

To Build a New Church together? Exploring Interdisciplinary Dialogue with a Christian Women's Ministry: Addressing Patriarchy in URCSA

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Abstract

There are many routes to address patriarchy in faith communities. This article asks the question whether one particular Christian Women's Ministry, that of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), can empower black women to address gender justice. It utilises a historical-narrative approach to interpret the goals, functioning and impact of this ministry in terms of its own primary documents. The findings point to the potential of such a dialogue, yet also highlight the complexities with regard to impact analysis within a denominational context. Some strides have been made, but this article shows there is still a need to work together to build a church where—besides putting policies and programmes in place—the church should prophetically address injustice and seek witness to the partnership between women and men.

Keywords: patriarchy; Christian Women's Ministry (CWM); women's empowerment; Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA)

Introduction

Faith communities are to be key spaces for women's empowerment. This has, however, not always been the case and remains a complex challenge. Patriarchy is a social phenomenon that can be seen as not just the suppression of females and children by males, but the "whole structure of Father-ruled society: aristocracy over serfs, masters over slaves, kings over subjects, racial overloads over colonized people" (Reuther 1983, 61). Plaatjies-van Huffel (2011) shows that some of the most progressive religious communities, in terms of their liberation struggle against racism, are only in recent years coming to terms with their fundamentally patriarchal nature. The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (hereafter URCSA) can indeed be proud of many leaders

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who have led campaigns in the struggle against racism before and after 1994. However, Plaatjies-Van Huffel qualifies this heritage by explaining:

From 1968 to 1982, discursive practices in the mission churches were influenced by Liberation Theology and/or Black Theology. During the same period, women of the DRMC and DRCA read literature which conditioned them to accept patriarchy as a norm in both church and society. Liberation Theology did not bring about a paradigm shift as far as the issue of women was concerned. Instead, women are largely absent, invisible and silent in the theological contributions of the black Reformed church fathers. During the struggle for social justice, the women's issue was side-lined. (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2011, 109)

Towards Building a New Church together

In 2005, at its General Synod, male delegates (who were by far the vast majority of the assembly) drafted and presented what they called an “Open Letter from the men of URCSA to the women of URCSA” (URCSA Acts 2005, 176). It was read by the eminent black theologian, Allan Boesak. In “humility,” the men confessed:

... we have taken over power in the Body of Jesus Christ. This is the way we received the structures of the church from our fathers and grandfathers ...

Instead of treating you as equal image bearers of the living God, we often pushed you into second-class citizenship in the household of God ...

They continue with reference to the *Belhar Confession*:

... we confess that we have applied the liberating guidance of Belhar primarily to the problems of overcoming barriers of “race,” culture and ethnicity. So today, as URCSA, we stand judged by the *Belhar Confession*.

... we commit ourselves to make restitution for this wrong and to build a new church with you—in which you are free to exercise your gifts and ministries and in which we develop an equal partnership to the glory of God.

That was 13 years ago. While this confession and commitment is indeed laudable, under the visionary leadership of the Moderator for the Synod, James Buys (URCSA Acts 2005, 178)—and one could call this synod URCSA's Gender Rubicon—the question remains: How did religious communities like this church, URCSA, actually “build a new church” (as men and women) together? Put differently, how would faith communities like these become liberating spaces for women and men to exercise their gifts? Plaatjies-Van Huffel is correct: the challenge is to deconstruct, or better, decolonise a patriarchal church. The words in the Open Letter are indeed moving, yet the question at the commemoration of 25 years of existence of URCSA, is whether this church is actually moving in the direction of building a new church.

There can be many different routes for a faith community like URCSA to address this question. As already suggested, professors and ecumenical church leaders like Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Christina Landman, and also, lay-leaders like Angela Buys, Dineo Seloana, Belinda Witbooi, Matlhodi Teu, and many others within ministries like the Christian Women's Ministry (CWM), have on various levels and at different stages of the development of URCSA, played key roles in addressing this challenge. In her insightful theological work on the historical development of women's ministries within URCSA and its ancestors, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA), Plaatjies-van Huffel outlines this long journey to freedom and refers in this regard to the initial position of women "as docile objects in theological discourse" (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2011, 105). However, she continues to show how, in light of ecumenical exposure and the rise of the feminist and womanist movement in theology, these spaces shifted towards being "sites for change," embodying "shared leadership" and also "partnership between men and women" (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2011, 111). She concludes that it is the women's ministries which became spaces to "becoming agents of change" (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2011, 118). In her reference to the role of the CWM Chairperson at the time, Mme Dineo Seloana, amongst others, Plaatjies-van Huffel concludes tellingly:

... [a]t the General Synod 2005 of the URCSA, a gender policy was accepted which was very much inspired by the contributions of the Christian Women's Ministry. (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2011, 118)

Indeed, the confession of and commitment from the "men of URCSA" in 2005, but also the proposed and accepted gender policy, did not merely fall from the sky—this was the fruit of women's agency and advocacy within URCSA.

This contribution proposes to celebrate the above-mentioned leaders, as well as those not mentioned explicitly. This is done by taking Plaatjies-van Huffel's affirmation of the role of the CWM as a starting point to build a new church together. With these leading pioneers, I also grapple with the question: What should and could the role of women's ministries (and involved lay-leaders) be within these churches—in partnership with ordained ministers and professional theologians. According to educational theorist Wenger (1998), these ministries are framed as "communities of practice" to address and dismantle the scourge of patriarchy. The author is an educationalist—not a professional theologian. However, she has been participating in the CWM for just over 25 years, since 1993, advocating for women's empowerment within, from and of faith communities. URCSA, we argue, needs to become a liberating space, a community of practice, to empower black women to build new churches, which furthermore can engage in civil society to address patriarchy in other spheres. She works from an educational background, but more so focused on how specific communities of practice can be empowering rather than domesticating. A community of practice, according to Wenger (1998), is defined as a group of people whose "collective learning over time, results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social

relations” (Wenger 1998, 45). While this approach is not exclusively theological, it builds on the work of scholars mentioned above. This bold quest, however, calls for a deeper and much longer engagement than one article. Nevertheless, in starting to explore (or experiment) with this mixed approach, in this modest, perhaps non-theological, contribution, the article limits itself at this stage to explore the potential for building an interdisciplinary methodology. How do I intend to do this?

The aim of this contribution is in the first place to hear and articulate the voices of this specific women’s ministry (the CWM of URCSA) itself. Secondly, there is also the need for a critical assessment within a broader historical, educational, but also ecclesiological frame of references. This is a pedagogical question as well as a theological-ecclesiological one. Coming from the field of education and not theology, my aim is towards exploring inter- and trans-disciplinary methodologies necessary to nurture this dialogue within empowering communities of practice. In this contribution, the author wades into the waters, by firstly introducing the CWM within URCSA as a key dialogue partner within a specific patriarchal church. The engagement is narrowed down to the documents within the structures and primary sources on a general synodical level. I will trace the formation and further development of the CWM within URCSA and then secondly ask the question whether indeed it has become an empowering community of practice. Lastly, the author draws conclusions and presents a proposal for longer and deeper research to promote further engagement—as a basis for possibly building a post-patriarchal church over the next 25 years.

Unmasking a Patriarchal African Church

URCSA wants to be an African Reformed Church (URCSA Acts 2005, 164). The CWM, as one of its ministries over the last 25 years, consists primarily of black¹ members and leaders. They have experienced the brutality of colonialism and current expressions of neo-colonialism, through a global system of neo-liberal capitalism, which impacts more severely on black women and children within South Africa. Liberation theology aims to address these realities. However, with the exception of black theology (*Handelinge NGSK* 1982a, 641; *Skema NGSK* 1982b, 377–380), liberation theology has never been accepted formally within URCSA or its predecessors, the NGSK (*Handelinge NGSK* 1990a, 944–945, 1093; *Skema NGSK* 1990b, 145–148) and NGKA (*Agenda en Handelinge NGKA* 1987, 307–318). From its inception in 1994, the meetings of this church did make references to notions of (racial) unity, reconciliation and justice, based on the *Confession of Belhar*. Given the reality of extreme inequality amongst its members, this is not surprising. This church does see its witness in addressing these realities. The responsibility of the congregations speaks of taking responsibility for spiritual and material needs. Ministry in this church, to

1 When I refer to “black” in this article, I define it in terms of the work of Steve Biko and others as inclusive of Africans, coloured and people of Indian descent.

humanity and the world, is to proclaim God's reconciling and liberating action in and for society (Church Order 1994, 3–4; URCSA Acts 1997, 102). This (again) is laudable.

With regard to the theme and concern in this article, it is noted that in the reports of strategic processes and emerging themes since 1996, presented to its General Synod of 1997, already explicit references are made to "Gender and Generation Equality" (URCSA Acts 1997, 66; see Plaatjies-van Huffel 2011). It was planned to consider possibilities that the composition of permanent committees of the General Synod was to include women and youth, but also, that there would be a "pro-active promotion of the interests" of women. With regard to what was then called "*Vrouediens*" ("Women's service"), it was proposed that the Commission for Restructuring was to organise a meeting of women to look into the possibility of a national structure (URCSA Acts 1997, 68).

It can be observed that despite these noble ideals in these initial stages, nowhere does one find the voices of women themselves advocating for gender justice in these spaces and decisions. Women themselves are invisible. Men dominate—even in proposing solutions to patriarchy. This struggle of women for justice within a church dominated by men, which in terms of an earlier definition is the clear sign of a patriarchal black church, is not merely a reactionary response or pragmatic consideration; it has deeper theological roots which also challenge the dominant forms of men's theology itself.

The proponents of womanist theology, like Jacquelyn Grant, Deloris S. Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas and Katie G. Cannon, amongst many others, were the first who exposed the contradictions within liberation theology, in particular North American black theology. Grant (1979, 418) charged: "Where racism is rejected, sexism has been tolerated." She continues:

In order for liberation theology to be faithful to itself it must hear the critique coming to it from the perspective of the Black women—perhaps the most oppressed of all the oppressed. (Grant 1997, 419)

She shows convincingly the need for what was called at the time the "Third World" and black women to collaborate in attacking not only the racism in (white) feminist theology, but more importantly so, the vestiges of patriarchy in black theology and the black church. Her attention is focused on black theology, as she asks the question: "Where are the black women in black theology?" This invisibility for her, arises from a male-dominated (patriarchal) culture, "which restricts women to certain areas of the society" (Grant 1997, 420). Therefore, she argues that it is important to study the reality of sexism as it functions within the black community and the black church. In a section entitled "The black church and black women" (Grant 1997, 423–427), she then delves into the failure and collusion of the black church within the North American context, in the marginalisation and oppression of black women. While the task of the church for her, in following James Cone, is the proclamation of the reality of divine liberation,

sharing in the liberation struggle and the visible demonstration of the gospel, it has not lived up to this call. She concludes:

One can see the contradictions between the church's language or proclamation of liberation and its action by looking both at the status of Black women in the church as laity and Black women in the ordained ministry of the church. (Grant 1997, 423)

These themes and challenges have been taken up by other womanist theologians in the USA, but also in South Africa by women and men. It resonates with the challenge by Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2008; 2011), as indicated in the opening paragraphs. One can refer to the key work done by the Circle for Concerned African Women, with scholars like Mercy Amba Odoyoye, Isabel Phiri (2010, 454–467), Roxanne Creasy-Jordaan (1995), Christina Landman (2017), Sarojini Nadar (Nadar 2009, 210) and Madipoane Masenya (2012, 205–214), amongst many others. Methodologically, the hermeneutical key is the particular experiences of black women in the foregrounding and unmasking of patriarchal practices and interlocking (and intersectional) systems of exclusion, domination and violence—whether they are at home, in church or in society at large. These scholars, however, go deeper in unmasking the existing (male-dominating) modes of reading scripture, based on a hermeneutics of suspicion (see Masenya 2012, 205–214; Nadar 2009, 210). When the eminent white feminist theologian, Denise Ackerman (1994), introduces an agenda for feminist/womanist theology, she speaks to the need to express the particular context and experiences or life-stories of women as the point of departure. This agenda foregrounds the description and analysis of the specific liberating praxis, where women struggle and side with those discriminated against, violated and oppressed.

Furthermore, the centrality of womanist communities (or circles) is affirmed by organisations like the Circle of Concerned African Women, which defined and centred a new humanity in inclusive and affirming ways. It is argued that these starting points ultimately lead to the challenging of distorted and humiliated images and call for the transformation (liberation and deconstructing) of the church (Ackerman 1994, 198ff.; see also Nel 2005, 69–71). In following womanist theologian Linda Thomas, as adopted by Botha (2003, 105–106), we would understand a dialogical approach where women, or others on their behalf, create knowledge by bringing the life-stories and experiences of women to bear upon the academy. In this instance, and taking the insights from Grant (1989, 9), this paper will now continue to explore one specific women's movement (Christian Women's Movement [CWM] within URCSA), which indeed would include a complex tapestry of events, feelings and struggles (Botha 2003, 107).

The Formation and further Development of CWM within URCSA

Historical Formation of Women's Associations within URCSA

Plaatjies-van Huffel (2008, 87–97; 2011, 105–119) has done extensive work on the historical formation of Christian Women's organisations of which the CWM is one

example. She shows that when URCSA was established, it was one of the ministries that was continued from the former DRMC and DRCA, arising specifically from the merger between the *Christelike Vroue Vereniging* (CVV) (“Christian Women’s Association”) and the *Christelike Sustersbond* (CSB) (“Christian Women’s League”), later called *Christelike Vrouediens* (CVD). Women participated in these with enthusiasm and in many an instance the comments were made that these associations were the real backbone of the church—financially and in terms of passionate action in communities. The *Vrouesendingbond* (VSB) (“Women’s Mission Society”) of the Dutch Reformed Church and the wives of missionaries (Crafford 1982, 206, 242; see Plaatjies-van Huffel 2011, 105–108) established these associations. For the DRMC, it was established in 1930 and the VSB wrote the constitution. The name for the association was initially *Kristelike Sustersvereniging* and in 1932 accepted by the Synod as the *Christelike Sustersbond* (CSB) (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2011, 108).

For the DRCA, the name of the association was initially the *Christelike Naturelle Vrouevereniging*, established in 1948, and it later became known as *uManyano Wabafazi* (“Women’s prayer associations”) or in short *manyanos* (Crafford 1982, 242). Gaitskell (1997, 253–267), refers to Mia Brandel-Syrer, who in the 1950s called these *manyanos* “the oldest, largest and most enduring of cohesive of all African women’s organisations in South Africa.” Gaitskell probes deeper into the formative role of the missionary enterprise on the self-understanding of these movements, and how it restructured gender relations. She explains:

By and large the African Christian women joined groups explicitly as mothers, and, particularly under the influence of missionary supervisors, assumed a vital role in safeguarding female chastity, marital fidelity, and material and domestic responsibilities. (Gaitskell 1997, 255)

She continues:

Although Victorian missionaries in South Africa repeatedly deplored the “slavery” of African women as “beasts of burden” in agricultural production, they agreed with Africans that women’s most important roles were reproductive. Though some stressed preparing girls for domestic service to settlers, none regarded a lifetime of wage labour as desirable for female converts. They saw African girls primarily as future wives of Christians, mothers of Christian children, makers of Christian homes. (Gaitskell 1997, 225)

In this regard, the emphasis on female adolescent “purity” was prominent—i.e. how to assist and support mothers to guide their daughters. Often women involved in the CWM are still referred to as the “mothers.” Gaitskell refers to the fact that in various churches special associations for unmarried girls, the daughters, were established by and under the supervision of the *manyano* associations (Gaitskell 1997, 257). This Victorian vision was the lens through which the mission, as well as the reading of scripture and prayer, i.e. the spirituality of these associations, was shaped. Another key feature of *manyano*

associations is also the unique uniforms for different denominations. This comes initially as a consequence of white mission supervisors' emphasis on uniformity with regard to dress-codes, but the appeal spread like wild-fire amongst especially African *manyano* associations.

From *Manyano* and Associations to Ministries

These initial impulses from the colonial missionary era were interpreted and contextualised in different ways within the various mission churches like the DRMC and DRCA. Hence, while there remained continuity with the past, there was also a discontinuity as the “daughter” (church) became a “mother” and later a vocal activist denouncing her oppression. The merger between the DRMC and DRCA to form URCSA in 1994 did not change much in terms of the inherited set of regulations, which guided the interaction between the associations or its relationship with the various denominational and ecumenical structures. The name initially chosen for the women's association—now called “ministry”—was *Christelike Vrouebediening* (“Women's Ministries, CWM”). It is of interest, though, that from the onset of the new uniting church, the following resolution was considered:

The synod undertakes a process through which the partnership of women and men, the priestly, prophetic and task in relation to the kingdom be considered thoroughly and implemented [sic]. This process will include study, articles in the church newspaper, congregational, presbyterian and synodical conferences, and the establishment of opportunities for women for broad exposure through national and international visits, etc.² (URCSA Acts 1994, 186–187)

It is not clear from the minutes whether this resolution was accepted and also how far the Synod went in implementing this significant resolution and process. However, one finds within the new CWM constitution a clearly worked-out vision statement. The first part of this vision statement is to strive to be dynamic in terms of unity, justice and obedience. The second part of the vision statement provides a roadmap to where the CWM wants to go—that is, it gives shape and direction towards gender equality and where equality is acknowledged. The challenge, however, is to embody this vision on the different levels within which the organisation functions.

A longer mission statement of the CWM was also developed. This statement refers to the following components:

- 1) To worship, meaning to build the faith and spirituality of women to be faithful witnesses for Christ in the church and society, and to oppose that which is in conflict with the Christian faith, within and outside the church of Christ.
- 2) To work in partnership with other ministries, within and with the church in its ecumenical relationships in building a community of believers where the walls

2 Direct translation from the original Afrikaans text.

of gender, race, language and culture are demolished, and equality acknowledged.

A further indication of where the CWM aimed to go, is to look at the objectives they formulated. They are as follows:

- 1) Promote Christian belief and faithful living.
- 2) Pray together and for one another as women and families.
- 3) Encourage and empower women to care for the needy.
- 4) Encourage women to be faithful in formal worship and prayer meetings.
- 5) Encourage women to raise their children in the Christian faith, respect their parents and elders and to desire a Christian marriage.
- 6) Assist the church in caring for creation.

Most of what is articulated in these objectives, on a surface level seems to play into the aforementioned Victorian vision of *manyanos* as the “mothers” responsible for and merely the guardians over domestic matters. This might be a narrowing down of the space for their Christian calling within the church and society. However, in focusing on the third objective, empowerment, which as indicated earlier was introduced at the first synod meetings of the new church in 1994, it raises the intent of the CWM towards encouraging and empowering women towards care for the needy. Did the CWM, after 25 years of existence, live out these objectives? This question was investigated by analysing the different annual reports and resolutions to the meetings and deliberations of General Synods relating to women’s issues.

Empowerment towards Gender Equality

Empowerment can take place on different levels. The matter of representation and participation in the various meetings and assemblies, as indicated earlier, was highlighted already in the first strategic planning processes in 1996. This is also a key theme in the work of Plaatjies-van Huffel (2008; 2011), especially in the years prior to the unification and thereafter. A resolution around gender equality in the church was tabled by the CWM at the General Synod in 2005 (predominantly male delegates), to take this issue further. The decision stated:

We [the CWM] resolve that:

- 1) The women representation in the church council, presbyteries in the regional and general synods be 50%.
- 2) Women be represented in all commissions of the church and in all decision-making structures of the church.
- 3) Women be involved in all unity within our church and the general reformed family.
- 4) Economic justice. (URCSA Acts 2005)

This was a very profound resolution tabled in support of gender equality at all levels of URCSA. This alludes to a key shift in the CWM praxis, or at least commitment regarding gender equality. This also complements the CWM's constitution pertaining to gender equality, but more so, this marks a definite shift away from "docile object" to empowerment. However, the General Synod decided "that women have at least 30% representation and strive for 40% (representation) on all decision-making structures of the church i.e. Church Councils, Presbyteries, Regional Synods, General Synod and all Commissions" (URCSA Acts 2005, 141). The question of how this 30 per cent representation would be achieved was not outlined. From within the CWM itself, it was resolved that the steps to implement these resolutions, were to "participate in identifying and supporting potential women theologian candidates." At least three possibilities of women participation and representation were identified.

Firstly, participation was imagined where women were elected as members of a church council, with the possibility to be nominated towards Presbytery and synodical meetings and leadership positions. Secondly, a woman being a minister would mean direct representation at these meetings. Thirdly, being a professional theologian, employed by one of the training institutions involved in the ministerial formation, would also open up possibilities of representation and full participation. Attending to these and the resolution on the support of theological candidates could potentially address female representation around the number of ministers. The CWM also recognised that this would take years, even decades to get to equal representation in theory. In this regard, theologians like Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Christina Landman, in serving as moderator and actuary on the Moderamen, played historical roles in opening up these spaces.

Another step decided upon by the General Synod was to "engage in extensive Bible studies focusing on economic justice" (URCSA Acts 2005, 141; Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2011). It can be argued that this step is feeding into the empowering of members about the biblical basis for economic justice—especially towards women. Another two steps proposed in working towards economic liberation was "to participate in skills development and educational training so as to enable women to create jobs for themselves" (URCSA Acts, 2005); and developing "a newsletter for information sharing and in so doing also build a database of economic activities among women within the CWM" (URCSA Acts, 2005). These different steps show significant potential in working towards empowering women—economic justice is an important enabler for gender equality.

As indicated earlier, these significant steps did not merely fall from the sky. There was a consultation on gender equality held from 10–11 June 2005, where Rev. James Buys pleaded for viable partnership between women and men at transformational and multiple levels as a means of breaking the chains of gender injustice within the church (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2008, 88). Buys added that "we need to break through leadership patterns of the domination and subjugation model of power that finds uncritical support

and legitimisation in religious and societal constructs” (Buys 2005, in Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2008, 4). This plea was supported by the then CWM chairperson, Mme Dineo Seloana, when she petitioned for bigger participation by women in all decision and policy-making structures in the quest to combat deliberate exclusion of women in these spheres, leaving the church and society impoverished in the process (URCSA Acts 2005, 306). On this, Plaatjies-Van Huffel’s view is that although the surface structures have been shifted at the synods, on the ground essentially nothing has changed (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2008, 90).

During the 2016 CWM General Synod, substantial evidence regarding the empowering of members was reported. It was reported by different regional synods that workshop topics ranged from internal skills development, like the induction of members, report writing and hand-over processes of executive members, leadership skills, administration and budgeting, team building and workshops around the CWM constitution (CWM General Congress Report 2016). These were topics that indicate some degree of success in attempting to empower women *within* the ministry. Addressing topics such as how to induct new members can give women the opportunity to be more than just followers in the ministry, but also to grow as an empowered member who was supported in understanding the functioning, the structure and the organisational culture of the CWM, i.e. exercising one’s gifts and talents.

In the same 2016 report, under the heading “Prayer,” the scripture promoting gender equality, Galatians 3:38, was studied. The report tied the meaning of this scripture to the right of women serving in church councils and various leadership positions. In most regions roadshows, rallies and awareness campaigns were conducted to promote gender equality. Capable women were encouraged to take up positions in church structures. These reports indeed indicate potentially powerful ways of promoting and enhancing equality within URCSA and society.

Under the heading “Service to others” it was reported “that within the CWM regions, congregations worked in partnership with other ministries within and *outside* the church with the aim of building believers where there is no gender, race, language or culture discrimination through praying together for the sick, etc.” (CWM General Congress Report 2016). These initiatives point to the possibility that gender equality was consciously foregrounded in activities.

Another key report highlighted the CWM representation at the All Africa Council of Churches’ Women Conference. This confirms the role of ecumenical exposure to ensure shifts in self-understanding, but also building alliances beyond URCSA. The CWM President, Dr Matlodi Teu, represented CWM and URCSA at the conference. She reported learning much about women leadership. The issues that prepare women leaders to be freed from what was referred to as slavery, were discussed extensively at the conference and delegates were encouraged to take up positions in different church structures with confidence. She noted the significant number of female ministers

delegated to the conference—from churches other than URCSA. The CWM president then became conscious of having female ministers representing their churches and not just women’s ministries. After reporting this to her constituency, the CWM made a recommendation to the General Synod that in future, URCSA should not just send the representative from the CWM, but also female ministers as URCSA representatives to ecumenical gatherings like this Women’s Conference (CWM General Congress Report 2016). However, at a subsequent international ecumenical conference in 2017, the URCSA representatives were the CWM president and two males. This possibly suggests that the General Synod or its functionaries did not take this recommendation, and thus gender equality, seriously.

Has CWM become an Empowering Community of Practice within URCSA?

The aforementioned discussion of the process of formation and structural development, but also its own reports and recommendations to the various General Synods, affirm that indeed references are made to gender justice and gender equality. The CWM itself is on a journey of awareness-raising and education, but also exposure to ecumenical dialogue and biblical engagement, where insights are brought back to its own structures and also to URCSA structures. In this regard, one must also note the General Synod of 2005 as a watershed—perhaps, without overstating the case, a *kairos* moment. Yet, reference is also made to the ongoing need for implementation steps. It remains to be seen whether these processes and implementation steps will be followed through and how this will impact on empowerment as key to full liberation.

One the other hand, the question needs to be asked whether the CWM has shed the Victorian (missionary) vision and self-understanding of the “mothers”—the “docile objects,” which is a limiting and perhaps marginalising space for domestic private morality, the aim of which to form “future wives of Christians, mothers of Christian children, makers of Christian homes.” The answer to this question needs to be found within the continued male-dominated General Synod assemblies, committees and leadership structures (Landman 2017, 168–69) and the language referring to women leaders. The continued reality of male domination in these spaces, but also the evidence of a lack of engagement and implementation of the resolutions with regard to ecumenical representation, suggest that the imagination remains locked into a patriarchy that is indeed contrary to the liberating prophetic voice of the *Confession of Belhar*. In this regard, the voices of women ministers, leaders in the CWM and professional theologians, like those mentioned in this article, as well as what Botha calls “the others on their behalf,” are stepping up in the quest for a building together of a new church.

The question is: How do we go from here?

Conclusions: A Research Agenda for further Engagement

The author was at pains to open this contribution with the limitation that the vision for building a faith community together, between women and men, is daunting. Much has been done over the last 25 years through the voices, publications and leadership from women theologians and leaders in the CWM. This must be affirmed and celebrated. However, this article does provide a limited and perhaps hesitant introductory engagement, starting with the experience and vulnerable, yet resilient voices of women in URCSA and through the CWM. This engagement, however, hopes to open up the possibility of a bigger and longer research journey—alongside and in solidarity with this ministry, ordained ministers and professional theologians. There is a need to probe deeper into the relationship between the colonial missionary history—the colonial memory of these women’s associations in relation to their current functioning within faith communities. Plaatjies-van Huffel’s challenge, namely that the theological-anthropology that undergirds patriarchy has not yet been dismantled, needs to be taken further.

This is a challenge to URCSA, but also to other African Reformed Churches in their quest for continued relevance—to build a new church together, a liberating and healing community for the future. Indeed, we need to work together to build a church where “in conjunction with policy and programme of action the church will ... [be able to] collaborate with civil society, prophetically address injustice and seek witness to the partnership of women and men” (Buys 2005, in Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2008, 4).

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