WBT Monthly Meeting Minutes March 19, 2017 Jowonio School

Women gathered for our third Lifecycle topic: Marriage, Family and Divorce. Chairs were arranged in a circle around the panel table. Refreshments were available throughout the meeting.

President Betty Lamb called the meeting to order at 3:15 pm with an opening reflection “First things First.” If we were to put God first, other people second, and the rest of life’s concerns third it would turn our values upside down and give us a different perspective. The WTB Mission Statement and Safe Place Declaration were read. Betty made three brief announcements:

* The InterFaith Works Roundtable is concerned that current federal restrictions have dramatically hurt local agencies helping refugees. Betty provided a list of phone numbers and asked us to call state officials (especially Gov. Cuomo, John DeFransisco, and John Flanigan) to urge money be put in the NYS budget to help these agencies function through this time.
* Daryl Files and Penny Hart are facilitators for IFW’s upcoming Seeking Common Ground Dialogues. Sign-up sheets were available for those wishing to participate.
* Ronald McDonald house is hosting a fundraising fashion show Tuesday, April 11 and is looking for volunteers and attendees.

Betty introduced our panelists for today’s topic “Marriage, Family, and Divorce.” Saro Kumar, a retired physician who has lived in Malaysia, India and the United States, attended Catholic schools and will speak to the Buddhist/Hindu philosophy. Judy Alderman, semi-retired United Methodist pastor, will represent the Methodist viewpoint. Joan Burstyn, professor emerita at Syracuse University, co-author of *Searching for God: Study Partners Explore Contemporary Jewish Texts,* mother of two rabbis and a chemistry professor, will represent Judaism and its American Conservative denomination. Jenni Gratien, Executive Director of Chadwick Residence, a program supporting homeless women, has degrees in Public Justice, Adolescence, and a background working with child protective services and BOCES. She raised her family in the Catholic faith and is currently a lector and member of her parish council. Each panelist will have about 10 minutes to share thoughts and answer questions.

Jenni Gratien began by explaining the history and mission of Chadwick Residence. For 30 years this small organization has provided housing and services for homeless women. These women may have mental health, addiction, or abuse challenges or just simply find themselves homeless. Residents can stay as long as necessary and receive intensive case management and education in parental, literacy, career, and independent living skills. The residence off Valley Drive supports 17 women and 12 children in a setting that is staffed 24 hours a day; residents with disabilities needing permanent services can rent community apartments through the agency. Pertinent to our discussion today, Chadwick Residence is a place that tries to heal the brokenness of families. In 1980’s the social norm of post-war nuclear families (father working, mother at home) began to fall apart under the feminist movement and other social pressures. When families and marriages breakdown, women need help and skills to start independent lives. Most women who come to Chadwick Residence are young single mothers or women in their late 40s coming out of unhealthy marriages. While not a faith-based organization, Chadwick does offer opportunities for its residents to connect or reconnect with faith traditions. Women come in broken—some angry—and as they heal many find connecting with a religion can bring positive changes in their lives. Questions centered on the challenge of finding affordable, decent housing in Syracuse.

Joan Burstyn noted that the Jewish family is in many ways the embodiment of the holy tent of God where Jews encountered God during their desert wanderings. The purpose of marriage is to make sure Judaism continues; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is with their descendants/families all the time and this is experienced through the family unit. Joan’s family hid some memories and shared others. For instance, her mother’s family fled from Poland to England prior to the First World War. Her grandfather had at least one sister who had remained in Poland with whom he kept in contact for the next thirty years. However, once the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, he was never able to contact her or her family again. Yet this was never spoken about – perhaps to move on from tragedy or to protect against the “evil eye.” When Joan moved to the U.S.A. in 1958, she worked hard to fit in but she still carried her British culture with her. For instance, she was surprised that children in the U.S. were not expected to sit quietly with their parents in temple. A friend explained to her that it is most important that children have positive, comfortable experiences in temple and at home. Even if they rebel as teenagers, they will look to the example of their parents living out their Jewish faith and be drawn back as they mature. Boys and girls become full adult members of a Jewish congregation, usually at 13 and 12 respectively. While a ceremony is not needed to mark that change in status, a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony provides a unique opportunity for the young person build his/her confidence by teaching a scriptural lesson to adults. In some synagogues a moving part of the ceremony occurs when the sacred scroll is taken from the ark and literally passed down the generations from great grandparents to grandparents to parents to son or daughter. Divorce has always been accepted within Judaism. Among some branches today, remarriage after a civil divorce, without religious documentation, may be accepted. However, in addition, Orthodox Jews need a “get” (religious Jewish divorce document) if they are ever to remarry. While the man must initiate the religious Jewish divorce, his income can be sequestered until he gives his wife a “get” and support money.

Judy Alderman was educated in Catholic schools in the post war period where the ideal family lived behind a “white picket fence”: stay-at-home mom, working dad, prayed together stayed together, did not get divorced. Her family was a “little bit out”: her parents were alcoholics who often fought, she was an only child which was rare, her mom worked and loved it, and her dad was Protestant her mom Catholic. Seeking the perfect family fantasy, she married at 19 and became a mother at 21; her marriage struggled. Judy stopped attending church after Vatican II changes left her feeling alienated, but later the Charismatic Revival pulled her back into the church. After a priest told her it was OK to divorce, she obtained a civil divorce but still felt she “wasn’t good enough” in the church. In the Catholic Church you must officially annul the marriage sacrament in order to remarry in the faith or receive communion; Judy did get a church annulment. While going through therapy she became a Protestant and eventually a Methodist minister. When her subsequent nine year marriage to a United Church of Christ minister ended in divorce, Judy was afraid to tell her congregation for fear of losing her job. Her church, however, proved to be very supportive. Judy shared that the Methodist Church operates under *Social Principles* (opinions) and *Book of Discipline* (rules). She shared some of the principles regarding families among them: families are the basic human community, there are a wide range of family options beside the nuclear family, marriage is sanctified but divorce allowed if marriage is broken, people can remarry, same sex marriage is not allowed.

Although Saro Kumar was born a Hindu, she has always been very comfortable fluidly moving between faith traditions and cultures. As her father was studying medicine in India, she spent her childhood in Malaysia raised by both sets of grandparents in a loving, supportive extended family. Her years at Catholic convent school shaped her character and values. After high school, Saro went to India to become a doctor and later moved to the U.S. with her husband. Hindus see four parts of life: Infancy (total freedom); Adolescence (education and instruction); Adult or Householder (marry, raise children, responsibilities); Spirituality (focus on how you will go to God). Marriage follows the Vedic principles (rules of living followed from ancient times). Fire is very important in the Hindu faith. The marriage ceremony involves walking around the fire 7 times (3 times led by bride, 4 times led by groom). There are seven steps (promises) including: man provides the living, create wealth by proper means, have kids, learn self-control, be true to each other. When these steps are completed the couple is married. Since only boys inherit from the parents and a girl gets only her bridal dowry, the brother of the bride must provide for his sister if her husband cannot do so. Divorce is frowned upon; when divorce occurs, courts typically say boys must live with the father only. Arranged marriages are still common in rural areas, but many educated people are allowing young people to choose their partners. In Saro’s case, her in-laws did not approve the marriage, so she and her husband had a civil ceremony only.

There was time for a brief question and answer session which brought forward the ways in which the Catholic Church has changed (making annulments easier to obtain and being more accepting of civilly divorced Catholics), wedding customs in modern India, and differences among Jewish, Methodist, and Catholic teachings touching abortion.

Betty thanked the panelists and gave each a small gift. Penny Hart closed the meeting with the thought that one thing Life teaches across traditions is that women are survivors. The faith choice each woman makes and the degree to which she follows her faith is always a very personal choice.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Bova,

Sunday Secretary