

Growth Around the Globe:

International Members Encourage Equality

By Harriet Sider Bicksler

In many countries around the world, men and women are said to be equal in all sectors of society. The reality, however, is often very different — male dominance often persists in the church and home, with women devalued and expected to unilaterally submit to men. Yet there is hope for women, in part because people around the world are encouraging the message of biblical equality.

In Australia where CBE members **Trevor and Liz Sykes** were born and raised, there is equal opportunity for all women in all sectors, but it is difficult for women to get to the top of any field. The secular situation is still far better than Christian churches and homes, where according to Liz, “Very few Christians are prepared to promote mutual submission for fear of ‘tampering’ with Scripture.”

Trevor and Liz experience this resistance firsthand, as they serve as part-time co-pastors at Belmont Christian Fellowship. Their connection with CBE began when they corresponded with Rebecca Merrill Groothuis after reading her book *Good News for Women*. They feel less isolated now, as members of CBE, because they can read about like-minded people, keep up to date with new developments and learn ways to effectively communicate the message of biblical equality.

Born in the United States and now living in Hong Kong, **Barbara Crouch** married an Australian (now deceased) and raised her three children in Australia. Barbara’s connection to CBE also began through corresponding with a book’s author: Linda Rainey Wright of *The Cord of Three Strands*. When Barbara wrote expressing appreciation for the book, Linda responded by suggesting an organization called



Rewriting the Word: In Australia, Christians resist mutual submission, say Liz and Trevor Sykes, because of a fear of “tampering” with Scripture.



Captive Audience: Barbara Crouch believes that biblical equality could help Chinese women who have lived in difficult circumstances for many centuries.

Christians for Biblical Equality. Barbara then wrote for information, joined and is still a member.

In Hong Kong, laws provide equal opportunities for women, and women hold some of the top positions in government. In mainland China, the communist government has made serious efforts to improve the status of women. Barbara suggests this is only half the story.

Mandated equal pay isn’t always upheld, and women’s jobs are cut first, Barbara says. Boys are favored over girls and given places in the best schools even if their grades are lower. Men feel that women should be faithful to their husbands, but men continue to have affairs and visit prostitutes. The pastors of the more than 900 Christian churches in Hong Kong are almost all men, and men usually lead church activities, with the exception of occasional women worship leaders.

Halfway across the globe in Eastern Europe, **Ed and Coralee Murray** are Americans who have worked with Campus Crusade for Christ in Europe since 1973. When the last of their five children left home for college about five years ago, Coralee began to study the Scriptures, asking God how to respond to this new season of life. As a result of her study, Ed and Coralee say they “stepped across the dividing line from traditional hierarchy to what we like to call ‘non-hierarchical complementarianism.’”

Like China, Eastern Europe has been heavily influenced by communism’s promotion of gender equality, yet because of cultural and religious history, women are in practice still not considered equal. According to Ed, the reality is that most women still have to do all the work at home after they go home from doing “man’s work” on the job.

“The attitude toward women is more closely linked to religious beliefs than political ones,” Ed says, “and cultural traditions and mores probably determine the position of women more than any-



Left Speechless: Ed and Coralee Murray say the Eastern European cultures in which they work have little framework for the concept of biblical equality. They believe people need to develop language that respects and values women.

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thing.” He also notes that in certain areas discipline of wives and domestic abuse are not uncommon among Christians, supported with so-called biblical teaching. The conflict in Bosnia and Kosovo in recent years, during which women were routinely raped, has left deep scars, he adds.

Thousands of miles south of Eastern Europe, **Ethel Pittaway** lives in the beautiful coastal city of Port Elizabeth in South Africa. Ethel’s introduction to CBE came by way of the Internet. She says she was prompted by the Holy Spirit to investigate the role of women and how they view their own value in the church and home.

Ethel describes South Africa as the Rainbow Nation, with 11 official languages. Since democratic elections in 1994, when Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first black African president, all South Africans are free to celebrate their unique cultural mix and share neighborhoods, schools, park benches, offices, boardrooms and beaches. The new government encourages equality, and many women hold prominent government and business positions.

Ethel notes, however, that women are still victims of physical and sexual abuse, and she believes that churches are lagging behind in teaching equality. A recent survey in a Christian magazine found that two of four South African denominations oppose women leaders in the church.

Across the Atlantic Ocean in South America, **Oscar Amat y Leon** lives in Lima, Peru, where he works as a pastor, sociologist and teacher. Oscar also discovered CBE on the Internet when he was looking for Christian agencies that could help his pastoral and sociological work. He believes God led him to CBE, where he has been able to join the effort for dignity and human rights from a Christian perspective.

Oscar describes Peru as in transition: The previous gov-

ernment was seen to be corrupt, but the promises of the new government to activate the Peruvian economy have not materialized so there is renewed civil and political unrest. Latin American “machismo” — the culture’s exaggerated sense of masculinity — supports patriarchy, which in turn is reinforced by traditional religious beliefs, both Catholic and evangelical.

According to Oscar, Peruvian men still believe that women belong in the home or doing domestic things. When women have received public recognition, he says it’s because masculine leadership is lacking, and the economic crisis has forced men to let women look for work.

Encouraging Equality

Each of these CBE members is seeking to encourage biblical equality within his or her own context. Trevor and Liz Sykes distribute articles and lend books, model equality in their lives, and try to correct gender bias when it occurs.

In Eastern Europe, Ed and Coralee say that the cultures in which they work have little framework for the concept of biblical equality. They believe people need to develop language that respects and values women. Women need to be encouraged to take their gifts seriously. They try to do this in their ministry by showing how much God values women and has used them in the past. They are convinced that teaching biblical equality would greatly enhance the gospel witness in Eastern Europe; however, most missionaries don’t recognize that there is a problem, so it is a slow process that requires patience and gentle confrontation.

Oscar says it is difficult to encourage biblical equality in his setting because men with a patriarchal ideology often work to keep women out of decision-making at evangelical churches. He has formed a CBE interest group with young evangelical leaders, and they are studying the Bible, reading literature and trying to apply their studies to their culture. He and other like-minded people are counter-cultural in the church and society, and often face opposition for their stands. He says, however, that he finds basic indifference more unsettling.

Barbara describes herself as the “book and resource person” for her family and fellowship in Hong Kong. She has bought multiple copies of books to give away. After reading the books, one friend told Barbara that they had saved her life and set her free. Another couple came to Barbara and her husband for marriage counseling, and again, they talked about biblical equality and loaned books and tapes. “They became ardent CBE members and will tell you that the principles of biblical equality helped heal them as



Inequality Times Three: Ethel Pittaway says that South Africa needs to address the inequality between ethnic groups and economic classes, as well as between men and women.



Magnified Masculinity: Oscar Amat y Leon, shown here with his daughter Sofia, says that Latin American “machismo” — the culture’s exaggerated sense of masculinity — supports patriarchy, making it difficult to communicate biblical equality.

individuals and save their marriage” Barbara says. She believes that biblical equality could help Chinese women who have lived in difficult circumstances for many centuries and have been treated as property to use as men pleased.

In South Africa, Ethel has organized Bible studies, hosted a tea where she shared CBE values, and tried to create awareness about CBE in the newspaper and on the local churchnet Web site. She does not find it easy to promote biblical equality because the initial reaction is that it’s a “feminist thing.” She notes that South Africa also needs to address the inequality between racial and ethnic groups and economic classes, and so resistance to the message of equality is often overcome when Scriptures like Galatians 3:28 are explained.

Partnering Across Cultures

In most countries there are other pressing social issues besides gender equality. In South Africa, like many other countries on the continent, HIV and AIDS threaten to completely change the social landscape, as rates of infection are staggeringly high.

Unemployment, corruption, drugs, abortion, lack of direction in youth, and marital problems are issues in China. China’s one-child policy has created a huge disparity between the numbers of boys and girls growing up, and some estimates suggest that up to 50 million young men will have no one to marry, because the girls who would have been their wives were aborted. In Australia, hierarchical attitudes discriminate against women, especially in the home where there is a high rate of domestic abuse.

The Murrays believe that the deepest issues in Eastern Europe have to do with human dignity and integrity. They say, “Communism and poverty have robbed many of their sense of worth and dignity. Only the Christian faith can properly restore that missing dignity, but it is often caricatured so that effective witness is difficult.” In Peru, Oscar notes that the important issue is development, by which he means developing the capacities and abilities people already have to determine their own destinies.

How might we in North America more effectively partner with our brothers and sisters working for biblical equality in other countries? The answers suggest a number of avenues for support:

- Provide financial resources, especially educational.
- Send people in the professions of education, medicine, agriculture and business to present a Christian way of working.
- Establish real communication, so that all sides can listen, respect each other, and learn.
- Establish bridges between cultures. Oscar would be glad to facilitate missionary or

study projects in Latin America. The Murrays invite people to join short-term summer projects in countries like Albania, where taking the *Jesus* film to villages gives effective exposure to a very different way of life.

- Produce Christian literature on gender equality in other languages (such as Spanish and Chinese).
- Maintain personal contact as a way to encourage people in far-off places.
- Above all, pray!

Trevor and Liz, Barbara, Ed and Coralee, Ethel and Oscar are just seven of many CBE members outside North America who are encouraging the worth, dignity and gifts of women, often in settings where doing so goes against the grain.

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Communication Across Cultures

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