

# Ordination of Women to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments: A turning point in the history of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa

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## Abstract

In 2016, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) celebrated 40 years since the first woman was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacraments (1976–2016). The MCSA Conference of 1976 ordained the first woman to the ministry of Word and Sacraments, a verdict that was long overdue. This became a turning point in the history of the MCSA. This document seeks to highlight the role of women in the MCSA prior to and after the 1976 Conference resolution. Included herein are key controversies, statements and events in the ministry of women within the MCSA.

**Keywords:** Methodist Church of Southern Africa; ordination; Word and Sacraments; women; Conference

## Introduction

Rev. Stanley Mogoba, former Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (hereafter MCSA), declared: “Women have played a vital role in the work of the Church from very early days—in fact, from that first Easter morning” (Oosthuizen 1990, v). Women first witnessed that Jesus had risen from his tomb and then spread the news (Mark 16). We also learn from the New Testament of women who had an impact on the growth of the early



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church, such as Priscilla (Acts 18: 2), virgin daughters who prophesied (Acts 21: 9) and others.

Only 156 years after her inception<sup>1</sup> in 1972, the MCSA resolved to ordain women in the ministry of Word and Sacraments. It was a decision requiring massive efforts; hence it took lengthy periods to pass. The first woman was ordained four years later, in 1976, by the MCSA Conference.<sup>2</sup>

In 2016, 40 years after the first woman was ordained in the ministry of Word and Sacraments, Rev. Ziphozihle Siwa, the MCSA Presiding Bishop in his address to Conference 2016, noted:

In the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, we celebrate 40 years of the decision made by this Conference to ordain women to the ministry of Word and Sacraments in the same way as the ordination of men. Let me be quick to say that it is a celebration that marks the awakened consciousness of the church that we are all equal in the eyes of God. Space should be opened for all to exercise the call irrespective of gender. Some have asked that we call this year a “year of lamentation” because of the injustices and prejudices suffered by women over the years. Whilst I acknowledge the need for such lamentation and repentance, we must not miss the opportunity to express our joy in what God has done. The doors were opened, some barriers fell. We must therefore use this opportunity to call for ongoing reflection and action that will remove any remaining barriers. (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2017, 8)

It is evident that in the past four decades, ministry for women has been an unpleasant experience due to inequality and discrimination, which are perceptible to this day. However, there are achievements that need to be celebrated. This document focuses on key controversies, statements and events in the ministry of women in the MCSA for the past 40 years.

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1 In 1816 Rev. Barnabas Shaw, a Methodist missionary set foot in the Cape and was deployed to Namaqualand, Leliefontein where he established the first Methodist station in South Africa (Mkhwanazi 2014, 22).

2 The MSCA Conference is the sole and final authority in respect of the doctrines of the church and their interpretation. Conference provides direction and inspiration for the church and is the church’s governing authority and supreme legislative body (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, 53).

## **Early Methodist Women**

The first woman to be acknowledged in the mission of the Methodist movement is Susanna Wesley, the mother of John Wesley. In her article, Rev. Purity Malinga notes:

It is unusual to find anything written about John Wesley which does not mention the honour of Susanna Wesley. She is referred to as “the mother of Methodism,” not just because she gave birth to John, but because she was a guiding star that led John towards his destiny—the founding of Methodism. Our celebration of John Wesley’s tercentenary would therefore be incomplete without celebrating Susanna Wesley. Before there was a John Wesley—there was a Susanna! (Malinga 2006, 105). [In this case, Susanna is the first Methodist woman.]

John Wesley did not ordain women, nor did he allow them to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. However, Wesley gave women an opportunity to practise ministry in the mission of the Methodist movement by appointing them as preachers. Yrigoyen states:

Methodists flourished under the direction of class and band leaders, persons of spiritual strength and insight. Most of them were women! Among them were Sarah Crosby, Dorothy Downes, and Grace Murray, exemplary Christians whose witness persuaded many to accept God’s grace and begin a new life ... In effect, Sarah Crosby, Mary Bosanquet, Hannah Harrison, Eliza Bennis, Jane Cooper, and others ... were engaged in preaching, and many people experienced conversion as a result of their testimony and proclamation of the gospel ... In 1787, despite the objections of some of the male preachers, he officially authorized Sarah Mallet to preach, as long as she proclaimed the doctrines and adhered to the disciplines that all Methodist preachers were expected to accept. (Yrigoyen 1996, 8)

Women have been actively involved in the ministry of the church, decades before the MCSA resolved to ordain them in the ministry of Word and Sacraments. Women exercised their calling through the Deaconess Order. According to Oosthuizen (1990, 2) the earliest recorded deacon to work in the MCSA was Sister Theresa who was ordained in 1890 in Johannesburg. Oosthuizen (1990, 9) further states that Sister Evelyan Oats followed Sister Theresa and arrived in Durban in 1894. In 1897, she opened a convalescent home and was the matron of

the training institution in Kilnerton. Since women were prohibited in the ministry of Word and Sacraments, the Deaconess Order became home to those who felt the call to serve God in the ministry of the church. This became visible when Conference resolved to ordain women and a number of them left the Deaconess Order and migrated to ministry of Word and Sacraments. Sister's Constance Oosthuizen, Dorothy Spink and Mavis Mbilini left the Deaconess Order for the ministry of Word and Sacraments soon after Conference had passed the resolution to ordain women. According to Oosthuizen (1990, 83), Sister Unez Smuts had resigned in 1959 from the Deaconess Order and was ordained by the Congregational Church in to the ministry of Word and Sacraments.

Women established mission movements and organisations to do mission within the MCSA. Black women of the MCSA established a Women's Manyano organisation. It was through this organisation that women were able to pray and preach. It also served as a sheltered space for them to share their experiences. According to Hinfelaar (2001, 45) the Manyano was an organisation for women only, giving them an opportunity they had been deprived of for years. The most important thing in the Manyano was prayer.

Prayer to God becomes a means through which women voice their burdens, away from sites of struggle, in their own safe space. It becomes an immediate link with the spiritual realm that enables them to see their lives from a different perspective as they unburden to God and to one another that which weighs heavily on their hearts. As they do this, women reach out with mutual care to one another and so "become" the incarnate response to this pain. That which is expressed within the spiritual realm is manifested and dealt with in their human relationships with one another. (Haddad 2004, 10)

Haddad (2004, 11) concludes that the Manyano movement is a safe site of struggle for survival against death and patriarchal oppression and resistance to dominant ecclesial forces.

Preston (2007, 45) asserts that white women within the MCSA established the Women's Auxiliary in which they gathered to pray together, to study God's word and do fundraising.

The aim of the W.A. is to know Christ and to make Him known. The goals of the organisation include the extension of the Kingdom of God, through the power of the

Holy Spirit by; building up and spiritually revitalising women in societies, engaging in and encouraging evangelical outreach, being part of the ministry and mission of the Church, keeping postal contact with women unable to attend regular Branch Meetings, and encouraging involvement in district and Connexional joint projects. The goal of spiritual growth is fostered through devotions, Bible studies, W.A. services, and prayer services. A portion of their meeting is always given to a guest speaker and the women spend time in worship together. (Preston 2007, 46)

The W.A. also has a strong outreach thrust, and fundraising forms a large part of their agenda. They support the Methodist old age homes and children's homes in particular and care for them and their staff with birthday celebrations, Christmas events and food and clothing. They also raise money for and care for Meals on Wheels, hospices, children's care centres, women in prison ministries and other community projects. Another important aspect of their ministry is the arranging of funeral teas. This is regarded as a special ministry to grieving families (Oosthuizen 1999, 2).

### **Turning Point**

The ordination of Rev. Constance Oosthuizen in 1976 was a turning point in the history of the MCSA. Through this the MCSA recognised and gave space for women to serve in the ministry of Word and Sacraments for the first time two centuries after her inception. Reverend Oosthuizen records: "Due to the fact that more and more deaconesses were doing the work of ministers there was considerable pressure from various quarters to open the ministry of Word and Sacraments to women" (Oosthuizen 1990, 74).

Although it had been long overdue, the ordination of Rev. Constance Oosthuizen was a turning point because after her, other women followed. She became a pioneer of women ministry in the MCSA. On the other hand, Rev. Mavis Mbilini became a pioneer of black women in ministry.

### **Women in Ministry**

#### **Key controversies**

Controversies that have been evident through the past 40 years include discrimination and gender inequality related to leadership roles. Although the reception of women in the ministry

was a turning point and a moment of immense pride, it also marked the beginning of discrimination towards women. According to Mkhwanazi (2014, 32) many circuits did not want to be ministered by women ministers. The reason for this may be that people were not used to women ministers. Since the inception of the MCSA there had never been a female minister before 1976. Therefore, it was already an established norm that a minister is supposed to be a man. Church members upheld the rule that female ministers had to have their heads covered during services. This means that female ministers were treated as wives in the black traditional communities, who are required to cover their heads everywhere they go. Their ministry was vastly restricted. If females were ministering sacraments, some conservative members did not fully accept them and refused female ministers the right to perform burials. In some communities when a person dies in an accident, only men are allowed in the graveyard. Therefore this would be a controversy in a case where the burial is to be conducted by a female minister. “Numerous questions arose from chauvinistic males including whether they [female ministers] may administer sacraments during the duration of their menstrual span. The church is clear about the ordination of women ministers but major difficulties lie within the members of the church” (Mkhwanazi 2014, 32).

The current problem is inequality in terms of leadership positions in the church. In a report to 2015 Conference, the General Secretary Rev. Charmaine Morgan said: “40 years after the ordination of the first woman as a minister, 17% of our clergy are women, 4% of our superintendents are women, and no women are Bishops” (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, 21).

Stating the challenges faced by women in ministry, Rev. Nomvuyo Mpuqa, stated that: “Despite the above 2015 Conference resolutions, Synod 2016 still elected male bishops and even in Districts where there was a female candidate” (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, 244). This simply means that the people called Methodists are still hesitant in electing a female bishop. However, a female minister should not be elected to the bishop’s office just because she is a female, but because she is eligible for the position. In other words, female ministers should not be advantaged in being elected for positions.

According to Williams and Landman (2016, 165) it is not only the problem of leadership positions that women are facing, but there are more issues that impact negatively even on

their families. Some of them are wilfully stationed in circuits that are financially in arrears, which means that they are in danger of not receiving their stipends.

Williams and Landman (2016) interviewed 13 women ministers in the MCSA. All of the interviewees have faced discrimination in various ways:

They believe that they are discriminated against by entering into the covenantal relationship with the MCSA and then by superintendent ministers, their male colleagues and a dominant male orientation within the MCSA. An example of such rejection is of a superintendent minister saying to a woman minister appointed to his circuit: "I won't have a woman minister in my circuit. I don't want you. You will only be here for a year. The church made a mistake in accepting you." Her reaction to the words of this superintendent was: "I was speechless and went through hell." (Williams and Landman 2016, 167)

The women ministers also believe that they are discriminated against by male persons in leadership positions within circuits and societies as a consequence of a patriarchal culture which leads to women ministers not being accepted. They experience circuit officials misusing their power by lobbying and acting beyond their mandate in the invitation of ministers and by influencing people to withhold their financial contributions. This results in ministers not receiving their stipend and allowances, being moved to another circuit or not being stationed at all. (Williams and Landman 2016, 164)

In the MCSA, the wives of male ministers automatically become leaders of the Women's Manyano and the Young Women's Manyano organisations. Every year the church pays for their retreats and they are treated with respect and dignity. On the other hand, the spouses of female ministers do not have such benefits. In Nguni, spouses of males are called *Mfundisikazi* or *Mongamelikazi* while spouses of female ministers do not have a term to be addressed with. Again, the male ministers' wives have a privilege of leading the Women's Manyano and the Young Women's Manyano by virtue of being married to a minister. This has caused controversy between the ministers' wives and women ministers.

Furthermore, women ministers also face sexual harassment in the church. They are victimised by both laymen and their male colleagues in the ministry:

A number of women ministers interviewed shared stories of how their male colleagues made sexual advances to them. Some also shared that even the lay leaders in the church harass them as women and they find it difficult to report and find justice from the church because the whole leadership system is male and those in leadership have a tendency of protecting their male colleagues. This leads one to conclude that there is no justice and fairness for women in ministry. (Kumalo 2016, 182)

Kumalo agrees that “there is a real struggle which has been caused by issues such as mistrust, insecurity and fear in the MCSA between ministers’ wives and women ministers. This struggle is even more prevalent when it comes to the leadership of the Women’s Manyano, which is the most powerful body in the church” (Kumalo 2016, 183).

### **Key Statements**

- “In 1999, 23 years following ordination of the first female minister, Conference passed a resolution requiring that all church structures observe representatives by appointing members to leadership in a ratio of 40:40:20 [women, men and youth]” (Kumalo 2016, 185).
- In 2006, the MCSA commemorated 30 years of women ordination in the ministry of Word and Sacraments. Rev. Ivan Abrahams, who was then the presiding bishop, in his address to Conference stated:

Today I honour and pay tribute to all women, grandmothers, mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, grand-daughters, aunts and nieces. Forgive us where we have failed you or taken your contribution to the life and witness of the church for granted. I wish to place on record today my commitment to gender transformation and I call the church to develop and implement a gender action plan that will seek to inter alia:

- Eliminate gender biases in our current policies.
- Set clear equality targets to ensure equal participation of men and women in decision making.



- Develop Bible studies and leadership programmes for institutional transformation.
- Reflect on the critical role and participation of men in gender equality.<sup>3</sup>

This project was given to the Women in Ministry forum to coordinate.

- The 2015 Conference passed two significant resolutions concerning women in the ministry: “Conference resolves to recognise and celebrate the ordination of Women Ministers for the 40 years, and affirms the work already done by the presiding bishop, especially in establishing a task team to lead these celebrations in 2016. As part of this celebration, Conference directs the task team, in consultation with SMMS, to develop a booklet on the history and stories of Women in Ministry” (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, 104).
- “Noting that 2016 marks the 40th anniversary of the Ordination of Women and the low number of women in leadership within the connexion, Conference refers all issues relating to the involvement of women at all levels of leadership in the church to the mission unit for consideration during the reflective sessions planned for 2016. Conference further instructs districts, circuits and organisations to be intentional about the inclusion of women in leadership and leadership development pipelines, such as leading conversations, Bible studies or as guest speakers in all the 40th celebrations in 2016” (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, 104).

### **Key Events**

- **1976:** Rev. Constance Oosthuizen was ordained and became the first woman in the ministry of Word and Sacraments in the MCSA.
- **1985:** Rev. Mavis Mbilini was ordained and became the first black woman to be ordained in the ministry of Word and Sacraments in the MCSA. She was stationed in Harding and Port Shepstone circuit (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 1985, 416).

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<sup>3</sup> The Presiding Bishop’s address to Conference 2006 (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2007, 5)

- **1986:** Rev. Constance Oosthuizen became the first female minister to hold a district position when she was elected secretary of the Natal Coastal District.
- **2000:** Rev. Purity Malinga was elected bishop of the Natal Coastal District, becoming the first and the only female minister to hold this position in the history of the MCSA.
- **2006:** The MCSA celebrated 30 years of the ordination of women to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. As part of this celebration, every ordinand had a woman presbyter in the laying of hands. Again, the charge to ordinands, that is usually done by the presiding bishop, was given by Rev. Joanne Jennings, a woman presbyter.
- **2009:** Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary (SMMS) was opened in Pietermaritzburg. At the centre of the SMMS buildings stands the Christ the Servant Chapel with its large doors. Behind the chapel is a beautiful, evergreen and tranquil prayer garden, built with cubicle hedges and strong pews. In the entrance of the garden is a stone with these words: “This garden remembers the witness of the Methodist women and honours the first woman to be ordained in the MCSA, Rev. Constance Oosthuizen, and the first woman Bishop, Rev. Purity Malinga.” The prayer garden serves as a reminder of the sacrificial service given by women ministers in the life of the Methodist Church since the ordination of the first female minister. It also celebrates the milestone achievement of a woman being elected as the first bishop of the Methodist Church and of a mainline denomination in South Africa.
- **2014:** The MCSA Conference elected the Rev. Charmaine Morgan to the office of general secretary of the MCSA. She is the first women to hold this position, which she will hold until 2019.
- **2015:** The Conference appointed the Rev. Purity Malinga to be the director of Education for Ministry and Mission Unit (EMMU). EMMU is responsible for the training of ministers of the MCSA. Rev. Malinga is the first female to hold this position.
- **2016:** The MCSA celebrated 40 years of women ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. The celebrations were done throughout the connexion. All services

including Bible studies, were conducted by women in Conference and a similar call was made to district synods.

## **Achievements and Challenges of Women in Ministry**

### **2013**

As reported to the Conference of 2013 by Rev. Nomvuyo Mhlongo (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2014, 207).

#### Achievements

- More women are candidating for the ministry of Word and Sacraments and Word and Service.
- A few women serve at district/circuit level as vice chairpersons, district secretaries and superintendents.
- Conversations between women ministers and ministers' wives took place on 28 November 2012 at the presiding bishop's office. The conversations continue in the different forums seeking healing and transformation for both parties.
- Improved working relations between WIM and Women's Manyano.
- WIM consultation where at connexional level we share our joys, pains, struggles and achievements! Here we encourage and empower each other.

#### Challenges

- The consistent pain, humiliation and oppression resulting from only one sector of male ministers being officially privileged to labour with their spouses, while other ministers across colour and gender do not enjoy the same privilege. This is an issue of injustice and human rights abuse which needs to be addressed by the MCSA.
- The tension between the Laws and Discipline (L&D) of the MCSA and the constitutions of the organisations.
- To move beyond "first appointments" churches.

- The inability to move in significant numbers beyond the local church to serve in connexional/district/circuit positions to effect change and/or be part of the decision dynamic on the connexional level.
- To effectively engage in WIM Connexional Task Team for gender transformation because of financial constraints.
- Conference that continues to ratify bishop elections which go against their own resolutions that seek equal representation on the decision dynamics at the connexional level. This action keeps most men in key positions as committee board members, which further stretches their strategic capabilities. The result is women ministers struggling for survival in the male-dominated workspace.

## 2014

As reported to the Conference of 2014 by Rev. Nomvuyo Mhlongo (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2015, 205).

### Achievements

- A very successful WIM consultation was held at eMseni from 27–29 August 2014 where 37 women ministers were in attendance.
- To God be the Glory, Great things He has done! In the 2014 Conference held at Umtata “*herstory*” was made in the MCSA when for the first time a woman minister by the name of Rev. Charmaine Morgan was elected general secretary of our beloved Church!
- The Conference appointed Rev. Nomvuyo Mhlonngo as the connexional coordinator in the EMMU Phase 3 Programme, bringing two voices of women in the EMMU general committee.
- The Limpopo district in their recent 2014 convention elected for the first time ever a woman minister by the name of Rev. Dineo Mathibeli as their Young Women’s Manyano president, the result of improved working relationships between women ministers and ministers’ wives begun in 2013. Very small *significant* steps indeed, but a *giant* leap for womankind!

## Challenges

- Painfully aware of how patterns form values that inform context when women ministers tirelessly continue the task of charting the process by which they within communities can be able to navigate oppressive social structures and form value patterns that bring about liberation in the midst of adversity.
- Districts and mainly circuits/societies which continuously reject women ministers and take pride in their actions. This makes the move beyond “first appointment” churches a mission!
- Establishment of a gender desk in the MCSA that addresses women ministers’ issues in particular.

## 2015

As reported to the Conference of 2015 by Rev. Nomvuyo Mhlongo (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, 242).

## Achievements

- Established a committee to work on a book outline, collect women ministers’ stories, edit and publish the book.
- A fundraising committee for the 40th celebration in 2016 was established and viz Revs Lumka Sigaba, Jabu Mhlophe, Nompithizelo Sibhidla—with powers to co-opt.
- Women in Leadership was launched on 5 August 2015 at MCO by Rev. Jane Day.
- A celebratory committee was appointed by the presiding bishop with Rev. D. van de Lar as its convenor.
- Women in ministry made more visible, e.g. the COGH synod chaired by the vice chair who is a woman minister hosted by Stellenbosch circuit under the superintendency of a woman minister, assisted by other women ministers for the smooth running of the synod.
- There are now two women who are district vice chairpersons and with more women in the leadership structure we hope that the voice of women will be audible.
- Placing WIM in permanent agenda of DEWCOM, where ethical issues pertaining women ministers are discussed.

## Challenges

- There are times where women clergy still experience—in relation to individuals or the church structures—issues of injustice including gender and race discrimination as well as gender-based violence. The church needs to continue examining practices and structures that perpetuate injustice and address this with urgency.

## 2016

As reported to the Conference of 2016 by Rev. Nomvuyo Mhlongo (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2017, 244).

## Achievements

It was only 10 years ago that we celebrated 30 years of ordaining women in the MCSA at Natal Coastal District. We celebrated on our own; not many people in the Connexion were even aware of the event, but in 2015, Conference made the following resolutions:

- To recognise and celebrate the ordination of women ministers for 40 years, and affirm the work already done by the presiding bishop, especially by establishing a task team to lead these celebrations in 2016. As part of the celebration, Conference directs the task team in consultation with SMMS to develop a booklet on the history and stories of women in ministry. The finance unit is requested to make provision for the cost involved.
- Noting that 2016 marks the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women, and the low number of women ministers in leadership within the Connexion, Conference refers all issues relating to the involvement of women at all levels of leadership in the church to the mission unit for consideration during the reflective sessions planned for 2016. Conference further instructs districts, circuits and organisations to be intentional about the inclusion of women in leadership and leadership development pipelines, such as leading conversations, Bible studies or as guest speakers in all the 40th celebrations in 2016.
- Conference requests the connexional executive to be intentional about the appointment of women ministers as circuit superintendents as a means of enabling gender equality and inclusion in senior leadership in the church.

- Conference directs EMMU in consultation with DEWCOM to develop guidelines and reflection tools as well as convene reflective sessions on the persistence of patriarchal attitudes at all levels of our church and report on progress at Conference 2016.

### Challenges

Despite the above 2015 Conference resolutions, Synod 2016 still elected male bishops even in districts where there was a female candidate. What is even sadder is that this very Conference will ratify the elections. Women superintendents are just tokenism. Most of these women's voices are silenced. Males, even those that are not in active ministry, remain the voice in all matters affecting the circuit where the superintendent is, according to our Book of Order, the official head of the church in the circuit. The question we need to ask is: "How many people in leadership are even aware of these resolutions? Do these cascade to the grass roots? Who is the watchdog of Conference Resolutions?"

### Conclusion

It is clear that 40 years after the first women was ordained in the ministry of Word and Sacraments, ministry for women remains a nightmare. Women are still victims of sexual harassment, discrimination and patriarchy. However, the people called Methodists have over the past 40 years learned to gradually accept women ministers to practise ministry in their communities. As it was not an easy decision to accept women in the ministry of Word and Sacraments, the Methodists people will gradually learn that women are capable to be appointed into leadership positions in the church. Despite the controversies, this research has demonstrated that the church is trying by all means to accommodate women in the ministry of Word and Sacraments through the key statements and events over the past 40 years. God has delivered us from a male-ministered church. He will again deliver us from a church that is dominated by male clergy to a church where all are equal, despite gender.

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