

Pioneering Gendered African Theology: A Historical Perspective of Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel

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Abstract

This article is a contribution to the Church History Society of Southern Africa as a tribute to the late Professor Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel (15 December 1959–19 May 2020). On 28 November 1992, she was the first female minister to be ordained by a Dutch Reformed Church in Southern Africa. The author, who is a former student of the late Plaatjies-Van Huffel, is aware of the delicacy of such an inscription and is mindful of the pain which her family and relatives, the church and the academic world has experienced after losing such a dedicated person. The article is a historical review of the contribution of Plaatjies-Van Huffel as a church pastor, a church leader, an expert on church polity (i.e., church government), an academic, and a renowned scholar. Her contribution made an impact on both the church and society not only in South Africa but across the globe. In honouring her, the article will give a historical narrative of Plaatjies-Van Huffel's life and achievements before her death. An overview of how Plaatjies-Van Huffel pioneered gendered African theology is presented as a way of honouring her contributions to and achievements in the church and the academic world and these will be discussed in four parts. The first part narrates her life with a singular focus on her early years and education; the second part relates her pastoral career; while the third part discusses her participation in church leadership – both local and international – and her serving on various boards and committees. Finally, the fourth part focuses mainly on her life as an academic. Since the narrative is historical in nature only archival sources will be used. The road for women to become pioneering gendered African theologians has not been an easy one because it has been marred by women despising and being frustrated with one another. Therefore, it is important for the church to have proper and up-to-date knowledge and information about church regulations and a critical analysis from a gender



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perspective of current church rules and procedures to allow inclusive language. In conclusion, the article presents a challenge and provides encouragement for women who desire to serve as leaders in the church, society and tertiary institutions that it is possible to do so even if there are patriarchal barriers and domination.

Keywords: pioneering; gendered African theology; Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjes-Van Huffel

Introduction

Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjes-Van Huffel was born on 15 December 1959 in Prieska, a rural town in the Northern Cape, South Africa, and died on 19 May 2020. She lived for 61 years and God used her to break down the patriarchal barriers in the church which was dominated by masculinity. The patriarchal system was ruling in the church and it was spreading to the academic world. She was the first female to be ordained as a minister of the Word and sacraments in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa. Her ordination took place on 28 November 1992. From that day on, Plaatjes-Van Huffel became a catalyst in pioneering gendered African theology not only in South Africa but by joining other women on the continent to emancipate women in the church and society. She achieved many things as a pastor, a church leader, an expert on church polity (i.e., church government) and an academic in the midst of fields which were particularly dominated by her male counterparts. The author of this article was supervised by Plaatjes-Van Huffel when he was pursuing his postgraduate diploma and Master's degree in Theology at Stellenbosch University from June 2012 to March 2016 although he knew her before through previous engagements.

The author has chosen to present the article in honour of her as a mother-figure and a mentor par excellence on his journey of academics in the area of ecclesiology (Church History and Church Polity). The author is regarded as an expert on church polity in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe because of the mentorship he received from Plaatjes-Van Huffel. In order to come up with a comprehensive narrative, the article will be presented in four parts, namely: an historical overview of Plaatjes-Van Huffel's early life and education; a narrative of her achievements in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA); a discussion of her participation in church leadership – both local and international – and her serving on various boards and committees in her denomination and other ecumenical boards worldwide; and finally, a chronicle of her achievements and contributions as an academic to prove how she is regarded and remembered as one of the church leaders, a church polity expert, and a noted scholar who pioneered gendered African theology.

Gendered African Theology

The term “gendered African theology” is explained in the article which was authored by Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2019) where she says:

The concept “gender” describes the differences between women and men which are based on socially defined ideas and beliefs of what it means to be a woman and a man (or a girl and a boy). Gender refers to the social roles allocated respectively to women and to men in particular societies and at particular times. Gender is distinguished from sex which is biologically determined; “sex” refers to a person’s biological makeup, while “gender” describes their social definition, that is, the values and roles society assigns them.

Gendered African theology in this article will mainly focus on the historical overview of Plaatjies-Van Huffel who was a pioneer as the first female pastor, an academic and a theologian in Southern Africa. In Africa, women are still marginalised in many churches; however, the person under review in this article endured all the opposition to and criticism of her pioneering gendered African theology. She pioneered this type of theology as a way of addressing the issue of patriarchal domination in the church and academic circles. Women are kept subordinate in a number of ways (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2019). Thus, the author intends to chronicle how Plaatjies-Van Huffel pioneered gendered African theology in the URCSA and the academic world.

Overview of Her Early Life and Educational History

As already indicated in the previous paragraph, Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies was born on 15 December 1959, the second child in a family of seven daughters. Her father, Johannes Jacobus Plaatjies, was a teacher by profession and her mother, Jacoba Johanna Plaatjies, was a house wife (Flaendorp 2014). She was educated at Bergrivier Senior Secondary School at Wellington and later proceeded to study for her teacher’s diploma at the University of Western Cape where she graduated in 1978. Van der Merwe (2021) notes that:

Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies was born on 15 December 1959 in Prieska in the Northern Cape. She matriculated in 1977 at Bergrivier Senior Secondary School in Wellington in the Boland. After qualifying and working as a teacher she enrolled at the University of the Western Cape to study Theology in 1986. She was licensed in 1992 and became the first woman to be ordained as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. After her licensing, Plaatjies-Van Huffel was called to the combination congregation of Robertson-Robertson East in the Western Cape where she was ordained as a minister.

The historical overview of Plaatjies-Van Huffel’s life shows that she did not go to train as a minister of the Word and sacraments because she had nothing better to do, but rather that she left her profession as a teacher to answer God’s calling. For her to become the

first gendered African theologian and pastor in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa was indeed a calling from God. God ordained her to fulfil His calling because He is the one who calls and ordains people regardless of their gender.

According to Plaatjies-Van Huffel's Facebook page, her motto was, "I write what I like".¹ Thus, the sky was the limit for her because she left her teaching career in 1986 and enrolled at the University of Western Cape to train as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). This was after the church adopted women's ordination in 1982 (Flaendorp 2014; Landman 2021). If her motto is critically analysed, it is true that by her motto, "I write what I like" Plaatjies-Van Huffel wrote what God appointed when He called her to be the pioneer of gendered African theology. It was not an easy assignment because the patriarchal system was the order of the day in the church and African societies. According to her motto, truly the person discussed in the article was a genius in the life of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and across the globe. Van der Merwe (2021) notes that the life of Plaatjies-Van Huffel cannot be separated from the Confession of Belhar, which is centred on the following:

The Confession of Belhar addresses three critical areas in the South African context, namely church unity, reconciliation and justice. On unity it states "that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ"; and further "that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted.

The Confession of Belhar is hinged on three pillars, namely, church unity, reconciliation and justice. Therefore, as discussed in the article, Plaatjies-Van Huffel was an advocate for church unity, reconciliation and justice regardless of race and gender. This was a result of apartheid which promoted racial discrimination among the people of South Africa.

After completing her studies in Theology, Plaatjies-Van Huffel became the first female minister to be ordained by the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa. She was married to Rev. Dawid van Huffel who is a fulltime minister of the Word and sacraments in the URCSA (Flaendorp 2014). Her ordination as the first female minister in the church which was dominated by male ministers was like a walk in the park for her (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2014). It is true that she pioneered gendered African theology because she was the first female to be ordained in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa.

1 <https://www.facebook.com/maryanneplaatjiesvanhuffel/photos/a.340813379634191/340813362967526>. Plaatjies van Huffel's motto was taken from the title of Steve Biko's book.

According to Flaendorp (2014) and Landman (2021), her ordination took place in the DRMC congregation of Robertson East in the Western Cape, about 730 km from where she grew up. Two-thirds of this community of 28 000 people were Afrikaans-speaking brown people (called “coloureds” in apartheid times). She remained in this congregation for 17 years, in spite of a schism in the congregation when a group of 120 congregants, mainly women, broke away to attend services at another congregation, not accepting a woman as a minister of the Word and sacraments. This shows that the life of Plaatjies-Van Huffel was full of opposition, but she did not look back. She continued to fulfil her mandate which was bestowed on her by God to be a pioneer of gendered African theology. Even though she faced opposition from both males and females, she did not surrender. This was because she knew that she was writing what she liked in the knowledge that we are all equal before God.

Plaatjies-Van Huffel as a Minister of the URCSA

In the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa, few women theologians have been pioneers in making their mark on decision-making structures, editorial boards and executive committees as decisively as Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2014; 2018) has. As a minister of the URCSA serving a congregation in Robertson East, a small, rural town in the Western Cape, Plaatjies-Van Huffel became involved in issues of gender equality and the empowerment of women in the church. It became clear to her that even though the period since 1994 was characterised by fundamental policy and legislative reforms which should have impacted women in the church and non-profit organisations, the non-compliance with said policies was still apparent in post-apartheid South Africa (Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Seloana 2008). Plaatjies-Van Huffel served the URCSA in Robertson as the congregation minister from 1992 until March 2010 which is a period of more than 17 years in the same congregation.

According to Flaendorp (2014), Plaatjies-Van Huffel was the first female minister to be elected in various leadership structures in the URCSA. From 2002 to 2010, she served the church as the first female minister to be elected to the post of Actuarium of the Cape Synod of the URCSA. She served this post for two consecutive terms. This is a clear testimony that she is the pioneer to the gendered African theology in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2019). More so, in 2008 she was elected as the vice-moderator of the General Synod of the URCSA. It is arguable that the person whom the author is presenting here in honour of what she did in transforming how people were perceiving females in the church proved to be an eye opener that women ministers are capable of doing what is being done by their male counterparts.

This was not the end though, because in 2012 she was elected to the highest position in the church, namely, the moderator of the General Synod. As such, she became the first woman to be elected to such a high office in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa (Flaendorp 2014). Plaatjies-Van Huffel was second to none in pioneering

gendered African theology. The author does not deny that there are other women who have done extremely well in gendered African theology, but as one of the students who was mentored by Plaatjies-Van Huffel had seen it befitting to present this paper in honour of what she did during her life time in pastoral duties and leadership structures in the URCSA.

Van der Merwe (2021) writes:

Plaatjies-Van Huffel did not only play a leading role during the general synod of 2012, but she also had a huge influence on the way forward. Although important discussions on unity between the two churches had started before her election in 2012, her leadership and passion for unity gave new momentum to the process. The outcome of several meetings between URCSA and the DRC was the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement between the two churches on 10 April 2013. The statement issued by the executives after the meeting on 9–10 April 2013, where the Memorandum of Agreement was signed, gives an idea of the importance of this event in the history of the two churches.

It is true as indicated in the above quotation that she was a leader par excellence and to her the sky was the limit to lead the church which was previously dominated and controlled by masculinity. She was not discouraged by being a female church leader as she was advocating for unity, reconciliation and justice among the church and society. The church is being called to have leaders who persevere to lead the church according to the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of John 17:21 which says: “That all may be one”. True, it is not possible for the church to preach about unity, reconciliation and justice if there is no oneness among believers. Even members of society are called to live a harmonious life within themselves. This was a call which Plaatjies-Van Huffel as a gendered African theologian and pastor was making not for her church alone but all churches across the globe.

According to her Curriculum Vitae (CV), Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2018) was elected a Church Law expert on the Permanent Judicial Commission of the Regional Synod Cape of the URCSA from 2002 until the time of her demise. This is further proof that the person under discussion here was unstoppable in pioneering gendered African theology in her church. She was not only representing the church but also speaking out against injustice of the government. In March 2020, she wrote an open letter to President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa lamenting the injustices which women and children were facing such as rape and stigmatisation. Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2020b) wrote:

We the people of South Africa are tired of hearing stories of mutilated female bodies, decomposed female bodies, dismembered bodies. We lament what South Africa is becoming of ... a slaughter house of women and children. Women and children are not free in this beautiful country of ours. They are imprisoned by the lustful gaze of those who are lurking in the streets to take what does not belong to them. Their movements are restricted by those who are prowling on them, who is guarding women and children

against the thousands of paedophiles, rapists and murderers who freely are roaming our streets?

As a minister of the Word and sacraments, Plaatjies-Van Huffel was not advocating for gender equity in the church only, but also in society as shown by her courage in writing an open letter to the president of South Africa to act against the oppression of women and children in the country. She was indeed a pioneer in the liberation of women both in the church and society. She was a multifaceted minister of the Word who was advocating for the liberation of women in a holistic way. She pioneered gendered African theology for the church and society in an independent Africa.

Plaatjies-Van Huffel devoted her life to deconstructing dominant dialogues especially patriarchal leadership structures in the church, gender treatises, contemporary issues of gender and church polity. She wrote many articles from a feminist standpoint (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2014) as a church law and church polity expert to address issues of gender impartiality in the church and society.

Plaatjies-Van Huffel as an Ecumenical Leader

As a pastor and church law expert Plaatjies-Van Huffel became more engaged in ecumenical leadership structures representing her denomination, country, and the continent of Africa. Her CV (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2018) showed that she was really pioneering gendered African theology from denomination level to international level. The sky was the only limit for her, she was unstoppable. According to her CV (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2018), she was a member of the following associations: *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* (2013–May 2020); International Consortium for Law and Religion Studies (ICLARS) (2013–May 2020); Africa Consortium for Law and Religion Studies (ACLARS) (2014–May 2020); Church History Society of South Africa (CHSSA) (2012–May 2020); *Kerkregwerksgemeenskap van Suid Afrika* (2012–May 2020); South African Council for the Protection and Promotion of Religious Right and Freedoms (SACRRF) (Executive member) (September 2011–May 2020); and the Circle of Concerned Women (2010–May 2020). Most of these associations specialise in Church History and Church Polity which was her area of specialisation.

According to Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2019b), church polity issues ran in her blood. She was made a permanent member of the Judicial Commission of the Regional Synod Cape of the URCSA (2002–May 2020). In all these mentioned associations Mary wrote many publications on issues to do with church government, gender issues and patriarchal domination in the church and society. Most of her publications and articles were firmly rooted in the reformed theology, black liberation theology, gender disparity in the church and society. All these were anchored within the basis of the Bible as the foundation of her address to issue which concern the unity, reconciliation and justice in the church and society.

Apart from being a member of all these associations Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2018) also represented Africa on various ecumenical committees across the globe, including: president of the World Council of Churches (WCC) representing Africa (2013–May 2020); member of the Permanent Committee of Consensus and Collaboration of the WCC (2013–May 2020); member of the Central Committee of the WCC (2013–May 2020); member of the Gender Task Team of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) (2015–2017); and member of the Procedures Task Team of the WCRC. During the same period from 2015 to 2017, she was a member of the Pan African Women’s Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN) (2017–May 2020); moderator of the Ecumenical Consultation on *The Churches Advocacy Role for Children’s Rights* at the WCC in Busan, Korea (30 October 2013–10 November 2013); and moderator of the Public Issues Committee of the WCRC at Grand Rapids, United States (18–28 June 2010).

On 3 September 2019, Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2019b) notes that there is a need to redesign our theology to give room to more people to do research on ecumenism. She writes:

Receptive ecumenism aims to develop unity among many different Christian denominational perspectives. I attend conferences and speak about this topic, and I have published materials through the WCC – such as in the *Ecumenical Review* – and other organizations. My presidency within the WCC has positively impacted my research related to ecumenical issues. My involvement with the WCC has helped me to advocate for social change, peace and justice, and has influenced my deeper thinking about our changing world.

According to Plaatjies-Van Huffel, her desire was to see a change in the type of theology and come up with a paradigm shift to introduce theology of liberation which accommodate all denominations and accommodate all people regardless of their social status. She also argued that as a leader in ecumenical bodies, such as the WCC, it is important to advocate that churches across the globe must do their work in democratic societies, within nations that face many challenges. Churches must also govern themselves effectively within the context of a secular world, and bring about change in a way that is proactive in maintain human dignity without looking at gender status.

Plaatjies-Van Huffel as a Church History and Church Polity Lecturer

Plaatjies-Van Huffel devoted her life to pastoral ministry but this did not hinder her from pursuing her dream of becoming a lecturer. She did her Bachelor of Theology Honours (1991) and Masters of Theology (1998) at the University of the Western Cape. In 2003, she was conferred a Doctor of Theology by the University of South Africa (UNISA) and in 2008, she was conferred a Doctor of Philosophy by the University of Pretoria. For her doctoral thesis at UNISA she researched the pioneering of gendered African theology under the supervision of Prof. Christina Landman (Landman 2021).

In 2010, Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2018) was appointed as a lecturer in Church History and Church Polity and she started publishing in accredited journals where she made great inputs as a researcher. According to Flaendorp (2014), she quickly progressed from lecturer to senior lecturer, to head of the discipline group and to co-professor within four years of being at Stellenbosch University. Plaatjies-Van Huffel was a lecturer par excellence who was well respected by her fellow lecturers and students. Her contributions in the field of Church History and Church Polity went far beyond the boundaries of Stellenbosch University because she supervised PhD students from different countries across the globe who are now regarded as church polity experts and academics in their countries and universities. The author is one of the products of Plaatjies-Van Huffel, and is now the Actuaris of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and International (RCZ 2018).

Flaendorp (2014) avers that Plaatjies-Van Huffel took a keen interest in the difficulties female students faced at Stellenbosch University as a female lecturer, a mother and a woman. Of course, she pioneered gendered African theology but she was still convinced that the struggle of women in the ministry was far from over. As a pacesetter she knew what was needed and the challenges of gender stereotype in the church. She was willing to share her experiences in the ministry as woman pastor to those training to be ministers.

In the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, she became the first black female lecturer to become a full professor. According to Plaatjies-Van Huffel's (2018) CV, from 2010 to 2017 she supervised 31 students (PhD 4; MTh 6; MDiv 12; BDiv 4; PGD 5). Truly she was an academic par excellence who pioneered gendered African theology because some of her articles advocated for transformation of the patriarchal mind-set in the church and society. In the course of the latter part of the 20th century, however, women's exposure to ecumenical discourse enabled them to claim their freedom and to resist domination (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2011). She was not supervising students from South Africa alone. As indicated in her CV, Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2018) was indeed the expert in her area of Church History and Church Polity, she supervised and mentored students who came from different countries across the globe. Being the first black lecturer and a female pastor did not discourage her from executing the mandate to which she was called by God. As she did exceptionally well in church leadership, she did the same in academic circles as a Church History and Church Polity lecturer. Indeed, she was not appointed a lecturer in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University because she was a woman, but because she was the right candidate for the post. It was not easy going to be appointed to such posts during her tenure especially at a university which was dominated by white personnel. As an academic scholar she was as a lecturer in the field of Ecclesiology (Church History and Church Polity). She also presented papers at national and international conferences representing Stellenbosch University and as an ecumenical leader (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2018).

As a gendered African theologian and a scholar par excellence she was a renowned author and wrote several articles about black theology. In one of her articles, Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2020a) chronicles the life history of James Cone who was an advocate for black liberation theology. She writes that James Cone categorically stated that “Black Theology puts the black identity in the theological context”. She argues that black theology includes, but is not limited to, ethnicity, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, physical and intellectual ability. Definitely, the person under discussion here was and is still regarded as one the pioneers of gendered African theology, both as a scholar and a pastor who was called by God to bridge the gap not only to liberate women but also to liberate both men and women spiritually and academically. Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2018) made major contributions to academia as a Church History and Church Polity lecturer through her publications in the form of book chapters, articles in accredited journals, books and conference papers. She was not appointed to become a lecturer at Stellenbosch University in order to address gender disparity because she was a female, but because she was an expert in the field of Ecclesiology (Church History and Church Polity). An expert is a person who is regarded as a genius in their area of specialisation. No wonder she was appointed as a permanent member on committees of church polity and ecumenical committees across the globe. She was a teacher, lecturer, mentor, supervisor and promoter par excellence.

Conclusion

How then to conclude this tribute to Plaatjies-Van Huffel who went to be with the Lord on 19 May 2020; who served the URCSA as a minister for 28 years; and who pioneered gendered African theology? Firstly, the author has shown that Plaatjies-Van Huffel was a pioneer in pastoring, church leadership, ecumenical leadership, writing and publishing, and university lectureship. She was the first woman to be ordained as a minister of the Word and sacraments in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa. By achieving that she opened doors to other issues such as black liberation theology and gender disparity in the church and society. For more than two decades, Plaatjies-Van Huffel was unrivalled as an academic and a highly illustrious respected church and ecumenical leader who executed her duties with distinction.

Secondly, by being the first woman to be elected into leadership positions in the church which was dominated by patriarchal structures proved that she was not elected for the sake of being elected but that she was a leader par excellence. Thirdly, Plaatjies-Van Huffel was used by God as an instrument to transform the mind-set of her male counterparts by proving that women can be good leaders in the local churches and international ecumenical bodies.

Lastly, Plaatjies-Van Huffel will be remembered as one of the foremost female African theologians across the globe whose footprint and legacy will continue to be referred to and remembered from this current generation to future generations. She was indeed a church minister, church leader, scholar, church polity expert, theologian and an

academic who advocated for a total liberation and transformation from a Western and patriarchal type of theology to a gendered African theology. The hard work of this sombre, meticulous scholar, committed pastor-teacher, minister of the Word and sacraments, and ecumenical leader is a role model for future theologians and ministers of the Word and sacraments. Indeed, she has left behind a wealth of reformed theology teachings worthy of and ready for replication.

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