

"Say to the darkness. . .we beg to differ"

Editorial

By Anne Wright-Gedcke, *Women's Perspectives*

"Say to the darkness, we beg to differ."

These words, taken from graffiti on a wall in Toronto, and used as the title of a book by Mary Jo Leddy in 1990, have been part of my personal mantra for the last decade or so. For me, the phrase expresses both the reality of much of our world, and the stance I want to take in responding to it.

To be honest, I often find it easy not to look too deeply. For when I do, I see the tragic effects of violence in our world. Modern warfare is wreaking havoc on the lives of women and girls, and on the health and educational services that are necessary to community survival and development. Sexual violence is systematically employed to harm and demoralize women, break apart families and terrorize communities. Families are displaced from their land and lose all their resources. Women have little representation in formal power structures and are often left out of the decision making processes which affect their lives.

It takes courage to face into the darkness, rather than succumbing to it. Remarkably, in the face of adverse circumstances, women demonstrate extraordinary strength, courage and spirit in keeping themselves and their families going. In so many ways, women "beg to differ" to the darkness.

As members of the human community, we need to speak and act in solidarity with these courageous women. Through art, music, writing, political action, prayer, sharing financial resources, hospitality, building community and many other means, we can give expression to our desire for a world without violence. Though these activities may feel small on an individual scale, I

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believe that they add positive energy to the universe, to move us toward a tipping point when the global community might be transformed.

I sing in a women's choir as one way of giving voice to my hope in the darkness. We recently learned a song by Danielle and Michael Sheppard called "I Can Touch the Sun". The introduction states: "this is a song for women everywhere who devote their lives to making the world a better place".

Women of the world, can you see the light?
You've got the power to make things right,
Children everywhere calling out to you,
What will you do?

Women of the world, can you see the light?
You've got the power to make things right
The wisdom of the ages is yours to share
Show us how you care.

Let me hear you say:
I am not alone
and I have just begun
Take my hand, I can reach the sky,
I can touch the sun.



Let us, as people of faith, bring our wisdom and gifts into the darkness of the world. Let us say to the darkness, we beg to differ.

Anne Wright-Gedcke
Anne is a mother of two teenagers, a board member of Project Ploughshares, and a social worker in the field of community mental health. She enjoys singing, walking with her sister, and playing softball and badminton. Anne attends Calvin Presbyterian Church in Kitchener, Ontario.

By Rev. Donna Carter-Jackson

Just as the widow cried out for justice and kept hammering away at the unjust judge, so we, as Christians, must keep hammering away at the power systems of our world to get justice for these women and children and others around the world, who have no voice of their own.

Back at the beginning of November 2007, as I was preparing to preach on Luke 18:2-8, Jesus' parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow, I received an e-mail from the Women in Ministry group of which I am a part. Attached was a report from Stephen Lewis released in a press conference in Nairobi Kenya, dated September 13, 2007. As I started to read it, I was sick at heart. It was a compilation of reports over the past 5 years, of women and children in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo who had been brutally raped and tortured. I knew I had to preach about it. Two weeks later when the Presbytery of Pickering met at my church, again I felt compelled to preach on this situation. People have to know what is happening in the DRC, and what is not being done about it here!

Just as the widows in ancient Israel had no voice and no power, neither do the women in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Just as the ancient justice system that God had set up had become corrupt, so many governments around the world today are part of the corruption and violence foisted on their people, instead of protecting them and advocating for their rights. And agencies whose mandate it is to protect the vulnerable in society, are either turning a blind eye or responding with indifference.

Just as Jesus surprised the disciples long ago with parables that went against the status quo, so he continues to surprise us today, in how he moves amongst us, opening our eyes and impassioning us to bring about his justice in today's world.

I will highlight a few of the reports Lewis cites.

A Medical Journal study reports that the death toll from this war between the years 1998-2004 is estimated at 3.9 million people - a humanitarian disaster unmatched by any other in recent decades, with little response from the international community.

In September 2007 John Holmes, the UN Emergency Coordinator and Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, returned from a trip to the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and characterized sexual violence against women as almost unimaginable - a "weapon of terror", adding that the intensity and frequency is worse than anywhere in the world.

Eve Enster says in her report of the visit to the area in August of 2007: "I have just returned from hell. I am trying to figure out how I communicate what I have seen: girls as young as nine, raped by groups of soldiers; women whose private areas have been blown apart by guns or cut to pieces, leaving them permanently damaged and unable to have children. Such insane violence reverberates with Hitler mentality."

A month earlier, in July 2007, Professor Yakin Erturk, the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council, felt exactly the same way. She writes of the roving gangs of psychopaths in the eastern DRC. "The atrocities perpetuated by these armed groups are of an unimaginable brutality that goes far beyond rape. The atrocities are

structured around rape and sexual slavery and aim at the complete physical and psychological destruction of women with implications for the entire society.... Women are brutally gang raped, often in front of their families and communities. In numerous cases, male relatives are forced at gun-point to rape their own daughters, mothers or sisters. Frequently women are shot or stabbed in their genital organs. Women who have survived months of enslavement tell of their tormentors forcing them to eat human excrement, or the flesh of their murdered relatives.”

Stephen Lewis says, “I note that this is the language of a formally appointed UN Rapporteur, delivered to a formal UN body.” He goes on to cite report after report.

A report by Human Rights Watch in June 2002 amassed a torrent of evidence of atrocities. Had the international community acted on this evidence and responded to protect the vulnerable 6 years ago, hundreds of thousands of lives would have been saved.

Stephen Lewis observes that what is so incredible about the inertia and passivity of the international community is the weight of evidence they had before them and the total bland indifference with which the evidence was treated.

Just as the widow cried out for justice and kept hammering away at the unjust judge, so we, as Christians, must keep hammering away at the power systems of our world to get justice for these women and children

“there is a prevailing environment of impunity, which renders the defense of human rights to a mere pipe dream. When I speak of impunity, I am speaking of the state’s failure to punish, or even properly investigate, crimes committed by paramilitaries, army personnel and officials of the state. The government of the DRC is complicit in the continued violations of its peoples’ human rights...”¹

Alexander Macdonald, PWS&D

and others around the world, who have no voice of their own. We must keep praying without ceasing that God will bring about his justice quickly. But most importantly, we must realize that we are part of God’s justice and if we remain passive, then we are part of the problem, instead of part of God’s solution.

Some action was taken immediately. Stephen Allen, Associate Secretary in Justice Ministries, advised that presbyteries, sessions and congregations could write letters of concern to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Canadian Government with copies sent to the Members of Parliament in their presbyteries. The

Presbytery of Pickering has done this and awaits a response.

Our congregation invited Alexander Macdonald, a representative from PWS&D to share with us what the church is doing and what more needs to be done. He informed us that “there is a prevailing environment of impunity, which renders the defense of human rights to a mere pipe dream. When I speak of impunity, I am speaking of the state’s failure to punish, or even properly investigate,

crimes committed by paramilitaries, army personnel and officials of the state. The government of the DRC is complicit in the continued violations of its peoples’ human rights...”¹

Mr. Macdonald informed us that through Kairos, PWS&D is supporting a Congolese organization (Heritiers de la Justice), working to create from the bottom up a culture of transparency and good governance. They are striving to build a state that upholds human rights and prosecutes those that do not. Civil society is being empowered to monitor government compliance with human rights obligations under the Geneva

¹ Alexander Macdonald, PWS&D speaker at St. John’s Presbyterian Church Milliken, Nov.18, 2007

² Stephen Lewis, Press Conference in Nairobi Kenya, Sept.13,07; reported by IRIN NewsPlus Sept14,07

³ Ibid

Convention and international humanitarian law. Women are the critical stakeholders in this government/citizen accountability process especially in the area of human rights.

There is so much more to do! On the Stephen Lewis Foundation's website

www.stephenlewisfoundation.org there is a quote of Stephen Lewis' by IRIN *Plus News* (UN News Service): "The contagion of sexual violence on the African continent is blood-chilling and nowhere more so than in the DRC...despite this, there seems to be unwillingness among the international community to take action".²

Lewis recommended that an international agency for women be created within the UN system.

"Such an organization...would ensure that women's issues were not ignored. We also need to convene female experts on rape to come up with recommendations for the sake of the Congo, because the world seems to be at a loss as to how to handle it."³

In a speech Lewis delivered at the V-Day 10th Anniversary Celebration in New Orleans, he refers to another speaker at this conference, Dr. Denis Mukwege, and his astonishing and heroic work with women in the Congo. "Driving his work is the endlessly grim and despairing litany of rape and sexual violence...in the vast historical panorama of violence against women, there is a level of demonic dementia plumbed in the DRC that has seldom, if ever been reached before."⁴

Lewis suggests a whole series of measures which the UN needs to implement. The final recommendation is that "the Secretary General of UN should pull out all the stops in getting the UN to agree that the Congo is

the best test case for the principle of the "Responsibility to Protect". This principle was universally endorsed by Heads of State at the UN in September of 2005...originally drafted with Darfur in mind...it's equally applicable to the Congo. We have to start somewhere."⁵

And so do we. As God's servants in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we need to raise our voices in support of the women and children in the DRC who have no voice of their own. In this next year, the V-Day organization has made the Women of the Congo the focus of their attention. Wouldn't this be the right time

for us to also raise this horrendous issue of abuse and violence against these women, in our own church and across Canada?

I challenge all of us to become more informed and inform others of this situation. If we do not, then it is as if these people cease to exist! Write

letters. If you would like a copy of the letter(s) written by presbyteries and churches to the government of Canada, e-mail me at dcarterjackson@rogers.com. Also, contact Stephen Allen at Justice Ministries and Ken Kim at PWS&D. Let us become part of God's solution to this injustice in the Congo! I pray for the Spirit's impassioned leadership in this issue throughout our church.

Rev. Donna Carter-Jackson
Donna is a recent graduate of Knox College (2003), mother of 2 grown children, Sean and Chantal, and minister of a wonderfully multi-cultural church, St. John's Presbyterian, in North Scarborough, Toronto. "This situation has really disturbed me and I feel very passionately about getting the information out to everyone I can. I am amazed how God continues to call us to action. I have never done something like this before!"

⁴ Stephen Lewis, Speaker at V-Day 10th Anniversary Celebration, New Orleans USA April, 2008

⁵ Stephen Lewis, Speaker at V-Day 10th Anniversary Celebration, New Orleans USA April, 2008

By Bernice Santor

Pastiche: a reworking of an original poem using the same style, form and meaning to express the essence of the poem in a modern context.

Several years ago my son Darcy went to Europe to study. There he met Ada, a woman from Bosnia. Later, while attending their wedding in Gradacac, I never dreamt that our family would be so closely connected to the realities of a war in Bosnia. When the war broke out, Ada's sister was studying at the university in Sarajevo and narrowly escaped being trapped there for the duration of the war. Today, both Ada and Lejla are living in Canada. When I look at these two young women, I am so grateful that they are safe. Through them, their family and friends, I have come to know more directly the horrors of war, especially for women. With this pastiche*, based on Isaiah 54, I want to express my hope that the women who have been raped and traumatized during the war will be accepted by their communities as they return home to start life again.

Gradacac...My Love

Shout aloud, O Gradacac,
mother of bastard children,
let your heart overflow in song
for you must become an adoptive parent.
For those who are born of rape
will be cherished by me
more than those who are born of love,
says Hashem.**

Expand your living quarters,
open wide your doors,
do not hesitate;
make room for your refugee daughters
and their ill-conceived children.
For, one day, they will be the new Bosnia,
stretching from border to border,
and they will fill the land
restoring the ruined cities.
Do not be afraid to accept these children;
for I will permit no one to dishonour you.

Do not give in to gossip or abuse;
for I will support and sustain you.

Time will heal the wounds,
and you will someday forget these atrocities.

For Hashem is your Protector, The One Above All
Others,
Who redeems you from your captors,
The Creative Power in the Universe.
For I know your grief and troubled spirit,
and share the sorrow of your defilement,
says Hashem.

For a time I let the war separate you from me,
but now, I embrace you,
I will not forget your daughters or their children.
For a while, I let my anger and disappointment
take me away from you,
but no more will I withhold my love,
says Hashem.

I will make you a promise
as I did in ancient days,
never to destroy the earth.

I pledge to set aside my anger,
never to use it against you again.
Nations shall disappear
and countries be consumed,
but my enduring love will be with you,
and my pledge of peace
will not be taken away from you,
says Hashem, who loves you very much.

O Gradacac, your houses devastated by war,
your people left with nothing,
I am about to bring to you a change of fortune.
I will rebuild your city and your homes,
their beauty will shine forth for all to see.
In them, the children of redemption will follow my ways,
and they will share in my abundant life.
In harmony, you shall live again,



no oppression will make you afraid,
no reprisals will threaten you.
If anyone stirs up gossip,
it will not be me.
If anyone abuses you,
they will be abused.

I am The One Who Makes All Things,
who holds the power to create or destroy.
The weapons of war will not annihilate you,
neither will the gossiping tongue.
You will always be the one I love,
and I will vindicate you before the whole earth,
says Hashem.

*pastiche: a reworking of an original poem
using the same style, form and meaning to express the essence
of the poem in a modern context.

**Hashem: a Hebrew word for the Divine,
which means "The Name".

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By Anne Wright-Gedcke

"In the final analysis, human security is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced. Human security is not a concern with weapons—it is a concern with human life and dignity." Human Development Report 1994

For the last five years, I have had the privilege of representing The Presbyterian Church in Canada on the Board of Directors of Project Ploughshares in Waterloo, Ontario. Project Ploughshares is an ecumenical agency of the Canadian Council of Churches established in 1976 to implement the churches' call to be peacemakers and to work for a world in which justice will flourish and peace abound. The mandate given to Project Ploughshares is to work with churches, governments and non-governmental organizations, in Canada and abroad, to identify, develop, and advance approaches that build peace and prevent war, and promote the peaceful resolution of political conflict.

The name and mandate for Project Ploughshares come from the ancient biblical vision in Isaiah in which the material and human wealth consumed by military preparations are transformed into resources for human development.

"God shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4)

One example of Project Ploughshares work is their involvement, over many years, in the movement to control the proliferation and misuse of small arms. Studies estimate that more than 500,000 people are killed each year from small arms—that is, one person every minute. There are presently over 600 million small arms in circulation around the world. Project Ploughshares collaborated with other organizations in gathering support for the 2006 Small Arms Review Conference on the United Nations Program of Action. You may have participated in this through the "Million Faces Petition", an international demonstration of civil society support for the Control Arms Campaign. On a regional level, Ploughshares has been involved in the horn of Africa

and more recently in the Caribbean to explore regional responses to the impact of small arms.

I have learned a number of things from my association with Project Ploughshares. I have learned that peacebuilding is a long, arduous process filled with numerous setbacks. It requires steady, reasoned voices in the public arena that are committed for the long term. It requires careful listening, building trusting relationships and much creativity. Peacebuilding is really a way of life; we are all involved in it daily in our families and communities. Project Ploughshares makes an important contribution in this area at a national and international level.

Local congregations and a network of Ploughshares local groups promote the work of Project Ploughshares at the community level. Local Ploughshares groups are active in Langley BC, Calgary AB, Edmonton AB, Saskatoon SK, Winnipeg MB, St. Catharines ON, Peterborough ON, Ottawa ON, Hamilton ON, and Fredericton NB. Sponsoring churches provide modest annual grants to Ploughshares; the majority of the annual budget comes from donations and project funding.

In 2007, the Presbyterian Church in Canada established a three year Peace and Human Security Internship Program with Project Ploughshares for Presbyterian university graduates. This is a gift to the organization, which gains valuable staff support, and to the intern, who gains relevant work experience with a reputable organization. Adam Parsons has recently completed his time with Ploughshares as the first participant in this program. Applications for the second year of the program, which begins in September 2008, are presently being reviewed.

As a person of faith, I am thankful that Project Ploughshares is speaking, and acting, to bring about a more just and peaceful world. I am thankful for their diligent research and analysis of the issues, their persistence in offering a different view to the prevalent culture of violence, and their collaboration with like-minded organizations to build a movement for change. I am glad to be a part of it.

Anne Wright-Gedcke



The Christian Council of Mozambique developed an innovative “swords into ploughshares” gun collection program to deal with the millions of weapons remaining after the end of the brutal civil war. In exchange for weapons which are destroyed, villagers receive tools or other goods to improve their lives. Remaining gun parts are turned over to artists who shape the parts into sculptures. In 2000 the sculptures were toured throughout Canada. To date, the churches have collected about 600,000 weapons and pieces of ammunition. Most recently, a new gun sculpture, the Tree of Life, commissioned by the British Museum, was placed on display in London. “The greatest hunger the world has today is for peace. This project is a very humble way that we can bring about that peace.”

Bishop Sengulane,
Christian Council of Mozambique
(Campaign to Control Small Arms Resource Guide,
Project Ploughshares, 2005–2006)

A Thousand Splendid Suns

by Khaled Hosseini

A book review by Anne Wright-Gedcke

A Thousand Splendid Suns, published in 2007, is the second novel by American author Khaled Hosseini, following his bestselling debut *The Kite Runner* in 2003. Both novels are set in Afghanistan. While *The Kite Runner* tells the story from the perspective of male characters, the new novel speaks primarily from the voice of women.

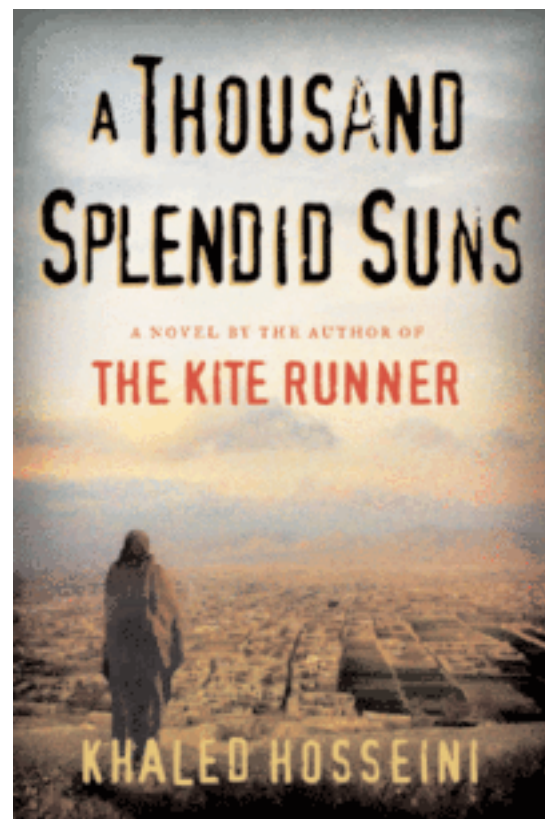
The novel tells the story of two women, Mariam and Laila. They come from different backgrounds and different parts of the country, but their lives become intertwined through common connection to Rashid, a middle class shoemaker in Kabul. The novel is divided into four parts. The first part focuses exclusively on Mariam, the second and fourth parts focus on Laila, and the third part switches focus between Mariam and Laila with each chapter.

I found the context of the book both educational and heartbreaking, as it provided information about the generations of conflict that have occurred on Afghan soil. The Soviets invaded and occupied Afghanistan in 1980, which led to the development of a resistance movement, the Mujahedeen, to fight the Soviet occupation. After the victory of the Mujahedeen, civil war came to Afghanistan, and Kabul was bombarded by rocket attacks. Several years later, the Taliban rose to power and ruled with extreme oppression and violence against women. The Taliban eventually fell to NATO forces which are present in Afghanistan to this day.

Hosseini's storytelling ability is excellent, and I found the novel difficult to put down. However, I also found it almost unbearable to read, for the powerlessness of the female characters was evident at every turn in the story. The women had almost no control about decisions that affected their lives, and the culture of violence seemed to be an accepted reality in their country. In spite of this, Mariam and Laila are presented as intelligent, resourceful

and determined women, and the reader hopes for a positive outcome for each of them.

Although this is a work of fiction, its portrayal of the impact of conflict and violence on everyday life is a reality that cannot be ignored. The novel ends with a glimmer of hope for the future, at least for one of the characters. It is well worth reading, but don't pick it up when you are in the mood for something light.



Project Ploughshares

www.ploughshares.ca

The Project Ploughshares website contains a wealth of information about the organization and current areas of work. Past issues of *The Ploughshares Monitor* and various papers, briefings and reports are posted on the website. The information is well researched and thorough, but it is not written for a popular audience, so be prepared to spend some time digesting it. Those interested can subscribe to a regular e-newsletter from Project Ploughshares.



Stephen Lewis Foundation

www.stephenlewisfoundation.org

The website contains information about projects that the foundation supports, speeches and reflections by Stephen Lewis, and creative examples of raising funds and awareness by people in Canada, including the Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign. Stephen Lewis has consistently spoken about the roles that armed conflict and gender violence play in the spread of HIV/AIDS.



Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan

www.W4WAfghan.ca

Afghanistan has suffered the ravages of conflict for decades, both at the hands of invading countries and internally as local warlords compete for power within the land. Women in Afghanistan have suffered terribly due to the ongoing violence and gender based oppression. Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan grew out of a small group of women acting to give voice and practical support to women half a world away.

“Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan is a volunteer solidarity network founded in 1996. CW4WAfghan began as a small volunteer network of women in Canada committed to supporting the empowerment of Afghan women and girls. There are now fourteen volunteer chapters and affiliated groups working in solidarity across Canada to support rights and opportunities for Afghan women and girls.” (taken from the website)

