

Vision Groups Synod Presentation: Continuing to Live the Vision

Vision Values: Dr. Florence Li Tim-Oi

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I am The Reverend Dr. Florence Li Tim-Oi and I have a vision of a church that values and respects all persons and does not prohibit anyone from pursuing or living their vocation in ministry, either lay or ordained, based on matters of gender, race, sexual orientation, age or any other idea that creates barriers between people.

My name, Tim-Oi means “Much Beloved” and from my birth until the day I died, I understood myself as a “Much Beloved” child of God. Keeping me alive for being born a girl in Hong Kong, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was a risk my parents were willing to take. This was the beginning of a life and faith journey that was filled with risk, suffering and great joy for me and others that would change the Church in the world. It takes one woman to bring about change as you will see from my story.

I was one of eight children, when I completed primary school at age 14, because of my family’s lack of financial resources. I had to wait until I was 21 to continue with a more formal education. I joined an Anglican church and at my baptism chose the name Florence, in part, because I admired the work of Florence Nightingale. Little did I know that she had a desire to become a priest, but was spurned by the Church of England at the time.

My call to ordination came while attending a service of ordination for an English woman to the order deaconess at the Hong Kong cathedral, the Chinese preacher asked if there were any Chinese girls who were willing to sacrifice herself for the Chinese church and I knelt and prayed “God would you like to send me?”, that call never left me. In 1934 I began my studies at Union Theological College in Canton. The church paid my college fees. While there I led a team of students in rescuing casualties from the Japanese carpet bombings, I just missed being a casualty myself – much like the work I envisioned Florence Nightingale was doing.

On Ascension Day 1941, I was ordained a deacon, as there was not an order of Deaconess in the Chinese church. After a brief stay as a curate in Kowloon, I was appointed to the Portuguese colony of Macau. Macau was a neutral territory at the time and was crowded with war refugees. There were people from everywhere with all kinds of needs and although we were short of food, I did my best to see that everyone had a portion of what there was. There were no distinctions made in this place, we were a diverse gathering of humanity and we sought to help each other.

I began teaching people and had an opportunity to hold meetings in the schools and began preparing children for baptism. My bishop said this of me at the time, “I was not primarily an evangelist but was a quiet, competent sympathetic pastor.” Quite a compliment, I felt.

Macau was far enough away from Japanese occupied Hong Kong that it was not possible for priests to make the journey and so for two years I was given a license by the assistant bishop to preside at Holy Communion. One must understand that my diocesan Bishop Ronald Hall had been in the United States and had a conversation with Ursula and Reinhold Niebuhr, about the ordination of women and they agreed that someone needed to have the opportunity to go ahead and do so. Upon his return to his diocese Bishop Hall, while in the part of his diocese which was in Free China, sent me a message and asked to meet with me. After a long and hazardous journey through the Japanese lines, we met arriving at the rendezvous point within twenty minutes of one another. We discussed the matter of my ordination to priesthood and after much prayer and conversation I was ordained a Priest of God on January 25, 1944.

The risk that Bishop Hall was taking was enormous and would have repercussions for years throughout the Anglican Communion. He was convinced beyond the shadow of doubt that in ordaining me he was acting with integrity and acting on his understanding of the inclusive nature of God's Kingdom. Using the story of Peter baptizing Cornelius in the book of Acts, after receiving the vision that reminded Peter that God calls people who are different from each other to serve in God's church, as his biblical rationale.

After the war and pressured by a "Purple Guard" (that is a Group of Bishops), and to the dismay of Bishop Hall, I resigned my license as a Priest, but would not give up my Holy Orders. For the 30 years that followed, I served God and God's people believing that neither the Church nor the Maoist regime were not going to stop me from fulfilling my call to serve God as priest. I was broken hearted and attempts were made to break my spirit but I continued to worship by "going up to the mountain to pray. Nobody knew".

I was then sent to a parish near Vietnam, where we started a maternity home to ensure that new-born girls were not put to death. We were trying to help increase the understanding that every child, male or female, was equally valued. I was simply trying to make friends for Jesus. It takes one woman to change the culture. It was dangerous for Christians to gather, I was sent to work on a farm and I became "Captain of Chickens". Finally the Bamboo Curtain was lifted and I got my back pay money from the government and got, more importantly, permission to visit my family who were by now in Canada. In 1971, two women were ordained in Hong Kong and I was officially re-licensed to serve as a priest, a time of great celebration for me. I left China and came here to Canada and in 1983 received a license as an honorary assistant priest in the Diocese of Toronto.

I believe this to be true, as we learn from one another and as we seek to serve God's vision in this world, we need both East and West... the West brought Christianity to the East and my ordination may very well have been a gift from the East to the West.

We are all earthen vessels with God's treasure inside us, let us work to live a vision that values the diversity of all, honouring the integrity of all. So may we keep the vision of God's valuing all people, alive and may it ground all that we do..... so this work continues as we live our vision!