

# First Sister Care held outside North America

**All-India Mennonite Women Conference held in Orissa, India, draws 325 women.**

Rhoda Keener



Small group discussion allowed women from different geographical areas and language groups to process the material.

Approximately 325 Indian Mennonite women gathered in Cuttack, Orissa, India, for the All-India Mennonite Women Conference (AIMWC) to participate in the first Sister Care seminar to be held outside North America.

Rhoda Keener, codirector of Mennonite Women USA, and Carolyn Heggen, a psychotherapist who specializes in trauma healing and women's issues, led the Sister Care sessions Oct. 24-28, 2012.

It was AIMWC's triennial conference, this year hosted by the Brethren in Christ churches in Orissa. Nearly twice as many women as usual participated. Women from eight of the nine Indian Mennonite conferences traveled by train to fellowship with each other and to learn how they might nurture and encourage each other through times of loss and grief.

Heggen and Keener's presentations were adapted to fit the Indian context to communicate about equipping women for caring ministry in their churches.

**In USA Sister Care seminars**, several women share their stories of loss and grief and how the church was helpful or could have been more helpful. Heggen and Keener were advised by Indian women to use anonymous stories rather than asking women to share their own stories publicly. Indian women oversaw the writing of real-life stories, working with Twila Miller who spent many years in India with Mennonite Central Committee.

The stories were written with fictitious Indian names and "told" by a third-party narrator who read each woman's story. Four such stories presented in this way throughout the five days triggered intense responses from the participants. Women talked among themselves and eagerly took the microphone to tell others how women in their church communities minister to each other when a faith sister suffers or faces a challenging situation.

**They talked passionately, addressing the crises** introduced by the vignettes.

One story in particular struck a chord with many of the women. During the second session a narrator read "Meena's story," first in Hindi, then in English. Meena is married to a pastor who becomes verbally and physically abusive to her, especially on weekends, when he starts to worry about the Sunday morning service. Meena cannot make chappatis to his satisfaction on weekends, and he becomes verbally abusive and often gets so angry that he beats her.

Heggen asked the conference participants, "How might the women of the church help Meena?"

Drawing from passages in Genesis, Ephesians and 1 Corinthians, Keener taught that violence against women is a sin and is not part of God's plan for how women and men should relate to each other.

Keener said, "There are many verses in the Bible that point to equality between women and men. One example is

how Jesus respected the woman at the well.”

Heggen noted that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, saying, “Violence against women is a sin against God.” Numerous women responded later to the speakers: “You speak good words.” One Indian woman leader said, “We have never had teaching like this.”

Following the conference, Heggen, Keener, Twila Miller and Cynthia Peacock visited nine churches in Champa, Korba and Dhamtari to meet women who had been unable to attend the Cuttack event.

They shared ideas and excerpts from the Sister Care seminar. When asked what was significant about the teaching at Cuttack, women talked primarily about Meena’s story. Many women said they or their good friends are “Meena” in the story.

Heggen says, “We experienced incredible hospitality and graciousness. These are such courageous, amazing women. Even though our worlds seem far apart, when we shared our stories, women trusted us and responded with their own stories.”

The seminar concluded with an invitation to women to anoint themselves with water symbolic of their tears and the tears of their sisters, and then to anoint one another with “living water” from Jesus.—*Twila Miller for Mennonite Women USA*



Rhoda Keener

Two women anoint one another during the closing blessing of the Sister Care seminar.



Rhoda Keener

Women theologians Nandy Nanda, left, and Elizabeth Kunjam participate in the All-India Mennonite Women Conference. Elizabeth led worship throughout the conference.

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