Of Zenanas and following Christ in Islamic Asia.

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Background:

The particular parameters of the paper that follows are due to the specific experience of the author. I am a woman who has spent the majority of the last twenty years in South Asia or the Middle East, in Bible Teaching and mentoring roles. That has certainly provided opportunity for becoming familiar with challenges to following Christ, and the way in which they affect a new believer's attitude to, and involvement with, any established church. I also realised, when initially invited to contribute to the consultation, that I had some very particular insights and perspectives that arose from being a woman familiar with the breadth of ministry by women in the recent and more distant past; hence the title.

Outline:

The paper begins by exploring how the involvement of women in the missionary work of the Church in the past has impacted the present. As women were initially invited to be involved because of certain unique challenges presented by Islam, we move on to explore what these challenges are. Experience in South Asia suggests that, regardless of gender it is not
always easy for new believers to become part of institutional church, because of attitudes within the established faith communities. These attitudes are outlined before finally looking at present day responses to the unique challenges that Islam brings, and how these interface with our understanding of Church.

**Zenana Ministries**

Some comments by Canon Tim Dakin in the CMS Newsletter of January 2003 caused me to wonder if there were ways in which the ministry of women missionaries contributed to a less than full commitment to institutional Church by new Christians. Reflecting on material in *The Church Mission Society and World Christianity 1799-1999*, Canon Dakin comments on the situation at the beginning of the 20th Century. He says that at that point, "the sheer weight of numbers of women missionaries eroded the clerical norm.[1] Today the clerical norm is not only subverted by the ministries of non-ordained women, but by all kinds of mission initiatives, including short-term youth programmes, prayer walking groups, and the initiatives of 'tentmakers' of one sort or another. Members of the programmes will have varying degrees of allegiance to any particular church, and a formally constituted Church may have only loosely endorsed their presence in a Christian programme in a second country. Was admission of non-ordained single women to the Protestant missionary work force the thin end of the wedge, which opened the way to an unsatisfactory situation today?

In the book from which Canon Dakin was drawing, Guli Francis-Dehqani suggests a different conclusion. She states that "the experience of the CMS women in Iran challenges the theological assumption that to be a Christian is to side with power and hierarchy, to become part of an institution based on gender imbalance and inappropriate clericalism.[2] My own experience has allowed me to consider whether her conclusions apply more widely.

I spent most of the period from April 1984 to September 2000 in parts of South Asia and the Middle East as a single woman mission partner. I belong to a mission that began as "The Indian Female Normal School and Instruction
Society" way back in 1852. However, especially during my second winter in South Asia I was privileged to spend periods of time with women from four or five other organisations that allowed me to gain some overview of unheralded steadfast service. I guess it has made me an insider in an interesting group of what might be called subversive practitioners!! They did not side with power and hierarchy. What I am trying to work out is whether their activity has been a good thing or a bad thing.

To assist in our assessment of such work it is important to first weigh the way Scripture presents the initiatives of women outside the 'ordained' system.

**Some Biblical reflection on the initiative of women**

When people in the Biblical text are named, this is for a reason. If Richard Bauckham is right, the ratio of named men to named women in the New Testament gives us a close approximation to the ratio of men to women leaders in the early church. [3]

Whatever, despite the fact that there are many named women in the Old Testament, few of them have recognizable 'ordained' or leadership roles. Even so, when we look more closely at named women in the Old Testament we see that their initiatives play a significant part in the outworking of God's purposes. The books of 1 & 2 Samuel provide powerful illustration, and are the more interesting to examine, as they are often used as the source for Biblical models of leadership.

Most of the characters in 1 & 2 Samuel are clearly paradoxical, made up of a muddle of human ambiguities. Mary Evans suggests that to some extent, of the main characters, both Samuel and David failed, whilst Saul forfeited the divine favour because of pursuing his own interpretation of his kingly office. [4]

There are both male and female named characters in the Samuels who contribute to the way the events unfold. We are shown that human power is usually a corrupting influence, and that true power resides in God.

Foundational to the whole account is the faith of Hannah. Hannah was powerless yet she was the one to embody and voice the true faith of Israel. I have encouraged illiterate women, rich in faith, who have thought their lives could not really count for God, through sharing reflection on Hannah. But as I have spent more time in the text I realize she not only carries meaning and significance for illiterate women. We do not have to go far into the text to meet up with strong, but alarmed, men who have seen friends die through looking into the Ark of the Covenant. They cry, "Who then can stand before the Lord,
the holy God?" (1 Samuel 6:19,20). The answer is of course, that a barren, bottom of the social-pile woman, who prayed in faith, could. Indeed, not only do we remember that she prayed and God heard. The text of chapter 1 tells us that she stood up (verse 9), and then in bitterness of soul wept and prayed to the Lord for a son. Then, in chapter 2, her song of rejoicing declares, ‘there is no-one holy like the Lord.’ (2:2). The evocations in the words of the alarmed men is intentional. The text is showing us that Hannah is not merely the chronological start for the story. In her powerlessness and prayerful faith she embodies the key paradigm through which to read the text. Not only do the books of 1 & 2 Samuel begin with a person in prayer at the place of sacrifice, but they also conclude in a parallel context. Hannah prays at Shiloh in the beginning. David intercedes at the threshing floor of Araunah at the end. In principled manner David has bought the site and the oxen for sacrifice from Araunah in obedience to God, in order to end the plague that was striking down the Israelites (2 Samuel 24). Echoing their opening chapter, the books of Samuel end with David praying at the place of sacrifice. Indeed, the concluding phrase of 2 Samuel declares "Then the Lord answered prayer..." And, in possible emphasis of the models set by 'insignificant' women, not only does this vignette mirror the experience of Hannah, but by language and form it also echoes an account about another marginalized woman recorded in 2 Samuel 21. In 2 Samuel 21 we read of the way news of the principled loyalty of grieving Rizpah stimulates David to deal properly with the corpses of Saul, Jonathan and the seven progeny of Saul killed to assuage the bloodguilt that had been incurred against the Gibeonites. Rizpah had been Saul's concubine. Amongst those put to death for the bloodguilt, which was identified by God as the reason for famine in the land, were Rizpah's two sons. The whole passage, which opens the closing section of 2 Samuel, climaxes with the burial of Saul and his sons, concluding: "After that God answered prayer on behalf of the land." It was when the action of a woman who had lost everything was drawn to King David's attention that he was stimulated to the right course of action. The structuring of the text indicates that these women, Hannah and Rizpah, are woven into the story to keep us alert to the example and influence of the otherwise unseen.
As Hannah's song at the beginning asserts:

HANNAH

'He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap...etc'
1 Samuel 2:8

and David's song at the end repeats:

'DAV I D DAV I D DAV I D DAV I D

'You save the humble,
but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low.'
2 Samuel 22:28

Words and phrases from Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2:1-10) are evoked throughout 1 & 2 Samuel. They are like threads which run all the way through, to be picked up in the final section, in David's song (2 Samuel 22). Most prominent is the theme of reversal. Both songs promote the same understanding about the nature of God, speaking of him as 'my horn' (Hannah - 1 Samuel 2:1) / 'the horn of my salvation' (David - 2 Samuel 22:3), and as 'Rock' (1 Samuel 2:2 / 2 Samuel 22:1, 47), as well as evoking a thundering God (1 Samuel 2:10 / 2 Samuel 22:14etc) acting on behalf of those He saves. The two figures praying at the beginning and end of the account are like bookends to the story, or more technically, function as inclusio. The presence of the two songs, mirroring each other at opposite ends, suggests the more the developed literary form of chiasm, which has a focus at the centre.

Interestingly, there is one more poetic interlude in the books of Samuel. It's position shows real intentionality, for it is indeed set right at the heart, in the first chapter of 2 Samuel. It is the lament of David at the death of Saul and Jonathan. It picks up the core theme of the other two songs, poignantly expressing the flip side of reversal:

'How the mighty are fallen' 2 Samuel 1:19
'How the mighty are fallen' 2 Samuel 1:25

This refrain is surely meant to remain as a warning in our minds as we meditate on the whole of the Samuels' accounts of the exploits of the powerful.

There are other women in 1 & 2 Samuel whose response to difficulty had positive outcome in the purposes of God. Amongst them is Abigail. Like those of Hannah and of Rizpah, the way her story is woven in gives it significance lost when read in isolation.

Abigail was the wife of a wealthy fool. We read of Abigail's wise influence on David (1 Samuel 25) between the two accounts where the greatness of David's integrity, righteousness and faith is demonstrated through his sparing of Saul's life (chapters 24 & 26). Chapter 25 recounts how David could have been enticed into a stupid ungodly act by Abigail's husband, were it not for the initiative of this wise woman, who was herself brought into the situation through the urging of otherwise powerless employees. Eugene Peterson picks up on the structure of inclusio / chiasm[5] here to suggest that it is carrying forward the undercurrent message of the books, where principled acts of faith by the powerless are integral to the way God fulfills his purpose. Abigail may only have one chapter of the Bible given over to her, and be barely mentioned elsewhere, but the whole of salvation history would have been different without her measured, humble initiative. The whole chapter is very instructive. David's reaction to Abigail almost sounds like a reversal of the assumption so often made about initiatives of women, who are presumed to be programmed to follow the pattern of Eve's failure, for 'David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping [saving] me from bloodshed." (1 Samuel 25:32, 33)

Scripture names women who took initiative and in the process played an important part in God's purposes. We have drawn evidence from the Old Testament. The New Testament draws and builds on this, so that it is not by
accident that the Gospel of St Luke shows, through theme and structure, how some of the Old Testament events we have looked at are echoed in the life and ministry of Jesus. There continue to be acts and initiatives of women that further God’s best purposes. What we need to weigh are the initiatives of women in the modern missionary era. Have they been initiatives based on good judgment?

A historical perspective on the Zenana ministry and its influence

Zenana is the word for the secluded quarters set apart for women in both Muslim and Hindu homes in the Indian sub-continent. When the modern missionary movement began it was impossible for a woman of the Indian sub-continent to gain knowledge other than through members of her own family. She could not receive education, medical help or learn of Jesus Christ from an unrelated man, nor have social contact outside of her family home. The Zenana missions began in response to this situation.

The institutional church found itself responding to the realities of an unfamiliar situation. The Zenana missions were ways of engaging with the unexpected. Parallel initiatives began over the latter part of the 19th century in Iran and China, and with initiatives like that of Lillias Trotter in North Africa.

One of the men endorsing the need for women to take evangelistic initiative was Hudson Taylor. His attitude was key to changing the climate of thinking about what women might and could do. [6]. Valerie Griffiths illustrates this; "In 1886 Chinese workers saw new believers emerging along the Guangxi River, but no male missionaries available for the work, so instead a chain of stations developed for 150 miles down the river, with the single women working and living alongside Chinese catechists and their families. Thirty years later there were ten centres, and sixty preaching points, with 2000 church members. (Not large by present Chinese standards!) Part of the value recognised by Hudson Taylor, was that "The native catechist never comes to true inward independence …, where he works under a European missionary … it is quite otherwise when he is associated with a missionary sister; then the work of teaching and preaching … devolves upon him; he counts as the
head of the mission, and must act independently... the mission sister is with him to advise him, whilst having a sufficient sphere of activity in the female part.. and if men also listen to her Bible-lessons, no offence is given... [7] That kind of thing was still happening in South Asia when Valerie Griffiths wrote her article. I know for I've had the experience, and know others who have welcomed Nicodemuses (Nicodemi?), and been valued confidents too. There have been women hospital Medical Directors who have earned respect from men in the community, as well as from the women they have served, with the result that dignified men following other religions have quietly sought them out for explanation of the Christian faith. There is the delightful story of how, in 1890, the widowed Mrs Pollen responded to God's call to return with her daughters to the Indian city in which she and her husband had lived when he was in the civil service.[8] Her husband's good name, and Mrs Pollen's obedience to God's call opened remarkable doors: "When the news went through Bulandshahr that Pollen Sahib's widow was back, all the principal Hindus and Mohammedans came to call - an unusual experience for a missionary women, and a tribute to Fredrick Pollen's sterling character. 'We not only knew him but loved him,' they said. One nawab took a New Testament, 'saying he had often desired to possess a copy but feared to purchase one owing to his private secretary being such a devout Moslem, but as a gift from me no objection would be raised.'... Another of the early pioneer women was once challenge to publicly defend the Gospel in debate with a Muslim religious leader. Nancy Williams was very conscious of her inadequacies as she faced the maulvi of Sholapur, but in the end won friends and further enquiries as she used the example of the sun, with its heat and its rays, in answer to questions about the Trinity. [9] The influence of the Zenana Mission extended beyond individual lives though, arguably being a pioneer in the promotion of Ecumenism (interdenominational cooperation) and a significant influence in the shaping of the Indian Church. From the Society's first official history we are told: 'In 1867, Henry Venn (General Secretary of CMS) drew up a statement of "Fundamental Principles" stating that 'in the constitution and management of Missionary Societies each section of the Church must conduct its operations upon its own distinctive
denominational principles'. But in the management of schools in India this did not apply. "Schoolmasters trained by one Society are freely employed by other societies. No questions need arise to prevent the members of different Churches from uniting to support a vernacular school, normal school or training institution." The Zenana Mission therefore, 'though originated by the zeal of members of the Church of England and mainly carried on by their support and desirous of spreading, through its teachers, the Protestant and Evangelical views of truth contained in her doctrinal articles and formularies - yet, as a Society, thankfully accepts the co-operation of members of other churches; and in its operations abroad is ready to unite with any of the orthodox Protestant Missionary societies, where there may be suitable openings for its benevolent institution." The Society was thus 'catholic and not denominational'.

'Further, Alexander Duff, the Free Church of Scotland's foremost missionary figure, fully approved 'this remarkable adjustment'. He told his daughter, Mrs Watson, one of the Zenana Mission Committee's leading lights, that "it enables the Society in a noble spirit of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood freely to co-operate with and assist all zealously contending for and teaching the faith once delivered to the saints… An admirable example to all Societies in such troublous and distracted times.'

Its joint treasurer, William Muir, summed up the position of the original 'Indian Female Normal School and Instruction Society' when he said: "The Society has as its field the whole vast peninsula of India. This field it can only occupy effectively by maintaining its independent and undenominational constitution… Now the Society is free to send its agents to any place (whether occupied by a Mission or not) where the way is open. Besides its efforts are regarded with less suspicion than if immediately connected with a missionary agency. For the missionary is too often forced into a position of controversy and antagonism, while the attitude of the female evangelist is free from even the appearance of aggression. Happily then there is no need of anything like ecclesiastical organisation either in the direction at home or the agency in India. It is simple evangelistic work in which all can join upon the common platform of the Bible. [10]
The interdenominational constitution was a new development in missionary organisations. The British and Foreign Bible Society and the Religious Tract Society, founded nearly half a century before the Zenana, were on a cooperative basis, but were not themselves missionary societies. The Evangelical Alliance, which preceded the Zenana by six years, was still only an occasional conference of like-minded Christians. And the interdenominational China Inland Mission, founded two years before Venn's 'Fundamental Principles' of 1867, did not work alongside different Churches, but was a body of individuals who had shed the denominational loyalties to undertake the peculiar and dangerous work of penetrating where no 'official' Church society dared send its men.

Though seemingly little remembered now, the seed sown by establishing this interdenominational society spawned significant replication. In 1906 Indian Christian delegates from all parts of the country met at Serempore to found the 'Indian National Missionary Society' and the Chairman was asked whether he thought it would be possible for members of so many denominations to work together. He replied, "Yes! It is possible. The Zenana Bible and Medical Mission has done it in India for over fifty years and therefore we can do it."

[11] Though I am not equipped to draw conclusions, I find it interesting that it was in the same place, as a result of what became known as the Serempore controversy some some eighty years earlier, in 1827, that William Carey and colleagues left the BMS and formed the Serempore mission. The controversy had been over the nature of the relationship of missionaries to home committees, and their freedom to take initiative.[12]

**Drawing some conclusions about the involvement of women**

What are we to make of the way the involvement of women, and especially in the first instance single women, has blurred some of the edges, whether to do with the authority to win people to Christ, establish groups of believers, or cross denominational boundaries? I believe Guli Francis-Dehqani is right in seeing this as a challenge to imbalances under the hand of God, keeping us from wrong dependence on systems and power.
Bearing in mind the lessons of 1 & 2 Samuel it is good to remind ourselves that the Zenana Mission was from its origins a fellowship rooted in prayer. I am struck by the fact that God makes sure that He keeps the creative initiative as He reaches out in love to this world. In some limited research which a group of us conducted we discovered that in conservative Islamic contexts young male missionaries do get to know a wide circle of unmarried young men, married men tend to know other men in formal contexts, married women frequently have very limited access to anyone in the community, but single women, when accepted as honorary sister or aunt, have access to whole families. Like the little slave girl in the story of Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5), a word of testimony shared out of respect and kindness by one who otherwise seems insignificant can be the start of a life-changing event. The parallels with Islamic Asia hold, for there too it can be difficult for someone to have their religious faith affect their community allegiance, as we shall now see.

Islamic South Asia

Overall, more Muslims have become Christians in the last decade than at any point in history. Nevertheless, there is still no mass Christian transformation taking place. One movement provides something of an exception, and provides a helpful means of focusing the question of what is institutional, for its growth comes out of experimentation and researching the potential of working with homogeneous groups. In consequence groups of converts to Christianity are not linked to something formally pre-existent. The ways in which church is 'done' in these groups is culturally meaningful. What has developed in different countries has to some extent depended on who has worked there and what sort of initiative that person or group has taken. What has gone on in each country is also prescribed by political and social influences. Thus in

- Bangladesh - the nature of the Islam followed is of folk religion character. Orthodox Islam has less overall dominance. Also the fact that Bangladesh became an independent nation by splitting from Pakistan, which was set up as
the Islamic State, shows that Bangladesh is first a nation of the people within its borders, before being part of the Islamic Umma (nation).

- Pakistan - needs to keep an image. When it became a separate nation from India, in 1947, at the end of the British Raj, it was like a Phoenix rising from the ashes. The rest of the world had not thought it possible to establish this new Islamic State. Now, so that Islam is not shamed, Pakistan has to uphold and enforce its Islamic nature. There is an accepted place for the church, which had been established at the end of the 19th Century. That church is largely Punjabi, and of families of low caste Hindu background. Converts from Islam are often of other caste or tribes.

- Iran - Most people in Iran see themselves as Persian first, before they are Muslim. Some speak of the late imposition of Islam on their already proud cultural history. Religious leaders would see conversion to Christianity as apostasy, but society would not see it as being a national traitor.

- Afghanistan - Tribal loyalty has traditionally come first.

- Arab world - In the heartlands of the Arab world people see themselves as Arab first, and this is assumed to be one and the same thing as Muslim. Where the ancient church has existed there is awareness that it is possible to be an Egyptian or a Jordanian, etc., and be a Christian. Lebanon has the most freedom and openness to difference and change.

In Islamic Asia people come to faith through dreams, what they see of lived faith, and intellectual search etc. It is people, and the Gospel, not church structure or institution that attracts.

**Obstacles**

Christianity and Islam view each other as heretical family members, and Islam has some built in barriers to Christian faith, both theologically and sociologically. There is resistance to elements of the institution, although converts normally have a strong desire to have the security of patterns through which to demonstrate belonging. Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity is also seen as an arm of Western imperialism.

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- For individuals - Ostracism, interrogation by mosque leaders, being thrown out of the family home and community life, are all possibilities when a Muslim converts to Christianity. These possibilities create a context of fear and control.
- Even in USA (article in "Washington Times", 13/10/02 Julia Duin) people want to keep their baptism quiet. "Most established denominations are unaware of the situation, as converts attend Bible study groups in their own language or small hidden churches that appear on no denominational radar."

One person identifies the barriers thus:
• The Religious Barrier (acceptance / blessing)
• The Social Barrier (Exclusion)
• The Economic Barrier (No money)
• The Psychological Barrier (Framework of emotional support & manipulation, may have been abuse)
• The Barrier of Spiritual Bondage (Real or imagined)

• Families who have embraced Christianity may not be able to change their designated religion on their national identity care. This can mean that, according to national laws they may still be considered Muslim and be required to educate their children accordingly.
• Levels of secrecy may mean the leadership of local fellowships of Christian believers have to function in a context of low income; they face a complex challenge of how to lead without outside finance.
• Especially women may have inadequate opportunities to go to church, share fellowship and discover their part in the body of Christ.

Adjusting to the loss of social support systems can be a huge demand on Christian believers from a Muslim background. In some contexts mosques are the main community centers, where everything is provided at times of death, and help and guidance for life's major issues is given. It is a place for male networking. Habits of being dependent on the advice can mean that new believers feel very lost when Christian churches do not fill the gap. So often our Christian 'institutions' are busy with other agendas.

Overcoming the obstacles:

• Creative initiatives are used to share the Gospel (see Modern Creative Responses below)
• One approach, generally referred to as the homogeneous groups principle, seeks to keep as much acceptable to the local community as possible. Phil Parshall, recognized as a leader in this approach has been careful to qualify how it is to be applied: 'Nowhere do I get the idea that a follower of a false religion should remain as a devout participant in its worship rituals. That indeed is isegesis rather than responsible exegesis. I request missiological contextualists to be more theologically astute in dealing with the Word of God' [13] A positive example might be that women keep purdah; there have been situations where this has actually allowed for much freedom in movement and faith sharing.
• Counsel is often given to converts to bide their time before telling family of their new faith, so that their changed lives can prepare the way for acceptance.
• Half way homes are provided that teach new Christians how to be part of a new community.
• The advice of one South Asian pastor is that young converts to Christianity should marry, for 'identity, companionship, belonging, recognition in the church, a place in society, freedom in developing a Christian way of life in
your own home. That can also require Christian friends to act as match-makers.

A surprising obstacle in too many contexts is the ambivalence of the established churches to helping new Christians who convert from a different faith background.

**Of ambivalence in Christian communities**

Revelation 2 & 3, reminds us, if we need to be told, that Christian communities in different places are very different from each other. Christian communities in Pakistan and in Egypt provide examples of the way this is still true today. They have similarities, but their communities are also very different.

**History**

- In both countries Protestantism is seen as an arm of the (powerful) West by those who are most opposed.
- In Pakistan - most of the Christians are progeny from a people's movement at the turn of the 19th into 20th century, by members of the outcaste community. They may be Pakistani (a provision of the constitution from the start) but ethnicity puts them outside the mainstream, and still a significant proportion are illiterate. Those who have done well may not be able to move into careers they want to, though new forms of professional employment may be open to the really able. In such a context the Church becomes the place for the ambitious but not truly academic. Young people who do really well academically would not normally think their place was in church ministry.
- Whilst there are communities of poor Christians in Upper Egypt, there have always been influential, aristocratic, and highly educated Copts. The church in Egypt has existed from the time of Christ, and Coptic Christians see themselves as the descendents of the Pharaonic people. Muslims are either progeny of the people who have come in to the country for trade or military reasons, or of those who left Christianity for various reasons sometime in the last 1300 years. If in some contexts there are Copts who feel marginalized, they do not feel inherently inferior. Strong churches across the denominations have highly educated leaders, including those who have left behind successful careers in response to God's call.

**Challenges**

1. Local Church response to a convert from Islam is often one of non-acceptance.[14] This may be due to
• Jealousy (e.g., poor or needy church members looking to mission workers for attention or money.)
• Fear. This may be of the newcomer, with the fear that they are infiltrating in order to find grounds to betray and bring some kind of action against the church. In this case the newcomer would find himself or herself mistrusted and unwelcome. Alternatively, the fear may be that family members of the newcomer, or perhaps the security services or some other group, will blame the church for the individual's conversion and take some kind of violent action against it.
• Suspicion. They've been cheated before; there have been conmen who have claimed to be needy converts but who were later discovered to be wily members of Christian families.
• The presence of someone different may simply threaten the status quo
• It is un-cultural to change faith communities and leave the patterns of the family home; someone who does so can even be seen by members of the Christian community to be violating a deep rooted belief about what is right practice, and to be breaking the order that God has made. Much pervading thought accepts the idea that God ordained people to their particular religious communities and that is how things should be left.

2. Established churches in some parts of South Asia are ill equipped to meet the range of pastoral and discipling needs that the new believers bring.
3. Homogeneous churches struggle to relate to existing, that is 'institutional' church. Language and form are the official issues, and one recognises fear, mistrust and loss of power may contribute.
4. In Western Asia, where new fellowships have grown up over the last 30 years, where previously everyone had been Muslim, one issue that some of the new churches now face is whether or when to celebrate events like the birth of Christ and Easter. Where the context was predominantly Eastern Church until Ottoman rule gradually pushed them out by one means or another, a dilemma is whether to go with the dates of the Western or the Eastern Church. Who is the church and what institutions should be taken on?

The church in the West expends a lot of attention and energy on the perceived persecution of indigenous Christians in places like Pakistan and Egypt, and can be unciscerning in regard to the rather different challenges faced by those born in to the Christian communities as compared to those who convert to Christianity from Islam. The established church would be well served if the West encouraged and helped it to be truly and wisely welcoming, and supported it as it faces the consequences. Our memories of what we have learnt from Hannah and David remind us to also pray and encourage continuing faith and prayer.

Modern Creative Reponses
Whilst the unique character of Islam may still mean it resists the best efforts at influence by the institutional church it has continued to call out creative initiatives from Christians. Today it is Radio, Literature, Correspondence Courses, satellite TV (Hollywood Movies!!??), and the WWW that reach where authorized individuals cannot go. It is not only women, but business people and civil servants, like Pollen Sahib of old, who commend themselves to the hearts of individuals, drawing enquiry from them and opportunity to explain the Good News of Jesus.

Some of the creative initiatives provide new ways of being church. As individuals share their prayer needs through Christian radio, other isolated believers identify and intercede, so becoming a virtual fellowship. TV programmes that show group fellowship provide models for small gatherings in restrictive access locations, and the teaching for Christians on family life and moral issues provide discipleship teaching for those who are isolated. Internet chat rooms and emails can provide fellowship and mentoring, but the issue of the role of the 'ordained' or 'set apart' individual is hard to watch over. The likelihood is that from these initiatives wheat and weed will grow, partly due to the fact that much as with the movement of women into mission, there will be examples of good judgment and poor judgment amongst those involved. It feels like it would be nice if the whole thing were controllable and tidy, but that was never the case in the New Testament era, and the Old Testament also dissuades us from expecting it to be that way, or expecting that it would serve God better if it were so.

The Gospel does call us into a community of faith, and to a respect for order. Developments which have occurred as Christians have engaged creatively with Islam raise the question 'when is a community of people who learn together, pray for one another, and encourage one another to be faithful, not a church?' Engagement with Islam is forever making us face issues outside our comfort zone, which we would prefer to ignore. Is it calling us here to check whether our questions on authority are not really to do with issues of power? Most people want to be wanted; is the ambivalence in Islamic contexts actually that of new believers, or of those who hold institutional power? Is that so very
different from the world of Hannah, Abigail and Rizpah, or at least of Peter, Paul and Barnabas?

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**Notes:**

i[10] "Pioneer Women: p17


iii[12] B. Stanley in Mission and Spirituality p80


i[3] Richard Bauckham, Gospel Women, pxxi

i[4] Mary J. Evans "1 & 2 Samuel" NIBC, p9

i[5] Eugene Peterson "Earthly Spirituality"

i[6] Guli Francis-Dehqani, p81
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see "from here… to eternity", Interserve, 2002, pp19,20

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