

Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel: A First Voice on Gender Equity in South Africa

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Abstract

The article contains and expands on the previously unpublished first “Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel Memorial Lecture” that was given by the author on 12 August 2020. This was the day on which Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel, who died on 19 May 2020, was to give her inaugural lecture as the first black woman to become a full professor in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. The article concentrates on the pioneering work Plaatjies-Van Huffel did in her first doctorate, which she submitted in 2003 under the supervision of the author. The question is asked why, after almost 20 years, the proposals for gender equity set forward by Plaatjies-Van Huffel in her 2003 thesis have still not been heard, either by local academia or by the church to which she belonged, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). In answering this question, her involvement in the equally neglected “Policy on Gender Equity,” accepted by URCSA in 1994, and adapted in 2005, will be highlighted.

Keywords: Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel; Policy on Gender Equity; Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA); African women theologians; women leadership abuse



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Introduction

When Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel died on 19 May 2020, she had already been promoted to a full professorship. Thus, she would have become the first black woman to be a full professor at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. She was to give her inaugural lecture on 12 August 2020. Instead, the first “Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel Memorial Lecture” was given on that day by the author at a webinar organised by the Stellenbosch Faculty of Theology. This article expands on the memorial lecture that has now been prepared for publication.

The author’s first serious engagement with Plaatjies-Van Huffel was in the year 1999 when she enrolled for a doctorate at the University of South Africa (Unisa) in Pretoria, South Africa. The author had herself, in 1990, become the first woman Professor in Theology at a South African university. Eventually, Plaatjies-Van Huffel and the author were to become the only two women ever to be elected to the General Synod Executive of URCSA (Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa), that is, at the time of writing.

This information is not given out of haughtiness or hubris but, on the contrary, to serve as a back-drop (Landman 2013; 2019) to Plaatjies-Van Huffel’s outcry in one of her last publications, “A History of Gender Insensitivity in URCSA” (2019) that women have not been heard in the church, and are still suffering gender abuse in positions of leadership.

The author has chosen a discussion of the 2003 thesis of Plaatjies-Van Huffel, entitled “Women in the Theological Anthropology of the Afrikaans Reformed Tradition” (translated) as the topic of her memorial lecture for two reasons. The first reason is the pioneering insights expressed in this thesis; the second reason is the claim of this present article that what she said 20 years ago in a neglected thesis, has not been heard or practised, even today, especially vis-à-vis women in leadership in URCSA.

In order to achieve this aim, the article will be presented in two parts. The first and main part will point to the ground-breaking insights in the thesis against the background of the time in which they were expressed. In the second part the question will be asked how far URCSA has developed over the past 20 years in realising the gender values expressed in Plaatjies-Van Huffel’s 2003 thesis.

Plaatjies-Van Huffel’s Theological Thesis (2003) on Women in the Afrikaans Reformed Tradition

This first part of the article will look at the academic, social and ecclesiastical world in which Plaatjies-Van Huffel produced her thesis in 2003, as well as at the pioneering contents of the thesis itself.

Short Overview of her Life

Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies was born on 15 December 1959 in Prieska, a rural town in the Northern Cape Province in the northwest of South Africa. She was the second of seven daughters, her father being a schoolmaster of a primary school and her mother a housewife. Prieska is the Afrikaans version of “Prieschap”; the name given to the town by the local Korannas. Ironically it means “place of the lost she-goat.” From this rural town of 15 000 inhabitants where there was not a fully developed high school, Plaatjies herself developed by matriculating in 1977 from Bergrivier Senior Secondary School in Wellington in the Western Cape, more than 700 km away from home (Flaendorp 2014, 1). She then graduated from the University of the Western Cape as a teacher, but came back to this university in 1986 to study for ministerial ordination after the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) restored women’s ordination in 1982.

In 1992, 10 years after the DRMC’s synodical decision to restore female ordination, Plaatjies-Van Huffel became the first woman in the Reformed family of churches in South Africa to be ordained. This was in the DRMC congregation of Robertson East in the Western Cape, again about 730 km from where she grew up. Two-thirds of this community of 28 000 people of Robertson were Afrikaans-speaking brown people (called “coloured” in apartheid times). She remained in this congregation for 17 years, in spite of a schism in the congregation when a group of 120 congregants, mainly women, broke away to attend services at another congregation (Flaendorp 2014, 2), not accepting a woman as minister of the Word.

In 1992 then, congregants who themselves were oppressed by the racism of apartheid, would not accept a woman pastor, one who 20 years after her ordination became the first woman Moderator of the General Synod of URCSA (Landman 2019). This was the woman pastor who was to become the first black woman Professor in Theology at the Theological Faculty at the University of Stellenbosch, 28 years after ordination, as noted, an appointment she tragically could not take up because of her untimely death in May 2020.

It is from these prejudiced backgrounds that Plaatjies-Van Huffel registered for doctoral studies in 1999/2000, and reached the first high point in her illustrious academic career when she submitted her first doctorate in 2003. Her thesis was written in Afrikaans and entitled “Vroue in die Teologiese Antropologie in die Afrikaanse Gereformeerde Tradisie” (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2003) at the University of South Africa in Pretoria under the supervision of the author of this article.

What did the ecclesial, social and political world look like in which she researched and finalised this thesis, and how hard was the ground she had to break?

Afrikaans-speaking Women's Worlds at the Turn of the Century

Because of racial privilege, there were great differences between the worlds of white and brown Afrikaans-speaking women during the last quarter of the twentieth century (Brink 1990; Landman 1994; 1995; Scholtz 1982; Van Deventer 1988), the period with which Plaatjies-Van Huffel's thesis mainly deals. However, all Afrikaans-speaking women shared the same fate as far as their gender roles and their struggle for ordination were concerned (Du Toit 1921). And although Plaatjies-Van Huffel focused on the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC, *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk*, NGSK) which in apartheid times was reserved for brown people, women in the "Afrikaans Reformed Tradition" with which her thesis deals, at the time also included women from three white churches, namely the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*, NGK) (Kleynhans 1983), the Netherdutch Reformed Church in Africa (*Nederduitch Hervormde Kerk in Afrika*, NHK) and the Reformed Churches in South Africa (*Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika*, GKSA). I will make no attempt to explain the doctrinal differences between these "sister churches" here, as it would make this article too long. There will only be references to what they have in common with regard to the lack of vision and will to establish women in church leadership.

I will now discuss the academic, social and ecclesiastical world in which the thesis of Plaatjies-Van Huffel was conceived and submitted, and for which she started reading more or less around the year 1999/2000. This discussion is mainly based on my own lived experience and summarised in the following points:

1. At the turn of the century, it was very rare for women to submit doctorates in theology at South African universities. Though I only had access to the relevant data bases of the University of South Africa, they should reflect the situation country-wide. In the decade from 1995 to 2004—the period in which Plaatjies-Van Huffel submitted her thesis—only 11 women obtained doctorates from Unisa's Theological Faculty. She herself was (in 2003) the first to come from the DRMC (that is, the "brown" Dutch Reformed Mission Church), and the first ordained woman in the local Dutch Reformed Church family. In the past 25 years (1995–2000) almost 400 doctorates were obtained in theology and religion from Unisa, of which fewer than 60 (that is 15%) were by women. Also, a majority of this 15% did their doctorates in Science of Religion and not in Theology.
2. At the time when Plaatjies-Van Huffel obtained her doctorate (2003), it was not only rare, but actually unheard of that somebody in South Africa would write a thesis in theology on women's studies. Women's studies, or theological feminism as it was called in Europe and the USA, were not considered to be an academic subject or theme in South Africa at all. Prof Simon Maimela, the first black professor appointed at Unisa outside of African languages (Landman 2010), started teaching an honours course on Feminist Theology in Systematic Theology at Unisa in 1982, with famous students such as Denise Ackermann (1990) and Henry Keane (1999) enrolling in the first year that it was taught.

This only happened after a huge struggle with the university to teach liberation theologies. In 1984, Prof Willem Vorster hosted the first conference on theological feminism in South Africa within the Institute for Theological Research at Unisa from which a book ensued, entitled *Sexism and Feminism in Theological Perspective* (Vorster 1984). However, the conference and the book did nothing more than reveal that there were hardly any women theologians in South Africa.

It would, therefore, be safe to say that, in spite of the efforts mentioned, at the time that Plaatjies-Van Huffel started reading for her doctorate, theological women's studies were not an actively researched subject in South Africa, and was actually not even regarded as an academic subject. There were a few women who received doctorates in theology in the last two decades of the previous century, and although this too was rare, they did not receive their doctorates in the field of women's studies. The author of this article herself graduated in 1987 with a thesis in church history and church polity entitled "The use of Scripture in the *Tractatus de regia potestate et sacerdotali dignitate* of Hugo Floriacensis" (translated from Afrikaans) (Landman 1987) at Unisa, while Yolande Dreyer obtained her doctorate in 2000 from the University of Pretoria with a thesis entitled "The Institutionalisation of Authority and Titles used for Jesus" (Dreyer 2000). Denise Ackermann was an exception who received a doctorate in theological feminism from the University of the Western Cape in 1990, entitled "Liberating praxis and the Black Sash: A Feminist Theological perspective" (Ackermann 1990). However, she fell outside of the Afrikaans Reformed tradition that is discussed here.

In short, then, though there were a few South African women from the Afrikaans Reformed tradition who had obtained their doctorates before Plaatjies-Van Huffel, their theses did not deal with theological women's issues. In the Afrikaans Reformed tradition Plaatjies-Van Huffel's was the first to do so.

3. During the period under discussion, discourses on race took priority over gender. The National Conference of Church Leaders in South Africa is an appropriate example. It was held in November 1990 in Rustenburg, now in the North West Province, to discuss the situation in apartheid South Africa, but no time was allocated to women's voices. After radical complaints from women, a session was set aside for them, during which the women in protest remained silent. Eventually a short paragraph (2.8) was included in the Rustenburg Declaration in which the male leaders confessed that "limiting the role and ministry of women ... we have impoverished the Church." When the author spoke to some of the male leaders afterwards, she found them angry that the women had "wasted the time of the Conference," diverting attention away from the really important issue of race. At the other end of the spectrum the Dutch Reformed Church restored women's ordination to the ministry in 1990, and was then accused of using women's ordination to divert attention from their racial policies. The first woman in the DRC to be ordained was Gretha Heymans

(Bloemfontein Student Church) and that happened only five years later, in 1995. Where does that leave our argument? During the 1990s, as well as before and after that—race was the main discourse and gender was treated as a secondary nuisance. With her thesis in 2003, Plaatjies-Van Huffel made a strong effort to place race and gender on par with one another. However, her gender voice was side-lined for many years, even until today.

4. Furthermore, and it is not to be taken lightly, during the 1990s and well into the 21st century, Afrikaans-speaking women were overdosed with the so-called “pink books” (*pienk boekies*). These are called thus because they almost always have pink roses on the cover. They are written by local lay Afrikaans women, making the white male-headed Christian publication houses rich, and keeping women’s lives private and pink. The ideal for women portrayed in these books is to be subordinate and functional, women being encouraged to stay functional to their husbands and church while adhering to a pink type of silenced subordination as the way God wants it. Women who had aspirations outside of these divine ideals are depicted as freaks and “lesbians,” and pink women are encouraged to isolate them. The influence of this image of the “ideal Christian woman” during the time when Plaatjies-Van Huffel prepared for her thesis should not be underestimated.
5. During the time under discussion there were hardly any women ordained. In 1982 the DRMC decided to restore women to the ministry of the Word, but it took another decade before a woman was actually ordained in this church, now URCSA. In the decade between 1992, when Plaatjies-Van Huffel was ordained, and 2002, only two more women were ordained in URCSA. Plaatjies-Van Huffel herself became the first woman in URCSA to be elected to the leadership of a regional synod when, in 2002, she became the Actuarij of the Cape Synod. Furthermore, it was 20 years after her ordination in 1992 that Plaatjies-Van Huffel became the first woman Moderator of the General Synod of URCSA. To date—almost 30 years after her 1992 ordination—there were only two women chosen for the General Synod leadership in URCSA, those being Plaatjies-Van Huffel herself, and the author.
6. At the time, there were hardly any women role models as far as teaching theology in South Africa was concerned. The only women from the Afrikaans Reformed tradition who were teaching theology back then were the author, teaching church history and polity at Unisa since 1980; Yolande Dreyer teaching in practical theology at the University of Pretoria since 2000; and Elna Mouton teaching New Testament at Stellenbosch in 2000. It was not until 2010 that Plaatjies-Van Huffel was offered a teaching post in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch—in church history and polity.

Seen against this background, it was in itself a brave decision of Plaatjies-Van Huffel to choose a woman as a promoter for her doctorate.

Insights Presented in the Thesis of Plaatjies-Van Huffel

In a time, therefore, when theological women's studies were not an academic topic, and when there were no women in leadership in the Afrikaans Reformed tradition, Plaatjies-Van Huffel wrote a thesis that could have changed academia and ecclesia, if anyone was listening to what she was saying.

The most significant contributions of Plaatjies-Van Huffel's thesis, using her post-doctoral article "Women in the Theological Anthropology of the Afrikaans Reformed tradition" (Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Landman 2005) as reference, are as follows:

1. The first point has to do with the methodology Plaatjies-Van Huffel used in analysing and interpreting how the Afrikaans Reformed tradition stylised women in their synodical decisions.

During the 1990s, the preferred method used in theological feminism in Western Europe and the United States of America was the Feminist Standpoint Theory. FST rests on two premises, *essentialism* and *epistemological privilege*. "Essentialism" views men and women to be essentially different from one another. Used in feminism, it aims at correcting the view that men are essentially stronger, wiser and less hysterical than women, but claiming that women are indeed in terms of endurance, caretaking and wisdom—and a myriad of other essential characteristics—superior to men. "Epistemological privilege" claims that only women can talk, write, publish and research on women, because of the knowledge only women can have based on their lived experience.

Plaatjies-Van Huffel took a different methodological road. It is probably because of her that theological women studies in South Africa never really developed a hard and dividing academic voice. When studying the theological anthropology of the Afrikaans Reformed tradition, she used post-structuralism and Foucauldian deconstruction to indicate how women in this tradition were held captive from 1924–2002 in specific roles in the church, which were formed by patriarchal language to which there was no alternative in the tradition under discussion.

2. Building on these methodological insights, Plaatjies-Van Huffel set out to create a new language to speak about women—not only in the church but in academia too. Her thesis itself establishes women's studies as an academic enterprise, undermining the then current notion that women's studies were stories from suburbia and not an academic enterprise.
3. Indeed, the thesis, by its very nature, challenged dominant discourses about women in church, and established women as agents with a voice, and not only as those spoken about.
4. In all this she was sensitive to the use of the Bible in male discourses. Eventually she dismantled male power in the church by demonstrating that it was not

necessarily truly biblical—or the truth. Male power was not neutral but self-interested. And a fundamentalist way of dealing with the Bible vis-à-vis women does not lead to truth. Nor was it innocent. Not as a New Testament scholar but as a church historian, Plaatjies-Van Huffel highlighted the enormous negative influence this way of interpreting the Bible had on the lives of women in the church. Such a thing had never been done from within the Afrikaans Reformed tradition before.

5. Plaatjies-Van Huffel also challenged women to revisit their own roles, especially in the way they were stylised in the women’s ministries of those times. That too, was rare at that time.
6. Plaatjies-Van Huffel undermined the church’s belief that women’s roles were biologically and divinely ordained, not in an FST way, but in a “pastoral post-structural” way, if something like that can exist.
7. Finally, her thesis called on and invited women to stand together in deconstructing harmful discourses about Christian women, providing the following guidelines:
 - Not only the lives, but also the histories of women should be deconstructed and women’s lives be rescoped as that of agency.
 - A dualistic, patriarchal and androcentric anthropology should be shifted to a relational and transformative anthropology in which everybody’s humanity should be acknowledged, independent of race, gender or class.
 - Instead of a Western dualism based on gender, the church should move towards a holistic integration of body and mind.
 - Biological essentialism should be replaced with a non-gendered form of freedom.
 - Universal truths about men and women should be deconstructed, if not destroyed.
 - Women’s experience is an important point of departure, but not the only one. Instead of the epistemological privilege of women, there is an invitation to responsibility, inviting men to change and publish, that is, to contribute to the body of knowledge on women’s deconstructed roles in the church.
 - Power relations in the church and society should move to partnership relationships that are non-dualistic and non-hierarchical.
 - New and inclusive metaphors for God should be created.
 - The Bible should be reread, not only to point to the few exceptional women who made it into the Bible, but also to expose the patriarchal discourses that feed the main narratives in the Bible.

- Finally, the Afrikaans Reformed tradition is invited to restructure itself according to these four values: inclusivity, holism, relationality, and transformation.

What Plaatjies-Van Huffel said was remarkable, and it was even more remarkable in the times in which she said it. We shall now continue to evaluate URCSA's response to Plaatjies-Van Huffel's four values of gender equity over the past 20 years.

Evaluation of URCSA's Response to Plaatjies-Van Huffel's Values for Gender Equity

The previous section concluded with the four values of gender equity put forward by Plaatjies-Van Huffel in her 2003 thesis, namely inclusivity, holism, relationality, and transformation. In this section we shall evaluate how URCSA has responded to these values for the past almost 20 years, using Plaatjies-Van Huffel's own evaluation in the very last article she published before her death in May 2020. The article is entitled "A History of Gender Insensitivity in URCSA" (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2019) and was delivered at the University of the Free State on 13 April 2019 (a year before her death), at a seminar "URCSA 25 years" celebrating URCSA's 25 years of existence. It was published later in 2019 in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (45.3) with 16 of the other academic papers on URCSA's 25 year history delivered at this seminar. Plaatjies-Van Huffel's article is autoethnographic, that is, telling the story of her journey with URCSA from her own lived experience, thereby making the article an important source for evaluating URCSA's response to her life's work.

It is the author's contention that the evaluation of these values of gender equity can be done by asking URCSA the following four questions, and answering them from Plaatjies-Van Huffel's article and the author's lived experience:

Exploring the Dialogical Spaces between Male and Female Theologically (Relationality)

The first question is whether URCSA has indeed, in the past 20 years, explored the dialogical spaces between male and female theologically in order to come to a varied notion of the relationship between men and women in the church in terms of the Church Order and the Bible, where previously this relationship was practised and defended only as binary.

In her 2003 thesis, Plaatjies-Van Huffel opted not for the radicalised binary approach of the Feminist Standpoint Theory that left men and women in opposing corners, but for deconstructing the male-female relationship to such an extent that gender would not have to play a role in elections and appointments in the church at all. She even, and especially, deconstructed an anti-man approach, even when it was needed to level the playing field in the church.

In 2019, however, Plaatjies-Van Huffel was forced to write that “(t)he ordination of women in URCSA only brought about a few modifications of the image of the status of the minister of the Word, **but essentially, nothing has changed in the patriarchal anthropology of URCSA**” [own emphasis] (2019, 2).

Ironically, the space for dialogue between men and women was there, available, created even long before Plaatjies-Van Huffel wrote her thesis in 2003, in the Policy on Gender Equity (Acta General Synod 1994/2005a). Reflecting on this Policy in 2019, calling it “a milestone never embraced,” Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2019, 7) wrote as follows:

URCSA has a gender policy, but the church at large is in total oblivion that such a policy exists. Already at the conception of URCSA in 1994, a gender policy was adopted. This policy was the result of deep reflection during the 1980s in the DRMC on the World Alliance of Reformed Churches’ (WARC) programme regarding the partnership between men and women.

In 1994, she pointed out (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2019, 7), URCSA gave in its Gender Policy (in 2005 amended as its Policy on Gender Equity) (Acta General Synod 2005a) the following guidelines for dialogue between male and female in the church:

1. The dismantling of all partitions that still separate women and men within the church.
2. To listen afresh to the biblical evidence regarding the partnership of men and women.
3. The recognition of the competencies of women for the broader ecclesiastical service, and the consequent involvement of women in leadership positions and positions of authority on all levels of the church. (*Skema van Werksaamhede NGSK 1994, A15/4*)

However, instead of these principles having been used for male-female dialogue, the author herself was unaware of the existence of this policy until recently. Enquiring about it from past and present leaderships achieved nothing. It was as if the Policy on Gender Equity had been obliterated from the memory of the church. The author traced it to the General Synod Acta of 2005, Decision 71 on pages 125 and 126. It was accompanied by an “Open Letter submitted by Klippiess Kritzinger to the Women of URCSA” (GS ACTA 2005b, 159, 160), which was read at the synod by Dr Allan Boesak. This is a beautiful letter of apology, *inter alia*, “For having worked against reconciliation by alienating women from significant participation in leadership positions and ministerial formation” and committed themselves “to make restitution for this wrong and to build a new church with you—in which you are free to exercise all your gifts and ministries and **in which we develop an equal partnership** to the glory of God [own emphasis].”

On being asked (by email on 28 January 2021), Boesak himself could not remember the letter, and consequently also not who was involved in writing it. However, in the same year Allan Boesak published a book in Afrikaans containing six liberative Bible studies

on women, *Die Vlugh van God's Verbeelding: Bybelverhale van die Onderkant* (The Flight of God's Imagination, Boesak 2005). During a time when the "pink books" were reigning, Boesak's book was not widely read and exercised little influence on women's church and everyday lives. More than a decade passed before it received recognition (see Landman 2017), and he himself published parts of it in English in "Children of the Waters of Maribah: Black Liberation Theology, the Miriamic Tradition, and the Challenges of 21st Century Empire" (Boesak 2019).

Boesak left URCSA after 2008 because of the General Synod's reluctance to deal with the gay issue by implementing the values of the Belhar Confession. Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2019, 9) lamented that, in gender equity too, the Belhar Confession was ignored when she wrote in her 2019 article "URCSA's ignorance of the *Policy on Gender Equity* and of the implicit principles embedded in the *Belhar Confession*, ultimately led to an uncritical tolerance of power struggles between men and women and identity politics in URCSA."

Creating a Contra-culture (Transformation)

Secondly, the church is to be evaluated by asking them whether they were indeed able to establish a contra-culture in the church. Could the church, during the past 20 years, lay the foundation for a contra-culture against patriarchy, hierarchy, fundamentalism, sexism, and androcentrism? Were they able to establish a contra-culture in the church that is multi-dimensional, both epistemologically and socially?

The answer is of course a resounding "no" within the irony pointed out by Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2019, 2) that "(t)he Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa hails that women are being ordained in URCSA, are taking up leadership positions in the church, are representing URCSA in the ecumenical world, and are lecturing at prestigious universities," but she herself was after one term as Moderator of the General Synod removed and, after what she called "manipulating processes of elections" (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2019, 3), replaced by a man. At the same time, a member of this male power group tried to publish an academic article in which he claimed that the women who had been elected to the General Synod were, like women in the leadership of the ANC, only elected on the basis of their gender and not of their skills. The article was removed from publication after the reviewers rejected the article and its sexist claims.

"As the first ordained woman, feminist scholar in URCSA," Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2019, 2) writes that she "has felt on more than one occasion the full brunt of overt and covert forms of gender insensitivity in URCSA." She particularly lamented the fact that because of her replacement as Moderator of the General Synod she was *per se* not delegated to international ecumenical movements anymore, such as the World Communion of Reformed Churches, where she used to play a leading role in gender justice programmes.

Eventually she writes: “I claim that URCSA is not a safe space for ordained women. URCSA pays no heed to the personal sacrifices that most of these pioneering women in URCSA have endured in order to retain the status as ordained women” (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2019, 3).

The author supports this claim from her own lived experience. One example is a General Synodical Executive meeting—held as recently as 20 January 2021—where the author fought for an ordained woman to be delegated to a specific ecumenical meeting, but was told in harsh, sexist language that a woman from the CWM (Christian Women’s Ministries), the church’s women’s ministry that does not cater for ordained women, would be sent.

Theologising Gender Sensitively (Inclusivity)

A third and important question to ask the church is whether it has effected an inclusive and gender sensitive theology to inform the minds of its members and the practices of its congregations, presbyteries and synods.

Plaatjies-Van Huffel had never written an inclusive theology, since she was not a Systematic Theologian. She focused on her fields of expertise, which are inclusivity in the Church Order and Regulations, the tabling of inclusive policies, such as the Policy on Gender Equity referred to in the above, and effecting inclusive language in church liturgies and formulations (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2019, 4–10).

As her supervisor turned into her “student,” the author would propose that at least the following be taken into account to mould such a theology based on the four Plaatjies-Van Huffel criteria for gender equality: transformation, inclusivity, relationality, and holism:

- (a) Transformation: Acknowledging women’s co-leadership in transforming inequality to equality as the main discourse in the dialogical spaces between science, religious belief and cultural taboos, embodying equality as a multi-dimensional contra-culture in ecclesiastical spaces.
- (b) Inclusivity: Acknowledging women’s indigenous knowledge and preferred ways of expressing their belief as basis for a wise and life-giving theology that emerges from a non-reductionist causality as far as gender is concerned.
- (c) Relationality: Acknowledging the needs of women as they have expressed them in their stories of sexual vulnerability, as the basis for exploring the dialogical spaces between male and female, and establishing healthy ecclesiastical practices that both defy and include gender.
- (d) Holism: Acknowledging women as caretakers in creating paths towards healing where gender was the cause of division.

Effecting Healing (Holism)

The final question to ask the church is, of course, whether it has brought healing into the church. Has it created wholeness in a gendered society and has it been able to establish partnership between genders?

As far as the Afrikaans-speaking churches of the Reformed Tradition in South Africa are concerned, with which Plaatjies-Van Huffel dealt in her 2003 thesis, the picture does not look like one of wholesomeness. The first generation of women ministers and theologians are retiring or have died. There is a second generation, but licensed women are experiencing problems in being called or elected to leadership positions to such an extent that one wonders what the third generation will look like:

- The Nederduits Hervormde Kerk (which ordained women first) has seven fulltime women ministers, 19 tentmakers, seven waiting to be called, and soon only one woman lecturing at a university.
- The DRC has (out of 218 licensed and ordained women), 83 fulltime women ministers (about a third), and 24 tentmakers—with at least 40 women who are waiting for calls.
- URCSA has 30 ordained women ministers, and three of them have already left the church. With Plaatjies-Van Huffel and the author having left, or about to leave, there will be no lecturers from this church teaching theology at a university, and none serving on the General Synod Executive.
- The Gereformeerde Kerke in Suider-Afrika still does not ordain women (at the time of writing).

Conclusion

Analysis of the 2003 thesis of Plaatjies-Van Huffel shows its insights into an ecclesiastical practice that would be supported by a theological anthropology that is based on the four values of inclusivity, holism, relationality, and transformation.

In the second part of the article, four questions were asked to “the church” about its growth in gender sensitivity. These questions are derived from Plaatjies-Van Huffel’s (2019) own descriptions of her lived experiences of gender insensitivity in the church in the almost 20 years since she finished her 2003 doctoral thesis. It was found that the church(es) she addressed showed little development in: 1) exploring dialogue between male and female in spite of an available Policy on Gender Equity; 2) establishing a contra-culture to undermine patriarchy, especially in leadership; 3) developing theological gender sensitivity; and 4) effecting healing and wholeness in church and society.

Plaatjies-Van Huffel's first thesis of 2003, the one discussed here, was a healing document, a blueprint for healing between men and women. This too, I am afraid, was a milestone never embraced.

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