

Esther Mombo Interview: *The importance of talking*

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Esther Mombo is one of Africa's foremost theologians and a formidable campaigner for gender equality. Despite some signs of change, she remains severely critical of patriarchal attitudes among Church leaders – attitudes that continue to foster discrimination and the oppression of women in African society. Interview by Kay Parris

What's the situation for women wishing to enter ministry in different regions in Africa?

When you look at the Anglican tradition, the situation differs from one region to another, one province to another and even one diocese to another. If you look at the Reformed Church of East Africa, women are still not ordained and it is stated in the church constitution that only men should be ordained. But this is not the same with other churches of the reformed tradition in the same region.

Will the ordination of women bishops in the Church of England have an influence in Africa?

Not immediately. It will take time because the election of bishops in most provinces is dependent on the tribe more than the theological position or leadership qualities.

Within their tribe women are viewed as outsiders because they will marry outside the tribe, and even within the tribe where they are married they are considered outsiders. Because of gender bias in leadership they will not easily be elected to a position of bishop.

What is the focus of your campaign for gender equality in the Church?

The main aim has been to ensure that women are theologically trained. This is for two reasons. First, it means they are qualified and ready to take up responsibilities in churches which choose to use them. Second, being theologically trained empowers them to speak for themselves, rather than someone speaking on their behalf. Many women are members of congregations, but they are not in leadership because they don't have the tools they need. Being theologically trained proves they can both study and think.

What happens to women who graduate in places where they can't be ordained?

In the Reformed Church of East Africa, the university has helped train up 12 women, four of whom have gone ahead with a master's degree and the others are serving in different capacities. I believe that the theologically trained women will raise their voices to the Church about their plight.

What kind of reception do such women get when they argue their case?

A few years ago the reception was bad but now it is different because there are so many women involved.

These women are now theologically trained and are able to deal with issues such as the local cultures, church traditions and biblical interpretations against women's ordination. There is a growing number of men who are now in support of women's ordination.

Why are you so passionate about this campaign?

I believe that men and women are created equal; they are given equal responsibilities to be fruitful and multiply – not just in terms of having children but also in the way they use their gifts. Jesus Christ in many ways liberated women, in the way he treated them, and he had theological discussions with some like the Samaritan woman. In the Gospel of St John, Jesus commanded Mary Magdalene to go and tell.

I believe that the community or church which was inaugurated in the book of Acts was inclusive of men, women, young and old. It was a community in which race, gender and class were null and void. In Paul's letter to the Galatians it is very clear that those who are in Christ are children of God. If this is the case then even in church leadership all the children of God should be able to participate and thus each person's gifts are utilised for the growth of the Church.

There are still many men and women who argue for ordination as exclusive to men, but I believe that God has called all of us to serve in different capacities and no one gender should be excluded from any service. It is this conviction that gives me the courage and faith to continue raising issues of marginalisation and exclusion.

Can women ministers in Africa make a contribution to broader questions of social equality?

I believe women have special gifts to offer through church ministry – they are able to understand issues that affect women, because they are women themselves. Women ministers are able to raise voices that haven't been raised before in the areas of inequality in social service provision, and about health, education and gender-based violence.

In my classes, when we talk about violence and men hear how women have been violated, they are horrified. I think the church has been very one sided, listening to patriarchal voices on issues of concern to women and then those issues are not dealt with properly, they are glossed over.

Have women in the Church been able to speak out on highly charged issues such as sexual violence and abuse?

Yes, I think the presence of women in ministry, and in theological colleges, has helped people to discuss those issues differently. You can see it in our Tamar Campaign against gender-based violence, which is based on the stories of Tamar [whose rape and courage in speaking out about it is depicted in 2: Samuel chapter 13].

This is a campaign that started in South Africa and is spreading fast to other parts of Africa. It seeks to acknowledge the existence of gender-based violence and to challenge the churches and religious institutions to address the crisis, especially the link between gender-based violence and HIV/Aids.

Do you think the presence of women can help the Church find solutions to divisive issues, such as sexual orientation?

I believe so. Women are able to understand issues of discrimination because they have been discriminated against. They understand oppression because they are more likely to have been oppressed.

I think one way you have described the prevailing attitude amongst the male leadership of the Church is that it is a “presumptive leadership”. Could you explain that?

Yes, what you see is a leader who presumes to represent the views of everyone or speak on their behalf, yet they haven’t listened to everyone. That is what I mean about presumptive leadership, a leadership that seems to represent people when actually, the leader hasn’t even talked to the people.

How widespread is this kind of attitude in the church at the moment in Africa?

I would say that especially on the sexuality debate, it is widespread among the leadership. But in the general populace sexuality is not a priority issue. As much as the topic is emotive, many people do not object to listening or talking about it. The leadership seems to have denied people a chance to discuss or listen. I believe in talking about the issues rather than running away from an issue.

You’ve said before that the African tradition of problem solving is to keep discussing a problem until it is solved.

It is true, traditionally you don’t turn away from a problem. You talk about it, give it space and consult. Consult with women, for example, and then come back. The idea of just issuing statements through the press, for example, is not a method that will solve any problem. Some of the statements issued by some leaders are just expressions of their own strong opinion, but they are invoking God so that people will believe they have right on their side.

The Church in Africa is thriving while in many parts of the world it is in decline. Why do you think African Christianity is such a dynamic force?

Well if one looks at the growth of the Church, you would have to say yes, you can’t deny the growth in terms in numbers. But we cannot just use that as an indicator for growth. We have to put the growth in context and look at the impact of that growth in the general life of the people. Today the continent where Christianity is growing so fast has so many problems, including poverty, disease, corruption and violence – which are on the rise. It appears that the growth in Christianity has little impact on the way people live their lives.

Yet if you think of the front line members of congregations, particularly in some of the poorest areas, where people might barely have what they need to survive, it seems like no amount of suffering can diminish their religious conviction. What would you put that down to?

It is biblical that no amount of suffering can separate us from God’s love and perhaps that is why even in the worst times, people’s hope and faith is not shattered. The belief that God is

there suffering with them gives people the hope that they are not alone. Their suffering makes them trust in God even more because they believe God is here with us.

And can that kind of conviction be channelled for the good?

Yes, they support each other, stand together and share in times of need, even when the newspaper headlines will show only the bad that is in society. Sometimes you will find people's faith is reflected in the way they share.