

WHEN ECCLESIASTICAL UNITY IS PURSUED BUT NOT REALISED: SYNODICAL INDEPENDENCY AND DENOMINATIONAL PLURALISM WITHIN THE CHURCH OF CENTRAL AFRICA PRESBYTERIAN (CCAP)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to appreciate the fact that though the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) is taken to be one denomination, the independence of the synods has made it to appear as if there are actually five denominations. By tracing the similarities and differences of the synods from their genesis it becomes quite clear that diversity outweighs unity in the CCAP. From a theological point of view we see that some of the differences are there because of different theological emphases, especially due to traditions of the mother churches that gave birth to the synods. Regarding political issues, it has been seen that the geographical and cultural contexts in which the synods are situated do contribute to the synods' perspectives on pertinent issues, as they cannot be taken to be operating in a vacuum. These observations therefore underscore the fact that the five synods' unity under the General Assembly is that of a loose federation rather than an organic one.

Keywords: Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP); Malawi; unity; diversity; general assembly; independence of synods

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the inner life of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in terms of different synodical practices, in order to highlight the points of unity and diversity within the denomination that is a product of three nineteenth century missionary organisations in Central Africa.

It will be seen that, though the three presbyteries of Livingstonia, Blantyre and Nkhoma came together in 1924/26, the process of becoming one denomination did not go all the way, thereby creating room for the perpetuation of distinctive characteristics of the missions which made them develop differently.² It is this fact that has made the CCAP one in name, but five distinct 'denominations' practically, due to synodical independency.

CONSTITUTIONAL MATTERS

The five synods differ first and foremost in their constitutions in that they are recognised as separate legal entities despite sharing the same General Assembly Constitution. During the formative years of the CCAP the original three groups that came together were at the level of presbyteries. As such they had their own constitutions independent of one another and still affiliated to their own home churches under whose synods they were operating. It therefore became necessary for the united church to come up with a constitution that could be agreed upon by all three original missions. Initially, Blantyre and Livingstonia missions agreed upon this constitution in 1924 while the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) of Nkhoma had to wait for two more years to consider it.³

Right from the beginning of the CCAP as a united denomination, differences were seen in the way many things were left to the jurisdiction of the presbyteries so that the autonomy of all the presbyteries was respected to the extent of rendering the synod powerless on many issues. To begin with, the presbyteries were left with all the powers to deal with their former churches as they pleased. This meant that the synod could not be completely free when the presbyteries' relationship with their mother churches could not be monitored by the synod itself. The presbyteries even had the powers to veto a decision of the synod as proposed in the Barrier Act of 1926:

That before the Synod passes any Act which is to be binding Rule or Constitution to the Church, such Act before passing into law shall have been passed by no less than three quarter ($\frac{3}{4}$) majority of members present, and shall therefore be remitted by them to the presbyteries, who may consult their respective sessions, and opinion of Presbyteries and consent thereto

2 *Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Minutes of First Meeting of Synod, 17-22 September 1924.*

3 *Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Minutes of Second Meeting of Synod 13-15 October 1926, Blantyre: Blantyre Mission Press, minute no. 5. 'Entrance of Nkhoma Presbytery into Synod', pp. 4-6.*

be reported to next Synod, who may then pass the Act as a law of the Church, if the more general opinion of the Church thus obtained agree thereto.⁴

This clearly shows that the synod as established then could not make any binding legislation and go to sleep expecting that the presbyteries would adhere to the policy. Even though the Barrier Act was there to safeguard the interests of the presbyteries over and against the wishes of the synod, it made the process of coming up with new ways of doing things in the synod very slow; as the synod could not conclude anything at any sitting since matters had to go the presbyteries first for their scrutiny before the synod could be given a go ahead to formalise the decision.

Since the establishment of the CCAP the nomenclature of the union has been changing over the years in order to respond to historical realities. When the three original missions came together, their churches were at the level of presbyteries in the structure of the Presbyterian system of church government. This means that the union of the three presbyteries resulted in the formation of the Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. The union, under the name of synod, operated from the year 1924/26 to the year 1956 when the three presbyteries were promoted to the status of synods. This development made the former synod to be referred to as the General Synod.⁵

The unity of the three synods in Malawi together with their sister synods in Zimbabwe (Harare Synod) and Zambia (Synod of Zambia), who joined them in 1965 and 1984 respectively, existed as the General Synod from 1956 up to 2002 when the CCAP adopted another constitution with some changes to suit the modern era.⁶ This constitution became not the Constitution of the CCAP General *Synod* but rather of the CCAP General *Assembly*. It is this General Assembly that now continues with the union or federation of the CCAP.

This therefore means that the CCAP denomination has practically six constitutions: the five constitutions for the synods and that of the General Assembly. This allows for diversity while providing room for some kind of unity. My observation is that there is more diversity than unity even at the level of constitutions. For example, on the issue of women ordination the constitution of the General Assembly explains it in such a way that any synod can do what it deems fit.⁷

4 Proposed Barrier Act, *Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Minutes of Second Meeting of Synod 13-15 October 1926*, Blantyre: Blantyre Mission Press, minute no. 27. 'Entrance of Nkhoma Presbytery into Synod,' pp. 12-13.

5 See: *The Constitution of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian 1956*, as passed by the meeting of the Eight Synod, held at Nkhoma, 25-29 April; and as amended by the meeting of the Ninth (Special) Synod, held at Livingstonia, 18-21 April, 1958, pp. 8-9.

6 See: *The Constitution of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian General Assembly*, Adopted at Lilongwe 8 December 2002.

7 *The Constitution of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian General Assembly*, Adopted at Lilongwe 8 December 2002. See: 'The CCAP General Assembly Constitutional Schedule', 6.12.1 and 6.12.2.

It can thus be argued that at the level of constitutions the CCAP is both one and five denominations. While oneness is still an ideal to be fully realised, practically the five synods are existing in the same way as other denominations that are not in any union but in some kind of agreement or association. This observation agrees with the study's presupposition that the CCAP is actually a loose federation of five denominations, notwithstanding their similarities in other respects.

LITURGY

Despite some similarities, the five synods have differences in the way their liturgies are performed to such an extent that if one moves from a congregation of one synod to another congregation belonging to a different synod, one feels like a stranger in the congregation of the new synod. The differences in liturgy are minor between Livingstonia and Blantyre but more pronounced between the Synod of Livingstonia and Zambia Synod. Nkhoma and Harare Synods are quite close but pronouncedly different from their three colleagues. This can partly be explained due to differences in the liturgies of the synods' mother churches back in Scotland and South Africa, which, though removed geographically and culturally, still influence their daughter churches in Malawi through historical connections and contemporary interactions. Besides, the closeness of the Synods of Livingstonia and Zambia can be explained in the sense that it was the Synod of Livingstonia that gave birth to the Synod of Zambia. In the same way Harare Synod is closer to Nkhoma Synod because the latter produced the former.

In the history of the CCAP attempts have been made to make the liturgy uniform in all five synods, but practically all the synods have continued with their particular liturgies. It seems that people prefer to continue with what they consider to be familiar rather than embracing something new and unfamiliar. On the other hand it can be argued that the General Assembly is lacking the capacity to implement decisions. It can also be argued that one of the reasons for the synods to continue with different liturgies is conservatism. The CCAP is well known for its conservative stand on points of spirituality, including the issue of liturgy. One of the reasons for breakaways or individual attrition from the CCAP in the recent years is the inability of the CCAP to embrace new ways of doing things, especially in the liturgy. Some youths and young adults leave the CCAP because they feel that the CCAP is quite rigid when it comes to changing its liturgy. These youths and young adults eventually find themselves in the Pentecostal and charismatic churches, whose styles of worship are considered livelier.⁸

It has to be appreciated, however, that of late the CCAP, at least in its three Malawian Synods of Livingstonia, Blantyre and Nkhoma, has adopted what it calls

8 Rhodian Munyenyerembe, *Christianity and Socio-cultural Issues: The charismatic movement and contextualisation in Malawi*, Zomba/Mzuzu: Kachere/Mzuni Press, 2011, pp. 89-90.

‘contemporary worship’. This type of worship or liturgy is quite charismatic and it is attracting a section of the church that was being pulled towards the Pentecostal and charismatic denominations. However, even with this development the contemporary service is looked upon as not being ‘the real thing’ as the traditional liturgies still dominate Sunday worship services.

Another liturgical difference among the synods is in the area of the sacrament of Holy Communion. My observation is that the strictness of preparation for partaking of the Holy Communion differs greatly among the five synods. In the Synods of Livingstonia and Blantyre a full communicant can decide to go and partake of the Holy Communion or even discover upon his arrival at the church that Holy Communion is being administered and then join the rest of the Christians. In the case of Nkhoma Synod such a thing cannot happen because people who want to participate in the Holy Communion on Sunday are first of all supposed to commit themselves to the rite by coming to church on Saturday for preparation. These preparations are spiritual on the part of the communicant and logistical on the part of the congregational leadership, so that they have a picture of what to expect during the communion service the following day.⁹

When one looks at these differences in something that is so central to the life of a Christian, it explains the frustrations many Christians experience when they transfer from one synod to another.

In certain cases the differences in liturgy among the synods are accentuated by the differences in culture and language, as it is a given fact that the cultures and languages of the synods differ in accordance with the places in which they are found. For example in the northern region of Malawi, where the Livingstonia Synod has its headquarters, the dominant language is Chitumbuka. This means that most services in this synod are conducted in the Chitumbuka language except in urban areas where you also have English services alongside the Chitumbuka ones. But in the rural areas it is mostly Chitumbuka or one of the northern local languages dominant in the area (such as Tonga in Nkhata-Bay district or Nkhonde in some parts of Karonga district) that feature in the worship service. For someone coming from the southern region or central region of Malawi it is not easy to fully participate in the worship services within such a context, especially when one considers the singing of Chitumbuka hymns, the liturgical recitation of things such as the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed in a language very different from one’s own.

While Blantyre and Nkhoma Synods use similar Chichewa hymn books and speak almost the same language of Chichewa/Chinyanja with different dialects, even between these two synods there are differences in culture and accent when one finds himself or herself away from one’s home synod. It is for this reason that the English language services are quite popular among urban Christians of the CCAP, as they

9 Int. Mr Nathaniel Kawale, Retired Church Elder and Evangelist, Nkhoma University, 20.2.14.

are a unifying factor among members of the congregations from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

THEOLOGICAL TRAINING

The history of theological training in the CCAP is one of the most fascinating things in the history of the church because of all the incidences experienced in this area. To begin with, it must be pointed out from the onset that when the missionaries arrived in central Africa they did not immediately set out to teach the people with a view to ordaining some of them into pastors in the nearest future. Each mission at first taught its people whatever individual missionaries felt was appropriate, without any structured plan of what theological content was supposed to be covered and for what purpose besides basic evangelism.¹⁰

Later each synod formalised its theological education, paving the way for the first crop of theological students to emerge, some of whom became the first ordained indigenous leaders of the church. During this time, despite cooperation in many areas, the synods did not have a single institution for the teaching of its theological students until after the union had come to fruition. It has to be mentioned, though, that during the early years of the Overtoun Institution some scholars came from other missions in order to obtain the advanced training that was being offered at the institution. For example in 1897 the DRCM sent four Africans to be trained as teachers at the Overtoun Institution.¹¹

Even with the CCAP union in place, the different synods continued with their own theological schools. This remained the state of affairs throughout the period of missionary control of the church until closer to the time when indigenous leadership was about to take over the control of the synods. In response to an overture from Livingstonia and Blantyre it was decided that a theological institution for the three original synods be established based at Nkhoma Mission, the headquarters of Nkhoma Synod.¹² It was thought that Nkhoma, being at the centre, was better placed in terms of the distance to be covered by the Synods of Livingstonia and Blantyre from the north and the south respectively.¹³

Consequently, the first truly joint theological institution for the synods was established at Nkhoma in 1963. This arrangement seemed to be working well for the three synods until in the early 1970s when due to political influence, the synods

10 John McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi 1875-1940: The impact of the Livingstonia Mission in the Northern Province*. Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000, pp. 171-172.

11 J.L. Pretorius, The story of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Nyasaland, *The Nyasaland Journal* 10(1), (January, 1957), p. 17.

12 *Church of Central African Presbyterian, Minutes of Eighth Synod, held at Nkhoma from 25-29 April 1956*, minute 36.

13 See also *Church of Central African Presbyterian, Minutes of the Ninth Synod (Special), held at Livingstonia from 18th- 21st April 1958*, minute 25, p. 7.

were divided, and the institution transferred from Nkhoma to Kapeni in Blantyre. The College was at Kapeni in Blantyre from 1974 to 1977 when it moved to Zomba, assuming the name Zomba Theological College. The three Malawian Synods continued to train their ministers at Zomba Theological College and were later joined by their sister Synods of Harare and Zambia.

It can be concluded in this section that there is no difference in terms of theology among the five synods. They are all Reformed in theological orientation and Presbyterian in church government, which indeed qualify them to be one denomination. Their differences, however, are in the emphases they make in certain liturgical items, ecclesiastical culture and approaches in dealing with contemporary logistical challenges in theological education, especially in view of the fact that Livingstonia and Nkhoma Synods are now situating their theological institutions within the synods' newly established universities. This means that while these synods still send some of their theological students to Zomba Theological College, a good number of their student ministers go to their synods' institutions.

EDUCATION IN THE CCAP SYNODS

In general, the policies of the synods on education do not differ much. In a way all the synods have continued with providing educational services from the missionary era.¹⁴ With regard to primary and secondary schools, Malawian Synods of Livingstonia, Blantyre and Nkhoma have many schools and their efforts are co-ordinated through the Association of Christian Educators in Malawi (ACEM) of which they are members together, and individually with other Christian denominations that own primary and secondary schools in the country under the umbrella bodies of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi, Malawi Council of Churches and the Evangelical Association of Malawi.¹⁵

The CCAP Harare Synod has only one school known as Nyabira CCAP School, which is a primary school offering education to children of ages between five and 13. This school was built in 1957 and it is one of the many schools that the CCAP built in Zimbabwe prior to the establishment of the Harare Synod. All the other schools were handed over to the government through the local councils. The Harare Synod does not have any secondary or tertiary institution. Nyabira School was left in the hands of the church in order to continue showing the church's concern for a holistic Christian ministry.¹⁶

14 See: Walter Lawrence Brown, *The development in self understanding of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod as church during the first forty years of autonomy: An ecclesiological study*. PhD Theology, University of Stellenbosch, 2004, pp. 80-110.

15 www.aceemalawi.wordpress.com/

16 See: www.ccaphresynod.com/ourschool.htm (accessed 11 August 2015).

The Synod of Zambia, just like its sister Synods in Malawi, is making a significant contribution to education in its area of operation.¹⁷ The history of this synod's contribution to education goes back to the missionary era when the Livingstonia Mission opened several schools in central, northern and eastern provinces.¹⁸ Some of these schools were taken over by the colonial government in 1952.¹⁹

At the 2002 Synod Meeting, the Education Committee of the Synod of Zambia recommended to the synod to re-possess some of its former schools.²⁰ In 2003 some of these schools were indeed repossessed by the synod. The synod now has a number of primary and secondary schools that it is operating. Some of these schools, especially primary ones, are community schools, meaning that they are operated like charity organisations in order to help the poor and vulnerable in society, especially orphans, and the teachers in these schools are volunteers.²¹ The synod so far does not have a tertiary institution.

With regard to tertiary education there is cooperation among the Malawian Synods in medical schools and hospitals through the Christian Health Association of Malawi (CHAM) in which they are also members alongside other Christian denominations that equally serve Malawians in this sector. However, on other fronts, especially in general tertiary education, the three synods are acting independently. Blantyre Synod does not have a university yet, though plans are at an advanced stage to have one. According to the Secretary General, Rev. Alex Maulana, the university was expected to open in September 2015.²² On the other hand, Livingstonia and Nkhoma Synods have their own universities in the names of University of Livingstonia and Nkhoma University respectively.²³

While some observers are of the view that it could be better for the CCAP as a whole to come up with one university, others feel it is far better for all the synods to have their own universities. However, looking at how the church-related universities are struggling (despite their tremendous contribution) I feel having one CCAP university would have been a better idea for the sake of a wider base for resource mobilisation and also for enhancing the oneness of the church.

Obviously the CCAP General Assembly does not have any plans to establish a CCAP university in the nearest future. The synods are, therefore, left to themselves

17 Victor Chilenje, *The origin and development of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in Zambia 1882 – 2004*. PhD, University of Stellenbosch, 2007, pp. 219-220.

18 See: P. Snelson, *Education development in Northern Rhodesia 1883-1945*. Lusaka: Kenneth Kaunda Foundation, 1974.

19 Victor Chilenje, *The origin and development of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in Zambia 1882 – 2004*. PhD, University of Stellenbosch, 2007, pp. 219.

20 Ibid.

21 See: www.ccapzambia.org/community-schools.html (accessed 11 August 2015).

22 See: Tikondane Vega, *University of Blantyre Synod to open in Malawi this year*, www.nyasatimes.com/2015/02/05/university-of-blantyre-synod-to-open-in-malawi-this-year-rev-maulana/

23 The University of Livingstonia opened in August 2003 while Nkhoma University opened its doors in September 2013.

on this issue, thereby being divided further with regard to unity of purpose in tertiary education matters.

WOMEN'S MINISTRY

Apart from the individual contributions that women make in the five synods of the CCAP, their group contributions are most conspicuous through their organisations known as women's guilds. All five synods have their women's guilds whose activities are almost similar.

Women's guilds

It is generally believed, and perhaps rightly so, that women's guilds are among the most active groups of Christians in the CCAP. The women's guilds in the five synods are known as: *Umanyano wa Wanakazi* in the Livingstonia Synod, simply known as *Umanyano*; *Chigwirizano cha Amayi* in Nkhoma and Harare Synods, simply known as *Chigwirizano*; *Mvano* in Blantyre Synod; and Christian Women's Guild in the Zambia Synod. Several names were suggested for these groups during their formative years before the current names were accepted by all.²⁴

The ideas that led to the formation of these women's groups were hatched in the late 1930s by women who were already active in church work. However, it was not until the early 1940s that the various women's groups in the presbyteries of the synods evolved in the women's guilds as they are now known. Among the many activities that women's guilds do, are such things as conducting Bible studies, doing charity work and comforting the bereaved during funerals. But above all, these guilds are also there to spread the gospel. It is interesting to note that in the history of the Women's Guild of the Synod of Livingstonia (*Umanyano*), the group at one time even sponsored an evangelist to go and do the work of a resident missionary in Marambo in Zambia in the 1960s and 1970s. The first evangelist to do this job in the name of *Umanyano* was Mr S.M. Kumwenda, who worked in this capacity from 1964 to 1973 before being succeeded by another man, Mr M.A. Nkunika.²⁵ This was a rare case of the women's guild shouldering the responsibility of an evangelist's welfare for the sake of the spread of the gospel. All this just shows the zeal and dedication that women have towards the success of the Christian ministry in their synods.

The women's guilds have worked as avenues of women's ministries in CCAP synods for a very long time. There was a time when the highest position a woman could get in the church was through her ascendance in the administrative structures

24 See: Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Synod of Livingstonia, *Mdauko, Mendeskero na Milimo ya Umanyano wa Wanakazi*, p. 14.

25 Ibid.

of the women's guilds. This is not surprising though, since women could not be ordained as ministers in all the synods until in the recent past when some synods have reluctantly accepted the development.²⁶ This means that in the synods where women are now ordained as ministers, it is possible to have women in the leadership of the church as a whole, while other women are leading in the women's guilds.

The changes that have taken place in the church have not spared the women's guilds. As a result we see that the women's guilds have also evolved with time in order to suit the modern context in which they are now operating. For example, changes have occurred in the manner of dressing and of conducting Bible study and other church activities following the innovation that comes with trends of doing things, especially as new generations take over from the earlier generations.²⁷

Women as ordained ministers

The five CCAP synods are coming from a background that used to take it for granted that men alone are supposed to be leaders in the whole church while women can be leaders among fellow women and children. This attitude can be traced back to the time of the missionaries where it was only male missionaries that could be mission heads and also serve in congregations as ordained pastors. Their wives were not recognised as they were only known as wives of missionaries.²⁸ The only women whose contribution could be appreciated were the unmarried women who came into the mission field in their own right as missionaries without being attached to a husband.²⁹ But even these could still be under a male missionary even if that missionary was junior to them in terms of age and experience. As Isobel Reid comments in view of the relationship between missionaries Jack Martin and Miss Mary Patrick at Livingstonia Mission's Bandawe station in the 1920s: 'It was entirely expected that a young inexperienced man should have authority over a single woman missionary with seven years more experience.'³⁰

26 Though some synods have accepted the ordination of women it is not celebrated by many Christians because people are still prejudiced against women ministers. See: Joyce Dainess Mlenga, *Women in Holy Ministry in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Synod of Livingstonia: A study of perceptions*, TRS PhD Module, Mzuzu University, 2008.

27 See: Esela Gondwe, *The continuity and change of the Umanyano Women's Guild of the Livingstonia Synod*. BA, University of Malawi, 2006, pp. 5-10.

28 See: Mamie Martin's letter to her parents of 26 August 1923 in Margaret Sinclair, *Salt and light: The letters of Jack and Mamie Martin in Malawi 1921-28*. Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2002, pp. 148-149.

29 Ibid, p. 149.

30 I.E. Reid, *Myth and reality of the missionary family: A study of the letters of Rev. J.R. (Jack) Martin and his wife, Mary Evelyn (Mamie), written from Livingstonia Mission, Malawi, 1921-28, with particular emphasis on the position of missionary wives*. MTh, University of Edinburgh, 1999, p. 35.

On the part of indigenous women, they too were not recognised as leaders in the church except among fellow women and children. Besides this lack of recognition, indigenous women were also belittled for their lack of education, especially during the first decades of the church. This situation continued even after the responsibility of the church's leadership was passed on to indigenous males.³¹

Due to changes in the secular world, especially as influenced by women's liberation movements, some churches began to get influenced, and in so doing they were forced to re-read their Bibles in order to find a justification for the ordination of women or to falsify the view that appeared to put women in the church at a disadvantage vis-à-vis men. These developments led to changes in the way some members of the clergy in the CCAP used to view women leadership in the church. Consequently, the Synods of Livingstonia, Blantyre and Zambia took courage to change their conditions for eligibility in becoming a pastor by allowing women, whether married or single, to join theological training for purposes of serving as ordained ministers in the church. Currently, there are women ministers in the Synods of Livingstonia, Blantyre and Zambia. In the case of Blantyre Synod one female pastor, Reverend Mercy Chilapula, has even served in the position of synod moderator, which is the highest but not the most powerful position in the church.³²

It can be argued that this trend is not likely to be reversed in the three Synods of Livingstonia Blantyre and Zambia. The question, however, is: do women now flood the theological institutions in order to take advantage of the chance long denied to them? The observation of the present study is that contrary to many optimistic expectations, the number of women theological students in the institutions of the synods is very low.³³ There can be a lot of reasons for this scenario but above all it has to be remembered that these churches are coming from a culture that never accepted women pastors due to reasons that range from biblical interpretation to traditional African culture via early missionary practices. It is, therefore, not easy to find many women joining what hitherto was perceived to be exclusively a man's calling in the denomination.³⁴

31 Phoebe Faith Chifungo, *Women in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod: A practical theological study of their leadership roles*. PhD, (Practical Theology), University of Stellenbosch, December, 2014, p. 164.

32 See: Paida Mpasu, *The big interview: Mercy Chilapula (27.10.14)*, www.mwnation.com/mercy-chilapula (accessed 1 June 2014).

33 The number of female students doing ministerial studies or theology is generally smaller than the number of male students. See: Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *The challenge of theological education for women in Malawi*, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, Volume, 35 Supplement, December 2009.

34 See: Joyce Dainess Mlenga, *Women in Holy Ministry in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Synod of Livingstonia: A study of perceptions*, TRS PhD Module, Mzuzu University, 2008.

Within Nkhoma Synod, the issue of women ordination is still being discussed and the synod is yet to take a position.³⁵ However, among the clergy of Nkhoma Synod there are some who personally and theologically have no qualms with women being ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, though they would not dare opine like this while in the pulpit or in the synod's meetings.³⁶ Despite the presence of diverse views concerning women ordination in Nkhoma Synod, many commentators feel the synod is oppressive towards women because of its official stand, which is yet to give women a leeway to pursue theological education for the sake of ministerial ordination.³⁷

This issue of women ordination, therefore, is another instance in which the five synods of the CCAP differ at the level of synods, though they are supposed to be one denomination in doctrine and practice. Their differences are making some observers to conclude that those synods that are acting differently from their sisters should be perceived to be oppressive if their policies appear to be negatively disposed towards women's rights and other considerations.³⁸

NON-ORDAINED MEN'S MINISTRY

Apart from the women's guilds in the Synods of Livingstonia and Nkhoma, known as *Umanyano* and *Chigwirizano* respectively, there are groups specifically for men's fellowship. These are *Umanyano wa Madodana* (simply *Madodana*) for the Synod of Livingstonia and *Chigwirizano cha Amuna* for Nkhoma Synod. While the Synod of Livingstonia has had this men's guild for quite some time alongside the women's guild, the phenomenon is of recent origins in the Nkhoma Synod, though it is now getting settled.³⁹ The Synods of Blantyre, Harare and Zambia on the other hand do not have special guilds for adult males.

It is on record that Nkhoma Synod copied the men's guild phenomenon from Livingstonia Synod where it was first established. But why would Nkhoma Synod copy such a thing unless it was advantageous to them? The testimonies of many members of Nkhoma Synod point to the fact that the church felt a need in the areas of men's coordination whenever men were supposed to do some tasks in the church.

35 See: Grace Patience Banda, A study of assessment of women's rights in Nkhoma Synod: A case study of three CCAP congregations in Lilongwe City. BA (TRS), Mzuzu University, 2010.

36 Int. Retired Nkhoma Synod Minister, Lilongwe, 20.2.14.

37 Angela Kadzakumanja Nyirenda, Women's voice in Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in Malawi: A critical evaluation especially with Nkhoma Synod. MA (Diakonia and Social Practice), Diakonhjemmet University College, 2013.

38 Cf. Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and patriarchy: Religious experiences of Chewa women in Central Malawi*. Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1997, pp. 110-111.

39 Griffie G. Victor Banda, *The role of men's guilds in relation to women's guilds in Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian: A case study of Lilongwe and Mlanda Presbyteries*. BA (TRS), Mzuzu University, 2010.

This problem was not there among women because their *Chigwirizano* was able to mobilise them whenever there was need. It therefore became necessary to come up with an organisation that could be in a position to mobilise men in ecclesiastical responsibilities, especially when we consider that a good number of men are not very active in the church when they are just ordinary members.

The formation of the men's guild on the part of both Livingstonia and Nkhoma is a contextually relevant development in these synods, which came up without the influence of the original mother churches that do not have such guilds in their churches. The presence of men's guilds in the two synods is enabling men, who would otherwise have been inactive, to be active participants in such things as Bible study participation, marriage seminars, charity work and evangelisation through guild initiatives.

One interesting thing in the phenomenon of men's guilds is that they do not have a woman elder in their midst to check on their discussions in relation to the norms of the church. In the women's guild within Nkhoma Synod there is the controversial position of a male member of the church leadership who sits in the midst of women in order to make sure that all is well with the women in their group. This position is known as *Mkhalapakati* (literally he who sits in the midst or in between, i.e. between the women's guild and the church leadership). The absence of this office in the men's guild makes some people to question the integrity of the church when it comes to its perception of women's groups.⁴⁰ This gives the impression that it is only women who need supervision in their spiritual gatherings and not men. As long as such practices continue, they will always be attracting the wrath of feminist theologians and other feminist scholars who are fighting for the implementation of the equality of the sexes in all spheres of life, but more especially in the church.⁴¹

YOUTH MINISTRY

All five synods have their 'youth departments' which are quite active in ministering to fellow youths, besides doing various church responsibilities that can best be handled by the youth.⁴² All five synods of the CCAP have youth organisations with representatives from synod level to congregational level. Due to the fact that the youth are energetic and quite conversant with contemporary developments, they in most cases fail to be edified by the ministrations of their elders. In view of this, the youth find it easier to engage in their spiritual exercises without elderly supervision. This sometimes clashes with the leadership of the church as they think that the youth

40 Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious experiences of Chewa women in Central Malawi*. Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1997, p. 90.

41 See: Hawkins Chepah Tom Gondwe, *The possible influence of crucial Pauline texts on the role of women in the Nkhoma Synod of the Central African Presbyterian Church*. MA (Biblical Studies), University of South Africa, 2009.

42 The term youth in the CCAP context may refer to anyone between 15 and 35 years of age.

are going astray. I argue that when such things happen, the youth are not going astray as such, but that they are expressing their dissatisfaction with the lack of spiritual imagination and contextual innovation by their elders and leaders, who naturally are comfortable with the status quo.

With the establishment of contemporary services in CCAP congregations, this is the kind of worship that many youths want and it is not a surprise to see that these services are mostly attended by them. In all five synods of the CCAP the youth have been very much influenced by the charismatic movement's way of doing things in the church. For example over a decade ago, the leadership of the CCAP discovered that their youth were drifting away from the spirituality and ecclesiastical culture of the CCAP to that of the Pentecostal and charismatic churches through their involvement in the Student Christian Organisation of Malawi (SCOM), since it was this spirituality that had pervaded the organisation. The leadership's solution to this problem was to establish a separate student Christian organisation that could identify with the ethos of the CCAP as a denomination. Consequently, the CCAP Student Organisation (CCAPSO) was born. This means that the birth of CCAPSO was a reaction to the emphases of SCOM and other Christian youth organisations as influenced by Pentecostal and charismatic spiritualities, especially as most of the people who are invited to preach and teach in the gatherings of these organisations, come from Pentecostal and charismatic backgrounds.⁴³

It has, however, been observed that CCAP students who have been significantly influenced by the charismatic spirituality continue their fellowship in SCOM rather than in CCAPSO, while some have dual membership of these student Christian organisations.⁴⁴ It is partly because of this trend that the youth have wholeheartedly embraced the introduction of contemporary services in their congregations. My observation is that what is termed contemporary worship, is actually the charismatic way of worship. It is known as contemporary in the CCAP because it is an innovation in this denomination, coming in after the manner of their charismatic neighbours, while among the charismatic and Pentecostal Christians it is just a normal thing, without any adjectives to qualify it as being new or contemporary.⁴⁵

Within the Nkhoma Synod there was born in the year 2005 another youth organisation with overtly charismatic spirituality targeting urban youth. The name of this organisation is CCAP Youth Urban Ministry (CCAPYUM) with its emphasis on urban ministry, especially in order to reach out to the urban youth whose life is very fast and who are vulnerably exposed to all kinds of influences; especially due

43 See: Boston Khonje, A historical study of the establishment and contribution of the Student Christian Organisation of Malawi (SCOM) to the Malawian Society (1961-2012). MA (TRS), Mzuzu University, 2013.

44 Personal observation on various college and university campuses in Malawi.

45 Cf. Rhodian Munyenyembe, *Christianity and socio-cultural issues: The charismatic movement and contextualization in Malawi*. Zomba/Mzuzu: Kachere/Mzuni Press, 2011, pp. 89-90.

to the proliferation of information technology and urban culture. This organisation works more or less like an umbrella organisation for all the youth fellowships in the congregations of Nkhoma Synod known as CCAPYUFS (CCAP Youth Fellowships).⁴⁶

It can be argued that the challenges that the youth face in the CCAP are basically the same across synodical boundaries, though there is no uniformity in dealing with them as each synod approaches the issue from its own pastoral angle. This means that the unity of the CCAP as a denomination does not translate down to the youth who remain confined within the perimeters of their synods. I believe things would be different if there were an active youth desk at the General Assembly level with the task of coordinating all youth activities in the denomination. However, the state of the General Assembly is such that it cannot manage to bring leadership to the synods on issues affecting the youth in the denomination.

CHURCH AND STATE RELATIONS AMONG THE SYNODS

This section discusses the varied ways in which the CCAP, both at the level of the General Assembly and at the level of the synods separately, has been responding to political issues over the decades that the church has been in existence, especially in Malawi. The section has been divided into four subsections, namely: colonial period, single party era, transition period, and multiparty era in order to show how the different political contexts have been influencing the church in its responses to socio-political issues over the course of history up to the present moment.

The discussion in this section concentrates on the Malawian Synods of Livingstonia, Blantyre and Nkhoma and the political issues in Malawi. This does not mean that there have been no church-state relations in Zambia and Zimbabwe where the Synods of Zambia and Harare operate. There are three reasons for not treating these synods in this section: Firstly, it has to be remembered that the Synod of Zambia was not there as a synod until 1984, which means that the synodical decisions discussed herein could not originate from Zambia until after that synod's establishment. The second reason concerns only the Synod of Harare which, though established as early as 1965, because of the immigrant status of its members, engaging with the powers that be would not be as practical as is the case with Malawian synods. Lastly, it has to be remembered that these two synods were very small for a good part of their history; it is only now that they are growing, hence not able to exert any significant political influence from their past. In view of these reasons it was not possible to find readily available information for their discussion under the title of this section.

46 Foster Kamuyanja, *The impact of Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Youth Urban Ministry in Nkhoma Synod (CCAPYUM): A case study of selected churches within Lilongwe Presbytery*. BA (TRS) Mzuzu University, 2012.

The colonial period

Church-state relations are one area in which the CCAP as a whole has had a challenge with regard to raising one voice on issues. During the colonial times Presbyterian missionaries were suspected by the colonial government of pulling in the opposite direction because of their tendency to act as a kind of ‘opposition party’ in certain circumstances.⁴⁷ And yet it was the missionaries that desired the establishment of British colonial government as preferred to Portuguese colonial rule.⁴⁸ The Scottish missionaries were of the view that a British Protectorate would be a better alternative to Portuguese annexation which they believed would be injurious to their work and to the welfare of the native population.⁴⁹

The relationship between the DRCM missionaries and the colonial administration became sour during the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902, as the DRCM found itself in enemy territory because Nyasaland was a British Protectorate.⁵⁰ The DRCM missionaries were subjected to suspicion by the colonial government, besides the afflictions caused by the war on their people in South Africa.⁵¹

It can, however, be safely stated that during the fight for independence the synods were all on the side of the freedom fighters, though more credit has been given to the Synods of Livingstonia and Blantyre than to Nkhoma Synod.⁵² The reason for this state of affairs has been the observation that the education policy of the DRCM perpetuated peasantry in its area of influence and did not produce many highly educated Malawians at the time of the independence struggle, as was the case in the jurisdictions of Livingstonia and Blantyre.⁵³ This gave the products of Livingstonia and Blantyre mission schools an upper hand in terms of articulating issues during the fight for independence.

When the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was imposed in 1953, it was bitterly resented and opposed by the African population. The Synod of Blantyre found it necessary to add its voice to the criticism levelled against this act of white

47 Cf. Andrew Ross, *Blantyre Mission and the making of modern Malawi*. Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1996, p. 129. Also *LWBCA*, August-December 1897 and Andrew Ross, *Colonialism to cabinet crisis: A political history of Malawi*. Zomba: Kachere Series, 2009, pp. 16-19.

48 See: P.R Warhurst, Portugal’s bid for southern Malawi, 1882-1891. In *Malawi past and present*. Edited by Gordon W. Smith et al. Blantyre: CLAIM, 1971, p. 25.

49 Kenneth Ross, Crisis and identity: Presbyterian ecclesiology in southern Malawi, 1891-1993, *Missionalia* 25:3 (November 1997), p. 382.

50 Christoff Martin Pauw, Mission and church in Malawi: The history of the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian 1889-1962. PhD, University of Stellenbosch, 1980, p. 82.

51 *Ibid*, pp. 82-86.

52 Cf. Andrew Ross, *Blantyre Mission and the making of modern Malawi*, 1996, pp. 11-12.

53 Janet Wagner Parsons, Scots and Afrikaners in Central Africa: Andrew Charles Murray and the Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Malawi, *The Society of Malawi Journal*, Volume 51(1998), pp. 31-32.

supremacy by issuing a statement condemning the many abuses and the retrogression that the Federation had brought to Nyasaland:

Synod is aware of the need for moderation and careful speech in these difficult times. Sometimes, however, to say nothing is to deny the truth. Synod therefore feels it urgently necessary to say that it is unanimously opposed to Federation as it has been in practice over these years. We see no hope of a peaceful, and righteous future for all the people of this land (whatever their race) under the present form of Federal Government.⁵⁴

Though this statement did not have much impact in Malawi, it did influence the Church of Scotland to plead with the British Government to consider taking Malawi out of the Federation, which later made it possible for the country to attain independence.

It is significant to note that even though race relations had become sour in society in general during this time, it was possible for black and white Christians to stick together during these trying times when the church was generally in support of African nationalism. During the State of Emergency of 1959 the Colonial Government wanted to protect the white missionaries and offered them protection if they were in danger. At Livingstonia Mission the oneness of the races in the church became significant during this time when the missionaries indicated that they were not in danger in the midst of their black brothers and they dramatised this by marking the words of Ephesians 2:14 with whitewashed bricks on the lawn, which could easily be seen by government planes flying above.⁵⁵

After observing the fellowship of black and white in the church as experienced during the independence struggle at Livingstonia Mission, the Rev. Stephen Kauta Msiska remarked: 'I think this is the beginning of Church history in Nyasaland.'⁵⁶ Kenneth Ross has observed in reference to these words of Stephen Kauta Msiska that it was in the heat of the crisis that the identity of the church became clear.⁵⁷

54 Blantyre Synod, Blantyre Synod statement on the present state of unrest 1958. In *Christianity in Malawi: A source book*. Edited by Kenneth R. Ross. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996, pp. 195-201(200).

55 Eph. 2:4 reads; 'For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility' (NIV). See: Bill Jackson, *Send us friends*, Belfast: Bill Jackson, 1996, p. 78. See also Bill Jackson, *Breaking down the wall: The diary of a participant in the emergency of 1959*, *Bulletin of the Scottish Institute of Missionary Studies*, No. 10 (1994), pp. 46-51.

56 See: Bill Jackson, *Send us friends*, Belfast: Bill Jackson, 1996, p. 68. See also Ferguson McPherson's Foreword to Stephen Kauta Msiska, *Golden buttons: Christianity and traditional religion among the Tumbuka*. Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1997, p. 15.

57 Kenneth Ross, *Crisis and identity: Presbyterian ecclesiology in southern Malawi, 1891-1993*, *Missionalia* 25(3), (November 1997), p. 389.

The single party era

Between 1964 and 1994, when Malawi was under the one party system of government, all the churches, in a way, became silent. It was not possible to criticise the government and the ruling party because of the ruthless way in which the government machinery was dealing with suspected critics of the regime. It has, however, been observed that the Nkhoma Synod was closely aligned to the ruling party, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). It can be argued that Nkhoma Synod's closeness to the MCP was not something that the synod consciously initiated but that the synod was actually overtaken by historical events. For instance, it happened that the State President then, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, was Chewa by ethnicity from the central region district of Kasungu. According to the church boundaries of the synods of the CCAP in Malawi, the central region largely falls under the jurisdiction of Nkhoma Synod. Besides, it was generally believed that Dr Banda was a church elder in the Church of Scotland, which automatically made him an honorary church elder in the CCAP and more so in the Nkhoma Synod. This made the Nkhoma Synod to view Kamuzu Banda as 'its own man'.

W.S. Zeze has argued that the relationship between Nkhoma Synod and the MCP-led government between 1964 and 1994 can be likened to a situation where Christianity became a state-sponsored religion.⁵⁸ Zeze develops his thesis by providing four instances to illustrate how Christianity became a state-sponsored religion in the way Nkhoma Synod related to the MCP during the single party regime.⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that this write up by Zeze is quite critical of Nkhoma Synod's relationship with the Malawi Congress Party during the First Republic despite the author being a member of Nkhoma Synod, from whom one would expect some sympathy. The write up is, therefore, self-criticism at its best within the Nkhoma Synod in view of past historical realities.

While the Nkhoma Synod can be accused of aligning itself with the government and the party during the single party regime, the Synods of Livingstonia and Blantyre can equally be accused of being silent during this time – so much so that many lives

58 W.S. Zeze, *Christianity: A state-sponsored religion in Malawi? A critical evaluation of the relationship between the CCAP Nkhoma Synod and the MCP-led government (1964-1994)*, www.iclrs.org/content/events/28/751.pdf (accessed 18 June 2016).

59 W.S. Zeze outlines the following instances as examples that illustrate his point: Rev. Dishan Chimombo Episode (1964), Nyau Episode (1965), Theological College Episode (1974), Prayers and Loyal Messages to President Dr H Kamuzu Banda and Political Transition Episode (1992-1994). In all these instances Zeze is trying to show how the Nkhoma Synod collaborated with the MCP and sometimes even placing itself under the party by appealing to the party's arbitration even on purely ecclesiastical matters. See: W.S. Zeze, *Christianity: A state-sponsored religion in Malawi? A critical evaluation of the relationship between the CCAP Nkhoma Synod and the MCP-led government (1964-1994)*, pp. 5-10.

were lost without saying anything because the synods had been rendered voiceless.⁶⁰ Here we see differences and similarities in the way the CCAP synods related to the government during the single party era. The Nkhoma Synod can be understood to have been co-opted, thereby rendering it very uncritical to whatever the ruling party was doing. On the other hand, Livingstonia and Blantyre, though not co-opted as was the case with Nkhoma, equally failed Malawians by maintaining a culture of silence for the sake of their own survival over and against exercising the prophetic role of the church in society.

The transition period to multiparty politics

Come the transition period from a single party system to a multi-party system of government in Malawi, the differences among the three Malawian synods became clearly pronounced. While the Synods of Livingstonia and Blantyre were in agreement with what was going on, the Nkhoma Synod took a very different stand, which made it appear as the sole defender of the MCP-led government among Malawi's ecclesiastical bodies.⁶¹ And yet, facts on the ground were indicating that the majority of the citizens in the country did not want to continue with that party's leadership in the country during the years 1992 to 1994.⁶²

When the Roman Catholic bishops issued their *1992 Lenten pastoral letter*, which many believe was the match that sparked the fire to burn up the single party regime, the Synods of Blantyre and Livingstonia supported the bishops' letter and expressed their desire for change. The Nkhoma Synod on the other hand did not support the Roman Catholic bishops' initiative. It actually even went so far as to

60 Kenneth R. Ross, *The transformation of power in Malawi 1992-94: The role of the Christian churches*. In *God, people and power in Malawi: Democratization in theological perspective*. Edited by Kenneth Ross. Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1996, p. 20.

61 Walter Lawrence Brown, *The development in self understanding of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod as church during the first forty years of autonomy: An ecclesiological study*. PhD Theology, University of Stellenbosch, 2004, pp. 234-236.

62 Some commentators have observed that the coming in of multiparty politics exposed the regional and ethnic divisions that have always been there in Malawi. For some people in the Central Region, those advocating for the introduction of multiparty politics were viewed as enemies of the Region and by implication of all the Chewa people, especially when we consider that the main political players on the side of multiparty advocates during this time, were mostly people from the Northern and Southern Regions. It is suggested that due to these facts, the Nkhoma Synod felt it was also being attacked due to its association with the leadership of the then ruling Malawi Congress Party, the region and the dominant ethnic group in the area of its jurisdiction. This partly explains why in the Central Region a majority (67.54%) voted against the introduction of multiparty politics in the 1993 June 14 Referendum in which Malawians were given a chance to choose either political pluralism or to continue with the single party system of government. See: African Elections Database, 14 June 1993 Referendum, http://africanelections.tripod.com/mw_detail#1993_Referendum, (accessed 18 June 2015).

distance itself from the agitations which the Roman Catholic Church and other Protestant churches were making in the country for the sake of political change.⁶³

Nkhoma Synod's aloofness or even its desire to pull in the opposite direction, led to the Malawi Council of Churches suspending the synod from its membership until it was ready to mend its ways. All this shows that, though the CCAP is supposed to be one denomination, the plurality of its independent synods sometimes made (and makes) it fail to speak with one voice on pertinent prophetic issues as a united denominational force. As Schoffeleers further comments, 'this difference of opinion between the synods made a formal official position of the CCAP on the bishops' letter impossible.'⁶⁴

The era of multiparty democracy

Some interesting things about the unity of the CCAP vis-à-vis political developments in Malawi have been manifested during the era of multiparty democracy, as the country continues to conduct elections every five years in order to choose its leaders. One thing that has come with the new dispensation is the issue of freedom of expression, which was not there during the single party regime. This means that the churches are now free to issue press releases in both print and electronic media in order for them to inform the general public on issues of national importance. It is in this vein that the CCAP has also sometimes seen it fit to write pastoral letters to its faithful in order to enlighten them on the position of the church on any burning issue in the country. In this regard the three Malawian Synods have sometimes cooperated to produce the said documents through their General Assembly so that all members of the CCAP have felt that their church has spoken. It has also sometimes surprised the faithful to see that pastoral letters have been written by one synod alone on an issue of national importance in a way that has put the leadership of the other synods in a quandary.

One example of the time when the General Assembly (still known as General Synod by then) wrote a pastoral letter that was quite useful as a prophetic voice was in 2001, when the Malawi nation was engulfed in uncertainty concerning the stability of its constitution with regard to the provisions regulating the presidential tenures. The then President of the Republic, Dr Bakili Muluzi, was cunningly pursuing the amendment of the constitution in order to allow for the extension of the constitutional maximum two terms for a president, to the possibility of allowing a president to keep on contesting in elections for as long as he/she wished. This was dubbed the 'Open Terms Debate'. After the failure of this attempt, there was a second attempt in the name of the 'Third Term Debate', where the argument was that the amendment

63 See: Mathew Schoffeleers, *In search of truth and justice: Confrontations between church and state in Malawi 1960-1994*. Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1999, p. 190.

64 Ibid.

would only give chance to a president who has been voted into power twice to stand again for the third and last time. This proposal was again defeated. It can be argued that the pastoral letter which the General Synod leadership had written prior to the voting had sensitised the people on the dangers of such a proposal and constitutional amendment to Malawi's nascent democracy, especially considering the fact that the first person to benefit from such a constitutional amendment would actually be the very first president who had emerged victorious against a life president.⁶⁵ It was as if the country was put in reverse gear in order to experiment with what it had just rejected in a period of less than a decade. The condemnation of such machinations was expressed in no uncertain terms by the CCAP General Assembly leadership under the very Rev. Dr Felix Chingota (Blantyre Synod) who was the moderator of the General Assembly at the time and Rev. Y.A. Chiyenda (Nkhoma Synod) who was the Senior Clerk.⁶⁶ Many Malawians of good will supported this letter and agreed with it entirely. The only people who were against this letter were the ruling party cadres and some political mercenaries from other parties who intended to benefit from such a rape of the constitution for the sake of their egocentric tendencies.

Recently, during the time of President Dr Joyce Banda, the General Assembly also spoke on behalf of the synods in the country concerning what it saw as the ills in Malawian society, especially concerning the looting of public funds in the government ministries dubbed the 'Cashgate Scandal', and also encouraging political leaders to campaign cleanly towards the 2014 tripartite elections that took place on 20 May 2014.⁶⁷

Despite their cooperation in different forums such as the General Assembly, the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) and the Malawi Council of Churches, where they are represented, the synods have also been exercising individual synod's rights to engage the general public or their own members by going it alone in their criticism of the government, or in guiding the faithful on political choices during elections. For example in the year 2009 the Nkhoma Synod wrote a pastoral letter titled *Choosing the right leaders* in order to enlighten Christians on various issues in preparation for the 19 May 2009 general elections. The pastoral letter went further to even giving tips to Christians on how to identify God's choice of a leader.⁶⁸

Come April 2012, the Nkhoma Synod issued another pastoral letter in which, among other things, it indirectly criticised the government and the ruling party for

65 See Kenneth R. Ross: Some worrisome trends: The voice of the churches in Malawi's third term debate, *African Affairs* 103(410), (Jan., 2004), pp. 91-107.

66 The CCAP General Synod, *Some worrisome trends which undermine the nurturing of our young democracy* (Pastoral Letter of the CCAP General Synod, 2001).

67 <http://mw-nation.com/ccap-general-assembly-calls-peaceful-elections/> (accessed 27 February 2014).

68 Nkhoma Synod, *2009 Pastoral letter: Choosing the right leaders*, pp. 3-4.

some socio-economic ills that were being experienced in Malawi.⁶⁹ This was perhaps one of the worst moments in the history of Malawi since the dawn of multiparty democracy. Of special concern among the issues that the Nkhoma Synod raised were such issues as the scarcity of forex and fuel, which came in as donor nations vowed to punish Malawi, following the country's poor diplomatic relations with them.⁷⁰ Nkhoma Synod also lamented the proliferation of political violence which the political leadership of the time appeared to be promoting, considering the freedom which the youth wing of the ruling party had in terrorising the masses.⁷¹

Thus the synod has found its voice in commenting on political matters without fearing any reprisals as was the case during the single party regime. It can be argued that the synod's practice is actually very much in line with Reformed theology, which looks at all professions as God's calling and therefore worthy of his praise whenever everything is going well; and liable to censure when human practice seems to be departing from the norm or the ideal. It is this kind of thinking that made the synod to condemn the Joyce Banda administration, especially in relation to the infamous Cashgate Scandal that rocked the country in the year 2013.⁷² Besides the Cashgate Scandal, this pastoral letter condemned other evils in society such as lack of respect for the elders, lack of decency in dressing, promotion of secular humanism, homosexuality, abortion, prostitution and pornography.⁷³

As can be seen above it is now generally expected that the churches have to speak out whenever there is need for some voice of reason in society concerning negative socio-political developments. This is unlike in the past when silence was the order of the day amidst the suffering of the masses at the hands of political leaders through the party and the government machinery that was at their disposal. It is in view of this that the CCAP General Assembly is taking an active role in prophetically condemning the ills in society but also giving some kind of direction on what would be in tandem with the values of the gospel.

69 Nkhoma Synod, *2012 Pastoral letter: Exercising our faith through prayer in our time, in our nation*.

70 Some observers are of the view that the scarcity of forex was not due to donor punishments as such, but the selfish attempt by the then President Bingu wa Mutharika to control the value of the Kwacha artificially. Oral information, Klaus Fiedler, 27.8.15.

71 There is documentary evidence on how the youth members of the DPP, also known as Youth Cadets by their leadership, were terrorising those of opposing views. As an example, there are pictures of these youths in pickup trucks wielding panga knives on the eve of 20 July 2011 in order to threaten the CSOs and concerned citizens who had planned to demonstrate against the government. Twenty people died as a result of this demonstration as the police clashed with the irate demonstrators.

72 Nkhoma Synod, *2014 Pastoral letter: Renewal and regeneration of our nation: A call for church responsibility*. The Cashgate Scandal refers to massive looting of government coffers by some civil servants and politicians that was revealed in the year 2013.

73 Nkhoma Synod, *2014 Pastoral letter of the Nkhoma Synod: Renewal and regeneration of our nation: A call for church responsibility*.

With regard to the individual synods, it is interesting to note that Nkhoma Synod has been quite active in the new political dispensation in openly criticising the political leadership whenever things have been perceived to be wrong, especially with regard to the issuing of politically critical pastoral letters.⁷⁴ This does not mean that the other two synods have not been active. Their contributions through the voice of the General Assembly cannot be underestimated, besides their own critical reflection as uttered from the lips of those in the synod's leadership.⁷⁵ It is, however, generally perceived that Nkhoma and Livingstonia have been more critical than Blantyre Synod as individual synods. Some see political bias in the way the synods respond to various political issues, especially when the voice of the synods is not coming through the General Assembly. Since the dawn of multi-party democracy, the presidents that have ruled Malawi have always come from the southern region, which is under the jurisdiction of Blantyre Synod, according to synodical administrative boundaries. Can it be that Blantyre Synod is succumbing to the temptation of treating its own 'children' with kid gloves? Can it be said on the part of Nkhoma Synod that since the Malawi Congress Party was ousted from the government some two decades ago, the synod has never been able to find an ally in political circles and it is, therefore, critical of any political party that is in government until 'their own political party' regains power? What about on the side of Livingstonia? Is it because the northern region is regarded as a minority politically and so the synod is always resentful of the ruling parties that come from the majority southern region, who, together with their central region colleagues, tend to scapegoat the minority north? One cannot avoid pondering over these questions as one tries to make sense of the synods' responses to political developments in the country, especially when one considers the fact that the synods are equally susceptible to socio-political pressures. The answers to these questions are not simple and straightforward as the synods are also influenced by the personalities and political leanings of their leadership, sometimes even leading

74 While this tendency by the Nkhoma Synod appears to be new practically, theoretically the Synod arrived at this position as far back as 1960. See: Sinodi ya Nkhoma, *Zolamulira, Zopangana ndi Zolangiza (Buku 2)*, Nkhoma: Nkhoma Synod of the CCAP, pp. 3-4, especially Z.II—12, 2 (d). In this passage the Synod clearly states that it is the church's responsibility to protect Christianity in the country, and that the church has a God-given mandate to oppose anybody, including the government, when it acts or commands things that contradict the Word of God. See also F.J. Botha, *Mkhristu ndi Ndale za Dziko*, Nkhoma: Nkhoma Press, 1963.

75 In this regard the Rev. Levi Nyondo, General Secretary of the Synod of Livingstonia, was arrested by the DDP led government in 2010 for uttering what the political leaders of the ruling party interpreted as sedition during the funeral of Professor Moses Chirambo, a former cabinet minister. See Frank Jomo, Church warns of Malawi 'dictatorship' after leader's arrest, *Ecumenical News Service*, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2010/8/27/church-warns-malawi-dictatorship-after-leader-arr/> (accessed 10 January 2015).

to divisions within the synods due to political influences, as the leaders team up according to their political sympathies.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to appreciate the fact that though the CCAP is taken to be one denomination, the independence of the synods has made it to appear as if there are actually five denominations. By tracing the similarities and differences of the synods from their genesis it becomes quite clear that diversity outweighs unity in the CCAP.

From a theological point of view we see that some of the differences are there because of different theological emphases, especially due to traditions of the mother churches that gave birth to the synods. Regarding political issues it has been seen that the geographical and cultural contexts in which the synods are situated do contribute to the synods' perspectives on pertinent issues, as they cannot be taken to be operating in a vacuum. These observations therefore underscore the fact that the five synods' unity under the General Assembly is indeed that of a loose federation rather than an organic one.

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