



Theological analysis of women's roles in black reformed churches of Soutpansberg



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The prohibition on women leading worship services and serving as elders, deacons and reverends in many black reformed churches in the Synod Soutpansberg remains a major concern. Adherence to traditional gender standards not only perpetuates gender disparities but also limits women's full participation and contributions inside the church. It is critical to address this issue in order to foster a more inclusive and egalitarian church culture. This scholarly inquiry tries to call into question the existing restrictions and redefine the roles given to genders within these religions by looking at the theological, cultural, and historical roots that support these gender-based exclusions. The inspiration for this research stems from the need to align church activities with current ideas about gender equality and justice. This study seeks to empower women and improve the spiritual and communal life of the church by thoroughly examining present gender roles and proposing alternative frameworks for inclusion, such as allowing women to lead worship services and serve as elders, deacons and reverends. The study employed a literary study, which comprised a thorough review of existing literature on gender roles in religious settings. This entailed examining church documents that define contemporary practices and beliefs, and theological writings that provide theological support for these practices.

Contribution: This study has enormous implications as it has the ability to influence the gender dynamics in the black reformed churches of the Synod Soutpansberg. This work contributes significantly to the field of gender studies in religion by challenging established boundaries and pushing for more inclusive practices.

Keywords: reimagining women's; gender roles; black reformed churches; Synod Soutpansberg; traditional boundaries.

Introduction

For an extended period, various religious institutions have deliberated women's leadership roles from theological, cultural and social viewpoints. Numerous black reformed churches within the Synod Soutpansberg continue to prohibit women from occupying the positions of elder, deacon and reverend. These actions are rooted in historical and spiritual contexts; however, they also illustrate a wider landscape of gender inequity in society. By excluding women, the church inhibits their contributions and reinforces the ecclesiastical hierarchy, so contradicting its assertions of equity and inclusivity. This study aims to conceptualise women's leadership in these churches by examining the theological, cultural and historical factors contributing to gender exclusion. The study analyses contemporary ecclesiastical documents and theological literature to contest entrenched gender ideologies and propose a framework for women's complete participation in church leadership. This study is crucial as it will aid churches in attaining gender equality and enhancing inclusivity.

Background

Because of apartheid, the Reformed Church in South Africa (RCSA) organised four separate Synods in 1963: coloureds, Sotho, Pedi, isiXhosa and Zulu speakers, Venda and Tsonga speakers and white individuals. The Southland Synod was designated for individuals of coloured descent. The Midlands Synod catered to speakers of Sotho, Pedi, isiXhosa and Zulu. The Soutpansberg Synod welcomed speakers of Venda and Tsonga. The Potchefstroom Synod was exclusively for white individuals (Ramantswana 2015:1; Zgambo 2018:77–78). The Synods convened to establish the General Synod, which convened during the apartheid era. The General Synod operated throughout that time, convening six sessions in 1965, 1975, 1980, 1984, 1988 and 1992, until becoming dormant (Ramantswana 2015:1). The current history illustrates the growth, maturation and decline of black reformed

churches in South Africa. Kim (2019:307–311) asserts that the economic nature of the period involved the white Synod to provide 'sustentatie' for the black Synods and to compensate black preachers. From 1963 until 1979, all groups of black ministers received their stipends from the white Synod, rendering them financially independent from their local congregations. The economic reliance of the black reformed churches on apartheid constrained their capacity to combat apartheid practices. Baloyi (2016:1) asserts that black churches could not articulate their doctrine or advocate for change because of the potential loss of financing, which rendered them financially dependent. This dependence contributed to the current state of the black reformed churches as the black church could not advocate for gender roles, as in the black communities, women were playing an important role.

Resolutions of Synod Soutpansberg about women in office

The Synods of Midlands, Potchefstroom and Soutpansberg convened on 10 July 2003, 09 September 2004 and 06 September 2005, in accordance with Article 48 of the Church Order regarding ecclesiastical matters that include women in office. The aforementioned deputies representing three Synods reported to the GKSA Synod in 2006 and issued the subsequent resolution:

Possible contradictory/differing decisions of the present National Synods and other assemblies, and the necessity or not to come to an agreement on these before new assemblies meet, for instance, decisions about women in office. The new assemblies (Regional Classes, Regional Synods and the General Synod) will appoint Deputies to establish whether there are contradictory/ conflicting decisions. These Deputies must advise the assembly how best to rectify those decisions in a church orderly way. (ACTA 2006:389–390)

Since 2006–2011 Synod Soutpansberg, never took other resolution about women in office, the deputies of Article 48 of the Church Order have persistently deliberated the issues raised until 2012 when they submitted a report to the Synod Soutpansberg, which included an addendum 4 addressing the subsequent response to Synod Potchefstroom, accepted as the Synod's position, see RCSASNS (2012), where the following resolution was taken:

It is concerned with Women in church office and other conflicting decisions of the Synods. In the period 2003 to 2006, the article 48 deputies, in conjunction with the deputies of Midlands and Soutpansberg Synod, examined this matter and reported about it to Synod 2006. We believe that the above-mentioned Synod effectively addressed this matter from a pure church polity approach. The decision was that the Possible contradictory/ differing decisions of the present National Synods and other assemblies, and the necessity or not to come to an agreement on these before new assemblies meet, for instance, decisions about women in office, should be identified by the respective ecclesiastical assemblies dealt with in an ordinary ecclesiastical manner according to church order so that matters can be rectified and brought in order, if necessary. (p. 55)

Since 2012, Synod Soutpansberg has not addressed the issue of women in office despite its resolution indicating that they

would do so if required. This is evident in the 2007 minutes, where the Deputies' 48 Church order stated that they did not meet with Synod Potchefstroom because of an agenda. The decision is as follows.

Your deputies could not meet with Potchefstroom. When they wrote us an email inviting us to a meeting, we found out that the agenda was to arrange Clasisis. We indicated that we had no mandate to attend this meeting as we had no mandate to arrange Clasisis. (RCSASNS 2007:31, author's own translation)

In 2008, Synod Soutpansberg deputies failed to meet with Synod Potchefstroom representatives. The following is the record of the decision:

Your deputies could not meet with Potchefstroom deputies. Your deputies are still standing on the same commitment that Synod has taken on the issue of restructuring. (RCSASNS 2008:24, author's translation)

On 13 August 2009, the Synod Soutpansberg deputies met with Potchefstroom representatives. The meeting did not cover the subject of women in office (RCSASNS 2010:10). In the 2011 report of deputies of Article 48 Church Order, when they sent the report to the Synod Soutpansberg, they did not tackle the issue of women in office; instead, they focused on theological education, reconciliation and the ecclesiastical links between GKSA and Soutpansberg (RCSASNS 2011:18–19). Since then, Synod Soutpansberg has never deliberated about the issue of women in office.

Critical analysis of Synod Soutpansberg's position on women in office

The resolution of Synod Soutpansberg regarding women in office reveals a pattern of deliberate inaction that effectively maintains the status quo of excluding women from leadership positions. By examining the language and subsequent actions (or lack thereof) following their 2006 and 2012 resolutions, we can observe several key patterns. In 2006, the Synod deliberately chose not to address the problem directly, but to defer it for another 5 years by submitting it to a procedure in which 'deputies will decide if and to what degree there are competing decisions'. This 'bureaucratic' epistemology enabled them to acknowledge the problem without agreeing or disagreeing. The essential term in their 2012 resolution, 'if necessary', reveals their genuine viewpoint. The phrase 'rectified and restored in order, if required' implies a belief that women's exclusion from office does not need to be addressed. Both resolutions focus on procedural problems ('church orderly way', 'regular ecclesiastical style') rather than grappling with theological and ethical questions about gender and church leadership. The fact that Synod Soutpansberg has not taken any additional action on the topic since 2012 is very noteworthy. The prolonged quiet has effectively validated the current exclusionary system. The Synod's position exemplifies passive resistance to female equality in office. Women's ordination, together with procedural focus, perpetuates ancient forms of exclusion without accepting responsibility for them in contemporary society. This contrasts with other reformed churches in the region that have been moving towards greater inclusion, as

discussed in this report. The Synod's lack of response may indicate that they do not view women's exclusion from church offices as an issue despite rising evidence of theological reasons for their inclusion and important contribution within communities of faith.

Methods

This study will utilise literary studies to analyse gender roles within the religious domain. The research will utilise the black reformed churches in the Synod Soutpansberg as a case study. This approach aims to analyse many pertinent materials to investigate the theological, cultural and historical factors affecting women's leadership in these churches. The study aims to elucidate intricate phenomena through several academic sources. This study will analyse ecclesiastical documents, including policies, theological declarations, historical records and minutes from Synod meetings. Davis (2019:77) has illustrated how ecclesiastical policies and doctrinal interpretations sustain patriarchal structures. These texts often serve as the primary means of promoting masculine power. Recent literature, particularly Masenya (2023:405), illustrates how texts enshrine gender constraints as a form of heavenly escapism. The research will analyse these documents to trace the progression of events and pinpoint areas for reform. This study examines theological writings that illuminate the ideological systems governing gender roles. The role of Judge (2020) in Horrell (2020) illustrates that scriptural interpretation and cultural norms sustain discriminatory behaviours, as highlighted by contemporary research. This research will critically analyse these texts to evaluate current procedures for theological justification and explore inclusive and equitable approaches that foster equality. It also examines contemporary literature on gender, theology and social justice, including Patel Cornish (2022) analysis of sustainable development goal (SDG) 5 and gender equality. Integrating various viewpoints will yield ideas for fostering inclusive leadership among the Synod Soutpansberg congregations.

Theological foundations and contemporary applications in African reformed churches

The emphasis on gender roles in black reformed churches of the Synod Soutpansberg must engage critically with the form of 'reformed ecclesiology' that originated from the Protestant Reformation. Though reformed ecclesiology upholds ideals such as the priesthood of all believers, the authority of scripture and the sovereignty of God, these theological tenets have been co-opted in such a way to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies and constrain women from leadership roles within their church communities. The article explores both traditional and progressive understandings of reformed ecclesiology and how both expressions have influenced the domesticating and formation of gender roles in black reformed churches in South Africa. Moreover, all Christians, regardless of gender or clerical status, possess direct access to God based on the principle of the priesthood of all believers. Leeman (2019:122–123) contends that this concept exemplifies

God's universal grace. Consequently, every believer possesses equal access to God and the need to serve.

Shih (2004:17) emphasised that John Calvin held diverse perspectives on *imago Dei*, indicating that humans are created in God's image and hence bear responsibilities for stewardship and ministry. Calvin maintained that the entire body of Christ bore equal accountability to God. However, numerous religious organisations often marginalise women, excluding them from prominent leadership roles within the religion. The notion of exclusion suggests a theological commitment that was not relevant to the other culture. Obstacles in our present surroundings are necessary for us to comprehend the priesthood of all believers. Observing women assume complete ministerial roles as the church maintains its identity (Leeman 2019:124). The exclusion of women from leadership debates undermines the theology of equitable access. A deficiency of diversity diminishes the profundity of church ministry.

The distinction between instructing and exercising the priesthood of all Christians should provoke apprehensions over the church's mission and legitimacy. If the church prohibits women from assuming leadership roles, it will be incapable of effectively confronting contemporary social and spiritual issues like gender-based violence and women's empowerment. Studies on church inclusivity indicate that empowering individuals irrespective of gender enhances the church's capacity to serve various communities and effectuate change (Bosch 1991:37). Because of these grounds, the doctrine of the priesthood of all Christians is increasingly gaining acceptance in black reformed churches and other theological groups.

For example, Uniting Reformed Church South Africa, established in 1994 by the amalgamation of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, has achieved notable progress in gender inclusion. The first female pastor of Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa (URCSA) was ordained in 2005, as noted by Flaendorp (2014:53–54), and subsequently served as one of the presidents of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. Women's Ministry frameworks have been established with significant impact on church governance. In 1986, the URCSA composed the Confession of Belhar largely as a response to apartheid, which in recent decades has been examined through the perspective of addressing multiple injustices against gender and sexual minorities, emphasising solidarity, healing and justice for everyone.

Furthermore, the Reformed Church of Zimbabwe has experienced two significant shifts in its perspective on women's roles. In 1992, the church commenced permitting the election of women as deacons. In 2001, women were allowed to serve as church elders. In 2017, following comprehensive theological deliberations about the priesthood of all Christians, the church appointed women as ministers (Chimhanda 2013:3–4). The Women's Fellowship agencies

have ardently advocated for gender equality inside the church and a catalyst for societal gender equality. In addition, the Reformed Church of Zambia is grounded in reformed theology, similar to the churches of the Synod Soutpansberg, and has implemented various reforms. The church commenced the ordination of women as elders in 2000. By 2012, the church commenced ordaining several women as ministers, following a theological reassessment of the priesthood of all believers that prompted this shift. The church established gender desks in all presbyteries to advance women's leadership (Hendriks 2012).

However, the Bible holds paramount significance for reformed Christians:

And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures Day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. (Acts 17:11)

This is referred to as scriptural authority. This authority dictates the church's doctrine, administration, and liturgy (Prevett 2021:59). Individuals and collectives understand scripture according to their hermeneutics, which affects the application of biblical principles across cultures and across history. Numerous ecclesiastical traditions, especially those originating from patriarchal societies, have historically endorsed male leadership and gender norms. The Reformed Church in South Africa (GKSA) retains male-only ordination practices and limits women's voting rights in specific ecclesiastical topics (Baloyi 2010:5; Strauss 2015). Critics have condemned the selective use of scripture to endorse oppression and socioeconomic structures that neglect justice, equality and liberation. Nosike, Chianumba and Nweke (2024:101) assert that we cannot expect inclusion and equity to emerge from corporeal approaches rooted in the gospel or similar ideologies. A significant difficulty in contemporary biblical interpretation is the necessity to transcend patriarchal readings that have influenced ecclesiastical activities. Feminist theology, postcolonial theology and liberation theology have each created significant domains of theological investigation that analyse scripture to uncover motifs and narratives advocating for the marginalised and the pursuit of justice for all individuals. Nosike et al. (2024) advocate for justice through interpretive methodologies. The biblical mandate guiding their attitude is 'Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God' (Mi 6:8). These methodologies invite readers to reflect on the cultural and historical settings of biblical texts and their contemporary applications. The church may confront various social issues, including gender inequality, poverty, injustice and racism.

Hermeneutical implications for Synod Soutpansberg's position

There has been a pervasive anti-feminist mentality in the Synod Soutpansberg because they are unaware of women in office, indicating a certain hermeneutic that must be critically examined. Despite asserting biblical integrity, is the Synod

guilty of selectively emphasising certain aspects of scripture? The Synod prioritises biblical texts that limit women's duties (e.g., 1 Tim 2:12) over passages that show women in leadership (e.g., Jdg 4, Deborah, Rm 16, Phoebe and Junia, Ac 18 with Priscilla). While reformed theology emphasises the priesthood of all believers and sola scriptura, the Synod's handling of women in office contradicts these teachings. This hermeneutic lacks the self-criticism that characterised the Reformation. The reformers aimed to transform ecclesial practices through fresh humanities readings, but the Synod did not apply the concepts to their understanding of gender. Aside from that, Covenantal theology is an important feature of reformed ecclesiology, viewing the church as the covenant community, transcending simple institutionalism to embody a collective of God's people unified under his covenant of grace. This divine covenant with humanity encompasses reciprocal accountability, resource allocation and cooperative governance. The church's mission can only be fulfilled if all members of our covenantal community execute their designated duties. This absence of engagement subverts the principle of collective accountability and opposes the church's goal to embody God's justice and inclusivity in the world. Covenantal theology, as defined by Common (2021:186), fundamentally advocates for egalitarian practices that align church structures and leadership with the biblical objective of equality. The covenant model of leadership prioritises service and stewardship above power and hierarchy. The church, by failing to hold women accountable, undermines its complete manifestation as a covenantal community. This constrains the church's capacity to exhibit the diversity and unity of God's congregation. Theologians and ecclesiastical reformers have promoted a novel church structure founded on the covenant principle. As per Common (2021), it encompasses alterations in governance, pastoral practices, community involvement and theological exploration. The black reformed church of Synod Soutpansberg, which have marginalised women from leadership roles, must transform for this transition. The church's testimony to covenantal theology should possess wider social and global ramifications for society. A covenantal community that genuinely embodies God's justice and inclusiveness exemplifies the gospel's transformative power. The church can visually represent an alternative community that prioritises inclusivity and signifies equality.

Covenantal inconsistency in Synod Soutpansberg's approach

This results in the continuous exclusion of women from church office, which is a significant contradiction to covenantal theology that requires immediate attention. The Synod has created a two-tiered covenant community, with men having full access to all forms of service and leadership and women being excluded from certain areas, regardless of their generation. According to the covenantal principle, all believers are liable for all others. The Synod's decision to exclude women from decision-making creates an unbalanced accountability system, leaving women reliant on male leadership and unable to exercise governance authority themselves. In a covenant theology, God's covenant applies

to all believers, regardless of gender. Limiting institutional access based on gender does not align with this divine catholicity. The Synod's silence on women serving in leadership suggests a preference for human traditions over God's intention for the covenant people. Covenantal theology emphasises the importance of valuing spiritual gifts given by God to all believers for the greater benefit. According to the Synod's statement, women who possess these gifts should face institutional hurdles that prevent them from fully expressing themselves in leadership roles. The Synod's reactions (2006, 2012) have been on record for years, followed by 3 years of inaction. Not to mention the apparent unwillingness to deal with it even now. By maintaining that such theological inconsistencies are acceptable (although not desirable), they undermine the integrity of their covenant theology. This has an impact on gender roles, as colonisation modified our idea of gender in Africa. The West established patriarchal systems (Lerner 1986). Consequently, these structures marginalised women. In pre-colonial African societies, gender roles were malleable rather than rigid. Colonialism imposed a rigid hierarchy of gender relations, privileging males and subjugating females. Colonial administrators predominantly engaged male leaders to interact with African civilisations, disregarding systems in which women possessed authority. Selective involvement under the guise of feminism perpetuates male supremacy over women. Moreover, the implementation of Western governance frameworks throughout colonisation exacerbated existing inequalities by excluding women from political representation and economic opportunities. Colonial tactics diminished the economic authority of indigenous women. Cash crop economies allocated agricultural work and resources to male-dominated sectors, displacing women who traditionally managed subsistence farming and selling. Colonial governments instituted land tenure systems that prohibited women from owning or inheriting land, thus constraining their economic autonomy.

Colonialism transformed cultural practices and moral principles. Christian mission work provides certain educational opportunities for women; nonetheless, it often perpetuates patriarchy by endorsing submissive femininity. The missionaries' teachings denounced customary practices that had previously allowed women to assume significant social roles, leading to a patriarchal structure. The erosion of gender complementarity in African cultures has had an impact throughout time. Numerous postcolonial African governments have relegated women to subordinate social and economic positions, obstructing equality. Academics propose that the upheaval caused by colonisation demands a deliberate decolonisation of gender and a restoration of pre-colonial African gender dynamics (Bertolt 2018:3). The influence of colonialism on gender roles and identity in Africa requires comprehension of the continent's cultural context. This must encompass both contemporary and historical ramifications. To tackle these challenges, we must strive to dismantle patriarchal structures while simultaneously revitalising indigenous gender systems that esteem the complementarity and cooperation of men and

women. Furthermore, Synod Soutpansberg's Colonial Inheritance and Resistance to Decolonisation stance on women in leadership is a complex legacy that must be unravelled. The Synod has acknowledged the impact of colonialism on church structure but has yet to address how colonial gender ideologies continue to shape its political bodies. The Synod acknowledges some effects of colonialism, such as racial segregation and financial dependence. However, it maintains a gendered structure from colonial times, indicating that gender justice is not included in its selective decolonisation approach. The Synod's rigorous gender hierarchy contradicts pre-colonial African gender systems that linked women's authority to various human activities. This is a missed opportunity to re-establish tribal wisdom on gender complementarity from pre-colonial times. Other reformed churches in the region (Zimbabwe, Zambia and URCSA) have engaged in contextual theological reflection, leading to the ordination of women. However, Synod Soutpansberg has not engaged theologically, indicating a resistance to authentic African reformed theology that addresses gender justice issues. Synod's 2006 and 2012 decisions highlight a lack of commitment to decolonising gender systems within the church, with a focus on procedures rather than action. Failure to speak with women in the office reinforces colonial patriarchy, contradicting their stated dedication to African contextual theology.

Recommendations for Synod Soutpansberg

Based on the examination of Synod Soutpansberg's stance regarding women in office, the following specific proposals are proposed. The Synod ought to establish a dedicated theological committee to examine the role of women in ecclesiastical positions, ensuring equal representation of male and female theologians. This commission must meticulously evaluate scriptural evidence, encompassing both orthodox and egalitarian interpretations. Furthermore, the Synod can look at the practices of other African reformed churches that have consecrated women. Facilitate listening sessions with women in congregations to explore their perspectives on vocation and abilities. Create a detailed report that articulates clear theological viewpoints rather than procedural postponements. The Synod can provide opportunities for women to pursue theological education and ecclesiastical leadership, including scholarships. Mentorship programmes connect experienced pastors with women seeking to enter the ministry. Recognise women's leadership in clerical auxiliary organisations. Furthermore, the Synod may commission a study into the influence of colonial gender ideas on ecclesiastical institutions, with a focus on pre-colonial Venda and Tsonga female leadership traditions, as well as the impact of missionary activity on prevailing gender limits. In addition, the Synod should investigate modern African theological ideas on gender and ministry. Set a time limit (no more than 3 years) for completing theological study. These ideas aim to go beyond the procedural deferral seen in the 2006 and 2012 resolutions,

needing extensive discussion of the theological, historical and cultural elements of women's leadership within the church.

Conclusion

The re-evaluation of women's leadership within the black reformed churches of the Synod Soutpansberg constitutes both a theological and a practical concern. The ingrained gender roles were concealed frameworks that emerged from selective interpretations of biblical texts and customary practices. These factors have diminished the church's capacity to accomplish its goal. The study advocates for the elimination of barriers, grounded in an analysis of theological concepts like the priesthood of all believers, covenantal theology and egalitarian readings of scripture. Given that women have vital cultural roles in African societies, exemplified by the Makhadzi tradition among the Vhavenda, it is indeed paradoxical to remove them from church leadership. This study advocates for the church to embrace a decolonial liturgy and leadership that aligns with African culture and promotes global gender parity. Appointing women as elders, deacons and reverends will augment the church's spiritual fortitude and enable it to address more significant social issues. This will establish an inclusive ecclesiastical culture, which is a scriptural imperative for justice and equality. Should the Synod Soutpansberg adopt the proposed model formation, the church's engagement with structures for change will be enhanced.

Synod Soutpansberg's silence and hesitation in addressing women in office speak volumes. Their actions indicate a lack of concern for women's exclusion from church governance. The church's stance has led to isolation within the African reformed tradition, as other churches have become more accepting. The Synod's approach contrasts narrow readings of inclusivity and the universally inclusive goals of equality and education in scripture, rather than between earlier interpretations and current cultural trends. In arguing that speaking to women in rulership is not 'necessary', they have essentially accepted a theological position they have not had to articulate. They are maintaining biblical patriarchy without fully protecting it in today's theological language. To achieve their covenantal and missional commitments in the 21st century, the black reformed churches in Synod Soutpansberg must address the issue beyond procedural appeals. This study's data suggests that engaging with theological complexity and contextual sophistication leads to enhanced inclusion, rather than exclusion. These churches must choose between adhering to colonial gender constructs and embracing a decolonised, African-inspired reformed ecclesiology that recognises and affirms all believers' gifts and callings, regardless of gender.

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Authors' contributions

N.M. and H.P.K.-N. contributed equally to this article. N.M. conducted conceptualisation; methodology; formal analysis; investigation; writing - original draft; data curation; resources and writing - review and editing. H.P.K.-N. conducted conceptualisation; methodology; formal analysis; investigation; writing - original draft; data curation; resources and writing - review and editing.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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