodification, and privatization out of an obligation to meet water needs. Water is thus a development issue, a human rights issue, as well as a faith issue. A rights-based approach to water can be helpful in understanding water, not as a commodity but as

an entitlement to which everyone has a claim and for which states, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), churches, and even individuals share responsibility.

- Climate change is inter linked to issues of water. The earth's rapidly changing climate is putting stress on earth's dynamic, complex, and vulnerable ecosystems and water. Increasingly, disastrous floods, droughts and storms from climate change are causing death and destruction. Climate change is altering and worsening conditions in all countries, increasing hunger and poverty among already vulnerable populations: much of the global south, women and children, the elderly and those who are already living in poverty. As time is short, we must act immediately.
- Women have advanced from being participants, to leaders, and to setting the agenda on the issue of water. Often people become concerned and involved with issues of water only after they feel a lack of water. As women, however, we believe that there are things we can do ourselves locally and together globally, using resources from our own and also other religious and cultural traditions to engage in the urgent issues of water scarcity and climate change before it worsens.

Water as an image of God

Jesus, the son of God said 'I am the living water'. As women we see water as an image of God. Feminist perspectives in theology encourage us to find new images of God, to create room among ourselves to exchange stories about these images, and to relate them to our own experiences. This is a gift. Using water as an image of God can open doors to understanding and experiencing truths about God. Including these images in our lives and in our worship can lead to positive change in our understanding of water and help us in reclaiming our lost traditions of reverence for water and to find new ways of experiencing that reverence. This image of God can help us:

a. to **repent** of our arrogant and dominant approaches to nature in general and water in particular without giving consideration that it is a necessity for all life forms.

- use of water as if it is an unlimited resource without a dignity of its own,
- misuse, pollution and wasting of water and
- letting it become an issue of power and a source of fundamental injustice.

b. to **rethink and re-experience** our relationship to God because it teaches us that:

- God (like water) cannot be mastered.
- God (like water) flows and can not be stopped, God's way will prevail; and
- God (like a river) cannot be contained.

c. to **rediscover** lost dimensions of our spirituality by paying special attention to

- elements of life and creation, water, wind, fire and earth.
- female faces of God, which can also be found in water.
- water stories of the bible and
- our own contextual and personal experiences related to water.

d. to **redevelop** our approach to nature in general and water in specific, giving up the tendency to see nature and water merely in terms of its use for human kind by moving away from.

- materialistic approaches, towards spiritual approaches and
- human centered approaches, towards cosmos centered approaches.

Follow-up

- ⑨ Women can engage in issues of water as individuals, through congregations, synods, national councils, ecumenical links, inter-faith organizations, NGOs, government organizations and through international organizations. Primary questions to ask in any water policy decision include:
 - Who is the main actor?
 - Who controls?
 - Who benefits?
 - Who participates in the discussion?
 - Questions of sustainability, justice, and ethics.
- ⑨ Gaining the interest and commitment of people to make life-style changes at the personal and community level. This will require information, education, and action at many different levels:
 - Local networks will be engaged, beginning with local churches.
 - Pastors can preach on water at Sunday services.
 - Special services including experts on water can be arranged. Sunday school, bible studies, catechism classes, adult forums are opportunities for further education.
 - As individuals, we can begin with small groups of people. Flyers can be printed (relevant for local situations) for churches, youth, men's, and women's groups, local and national conferences, etc. Newsletters and pamphlets can help inform on the issues.
- ⑨ Project work and hands-on involvement is educational and informational. Some examples:
 - Making quilts with water as a theme to be sent to flood-devastated areas or raffled off for a water-based concern.
 - Pass a water-bucket from one women's group to the next, across the nations;.
 - Personal stories connected to water that can be collected, published and sold, and
 - A CD with water-related songs from around the world for publication and sale.
- ⑨ Organizational support are resources to inform and work with.
 - A web page under the WICAS site needs to be set up with relevant links and resources on water (e.g. www.menschen-recht-wasser.de).
 - WICAS needs to continue convening consultations at regional and international levels.
 - Build on and share the knowledge and experiences that each consultation produces.
 - An LWF campaign about water-related issues be organized, perhaps by WICAS. A theme could be "Bonded Together: H2O"

- A worship resource be created for March 22, 2005 when the UN Decade on Water begins and
- We as participants commit ourselves to establish an Internet support group with wider links and to engage with local governments on water policies.
- We request that a strong women's representation be elected to attend the U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development in New York, April 2005 which focuses on water and to other existing meetings of importance.

We are excited and encouraged that from this small gathering will flow energy and spirit to other regions, joining other movements, gathering momentum like a river to make real and sustainable change. In a spirit of humility and hope, we pledge to begin this with ourselves.