



NSW.ACT

Women's Business: the challenge to white women

*Ann Wansbrough, Research and Liaison
UnitingCare NSW.ACT*

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Introduction

There are several ways of handling my role in this conference as the only white woman speaker. I have been asked to speak on "The Challenge to White Women". One way would be to tell stories which confirm the criticisms of the church already provided in this conference. The fact is, the churches, including their social justice agencies, have failed to adequately address the abuse of human rights of

Aboriginal and Islander people in Australia. Some church agencies, such as the Board for which I work, take some action. None of us take enough action.

A lot has been said in this conference about the need to sit down with one another, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, so that non-Aboriginal women can learn. There is truth in that, and there is also a serious danger. We will leave here after sitting with Aboriginal women for four days - we have a responsibility to act on what

we have learned here. One of the serious problems developing in our churches is that "consultation" and "negotiation" is becoming an excuse not to act. Some of the things that need to change, some of the fundamental issues that need to be addressed, are abundantly clear. The churches, including we women and our networks, must take action on what we know.

For example, some of the fundamental problems have already been well documented by Mick Dodson, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. He has sat down with his own people in a number of communities, and has documented what is happening and what is wrong with the system of government and bureaucracies around Australia. He has made recommendations. He has now released three reports - 1993, 1994, 1995. The most recent was released very recently, and has been in the newspapers over the past week or so.

I am frankly amazed that some women are saying at this conference "we did not know". Not only are there a plethora of reports on what is happening to Aboriginal and Islander people, but they are reported in newspapers, and on radio and TV. How could we possibly not know? I admit that the media are often inadequate and inaccurate in their reporting, but on Aboriginal issues there is enough reasonable reporting that we should have a substantial knowledge of these issues, and should know about many of the reports which can give us more precise information.

We should also know about these issues through church information networks. There are church statements and church publications about some issues of Aboriginal justice. Some of us have ignored these. It is time that women's church networks committed themselves to studying, understanding and acting on these. In the Uniting Church, this might begin with the covenanting statement of the 1994 Assembly, and the UAICC response to this, followed by the Covenanting Kit. In the Catholic Church, you might begin with what the Pope has said about Aboriginal land rights, and

publications on what this means to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

Moving Forward

So how are we, as "white women" to move forward? How are we to move into a new era of responsibility and sisterhood, in which we take action for change, on the basis of what we have learned?

The aim of this paper is to offer some strategies for understanding the issues that have confronted us in this conference, and to find ways of working out what we can and should do in our own context. We all have some sort of power. Some have more power than others. What do we need to understand, so that we can use our individual and group power responsibly and effectively?

There are three parts to this paper

- issues of communication so that we can go on learning in the future
- developing womanist theology - strategies for thinking and action
- the contexts in which action can and should happen

The paper is intended to stimulate and to evoke. It should be used creatively, not slavishly. That is, I am suggesting dimensions we need to explore, not a point by point technique.

1. Communication

We came to this conference as women concerned about our Aboriginal sisters. We came because we *need* to hear their agenda, their perspectives. Our liberation is tied up with theirs, and we needed their perspective on society, church and nation.

This means that the conversation is not an ordinary conversation. The agenda, by definition, is the agenda of Aboriginal women. Yesterday we found ourselves in difficulties, because we failed to recognise whose agenda mattered.

When we are serious about hearing the cries of people who are oppressed, then we need to use the elements of good pastoral conversation. The first requirement of social justice is that those

who are part of the oppressors participate in the conversation in an appropriate way.

Whose agenda? Whose rules?

The agenda of Aboriginal women takes priority because it is an agenda about issues literally of life and death. Lea Paulson and Lyndall Robb made that very very clear yesterday. Some white women say they felt their dignity being damaged. Who cares? What is our dignity, compared to their people dying? Jaquelyn Grant asked us yesterday morning: what are we prepared to give up? What became clear yesterday afternoon is that two of the things we need to give up, as white women, are our agenda ("I need to know - now - what I can do") and our own (false) dignity. Aboriginal women have dignified us by trusting us to come here. They are not attacking our dignity. Only we can destroy our own dignity, by reducing life and death issues to a matter of our own feelings. In serious social justice conversation, those who are the oppressors take the first step towards justice by giving up their own rules about how things should be discussed.

Keeping the dialogue focused

In our future conversations with our Aboriginal and Islander sisters, we need to learn to stay with the agreed agenda, instead of diverting or subverting it. This is very hard when we are part of the dominant culture. It is also hard when as feminists, we keep seeing ourselves as the oppressed. We need to learn a different role, as oppressors who seek justice for the oppressed. For example, being aware of our own pain as victims of sexual oppression offers us a basis for empathy to the much more serious pain our Aboriginal sisters experience as a result of racism and imperialism.

Some of the elements we perhaps would find helpful are the normal elements of pastoral conversation. Indeed, they are the normal elements of any good conversation which takes seriously those with whom we are speaking, when the conversation is about serious matters.

Attending and responding. Listening, and showing that we have heard, in a way that checks out that what we think we heard is what was meant. Recognising that the

emotions of our Aboriginal sisters are a response to injustice, and are also a means of communicating the seriousness and urgency of the issues.

Accurate empathy (taking the conversation below the surface). Recognising the feelings and the meaning, and the appropriateness of expressing the anger and the criticism.

Appropriate self-disclosure. Sharing ourselves and our experience, when this is relevant to further the agenda of Aboriginal women, not our own agenda. Again, being sensitive to whether this opens up the proper agenda, or closes it off.

Action. When our Aboriginal sisters are ready, when they tell us that they think we have some idea of what they are telling us, moving on together to the question of action.

My point is that we were invited to this conference on the basis that we would respect the agenda of Aboriginal women. The essence of social justice, when it is part of the oppressive structure, is learning to give up one's own agenda and take on a different agenda with different priorities in the conversation.

We have and will sometimes find the conversation demanding of us emotionally and intellectually. We need to support one another, as white women, in working through this, and not use it as a means of subverting the basic agenda.

2 Towards a womanist theology - strategies for thinking and action

How are we to move forward on the basis of what we have learned already through conversations and papers at this conference? How do we go about developing a womanist theology? How are we to work out what the underlying problems in society are, and how to bring about effective change?

Some of us have never thought of ourselves as theologians, some only know traditional patriarchal theology, some have only explored theology as white feminists. Some of us have been exposed to womanist theology, and have tried to develop an understanding of how to think

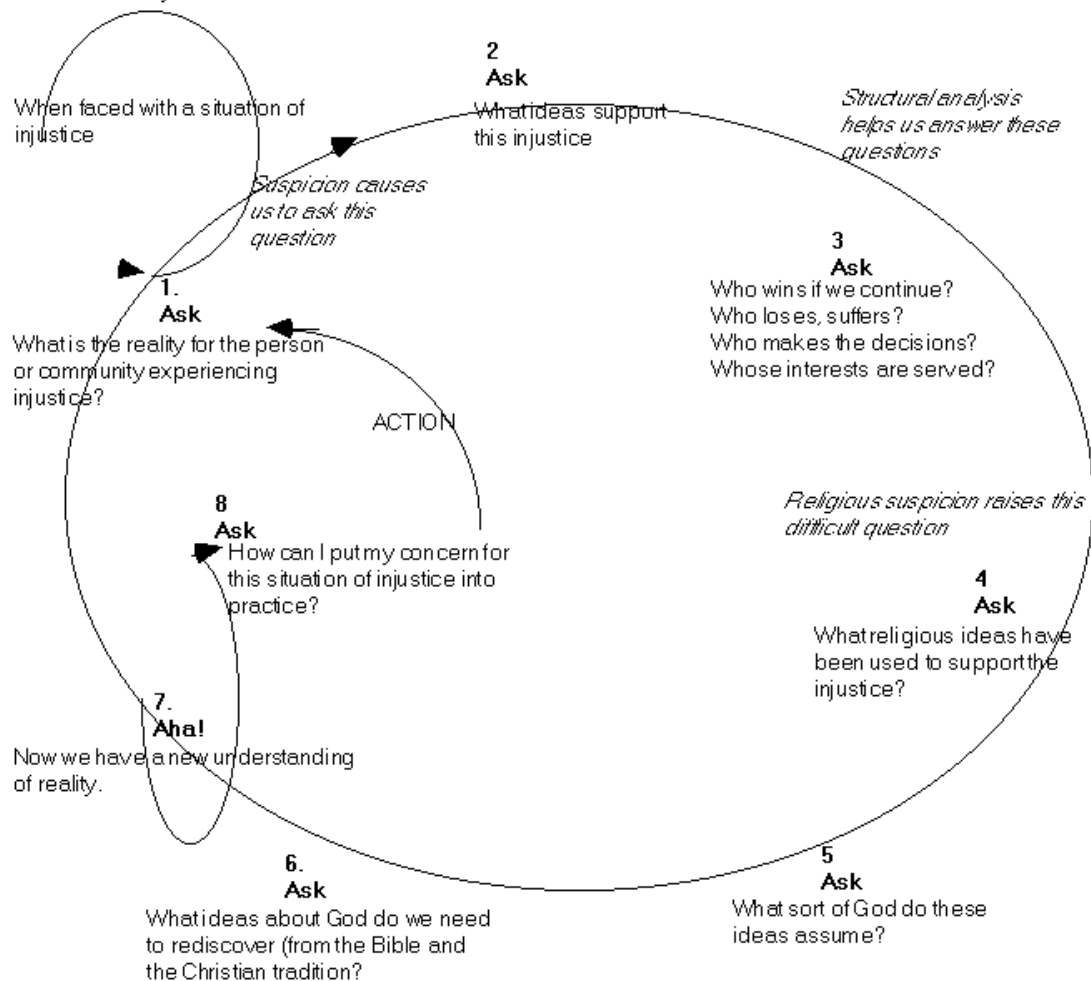
theologically as women who take seriously the survival issues of our sisters.

The method I wish to share with you is the method that underlies my work for **UnitingCare NSW.ACT** (Uniting Church in Australia, NSW Synod) and which has been sharpened by my involvement with the international women's organisation: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, which runs workshops for Asian women and publishes

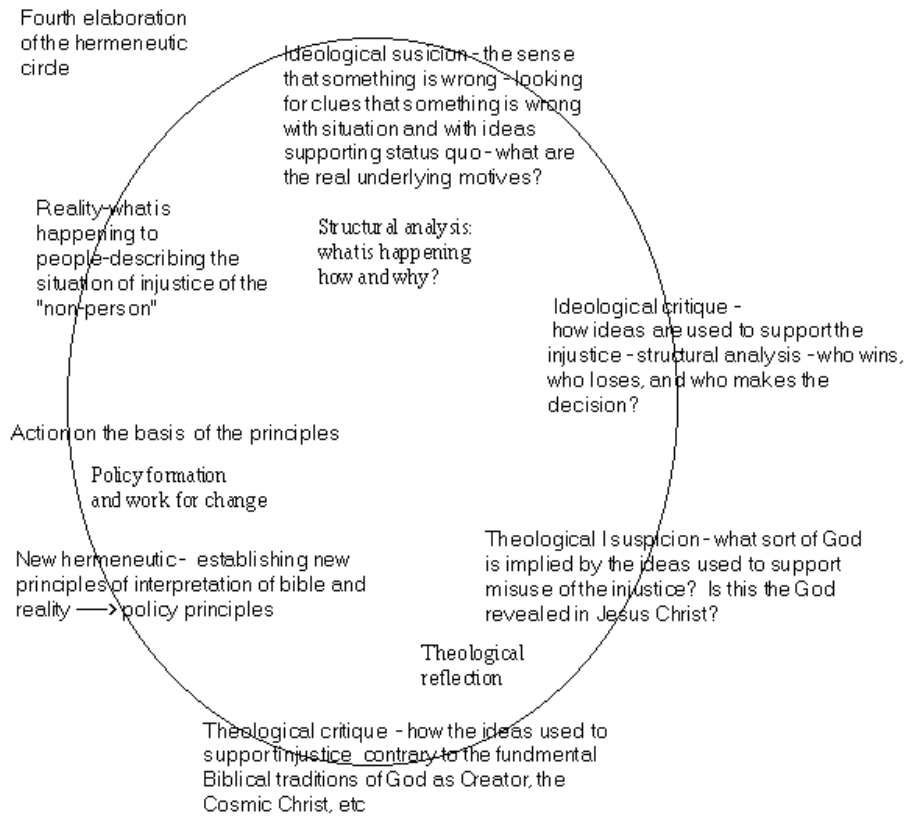
the highly respected journal of Asian Women's Theology called *In God's Image*. It is located in Asia and is controlled by Asian women. I am the only white woman on its Coordinating Team. In the following outline, I will apply my method to the issues we have been considering in this conference, but it can be used in other contexts also.

A diagram of the method is provided here.

Fifth elaboration of the Hermeneutic Circle
- a version for lay education



Ann Wansbrough (1995)
Developed in consultation with
Ian Richardson



Ann Wansbrough 11/95

Using new lenses to see and interpret the world (hermeneutic principles).

- As white women, we need to learn to view the world from the standpoint of the following statements. These statements are confessions, but they are not intended to make us feel guilty. They offer new ways of understanding the world.
- Our society is racist, and we are racist. We are part of the dominant, oppressive culture.
- Our society is based on class, and most of us are part of the elite class with access to income, education and some level of power.
- Our society is sexist. That oppression can take different forms for different women.
- Our society is based on imperialism - economic, political and cultural. We benefit from this imperialism.

- The fundamental issue from all this is HUMAN RIGHTS. All these factors of our lives contribute to the abuse of the human rights of Aboriginal people. This is not an intellectual idea - it is a matter of life and death.

Giving up our ego-centric view of reality - (defining reality from the perspective of those who are treated as "non-persons")

To make sense of the world using these lenses, we need to listen to the reality expressed by our Aboriginal sisters, as the most oppressed group in Australian society.

Some of us have begun doing this at this conference. Some of us think that we had begun doing this before this conference. Either way, our sisters have shared their stories, their grief, pain and anger with us because they trust us to use that information for the sake of them and their people. To deal with injustice, we have to give up our ego-centric perspective.

Listening to these stories should lead us to a sense of suspicion about what is happening in our society, and the ideas and values used to keep the current system going (Ideological suspicion)

We need to challenge the ideas sold to us by media, business, politicians, academics, feminists, and the church.

As members of the elite, we benefit from the system as it is. We need a sense of **self-suspicion**. In other words, we need to question our own motives, agenda and ideas. For example,

- Given that these issues are discussed in newspapers, magazines, on TV, etc. - how can any of us possibly claim not to know that these issues exist?
- What do we do with our resources as church women? how willing are we to share our resources with Aboriginal women for their agenda?

We need to do disciplined analysis of church and society - how does society, economy, culture, and political system work to perpetrate injustice (structural analysis)? What is wrong with the ideas and values that support this system?

Structural analysis uses resources of grassroots wisdom, and makes critical use of the social sciences. We need to understand how our society works - and not in the way the academic text books tell us. For example, our whole economy is based on the theft of the land, and its enforcement through genocide.

- Who makes the decisions (has the power)? Who gets the benefits? Who pays the costs? What are the costs? What are the benefits?
- Who defines the ideas and values which support the system?
- What benefits do we get from the system?

We tend to be very naive about our society and its power structures. There are illiterate women in Phillipino villages who understand their society better than many Australian church women. We need to value the freedom of speech and freedom to publish which we have in Australia by

using the sources of information available to us, and learning to think about it critically.

Challenging the way people understand the system and the reasons they support it (Ideological critique)

We need to think critically. We need to use our freedom of speech to explore alternative ideas, instead of absorbing whatever is dished up as "the truth" or "what is in the best interests of the nation"

- How have we been persuaded to accept the system?
- Why do we accept the benefits we get from the system? Why is this wrong?
- What are the ideas used to support the system?
- Why are these ideas wrong?
- How does society enforce this system?
- What are the points of access to power in the system?

Religious suspicion

Religion has played a role in injustice. We need to be wary of the church, and to evaluate its role in the past and in the present.

Challenging the way the church has supported and encouraged the system (Theological critique)

- What has the church done that has contributed to the problems?
- What has the church said that has contributed to the problems?
- How has the church being silent contributed to the problems?
- How is racism built into the structures of the church? How has the church treated Aboriginal women in its structures?
- What religious ideas has the church used to justify this?
- What religious ideas have been oppressive to Aboriginal people?

- What religious ideas have been used to silence our sense of suspicion - to tell us that everything is really all right (e.g. the emphasis on evangelism, conversion, life after death, prayer)
- How does the church enforce these ideas? (e.g. through guilt, bribery, fear..)
- Who holds the power in the church, and how do those people use their power? (e.g. leaders who keep silent although only they have the right to speak; using white people to interpret Aboriginal ideas and needs)
- What sort of God is represented in those ideas, and in this sort of church?
- How does the God represented in these ideas compare to the God revealed in the great salvation events of the Bible - the rescue of Israelite slaves from Egypt, and the God of love revealed in Jesus Christ our Saviour?

Finding a new way of understanding our faith, as a basis for a new way of viewing and living in the world. (New hermeneutic principles)

- What do we discover about God and the Christian life, when we go to the Bible seeking help to understand what is happening and to find directions for change?
- Who is God, in the great salvation events of the Bible:
- The God revealed in the Exodus - who challenged Pharaoh, rescued the Israelite slaves, etc?
- The God revealed in great events recorded by the prophets?
- The God revealed in Jesus Christ, in the four gospels, e.g. in the Song of Mary?
- What is the Christian life - justice, community...? See e.g. Isaiah 1, Isaiah 58
- How does God work in our world? What does this mean for Australia?

Finding a basis for action (middle axioms, policy principles)

If we are to respond to the reality of our Aboriginal sisters in the most appropriate way, we need a set of basic principles or ideas which guide our action and by which we can evaluate changes in the church and in society. For example, these might be possibilities:

Aboriginal women in the church should control ministry among Aboriginal women. This should not be controlled either by the white church, or by Aboriginal men. This includes finances, strategies, programs, materials, property.

All non-Aboriginal women have the responsibility to work to dismantle the systems in church and society which oppress Aboriginal people. We should let Aboriginal people guide us as to what is wrong - but it is our system and our job to change it.

There is already a lot of evidence of what is wrong with the system. Non-Aboriginal women (and men) have the responsibility to learn what is already known, and to take action. e.g. to read Mick Dodson's reports as Aboriginal and Islander Social Justice Commissioner of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, to demand action of their local MPs, and to demand that church leaders support Mick Dodson's demand for change.

Within the church, those with the authority to speak publicly on behalf of the church must do so. Silence by church leaders is collaboration in the abuse of human rights of Aboriginal people. We have a responsibility to challenge and oppose the silence of church leaders.

God calls us all to create a just society. Christians must use their rights as citizens to promote justice and human rights. All Christian women have a responsibility to challenge the political candidates in all elections, to demand that they support and implement policies which will improve the human rights of Aboriginal people.

Acting for change

We have a responsibility to act on what we know. We should make sure that what we are doing is acceptable to Aboriginal people. But they have already told us

some of the fundamental things that they want. We must not let consultation become an excuse to fail to act. That is a "cop out" which is common in the white church in Australia.

For example, how are we going to evaluate candidates in the next federal election? Are we going to pursue self-interest, or to demand of our political parties that they give high priority to protecting and enhancing the human rights of Aboriginal people?

In his statement for Human Rights Day 1995, the Moderator of the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church has stated that the protection of human rights is the fundamental test of the legitimacy of government, and has challenged both Government and Opposition to implement Mick Dodson's reports. A similar stance on the proper role of government is taken in Catholic Social Teaching, although I am not sure how clearly Australian Catholic Bishops have applied this in the Australian context. Will we support and encourage our church leaders to make clear statements which challenge political parties? Will we follow up this statement by demanding better policies from the political candidates in our electorate?

It is up to you. As a church member, and a voter, you have power - how will you use it? And how do you want the church to use its institutional power?

As we act, we will learn more, and will proceed around the circle or spiral again, and again. Each time, we will have to decide whether we are willing to let go of more and more of what we thought we knew. We will also have to give up other types of things - power, material goods, and so on. However, if we are truly open to God and to our Aboriginal sisters and brothers as we work through this process, we will find that we move into a new community and discover God in a new way.

3 Transforming hearts and society - Don't cry for me: organise!

Someone wrote a book entitled *Don't cry for me - organise!* This paper has been written on the basis that the first thing we

need to transform is our way of thinking - to learn how to think in a way that serves our Aboriginal sisters by building on what they have shared with us and entrusted to us. The next thing we need to do is organise our action so that we contribute to the transformation of society.

To do this we need to think about the contexts in which we exist and can act. One possible grid to help us see what can be done is set out below.

	Women's Networks	Church	Society
Personal			
Local			
State			
National			

For each context: we need to ask:

What needs to happen? What are the outcomes that Aboriginal people need?

Who are the "kings" (remembering yesterday's bible study on Esther)? How does the way those in power use their power contribute to the abuse of the human rights of Aboriginal women?

Who has access to the people in power?

How can we gain access?

What can we do ? When are we "kings"? What do we have power over? How do we use that power?

What do we have to give up ?

This grid is offered to the conference as a basis for our discussion of strategies now. It is also offered as a way of thinking about strategies and actions in the future, as we encounter new issues of Aboriginal justice.

Appendix

The Church has many opportunities to speak and to act on these issues. For example, the final day of this conference was United Nations Human Rights Day (10 December). The Moderator, Rev Dr Dean Drayton issued the following statement:

On this United Nations Human Rights Day, 1995, the Uniting Church in Australia affirms the importance of human rights as a fundamental principle which follows from our belief that God created all humankind. Governments have the responsibility to protect and enhance human rights through law and through the services of the public sector: these rights are civil, political, economic, social and cultural. Governments are only legitimate to the extent that they fulfil this duty. The human rights covenants should be the framework in which all political parties formulate their policies, and the standard by which every Government is tested by the people.

We call on all politicians and all social institutions in Australia to recognise that the international human rights instruments provide an appropriate and necessary expression of the public ethics on which our multicultural society should be based. Every interest group in society, including commercial interests, have the responsibility to recognise and support those policies which enhance the human rights of all Australians. Australia also should ensure that all its international dealings, including the business practice of Australian companies in their overseas activity, are based on respect for the human rights of the people of other nations.

The Uniting Church in Australia supports Mick Dodson, Aboriginal and Islander Social Justice Commissioner, in his criticism of the way that Australia has ignored and undermined the rights of Indigenous people. We support his call for fundamental changes in government policy and practice, so that Aboriginal and Islander people and communities are treated with the respect and have the quality of life which the human rights instruments are intended to support and protect. This is the fundamental human rights issue facing Australia at this time,

and we call on both Government and Opposition to learn from his reports and to implement his recommendations. All Australians, whatever their cultural background, have the responsibility to support the human rights of the Indigenous people of this land.

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