

## Parish study notes - Women and the church

Opening statements by Dr. Athyal:

From the earliest days of Christianity, women have had significant roles in the life of the church. Though none were among the apostles, they were among disciples who moved and worked with Jesus. They are prominently seen at the death and resurrection of Jesus and have continued to play their role in the life of the church since those early days. Even though the church has not been faithful, women have been faithful to the church. As we strive to move women into leadership positions within the church, we invite Ms. Anitha Oommen to share her experiences and thoughts. She was the first woman to assist in the *Madhbaha* as part of regular worship service in the parish.

Thoughts from Anitha Oommen

What is equality?

- No discrimination
- Same rights and social status

Are women equal? In the world, country or church? No to all three questions.

Women have been placed in traditional roles, but around us, things are changing. Rural areas and parts of the world like Pakistan still put women in second class roles and are often subjugated and abused.

In our own communities, traditional mores still exist under the surface. Women are still seen through the lens of their roles as daughters, wives, mothers. Women who do not fulfil those roles as traditionally understood can be judged; sometimes overtly. In spite of these remnants of older norms, our community is one that is there for each other and trying to move forward.

We are challenged as we try to create a balance between deeply held values and expectations from individuals towards those values. Women are often discouraged from (or not encouraged to) getting involved in church leadership activities - sometimes subject to subtle or not so subtle negative comments regarding the roles they like to take up. On the other hand, many women do not step up to the plate to take advantage of the opportunities they have been given. Even though Carmel Marthoma parish allows women and girls to enter the *Madhbaha* very few of them avail of the opportunity. Only 3-4 of do it on a regular basis. We shouldn't be taking these opportunities for granted especially since these opportunities don't exist in other parishes.

Questions/comments:

- Christians should be proud of their heritage of inclusiveness of women.
- What do we do about people who object to expanded roles for women on a Biblical basis:
  - The Bible was written at a different time.
  - We should not take single verses out of context (verses regarding speaking, covering head, etc)
  - Biblical interpretation cannot be taken lightly.
  - God inspired people to write the Bible.
  - Its essence does not change

- OT and NT is the word of God. You cannot negate it nor can you interpret it according to your own comfort.
- We need to distinguish between core beliefs like the Nicene Creed and the details.
- The Bible is 'sufficient for man's salvation'. The other details are in support of this core principle.
- What kind of 'changes' can theologians make? They cannot change any of the core beliefs.
- How are other parishes responding to the expanded role of women?
  - They are free to change if they want and have their own internal discussions regarding the matter.
- Even Jesus Christ worked in a context and culture
  - He could not have had 6 women apostles along with 6 men and be effective
  - A leader can be a few steps ahead of the people. But he cannot be 200 steps ahead and expect them to follow.
  - Culture in the church today with regards to women's equality is very different from the secular world.
  - Between Martha and Mary, Jesus appreciated Mary; the one who was not following the traditional woman's role
- Are women in Carmel Marthoma really empowered? What is their role in day to day affairs.
- When are we going to move forward and have equal numbers of female priests and bishops?
- The church 'enforces' women covering their heads. Why is that?
  - Older Achens may object
  - It is a question of humility
  - In Kerala, a 'servant' removing the head gear is a sign of servitude.
  - The message of Jesus was to accept. Christ was always inclusive.
- Comment from youths; Youths are proud of Carmel parish for its inclusiveness towards both youths and females.
- What would Jesus want? Jesus included everyone.
- We are in communion with CSI and CNI who have women priests and bishops. We can receive communion from those priests and bishops so there is no theological reason against us following the same.