

Surprise is a Name of God

By Jane Appleyard Roel
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I borrowed the title of this article from Brother David Steindl-Rast's book, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*. I read the book during Lent and part of Easter along with members of my parish and it resonates with so much of my life and experience these days. Before I was asked to attend the UN Commission on the Status of Women, last March, as a delegate of the Episcopal Church, I had never considered myself a social or political activist. But the moment I was asked, I recognized that the invitation was itself a surprising gift, privilege and opportunity to explore new things – to learn about the work of the U.N., issues of international justice and especially gender equality – the focus of this annual 12 day conference in New York City. I attended one week of it and the experience has begun to waken me, opening the eyes of my heart to the interconnectedness of us all.

What is the UNCSW?

The U.N Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) takes place every year during the first two weeks of March at the United Nations building in Manhattan. Delegates from member nations around the world flock to New York to attend and present progress reports concerning political, legal and social advances being made on behalf of women in their own country. Additionally, hundreds of involved members of faith communities, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and others travel to New York to educate and report during side events, sharing "best practices" from real experience about the programs in which they are involved. All come to share, learn, connect with passionate peers, advocate for women and girls, and perhaps most importantly, to find strength to continue their work.

What is the Beijing Platform for Action?

In 1995, the United Nations Fourth World Conference met in Beijing, China. The dynamic, dedicated women there established what was consolidated into the Beijing Platform of Action, a set of 12 strategic objectives and areas of concern that are designed to close the gaps between governmental policy and effective results in the actual lives of women in each country. The goal – to achieve absolute equality between men and women by empowering women to have equal human rights. The UN adopted the Beijing Plan for Action and this year, 2010, was a year to review progress made by member states in each of the 12 areas of concern:

1.) Women and Poverty; 2.) Education and training of women; 3.) Women and health; 4.) Violence against women; 5.) Women in armed conflict; 6.) Women and the economy; 7.) Women in power and decision making; 8.) Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women; 9.) Human rights and women; 10.) Women and the media; 11.) Women and the environment; 12.) The girl child.

What is our involvement as Episcopalians?

Our Episcopal Church has been involved in the U.N.'s work for women's equality since its infancy. And our Anglican Communion, representing over 80 million Anglicans in 160 countries, has provided a presence and a voice at the U.N. through its Office of the Anglican Observer since 1991. We are represented at the U.N., in the person of the Anglican Observer who both conveys Anglican concerns to the UN and keeps Anglicans informed about international initiatives. Presently, Ms. Hellen Grace Akwii-Wangusa is the Anglican Observer.

This past March, I had the privilege to attend the UNCSW for the first time, joined by Jeanne Provenzano, wife of our new bishop of Long Island, Bishop Larry Provenzano. We were part of an impressive delegation of almost 90 Episcopal and Anglican women, as well as young women and men, who came from around the world to participate in the numerous events surrounding UNCSW. The day began with joyous worship service at the UN Chapel, with close to 100 women, singing, praying and dancing. We then went to the Episcopal Church Center near the U.N., where I was surrounded by a kaleidoscope of women of all ages and nationalities, lay and clergy. The world was represented right in that room in the variety of women and gifts exhibited.

What I learned

In many countries, women cannot own land! Therefore, if they experience abuse from their husbands and want to leave, they have no right to any of the money from the home or fields, even though women are primarily the ones cultivating the land.

Death of women from pregnancy and/or childbirth is a huge and largely preventable cause of death for women in the developing world. What I take for granted in the U.S., that I can become pregnant, safely deliver a healthy child, and be back on my feet in a few days is an experience that millions of women do not have. In fact millions face physical consequences of problematic births that result in fistulas, causing them to be ostracized by husbands and villages to live and die alone. (Good news, though – just last week, a new study was released in the medical journal, *Lancet*, indicating that the maternal mortality rate has dropped significantly in the last 28 years, so there is cause for hope and continued intense efforts to be maintained.)

More than 60 percent of chronically hungry people are women.

Women, both Christian and Muslim, together prayed and peacefully demonstrated in Liberia, resulting in an end to a 14-year civil war that had destroyed much of the country's infrastructure. Because of the non-violent, persuasive power of those women, the warring factions were forced into the peace process, resulting in the removal of President Taylor and his violent, corrupt government. I heard one of the leaders of the women's movement in Liberia, Leymah Gbowee talk about how critical women are as members of the ongoing security forces in countries such as Liberia where armed conflict remains.

Today, women and girl children are trafficked in the United States (and other developed countries) as well as in developing countries – a form of modern day slavery. They are trafficked for sex, servitude, and even body parts. At one of the day events, an Episcopal layperson witnessed that people were being regularly trafficked regularly in her home state of Texas for transplantable livers and kidneys.

Girls are still being forced into arranged marriages at ages as young as 10 years old! The week I attended the conference, I read an article in the NY Times about a Yemini girl named Nujood who was married at the age of 10 years old to a man in his 30's, with her parents' permission. He forced her to leave school, have sex with him, and then he started beating her. She ran away, found a courthouse and judge, and demanded a divorce which she received – before she was 12 years old! There are many stories like this.

Men can and must become partners with women as agents of change against sexual and physical abuse. South Africa has various advertising and educational programs targeted at the men, teaching them alternative ways to see themselves and their relationships, often resulting from being physically, violently abused themselves.

I am changed by all I have learned. It is possible I do not even know how deeply this experience has altered my understanding of our global interconnectedness and

interdependence. I now have a choice to continue actively engaging in conversations and activities that promote changes in myself, and perhaps others too. I can answer, "Yes" to the invitation to belong to a global community. You can be too if you choose to learn more and open yourself to be surprised.

Below are just a few suggestions:

Read the book, *Half the Sky*, by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn, Pulitzer Prize Winners, which tells the inspiring stories of different women who have risen above horrible conditions, becoming empowered and productive in spite of daunting odds against them. Or look for Nicholas Kristof's OpEd pieces that appear weekly in the New York Times.

Watch the DVD "Pray the Devil Back to Hell", which tells the story of the Liberian women who forced the end of the long, violent war in Liberia through peaceful civil disobedience.

Consider joining a **Beijing Circle** on Long Island with other women who want to explore the spiritual elements through examination of the 12 areas of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Become a fan on Facebook of or donate to any of the numerous organizations that support women's rights. Examples include: CARE, Women for Women Intl., Girls Educational and Mentoring Services' (GEMS), Afghan Institute of Learning.

Mentor a young woman to attend the UNCSW in March, 2011. The focus will be on the Girl Child and it would be great to have a few mother/daughter teams from the Diocese of Long Island.

Email me with questions at jane.roel - at sign - gmail.com

As Br. David Steindl-Rast says in the final chapter of his book, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, " 'Thou shalt love' is a command that calls for three steps: first, saying "yes" to belonging; next, to look and see what our 'yes' implies; finally, to act upon that 'yes.' One step leads to the next. If we have said the first 'yes' with full conviction, we will surely care enough about those to whom we belong to inform ourselves about them. This includes exploited brothers and sisters at home and abroad.... And little as it may be, there is always something I can do."