

## Angolan Bible Women Organize

by Yvette Moore \*

United Methodist Women carried its Bible Women training, popular across Asia and the Pacific Islands, to Africa this summer. Close to 40 Angolan women and a few men gathered in Luanda in July to address domestic violence, peace and conflict resolution through the lens of Scripture.

Fifty-five people - 39 women, 13 men and three translators - participated in training with United Methodist Women leaders from the United States that featured six Bible studies. Trainers from the Women's Division of the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries used the human-rights literacy models of ProLiteracy, a nonprofit organization formed with the 2002 merger of Laubach Literacy International and Literacy Volunteers of America. This model asks participants questions about pictures to start a process of discussing issues in their lives and communities known as FAMA. They:

- Gather Facts,
- Make Associations,
- Analyze Meanings and
- Plan Actions.

Women's Division executives Glory Dharmaraj and Karen Prudente and retired division executive Ruth Prudente led the Bibles studies at the July 16-22 training in Luanda, Angola. The training brought together ecumenical partners who are striving to serve a nation struggling to recover from a 27-year civil war.

Staff of Church World Service's Southern Africa Office and the Angolan Council of Christian Churches, are partners of the division for the Bible Women initiative in Angola.

The six Bible studies included:

- "Charity and Justice";
- "Shalom and Shalom-Workers";
- "The Bent-Over Woman";
- "Healing and Peace: Ritzpah in the Old Testament";
- "Anointing Women Anointing the Anointed One, Jesus the Christ"; and
- "Resurrection Women."

Each Bible study addressed issues of domestic violence, peace and conflict resolution.

"We looked at the Bible through the eyes of women," Ms. Dharmaraj said. "We followed ProLiteracy's FAMA method of teaching, which involves pictures of human rights and poses questions to solicit facts. Usually, when we ask 'What do you see?' participants share their stories or trauma because they have been through so much.

"This method creates awareness and connections between the facts and their lives. Their experiences lead to action. So it is not just literacy. It is human rights and literacy. It's not just writing. They are defending their human rights."

Ms. Prudente explained the training's purpose to Women's Division directors meeting in White Plains, N.Y., Aug. 18-20.

"After war, unless you have healed yourself, it's hard to heal others," Ms. Prudente said, explaining the literacy training was like a spiritual retreat for many of the participants who bear scars from years of war. "The biblical foundation strengthened them."

During the war, the Angolan church was divided as factions within the church sided with the two opposing political parties: the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), led by Jose Eduardo Dos Santos, and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), led by Jonas Savimbi. Cuba and the Soviet Union backed the MPLA; the United States and South Africa backed UNITA.

The war - started in 1975 when Angola gained independence from Portugal - ended in 2002 when Mr. Savimbi died. Mr. Dos Santos pledged to hold elections in 2006 but these did not occur. It is now predicted elections can be held in 2007 or 2008.

Those trained as Bible Women are from both sides of Angola's political divide.

"Toward the end of the war, church leaders realized they had to work together to address issues of peace and reconciliation," Ms. Dharmaraj said. "Where the government cannot go, the church can go. The church is taking decisive steps on the road to peace-making and nation-building without much government support because infrastructure is not in place."

While Angola is rich in diamonds, minerals and other resources, lack of a strong central government and landmines planted during the war hamper its ability to produce and transport food and provide clean water to many of its people.

"In spite of this - a wounded country, a wounded people - Christian leaders are rising to the occasion," Ms. Dharmaraj said. "The churches are overflowing. You have to get to church at least a half an hour early to get a seat. The Bible is real to them."

"They speak in biblical terms. They refer to refugees coming back to Angola as 'coming back from exile.' The Jesus of Isaiah 53 - a man of suffering and acquainted with grief - is very close to them because of their experience."

Ms. Dharmaraj said the Angolans inspired her.

"They have strengthened my faith because, through it all, they are faithful to this Jesus that we find in the Gospel."

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