

**Statement of the Indian Women Theologians' Forum (IWTF)
Annual Meeting, 24th – 26th April, 2016,**

on

“Liberating Christ” in the Indian Context: A Feminist Theological Search.

As Indian feminist theologians committed to a Church in which all, female, male and transpersons, are one in Jesus Christ, 15 women from different parts of the country gathered at Montfort Spirituality Centre, Bangalore from 24th - 26th April, 2016 to reflect on the theme: *“Liberating Christ” in the Indian Context: A Feminist Theological Search.*

Our deliberations began by defining theology as an articulation of our knowledge of God in the daily business of living, thereby moving the discourse from text to context and the texture of life. Taking our life stories as the locus of our theologizing, we looked into our experiences of Christ at the different stages of our lives. Our shared transitions from a cultic to a liberating experience of Christ helped us to discover Christ outside the box of traditional Christology, as a God who stands with us in our human struggles, who is at home and incarnated in the lives of the marginalized and who is experienced as the Cosmic Christ, beyond religions and even anthropocentric Christian categories.

From the personal, we moved to encounter Jesus in the pain-filled and sometimes hopeless stories that are so much a part of the fabric of India. We recognized him in the crucifixion of our Dalit sisters and brothers who courageously struggle to climb out of the abyss of caste, people like Rohith Vemula and his mother Radhika, and the countless couples that dare to cross caste and sub-caste boundaries only to be sacrificed in honor killings. Using powerful art forms and images that enabled new depths of understanding we watched Jesus suffer as women's bodies were broken and their blood shed in the struggle for survival and in the domestic violence, deprivation and neglect that were their lot.

We critiqued however, the traditional use of Jesus as the “suffering servant of Yahweh” to glorify suffering. Instead, we affirm him as a person of conviction, making a choice for justice and Truth that involved challenging the religious authorities of his times and initiating a counter culture. Jesus' suffering and crucifixion were a consequence of this choice. This Jesus stands as an inspiration to women who have been taught to “suffer in silence”, and urges them to demolish the social, political and religious structures of their oppression. In the triumph of their rising above their crushing circumstances, we witness the power of the resurrection.

As feminist theologians, we find that our answers to Jesus' crucial question “Who do you say that I am?” are coloured by our experiences of exclusion from ordained ministry and leadership in the Church. We recognize that the image of ‘Jesus the male savior’ has been used as a powerful patriarchal tool to privilege men over women in the Church. The maleness of Jesus has been assumed to reveal the maleness of God (Jn 14:9); it has been presented as the norm for what it means to be human; and its historical reality has been appropriated and presented as a theomorphic and Christomorphic identity, one beyond the reach of women. Consequently, since

women can never bear a “natural resemblance” to Christ, they must remain in perpetual subjugation to a patriarchal clerical hierarchy.

Using a feminist lens we sought to liberate Christ from this prison of patriarchal ideology. We understand Jesus’ “human flesh” as including all genders. Looking to the gospels we experience him as a compassionate mother and healer, but also as a liberator and revolutionary who prophetically led a movement for religious, social and spiritual change. We learn from his egalitarian attitude that gave every woman, no matter her background, the respect due to a human person. Jesus’ refusal to treat women as sex objects or shun them as insignificant is a serious challenge to the hierarchy in the Church. His theological discourses with women - as he offered them living water, a place to learn at his feet, insights into the resurrection and finally the honour of being the first to proclaim “He has arisen”- in turn liberates us from patriarchal shackles and affirms our personhood.

Jesus’ politics of the Reign of God that made him break the traditional barriers upheld by the Jews and include in his “kin-dom” children and women; publicans, prostitutes and sinners; the sick and the maimed; and the cultically impure, provokes us to consider new ways of being Church.

As Indian feminist theologians we therefore envisage the Church as...

- a ‘discipleship of equals’, non-hierarchical and participatory, with women being co-responsible in decision making and the services in the church;
- a community that is open to all irrespective of class, caste, creed, gender or sexual orientation;
- a body incarnated in the lives of the poor and the marginalized;
- a people in dialogue with religious and cultural pluralism, “revered” tradition, and the ‘signs of the times’;
- a member of the wider human family, networking with people of good will for the common good, and intervening prophetically to address violence and injustice;
- an ecological blessing committed to protecting and sustaining creation; and
- a sign of peace and harmony promoting the communion of all faiths.

These new ways of being Church entail rediscovering and translating to our present times the egalitarian vision of the Jesus movement that says no to all forces of domination, and promotes inclusive, liberative and welcoming spaces for all.