



The dynamics of empowering women in the post-missionary Church of Christ in Zimbabwe



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Dates:

Received: 15 June 2023

Accepted: 12 Jan. 2024

Published: 29 Nov. 2024

How to cite this article:

Masengwe, G. & Dube, B. 2024, 'The dynamics of empowering women in the post-missionary Church of Christ in Zimbabwe', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a9113. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9113>

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The evolution of the Ladies' Circle into the Mother's Union in the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe (COCZ) holds great significance in that circles in Africa symbolize collectiveness and consensual decision-making. The Ladies' Circle emerged as a response by white women influenced by the Victorian Womanhood Cult with regard to the discontent they felt with patriarchy in the church. Black women supported white female missionaries in leadership roles, when they (black women), continued to face oppression due to (white and black) male resistance to change, as well as fear of losing male-privileges. Empirical evidence in the COCZ suggests that black women in Zimbabwe made significant progress in the secular world compared to their progress in church. This study uses a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework to examine how the transformation of the Ladies' Circle into the Mothers' Union empowered African women to deal with their own oppression. It aims to understand how white women overcame restrictive Victorian norms and the Womanhood Cult, which promoted submissiveness and domesticity as defining aspects of womanhood. The study further notes that inconsistencies in addressing race and gender differences in the church perpetuated the dominance of African men on women within the church. This study thus acknowledges that the Women's Unions, like the Mothers' Union, have the potential to empower COCZ women and challenge racial and gender oppression within that church.

Contribution: The study reveals that denying women's involvement in church can have debilitating effects on gender equality in Zimbabwe. The Ladies' Circle, a platform created by the Church of Christ, provides women with a space for social and religious participation. The intersection of gender, race, and religion used by religious and cultural authorities to control women, call for a re-examination of the COCZ's theological foundations on these subjects.

Keywords: Church of Christ; gender; Ladies Circle; post-missionary church; womanhood Cult; race.

Introduction

The article discusses the role of the Ladies' Circle in the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe (COCZ) and its impact on gender identity and equity within that church. The COCZ is a Christian denomination that has existed in Zimbabwe since its arrival in the 1890s. Throughout its history in Zimbabwe, African women were primarily associated with cooperative and unitive activities within their fellowship circles, while major elements of the faith, such as sacraments, were reserved for men. The COCZ restricts preaching and sacramental roles to men, while women can sparingly preach under the surveillance of men.

During the colonial era (1930–1980), the Ladies' Circle in the COCZ allowed women, mostly white, to participate in church affairs, particularly in fundraising activities. Exclusionary practices that confined women to fundraising in the COCZ need to be critically interrogated through the lenses of history, power, race and intersectionality (Bae 2016). Colonial confinement of women to domestic and charitable roles reinforced patriarchal systems and limited COCZ women's agency in church and society (Fambisai 2019). Racial dynamics in church further disenfranchised African women in marginalised communities from participating in socioeconomic and political sectors to transform the limiting societal structures.

However, as more African men entered ministerial training as pastors, the situation did not change for African women. The unequal treatment of African women in the church was justified by the prevailing patriarchal culture in Africa (Amadiume 2005; Masenya 2000), which was further reinforced by militant groups during the liberation struggles (Dube 1999).

Note: Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

While white women were empowered to participate in various church activities, African women faced restrictions and were not accepted as equal partners in the church, because 'the Bible is selectively applied when dealing with issues of gender and thus religion acts as a weapon in causing gender inequalities' (Maseko 2015:iv). However, 'All new missionaries and their wives would of course be involved, in addition to the duties just listed in the more specifically evangelistic side of the mission as constituted in Sunday services, Sunday schools, women's work, wayfarers and Bible study groups' (Savage 1980:30). This inequality was perpetuated by the selective application of biblical teachings on gender and racial differences, with religion and culture being used as a weapon to maintain these inequalities. It was clear that race affected black women where restrictions for participation were restricted on colour lines. The white women were privileged. This indirectly subdued black women within the church and rendered them lesser beings.

The post-missionary COCZ (2000–) witnessed a new generation of African leaders who established standards that oppressed women in the church (Masengwe & Chimhanda 2019). These leaders emphasised the weaknesses of biblical women, portraying figures such as Eve, Delilah and the Corinthian whores in a negative light (Jack 2017). This approach stood in contrast to the empowerment through the priesthood of all believers, which others within the same church saw as a means to achieve the Great Commission (see Mt 28:18–20; Masengwe, Chimhanda & Hove 2019).

The COCZ departed from the Methodist and Baptist traditions it initially inherited, which emphasised congregational autonomy and the priesthood of all believers. It downgraded women's roles in following with the Womanhood Cult of the Victorian era (1837–1901) that emphasised femininity as domesticity, purity, modesty and submissiveness (Masengwe et al. 2019). Contrary to biblical principles, the Cult emphasised that women were expected to be caretakers of households as mothers and wives rather than pursue education and professional life. This ideology became useful and self-serving strategy by incompetent Christian men to reinforce patriarchy in church (Elliott 2010; Machingura & Nyakuhwa 2015). A contextual reading of the Bible and good hermeneutics can assist contemporary Christians to re-engage in answering emerging questions (Cooper 1991; Maxwell 1987). The church therefore needs to free women in public worship to commune with others (Boomsma 1993; Cunningham & Hamilton 2000).

Despite these challenges, historical records indicate that women, both white and African, made significant contributions to the development of mission stations within the COCZ (Masengwe & Dube 2023). Failed ministries led by white men were often salvaged by their female partners through charity and evangelism (Savage 1980). Post-independence Zimbabwean women faced more resistance in church leadership than colonial-era white women (Fambisai 2019).

The article's aims are captured in the question: (1) *What has the Ladies' Circle done to conscientise women towards gender identity and equity in the COCZ?* (2) *How have women participated in their Christian vocations in the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe over the years?*

Three specific questions support this assessment:

1. What has the Ladies' Circle done to liberate women in the COCZ before and after independence?
2. How have white and black women in Africa used the Ladies' Circle to advance their Christian vocations?
3. How can the Ladies' Circle be utilised to promote gender identity and equity in the COCZ?

There, however, are similarities between the COCZ Ladies' Circle and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (CCAWT), an organisation that advocates for the concerns and rights of African women theologians (Fielder 2010). While the COCZ Ladies' Circle focuses on mission and ministry, the CCAWT emphasises the theological development of Christian materials from the perspective of women. It is therefore not necessary for us to spend time on the CCAWT as the Ladies' Circle pre-existed the CCAWT. The COCZ Ladies' Circle is referred to using various terms such as 'The Women's Guild', 'the Ladies' Fraternity' or 'the Women's Fellowship', also known as *Ruwadzano/uManyano* in the local vernacular. In this paper, the Ladies' Circle is viewed as a platform that liberates African women within the COCZ.

Research approach

The study employed a small, purposive sample comprising five key female leaders from the COCZ Ladies' Circle to answer the in-depth interview questions (Van Driel et al. 1998; Hancock 1998; Marshall 1996; Oppong 2013). The two researchers also sampled six female participants for a focus group discussion (FGD). A second FGD, also a control group, was selected from six male leaders to help generate comparative data for the conversations on the inclusion of African women's vocations in the COCZ.

The research utilised interviews for primary data collection, by employing less-structured research strategies to promote open conversations and reduce power dynamics between interviewers and interviewees (Kawulich 2005). Interviews and FDGs yielded rich narratives and insights, providing a deeper understanding of the visions and goals of the Ladies' Circle.

The interviewees included key individuals such as the national Chairwoman, National Secretary, National Treasurer, National Auditor and two female theologians holding provincial posts within the COCZ (Abbot 2001; Kawulich 2005). Their perspectives and experiences were instrumental in capturing the complexities of women's participation in the church.

In addition, two focus groups were conducted in Bulawayo and Gweru, employing convenience sampling (Woodley & Lockard 2016). This approach allowed for the gathering of

insights from a diverse range of participants, and non-verbal cues, including body language, were considered to elicit new meanings and understandings (Abbot, 2001; Sekaran 2006; Woodley & Lockard 2016). This methodology ensured compliance with ethical requirements for research involving human participants. In all, the study methodology is qualitative and employs interviews and focus groups.

Research theories

The study incorporated two theoretical frameworks: Musimbi Kanyoro's African Cultural Hermeneutics Approach (ACHA) and Martha Nussbaum's Human Capacities Approach (HCA). These theories provided valuable perspectives for understanding the experiences and aspirations of African women within the context of the COCZ.

African Cultural Hermeneutics Approach, developed by Musimbi Kanyoro on the interpretation of the Bible, 'is a methodological resource that makes African social cultural contexts the subject of interpretation' (Adamo 2015:59). African Cultural Hermeneutics Approach reappraises how African world-views, cultures and life experiences can be incorporated in the interpretation of ancient biblical traditions. It therefore reviews and interprets conditions of African women in a capitalist-colonial project (Kanyoro 2002). The framework challenges African women to navigate patriarchal systems in shaping new gender roles and expectations within the sites of struggle for African women's empowerment. It achieves women empowerment by highlighting the agency of women in negotiating for spaces for their own empowerment (Gallagher 2004:451–472). This includes women's actions, strategies and initiatives to effect positive change at the intersections of culture, religion and gender.

For this reason, Alice Walker suggested 'womanism' in the interlocation of gender, class, race and sex distinctions among African Americans (Walker 2004). Womanism self-defines a woman and gives her courage and strength to act independently within the contexts of her cultural and political heritage. Black religious women are self-defined and liberated as they retell their own stories (Mbao 2009; Ruether 1995). The Ladies' Circle in the COCZ sensitises and appreciates the work of female ministers in church.

Martha Nussbaum's HCA, on the other hand, offers a philosophical approach to comprehending the minimum principles that should guide church lawmakers (Nussbaum 2000). Human Capacities Approach emphasises the concept of capabilities, which refers to the expansion of inherent individual abilities through capacity building. By training women in evangelism, discipleship and church growth, their inherent gifts and capacities are stimulated (Howe 1982). Human Capacities Approach calls 'for reassessment of the ancient biblical tradition and the African worldviews, cultures and life experiences, to correct the effect of the extraneous cultural and ideological conditioning' (Chukwuka 2022:1). It criticises the limitations of persistent discrimination against women by unjust social structures. It rereads the

Bible from a premeditatively African perspective to produce 'new allegories, images, figures of speech, ways of reasoning, etymologies, analogies and cosmogonies to gratify the intellect' (Chukwuka 2022:1). It calls for politics and economics to be attentive to feminism attention in church and society (Masengwe et al. 2019).

Both frameworks challenge the androcentric and patriarchal interpretations of the Bible that undermine women's abilities and contribute to their subordination (Marg Mowczko 2012). They address issues such as forced marriages, sex slavery, gender pay gaps, sex-selective abortions and male-dominated boardrooms, which hinder women's agency and well-being (Pidgeon 2017). By adopting ACHA and HCA, the study encourages the recognition of women's positive roles in the church and advocates for choices, options, human dignity, identity, freedom, equity and justice for women in church and society (Harry & Vijayakumar 2023).

Results and discussion

Results for this study are thematically discussed in the following text that discusses findings on the history of the Ladies Circle in the COCZ.

The history of the Ladies' Circle in the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe

The Ladies' Circle that advocated for the recognition and empowerment of African women within the COCZ originated in the New Zealand congregations at Dadaya and Colen-Brander in Bulawayo (CBACOC 1965). Interviews indicated that Colen-Brander was established as a Mission Centre for the activities of the Churches of Christ in Southern Africa, serving as a hub for missionaries who came to establish schools and hospitals (Discussion on 22 August 2019 with Pastor Fortune Mate, Church of Christ, Colen-Brander Avenue, Somabhula Conference Centre, Zimbabwe; Savage 1950, 1980). The Women's Circles at Colen-Brander played a significant role in the early years of the COCZ, empowering women and providing them with the opportunity to contribute to the church's activities and decision-making processes (CBACOC 1965; Jack 2018; Tembo 2017). Minutes at Colen-Brander read:

Mrs. Kennedy then indicated her pleasure at the cooperation she was receiving from the women for her Morning Circle. She felt she had a wonderful group of women and was very proud of the Circle. She explained that both morning and evening circles had cooperated extremely well. The morning circle had been concerned with the working on clothes for Hazel's Christmas Fund and the Evening Circle had been concerned with the Walker family when Norman was so seriously ill. They also took flowers to patients in hospital and especially those who had lost contact with the church. (CBACOC 1965)

The Circle's activities included various initiatives such as working on clothes for charitable funds, providing support to families in need, visiting patients in hospitals and ensuring the inclusion of women's perspectives in church matters (Mate 2019). The influence of the Ladies' Circle in the COCZ

was evident in the suggestions they made, including decisions related to the church's physical environment and internal colour scheme.

The current church pastor stated: 'The paint in this sanctuary, this organ (and musical instruments) and the type of floor, were suggested by the Ladies' Circle at this church. That is why on our church board we have an equal number of men to women' (Mate 2019).

Hence the church minute stated: 'Mrs Jenkinson proposed a vote of thanks to the Ladies for their internal colour scheme. Mrs F.G. Jenkinson suggested we include the vestry and possibly the back room' (CBACOC 1965).

The Circle also extended its assistance to children and assumed responsibilities within the church as 'Mr. Hadfield thought the Ladies' Circle might be interested in assuming responsibility' (CBACOC 1965). The Ladies' Circle in the COCZ could be appreciated to the extent of proposing a letter to be published in a newsletter on *The Work of the Christian Women Fellowship* (CBACOC 1965).

However, it is important to note that the leadership positions within the Mission Centres, particularly in education departments, were primarily held by white women from New Zealand and the USA. For instance, 'Madonna Burget and Dr. Cobbs worked at both Mashoko and Chidamoyo hospitals; as a trained nurse and medical doctor respectively' (Interviewee 2, 2018). This limited the opportunities for African women to take on leadership roles within these areas. African women were often confined to youth (on Saturdays) and women's programs (on Thursdays), where they taught Bible studies and life skills to other women and young people. The participation of African women in church programs, especially in leadership roles, was hindered by religious, cultural, colonial and educational factors. Their access to education was limited, and their contributions were often overshadowed by white women despite their comparable levels of education and training.

This marginalisation of African women within the church cannot be separated from issues of race, class and education. A male interviewee stated: 'I went to work in Chidamoyo as a nurse and the Sister in Charge there took pastors to interpret for her at church. They interpreted for her on Communion, Offering and Message, which could not be done for a black woman' (Interviewee 8, 2017). Thus, 'Black women have been doubly oppressed as women and as black people' (Interviewee 5, 2019). The prevailing belief was that they should listen rather than speak in congregations because 'African women did not want to learn, and expected to be given everything on a silver platter' (Interviewee 10, 2018). The Ladies' Circle serves as an empowerment initiative (Fambisai 2019), aiming to challenge the notion that 'women should use their God-given abilities to reproduce and bear obedient male children who will rule in the church through their good morals' (Interviewee 7, 2018).

The Circle's efforts also extend to empowering women with skills to sustain their homes and marriages, drawing on the wisdom of elderly women who taught younger women about love, parenting and spousal relationships (Interviewee 10, 2018). Additionally, the Ladies' Circle has given rise to the formation of the Single Women's Forum within the COCZ, which is seen as a protest movement by ambitious women. These initiatives developed during the post-missionary era and align with the broader goal of promoting gender equality and women empowerment, which is a key aspect of many feminist theories, including the African women's theology, at a time when there was a leadership vacuum in the COCZ (Masengwe et al. 2019).

The Ladies' Circle and Mission Work in the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe

The Ladies' Circle played a significant role in promoting 'Evangelism through Education' during the period from the early 1930s to the late 1970s. Interviewees indicated that the period marked a time of consciousness towards 'the liberation of white women' during the Victorian Culture and Womanhood Cult (Williams et al. 2013). Findings supported literary writings that the Victorian Culture promoted domesticity and submissiveness in defining femininity and resistance and power for masculinity (Williams et al. 2013). In the USA, the Tennessee Tradition viewed the Womanhood Cult as divinely ordained and celebrated (Williams et al. 2013). As quoted by COCZ leaders in many of their meetings, Elder James Harding always contented with people who allowed women to teach and preach in church (Williams et al. 2013). However, participants agreed with scholars that gender inequality and differential treatment were a form of gender inequality (Spencer-Wood 2005).

During this period, many female missionaries gained the freedom to acquire educational competencies and take on roles as evangelists, nurses or instructors in practical and academic subjects. While missionary husbands focused on infrastructure development, their wives engaged in spiritual and Christian instruction (Masengwe & Dube 2021). This allowed missionary families to work together as couples and achieve positive outcomes without differentiation (Masengwe et al. 2019), for instance, that 'the Todds had been selected in New Zealand to go to Dadaya because Grace [Todd] was a qualified teacher' (Paul & Grundy 2011). African women, on the other hand, were excluded from similar roles in assisting African preachers, possibly to maintain control over remuneration expectations. However, white women who lost their husbands like a Mrs. Anderson who 'remained working for the Lord as a widow' (Savage 1980) and another 'Mrs. W. Mansill and her daughter, Hazel' (Savage 1980).

Female missionaries, including those who came without husbands, played important roles in mission centers, like 'Hazel Mansill [who] organised Sunday school at Makokoba Church of Christ, a work that is prominent in the congregation today' (Mate 2018; CBACOC 1965). They served as headmistresses, heads of departments and ministers in the

church (CBACOC 1965; Paul & Grundy 2011). They trained and nurtured new Christians, while their husbands focused on construction and administration (Savage 1980). For example, Grace Todd, wife of Garfield Todd, made significant contributions to education by developing comprehensive curriculum schemes (Chigwedere 2002). The education system she established had a lasting impact on African primary education in Zimbabwe and then Southern Rhodesia (Interviewee 2, 2018).

Literary findings also indicated that women from New Zealand had gained the right to vote and hold leadership positions early in the 1900s as witnessed by interviewees that they freely participated in mission work at Dadaya (Paul & Grundy 2011). They held leadership positions in schools and were involved in training evangelists. They also brought up many African political leaders at Dadaya, where they began their careers as school teachers (Sundkler & Steed 2000). Missionaries interviewed indicated that they could not do much without African 'teachers and preachers' (Paul & Grundy 2011:630). Literature supports the fact that a lady, Valerie Kirby worked in teacher training (1956–1961), mission treasury and the Programme for Accelerated Christian Education (P.A.C.E.) (Savage 1980:30). Hence, women helped in choirs, Sunday services, prayer meetings and teaching sessions with Pastor P. Nyoni-Baka (P. Nyoni-Baka [interview] pers. comm., 18 August 2018). They were actively engaged in preaching, teaching and disciple-making.

However, it is worth noting that the historical records and accounts tend to focus more on the activities and contributions of men, while the roles and contributions of African women are often overlooked (CBACOC 1965). We can have a more comprehensive and balanced history of the COCZ with names and experiences of African women, an aspect we cannot have at the moment.

The evolution of leadership from White to Black women in the Ladies' Circle

The inclusion of African women in church committees,¹ such as the Dadaya Governing Board and the Dadaya Conference Council, was more prevalent in the early stages of the COCZ (Savage 1980). During this time, missionaries often replaced committee members on furlough with female missionaries. However, as time progressed, conservatism and traditional beliefs started to limit the participation of African women in church committees and leadership roles. In Zimbabwe, like other African countries, as interviewees responded, 'customs dominate laws and customary practices dominate religion' (Interviewee 1, 2018). Thus new waves of awareness on women in the world have influenced women leadership in church, hence the 'Ladies' Circle'.

1.The Churches Committee included the *Dadaya Governing Board* (Garfield Todd (chairperson), Ray Knapp, Peter Nathan, David Mkwanzani, J.N. Hlambe, M.D. Nyoni, Mesdammes W. Bell and Grace Todd) and the 1980 *Dadaya Conference Council* (J. Mafa (President), J. Gumbo (Deputy), M.D. Nyoni (Chairperson), S. Mutomba (Vice Chairperson), P. Nyoni-Baka (Secretary), T. Thompson (Treasurer); Councillors: Mrs J. Mafa, Mrs N. Sibanda, Miss M. Massina, Mrs Hlangeni, Mrs J. Gumbo, N.J. Sibanda, R. Sesemani, V. Maposa, C. Mukamuri, J. Ndlovu and Z. Sibanda).

The contemporary situation in the COCZ reflects a hierarchical structure where men are automatically seen as leaders and pillars of the church, while women are relegated to secondary roles (Machingura & Nyakuhwa 2015). This conservative mindset was generated by the thinking that Jesus Christ had only 12 male disciples who later became the 12 apostles. This has facilitated African women's exclusion from influential church positions (Masengwe & Chimhanda 2019). Yet, during the colonial era 'The first African woman leader I know was a wife of a pastor, Mrs. Baka' (Interviewee 9; Interviewee 3, 2018). Thus the training of pastors' wives makes a worthwhile endeavour in that church (Interviewee 5, 2018; Interviewee 1, 2018).

Religion and culture have played a significant role in inhibiting African women from assuming leadership roles in the church (Interviewee 6, 2018; Interviewee 5, 2018). Biblical texts have been interpreted and used to restrict women's ascendance into higher leadership positions. The idea that husbands provide a pinnacle for women's leadership potential has also been raised, limiting unmarried women from being elected to influential church posts.

The Ladies Circle, on the other hand, has played a role in promoting women's leadership by raising awareness and providing opportunities for women with aptitude and stature. However, some argue that the Ladies' Circle has also been influenced by colonial ideologies that restricted women to the home and men to industry, reinforcing traditional gender roles. An interviewee, however, negated the women's movement in the colonial era saying: 'The Ladies' Circle became captured by the colonial capital projects that allocated women in the home and men in the industry as male leaders who endured indoctrination of the colonial ideology took up church leadership and fulfilled the goals of capitalism' (Interviewee 1, 2018). This is because there seems to be a discrepancy between African cultural values, which revere and empower women in certain roles, and the teaching of the Bible, which does not necessarily restrict women from participating in church leadership (Gombe 1998). It can be argued that the Bible does not explicitly refuse women's leadership using examples of influential women in the Bible such as Hannah, Esther, Ruth, Miriam and Deborah (Interviewee 10, 2018; Interviewee 1, 2018; Interviewee 6, 2018; Interviewee 3, 2018; Interviewee 5, 2018).

The restriction and undermining of women's contributions to leadership, administration and works of charity, prayer and intercession by men have perpetuated gender discrimination within the COCZ. It needs to be argued that gender inclusivity and oneness in Jesus Christ encapsulate concerns and prejudices about feminine power in public church gatherings. Literature and biblical examples² have influenced how African women participated in church (Cunningham & Hamilton 2000; Machingura & Nyakuhwa 2015; Masengwe et al. 2019).

The reasons why white women participated more actively in church activities while African women were restricted are

2.Ephesians 5:22

complex and influenced by a combination of historical, cultural and religious factors (Elliott 2010).³ The influence of Victorian Culture, the liberation of white women in Western societies, and the missionary context may have contributed to the differential treatment of women in the COCZ during the early to mid-20th century.

The lessons learned from women leaders in other Churches in Africa

This section discusses the experiences of women in various denominations of Zimbabwe. However, before we can discuss about other denominations, it can be stated that 'most African women leaders in the COCZ came from well-to-do families rather than from poorer families' (Interviewee 1, 2018; Interviewee 6, 2018; Interviewee 5, 2018). Rich men uplifted their own wives and children, within and without the churches (Interviewee 10, 2018; Interviewee 3, 2018). This section thus examines how women in other churches are observed.

In most mainline churches in Zimbabwe, women's efforts are promoted. Participants observed this in the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (UPCSA), the United Methodist Church (UMC), the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ), the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe (UCCZ), Lutheran and Baptist churches, the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God, Africa (ZAOGA) and the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM). In these churches, women are promoted and uplifted. An interviewee argued that 'we can give communion and grace the service' (Interviewee 10, 2018), another said, 'only trained women-pastors can do what men do in church' (Interviewee 1, 2018), and yet another one stated: 'we can now stand behind the pulpit to address the congregation' (Interviewee 6, 2018). Others unanimously agreed that 'women seat anywhere in the congregation and can do what men do' (Interviewee 3, 2018; Interviewee 5, 2018).

Interviewees criticised white missionaries who prioritised and promoted white women in accordance with their own cultures within the COCZ. They stated: 'Most white missionaries were not theologians but volunteers in their individual professions as doctors, nurses, teachers, historians, carpenters, builders, farmers, journalists and hunters' (Interviewee 2, 2018). This negated the spread of Christianity, the participation of women and the Africanisation of the church. 'They could not interpret the Bible to contextualise it into the African culture' (Interviewee 7, 2018). African women were seen as key figures in liberating all people within the church, as many white missionaries lacked theological training and had limited understanding of African ways of life. This lack of understanding made it difficult for them to interpret the Bible in a way that contextualised it into the African culture.

One pastor argued that the church has a responsibility to correct the past faults of missionaries, acknowledging that missionaries sent to Africa were not always the best equipped

³See Galatians 3:27-28

to understand and address the needs of the African people. He said: 'Missionaries who were sent to Africa were not always the best; the church has a monumental task of correcting the past faults of the missionaries' (Interviewee 4, 2018). Giving African women opportunities and exposure in leadership roles within the COCZ was seen as crucial for restoring dignity, respect, identity and equity within the church (Boomsma 1993).

The inclusion and empowerment of African women in church leadership were seen as important steps towards rectifying the historical imbalances caused by missionary influence and promoting a more authentic African expression of Christianity within the COCZ (Masengwe et al. 2019).

Impact of the Ladies' Circle on Women in the Church of Christ Zimbabwe

The Ladies' Circle played a significant role in the COCZ, particularly in terms of empowering women and challenging traditional gender roles within the church. Its first assembly in 1959 at Dadaya marked a new venture and brought together women from surrounding churches for a 2-day rally (Savage 1980:47). This gathering showcased women's active involvement in building the church, as exemplified by the construction of the Dadaya sanctuary, which was made possible by funds bequeathed by Mrs. Middlemiss (Savage 1980:52).

The Circle aimed to demystify the notion of women's weakness, recognising that religion, tradition and culture often unjustly 'justify women's subordinate positions in society' (IPS 2014:16). The empowerment of women within the COCZ was seen as essential not only for women's own sake but also for the betterment of humanity as a whole (Osborn 2011). It acknowledged the changing reality of independent women who cannot be subordinated to male figureheads. By providing a platform for women to voice their concerns, the Ladies' Circle sought to achieve full human salvation and bring about emancipation for all women in the COCZ (Fielder 2017; Masengwe & Chimhanda 2019).

The Circle also facilitated women's participation in income-generating projects, addressing the challenges posed by Zimbabwe's predominantly informal economy (Jack 2017). Women gained prominence in supporting pastors as well as funding church activities. In this way, it provided a way forward for COCZ women to ascend to positions of power that potentially rejuvenated the denomination (Jack 2017; Machingura & Nyakuhwa 2015; Masengwe et al. 2019).

Some African women argued for an inclusive approach to church mission and ministry, emphasising a 'theocentric perspective' that includes every human being regardless of their biological condition (Anthony 2012:179). They saw the Ladies Circle as a means to challenge the masculinisation of church leadership and promote feminisation instead. However, there were opposing views within the COCZ 'questioning the biblical legitimacy of women speaking and

holding leadership positions and or any positions of authority in churches' (Osborn 2002:462). Women leadership has thus followed basic traditional gender roles that refused them from public worship participation (Williams et al. 2013).

The COCZ's approach to women's participation and leadership was complicated by unnecessary prohibitions and obstacles, including the expectation of submission to husbands⁴ and the marginalisation of single women (Jack 2017; Williams et al. 2013). These limitations contradicted the teachings of Christ, who included female disciples in his ministry,⁵ and '2000 years later, many women still struggle to break into that circle' (Naidoo 2015:57). The need to deconstruct and reconstruct ecclesial ideologies was emphasised, with the Holy Spirit's empowerment seen as particularly relevant to African women living on the margins of society (Machingura & Nyakuhwa 2015).

Overall, the Ladies' Circle positions the COCZ as 'a champion of gender equality and relational justice in society' (Nyengele 2004:22), 'guided by a vision that seeks to free both men and women to live together in a partnership of equals – in non-oppressive ways' (Nyengele 2004:20).

The dynamics of the Ladies' Circle in the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe

Utilising Musimbi Kanyoro's ACHA and Martha Nussbaum's HCA allows for a deeper understanding and analysis of these dynamics within the COCZ and the impact on women's experiences and empowerment. In fact, the active engagement of women in the Ladies' Circle has enabled them to retell their own stories of salvation within the COCZ. This active involvement reflects recognition of the image of God in women and their equal status with men (Butler 2007). The invocation of women's capabilities, according to Martha Nussbaum's HCA, raises important issues of equality, equity and inclusivity within the church and challenges traditional roles of women that deny them attain the various roles of priests, pastors, evangelists and church presidents.

In the Zimbabwean Shona (patrilineal) society, women hold key positions of authority in family disputes, with higher possibilities that they display patriarchal attitudes towards their brothers' wives, reflecting internalised self-hate among women (Mesters 1983; Nyirongo 1994). The Ladies' Circle, in line with the ACHA, acts as a means to rebuild the image of Christ in both men and women, acknowledging the positive attributes and multifarious examples of women in the Bible and COCZ history (Belleville 2000; Masengwe et al. 2019:278–289). Femininity is symbolised as representing fertility, life, care, nurturing and ingenuity, reflecting the church's fruitfulness. While the COCZ Ladies' Circle did not exist alongside the CCAWT, it shares similarities in addressing women's concerns. However, concerns arise regarding the indigeneity of Circle leaders, who were primarily Western.

4. See 1 Corinthians 7:7–8, 25–28, 32–34.

5. See Luke 10:42

The COCZ's theological foundation is rooted in emphasising gender equality in Christ, contrary to Jewish culture where women had limited roles (Fiedler & Hofmeyr 2011; Kvam, Schearing & Ziegler 1999). In the COCZ, we have a history of women's lack of exposure and experience in deconstructing and reconstructing their own theologies (Machingura & Nyakuhwa 2015). The Circle provides a platform for women to engage with one another, fostering growth and leadership opportunities through conferences, workshops, retreats, seminars and fellowships. Women's struggles in Africa have capacitated, along with Nussbaum's HCA, the entire Christian community to be committed to developing new theological strategies that contribute to building new Christian worlds (Tembo 2017).

In all, the Ladies' Circle allows women in the COCZ to retell their stories of salvation, challenge traditional gender roles and promote inclusivity and equality within the church. It provides a space for women to explore their own theologies and experiences, empowering them to exercise leadership and contribute towards the growth and transformation of the Christian community.

Conclusion

The initial composition of the Ladies' Circle with white missionary women who were regarded as equals by white male missionaries highlights a disparity in treatment between African and white women. African women who followed in their footsteps did not receive the same recognition and equality from African male church leaders. While lack of education initially served as a reason for exclusion, after independence, more African women became educated but still faced a lack of acknowledgment from African churchmen.

The Ladies' Circle has played a significant role in propelling women into church leadership positions, offering a platform for African women to ascend into positions of power. Women in the COCZ were restricted from becoming regular preachers or taking on sacramental roles during Sunday worship services, limiting their participation to the Circle meetings only. Despite potential obstacles stemming from interpretations of the Bible, culture or religion, African women have persevered and claimed these leadership roles. The Ladies Circle has provided African women with support in social and spiritual services, and it can be instrumental in training women for church leadership. The Ladies' Circle represents a model of women's empowerment, the acquisition of leadership skills and genuine transformation for women as opposed to artificial coatings of politics, which ultimately contributes to the success and progress of the entire human race. This leads us to the recommendations.

Recommendations

The following can be recommended in this study:

- The COCZ should value women empowerment for impact on women's personal growth and development because more work is done when women are involved.

- The COCZ women should highlight how they overcame restrictions to be regular preachers and presiders over sacraments, and how they took on leadership roles for others to benchmark.
- Other churches should consider providing a supportive environment to women's social and spiritual nurturing so they can flourish in their faith and leadership roles.
- Churches should explore ways of training women in leadership skills acquisition to on take greater responsibilities within their churches.
- Churches should emphasise genuine transformation, especially among COCZ female members, based on the overall growth and development.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

G.M. conceived the article, investigated the issue, and wrote the draft. B.D. authenticated the study, provided study guidelines, analysed the findings and edited the first draft and completed the writing of the article for publication.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the (General/Human Research Ethics Committee [GHREC], University of Free State) (No. UFS-HSD2022/1559/22).

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

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

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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