

# WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINE

## BACKGROUND

Women living in contexts of violent conflict and post-conflict have a critical role in fomenting peace and reconciliation. They are often the first to spot rising tensions, act to de-escalate conflict, and are on the frontline in supporting those suffering the consequences of violence.

They may not occupy formal leadership roles, but many find themselves in positions of public responsibility. In many parts of the Anglican Communion, the wives of bishops and clergy find themselves thrust into a very public office but without the practical and theological training that their husbands receive. While being called on to pastor their diocese or parish (and particularly the women within it), they are not always trained in the skills which enable them to live out this vocation with confidence. In situations of conflict, many are exhausted and traumatised, isolated from other women with similar experiences.<sup>1</sup>

## VISION

The vision of the *Women on the Frontline* initiative is threefold:

- i. to recognise and nurture women in the Church who live in contexts of conflict or post-conflict
- ii. to equip women to become ambassadors of reconciliation in their own context
- iii. to facilitate community-level reconciliation work led by women

All the work is based in-country, partnering with the local church, to ensure that it is both contextually appropriate and sustainable. We work within the Anglican Church structures, at the invitation of the Primate of the province. The bishops' and clergy wives whom we support can then in turn work with other clergy wives within their dioceses, who support women across the parish. Where possible, the women gather for training during moments in the Anglican calendar when they are already meeting, for example during the annual House of Bishops. This minimises cost and disruption to family life. For many of our programmes, it is the very first time the women have had opportunity to meet one another. *Women on the Frontline* thereby acts as a vital catalyst, bringing together women who share not only significant responsibilities and challenges in their roles as bishops/clergy wives, but also the context of ongoing and often violent conflict.

## CORE PRINCIPLES

Our way of working is guided by five core principles:

- i. **Presence**  
*Women on the Frontline* gathers together women in similar and highly conflicted contexts, who rarely or cannot meet otherwise. This physical manifestation of solidarity and care is critical, offering both

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<sup>1</sup> While this pattern is replicated in many parts of the Anglican Communion and beyond, we are aware that it is not true of all Anglican provinces. The Archbishop of Canterbury's Reconciliation Ministry team seek to support women and men involved in peacemaking in a variety of ways, of which *Women on the Frontline* is just one.

symbolic, moral encouragement and facilitating the sharing of experiences, practical and spiritual. The presence of the wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury (often known as ‘Mama Canterbury’) is often particularly significant for women who shoulder substantial and very public responsibilities alongside their husband’s ministry. Her willingness to visit and stand in solidarity with them in their home country reminds them that they are not forgotten, and that their ministry, whilst challenging, is significant and important.

**ii. Parity**

Women on the Frontline values the inclusion of women from all tribal, linguistic and social backgrounds. Throughout the retreat and training, all participants are encouraged to be themselves and to listen to one another as equals. Many of the women we work with lead lives governed by strict hierarchies of status. In our programmes, participants are encouraged to step beyond these for a little while – emphasising that the contribution of every participant is equally valuable.

**iii. Particularity**

Our role is to offer principles and tools which the women can use and adapt within the unique particularities of their own contexts. We do not prescribe solutions but support the women to grow in confidence in their identity in Christ and to discern and plan next steps in appropriate to the needs of women in their communities. We are a people-led, not project-led initiative, in which each training is tailored to the needs and stated priorities of the participants themselves.

**iv. Potential**

We recognise the potential of every woman we work with to become instruments of God’s grace and healing in their context – as women who are called, loved and chosen by Him. We have also seen how God has used and transformed the potential of the *Women on the Frontline* programme as a whole. It is a small initiative, working with limited resources – but is being used by God to do something far greater than the sum of its parts. Our approach is to work with a small group of women who can in turn provide similar support and encouragement to other women in their provinces and dioceses, enabling the impact to cascade and extend far beyond the confines of the initial programme.

**v. Prayer**

*Women on the Frontline* is underpinned by prayer – before, during and after each visit. Prayer is also integral to the retreat and training, and participants pray for one of their fellow participants for the duration. This has proved to be a particularly powerful element of the programme.

## 1. RETREAT

Our programmes always begin with a pivotal time of retreat. This is space set aside for connection between the women and with God, often led by Caroline Welby or another experienced retreat leader. Interactive sessions include short Bible reflection, prayer, worship and creative activity.

Caroline Welby’s Ignatian style of retreat is a new and different experience for most participants, with its non-prescriptive tone, and encouragement to bypass the thinking part of the brain in order to be fully present. It opens up a space in which the Spirit leads in surprising and unexpected ways, including lament and gratitude. It is often a time of healing in which relationships with God and with one another are deepened (reconciliation concerns healing what is broken, in our vertical relationship with God, and our horizontal relationships with one another). It lays important foundations for the training that follows.

For women who have very few opportunities to share with one another and who are far more accustomed to giving than receiving support, this time is particularly precious, allowing the expression of many hidden or buried sources of hope and despair. In our South Sudan programme in 2017, the transformation in just two days of retreat was remarkable. One woman moved from describing utter hopelessness on day one to a renewed sense of purpose, vocation and hope for South Sudan on day two.

## 2. TRAINING

The second part of the programme involves practical peace and reconciliation training, tailored to the specific needs of women in that context. Sessions include interactive workshops, drama, art and storytelling. Teaching is led by local experts in a particular field, and/or by the Archbishop's Reconciliation Ministry team. The purpose is to strengthen the women's skills and their confidence in using them in their communities; and to enable the women to discern where and how they can make a bigger impact, identifying the key challenges and possibilities of women in their communities. Where possible, the training is extended to a larger group than those receiving the retreat, possibly including ecumenical partners and Mothers' Union coordinators.

## 3. FOLLOW-UP

Planning for the future is an essential component of the *Women on the Frontline* programme. The aim is to sustain the supportive networks and skills developed during their time together, and to extend their reach in local communities, working through the church and related channels. We check in regularly with participants in the year following the programme and encourage church leaders to convene further meetings of the group.

*Women on the Frontline* adopts a cascade-down model in which participants of the first in-country programme (often bishops' wives) are encouraged to be ambassadors of reconciliation within their own dioceses, supporting and training clergy wives, who in turn are encouraged as reconcilers within their parish communities. In practice, this requires identifying flag-bearers for the programme, sometimes including an in-country "Mama" (often, but not always, a senior and experienced woman in the church) to mobilise the women to practice and pass on what they have learned.

Follow-up may also involve accessing additional training, planning a series of retreats or trainings for women at diocesan or parish levels, or initiating a new project. In South Sudan, two of the participants underwent an intensive 'train the trainer' programme and are now qualified to lead trainings for others in their communities. Where possible we link the women into existing programmes on the ground which are well placed to provide continued support.