

JUST FAITH AND ACTION:
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Reaching majority age

Years ago, as a young academic in African studies, I published a little article on “the inheritance of Christian widows.” Back in the 1920s missionaries in Kenya had been concerned that there were far too few Christian women converts, and they needed to keep these women “in the fold” at all cost. The tradition of widow inheritance – where the widow was cared for by her late husband’s brother (much as in Luke 20) – was thus seen as a threat, the fear being that the Christian widow would be “forced” to go to a non-Christian brother-in-law, and thereby “lose” her faith. Missionaries and colonial officials went back and forth about it for years (Africans, Christian and non-, were not included in the debate). The “final” answer – though not so final, since the issue is still alive – was to pass legislation saying that by the act of becoming Christian, women reached “majority age” and could make their own decisions.

I have to confess that I have, even today, ambivalence about the tension between a universal view of what is just and a contextual claim for respect for tradition. I know that kind of confession can get a person in trouble! I’ll just take satisfaction that I’m not alone. We’re in the midst of the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People, with its call to respect the worldview of often marginalized societies. And yet, the fabric that holds this worldview together often seems – to use an old colonial phrase – “repugnant to justice and morality.” Meanwhile, contextual theologians from the liberation struggles in southern Africa have embraced a community process of discernment of the “signs of the times” in their immediate, local, context. What do we do with that, when we step in with a universal claim?

To empower women and promote equality between women and men: That is the third Millennium Development Goal.

Nowhere has the tension I described above created more passion than over gender equality. We need, I think, to be very clear that the gender equality goal is not there as a part of a Western agenda, and we cannot, in turn, evaluate the status of women throughout the globe by the standards we apply to our nation and our Church. The bottom line, this goal affirms, is that women, worldwide, are of majority age, so an “empowered” voice for all human beings is the task we face...in a rich variety of contexts.

Strikingly, this Millennium Development Goal avoids the trap of “culture” vs. “justice.” Its indicators speak not of what women should say but of the opportunity to secure the education that grants meaningful voice; hence they look for equality in literacy rates, and in the ratio of girls to boys in schools. Indicators speak not of what women should do with their resources but at the proportion of women in wage employment. Indicators speak not of what the “gender agenda” should be, but of the opportunity to be heard; hence they look at the proportion of seats women hold in national parliaments. In all, there’s been some progress in the last decade, but it’s not yet a pretty picture.

The Bible teaches that we are God’s children. But the odd thing is, by entrusting us with the Good News, Jesus also treats us as having reached “majority age.” All of us. We need to give that calling meaning.

Yours faithfully,
Leon Spencer

This is the third in a series of reflections on the Millennium Development Goals originally prepared for the Cambridge Consultation at the 2003 General Convention of the Episcopal Church.

If there are others you would like us to send these reflections to, please pass their names and addresses on to us. Alternatively, if these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we’ll remove you from our list.

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