

UNiTE in ACTIVISM

for

NO VIOLENCE against WOMEN

A 16-Day Bible Study Programme

Miranda Pillay



Artwork: "The Parcel – remembering Uyinene" by Chris Ahrends (ink and bleach)

To Chris Ahrends

For acknowledging your white male privilege and for being critical of patriarchal gatekeeping. Your gender activism can be traced back to a time when it was *not* deemed 'politically correct' – not in apartheid South Africa, and certainly not in the church. In 1989 you resigned your licence as a priest in solidarity with women who were continually denied access to the ordained ministry in the Anglican Church. A true ally in the struggle against gender injustice, you have been intentional about exercising your ministry in ways for all to flourish – women, men, straight, gay, youth. With a vision of “a church without walls” and a mission to “swimming upstream” against discrimination, your life and ministry is a reminder that words matter and that action matters more. Now, as you’re about to retire, you leave a legacy of gender advocacy, activism and ministry that are both pastoral and prophetic, dear priest, prophet, poet and friend.



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FOREWORD

REFLECT, RECOGNIZE, REVEAL

In this 16 Day Bible Study Programme Dr Miranda Pillay, with clarity and persuasiveness calls us

- ... to **REFLECT** on the Text of Scripture
- ... to **RECOGNIZE** the Patriarchal Backdrop of Scripture
- ... to experience the **REVELATION** of Scripture

This year's edition can be used in conjunction with last year's threefold call to PAUSE, PRAY, PLEDGE.

- "Pause" The 'space bar' on the keyboard is the Pause button.
It creates the spaces between words which makes the sentence readable and intelligible.
To read the signs of the times and to make sense of what is going on around us we need to 'Pause'.
This programme invites us to Pause often.
- "Pray" To Pray is to communicate, or create the environment in which communication can take place,
which calls for deep silence and active listening. This programme calls us to Pray daily.
- "Pledge" To Pledge is to commit and to signal a willingness and a generosity of spirit to act. We want to make
our words count, to incarnate them. The word became flesh and dwelt amongst us.

God speaks and things come into being. This programme invites us to become creative. Pause, Pray, Pledge is a dynamic triad of action and within this activity we are called by Miranda Pillay to "hear the word of the Lord today" through the Daily Bible Studies and the incisive questions, which sparks our thinking into seeing the texts of scripture in a new light.

This year's edition of 16 Days of Bible Study, by Dr Miranda Pillay, is dedicated to Canon Chris Ahrends. Chris Ahrends has coined a provocative and controversial phrase ... "burn the pews" (btp). It is really a metaphor for calling for the dismantling of divisive and oppressive structures. Pews can be very divisive by keeping people locked and only looking at other people from the back. "Btp." is a powerful call to breakdown systems of abuse of power.

This Daily Programme for 16 Days of Activism comes to us as a gift to be treasured and used. We are indebted to Miranda Pillay for this work so appropriately dedicated to Chris Ahrends, a daughter and son of the Diocese of Saldana Bay, who have contributed so richly to our development in theological thinking and prayerful living.

+Raphael

Introductory Remarks¹

This year (2020), the 16-day period of activism for no violence against women – 25 November to 10 December – starts off with five days of mourning the many lives lost through GBV, femicide and Covid-19. From Wednesday, 25 November to Sunday, 29 November the South African flag will be flown at half-mast between 6am and 6pm daily. Last year, the spike in violence against women (VAW) and femicide resulted in gender-based violence (GBV) being declared a national crisis in South Africa.²

Now, Covid-19 has also put an international spotlight on GBV. The United Nations (UN Women) declared GBV a ‘shadow pandemic’. While GBV, particularly VAW, has been prevalent in families and communities long before Covid-19 struck, recent reports indicate an increase in GBV during this global health crisis. The UN’s “UNiTE” campaign calls on all spheres of societies – including faith communities –to employ intervention strategies aimed at preventing and ending GBV.³ Like so many who are advocates and activists for justice, my hope is that women and men of faith will stand united against gender injustice in all its manifestations.

Many scholars and activists point to the fact that the Bible has been used as a tool of oppression by those in power to justify and defend slavery, racism, apartheid and sexism. They also point out that, while many women were activists against apartheid (the ideology behind white supremacy) in South Africa, the majority of men in this country are slow in recognizing that patriarchy upholds male supremacy and justifies systemic sexism – both of which are social drivers of violence against women.⁴

The question for us today is: How can we, Christians, unite to prevent the violence perpetrated against women just because they are women? UNiTE in ACTIVISM for NO VIOLENCE against WOMEN is an invitation to Christian men and women to participate in a 16-day Bible Study Programme aimed at fostering solidarity in our quest to mitigate against, and end the scourge of VAW.

1 For more on the context and relevance of this Bible Study Programme see the pages at the back of this booklet.

2 We remember, amongst others, Meghan Cremer: I was found dumped in a sand mine on a Philippi farm with a rope around my neck. I was a 30-years old avid showjumping-horse rider; Uyinene Mrwetyana: I was raped and murdered in a post office in Claremont before my body was dumped. I was a 19-year old University of Cape Town student; Jesse Hess: I was murdered on a bed in our Parow home. My grandfather, Chris, was tied up and killed in the toilet. I was a 19-year old theology student at the University of the Western Cape; Janika Mallo: I was raped and found half-naked with my head bashed in in my grandmother’s garden. I was a 14-year old schoolgirl; Leighandre “Baby Lee” Jegels: I was shot and killed by a police officer ex-boyfriend – a police officer. He also shot and wounded my mother, Rita. I was a 25-year old boxing champion.

3 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/take-action/16-days-of-activism>.

4 Patriarchy, in broad terms refers to male-headship and male rule giving men privilege and power over women. See my article “The Anglican Church and feminism: Challenging the patriarchy of our faith (2013)”, <http://repository.uwc.ac.za/xmlui/handle/10566/1986>.

We are aware that there are huge differences between the world of the Bible and the world we live in today. We are also aware that the common thread in these diverse worldviews of ancient Biblical texts and contemporary contexts, is patriarchy. Thus, being alert to the patriarchal nature of Biblical texts is crucial in discerning the meaning of God's word in contexts where women suffer abuse in what is perceived to be "a man's world".

Methodology

How do we "hear the word of the Lord" today? One aspect of our discernment is to **reflect** on the *content* of the text being read. It means a 'close reading' of the text – looking, for example, at the characters (named and unnamed), the story-line, who says what to whom to what effect, and why. Sometimes, the text itself requires of one to read beyond a particular selected text to get a fuller picture of what is 'going on' in the text.

A second aspect is to **recognise** the 'normal' patriarchal patterns and possible interruptions of patriarchal norms in Biblical texts. It is important to recognizing patterns of oppression and abuse of power and to be alert to whether and how such patterns are condoned or confronted. This requires one to ask questions about the *context* of the text. Information about the literary-, political-, social-, cultural-, religious, economic- and ideological contexts of ancient texts will help us recognise what is being communicated, described, prescribed, confronted, confirmed, and why.






Thirdly, in discerning the word of God, it is our responsibility as people of faith, to explore and examine a Biblical text in such a way that it **reveals** its life-affirming and life-giving potential. This way the Bible becomes a resource towards healing and wholeness for individuals, families and communities in society. For this to happen we have to hold in tension three things: (1) Remember that we have all been created in love, by Love, through love, for love. (2) Develop a critical consciousness of reactionary push backs by those who justify and defend male-headship as "God's natural order". (3) We have to be mindful of the fact that we bring our own pre-conceived ideas about the text to the text and that we sometime hear what we want to hear.

How to use this Bible Study Programme

The 16-day Bible study programme is a follow-up on the *PAUSE-PRAY-PLEDGE* Daily Programme which I produced last year for the 16 Days of Activism for NO VIOLENCE against women & girls. This 2019 resource gives more background and insights into GBV, particularly the violence (seen and unseen) perpetrated against women by men. The prayers in *PAUSE-PRAY-PLEDGE* may be used at the start or end of each Bible study.⁵

⁵ Copies available from drmiranda@mirandapillay.co.za

While the Bible Study Programme has been specifically developed for use over the dedicated 16-day period, 25 November to 10 December 2020, it could also be used at any other time, as long as violence perpetrated by men against women remain a lived experience in many (if not all) relationships and communities.

-  When responding to the questions asked, do so in ways that will help you develop your own thoughts even though ideas about a particular text have been shaped and influenced by past interpretations, through engagement with the texts and listening to sermons or sayings about them.
-  Keep in mind that the questions set on selected texts from the Old- and New Testament are embedded in a Reflect-Recognize-Reveal methodology, as explained above.
-  The Programme could be followed in small groups. Personal & collective insights and commitments might lead to transforming personal- and communal relationships in the family-, church- and work environments.
-  While face-to-face meetings may not be possible or advisable during Covid-19, virtual meetings could also generate transformative insights and commitments.
-  Individuals or members in the same household may follow the 16-day programme as part of 'quiet time'/meditation.

16-Day Bible Study Programme

Day 1: A tale of two stories

Read: Genesis 1:26-3; Genesis 2:20-24; Genesis 5:1-2

1. Compare Genesis 1:26-3 and Genesis 2:20-24
 - (a) What are your thoughts and feelings when you read these two very different accounts of the creation of man and woman?
 - (b) "Hear the word of the Lord" applies to both texts. Should we take the creation story literally? What are the implications if we do? And, if we don't?
 - (c) According to the 'first'⁶ creation story, God created both man and woman in God's "own image" Gen 1:27.

⁶ It is thought that Gen. 2 is, in fact, the earlier story and that these two different accounts of the creation story reflect different social and economic contexts – the earlier account (Gen2) takes into account the lived-reality of a rural, agrarian context where physical strength is needed to provide and survive, while the later account (Gen 1) reflects a more urban context.

- (i) If women and men are created in the image of God, What does it say about women; about men; about God?
 - (ii) What then, do you make of Paul's message to the people in Corinth when he says that a man "is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman but woman for man" (1 Cor11:7-9)?
 - (iii) What would you say to Paul if he told you, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first" was his (Paul's) advice to Timothy (1Tim 2:12-13)?
- (d) What would you say is the value of considering both creation stories for women and men in your context?

Day 2: *Rape is Rape*

Read: Genesis 19:1-14

1. What comes to mind when you hear "Sodom and Gomorrah"?
2. "Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof" (Gen 19:8)
 - (a) Why, do you think Lot protected the two male guests in his house from being raped (sodomised) by the men of Sodom, but was willing to give his young daughters to be raped by the mob?
 - (b) What about verse 8 is oppressive, abusive and degrading towards women today?
3. How, if in any way, might this reading (**Gen 19:1-14**) help us today to:
 - (a) Condemn the sexual exploitation of girl children?
 - (b) Stop demonizing our fellow sisters and brothers who identify as LGBTQI+?
4. Now Read: Judges 19:15-30 and reflect on:
 - (a) How the "old man" in Judges model Lot's behaviour?
 - (b) The gang rape of the concubine.
5. "Such a thing has never been seen or done ... Think about it! Consider it! Tell us what to do!" This is the advice given at the close of Chapter 19 where a woman was gang-raped and left to die.
 - (a) Has "such a thing" ever happened in your context?⁷
 - (b) How would you implement the advice given in Judges 19: Think about it! Consider it! Tell us what to do!?"

7 In the article The Anglican Church and Feminism: Challenging the Patriarchy of our Faith, I mention the gang-rape and murder of 17-year old Anene Booysen of Bredasdorp in 2013.

Day 3: *Giving and ‘Taking’ a Woman*

Read: Genesis 20: 1-18

1. According to the reading King Abimelech would only be guilty of a sin (punishable by God) if he had sex with Sarah because she was another man’s wife. The king could get away with “taking” Sarah if she had been Abraham’s half-sister (v12) only, and not also his wife.

If you could, what question would you want to ask:

- (a) God
 - (b) Abraham
 - (c) Sarah
 - (d) King Abimelech
-
2. Abimelech, a king, had the power to ‘take’ any woman he desired and “make her his wife” – but not if the woman was already married. The only way a man could “take” another man’s wife was to kill the husband.⁸ Abraham, a newcomer in a foreign kingdom, knew that by making it known that Sarah was his sister, would make her sexually available to a man desires her, and there would be no reason for anyone to get rid of him.⁹ Abraham said to Sarah “Wherever we go, tell everyone that I am your brother, “This is how you can show your love to me” (Gen 20:13b).
 - (a) Like the daughters of Abraham’s nephew, Lot, Sarah is “given” by a man she loves to be sexually exploited by other men. How does this exploitation of women’s sexuality make you feel?
 - (b) Can you think of any examples in your own context where women sacrifice their bodies and being for the sake of the men in their life?
 - (c) In light of this Bible study, what are your thoughts about the question “Who gives this woman to be married to this man”? asked in the marriage service after which the priest “receives the woman from the hand of her father” and passes her on to the groom¹⁰?

Day 4: *Patriarchy: Our Land, Our Women*

Read: Numbers 27:1-11

1. The idea that sons (and not daughters) carry a father’s name and memory is evident in verse 1 where the genealogy of Zelophehad traces his roots to his great-grandfather and all the way back to Joseph (Gen 41:51). Zelophehad had died during the journey

⁸ Remember what King David did to Uriah (2 Sam 11)?

⁹ Isaac said the same of his wife Rebekah (Gen 26:7-10).

¹⁰ An Anglican Prayer Book (1989:463).

from Egypt (Num 27:3), leaving no sons to inherit land allotted to him and his brothers (Num 34:2). The names of Zelophehad's five daughters are listed and their agency recorded as they reason with Moses that, for the sake of their dead father's name and memory, his inheritance ought to be given to them and not his brothers.

- (a) Are there incidences in your context today where sons only inherit their parents' property? If so, why do you think this is still the case?
 - (b) Look at the well-thought-through reasons the daughters give (Num 27:3-4), basing their appeal on their father's loyalty to Moses and to God.¹¹ **What would daughters who might find themselves in a similar situation today base their arguments on?**
2. The outcome of the daughters' appeal against their property going to men in the family is clear, "If a man dies and leaves no son, turn his inheritance over to his daughter" (Num 27:8).

Now read: Numbers 36: 1-12

- (a) What are your thoughts about:
 - (i) The counter-argument made by the male relatives of Zelophehad (36:2-4)?
 - (ii) God's "change of mind" and the setting of restrictions for the five sisters (Num 36:5-9)
- 3. Are there instances in your context where counter arguments are made against gender justice?
- 4. The five sisters complied with the conditions set, and married their cousins on their father's side (Num 36:10-12).
 - (a) What do you think might be the reasons the sisters complied?
 - (b) Do you know of any instances today where women have to comply with conditions or restriction because their views are dismissed or because their reasoning/ views do not count?
- 5. What insights have you gained from doing this study on Numbers 27 and 36 and how could you apply it in your personal and communal life?

Day 5: *Power in Storytelling*

Read: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

1. This is a lectionary reading for Sunday 1 August 2021. After the reading we will be prompted to say "Thanks be to God". **In your view, what is it we could or should be "thankful" for in this reading?**

¹¹ Read Numbers 16:1-50 to see why the daughters think their father does not deserve to be punished and 'forgotten'.

2. The lectionary reading ends rather abruptly in the middle of verse 13. When you include the rest of verse 13 and verse 14, **what concerns might this text raise in your context today?**
3. What do you know about the characters, named and unnamed, in this text?
4. David is to be punished because he had done something that “displeased the Lord” when he “took” Uriah’s wife and then had him killed (2 Sam 11:2-17). Part of God’s punishment is: “Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight (2 Sam 12:11-12). **What are your thoughts about the way women are (ab)used in this text?**
5. Notwithstanding the dis-ease that present-day readers might feel when reflecting on the way women are treated in the text, the lesson David learns from the story Nathan tells him is that, exploiting the poor and vulnerable and taking advantage of those whom you have power over and are expected to care for, are wrong and offensive (1 Sam 11:26-12:7). **In what way can this lesson be extended in your context to bring men who abuse their positions of power to exploit and manipulate those who trust and ‘look up’ to them?**

Day 6: Deborah – Lead woman, lead

Read: Judges 4:1-24

In these 24 verses of Chapter 4 in the book of Judges we learn that a woman leader of the Israelites saved her people from the tyranny of Jabin, the Canaanite king. In Chapter 5 Deborah repeats the victory in poetry and the chapter ends reassuringly, “Then the land had peace for forty years”. This stands in stark comparison with the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert.

These two chapters (Judges 4 & 5) give us a glimpse into the leadership of this woman judge, warrior, prophet and poet. She is the only woman judge in the Bible and one of five women prophets in the Old Testament.¹²

- ❖ Deborah judged wisely (4:5) and, like Moses, she was God’s representative (4:6).
- ❖ She led with authority when the military commander, Barak, dictated conditions to the command she gives him (4:6-10).
- ❖ Her prophecy to Barak, “...the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman” came true when the Canaanite army commander, Sisera, was defeated by another woman, Jael (4:9-22).
- ❖ Deborah has personal agency. Her decisions are directed by wisdom from God, and not because of her relationship to her husband, or another man.

- (a) Consider how the two women in Judges 4:1-24 challenge gender stereotypes and gender roles then, and now.

¹² The other four women prophets are Miriam (Exod. 15:20), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22), Noadiah (Neh. 6:14), and “the prophetess” (Isa. 8:3).

- (b) Women are not powerless by nature. How can this text be a resource in your context for transforming harmful theologies and traditions that render women powerless?

Day 7: *Different Strokes for different Folks*

Read: 1 Tim 2:8-15

1. 1 Tim 2: 8-15 has been used to justify the exclusion of women from positions of teaching, preaching and decision-making. Paul advises Timothy, who is the pastor at the church in Ephesus (1 Tim1:3) that “a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. “I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim 2: 11-13).
 - (a) What are the reasons Paul gives for not permitting a woman to teach or have authority over a man?
 - (b) In light of the two creation stories (Day 1 above), what do you think of the reasons Paul gives for why a woman should not be allowed to have authority over a man?
2. The idea that women should learn in quietness and full submission is in conflict with other passages in the New Testament. (e.g. 1 Cor 11:5). Besides, elsewhere Paul speaks highly of women being active in ministry. Women are also Paul’s “fellow-workers” (Philippians 4:2 - 3, Acts 18:24 - 25 and Romans 16:1-16).
 - (a) To what would you ascribe the different teachings in Paul’s letters?
 - (b) Have you experienced in your own context (past or present) how some of Paul’s teachings are emphasized in order to exclude women from leadership and decision-making positions, while other Pauline texts which speak of women as teaching and leading figures have been ignored?
 - (c) What insights have you gained from this study that might advocate against the exclusion or exploitation of women’s work and time in the church?

Day 8: *Interrupting His-story*

Read Matthew 1:1-16

1. This first book in the New Testament starts with “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ son of Abraham”. Genealogies are long lists of *son-of-so-and-so* or *father-of-so-and-so*, which we usually skip over and ignore. But, there’s something different about this listing of Jesus’ ancestry.
 - (a) Read through the list of names in Matthew (1:1-16) and compare it to Luke’s genealogy of Jesus (Lk 3:23-38)
 - (b) How many women are there in Matthew’s account?
 - (c) What do you know about each of them?

2. Besides the women sticking out like a sore thumb because it would not be usual to include the names of women in one's ancestry – especially not that of Jesus who is called Christ – all these women had a 'scandalous' past. Even today, the older generation still judge a person's character or standing on the basis of the character or standing in the community of her/his mother or father.
 - (a) Do you know of any women in your circle whose past is not considered 'honourable' and whom you'd be hesitant in admitting her being related to you?
 - (b) In the case of the women in Jesus' ancestry, what was perceived as 'scandal' was due to perceptions and rules/ laws based on biases regarding their race, ethnicity, class, culture, religion and gender. **Do you know of any woman in your context who is frowned upon or criticised because of circumstance of sacrifice?**

Day 9: A Woman's Touch

Read: Mark 5:21-34

1. In this text there are two intercalated healing stories: Jesus is on his way to save a twelve-year old girl from dying when he was 'touched' by a woman suffering "the issue of blood" for twelve years – most probably vaginal bleeding.¹³ Having a very long menstrual period is not uncommon in women about to enter menopause. But to bleed continuously (whether intermittent or not) would have been a heavy burden on a woman in a culture where she was deemed to be impure/ unclean when menstruating. In fact, she was not to touch anyone or handle any eating utensil that anyone else might use, because the belief was that, that person too will be made unclean.¹⁴ So important was this story in the early church, that it is recorded in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew 9:18–22, Mark 5:21–34, Luke 8:40–48).
 - (a) The woman must have been sure that Jesus himself would not be defiled by her touching him. See Mark 1:40-42 for what she might have based her decision to touch Jesus on.
 - (b) Jesus was responding to a request from a synagogue leader to save his daughter from dying. **What, for you, is significant about Jesus' action when he stopped to speak to someone in the crowd?**
2. What, if any, parallels can be drawn from:
 - (a) The woman's twelve 12 years of bleeding and the young girl's age?
 - (b) Jairus' faith and the woman's faith in Jesus' power to heal? (See verses 23b and 28).
3. "Daughter, your faith has healed you, Go in peace and be freed from your suffering"

¹³ Heavy menstrual bleeding (period) happens in women who are *perimenopausal* – meaning a longer than usual period before menopause sets and she'll be past childbearing age, usually around the age of fifty. Many girls have their first period at the age of twelve – indicating the start of her ability to bear children. This observation is not irrelevant considering that, in that context, a woman's main function in life was to bear children – especially sons.

¹⁴ See Leviticus 15:19-28.

- (a) If the woman could “feel in her body that she was freed from her suffering” (Mk 5:29), what suffering is it she still has to be freed from when she goes back to her family/ community? (Mk 5:34).

Day 10: One Woman Blesses Another

Read: Luke 1:5-25; 39-45

1. The picture many of us have of Elizabeth, is that of a barren woman whom God makes fruitful in her old age.¹⁵ We sense that she was shamed into silence by a society that sanctioned motherhood as the primary source of honour for a woman. But, if listen carefully to the text, we’ll hear that Elizabeth’s worth is not only in her womb, but also in her voice and ‘priestly’ hands. Luke makes a point of mentioning that, like her husband Zechariah, Elizabeth also descends from a priestly line.
 - (a) What do you think about this reversal: Because Zechariah hesitated to believe that Elizabeth could “bear him a son” (Lk1:13-18) he was shamed into silence (19-22) while Elizabeth’s disgrace was “taken away” (Lk1:25) and she had to speak publically on behalf of her husband?
 - (b) Elizabeth *speaks up* and names her son because the father who is, culturally speaking, the only one allowed to name a boy child, could not speak. (Lk1:61-63).
Note the circumstances under which Zechariah’s voice returned (Luke 1:61-64).
2. Elizabeth says to Mary, “Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished” (Lk1:45).
 - (a) Compare Zechariah’s response upon hearing that his wife, who was “well on in years”, will give birth to a son (1:18), to the response of Mary (1:38), who was a virgin when she heard that she “will be with child and give birth to a son”.
 - (b) Note that it is Elizabeth who pronounces a blessing upon Mary, and not her priest husband, whose voice had been silenced by God. **What are your thoughts?**

Day 11: All is Fair in Love and Law

Read: John 8:1-12

1. While Jesus was teaching those who gathered around him in the temple precincts, some Pharisees and Scribes brought to him a woman “caught in the act of adultery”. Appealing to the Law of Moses which requires that she be stoned, they ask Jesus to judge her case. But Jesus bends down to write on the ground with his finger. When they continue to press him for an answer (8:7) Jesus stands up and addresses the

¹⁵ As was the case with women in the Old Testament, like Sarah, Rachel, Hannah and others.

Pharisees and Scribes. “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (8:7).

Jesus did not argue against the law commanded by Moses but his response to the group of men pointed to the blind spot in their own vulnerability and guilt. This reminds us that the defenders of the law are not always the keepers of the law.

- (a) Can you imagine the scene of this crime. One person caught in the act of adultery!
 - (b) Do you see a connection between the men’s reference to the Law of Moses and Jesus’ act of writing?
 - (c) Do you wonder what Jesus was writing on the ground? What do you think it might have been, or who it might have been about?
 - (d) What do you notice about Jesus’ posture? Have you had an experience where body language speaks louder than words?
 - (e) What new insights have emerged for you from engagement with this text?
2. Often the focus of John 8 is on the Pharisees as the ‘bad boys’ because they were using the question [about the law] to trap Jesus (Jn8:6). The fact that the men were using the woman for their own devious purpose is seldom recognised. Is our blind spot perhaps because we condemn the woman on the basis of Jesus’ last words to her?

Day 12: *Boundaries that Burden*

Read: Mathew 15:21-28

1. A non-Jewish woman, a Canaanite cries out to Jesus, asking him to help her daughter who “is suffering terribly from demon-possession”. As a woman, a gentile and a foreigner she certainly did not know her place! “Send her away, for she keeps crying after us”, the disciples advise Jesus. What follows is a profound theological discussion. **What is it about the woman’s argument that was persuasive?**
2. A closer look at the text and its context points to the fact that Jesus’ reference to ‘dogs’ was describing a normal practice, not confirming it. Jews, who believed themselves to be superior in the eyes of God, usually referred to Gentiles as dogs. Besides, Jesus had already granted a similar request from a Gentile man who, like the Gentile woman, asked Jesus’ help on behalf of someone else (Matthew 8:5-13). **What burdens of discriminatory prejudices do boundaries based on race, class and gender do you see in your own context?**
3. The Canaanite woman understands Jesus’s mission better than both the Pharisees who are blind guides (Matt 15:14) and the disciples who “are still dull” (Matt 15:16). **Does the heading, “The Faith of the Canaanite Woman” convey all there is to this story?**

Day 13: *In Her Memory*

Read: Mark 14:1-11

The scene shifts from chief priests and scribes plotting to arrest Jesus and kill him to a dinner at the home “Simon the Leper”. Here an unnamed woman pours very expensive perfume on Jesus’ head. The woman’s action was not welcome and the guests express much criticism. Jesus interrupts them and sings the woman’s praises.

1. This unnamed woman “did what she could” (14:8). **Did she perhaps know and understood what was about to happen? Was this a prophetic act?**
2. How are we to tell the story “in memory of her” when we don’t know her name?
3. Read verses 9 and 10 again. **What prompted Judas to go to the chief priests?**
4. Note that the woman spent money to do “a beautiful thing” for Jesus with her hands while Judas was about to make money by handing Jesus over. **Does this observation reflect anything in your own context?**

Day 14: *See This Woman?*

Read: Luke 7: 36-50

Here Jesus is having dinner at the house of Simon, the Pharisee. When Jesus ‘accepts’ the touch of an unnamed woman, it disturbs Simon so much that he thinks Jesus could not be a prophet or an honourable man.

1. Jesus tells Simon a story. **What is it that Simon is supposed to learn from it?**
2. Simon does not know that Jesus is a prophet. **Do you think the woman knows?**
3. See this woman? **What new picture of her emerge from Jesus’ interaction with her and Simon?**
4. What is it that demonstrated the woman’s faith?
5. Can you think of ways to demonstrate faith through being hospitable in your own context?

Day 15: *Go, Tell...*

Read: John 20:10-18

“Mary”! Her first reaction was to embrace him. Hearing him call her by her name, must have caused her heart to jump with joy. Jesus calls her by name without identifying her with the place she comes from – Magdala. He recognizes her for who she is and not where she’s from.

1. What is the first thing Mary tells the disciples?
2. Why, do you think, Mary was the first person whom Jesus appeared to?
3. Is it possible that she was the “beloved disciple”? (See John 1:37-40).
4. “Rabboni”! Her immediate reaction was to reach out and hug him like she used to. But Jesus has a mission, and so does she. “Go... go tell ...”
5. Go! Tell... What is your mission in a context where violence is perpetrated against women – just because they are women?

Day 16: *Back at the Well*

Read: John 4:1-42

This is the longest conversation Jesus has had with anyone – with a woman at the well in Samaria. It becomes clear, from the text, that there was much dispute between Samaritans and Jews. The woman raises a number of religious and theological issues during her very long conversation with Jesus. One could say that she's the spokesperson for the Samaritan people. In verses 16-19 we hear that the woman has had five husbands but it appears Jesus is not particularly interested in the details of why she was not married or what happened in her relationships with the husbands she's had.

1. What preconceived ideas did you have about the Samaritan woman?
2. Do you know why there was animosity between Jews and Samaritans?
3. The gossip stories we pick up about someone, especially why a woman is not married or why she's divorced, can paint a blurred, tainted picture of who she really is. Has that ever happened to someone in your context?
4. What are your thoughts about the reciprocity in the story as Jesus asks the woman for water, and also that he has water to offer?
5. Water is a central image in John's Gospel. Water is essential for life and living – the development and growth of new life as well as the birthing process. Jesus asks a drink of water from a woman, a Samaritan woman, a Samaritan woman with no husband.

Jesus always seems to risk being ridiculed and have his reputation tarnished when it comes to women. BUT Jesus continues to interrupt patterns, attitudes and practices that put women at a disadvantage; that exclude them; that dismiss their contributions; that make them invisible; that alienate them from community AND Jesus offers living water to nurture healthy relationships where all can flourish.

Let's go to the Source of our faith, drink from the well and be UNITED in ACTIVISM for NO VIOLENCE against women. Go, tell...

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Additional Content on the Context and Relevance of this Bible Study Programme

This year, 2020, is being celebrated as the “year of the Bible” by the Bible Society of South Africa.¹⁶ Besides the many translations nationally and internationally, there are also a number of different versions of the Bible. And, as we know, the bible is used for many different reasons by different people in a variety of contexts and circumstances with different, sometimes contradictory, results. Different people use the same Bible to help them decide on moral issues (such as human sexuality, capital punishment), and often come to opposite conclusions.

One common factor though is that we, Christians, believe the Bible to be “the word of God”. In this Bible study programme we explore what this might mean. We acknowledge that prayer is central in our discernment of God’s word, but we also know that we have to be responsible about the way we read the Bible. It does influence and shape how we understand ourselves in relation to God, in relation to others, in relation to possessions, in relation to the earth and all that is in/ on it.

We have to approach the Bible with a sense of wonder and respect. In this collection of books and letters, people from long ago, in situations different from our own, witness to their relation of love and trust in a living God – a God who created them, continued to provide for them, and saved them. They testify to God’s life-giving presence in their ordinary, every-day lives. But they also lament the pain and suffering that result from living in a world of strife and struggle and competition and oppression as they navigate the changing political, religious and cultural landscapes of their time.

Some questions for our time are: How can we hear the words in the Bible in ways that would bring about healing and wholeness in relationships so that everyone is treated with dignity? How can the Bible help us respond wisely and responsibly to diversity of opinion, culture, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, nationality, etc? How can the Bible influence and shape our understanding of identity – of who we are and whose we are?

Can the Bible truly shape and reform the memory, language, and culture and religious beliefs of individual people, communities and societies?

While there is explicit, or implied evidence in the Bible that oppressive attitudes and practices normalized by those in power are interrupted and confronted, the Bible itself is not a treasure trove for advocating against violence in general, or violence against women in particular. However, if we consider Jesus’ reaction and action to the treatment of women in first century

¹⁶ Over the past 200 years, the Bible Society has produced Bibles for South Africans in eleven different languages.

Palestine, we may conclude that Jesus was an activist for NO VIOLENCE against women in a context where patriarchal biblical laws and cultural norms privileged men. I dare say, if Christians believe that Jesus is the word (of God) made flesh, then Christian women and men ought to follow the example set by Jesus and unite in activism for no violence against women.

UNiTE in ACTIVISM for NO VIOLENCE against WOMEN is a 16-day Bible Study Programme aimed at fostering solidarity between Christian men and women for the purpose of shining light on GBV and illuminate the pain and devastation inflicted on, and suffered by women, just because they are women. Many scholars, particularly the work of feminist theologians, point to the fact that the Bible has been used as a tool of oppression by those in power to justify and defend slavery, racism, apartheid and sexism. They've also point out that, while many women were activists against apartheid (the ideology behind white supremacy) in South Africa, the majority of men in this country are slow in recognizing that patriarchy upholds male supremacy and justifies systemic sexism – both of which are social drivers of violence against women.

Violence and violation of women's bodies and being have roots in every-day, 'normal' attitudes, behaviour and practices in families, faith communities, places of work, etc. – the most subtle of which is exclusion, marginalization and exploitation. In many instances it is 'normal' to defend culturally determined gender roles that give men power over women. Male supremacy is also accepted and defended as 'normal' when the Bible is used to justify male-headship and the subservient role of women. Thus patriarchy (male dominance) is given a double holy-halo by culture and religion.¹⁷

Women are often excluded from male dominated spaces based on headship theology embedded in patriarchy. When they are represented in patriarchal normative circles, women's views and ideas are generally not taken seriously.¹⁸ Women's voices are often muted, ignored, corrected or simply not heard. For example, the insistence on the use of gender inclusive liturgical language is, more often than not, trivialized and dismissed as irrelevant.¹⁹

Where women do occupy positions equal to that of men they are often not paid equally and their authority is undermined and ignored. Women who exercise authority in occupations previously reserved for men are often labelled "bossy" or "unladylike" while men exercising the same authority are seen to be exhibiting good, firm leadership. It is clear that while the laws of the country, South Africa, have changed, and women now have access to positions of power and decision-making, patriarchal power remains pervasively prevalent. This is

¹⁷ See my article "Women, priests and patriarchal ecclesial spaces in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa: On 'interruption' as a transformative rhetorical strategy" (2020:2), <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/5820>.

¹⁸ See my articles "Women, Priests and the Anglican Church in Southern Africa: Reformation of Holy Hierarchies" (2017), https://repository.uwc.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10566/3299/Pillay_Women-priests_2017.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

¹⁹ See "Women, priests and patriarchal ecclesial spaces in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa: On 'interruption' as a transformative rhetorical strategy" (Pillay: 2020), <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/5820>.

especially the case when the Bible is (ab)used to defend male supremacy and justify the exclusion, exploitation and marginalization of women. This ill treatment of women is a violation of their dignity and an obstacle for women to flourish as beings created in the image of God.

As a root cause of violence against women, patriarchy is a death-dealing reality that robs women of abundant, dignified life. Patriarchal violence (physical, emotional, economical, spiritual) also puts at stake the dignity of men.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu argues that 'freedom' from apartheid was not only meaningful for people of colour, but it also meant freedom for white people – from their claims to superiority. In the same way, men cannot be truly free as long as women are not.

In our quest to unite in activism for no violence against women, we should heed the call made by Professor Denise Ackermann: that men should join women in the struggle against discrimination, abuse and violation. The dignity of men is as stake as much as the dignity of women.

Being made aware of one's own gender biases and interrupting patriarchal privilege afforded to men at the expense of violating women's bodies and being, is what this 16-day Bible study programme is about.



Psalm 139:13 -24

For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

How precious to me are your thoughts, God!

How vast is the sum of them!

Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.

If only you, God, would slay the wicked!

Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!

They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.

Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?

I have nothing but hatred for them;

I count them my enemies.

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Amen