

Looking Back at the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe's Adoption of Individuals with Special Needs as Spiritual Workers

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Abstract

This article explores the progress made over the last 50 years by the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ) in integrating people with special needs as spiritual workers. In 1891, missionaries from South Africa founded the RCZ. The Dutch Reformed Church propagated the gospel using various strategies and tactics, such as evangelism, education, healthcare, and literary translation. Missionaries utilised education as a means of evangelisation during the founding and development of the church. To serve those with unique needs, the church founded special institutions like the Henry Murray School for the Deaf and the Margaretha Hugo School for the Blind. There will be a historical synopsis of such an insertion. Subsequently, the focus of attention will be the adoption of special needs people ordained as pastors and evangelists in Zimbabwe's Reformed Church throughout the last 50 years. Ultimately, this section will emphasise the accomplishments and efforts of specific pastors and evangelists. The article ends with recognising the inclusive approach used by the RCZ in sharing the gospel with people with special needs.

Keywords: Reformed Church in Zimbabwe; spiritual workers; special needs; adoption; past 50 years

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Introduction

The Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ) has long been a beacon of spiritual guidance and community support in Zimbabwe. In recent years, the church has embarked on a transformative journey, integrating individuals with special needs into its spiritual workforce. This initiative reflects the RCZ's commitment to inclusivity, recognising the unique gifts and perspectives that individuals with disabilities bring to the faith community. By embracing diversity and promoting equal opportunities within its spiritual and administrative functions, the RCZ not only enriches its ministry but also challenges societal norms, advocating for greater acceptance and understanding of people with special needs. This progressive approach not only strengthens the church's mission but also serves as a powerful testament to the inclusive and compassionate ethos at the heart of the RCZ.

This article interrogates and celebrates the progress made over the last 50 years by the RCZ in integrating people with special needs as spiritual workers. Special attention will be given to the RCZ.¹ The RCZ has its origins in the Dutch Reformed Mission of the Cape Synod, South Africa on 9 September 1891 at Morgenster Mission, under Chief Mugabe in Masvingo Province, which by then, was known as Fort Victoria. However, the historical background of the RCZ serves as the background information of the subject matter. The main objective of this paper is to unveil how the RCZ, as a church, cares for people with special needs and how it has adopted these people to be ordained as pastors and evangelists throughout the last 50 years. The historical development of the RCZ has to be dealt with before articulating the thrust of this article.

Research Methodology

The research used a qualitative approach involving conducting a literature review and interviews. Qualitative research, as explained by Tagwirei (2021,2), focuses on capturing people's perspectives in their natural environments and producing information that reflects real-life experiences rather than the author's preconceptions.

A literature review examines published information within a specific subject area, often within a certain time frame. It can be a simple summary of sources, but typically follows an organisational pattern and combines summary and synthesis. In this research, literature on the history of the Reformed Church was consulted to gather data about the training of ministers in the RCZ. Additionally, interviews were used to fill gaps not covered by the literature review.

The interviews, as described by Tagwirei (2021,3), were conducted to obtain answers to questions and gain an understanding of the lived experiences of people. The research involved all four spiritual workers with special needs in the RCZ: a Minister of the Word and Sacrament, an evangelist, a deaf pastor, and a pastor living with albinism. In-depth

1 RCZ is an acronym for Reformed Church in Zimbabwe.

interviews were conducted with these individuals to gather information about their autobiographies since this information was not available in the RCZ's literature and minutes of various committees.

A Historical Development of the RCZ

The Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Zimbabwe came to Zimbabwe, then Rhodesia,² after the initiation of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM)³ Christians in Zoutpansberg Congregation under the leadership of Rev. Stephanus Hofmeyr. The missionary work of the DRC in Zimbabwe started with Andrew Louw under the permission of the DRC (Cape Synod) in 1891 (Van der Merwe 1981,1; Cronje 1984,115; Baloyi 2016,16). Andrew Louw laboured diligently in training evangelists, holding special revivals to stir up church members to participate in the noble cause of witnessing amongst non-Christians across the Limpopo River.

As stated by Houser⁴ (2000, 100), the DRC's mission work in Southern Rhodesia can be traced back to 1865 when Stephanus Hofmeyr came to Zoutpansberg in Northern Transvaal. As a great missionary, he was not only concerned with the spiritual well-being of the natives of that province but also with the perishing souls across the Limpopo River. For Hofmeyr immediately wrote a letter to his inherent board in the Cape requesting that missionaries be sent to the *Banyai*⁵ people in the then Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe (Baloyi 2016,16).

Arrival of Missionaries in 1891

The first mission station was established on 9 September 1891. This was the day when Andrew Louw and seven evangelists built their shelter on Chief Mugabe's mountain (Van der Merwe 1981,64). The seven evangelists who accompanied Andrew Louw were Micha Maghato, Joshua Masoha, Lukas Mokele, Jeremia and Petros Morudu (two brothers), David Molea, and Izak Khumalo (Van der Merwe 1981,64). Similarly, Paas (2006,221) notes that Andrew Louw cooperated with the seven evangelists to start missionary work in Zimbabwe, south of the Limpopo River. The preaching of the gospel

2 Rhodesia was the name of the country of Zimbabwe which was changed after the attainment of independence on 18 April 1980.

3 DRCM stands for Dutch Reformed Church Mission from South Africa which initiated the evangelisation of Zimbabwe.

4 Houser Tillman was born in 1922 in the United States and did his MA at the School of World Mission at the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He pastored for seven years in the US. He spent 35 years as a missionary in Zimbabwe, including 15 in Natal, South Africa. His missionary services in Zimbabwe included managing primary schools and planting churches. He edited and published translations of the Free Methodist Church standard of faith and practice in Shangaan and Shona. The Free Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, founded by Houser, is a missionary Church that shares a hymn book with the RCZ.

5 The term "banyai" was used to refer to the Shona-speaking people in the then Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. This is the largest group of people found in Zimbabwe. Today, 75 per cent of the total population in Zimbabwe is Shona-speaking people.

remained a mandate of the Church as a clear command to witness the risen Lord himself. The missionaries were obeying a command by our Lord Jesus Christ as mentioned in Matthew 24:14 and Matthew 28:18–20. Jesus Christ commanded the Church to preach the good news to all the people and all nations starting from Jerusalem. It is clear from these verses that the gospel must be preached to people of all nations. The preaching of the gospel is the mandate of all people, including those with special needs.

Christopher Zvobgo, a Zimbabwean historian, in his book *The Wesleyan Methodist Missions in Zimbabwe*, acknowledges that the Dutch Reformed Church Mission of the Cape Synod led by Rev. Andrew Louw established its mission station at Morgenster on 9 September 1891 (Zvobgo 1991,4). Baloyi (2016,18) concurs with Zvobgo emphasising that, from the beginning of his missionary work, Louw cooperated with his seven evangelists.

Establishment of Mission Stations, Special Schools, and Congregations

Morgenster Mission Station remained the only station of the DRCM for ten years, since the arrival of Andrew Louw and the seven evangelists in 1891. However, from 1901 onwards, missionaries established more mission stations and congregations in rural areas, towns, and mines (Baloyi 2016,18). Moreover, white missionaries usually manned these establishments. From 1901, more mission stations and congregations were established mainly in Manicaland and Masvingo provinces. Initially, only white missionaries were allowed to manage missions, while black missionaries shepherded the rural congregations. However, the black missionaries were supervised by mission stations led by white missionaries (Baloyi 2016,20).

Missionary Methods and Approaches

This section considers the methods and approaches of the missionaries who established RCZ in spreading the Gospel. The methods and approaches remain relevant since the RCZ still uses evangelism, education, and healthcare to spread the Gospel. In addition, the RCZ still uses education as a way of evangelisation, encompassing people with disabilities. According to Coris (1984,55), evangelism is communicating the Gospel of Jesus Christ to convert the hearer to faith in Christ. Evangelism⁶ is the obedience to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18–20): To make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey Jesus' instructions as well as baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, habitual of being in the community (Paas 2007,16). The adoption of people with special needs as spiritual workers is part of the Great Commission because it encompasses diversity as a way of doing evangelism. The Church's mandate is to preach the Gospel without segregation or discrimination, meaning, all cultures, races and people are the candidates of the Gospel. It is the duty and mandate of the Church to care for people with disabilities, as it does to those

6 Evangelism means bearing witness to the Good News that Jesus Christ has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death, and reconciling the world to Himself. People with disabilities are included in the Good News of reconciliation.

without. Evangelism embraces the synchronicity of the whole Church, the *Kerygma* (its proclamation of God's salvation through Christ) and *Diakonia* (its service with Christ in the world). The issue of inclusivity is paramount as proclaimed that Christ came to save all people regardless of disability.

Education

The evangelists who came to Southern Rhodesia with Andrew Louw returned to South Africa in 1982 and brought their families, and this created an urgent need for a school for their children (Baloyi 2016,32). As a result, the first school was established at Morgenster (Van der Merwe 1981,54). This ignited a massive expansion and development of the educational missionary work of the DRCM. The missionaries had constant inroads for evangelism as schools were constructed as instruments or channels to communicate the Gospel to their compatriots by word as well as way of life. Education was not important on its own but was used as bait to preach the Gospel. More so, in 1947 the Mission Council responsible for overseeing the running of education in the Church laid down conditions of service which had to be accepted by those who wanted to be recruited in training as teachers at DRCM Teachers' Training College. Before training, one would make an oath that teaching duties would include spiritual as well as church services, catechumen classes' evangelistic work, Sunday school, and prayer meetings and teachers would be held responsible for all the religious work at their outpost (Baloyi 2016,32).

It should be noted, however, that the DRCM in Zimbabwe's quest for education as an evangelism tool was not only directed to those who were able-bodied. The church grew in its endeavour for evangelism by including people living with disabilities.

The Rules and Regulations of the RCZ (2017,16–17) show that the Church's vision and mission statement mandate it to preach the Gospel in a way that integrates people with disabilities.

Vision

To be a missional and communal church that witnesses the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, bringing transformation to humankind.

The vision of the church spells out clearly that the RCZ exists to witness the Kingdom of God in Jesus' Church. Thus, the transformation of humankind involves those living with disabilities, and the mission statement explains this.

Mission Statement

We obediently and faithfully witness the Kingdom of God to humankind through:

- Preaching, teaching and living the Word of God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in a holistic and contextual way.

- Promoting and encouraging an understanding of the interdependence between man and environment.
- Provision of education to able-bodied and special needs⁷ persons.
- Provision of health care in order to address the spiritual, physical and social needs of the people.

The RCZ started caring for people with special needs during the missionary era. This is evidenced by the Church's establishment of schools which cater for people living with disabilities or special needs. Caring for people living with disabilities is a niche area of the RCZ as stated in the vision and mission statement.

School for the Blind

The DRCM School for the Blind opened its doors in 1927 and on its inception, it had one male student (Van der Merwe 1981,97). The boy's mother had fled to Chibi Mission Station during a famine in 1915 after her husband had instructed her to drown the boy in Tugwi River, prompting a missionary couple at Chibi Mission, Rev. and Mrs H. Hugo, to take the boy under their care. In 1927, Mrs Hugo started giving the blind boy religious teachings, preparing him to accept Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour. After confession of faith, he was baptised and became Samson, his new religious name. In the same year, two other children enrolled and in three years, the number rose from three to 28. Mrs Hugo chose Isaiah 42:16 as the scriptural motto of the mission of the blind in Zimbabwe. It reads:

And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known; I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them (Van der Merwe 1981,98).

In 1928, Mrs Hugo obtained a government grant for this school (Van der Merwe 1981,98; Baloyi 2020,52).

Mrs Hugo left Zimbabwe in 1935, leaving her daughter Helen, who became the school's principal. In 1939, the school was moved from Chibi Mission to Zimuto Mission farm and it was named Margaretha Hugo School for the Blind, in honour of its founder (Van der Merwe 1981, 98). Pupils came from all over Zimbabwe and Mozambique to receive academic and religious knowledge. The school also taught simple crafts, music, and singing, with blind students holding gospel concerts in the big cities of Zimbabwe.

The School for the Blind continued with its teaching and training activities for the first three decades of its existence. A secondary school was introduced in 1976 to complement a primary school founded in 1958, with Miss Hugo, the principal, who later

7 The church has replaced the word "disability" with "special needs."

introduced a teachers' training course for five blind students from this secondary school (Van der Merwe 1981,151).

The School for the Blind continued to bear Christ's witness, spreading the influence across other parts of Africa and abroad. In 1959, a tour was arranged for Margaretha Hugo School of the Blind Choir to Stellenbosch, Cape Town, and various places in the Cape province. The tour was a great success story and a blessing to people of different races and religions. More so, a recording of the choir, which gave birth to a cassette with gospel songs, was made. The tour to Israel in 1969 was dedicated to blind pupils with their verbal witness and message through song leaving a lasting impression, resulting in numerous recordings being distributed. After 36 years of mission service at the Margaretha Hugo School for the Blind, the former Principal, Miss Helene Hugo, retired in 1969 (Van der Merwe 1981,152). Her life and works were characterised by sanctification, faith, and prayer, and the Lord used her mightily in calling blind people to repentance. Some students became evangelists in DRCM and other denominations (Van der Merwe 1981,152).

M. Hugo (Copota) School for the Blind has more than 90 per cent of its students living with visual impairments, with the remainder having multiple disabilities (Van der Merwe 1981,153). Students with disabilities include those with albinism and some with physical handicaps. The school has grown through the years by introducing secondary education, workshops for the blind and later on A Level.⁸ Despite many challenges faced by the institution, the schools boast of highly motivated staff that provides academic education, skills training as well as rehabilitation to learners with visual impairments. The institution remains dedicated to meeting the needs of people with visual impairment and other disabilities in realising the importance of entrepreneurship, practical, technical, vocational, arts, sports, agricultural and other life skills. This is supported by the mission of the institution which says: "Thriving to improve the livelihood of people with visual impairment by giving them education training and rehabilitation."

The RCZ is the responsible authority which superintendents the running of the primary and secondary schools and workshops. The RCZ is responsible for these children while they are studying because some of their parents have not yet accepted the challenges emanating from various disabilities, with some of the children having been abandoned. The Margaretha Hugo School for the Blind popularly known as Copota, comprises a primary and a secondary boarding school. It is home to more than 480 students with disabilities, most of them with visual impairments. The RCZ prioritised inclusivity in approaching people with disabilities, which can be referred to as a theology of inclusion, contrary to the African belief system that associates disability with curses or witchcraft (Makamure 2017, 110). Some of the students educated at these schools, regardless of their visual impairments, later trained as evangelists and pastors in the RCZ and other

8 "A" Level stands for Advanced Level.

denominations across the country. The ordination of people with special needs will be discussed later in the article.

School for the Deaf

The Henry Murray School for the Deaf is an RCZ institution in Masvingo District, Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe. It is situated near the Great Zimbabwe Monuments, 35km south of Masvingo City. The school was established by the Dutch Reformed Church missionaries in 1948 and the first teachers came from the school for the deaf at Worcester, Cape Province in South Africa. The school started with an enrolment of 11 pupils which increased to 40 by 1952 (Baloyi 2020,54–55). People came from all over Zimbabwe with some female students taking up courses in building and carpentry, and they made good progress in their studies. This school was named after the Chairman of the Mission Council, Henry Murray, who had succeeded A. Louw after he retired in 1937. Henry Murray died in 1948. The school was named Henry Murray School for the Deaf (Baloyi 2020,55).

In the first report to the Mission Council, Henry Murray as the chairperson stated that:

It takes many years of schooling and language instruction to explain to the deaf person about God. Yet joy is expressed because the crucifixion of Christ has been related and explained to the two most advanced pupils through the medium of lip-reading. Soon, there will be some pupils who will be confessing their faith in Jesus Christ (Van der Merwe 1981,99).

In 1950, His Excellency, the Governor of Southern Rhodesia, Sir John Kennedy, visited Morgenster and was introduced to the staff and pupils of the Henry Murray School for the Blind. One of the pupils, Farai (Rejoice), wrote a letter to the Governor which he handed to him personally. In it, he stated that he was pleased to see that the Governor had a good heart and that Jesus had died for him. The Governor sent a reply in his handwriting as follows:

I was very pleased to see you all and to hear that you are learning to read and write so that you will grow up and be a useful person to the country and beyond. Let us pray that God will continue to bless the good work that is being done for Africans at Morgenster (Van der Merwe 1981,100).

According to Baloyi (2020,55), at a meeting of the Mission Council held in 1952, it was reported that Henry Murray School for the Deaf had thought of bringing their thanks offering to the Lord on the first Sunday of the month as a way of showing their Christian faith. Undoubtedly, there was an opportunity for effective evangelism in both schools for the blind and deaf. They were effectively integrated into the young Dutch Reformed Church in Zimbabwe.

The RCZ is one of the few churches in Zimbabwe that has cared holistically for people living with disabilities. The church has not discriminated against people with disabilities in terms of their spiritual, social, and physical needs.

Reformed Church University

The RCZ did not cease to use education as an evangelism tool, with 2010 witnessing the birth of the Reformed Church University. A brief background of the university follows. The Reformed Church University is a registered tertiary institution with a mandate to offer degrees in social needs, education, commerce, and theology. The Parliament of Zimbabwe officially approved the University Charter and the then President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, endorsed it in 2001. Due to a protracted misunderstanding between the Church, the university administration, and some stakeholders, the Church stopped supporting the development of the university, leading to the temporary closure of the university in 2004. In the same year, the government requested the Church to surrender its original name, “Great Zimbabwe University” to Masvingo State University and the Church obliged (Synod minutes 2010,42). Soon after the closure of the University, the Church, through its moderator, Rev. Dr E. Chomutiri, requested that the university be renamed Reformed Church University (RCU) and the request was made to the Permanent Secretary for Higher and Tertiary Education, Dr W. T. Mbizvo. Permission was granted to the RCZ in 2010 after changes were effected to the University Charter. The Revised Charter was approved by the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE)⁹ on 18 January 2011, permitting the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe to develop its university (Synod Minutes 2010,43).

The Reformed Church University opened its doors to its first group of students on 15 August 2012 with a total enrolment of 75 students. In November 2012, Professor Wiseman Magwa who was leading the University as an Acting Vice-Chancellor was appointed substantive Vice-Chancellor on a five-year renewable contract (Synod Minutes 2014,63).

Education was used and it is still used as a vehicle for spreading the gospel to the pupils and students at all Church institutions. Devotions are held regularly in all departments. The RCZ has 13 primary schools, 16 secondary schools, one teachers’ college, and the Reformed Church University (Synod Minutes 2016,49–51). Even though this article focused on including spiritual workers with special needs, it is prudent to acknowledge that the Reformed Church University addresses the issue of inclusivity as its niche area.

Reverends and chaplains are required by the Church, as the responsible authority, to conduct devotions and pastoral care to both the students and staff members. This is

9 ZIMCHE is an acronym for the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education. The main objective of this board is to ensure that all higher education institutions actively and effectively implement their mandates in line with the nation’s development needs and in conformity with the government’s expectations.

supported by Munikwa (2010,84) as he notes that evangelism is closely related to education with teachers being expected to be more evangelistic. The researcher believes that the Church should continue to recruit teachers who are more aggressive in evangelism so that they will be in a position to help the resident pastors and chaplains at all RCZ institutions of learning (Baloyi 2020,58).

The mandate of the RCU is that of being a world-class centre of excellence in special needs education, theology, and community service embedded in Christian values. The church as an institution provides quality education to people with disability across all faculties. Rev. Trymore Chikandaviya, one of the spiritual workers with special needs, graduated from this university on 27 October 2023 (RCU Graduation Handbook 2023,30)

After seeing that the RCZ used education to witness and care for the people living with disabilities, some new churches have now taken it up as an image-building activity. More and more are witnessing that people with disabilities were and are not discriminated against by the church in the spreading of the Word. The RCZ has taken it upon itself to embrace every person who is deemed to be called into the ministry of the Word to become an evangelist and pastor regardless of physical challenges like disabilities. The RCZ believes that “Disability is not inability” and the duty of calling remains in the authority of our Almighty God. Attention is fully given to people with disabilities such as blindness, deafness, and albinism, who are already ordained into the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament in the RCZ.

From 2015 to 2020, the Reformed Church University has produced 10 graduates living with disabilities. Six of these graduates are male and the rest are female. This reflects the vision of the University which says, “To be a relevant world-class centre of excellence in inclusive education, research and community service embedded in Christian values.”¹⁰

Ordination of Individuals with Special needs as Spiritual Workers

In this section, I will give autobiographies of four people with special needs who were ordained as pastors in the RCZ, underlining that the Church does not discriminate. From 1924 to 2022, the RCZ has trained 240 ministers of the Word and Sacraments (Synod Minutes 2022). The ordination of four persons as evangelists and pastors since the RCZ was founded was the turning point for the Church because it shows the Church’s inclusivity. The RCZ has so far ordained the late Rev. Joseph Chivhoko, Evangelist Wonder Chitongo, Rev. Trymore Chikandaviya, and Mary Chipoka-Zenda.

10 Reformed Church University, 2019 4th Graduation Ceremony, p 3.

Reverend Joseph Chivhoko

Rev. J Chivhoko was born on 2 August 1947 in Mukambirwa village, Buhera District, Manicaland Province.¹¹ He suffered blindness at the age of eight and is believed to have become blind while he was alone herding cattle in the bush. Instead of his parents rushing him to the hospital, they took him to diviners who could not treat him, and by the time they took him to the hospital, it was too late, making him blind to date. As a result, his elder brother took him to Copota School for the Blind to enable him to get an education.

Rev. J Chivhoko was educated at Margaretha Hugo School for the Blind, where he attained Standard Six in 1967. He trained as a pastor at Ekupileni Bible College from 1968 to 1969. At the time Murray Theological College for the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe was not equipped to train blind people. After completing his studies at the said college, the RCZ did not accept him to be ordained as a Minister of the Word but assigned him to be an evangelist per his calling. He was posted to Gutu Mission to work as a chaplain at the hospital. While he was at Gutu Mission in 1973, he married Judith Machova and the couple was blessed with five children (three boys and two girls) namely, Esther, Silas, Tafadzwa, Tinashe (Ephraim), and Portia, all of whom are now adults and happily married (Synod Minutes 1998,16).

Rev. J Chivhoko, though blind, passed three Ordinary Level subjects, including the English language through correspondence, which ignited the RCZ Synod to permit him to enrol for training as pastor at Murray Theological College. This was the first time for the college to train a blind person as a spiritual worker. He enrolled in 1994 and graduated on 27 November 1996.¹² He was ordained as the Minister of the Word and Sacrament in 1997 to shepherd lecturers and students at Morgenster Teachers' College (Synod Minutes 1998,16). Despite his disabilities, he was a great evangelist-pastor; God used him to minister among the people. He defied the conviction that being blind is a deterrent, proving that disability is not inability.

Rev. J Chivhoko passed on after serving at Morgenster Teachers' College for nearly five years (Synod Minutes 2002,1) and his wife Judith also passed on, as was reported in the RCZ Synod Report of 2010 (Synod Minutes 2010,10). The inclusion of Rev. J Chivhoko in the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments indicates that the RCZ is one of the churches caring for and working with people with disabilities. This compels every church preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to embrace inclusivity as a culture and values of true Christianity. Differently abled persons should draw a leaf from this late clergyman. Despite the organisational and societal obstacles thrown along their way, with determination, focus, and character they too can overcome and rise to dizzy

11 Oral interview with Tafadzwa Chivhoko, the son of the late Rev. Joseph Chivhoko. He was the Minister of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe in Mbizo Congregation in Kwekwe and Budiriwo Congregation in Harare. He transferred to Reformed International – Australia in January 2024.

12 RCZ Synod Minutes (1998).

heights. As the Church cherishes the life of Rev. J Chivhoko, let it be incumbent upon congregants, congregations, and departments to further uphold the spirit of inclusivity in the conduct of Church business. Rev. J Chivhoko is no more. His earthly existence came to an abrupt end, but the living should always remember that the Lord took hold of his hand and led him along unfamiliar paths he had never known.

Evangelist Wonder Chitongo

Evangelist W Chitongo was born on 12 December 1963 in Mvuma, Chirumanzi District in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. He grew up in Silobela in the same province because his family migrated from the Chirumanzi District and settled in Silobela. His parents are Patrick, who passed away in 1996, and Modester, who passed away on 17 September 2019. Evangelist Chitongo grew up in a family of six boys and four girls.

In 1969, Chitongo became sick with Measles, resulting in his blindness despite his parents' efforts to seek medical assistance. He was then taken to Jairos Jiri Centre in Ascot, Gweru, where he completed Grades One to Three. Later, he transferred to Muwunga Primary School and completed Grades Four to Seven. In 1978, he attended Margaretha Hugo Secondary for the Blind and passed three subjects.

The Church trained people with special needs such as blindness at the theological college at that time. Through the help of Rev. Dr A Mutumburanzou, Evangelist Chitongo was placed under the mentorship of Rev J Chivhoko, who was working as an evangelist at Gutu Mission Hospital at that time. He was later appointed as Rev. J Chivhoko's assistant chaplain at Gutu Mission Hospital on 1 June 1983 and was eventually upgraded to become an evangelist.

Evangelist Chitongo is married to Tsvakai Chabata-Chitongo, and they have three boys named Theophilus, Matthew Theodore, Worship Steward, and a girl named Compassionate Chishuvo.

In 1992, the Church transferred Evangelist Chitongo from Gutu Mission Hospital to Morgenster Mission Hospital, where he works as a chaplain. He visits patients in all the wards of Morgenster Hospital without anyone assisting him. Evangelist Chitongo can even go to the mission station without assistance or guidance. Besides his pastoral duties in the hospital, he works with the Minister of Morgenster Congregation in all pastoral duties of the congregation.

Reverend Mary Chipoka-Zenda

Born in 1985, Rev. Chipoka-Zenda, originally from Nanhwi Village, under Chief Zimuto, in Masvingo Province, is the third daughter of Mr and Mrs Jonathan and Egneta Chipoka (interviewee #3). She did her primary education at Henry Murray before she went to Emerald Hill for her secondary education before moving to the National Institute of the Deaf in Cape Town, South Africa. At the institute, Rev. Chipoka-Zenda

first earned a Certificate in Theology before proceeding to do a Diploma which gave her enthusiasm for evangelism. A visit to her workplace revealed that Rev. Chipoka-Zenda, who went down the aisle with her love, Mr Trevor Zenda, who is also deaf and from Mutare, commands respect and demonstrates a high degree of assertiveness and astuteness. Her wedding was sanctified on 15 July 2017. Being a female was not an issue for Mary Chipoka-Zenda who is deaf as she attained relevant knowledge at Henry Murray School for the Deaf.

Similarly, the School for the Deaf has produced one minister of religion in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (Synod Minutes 2014,50). The moderator's report stated: "Mary Chipoka-Zenda¹³ a hearing-impaired student is studying at Worcester in Cape Town, South Africa with the support of the Church." Worcester College is the same school mentioned in the preceding paragraphs regarding the School for the Deaf which seconded teachers to start School for the Deaf at Morgenster. This was also noted in the minutes of the Synod of 2016 that Mary Chipoka-Zenda, the first ever hearing-impaired student in the history of the RCZ (in conjunction with the Henry Murray School for the Deaf) had studied at Worcester in Cape Town, South Africa (Synod Minutes 2016,35). The RCZ's history shows that the missionary used a holistic approach in her ways of spreading the gospel to the people of Zimbabwe regardless of their visual and hearing impairments. The ordination of the hearing-impaired minister in the RCZ was well-received in the country as it was aired on television, published in many newspapers, and attracted the attention of the media fraternity (RCZ Synod Minutes 2018,17 and 24). The ordination of Rev. Mary Chipoka-Zenda took place on 23 September 2017 and was published in the local newspaper, *Masvingo Mirror* with the heading "First RCZ deaf and dumb pastor." She has since been appointed resident Chaplain for the Henry Murray School of the Deaf at Morgenster in Masvingo. Rev. Chipoka-Zenda said she derives inspiration from her husband who stood by her while she was studying:

When I nearly dropped my studies in South Africa, my husband kept on encouraging me. My sponsors also made life easier for me as I was left to concentrate on my books rather than thinking of paying fees. Our church moderator Reverend Dr Rangarirai Rutoro also played a big role in my studies which helped me to become a reverend and chaplain at the same time.

These are her words in appreciation of the inclusivity of the RCZ in the Ministry of the Word of God.

Rev. Chipoka-Zenda socialises with people easily and attracts a huge following during her sermons, and this motivates her a lot. Dr Rutoro agreed that Rev. Chipoka-Zenda is

13 Mary Chipoka-Zenda is the first hearing-impaired pastor to be ordained in Zimbabwe. She was ordained in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe on 23 September 2017 at Morgenster Mission in Masvingo Province. She has been posted to work as a chaplain at the Henry Murray School for the Deaf.

an amazing woman of God, whose preaching has turned the hearts of many, despite the perceived language barrier. He further postulated that the gifted preacher, who uses sign language with the assistance of an interpreter, has seen many church-goers learning unique preaching that the church will not need an interpreter at the end of the sermon.

Rev. Dr Rangarirai Rutoro who was the Moderator of the Reformed Church Zimbabwe on the day Rev. Mary Chipoka-Zenda was ordained says:

We are the first church in Zimbabwe and beyond the region to have a preacher who is deaf. This is a milestone achievement as Rev. Chipoka-Zenda has gone through rigorous and painstaking pastoral training up to the diploma level like any of our pastors. She was enrolled at our pastoral college in Cape Town in South Africa where her lecturers are also singing praises about her character and work ethic.

Dr Rutoro (RCZ Synod minutes 2018,17) who was also Chancellor at the Reformed Church University believes that this accomplishment will put the RCZ in a position where the deaf community will have a chance to understand the Word of God in its raw form coming from one of their peers. He emphasised that the Church had an ingrained reputation for nurturing the disabled, including those with hearing and speech impairments.

We are known as champions in assisting children with disability through the Henry Murray School of the Deaf at Morgenster and Copota School for the Blind in Zimuto Communal Lands. We have provided this community, which is an integral part of society, with an opportunity to learn and venture into their preferred disciplines or careers with a special emphasis on the word of God, since we are Christians. This has seen several talented children emerging as role models in their own right as we have presented them with favourable platforms to unleash their God-given talents. The disabled have had an opportunity to learn skills, becoming a marvel to a society that inadvertently stigmatised them. We have, however, scored our first for ordaining Rev. Chipoka-Zenda as a pastor despite her condition and this is a milestone achievement for us as a church. This would go straight to the enviable chronicles of the church (Rutoro in Mswazie, 28 October. 2017).

Since Rev. Chipoka-Zenda is attentive to detail, it is difficult for one to tell that she has a hearing impairment. She possesses the rare work ethic of a leader, manager, and woman of God. Members of the clergy in her church say her professionalism bears testimony to the old saying, “Disability does not mean inability.” Rev. Chipoka-Zenda has the traits a chaplain needs to oversee a school with more than 200 pupils and 20 staff members. The couple has been blessed with a baby girl, Loveness (Anesushe) Zenda.¹⁴

As a way of implementing the inclusive policy which was passed at the General Assembly of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, she was invited to lead devotions at

14 Oral Interview with Rev. Mary Chipoka-Zenda on 15 January 2024.

the 8th Biennial General Assembly of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches from 28 to 29 August 2020, held in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Reverend Trymore Julius Chikandaviya¹⁵

Born on 26 April 1990, Rev. Trymore Chikandaviya grew up in a family of six. His parents and siblings are still alive. Rev. Trymore Chikandaviya and his two sisters are living with albinism and all have challenges with their eyesight (Interviewee #4). He did his primary education from Grades One to Five at Madamombe Primary School in Chivi District, Masvingo Province. He was transferred from Madamombe to M. Hugo Primary School after his teachers discovered that he was short-sighted and was not coping well with other learners. The same school has been discussed in the preceding paragraphs of this paper. Though it is a school for the blind, it also caters to those living with albinism, explaining why Trymore was transferred to the school. After completing his primary education, Trymore continued with his secondary education at M. Hugo High School for the Blind, where he passed his Advanced Level.

After completing his Advanced Level, he enrolled at the University of Zimbabwe where he studied for an Honours degree in Administration, but he did not complete it. During his first year of studies, he responded to God's calling for him to become a Minister of the Gospel in the RCZ. Moving from the University of Zimbabwe to go and train as a pastor at Murray Theological College was difficult. Many people did not support the move for various reasons, with some arguing that people living with albinism couldn't become Ministers of the Word.

In 2014, Trymore started his theological studies at Murray Theological College and eventually graduated in 2017. He is now a proud holder of a Diploma in Theology and a Bachelor of Theology Honours degree. On 19 November 2018, he was called into Ministry by the RCZ, Victoria Falls Congregation, to become their pastor. He accepted the call and was ordained on 2 March 2019. In August 2020 he enrolled for an Honours degree in Theology at the Reformed Church University on a block release programme and graduated on 27 October 2023.

Moreover, Trymore married his beautiful wife Kudzai Precious Javangwe and their wedding took place on 3 August 2019. The couple has been blessed with two sons, Salem Tinomudaishe and Praise. His wife and sons do not have albinism.

Additionally, Rev. Chikandaviya is a pastor called to minister through music. To date, he has recorded three albums and has so far managed to produce one video. He believes disability is not inability, and the Church has embraced him because it believes that every person was created in the image of God, therefore, discrimination has no place in the Church of Jesus Christ.

15 Oral Interview with Rev. Trymore Julius Chikandaviya on 15 January 2024.

RCZ and the Gospel of Inclusion

As already discussed in the historical development of the RCZ, missionaries used a holistic approach to evangelism. The type of gospel they preached was the gospel of inclusion with consideration of all people being viewed in the image of God regardless of disabilities. All people, including those with disabilities, were created in the image of God and salvation is available to all who believe regardless of apparent impairments. The Holy Spirit is responsible for transforming lives, which is the reason why the RCZ has allowed people living with disabilities to fully participate in the evangelisation of the Word of God. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul mentioned that God can use the weak and foolish to disgrace the wise and strong, which means that every believer is a member of Christ's dominion. The RCZ's Gospel of inclusion reflects a commitment to embracing diversity and affirming the dignity and worth of all individuals within the Christian community.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the historical overview and development of the RCZ, as well as how it has successfully included people with disabilities, it becomes clearer that God created all people in His Image. It, therefore, means no one deserves to be marginalised, disregarded, or discriminated against. The RCZ has set an exemplary approach to inclusivity and appropriate ways to worship the Lord through loving His works and people regardless of their ability, both in education and worship. The Church presents a collective and several believers making an institution that has to rethink the current approaches to worshipping in tandem with the non-excludability of those living with various debilities or physical challenges. After all, there is only one God who created every human in His own image. Welcoming our friends and relatives with various degrees of disabilities in churches, allowing them to participate collectively, and supporting them will make this world a better place and habitable for all. Overall, the RCZ's decision to adopt individuals with special needs as spiritual workers represents a positive step towards greater inclusion, diversity, and empowerment within the church in the past 50 years. By affirming the value and contributions of individuals with disabilities, the church not only enriches its own community but also bears witness to the inclusive love of God.

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