Preface

Phoebe Griswold*

Why hold a conference on Anglican women at prayer? What was the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross hoping to demonstrate by bringing Anglican women together to live a shared experience of praying with each other? We knew that women praying together, sharing the deepest desires of their hearts as they reach toward God, weaves an unbreakable bond of affection.

The Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross knows by experience that prayer is a shared charism. In 1881, Emily Malbone Morgan, with a small band of women, formed a Society vowed to intercessory prayer, simplicity of life, and thanksgiving. What has sustained the Society’s prayer over these one hundred twenty-five years is the companionship formed through praying together. We understand each other’s words and have a common language to search for their meanings.

But what do we know and really comprehend about women praying in other cultures of the Anglican Communion? How do they pray? What do they pray about? How would they describe their experience of God to whom they pray? How might we pray with each other?

Many women in different cultures share a graced gift from God to live into God’s love through prayer. But do we really hear what others are praying, even though we think we understand the words? How can we practice praying with each other, rather than our more usual prayers for concerns that one person puts forth? Can we pray back and forth, asking and listening to each other, coming to a deeper knowing of the other and our experience of God as we pray together?

* Phoebe Griswold is a member of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross. Among her many efforts to create opportunities for women across the Anglican Communion in different contexts to cross bridges by praying together, Griswold co-founded the Episcopal Church and Visual Arts (ECVA) and served as chair of the “Anglican Women at Prayer” conference organizing committee.
To explore praying with Anglican women from other cultures, the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, with the partnership of the Center for Anglican Communion Studies at Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS), held a conference at the seminary in March of 2014. We soon discovered that Anglican women praying was a little-explored topic. We heard a call to venture into new territory. We were well aware of women’s tremendous contributions to the demanding issues of our day: education, violence, poverty, and gender equality, to name a few. But cross-cultural prayer is seldom mentioned as one of the ways to understand and address these issues.

We discovered an immediate interest in the conference topic, especially from seminaries in the United States and in the Anglican Communion, who sent participants and resources. We looked for other partners and found them in the International Anglican Women’s Network, the Anglican Fellowship of Prayer, and the Daughters of the King. The Episcopal Church and Visual Arts joined the exploration by putting out their first global call to artists for an online exhibit, *Women at Prayer*. And we found an eager audience when we held several preconference workshops on prayer in New York City at the United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women.

The outpouring of support told us that there is an untapped hunger for expanding the experience with the sacred through prayer. The offer of partnership by the Center for Anglican Communion Studies at VTS affirmed the work and gave us confidence to move ahead. The seminary’s generosity through so many on campus brought a level of expertise to the work. The seminary’s relationship with Msalato Theological College of St John’s University in Tanzania enabled us to participate through Skype with women seminarians from Tanzania. We wept as our sisters greeted the conference, sang, prayed, and asked questions during the presentations.

The international support and engagement came from another part of the Anglican Communion when the Women’s Study Center in New Zealand enabled the Reverend Dr. Eleanor Sanderson (Ellie) to attend as our keynote speaker. Ellie is a young English priest working in New Zealand. Her research has focused on the spirituality which women embody within different cultural traditions. Her experience encompasses the Pacific and Africa. As she prayed in Swahili with our online Tanzania sisters we could see the joy on their faces. We witnessed the creation of an unbreakable bond reaching from Alexandria, Virginia, to Dodoma, Tanzania.
One hundred and fifty attendees at the conference included Companions and women from thirteen provinces of the Anglican Communion, including the Episcopal Church. The agenda featured small-group work, whose leadership was trained by Education for Ministry, based in the University of the South in Sewanee. Plenary sessions, Bible study, and worship were folded between the small groups. A post-conference educational resource for small groups, videos of Dr. Sanderson’s sermons, and a plenary session with Dr. Sanderson and Zeyneb Sayilgan, a Luce Muslim Visiting Scholar at VTS, can all be found at www.anglicanwomenatprayer.org.

This issue of the *Anglican Theological Review* is an answer to prayer. What the Society hoped for was that someone would notice that more theological study needed to happen around women—who comprise well over half the membership of the Communion—and global women’s prayer. We are very grateful to the ATR. Now new bridges among women praying need to be built across cultures. “Prayer is the world’s largest wireless connection,” said a young Kenyan participant.

What does this connection look like for today’s world? We know what Emily Morgan said about the power of intercessory prayer in her letter to her Companions in 1896: “I understand better than before what this great work of intercession might be. How the petitions of the faithful circle the earth, and have circled it in all ages. How it makes us one with all who have ever striven with God for souls.”¹ The Companions are dedicated to the vision given by our foundress. We want to know what petitions of the faithful will look like for the twenty-first century.

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