

It Takes ONE Woman

For more information about the LI TIM-OI FOUNDATION

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Author's footnote

[†] A child soldier is any child, girl or boy, under the age of 18 who is compulsorily, forcibly, voluntarily recruited or otherwise used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defence units or other armed groups. Child soldiers are used for sexual services, as combatants, as forced "wives", messengers, porters or cooks. The estimated number of child soldiers in combat at any one time is 300,000 and a large number is found in African countries. For more reading see Graça Machel, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: A critical review of progress made and obstacles encountered in increasing protection for war-affected children* (Winnipeg, Canada: International Conference on War-Affected Children, September 2000.)

Li Tim-Oi Foundation

While the numbers are shocking, it is not the numbers that matter, it is not statistics of those who are being violated, be it women or children, as long as one is subjected to violence, that is one too many. Women and children are not mere numbers. By making them statistics is to dehumanise them. It is to take away their voice, their tears, their laughter and contribution to those around them.

CONCLUSION

In providing training for women to serve in various ministries and especially sensitive areas, the Li Tim-Oi Foundation has followed the principles of Jesus Christ who stood against injustice particularly where women were concerned. Christ taught us by his attitudes and his behaviour with all women, that he valued their opinions and their company that he trusted their leadership and he admired their intellect.

The alumnae of Li Tim-Oi Foundation have made a historical difference by working at the most sensitive spots of the church and the society. The impact of these women both in the homes, church and societies is immense. To quote James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey an African intellectual:

If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family.

The fact that women take time to work both at home, in the church and in society; the impact of the alumnae is being felt in many places even if they may only be one or a few. As the website motto of the Foundation notes It takes ONE woman. Surely it takes one woman to impact whole societies.

It took one woman, Deborah, to save the Israelites from the oppressive foreign rule.

It took one woman, Esther, to stand before the King at her own risk, and plead for the survival for her people.

It took one woman from Samaria to become the first evangelist to her people.

It took one woman Mary Magdalene to become the harbinger of the good news of resurrection.

It took one woman Li Tim-Oi to be ordained against all odds, and leave such a rich and immortal legacy

Ladies, and gentlemen, IT TAKES ONE WOMAN.

Gracious God, we thank you for calling Florence Li Tim-Oi, much-beloved daughter, to be the first woman to exercise the office of a priest in our Communion; By the grace of your Spirit inspire us to follow her example, serving your people with patience and happiness all our days, and witnessing in every circumstance to our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the same Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen



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ALUMNAE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

From the work of the Foundation in supporting women's training, one realises that women are involved in the mission of the church in their various ministries. As Emil Brunner put it, the Church exists by Mission as the fire exists by burning. Mission is understood as the witness to God's love that enhances life in all its fullness. Mission becomes meaningful and apt as it underlines the need of courage to bear witness to God in Jesus Christ who is the revealer and the revealed.

The alumnae of the Foundation are following the model of serving as shown by Jesus Christ. In this, they are involved in serving those in need in a society which is riddled with stigma, discriminating and dehumanization. Working in the area of HIV/AIDS, one of the alumnae says that even if society is better informed about the causes of HIV/AIDS, and the care and treatment of People living with HIV/AIDS, this has not reduced the stigma towards those who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS. In this context, the Church becomes a place where many look for social, spiritual and moral support.

Working with women's empowerment an alumna notes that women who are responsible for the survival of the family spend most of the time dealing with the demands of the home, the children and the sick. In rural areas, women have to deal with issues like clean water, supplies of firewood, food, and healthcare. All this work means that women are forced to produce in difficult situations. In view of this, many women are subjected to gender-based violence which is getting worse in view of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Because of cultural practices, many women are less educated than men are, and so they are less able to access wage labour, or negotiate access to social benefits even if they were available. Social norms also exclude women from leadership positions in projects and may also mean that they have less control over any income they might earn from their productive labour. Working with women therefore means taking these factors into consideration and to build into the programmes self-awareness and cultural awareness dimensions so that women can understand the roots of their economic position and find transformative ways to respond.

Other alumnae work with children, which is a needful area on the African continent. The situation on the continent for children is worrying because almost 45% of the population is 0~15 years old (meaning more than 50% of the population is children of 0~18 years), which is an age-group most vulnerable to violence, poverty, and HIV/AIDS, and needing persistent nurturing and guidance. Unfortunately, some of these children - girls and boys - get recruited as child soldiers[†]. They are also forced to act as breadwinners in child-headed homes by engaging in underage labour and trans-generational sex, or even commercial sex.

It is a thrilling privilege to be invited as part of these celebrations in honour of Li Tim-Oi. A celebration is more than ticking a date off the calendar. It is a celebration of the ideals and achievements of the Foundation, and a memorial to the founder. If the Foundation had not done good deeds, it would not have survived for this long.

The Foundation has supported the training of 200 women from 82 dioceses in 11 provinces of the Anglican Communion in Africa, Brazil, Fiji and Pakistan. These women have gone forth to their several callings in the world and the church, and continue to make solid contributions. The Foundation is indeed more than the infrastructure. It stands for the products and founding people, and more importantly, for the vision that was initiated by the Foundation.

While I may not be able to speak on behalf of the whole Anglican Communion, not even on behalf of whole Africa, I might say something as an East African. Over the last six years, of the one hundred women students trained at St. Paul with the support of various agencies, 20% have been beneficiary of Li Tim-Oi Foundation. I have had the opportunity to train and work with some of the women. In these women I have seen consistently exemplified the Christ-like qualities of deep human compassion for those who suffer, abundant and unequivocal hospitality especially for those otherwise excluded, devalued and overlooked.

While preparing to speak today I did a spot-check of what these women are doing today, it is wonderful to note that some of the women trained by the Foundation are pioneers in their dioceses having been appointed to positions of Archdeacon, Administrative secretaries, legal advisers, HIV/AIDS coordinators, Project leaders on issues of poverty, agriculture etc. These for a long time have been preserves for men only. Were it not for the training of these women, they would not have been able to be appointed to these positions.

ALUMNAE COMMENTS

I asked some of the alumnae to comment on how the Foundation had helped them and I have sampled some of the comments.

"I always desired to join a theological college to train for the ordained ministry, but funding was a big problem. I attended interviews and passed but the church was not able to sponsor me to theological college. I was introduced to the Li Tim-Oi Foundation. Today I can afford a smile since I feel that my vision of serving the church of Christ especially in empowering all women has been fulfilled."

"I am not ashamed to say that LI TIM-OI gathered my shreds of sorrow,

pain, tears and frustrations for not getting funding to study and provided me with an opportunity to study and become an advocate for other woken.”

“Life is always unbearable for most African women who have no education and depend on their families for support. Those who are married remain poor and are subjected to domestic violence. I was one of those, having completed high school and had no money to continue with education or training. Were it not for the Li Tim-Oi Foundation, I would not have escaped my misery. Through the Li Tim-Oi scholarship I am today theologically equipped, enlightened, inspired and liberated. I am now able to serve God and humanity unlike before when I lived in total ignorance without even discovering my rights as a human being.”

“I was introduced to the Li Tim-Oi Foundation by a sister who is now no more. I joined the college with the hope that the Foundation will sponsor me. Before the news of the scholarship, I dreaded to meet with the college Principle, or accountant. I feared any letter addressed to me from the college because I knew I was being asked to pay what I owed the college and I did not have. But one day I received news that the Li Tim-Oi Foundation had given me a grant of one thousand pounds per year. The news of this scholarship changed my life.”

“With this news, my stress disappeared.

With this news, I was never served any memo on fees again.

With this news, I never dreaded coming across the college principle or the accountant again because my fees had been paid

With this news, I cleared my studies without a hitch.

With this news, I attained my Bachelor of Divinity degree.

By this news I am serving as an archdeacon in my diocese.

Long live Li Tim-Oi.”

“I don’t have enough words to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who is involved in this ministry of Li Tim-Oi Foundation. They sacrificed a lot for my sake and accepted me to be God’s instrument. May God reward you abundantly. The Li Tim-Oi Foundation scholarship marked the turning point of my life. I am no longer the same person. I used to be like broken piece of metal but now I am a whole.”

“I left Rwanda during the Genocide. Like other Rwandese people, the aftermath of the 1994 curtailed my training. I found myself a refugee in another country. I had served as an accountant in a diocese and wished to continue helping the church in managing funds. But this was no more. As a refugee I was introduced to the Foundation and after application, I was granted a scholarship to study. I completed the required courses in August 2006, I graduated on 4th October 2006 with a Bachelor’s Degree in Business

Administration and Management. Special thanks to the Almighty who took me through this period!”

These and many more are the expressions of the women who have been trained through the support of the Foundation. As noted earlier the Foundation has realised the vision of its founders.

Since the independence a wind of change has swept through African countries and educated women have taken their rightful place in business, government, education and other professions. Today there are a good number of African women in all fields holding key positions. We have key women in the political field for example Elly Johnson the president of Liberia. On 9th October 2004 Prof Wangari Mathai was awarded the 2004 Noble Peace Prize for her thirty years of activism in environment conservation

But, even if the wind of change has swept through most sectors of society, this wind of change has not penetrated into the church yet. In most of the churches women are still marginalised in separate and unequal women’s organisations. The teachings of the church and the Bible are often used to perpetuate the subordinate status of women.

It seems that the Church in Africa just ignores the evidence that women contribute immensely to the social economic development of every society, and that they constitute a huge and vital resource to the community of faith. To refuse to take women seriously, and to refuse to enable them to make serious contributions and refuse to ensure that they are not mere decorations and tokens, is to deprive the community of a substantial and vital contribution from women.

Besides, it is a spiritual issue, if we marginalize women. How can we honestly criticize secular society when the church discriminates against women? How can the world believe the church when it purports proclaims justice, human dignity, human rights, when the church itself is riddled with sexism, ageism, tribalism etc?

If you spoke to most church leaders in the continent of Africa, they will tell you that women are given equal opportunities in the church, but if you check how churches invest in women’s education for the good of the church, you will find very few. The task of sponsoring women’s theological education seems to have been left to Foundations such as the one we are remembering today. The comments of the women on what the Foundation has done for them are a testimony to the Foundation’s glorious achievements.

The reasons as to why the church appears not to invest in women are because of the ideology of Patriarchy which continues to influence the thinking, imagination and practice of the church. This ideology needs to be tested by integrity if the gospel is to be credible.