

Reclaiming public spaces



Marking International Women's Day with the Anglican Alliance

All over the world Anglicans are taking action to support women and rebuild relationships, so women can reclaim their streets, their communities, their places of work - even their homes – as places which they can use in safety.

This resource sets out some of the experiences of Anglicans, drawing from Bible stories and providing pointers for how you can join with Anglican women to help make local communities safer. With many thanks to the Anglican Church in Zambia for inspiring this resource.

There are many examples of ways that Anglicans are making communities safer for women. By reclaiming places where women may be at risk, public spaces and also private places: some women are unsafe in their own homes.

In Latin America, the Church of Uruguay provides support for women who are affected by domestic violence and also for their children who are so often either the victims or witnesses of the violence at home. The Church has won donor funding for its special centre.



In the Pacific, the Christian Care centre in Honiara provides an outstanding model of the good practice in supporting women and their children. They provide counselling to reconcile men and women.



And Anglican women were in the forefront of the “Speak Out” campaign to encourage action in the Church to tackle gender-based violence. The Anglican Alliance has highlighted the hardships of women with disabilities who face assault and exploitation after fleeing from their homes due to conflict or natural disasters.

Let us know about the work that your church is doing to reclaim public spaces for women.



This Bible reading from Ruth chapter 2 tells the story of a woman who expected danger, but found safety.

The book of Ruth is about a refugee woman who loses her husband, and flees her home country with her mother-in-law Naomi. This section tells how she is provided safety in the fields by a landowner, a wealthy relative of Naomi's.

“Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side of the family named Boaz. He was a wealthy, prominent man from the clan of Elimelech. One day Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the fields so I can gather grain behind whoever permits me to do so.” Naomi replied, “You may go, my daughter.” So Ruth went and gathered grain in the fields behind the harvesters. Now she just happened to end up in the portion of the field belonging to Boaz So Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen carefully, my dear! Do not leave to gather grain in another field. You need not go beyond the limits of this field. You may go along beside my female workers. Take note of the field where the men are harvesting and follow behind with the female workers. I will tell the men to leave you alone. When you are thirsty, you may go to the water jars and drink some of the water the servants draw.”.....

When she got up to gather grain, Boaz told his male servants, “Let her gather grain even among the bundles! Don't chase her off! Make sure you pull out ears of grain for her and drop them so she can gather them up. Don't tell her not to!” So she gathered grain in the field until evening. When she threshed what she had gathered, it came to about thirty pounds of barley!..... She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much grain she had gathered. Then Ruth gave her the roasted grain she had saved from mealtime. Her mother-in-law asked her, “Where did you gather grain today? Where did you work? May the one who took notice of you be rewarded!” So Ruth told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked. She said, “The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.”

Naomi then said to her daughter-in-law Ruth, “It is good, my daughter, that you should go out to work with his female servants. That way you will not be harmed, which could happen in another field.” So Ruth worked beside Boaz's female servants, gathering grain until the end of the barley harvest as well as the wheat harvest.

The story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is about a young woman who met violence and injustice in the place where she should have been safe – at home.

The rape of Tamar tells of a family destroyed by domestic violence, and of justice denied.

Now David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister named Tamar. In the course of time David's son Amnon fell madly in love with her. But Amnon became frustrated because he was so lovesick over his sister Tamar. For she was a virgin, and to Amnon it seemed out of the question to do anything to her.....

So Amnon lay down and pretended to be sick. When the king came in to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come in so she can make a couple of cakes in my sight. Then I will eat from her hand.".....

So Tamar went to the house of Amnon her brother, who was lying down. She took the dough, kneaded it, made some cakes while he watched, and baked them. But when she took the pan and set it before him, he refused to eat. Instead Amnon said, "Get everyone out of here!" So everyone left.

Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the cakes into the bedroom; then I will eat from your hand." ...As she brought them to him to eat, he grabbed her and said to her, "Come on! Get in bed with me, my sister!"

But she said to him, "No, my brother! Don't humiliate me! This just isn't done in Israel! Don't do this foolish thing! How could I ever be rid of my humiliation?".....

But he refused to listen to her. He overpowered her and humiliated her by raping her. Then Amnon greatly despised her. His disdain toward her surpassed the love he had previously felt toward her. Amnon said to her, "Get up and leave!"

But she said to him, "No I won't, for sending me away now would be worse than what you did to me earlier!" But he refused to listen to her. He called his personal attendant and said to him, "Take this woman out of my sight and lock the door behind her!" So Amnon's attendant removed her and bolted the door behind her.

Then Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went on her way, wailing as she went.

Her brother Absalom said to her, "Was Amnon your brother with you? Now be quiet, my sister. He is your brother. Don't take it so seriously!" Tamar, devastated, lived in the house of her brother Absalom.

Taking action

The groundbreaking publication "Silent No More" sets out some of the challenges facing the church in tackling gender-based violence, and how important women leaders in the Church are in:

Discussing and documenting gender-based violence

Supporting survivors and providing help

Creating safe environments

Providing access to justice

Working with perpetrators

Here are some pointers to ways to think through how you can enable women to reclaim the streets, the fields, their homes as places of safety. Remember it's not just women who can be at risk. UN figures show that worldwide 150 million girls have experienced sexual violence - and so have 73 million boys, according to the Tearfund report "Silent No More".

In your church or women's group think through:

Where are women at greatest risk, or where do they feel the least safe?

It may take some care to think this through. Sometimes people avoid places where they think they may be attacked - and so parts of the public space become women-free or child-free zones through fear. In urban areas it can be coming home at night in the dark if there are no street lights or police. In rural areas it may be going to work in isolated fields. Or for many women the place where they feel the least safe is at home. Women leaders in the Church can help create a climate of confidence in which others can express their fears and concerns.

Who is responsible for that unsafe space?

In Ruth's story Boaz was responsible for the field and created a climate of safety. In Tamar's story, her brother Absalom should have been responsible for creating a safe environment. It may be the church, police, local authorities or traditional authorities - or the family are responsible.

How can your group help reclaim that unsafe space, and how can you work with the people responsible for it?

Creating a culture of justice and peace

The Church's mission is to reconcile people in conflict: how can you make this a reality in the life of your church group?

The story below sets out how a Church in a very poor area of London helped local people reclaim the streets after violent riots in 2011. They worked with the Police and local community groups for community safety for everyone.

In Edmonton and Stepney under the leadership of Bishop Peter and Bishop Adrian the church has played a large part in reclaiming the streets for the overwhelming majority of responsible citizens by prayer vigils and public demonstrations of solidarity with other Christians and community groups.... One of the most appalling aspects of what has happened is the utter disregard for life and livelihoods shown by a minority of those who went on the rampage. The police spontaneously expressed their admiration of what he and other church based workers were doing.

And here's a startling account of how, using the last Anglican Alliance International Women's Day pack, a group of Anglican women in North India identified the risk to their safety and well-being, formed an action committee, identified excessive drinking of alcohol as a risk to their safety, and took direct action to reclaim their community.

In Durgapur Diocese in India, Alliance steering group member Khagendra Das held a Justice for Women seminar to mark International Women's Day. It concluded in the formation of an action group to promote Justice for Women, a move which Khagendra said made it a benchmark day for women's empowerment in the community. The seminar, in Danga Village Church, reviewed the status of women locally, nationally and internationally and involved Rev. Amiya Das and district women leaders Ms Samapa Daripa and local councillor Ms Seuli Mirdha. They discussed biblical women like Ruth, Sara, Mary and Mary Magdalene Mary, and their role in the home and society.

The seminar culminated in formation of a 19 member's women action group to combat the social ills that keep families in poverty. The names of the action group members were submitted to the police for reasons of protection. The group's first steps were to act against unauthorised alcohol sales in the community, and taking action against people illegally trading in alcohol.

Linking with others

There are many other Anglicans you can link with nationally and globally to reclaim public and private spaces for women to feel safe. You can also connect with the UN's work on International Women's day at: www.internationalwomensday.com

"Silent No More" sets out challenges for Church and world leaders to provide safe spaces for women.

In Zambia the Anglican Church is working with the Zambian government to increase access to justice especially for rural women.

At global level Anglican Women at the UN Commission on the Status of Women are this year focusing on ending gender-based violence.

Here are some more resources you can use for your work:

Anglicans responding to gender based violence: A list of resources: http://iawn.anglicancommunion.org/resources/docs/gbv_resource_list.pdf

Violence and the Family: Action Plan for the Churches to tackle Abuse (International Anglican Family Network) <http://iafn.anglicancommunion.org/newsletters/2011/march/index.cfm>

And for more faith-based work on gender-based violence you can visit the website of Restored Relationships at: www.restoredrelationships.org/

Make sure you tell us what you are doing

We will gain strength by supporting each other and sharing our work.

The Anglican Alliance website is hosting a special forum for International Women's Day, to get feedback from your work. And so that you can exchange news and views with other Anglicans working on these issues.

You can join in the discussion at www.anglicanalliance.org , click on Forum and register. Or email us at: anglicanalliance@aco.org.

THE FORUM IS OPEN NOW!