



„Stronger together“ – “Gemeinsam stärker”

What an international Godly flavor we experienced together with more than 150 women from 27 European countries in the Styrian Mountains of Schladming, Austria! A precious time that fostered our strong desire to find out more about what makes us “**Stronger together**”. This was our motto for the four-day-long Women in Leadership conference, organized by the *Hope for Europe Women’s network* within the *European Evangelical Alliance* (EEA) and *Prisca*, the women’s branch of the *Austrian Evangelical Alliance* (ÖEA).

Rev Dr Kate Coleman (UK)¹ was the keynote speaker.

I) Kate challenged us with thoughts like “What holds you back to fill the place God prepared for you, and what makes you take this place away from others?”

Women especially fall into the comparison-trap: best style, newest clothes, most loving husbands...

Kate questioned our passion. There are three streams, but only one river:

- **Mission:** Men and Women together – Christ in the centre
- **Diversity:** Gender, Ethnicity, Race – God tells his story through me, embrace it! (“*God didn’t call me despite who I am, but because of who I am.*”)
- **Leadership:** Do we believe in women in leadership? (“*If God already has spoken to you, you don’t have the luxury to reject him.*”)

The “7 sins of women in leadership”, according to Kate Coleman, are:

- 1 Limiting self-perceptions
- 2 Failure of draw the line (wrong yes or no)
- 3 Inadequate personal vision (vision/resilience needed to maintain the course)
- 4 Too little life in the work (we work even on holidays!)
- 5 Everybody’s friend, nobody’s leader
- 6 Colluding not confronting (perceptions of leadership are male)
- 7 Neglect in family matters

II) Kate invites us to bring our stories together, as God wants and He will work on my/our behalf, together.

She proclaims “**Talita kum! – Little girl, arise**” over us.

Internal and external obstacles can be overcome! What helps or hinders us to unfold our full potential? See the passage in Mark 5:21-43, Jairus daughter (verse 41).

¹ “Kate is founding director of Next Leadership. She has well over 30 years of leadership experience in the church and charity sectors, supporting and mentoring leaders.” Source: <https://www.nextleadership.org/about-us/> May 2006: “Rev Kate Coleman has become Britain’s first, black female president of the Baptist Union of Great Britain”, <https://www.nextleadership.org/resources/read>.

- Who are the people ahead of me in the journey – that walk BEFORE me?
- Who are the people that speak into my life – and walk BESIDE me?
- Who will be the people that come after me – and walk BEHIND me?

Name them, thank them and pray with/for them.

How to raise leaders?

Leadership principles:

– Learn to receive help!

Who is our Jairus? We need someone who supports us! We need men and women! Mentors, coaches, supervisors, counsellors! How can we stay childlike without staying childish?

We are called to do something with eternal relevance, be dependent on him!

Women often give, give, give, even when the tank is empty. We need friends who carry us on the stretcher. Jairus advocated his daughter, even when women and kids at that time were not as important.

– Take responsibility!

Jesus speaks to the girl and she is able to respond. We can't control others but ourselves and this is our part! Don't pass on responsibility to others, when it is yours. The mourners proclaimed the girl's death, but Jesus went into another direction. There are people proclaiming our death, but without the right to do so. Jesus throws them all out (v40).

– Grow up!

Grow up and grow in all dimensions. Horizontal growth (how many, how much) and vertical growth (maturity, concernment) leads to transformation.

III) What does it look like, when sisters empower one another?

Cultivate your talents and gifts as soon as you are aware of this God-given gifting, the title might follow later, if it is God's will.

– “To lead” – means “to travel together” (old English word)

– “Leadership” – new places we would not have got to by just ourselves

It is an innovation when people work together. Women are unconventional and community builders (*fabric of relationships*), even when they had less rights. They are enablers: they help making others' journeys possible, often without longing for power or might.

Numeri 27:1-11 gives us a good example of how to become stronger together:

The story of Zelophehad's daughters

These five single women (situation first mentioned in the OT!) wanted to keep the legacy of their father's name. Through their friendship and collaboration, they could go far; alone it would not have been possible. When we have sisters around us, we can go far as well.

(*“One hand can not clap”* – Sudanese proverb)

Kate invites us for personal reflection:

– Do you limit your potential?

– Are there places you don't go, people you don't engage with, or challenge or avoid? Scale yourself from 1-10.

– Do you fear breaking convention, doing old things in new ways, doing new things?

Identify one “new” personal or organizational commitment that would make a positive difference on your score.

In the previous Chapter (Numbers 26) Moses makes the census only with men. The five sisters entitled themselves to the right for a just law and had a desire for change.

Something that grows fast, is not necessarily what God wants.

Raise your voice for those who can't do it for themselves (more female element).

It is our task to find ways how men and women can work together!

Those five sisters might only have had each other, they had to collaborate and hold together.

- Are you willing to question the status quo?
- Are you willing to “step up” when the challenge has your name on it?
- Are you willing to “stand out” and be uncomfortably visible? (to speak out when words are needed)

“There is very little we can’t do, if we trust another.”

- Are you future-proofing your efforts?
- Are you thinking short, medium and long-term?
- Are you imagining the world you want to leave behind, as well as the world you live in?
- Are you creating solutions and DNA you can pass on?
- Are you building relationships with the next generation as well as having great ideas for this one?

Ensuring sustainability.

IV) On the European Women’s day on Saturday Kate talked about Mary and Elizabeth.

Luke 1:5-14, 23-41

They show leadership principles at its best. Mary and no one else is entrusted with the gift of Jesus; Elizabeth gives birth to the forerunner.

Whatever God entrusted us will always be impressed (engraved) by our personality, but God operates. We will never do it alone, only with others.

Friendship goes alongside with challenges but keeps greater gifts.

His truth will be revealed, and his power let grow and encourages us.

- Compare **Joshua and his friends** in the war; Moses was more protected.
- **David and Jonathan** were very loyal to each other, stronger than the service for his father.
- **Esther and Mordechai** kept close family-relations, later on Esther was promoted queen of Persia.
- **Paul and Barnabas** also had up and downs.
- **Mary and Elizabeth** enjoyed a power friendship despite differences of generations. (14-years old and old-woman)

If we overcome those differences, we will have a great learning experience!

There are many human-beings living in different districts, with different religious backgrounds, prejudices etc. Which story do we tell?

Many Muslims are attacked, persecuted, but also have dreams of Christ. We never hear those stories in the news. Befriend them! Seek and find Jesus in them. Be honest.

Vulnerability makes us stronger if shared.

Mary needed Elizabeth in this situation more than her peers.

Whom do you need as partner? Who must you be for someone else?

Revival is often a consequence of different groups that meet and the work of the Spirit in and through us. Mary and Elizabeth were relatives, also in the Spirit!

Share your experiences! They shared their (both!) unexpected pregnancies.

Are you ready for a journey of geographical, psychological, emotional or spiritual matter?

You can be a door opener for others and someone will be for you!

“You don’t need to explain yourself to friends, they already know you!”

Your friends stand by you, encourage you to confess sin and let go, shared moments in all walks of life.

We need companions in our lives and leadership that understand us and support us.

They are blessed because they believed in God's promises.

When was the last time, the Spirit jumped in you when you greeted a friend?

Cheer each other (independently of cultural backgrounds).

How do we honor our predecessors? How our successors?

How do we engage with Mary? She carried the hope of humanity. She didn't wish for competition but sympathy. Indiscretion can be a killer. Better bless and support!

You are never too old to give birth to something new! We think it is too late, but God operations. Some promises approached us early in life, but we are never too young. Mary and Elizabeth spent several months together (Magnificat)! God's promises remain in all circumstances. The Magnificat reminds us, that God is here in all situations; he gives us the power to change the world, even when the world laughs. The weakest have the most profound ideas! Mary was only 14. Withstand the temptation to be void and the weakest of all. God's word will never come back empty! Seek friends and become a friend for someone. Celebrate what you carry together.

What can be our task?

Sabine Kalthoff was the main bible expositor at the Conference

1st talk: Sabine started with an exclamation *"We are weak, and we know it, even if others think we are strong. However, we are stronger together!"*

What photo would you take that shows "stronger together"?

- a rope with its threads intertwined
- ant hill
- hand
- mountain range
- kitchen team
- two persons and two hands
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John 15:1-8 – Jesus and the Vine

"Read the bible slowly to truly listen to him."

Sabine asked us: *"Paint a picture of the story and explain it to your neighbor."*

Context: Jesus came into town and the expectations were high. The disciples were fearful, chaos and restlessness lays in the air.

Peter proclaims to follow Jesus and will never leave him, but is he reliable?

Jesus says *"Do not be troubled – trust in the Lord and in me."* (John 14:1)

"I am the true Vine – to my fathers glory".

Picture of fake vine: this can't keep the promise, Jesus asks us to trust in him, in all circumstances. He is the source for "stronger together".

Verse 5 is a promise, not a command: "he will bear much fruit."

It is also not said "little fruit".

Growth takes time and can't be produced!

"God is the gardener: he cares, he cuts etc. Growth doesn't happen when adding, but taking away (cutting of)."

What does he need to take away?

Realize: The gardener is never closer than when he prunes (cleans us through his word!)

God is glorified!

How/what do the disciples feel? See the context.

In my weakness God is strong, he comes close to me; this is not a problem for him. However, we don't need to be strong "for" the Lord.

It is God's promise that we will bear fruit if we remain in him.

"Remain in me" is the only command in the text. Additionally it is a plural word: as community and not as individual we are called to remain in him; as well as "bear" (much) fruit, also in plural: working together and not as competitors is key.

How do we help each other?

Do you have a prayer partner?

Ministry: it is not just about me, but also about how to invest in others?

Think of Mentoring as multiplication!

Verse 6: together, but personal responsibility at the same time.

The branches can't decide, but we can decide to remain and for that we are actively invited.

"I will remain in you", says Jesus.

The cross is the tree of life, and his death brings life. He is faithful.

Verse 16: *"I have chosen you to bear fruit. His trust in us gives strength"*.

2nd talk: About the "one another culture" in the NT: forgiving, working together, caring, spurring on: this seeks not independence but interdependence.

How will it look like in my area and family etc?

"Stronger together" needs to be lived out!

John 13:1-17 – Jesus washes Peter's feet

The Lord shows his love; verse 3: All power is in his hands; how is he using it?

To love and serve, not to destroy.

Sabine invited us to have a closer look at a beautiful picture about that scene.

Washing one's feet was the task of servants and slaves, not even from Jewish slaves but foreigners; a very low task, but Jesus served; surrender to love.

Embracing situation: When Jesus bows and started washing him, one hand pushed him away and the other embraced him. There is an ambiguity in the picture.

Which part is closed before Christ? Be honest and let him love all parts, he is passionate about me/us.

"Jesus saves us and it doesn't feel good. He is not a waiter who brings us what we want and need. His unconventional behavior goes after his guidelines."

Verse 14 command to wash each others' feet: serving others and serving the Lord, in love.

It is often easier to criticize but do we serve the community and churches?

It is important to express our needs.

How do we react? Do we love and serve each other?

The best witnessing act is loving one another: In Nepal they offered a Christmas dinner outside in the village and invited people of all casts. People came to church. We need to pass this love to others!

How does this all speak into my life?

Verse 4: Jesus laid down his outer clothing and with his towel he dried my feet.

"We first need to come to Jesus before we can serve others."

This vulnerable "culture of one another" makes us stronger. How can we live this?

The experience of grace will enable us, his grace and cross lead us along and he walks with us.

Dr Jutta Henner was the second main speaker at the European Women's day in the Congress Hall in Schladming.

She started with a controversial question: Is the motto "Stronger Together" biblical?

Delegation would be all, all leaders are replaceable, even Moses.

Paul is by far the best example, even for women; we need each other!

He wrote about it.

1 Cor 12: picture of the body; each part (even the small ones) is important, what does it mean?

What does it mean to stand for our faith in Jesus Christ?

– **Paul is inflamed for this message** and his Lord. He evangelizes in metropolis and even goes into prison, but he knows his calling.

– **Paul was always surrounded by a team** and never travelling alone (e.g. Barnabas, Silas, others).

Rom 16:1f: Paul recommends Phoebe to the Romans, he himself was still in Corinth/Greece. And asks for welcoming her in the best way. He lists 10 females and 16 male names. About 56 AD Paul already knows these people, even without having been there in person.

Paul sends greetings (even when papyrus was expensive), and adds personal thoughts, namely what interconnects with them: their faith in Jesus Christ and common memories.

How and where can we read the stories of our companions?

What do we take home? The stories of others!

The list shows a balanced mix of men and women, obviously they worked together well: Cross-generations, cross-professions and incoming-groups; even slaves and free people, rich and poor ones, Romans and immigrants (names!).

Those people would have never met in "normal"/common circumstances. Despite their different milieus and backgrounds they are connected through the same calling.

Accept people (Rom 15:7) as Jesus accepted us!

Notice gifts at each person and accept that we need one another; we need to collaborate! There is a bond (connectedness) and not just a facebook friendship!

Don't talk negatively about others, especially not in churches!

Do we see the other person with Jesus' eyes?

Where there is appreciation there is no room for competition or envy.

How does it look like in our lives? Are we stronger together?

Beware of separations and splits! Try to be open for reencounters with people and stay in connection with them.

We all need forgiveness and are also not easy to be accepted by others!

These Workshops / Roundtables were offered:

- **Abuse** – not in the Church? with Margit Eichhorn and Dr. Elizabeth Domig, Austria
- **Be reconciled!** With Dr. Verena Lang and Johanna Binder, Austria
- **Networking** of evangelical women within a nation: resources – experiences – ideas with Hannelore Illgen (Germany) and Maureen Ma (France)
- The paper “**Call to all Christians**” with Amanda Jackson, Austria, see www.riseinstrength.net
- **Women in Leadership** with Elke Werner, Germany

And these Panels:

- *Mentoring the next generation*
- *Prayer Houses*
- *Serving Refugees*
- *The Value of Scripture*
- *Training for Women*

Female Heroes in our nations

Through all times there have been “strong” women in each nation. They acted upon their faith and Biblical convictions – often against conventions of Society and Christian Religion. We honored these Heroes through giving report about their lives and their tireless involvement in the Kingdom.

We got to know for example royal ladies (like **Renée de France** – Italy, like Princess **Zsuzsanna Lórántffy** – Hungary, like **Princess Olga** – Russia),
– as well as (former) nuns (**Marie Dentièrre** – Switzerland, **Katharina von Bora** – Germany)
– and just „simple“ missionaries (**Soula Isch** – Greece, **Wafa Fayes** – Egypt, **Alice Gordon Gulick** – Spain).

Although their lives and activities were very different, their faithful examples encourage us even today, to make a difference – in kindergartens and schools, in social challenges, in prisons and pastoral ministry.

They have in common a tireless love for God and men, and they risk to overcome borders – with the motivation to serve God and make Him known. Their suffering brought rich fruit (s. John 15,2).

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