

The Belhar Confession and Gender Inclusivity: A Critical Analysis of Theological Limitations and the Case of Synod Soutpansberg

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Abstract

The Belhar Confession was ratified by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1986 as a theological reaction to the racial transgressions of apartheid, articulating unity, reconciliation, and justice as essential ecclesiastical principles. This confession has been lauded as a prophetic text that confronted systemic and discriminatory exclusion within South African Reformed churches during the apartheid period. Nonetheless, despite its widespread acclaim, this paradigm has not been universally adopted by African Reformed churches. Notably, Synod Soutpansberg is affiliated with the Black Reformed Churches in South Africa (Black RCSA) but has neither embraced nor deliberated on the Belhar Confession; it adheres solely to the Three Forms of Unity, namely the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort. This stance on confession represents a significant theological divergence among the black church, as it rejects a confession that sprang from communities that endured the oppression of apartheid. While the Belhar Confession prophetically condemns the exclusions of the apartheid era, it conspicuously fails to address narratives of gender inclusivity or women's leadership within ecclesiastical systems. This considerable neglect has perpetuated patriarchy within the Black RCSA and limited women's involvement in rural local church ministry and leadership. This article critically analyses the limitations of the Belhar Confession concerning gender justice, the problematic rejection by Synod Soutpansberg, and the potential of missional hermeneutics to facilitate its contextual reinterpretation to empower women and dismantle patriarchal hierarchies within the Black RCSA. This study contributes to hermeneutical approaches to the reinterpretation of confessional documents to promote gender justice within African Reformed traditions, while critically analysing Synod Soutpansberg's dismissal of the Belhar Confession and its gender constraints.



Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
2026 | #21417 | 17 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/21417>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online)

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Keywords: Belhar Confession; gender inclusivity; Black RCSA; Soutpansberg Synod; missional hermeneutics; justice; Three Forms of Unity; patriarchy; women's ordination

Introduction

The Belhar Confession is a significant theological declaration that emerged from South Africa's anti-apartheid movement. The confession was acknowledged and supported by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1986, articulating a prophetic stance against the theological justification of apartheid and embracing the biblical principles of unity, reconciliation, and justice (Plaatjies Van Huffel 2014, 303). The confession followed a history in which the Dutch Reformed Church provided theological justification for racial segregation, therefore signifying a notable theological rupture with apartheid's heretical rationale. Throughout the years, the Belhar Confession has attained international recognition and has been adopted by several Reformed denominations worldwide, including the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (Pillay 2022, 9).

Despite the warranted focus on its prophetic stance against racial injustice, the Belhar Confession has been criticised for its silence on other forms of systemic oppression, including gender-based inequality. According to Redford (2015), the progressive interpretation of the confession may be applied to other forms of oppression, including those related to gender and sexuality, albeit this application is not without complications or ambiguity. This division is particularly significant in the African Reformed churches, where patriarchal structures continue to inhibit women's participation in leadership and the clergy (Mudau and Khosa-Nkatini 2025, 2).

Organised into regional synods based on the discriminatory classifications of apartheid, the Reformed Churches in South Africa (i.e., Black) persist as profoundly patriarchal institutions. In the Soutpansberg Synod, which serves Venda-, Tsonga-, and Sotho-speaking populations, women are underrepresented in roles as elders, deacons, and ordained clergy (Mudau and Khosa-Nkatini 2025, 2), despite the South African Constitution that underscores gender equality and the widespread global consensus advocating for women's full participation in ecclesiastical leadership (see Baloyi 2016). The Synod's tacit intransigence towards women's ordination, manifest in procedural actions rather than in theological and ethical discourse, has solidified exclusionary practices (Mudau and Khosa-Nkatini 2025, 2).

This article posits that missional hermeneutics allows a reinterpretation of the Belhar Confession of Faith in light of its gender-biased deficiencies. Missional hermeneutics, which interprets Scripture through the lens of God's efforts to establish justice, reconciliation, and wholeness in creation, offers resources for contextual theological interpretation that connects the confession's dedication to justice with the inclusion of women's equality (Wright 2023). This study will analyse the missional implications of Belhar for the church's theological character, demonstrating that its core principles of

unity, reconciliation, and justice necessitate affirming women's full inclusion and empowerment in church leadership and ministry.

This work contributes to the broader scholarly discourse on gender justice within African Reformed traditions (Agadjanian 2025, 1) and enhances discussions regarding the contemporary interpretation and application of confessional writings. The study employs a qualitative methodology, utilising theological literature, ecclesiastical texts, and contemporary works on gender and Reformed theology to formulate a missional interpretation of the Belhar Confession, specifically addressing gender inclusivity within the Black RCSA in the Soutpansberg Synod. This article is positioned within the domains of church history and the history of Christianity. It specifically examines the historical evolution, reception, and contextual reinterpretation of confessional writings in South African Reformed churches. The historical and confessional development of the Belhar Confession, from its inception in the anti-apartheid movement to its contentious acceptance among African Reformed denominations, serves as the principal historical framework for the theological and gender-justice arguments presented in this study.

Literature Review

The Belhar Confession: Historical Context and Theological Significance

The Belhar Confession emerged in the context of apartheid South Africa as a theological response to the Dutch Reformed Church's justification of racial segregation. Authored by Allan Boesak and others in 1982, it was incorporated into the denomination's practices in 1986, addressing what we refer to as a status confession: a condition of the truth of faith when matters that are inherently adiaphora (indifferent) are managed in a manner that negates the truth (Plaatjies Van Huffel 2013, 1). The themes of oneness, restoration, and justice within the confession directly challenged the theological foundations of apartheid, asserting that God is uniquely "in sympathy with the poor, vulnerable, and oppressed" (Sosanti 2024, 33). The confession asserts that unity is both a gift and a duty of the church, and that any belief or practice that causes division based on race is contrary to the gospel (Boesak 2008, 4). This means that reconciliation can only be attained through the pursuit of justice, and that genuine justice necessitates alignment with those who endure injustice. Theological principles made the Belhar Confession a powerful prophetic declaration, advocating against apartheid and addressing issues of justice and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa and beyond.

Beyond its shores, Belhar has been recognised globally as a significant ecumenical declaration. The Reformed Church in America adopted it as a fourth confessional standard in 2010, while other denominations have engaged with its theological themes (Meeter 2011). The reception of the confession has been contentious. The theological perspective has been characterised as ambiguous or "tentative," with different interpretations being feasible, including the question of whether its theology extends

beyond racial justice to encompass other types of oppression, such as gender (Cooper 2010).

Gender Exclusion in the Belhar Confession: A Critical Silence

While neither approving nor promoting racism, the Belhar Confession is entirely mute on sexism and the exclusion of women's full involvement in leadership within worship communities. This silence is unexpected, particularly given that the confession was made during a period when feminist theology and women's liberation movements were gaining momentum globally. Academic literature reveals diverse hermeneutics, from interpretations of Belhar that broadly encompass emancipation from all types of oppression, including gender discrimination, to those that narrowly focus solely on racial reconciliation (Dames 2012, 25).

The ambiguity regarding the applicability of the confession to gender concerns illustrates broader debates within Reformed theology concerning the extent to which confessional documents should address various forms of injustice. Certain Reformed traditions have openly rejected the notion that the Belhar Confession endorses gender egalitarian leadership within the church, asserting that sin transcends social strife and that salvation is solely by trust in Christ, rather than social emancipation (CRCNA Synod 2009, 531). This limited interpretation has enabled churches to commemorate the confession's denunciation of racism while maintaining patriarchal frameworks that obstruct the ordination of women.

A 2025 request for papers commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Belhar Confession identifies "Belhar Confession and Loopholes in Gender Inclusivity" as a specific study focus, acknowledging the theological endeavours that lie ahead (AOSIS 2025). Recognising such tendencies indicates a growing awareness among the Reformed community that the confession's silence on gender has permitted the continuation of entrenched exclusionary practices, which contradict its initial aim of promoting justice and peace.

Women's Leadership in Black Reformed Churches in South Africa

The history of Reformed churches has been lengthy, arduous, and contentious. In the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), there persists an inequitable representation of males and females at all levels (Plaatjies Van Huffel 2019, 1–2), with the first female minister being ordained only after 1994, following South Africa's attainment of freedom and democracy. The Reformed Church in South Africa (GKSA) maintains an official stance that women are ineligible for the roles of minister and elder, as reaffirmed at Synod 2026 (Meijer and Jansen 2026). The ordination of women as elders in certain congregations, in blatant disregard of that decision, has precipitated a division within the church. These congregations have been allotted one year from Synod 2026 to rescind those ordinations or face the possibility of being deemed self-severed from the GKSA (Meijer and Jansen 2026).

The prohibition on women serving as elders, deacons, and reverends is profoundly entrenched, particularly within the Black RCSA, and more so in the Soutpansberg Synod. Recent research indicates that after 2012, the Synod has not achieved substantive advancement regarding women's ordination; it effectively employs silence to validate and sustain an exclusionary system (Mudau and Khosa-Nkatini 2025, 2). The church's limited opposition to gender injustice is markedly dissimilar to its historical attitude to racism, indicating that patriarchal structures have proven more enduring against theological scrutiny than explicit racial hierarchy.

Female leadership within the Reformed tradition presents issues that are further complicated by the intersection of gender with various types of marginalisation. Female pastors in black churches have observed a confluence of sexism and racism that often undermines their pastoral authority, as they face challenges from both male colleagues and congregants (Landman 2019, 10). Patriarchal societies, particularly in rural congregations, continue to adhere to conventional gender roles and perceive women in leadership positions as a danger. Research indicates that, while men may articulate a politically acceptable stance endorsing female leadership in theory, many harbour an underlying apprehension that it will undermine male authority in both ecclesiastical and interpersonal contexts (Landman 2019, 12).

The Christian Women's Ministry of the URCSA has engaged in many initiatives to address gender inequality, including a 2005 resolution advocating 50% female representation in church councils, presbyteries, and synods. Nonetheless, the implementation of these policies has been inconsistent, revealing significant disparities between proclaimed commitments and actual conditions regarding gender equality (Nel 2019, 7). The persistence of these disparities suggests that formal policy modifications are insufficient without concurrent religious and cultural revitalisation.

Patriarchy in African Reformed Traditions

Patriarchy within African Reformed churches intersects with traditional African cultural norms and colonial Christian influences. The result is what Agadjanian (2025) refers to as neo-patriarchy, a reconfigured gender inequality that undermines traditional extended family structures in favour of individualised marital dependency while perpetuating male dominance. African churches have frequently reinforced patriarchal norms by portraying female obedience to male authority as divinely ordained and crucial for the preservation of marriage (Agadjanian 2025, 10).

Specific passages in the Scriptures (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:11–12; 1 Corinthians 14:34–35) have been employed to support the theological rationale for restricting women from occupying church leadership positions. These verses are frequently seen as establishing immutable, transcultural obstacles to women's ministry rather than as culturally specific directives relevant to first-century contexts (Boyd 2017). These interpretations overlook several biblical narratives of women in leadership and fail to critically engage with

concepts of gender equality grounded in the *imago Dei*, which holds that women, like men, were made in the image of God (Khosa-Nkatini et al. 2023, 3–4).

The enduring presence of patriarchy in African Reformed churches has significant consequences that extend beyond the marginalisation of women from formal leadership positions. It maintains broader types of gender inequality within society, restricts women's economic empowerment, and reinforces gender-based violence by legitimising male dominance over females (Musoni 2023, 12). The church's testimony and societal ministry are diminished when women's contributions and viewpoints are excluded from leadership, contradicting Pauline ecclesiology, which asserts that the body of Christ embodies an "each-member" spirituality, allowing all members to utilise their Spirit-bestowed gifts for the collective benefit (1 Corinthians 12:4–11).

African women theologians have contested these systems by developing theological programmes, including African women's theology and feminist interpretations of the Bible. Theologians like Mercy Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, Khosa-Nkatini, and Musa Dube have formulated theologies that recognise the complete humanity of women and advocate for their liberation from dehumanising structures (Chitando 2025, 581). These theologians assert that patriarchy is not inherent to African culture but rather a distortion of both African tradition and Christian practice. They advocate a re-evaluation of theology and society to reaffirm the dignity, value, and equality of women.

Missional Hermeneutics as a Tool for Reinterpretation

Missional hermeneutics is a method of biblical interpretation that considers the Scriptures through the lens of God's mission (*missio Dei*) to redeem and establish justice and wholeness in the world (Han 2024, 39). This methodology, articulated by scholars such as Wright, Barram, and Redford, underscores that accurate scriptural interpretation is intrinsically linked to active participation in God's engagement with the world (Barram 2015; Redford 2012; Wright 2023). Missional hermeneutics encourages readers to transcend doctrinal or historical interpretations of texts, focusing instead on how these texts may prompt the church to manifest God's justice and reconciliation in specific cultural contexts.

A missional hermeneutic would be attuned to ideas of justice, freedom, and inclusion throughout the biblical narrative (McKinzie 2022, 2). It recognises that God's work is particularly focused on the downtrodden and victims of oppression, a conviction upheld by the Belhar Confession, which states, in reference to apartheid South Africa, that God is in a distinctive sense the God of the impoverished, the poor, and the oppressed. In the realm of gender, missional hermeneutics examines how biblical texts reflect and challenge patriarchal structures, and how the liberating impact of the gospel encompasses women's empowerment and full participation in God's mission. Missional hermeneutics emphasises the need for "reading in context." It recognises that readers cannot read any text in isolation but must always read it within cultural contexts, and that the interpretation of literature must properly account for the social realities

evident in modern communities (McKinzie 2014). This contextual sensitivity is essential for confronting gender injustice in the African Reformed churches, as it requires an examination of patriarchy within African cultures while simultaneously utilising resources from both African traditions and Christian theology to effect change (Dwamena-Aboagye 2015; Kategile 2020, 42–43).

Contemporary theology has begun to employ missional hermeneutics, revealing shortcomings in gender issues. Barram (2014, 387) demonstrates that interpreting Genesis 1–3 through a missional lens highlights biblical obligations to economic justice and human well-being, which contest patriarchal economic structures. Baldonado (2025, 1) employs the narrative of Jesus and the Samaritan woman to conceptualise ministry as a site of profound encounter and transformative prophetic engagement that surpasses gender and ethnic boundaries. These studies demonstrate that missional interpretation provides tools for interpreting Scripture and confessions, emphasising themes pertinent to all marginalised groups, including women.

Methodology

This study employs a theological literary research method, integrating a literature review, document analysis, and hermeneutical interpretation. The research relies on three primary categories of sources: (1) theological texts related to the Belhar Confession and Reformed theology; (2) studies on gender, women's leadership, and feminist theology in African contexts; and (3) ecclesiastical documents from Synod Soutpansberg of the Black RCSA regarding women's ordination and leadership. This study also conducts a thorough re-examination of the Belhar Confession as a primary source. This entails a meticulous analysis of the confession's five articles about the unity of the church, reconciliation, justice, the essence of the church's witness, and its doxological conclusion, with a focus on the text's explicit statements, implicit meanings, and omissions. This re-reading is not solely descriptive but analytical: It scrutinises the underlying logic of the confession and enquires whether its articulated theological ideals of unity, reconciliation, and justice are rationally extendable beyond the realm of racial injustice to encompass gender-based exclusion. The re-reading occurs within a missional hermeneutical framework, asserting that confessional writings should be interpreted concerning God's continuous mission in the world, hence allowing for contextual reinterpretation. This method guarantees that the rationale for gender inclusiveness is rooted in the confession's own theological framework rather than being externally imposed.

The analytical framework originates in missional hermeneutics, functioning as a lens to elucidate the Belhar Confession and to address its deficiencies regarding gender. The article examines how the confession's core theological principles of unity, reconciliation, and justice might be employed to incorporate gender equality through a process of contextual reinterpretation. This hermeneutic underscores that confessional statements are not static utterances but dynamic resources that embody their theological

identity and must be interpreted anew in light of contemporary circumstances (Tesfaye 2018).

The study illustrates that future research should draw lessons from and collaborate with the established case of the Black RCSA Soutpansberg Synod when examining concerns pertaining to historical patterns of women's exclusion and contemporary practices concerning gender justice. Sources comprise synod remarks, ecclesiastical order documents, and secondary literature regarding gender relations within the specific ecclesiastical context. The study seeks to identify obstacles to complete female participation and potential avenues for change through missional theological discourse.

The Belhar Confession's Silence on Gender: Analysing the Gap

Theological Principles and Their Incomplete Application

Despite the fact that it makes no explicit mention of gender, the Belhar Confession articulates three key theological principles: unity, reconciliation, and justice, all of which impact gender relations. The Belhar Confession's belief that "unity is both a gift and an obligation" and its conviction that forced separation among people is a sin that distorts God's intent for humanity (DRMC 1986) provide a theological basis for other forms of human division, including gender-based separation among clergy, which can be used to construct a logical argument (Fromm 2006, 13–14).

It maintains that genuine reconciliation requires justice for the offended and that the church should stand with "the destitute, the poor, and the wronged" (DRMC 1986, art. 4).

The exclusion of women from ecclesiastical leadership constitutes an injustice that the church community must acknowledge and rectify for genuine reconciliation to occur (Van Wyk 2023, 20). The confession's failure to identify gender as a locus of injustice has allowed churches to pursue racial reconciliation without reforming patriarchal systems.

The confession indicates that God is, in a unique sense, the deity of the destitute, the impoverished, and the wronged, hence allowing for preferential considerations for other marginalised groups (Vosloo 2020, 360). The confession's silence on gender has restricted its preferential option to ethnic minorities, inadequately addressing the marginalisation of women inside those institutions. The comprehensive application of justice concepts in the confession must also confront gender-specific injustice and prejudice.

Patriarchal Structures in the Black RCSA Soutpansberg Synod

The Black RCSA Soutpansberg Synod, primarily including Venda- and Tsonga-speaking Reformed communities in Limpopo Province, South Africa, exemplifies the continuation of patriarchal practices within African Reformed churches. Despite the

church's historical commitment to three forms of unity, women remain mostly excluded from serving as elders, deacons, and ministers in most congregations within our synod (Mudau, Tsara, and Mudimeli 2025, 2). This exclusion is maintained by theological justifications, cultural rationalisations, and institutional complacency.

The Synod's archives reveal that the ordination of women has been infrequently addressed, and when it was, the resolutions were seen more as procedural formalities than as earnest theological and ethical deliberations. The Synod's position exemplifies what Mudau and Khosa-Nkatini (2025) describe as "passive resistance to female equality in office," a fundamentally non-confrontational tactic that effectively perpetuates discriminatory practices. The phrase "rectified and restored in order, if required" in synodical decrees implies that the exclusion of women is not regarded as an urgent matter for correction.

Theological justifications for the exclusion of women generally focus on ambiguous interpretations of Pauline texts, particularly 1 Timothy 2:12 (Eyoh and Olusakin 2024, 203). However, such interpretations fail to consider the broader biblical testimony on women in leadership or contemporary studies of the cultural context of these assertions. Moreover, they neglect to acknowledge that the church currently engages in cultural accommodation in numerous other areas, indicating that the opposition to the ordination of women is more rooted in tradition (indeed, sexist) than in biblical doctrine.

The impact of women's marginalisation on ecclesiastical life and mission is significant. It significantly diminishes the pool of prospective leaders, suppresses the voices and viewpoints of Christian women in theology, and implies that women's contributions are less significant or useful than those of men. Women, who are often the predominant active participants and undertake a significant portion of church responsibilities in rural congregations, are excluded from official leadership positions, resulting in a rapid disjunction between duty and authority that is detrimental to effective ministry (Eyoh and Olusakin 2024, 200).

Missional Hermeneutics and Gender Justice: Reinterpreting the Belhar

Missional hermeneutics offers a critical perspective for reinterpreting the Belhar Confession's dedication to justice concerning the gender inequalities expressed within. Grounded in the *missio Dei* (the conviction that God is fundamentally a sending, or missionary, deity who commissions the church to engage with the world), missional hermeneutics interprets Scripture and confessional texts not as static data but as testimony to God's ongoing revelation concerning His salvific work in creation. The Belhar Confession, established in 1986 as a theological rebuttal to the malevolence of apartheid, asserts that the church ought to be situated where God is: with the oppressed rather than the persecutors (Boesak 2008, 16). From a missional perspective, this confessional stance extends beyond its anti-apartheid context to denounce all forms of structural exclusion and hierarchical control within the body of Christ. Similar to Belhar's repudiation of the theological justification for racial segregation as heretical

and a distortion of the gospel, missional rereading challenges theological assertions that subordinate women to inferior status, which fundamentally contradict God's reconciling mission to dismantle barriers and create a new humanity through Christ (Eph 2:14–16).

Implementing missional hermeneutics for gender justice within the Reformed tradition necessitates acknowledging that God's mission transcends cultural patriarchy and compels the church to embody prophetic testimony against all forms of marginalisation. The Belhar Confession's assertion of unity in Christ, which transcends distinctions based on ethnicity, social status, or gender, posits a challenge to denominations like the GKSA to reevaluate whether gender-based ordination restrictions reflect genuine biblical fidelity or merely cultural conformity that impedes the liberating power of the gospel (Fortein 2023, 1–2). A missional interpretation of Belhar suggests that the exclusion of women from ordained ministry parallels the apartheid-era exclusions; both invoke biblical justification while ultimately reinforcing existing power systems rather than advancing God's kingdom. This interpretive method emphasises the significance of sound biblical exegesis while asserting that such exegesis must be situated within the context of God's overarching narrative mission: reconciling all things in Christ, where "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave and free, male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). When its internal constitution contradicts this reconciling spirit, the church's testimony to the world is compromised.

Discussion: Towards a Gender-Inclusive Missional Reading

Extending the Confession's Justice Principles

When interpreted missionally and inclusively, the Belhar Confession implies the complete involvement of women in ecclesiastical life and leadership, therefore actualising its assertions of justice. This extension is not an extraneous addition to the confession, but a needed outcome rationally aligned with its foundational theology. If the church acknowledges that God supports the oppressed and marginalised, and that division based on superficial characteristics contradicts the gospel, it must likewise repudiate the exclusion of women from leadership solely based on their gender (Williams 2024, 21). Such reinterpretation is based on resources that are fundamentally driven by Reformed theology. The concept of the universal priesthood of believers (1 Peter 2:9), while not directly repudiating specific church offices, provides little to no ground for hierarchical appeals, cleaving anyone off from Christ's mediatorial dignity. The Reformed doctrine teaches that the Holy Spirit freely dispenses ministerial gifts to every member of Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:7–11; cf. Joel 2:28–29). If there are no gender boundaries in the Spirit's distribution of gifting for teaching, leadership, and proclamation, then the burden of proof lies with anyone who wishes to restrict these to one class of people or another based on gender. What the Heidelberg Catechism affirms (Q & A 32)—that Christians are anointed "to be prophets, priests and kings" with the Holy Spirit—is simply to say that ministry empowerment by the Spirit is not a male privilege or prerogative; instead, all people in Christ inherit it.

Due to the Reformed tradition's stress on Scriptural authority, meticulous interpretation is essential. The approach emphasises comprehensive instruction of Scripture and refrains from proof-texting. When examined comprehensively, Scripture attests to women's involvement in God's work, from ancient Israel (Deborah, the judge) to the era of Christ (Priscilla, a teacher alongside her husband, and the first to see the risen Jesus) (Nelson 2024, 1).

The emphasis of the confession on reconciliation necessitates restoration not only among races but also between genders inside the Christian community. Authentic reconciliation necessitates acknowledging the harm inflicted upon women due to their marginalisation and expressing remorse for patriarchal systems, while actively pursuing their complete inclusion in decision-making and leadership roles. In the absence of reconciliation, the church's testimony to God's reconciling efforts remains incomplete and compromised.

Practical Implications for the Soutpansberg Synod

A gender-inclusive missional interpretation of the Belhar Confession presents several practical ramifications for the Black RCSA Soutpansberg Synod. Initially, we must transition from procedural discussions to a significant theological discourse on women's ordination. The Synod must clearly articulate whether the exclusion of women from teaching and supervisory roles aligns with its assertion that God advocates for the oppressed, as enforced segregation contradicts the gospel.

Secondly, it requires educational outreach that equips churches to understand the biblical and theological foundations of gender equality. This necessitates training in fundamental hermeneutical principles to prevent the conflation of culturally conditioned directives in Scripture with transcultural theological truths. This also entails engaging with African women's theology and using churches that have established a successful environment for women's participation.

Thirdly, the Synod will make definitive decisions regarding the practical implementation of full gender equality within church leadership structures, including by setting quotas or targets for women's representation at the synodal level. Such initiatives should be associated with monitoring and periodic performance assessments. The URCSA's 2005 resolution to achieve 50% female representation serves as a model, though its implementation challenges underscore the need for sustained commitment and structural transformation (see Plaatjies Van Huffel 2013, 2014, 2019).

The issue of gender inequality must be contextualised within the broader framework of women's empowerment in both the church and society (see Wood 2019). This entails endorsing women's theological education, cultivating environments for women's participation in biblical interpretation and church governance, and addressing cultural practices that subordinate women. The church's message regarding justice will be credible only if it reflects justice within its own structures and practices.

Challenges and Opportunities

Nonetheless, the path to achieving gender diversity within the Black RCSA is fraught with challenges. Significant cultural resistance to female leadership persists in numerous rural regions of the country, where society is governed by established gender stereotypes. Some see women's ordination as a Western imposition that would undermine African cultural identity. Male ecclesiastical authorities frequently fear that gender equality will diminish their authority and status (Fry and David 2019, 90).

These challenges present an opportunity for theological contemplation and development. Addressing gender justice concerns can enhance the church's understanding of the gospel as a liberating message and improve its capacity to testify in a culture plagued by gender-based violence and injustice. The church can draw upon resources from African cultures and Reformed theology that highlight the dignity and worth of women. The Ubuntu philosophy emphasises the well-being of the community, while the Reformed doctrine of *imago Dei* underpins the equal contributions of women to both the church and society (Hobson 2019; Nnodim and Okigbo 2024).

Furthermore, a worldwide consensus on women's rights and the increasing representation of women in leadership roles across numerous African religious denominations are fostering momentum for change (Udemba 2024, 3). Young individuals exhibit a weaker attachment to patriarchal frameworks and are more inclined to embrace an egalitarian style of ecclesiastical leadership. Leveraging this generational shift while acknowledging the guiding role of meticulous theological inquiry within our tradition can empower the Synod to navigate a transition towards enhanced gender inclusion.

Conclusion

This study argues that the Belhar Confession, serving as a prophetic witness against racial injustice while being silent on gender issues, has perpetuated enduring patriarchal structures within African Reformed churches. The assessment is somewhat accurate; nevertheless, the Black RCSA Soutpansberg Synod has demonstrated how churches can embrace principles that oppose racial oppression while yet maintaining gender-based exclusion. A missional hermeneutic interpretation of the confession implies that its fundamental theological principles of unity, reconciliation, and justice should equally pertain to women.

Missional hermeneutics provides a framework for reinterpreting confessional documents, considering contemporary issues and emerging perspectives. This methodology, when applied to the Belhar Confession, demonstrates that its repudiation of coerced segregation, affirmation of divine sympathy with the marginalised, and emphasis on reconciliation through justice have significant implications for achieving complete gender parity in ecclesiastical leadership. The exclusion of women contradicts

the fundamental principles of the confession as significantly as racial discrimination did.

For the Soutpansberg Synod and other African Reformed churches, gender inequality is a substantive concern. It necessitates religious transformation, cultural involvement, and substantive structural reform. This involves not only opposition but also the proactive advancement of women's leadership, educational initiatives on biblical theology and gender, and accountability mechanisms to achieve gender equality.

The church's witness to God's justice and reconciliation will be credible only if it exemplifies these principles in its own existence. Furthermore, by integrating the justice principles of the Belhar Confession to encompass gender equality, African Reformed churches can strengthen their prophetic testimony and augment their participation in God's plan to restore shalom (peace/wholeness) to all of creation. Rebelling against patriarchal traditions requires audacious daring; navigating cultural norms demands intelligence, and believing that the Spirit of God will guide the church towards comprehensive justice and reconciliation necessitates faith.

Subsequent research may explore gender-inclusive policy frameworks for Africa. It could examine the practical implications of reformed contexts by investigating the experiences of women ministers in churches that have integrated them, and by exploring the perceptions of younger generations of church members regarding gender and leadership roles. This research may enhance both contemporary theological discourse and practical efforts towards a more fully actualised Belharian vision of a united church dedicated to justice and reconciliation, wherein women are regarded as equal participants, thereby fulfilling the confession's promise of unity.

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