AFRICAN WOMEN IN THE NETHERLANDS

The growth of African churches in western Europe is drawing increasing attention. This is also the case in the Netherlands where many West Africans, particularly from Ghana, arrived during the last decade, searching for better human conditions. They mostly live in and around Amsterdam, the country's capital city. Many of them have found homes in the southeastern district of Amsterdam, generally known as the Bijlmer, a place which made worldwide headlines in October last year when a plane tragically crashed into some of the towerblocks.

Many of the Africans living in the Bijlmer or elsewhere in the Netherlands are women. They may have come on their own or followed their husbands, or be married to a Dutch man. Those living in the Bijlmer usually belong to one of the many African churches, or church groups, which came along with these immigrants and are a new religious phenomenon in Dutch society. As yet these churches are little known in the Netherlands. This is partly due to their relative insulation as a result of the marginal position of Africans, and partly due to the lack of visibility. Whereas traditional churches in the Netherlands clearly show their presence by proudly presenting their spires, the African churches are almost conventicles. The faithful come together in house communities, they congregate in the empty spaces under the multi-story car-parks in the Bijlmer, or they find temporary shelter in run-down places, such as an old shop or a former pharmacy. The lack of space to worship on Sundays and to engage in community-building activities during the week is one of the most pressing problems for many African Christians.

When in April this year the Catholic Theological University at Utrecht celebrated its 25th anniversary, the department for the study of religion, in collaboration with the women's studies group, organized a workshop which focussed on the religious experiences of European and African women in changing contexts. Women active in basic communities in the Dutch Catholic Church were invited, together with African women in the Netherlands coming from various Christian denominations. With one of the main guests at the university's jubilee, Dr. Teresia Hinga from Kenyatta University, the women entered into a lively discussion about their own experiences and the social consequences of the different conditions of their lives. It was a unique meeting as in day-to-day circumstances these women rarely meet and the voice of African women in particular is rarely heard in the Netherlands. On this occasion they not only shared their views in discussions with other women, but also in songs which were much appreciated.

The exchange of views and feelings revealed a mutual sense of interest aimed at
removing ignorance on both sides. The African women were informed about some of the issues which cause great concern to Dutch women in the Catholic Church in particular. Such issues are, for example, sex discrimination as well as the relations between white and black women. The Dutch participants expressed a great willingness to listen to their African (and some other non-Dutch) sisters, in spite of the painfulness of some of the observations. Several of the latter complained about the cold and unwelcoming atmosphere in most Dutch churches, which forced them to stay at home or try to find an African church. Others accused Dutch society of racism and lack of openness to people from other cultures. At the same time all acclaimed the initiative of the meeting which had brought out the great need to bridge the gap between communities.

The relationship between religious experience and social reality turned out to be one of the most important aspects of the meeting. The discussions centered around problems of identity, education and so on, in all cases issues of great concern to the African women. The connection between religious and social life was also expressed in their songs. "Because Jesus lives, I can face tomorrow", was the theme of one of the hymns, while another stated, "Yes, we need Jesus now more than ever". The belief in the living power of the Christian faith, as expressed by the African women, is rather uncommon in Dutch society and constituted an unusual reality for most Dutch women present at the meeting. At the same time this reflects the difference in circumstances for Dutch and African women in the Netherlands. For the African women the belief in Christ is a fact of life that makes itself felt in their daily existence and can work miracles in their lives. They shared their experience of such miraculous power with the other participants, showing to them the importance of the Christian faith in their struggle for survival. "Our problems go beyond the human disposition", one of them said.

In a summarizing conclusion Dr. Teresia Hinga pointed out that the opportunity of self-expression for women is the starting-point for a process of healing. Only when we know where things hurt, can we begin to try and heal our relationship. She emphasized the importance of spirituality as a source of power for most African women, especially in the conditions of modern western life. She went on to stress the meaning of love as a means to overcome our differences without losing one's own identity.

The meeting was generally considered a success and an unusual academic event. It gave rise to healthy debate as well as to new reflection, caused by the bringing in of a new perspective. The organizers therefore decided to invite comments and ideas as to how to follow up this event in such a way that both Dutch and African women, in their respective churches in the Netherlands, will continue to benefit from the encounter.

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