

A Pilgrimage from Thursday to Thursday

by Lyn van Rooyen

When first introduced to Thursdays in Black, it seemed like an “easy” thing to do. What could be simpler – wear black clothes on Thursdays and wear my pin to show that I dream of a world without rape and violence. Every ‘good’ Christian could support this and I casually suggested to my colleagues that this was something CABSA could support.

But what does a seemingly simple campaign to create awareness about sexual and gender-based violence have to do with the “Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace”?

At first, this connection can seem obscure.

When we think of a pilgrimage, we often think of a physical journey, but it can also be a metaphorical journey into someone's own beliefs. Thinking about peace, we are reminded that it is not only an absence of violence or conflict, but also the freedom from fear of violence, while justice holds in its meaning aspects such as fairness, righteousness and morality.

In the two and a half years supporting the campaign, CABSA and I realised that it is not simply “wearing black clothes and a badge” every Thursday.

As the weeks and months passed the number of interactions increased:

- The teacher that told me how learners suddenly speak to her of the abuse they face at home, from fathers, uncles and brothers,
- the young gas station attendant that greeted me with “*Good morning, lady in black!*” After I explained why I was wearing black, he asked for a badge: “*Because my name is Life, you see, and if I want to be true to my name I have to support this*”,
- the woman at the airline counter who pointed to my badge and said: “*My daughter is being abused by her husband, what should I do?*”
- the pastor who had to hear that the lead-elder has been abusing his wife for many years, and never felt that she could tell anyone “at church”.

I began to realise that this is not just something “easy”. The simple campaign was leading me on a journey into my own beliefs, particularly about gender and my own understanding of peace and justice. The pledge I committed to became a road map on this journey.

One Thursday morning I just did not feel like wearing black – I felt like something light and colourful. I stood in front of my cupboard, remembered my pledge and that there were women, children, even men, in situations of abuse that had no choice, and I realised that my *promise of protest* could not be based on what I feel like.

One morning I forgot what day it was, and dressed in a lilac shirt, with a lovely lilac and deep purple floral scarf. As I said goodbye, my husband asked: “Isn’t it

Thursday?" And I turned around, took off my lovely lilac shirt, and dressed in black. I realised that my *promise of solidarity* could not be forgotten.

Attending the "Global Summit to End Violence in Conflict" with WCC-EHAIA, I was confronted by a well of pain deeper than I could imagine. The pain of a child soldier, raped daily for years, the pain of mothers seeing their children abused, of husbands viewing the rape of their wives. I realised that my *promise of mourning* cannot just be words.

As I read about the breadth and depth of the challenge and learnt words like "corrective rape" and "rape culture", I realised how little we know about the problem and how important my *promise of awareness and information* is. I realised that I need to be informed to continue the discussions and give real and considered advice when asked.

My husband wears black every Thursday, whether teaching, guiding strategy sessions or even on the beach. I realised that every time he and every other man supporting the campaign wears black, they embody the *promise of hope* of a different reality, of thousands of men who would never contemplate violence.

Every sentence of the pledge continues to challenge me in many different ways.

Through the seemingly "easy" campaign, I embarked on an unexpected pilgrimage, which forced me to explore my own beliefs around a Biblical understanding of gender and how unhealthy theologies have contributed to gender based violence and forced me to think about the absence of justice and peace in gender relations.

A seemingly simple campaign with no central campaign resources of secretariat survived for nearly 40 years, has grown world-wide and continues to guide individuals, churches and organisations large and small, in confronting all forms of gender violence.

You could ask about the success if the campaign is still necessary after 40 years. Thursdays in Black champions can tell many stories of increased openness, awareness and changes in attitude. But for a problem so large, so ubiquitous and so pervasive, more is needed.

Join the growing swell of people in black on Thursdays on a pilgrimage of justice and peace, towards a world without rape and violence.

CABSA manages an online resource kit of faith based and secular information and resources on sexual and gender based violence available on www.thursdaysinblack.com

The Thursdays in Black Campaign pledge can be signed online at www.thursdaysinblack.co.za/pledge and photos and stories can be shared on www.facebook.com/ThursdaysBlack