

World Council of Churches  
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

*Faith and Order Plenary Commission  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
28 July - 6 August 2004*

**Bibelstudy – 30th July 2004**  
Kyung Sook Lee

**1 Corinthians 12,12-14**  
One body with many members

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

**Who has the right to despise these women?**

Today's text is 1 Cor. 12:12-14. It is a well-known text to those who are interested in ecumenism, I don't need to explain it again. What is said in verses 4-11 is that each and every one of us in the church has a different function and different talents, but that we are nevertheless all equal, there is no difference between us. Verses 12-14 state: through baptism all Christians are equal, be they Jews or Greeks, black or yellow or white. There is no difference on the basis of confession, of nationality, status, skin-colour or gender, through baptism and through the Holy Spirit all Christians are equal. It doesn't matter whether one is free or a slave. Each of us should respect the other, we should love and mutually support one another. This sentence is the slogan of equality in the church, particularly in the ecumenical movement. Further on in Verses 24b-26 "But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it."

Today I shall be interpreting verses 12-14 as God's particular challenge to us in the light of verses 24b-26. Verse 26 is particularly important for me because this important statement is often forgotten. Through our desire to compete we often slander, scorn and injure others. This may give us short-term pleasure, but seen more long-term we are torturing one another. Here and now we must ask ourselves which member it is that suffers the most in our churches and our societies? As a Korean woman my answer is that this suffering member in our church is the poor Asian women who have been forced to sell themselves as prostitutes. Women are vulnerable members in Asian countries because they are traditionally less valued than men. Of course one can ask whether this is not now something of the past. Nevertheless, this way of thinking is deeply rooted in our society and often resurfaces. Prostitution has a long history and is in my opinion a very grave and serious problem. Up until now the church has dealt very little with this issue because prostitution was a taboo subject for the church. It is high time that the church discuss this problem openly and take it seriously, because the new forms of prostitution are destroying members of the body of God.

Many different problems are hidden within the problem of prostitution: imperialism, colonialism, snobbery, sexism etc. As no doubt all of you know, Asian women have been victims of international sexual abuse since the second world War. During the time of Japanese colonialism many young girls aged between 12 and 19 were systematically seized, abducted and transported to the war front as so called "comfort women" for the frustrated

Japanese soldiers of that time. Various methods were used to abduct women to the military brothels. Deception was used to lure many women into the brothels, like through the offer of a well-paid job in a Japanese armaments factory etc. The number of comfort women is estimated to have been between 100,000 and 150,000. They had no freedom of movement and lived the life of slaves. Each night they had to sexually service between 20 and 50 soldiers. Fighting for life or death in the war, the soldiers were mostly rude and violent. They regarded the women as objects for their satisfaction, not infrequently threatening them with knives or ill-treating them.

After Japan's defeat in 1945 many of the comfort women were put into the same allied camps as the Japanese soldiers; after months or years they were allowed to return home. But there were many other women. Many were systematically killed as the Japanese troops withdrew, others were forced to end their days abroad. Those women who did go home after the end of the war could of course no longer lead normal lives. Many suffered anyway from psychological or physical illnesses. In our society which puts a high value on chastity they were often regarded as "dirty women", not only by others but also by themselves. Fear of contempt or of isolation from those around them meant that they were under constant pressure to keep their past secret right up to the end of their lives. Yet their whole lives through they had to live with the terrible nightmare of that past. What must they have had to endure? Recently a newspaper wrote about their psychological illnesses. Sixty years later almost no women have overcome the trauma. In the past they were slaves, now they are slaves to that past.

Gradually this generation of women is dying out. Fortunately some years ago the issue of comfort women was publicised by the women's association of the Korean churches (Korea Church Women United). At that time a few women committed to both feminism and the church were fighting sex tourism. In this context they tackled the issue of researching the comfort women's terrible history. In 1990 they founded the Korean Council for the comfort women. This Council received its first contact from a former comfort woman, Ms Kim Hak Sun in 1991. Since then more and more Korean former comfort women contacted the Korean Council and the Council began to provide financial support and rehabilitation for them through various activities. Following on from this former comfort women from the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, North Korea and the Netherlands also got in touch. They now say: "It is the Japanese government which should be ashamed and not us." Today 154 comfort women are known of in South Korea and around 220 in North Korea. Of those who are still alive around 40 Korean former comfort women demonstrate every Wednesday in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul - so far 430 times. They make the following demands: that the crime be exposed, that a public declaration of guilt be made to admit to the horrors, that reparations be paid to survivors and their relatives etc. But they are still waiting for a reply from the Japanese government. It wants to deny everything. And unfortunately Korean Christians demonstrate little interest in the issue and give hardly any support to the women's concern...

American troops were stationed in Korea when the Second World war came to an end. Where the American soldiers were deployed women soon arrived, seeing this as their only opportunity for survival. They came voluntarily, to seek money or to rebuild their future. Some women were lucky, their dreams would come true, but other women experienced only frustration - mistreated by the American soldiers and neglected by the Korean authorities. There were two reasons for this. The Korean war was more important to the American government than to the Korean. So an unequal treaty was signed by America and Korea (Status of Forces Agreement). The Koreans had no legal right to take action against American soldiers or to put them on trial. If Americans committed crimes they were to be sent back to America, but not brought to justice in Korea. Secondly, as far as the police and the authorities were concerned, good relations between America and Korea should not be put at risk because of these "dirty women". Sexual attacks or other criminality continued to increase - it is hardly possible to describe the cruelty. But no-one was interested. Many people said that it was the women who were responsible for everything. Recently a number of unspeakably cruel cases have come to light. The Korean government has woken up and protested against the unequal treaty. At present we are trying to correct this unequal treaty as best we can.

Even if Korean women do manage to emigrate to the USA, life does not hold much promise. How can they be happy in a country where they do not know the language, where they have no knowledge of the culture? It is even worse for them in America than in Korea. They are seen as being unworthy, as freaks, even though they are in the land of their dreams. Sometimes they become Christians and go to church to find comfort or help. But I do doubt whether the church accepts them with dignity and treats them as human beings. The church expects them to repent and to donate a lot of money, but otherwise to remain quiet. Their voices should not be heard. They are seen as sordid for two reasons, firstly because they are prostitutes and secondly because they have sex with blue-eyed foreigners. But what is the context for this? The Americans came to Korea because we had no means of self-defence.

It is possible to buy and to sell everything in our capitalist society. Today it is even possible for women to be imported or exported according to the rules of free trade. Many people say that the sex trade is a necessary evil. But the women who work in this trade are completely and utterly exploited. Quite apart from the fact that they face moral contempt and condemnation, they are victims of this trade. The women sacrifice themselves, often they become ill. It is other people who earn the money, the pimps, but also the police. Some people claim that prostitution is a job like any other, that women can choose to do it. But in Asia no woman voluntarily chooses prostitution. It is only because members of their family are ill, because of debts or for some other serious reason that women go into prostitution. They hope to quickly pay off their debts and then give up prostitution. But the path to freedom is not as easy as they imagine. The network of exploitation is so tightly woven that no woman by herself can liberate herself from it. The problem of prostitutes is not a private or an ethical problem, it is a societal and a structural issue. Prostitutes often face violence, sexual mistreatment, they become ill, they are murdered. The likelihood of being killed is much greater for prostitutes than for other women. Many people believe that women can be protected by tougher laws or prohibitions. But the problem is not so straightforward. Tougher laws mean that the pimps just keep the prostitutes under ever-tighter control. Prostitutes are then treated more and more roughly and become more and more isolated. Their passports or ID cards are confiscated and their very existence is completely denied.

At the moment sex tourism to Korea is very popular with Europeans and Americans. Many women came to Korea in the 1980s from the Philippines, Thailand, the former Soviet Union, Bolivia, Peru, Sri Lanka and other countries to earn money in the sex industry. It is said that a clear route exists which determines how women are collected and also where they are sent. It is an international and global network. In 2001, some 8,586 foreign women came to Korea claiming that they were going to work in the entertainment industry. But they neither dance nor do they sing, rather they work in the sex trade. Russian women in particular are very popular. Korean and Asian tourists are very interested in the European Russian women. But what they have to go through is simply indescribable. They have no passports, no money and no freedom that would allow them to return home. They live in a private prison - as long as they are healthy and young. As far as the pimps are concerned the women represent money in this business, they are movable assets. They are not able to decide freely whether to give up or not. Many former prostitutes later become inspectors and spies, and they are all the more able to keep the younger women under control because of their own experiences.

What can the church do for these women? Up to now the church has not really bothered very much about prostitutes, because prostitutes, written off as sinners, were treated as unclean. But when you look closer they are the innocent lambs on whom our sin is piled. Who can scorn them - their clients? the pimps? the police? or us? I believe that they are not guilty, but rather the guilty ones are those who undertake wars or exploit and mistreat them. I do not know if it is possible to abolish prostitution, but without any doubt we must make every effort to avoid war, to abolish the system of exploitation and to liberate women from the web weaves to entrap them. We need to give them our full support both financially and through pastoral as well as struggling on their behalf in society, for they are members of the body of Christ. When they suffer, we suffer with them. They have been made in the image of God. Until now we were too egotistical. We thought only about ourselves. Perhaps now the time is ripe for us to think about the whole body of Christ. We are many members, but one body. Thank You.