



International Women's Year 1975

By Religious News Service

The 1975 International Women's Year (IWY) decreed by the United Nations has much broader moral and religious implications than its stated aims of "equality, development and peace" imply. It is caught up in questions of justice, God-given rights and basic human dignity.

And women in religion are anxious to use the opportunity to encourage greater recognition and support of women in church and synagogue roles, just as their secular counterparts seek to boost women in political, economic, and social spheres.

Last September, a member of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women set the tone for the religious thrust by telling a national Roman Catholic women's organization that the move for women's rights must be coupled with a movement to boost women's participation in religion.

Speaking in Omaha to a general assembly of the National Council of Women, Dr. Ruth Bacon said "without the religious angle, you lose hope, humor and the prospect of working together — none of which we can afford to lose."

She said it was because of the realization that the problem of women's rights "is consistent" throughout the world that the U.N. delegation to her commission proposed that the IWY be established.

In December, 1972, the U.N. proclaimed 1975 a women's year to gain "worldwide awareness of women's worth." Goals for the year are "equality between men and women," "the full integration of women into the total development effort," and recognition of "the importance of women's increasing contribution" to world peace.

Mrs. Helvi Sipilä, the Assistant Secretary General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs at the U.N., was designated as Secretary General for IWY. She has the responsibility for organizing the world IWY conference at Mexico City, June 22-July 4. A number of religious organizations will take part in that conference.

It was Mrs. Sipilä who last November elicited "full support" of Pope Paul for the IWY observance. During a special audience, the pontiff told her that "in the contemporary effort to promote the advancement of women in society, the Church has already recognized a sign of the times and has seen it in a call of the Spirit."

He said that a study commission set up at the Vatican has a "mandate" to explore, "in comparison with the aspirations of today's world and the enlightening doctrine of the Church, the full participation of women in the community life of the Church."

Despite the endorsement of the IWY and its aspirations by religious leaders and organizations at various levels, the IWY observance is expected to bring into clearer focus a great many thorny issues facing religion in 1975. Not least among them is the controversy over ordaining women, equal participation in religious decision-making, "feminism" in religion, and sexist discrimination.

In the U.S., controversy over the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution has strong religious implications, particularly as it relates to family life. And it certainly will be a subject for IWY discussion.

The U.N. statistics show that while women make up just less than half the world's population "in no country have they attained full equality," among the more than 700 million illiterates in the world, the majority are women; access to good education and high-level employment is limited; and in most countries, relatively few women hold policy-making posts in government.

There are many corollaries on the religious scene, particularly in areas like equality of the sexes in ministry and the role of women in decision-making.

Recently, in Lima, Peru, a Methodist feminist leader addressed herself to the status of women in religion by saying that the Christian churches have generally distorted Christ's teaching on humility and service and have relegated women to subservient roles.

But, at the same time, Berta Vargas stressed, the Churches have a key role to play in the liberation of women. "Both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches have an important responsibility in overcoming the discrimination against women that has gone on for centuries — especially since the Churches helped create that discrimination."

She also asserted that women from the developed nations like the U.S. can share in the struggle for women's rights in the underdeveloped world. She said they can share their research on how women find identity, raise funds for projects among deprived and alienated women, and influence churches to call missionaries home who stress teaching women to be submissive and dependent.

Similarly, in the U.S., a Southern Baptist sociologist told participants in a conference on liberation and contemporary women last August that most Christian churches are guilty of "sexism" and called on her church to initiate a "serious study of the current and future status of women."

Dr. Sarah Francis Anders, head of the sociology department at Louisiana College, Pineville, said that while women are a "decided majority" in most congregations in denominations, they are a "decided minority" in most levels of leadership and decision-making.

Among the churchmen acknowledging the responsibilities of the churches with respect to promoting sexual equality and women's rights is Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin of Cincinnati, president of the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference.

In remarks endorsing the IWY observance, he said the Catholic Church, like other institutions, "has grown in awareness and sensitivity to the rights of women." Adding that while progress towards equality for women "has met with misunderstanding and even opposition," the prelate said many groups and individuals have seen in the worldwide women's movement "a manifestation of both a new stage in human culture and a contemporary expression of God's will for the human race."

While the IWY observance in 1975 is seeking to serve as a catalyst for worldwide attention to the status of women in society, developments in religion during the past year have closely paralleled the IWY thrust toward equality and liberation.

In November, for instance, women involved in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) prevailed upon the 12th COCU plenary to authorize a task force on women which will attempt to bring the insights of women to the forefront. The resolution creating the task force said that "racism, sexism and classism" are interrelated.

Shortly before that, the board of managers of American Baptist Women said in a Message to the Churches that "women have an important role to play in the promotion of peace, population programs and economic and social plans. We are encouraging women to observe the IWY at all levels of our denomination."

In July, 1974, the Lutheran Church in America's biennial convention called upon congregations, regional synods and denomination-wide agencies to "examine their policies and procedures with regard to women and strive for change in necessary areas." The recommendations came from a Committee on Women in Church and Society, and specifically addressed the question "proportionate representation of women" in decision-making bodies.

More recently, a women's task force formed at the second Thanksgiving Workshop for Evangelicals in Chicago issued a 13-page document affirming, among other things, the right of women "to exercise the gifts of Christian leadership and their right to respond to God's call upon their lives."

Participants in a discussion on the women's movement in the Jewish community during the 1974 meeting of the American Jewish Committee in New York advocated changes that would bring women into "full partnership" with men in Jewish life. One male member of the panel called for active recruitment of women to serve as rabbis, cantors and leaders in other community roles.

During the November, 1974 meeting of U.S. bishops in Washington, D.C., a delegation of Roman Catholic feminists urged the prelates to establish a national task force to deal with the status of women in the Church and to work for "full" equality of women in the ecclesial structure.

They conferred with members of the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Women in Society and the Church, and cited the forthcoming IWY observance as an incentive for setting up the special task force. They particularly urged the bishops to appoint "qualified women" to Church bodies dealing with matters of concern to all Church members.

Archbishop Iakovos, primate of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, indicated in a recent interview that while he believes women are more valuable in the home than in the pulpit he considers that they have "distinctive contributions" to make to both the church and modern society.