

“There is also apartheid in our homes”
Interviewing leaders of black women’s Christian organisations in
KwaZulu-Natal

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PART 1 METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the preliminary findings of an oral history project on “leaders of black Christian women’s organisations in al-Natal during apartheid”. This study was initiated in 1999 by the Oral History Project of the School of Theology, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg (hereafter OHP) in collaboration with the School of Religion and Culture of the University of Durban-Westville. It constitutes the second leg of a wider research project aimed at retrieving the lost and silenced memories of the Christian communities under apartheid through the methodology of oral history.

Background

The first phase of the project, which dealt with “black clergy under apartheid in the Natal-Midlands”, has led, among other things, to the publication of a book entitled *The Caspar and the Cross. Voices of Black Clergy in the Natal Midlands*.¹ Thirty-four ministers from the Natal Midlands were interviewed on topics such as discrimination at the work place, discrimination in the church, black ministers’ organisations and the influence of political violence on church life in the 1980s and 1990s.

At one of the workshops organised by the OHP to evaluate the progress of the project and discuss methodological issues, a (female) colleague from a neighbouring university asked us why we interviewed almost exclusively men. Only one woman – Nora Shezi, a “prophetess” of the St John’s Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, an African initiated church (AIC)²– was part of the sample. We replied that this bias was due to the topic of the research. Until very recently only men were ordained to the ministry in South Africa. Nearly all black clergy

¹P. Denis, G. Macaca and T. Mlotshwa, *The Caspar and the Cross. Voices of Black Clergy in the Natal Midlands*. Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 1999.

²Interestingly the St John Apostolic Faith Mission was founded by a woman, Christina Nku. See A.H. Anderson and G.J. Pillay, “The Segregated Spirit: the Pentecostals”, in R. Elphick and R. Davenport, *Christianity in South Africa. A Political, Social and Cultural History* (Oxford, James Currey, 1997), p. 232. Her daughter, Lydia August, is also a church leader. She is the author of a AIC women’s mission manifesto which is discussed in *Missionalia* 28 (2000), pp. 254-266.

were male. But we found the objection valid and resolved to dedicate the second phase of the project to leaders of black women's Christian organisations.

Prior research

There is an increasing interest in the history of black Christian women's organisations, also known as *manyanos*, among historians, anthropologists and gender studies scholars in Southern Africa. Mia Brandel-Syrier, a South African sociologist, opened the way in 1962 with her ground-breaking study *Black Women in Search of God*.³ In 1979 Adrian Hastings devoted a few pages to *manyanos* in his book *The History of African Christianity, 1950-1975*.⁴ According to him, the 1950s witnessed "something of a breakthrough" on the part of Christian female organisations.⁵ Deborah Gaitskell's 1981 doctoral thesis on (white and black) Christian women's organisations in the Witwatersrand during the first half of the twentieth century⁶ and her subsequent publications⁷ provided new information on the history of the *manyanos*. The founders of these organisations, mostly women missionaries employed by the Methodist Church, the Anglican Church and the American Board mission, wanted the African women to conform to their typically European ideal of "devout domesticity". To some extent they succeeded. But the women transformed the *manyanos* to make them respond to their cultural and emotional needs. Similar studies exist for Zimbabwe⁸ and Lesotho.⁹ The first women's organisations in Southern Africa were Protestant. They were founded in the Transvaal and in Natal in the 1910s. The Catholic sodalities, studied by Alan Henriques¹⁰ and Joy Brain,¹¹ came later.

³London, Lutterworth, 1962.

⁴Cambridge, CUP, 1979, pp. 114-116.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁶D. Gaitskell, *Female Mission Initiatives: Black and White Women in Three Witwatersrand Churches, 1903-1939*, PhD thesis, University of London, 1981.

⁷See in particular "Devout domesticity? A century of African women's Christianity in South Africa", in Cheryl Walker (eds), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (London, James Currey and Cape Town, David Philip, 1990), pp. 251-272; "Praying and preaching: The distinctive spirituality of African's women's church organizations", in H. Bredekamp and R. Ross (eds), *Missions and Christianity in South African History* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), pp. 211-232; "Power in prayer and service: Women's Christian organizations", in R. Elphick and T.R.H. Davenport (eds.), *Christianity in South African: A Political, Social and Cultural History* (Cape Town: David Philip; Oxford: James Currey, 1997), pp. 251-267.

⁸F.D. Murorewa, "Through prayer to action: the Rukwadzano women of Rhodesia", in T.O. Ranger and John Weller (eds), *Themes in the Christian history of Central Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1975), pp. 256-268.

⁹M. Epprecht, "Domesticity and Piety in Colonial Lesotho: the Private Policy of Basotho Women's Pious Associations", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19/2 (June 1993), pp. 202-224.

¹⁰A. Henriques, "The Catholic Women's Union: a Catholic women's organisation in the Archdiocese of Durban", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 25/2 (December 1999), pp. 121-141.

¹¹J. Brain and M. Christensen, "Catholic women", in P. Denis and J. Brain (eds), *The Catholic Church in contemporary Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 1999), pp. 282-283.

More recently several feminist theologians had new insights into the history of the *manyanos* and their often unrecorded theologies. Particularly significant is Beverley Haddad's research work on the women of Sweetwaters and Nxamalala near Pietermaritzburg and their "theologies of survival". She studies the life stories of twelve women of the Mother's Union, an Anglican sodality in St Raphael's, Sweetwaters.¹² Also worthy of mention are Nyambura Njoroge's doctoral thesis on the moral agency of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa's Woman's Guild in Kenya,¹³ Isabel Phiri's study of Chigwirizano cha Amayi a Christiku, another Presbyterian sodality in Malawi,¹⁴ and Edith Born's research on the Methodist *manyanos* in South Africa, which is based on oral interviews conducted in the mid 1990s.¹⁵

The *manyanos* constitute the backbone of the Christian communities, in all African mission churches and in a significant number of AICs. The contribution of their members to the life of the church is vitally important: they sing, evangelise, care for the sick and raise funds. With few exceptions, the direction of the church is male. It is in their own organisations that the women exercise leadership. But even here they are not autonomous: all key decisions are submitted to the approval of the pastors. They nevertheless have a fairly large degree of independence. The *manyano* women have their day – usually a Thursday – in addition to the Sunday, the day of the common worship. They have their uniform, given to the members at a robing ceremony and worn with pride. Highly visible, the *manyanos* are by far the most organised body in the church. They give their members a sense of pride and dignity which few other organisations in secular society can provide.

The interviews

Our initial intention was to conduct the research in three locations, all chosen for their relatively long history: Sobantu and Imbali in Pietermaritzburg and Umlazi in Durban. As the research progressed, we felt the need to restrict our investigation to Sobantu for the section concerning Pietermaritzburg.

¹²B.G. Haddad, *African women's theologies of survival: intersecting faith, feminisms and development*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2000. Parts of the thesis are discussed in "Theologizing Development: a Gendered Analysis of Poverty Survival and Faith", *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa* 110 (July 2001), pp. 5-19. The stories of twelve MU members have been published, in Zulu and in English, by B. Haddad and N. Magubane in *Untold Stories of Faith: Celebrating 50 Years in the Mother's Union, St Raphael's, Sweetwaters* (Pietermaritzburg, 1999).

¹³N.J. Njoroge, *Kiama kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation* (Accra, Asemba Publishers, 1997).

¹⁴I.A. Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy. Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi* (Blantyre: Christian Association Literature in Malawi, 2000), pp. 80-102.

¹⁵*From Memory to Hope: A Narrative History of the Areas of the World Federation of Methodist Women* (Ferum College, Virginia, 2000), pp. 215-243. We express our gratitude to Deborah Gaitskell who referred us to this publication.

Only three of the women interviewed – of the twenty-three – are from Imbali. They belong to the St John Apostolic Faith Mission. Not all the other women live in Sobantu (some reside in Eastwood or Imbali) but they all go to church in Sobantu. The interviews took place between May and December 2000 either at their homes or in the Sobantu senior citizens hall. They were all conducted in Zulu, transcribed in the original language and translated into English.¹⁶ On average the interviews lasted for an hour, but some were longer. Twenty-three women were interviewed. Since one of the interviews was with two women, the total number of interviews is twenty-two, excluding the pre- and follow-up interviews.

During the same period fourteen interviews were conducted in Umlazi, Durban by another field worker, Olga Dlamini, who is herself a church leader (in the Methodist Church). Some of these interviews still need to be transcribed.¹⁷ This paper deals almost exclusively with the interviews conducted in Pietermaritzburg.

Profile of the interviewer

With two exceptions,¹⁸ the interviews from Pietermaritzburg were conducted by Nokhaya Makiwane, a research assistant attached to the OHP. In *Women of Phokeng*, Belinda Bozzoli notes that her main interviewer's subjective involvement in the lives of the informants and their perception of her as having a particular meaning in their lives proved to her greatest strength. "Of course, she was a University-trained historian and sociologist", she commented. "But to the women she was interviewing ... she was almost a kinswoman, a young girl, a child to some, who wanted to know the stories of the past."¹⁹

Nokhaya Makiwane's empathy with the women she interviewed was of a similar nature. Admittedly she was not a native Zulu-speaker. Born in the Transkei she speaks Xhosa at home. This, however, did not prevent her creating deep relationships with the women of Sobantu. They shared a common experience. Nokhaya knew what it meant to be a woman in an African home. Married to a lay minister, she had spent several years in a seminary and was used to relating to male ministers. Many interviewees were elderly women. For them Nokhaya

¹⁶In addition the fieldworkers were asked to compile a fieldwork report describing the various phases of the interviewing process. All women completed a release form indicating the status of the interview (accessible without restriction, accessible under certain conditions or restricted).

¹⁷For a preliminary analysis of this material, see James Worthington, "Leaders of black women's Christian organisations in KwaZulu-Natal", paper read at the Empowering the Powerless Conference, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 27 June 2001.

¹⁸Both interviews were conducted by Bernard Likalimba, a doctoral student in sociology seconded by the OHP to a University of Hamburg research project on the St John Apostolic Faith Mission. In one of them the wife of a minister is interviewed in the presence of her husband. The second interview was with two young women, with no leadership position in their church.

¹⁹Belinda Bozzoli with the assistance of Mmantho Nkotsoe, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983* (London, James Currey, 1991), p. 6.

was a young girl (in fact she was a mother of four with a thirteen-year old daughter) to whom they could entrust some of their secrets. In the interviews they often addressed Nokhaya as “my child”. They felt at ease with her. Some of them related very intimate experiences. Nokhaya spent hours in Sobantu. Sometimes she would interrupt an important meeting at the university because one of the women she had interviewed needed her help or her advice. She would take the first taxi and join her at the Sobantu senior citizens club hall.

The women interviewed

Our definition of a woman leader was as inclusive as possible. It included minister’s wives, *manyano* leaders, *umkhokhelis* (lay ministers), women ministers, evangelists and Bible class teachers. Of the twenty-three women interviewed only seven exercised a recognised ministry in their church. Four had served, or were still serving, in the Anglican Church: two as lay ministers, one as chair of the church council and the other as church warden. The others were respectively *umkhokheli* in the Uniting Presbyterian Church, local preacher in the Methodist Church and lay minister in the Church of the Nazarene. In addition, three were wives of ministers, a powerful, if informal, position of authority in the church.

The women interviewed belonged to the following churches:

Assemblies of God	5
Church of the Nazarene	1
Church of the Province of Southern Africa (Anglican)	6
Methodist Church of Southern Africa	3
St John Apostolic Faith Mission	4
Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa	4
Total	23

Three of these churches – the Anglican, the Methodist and the Presbyterian churches – are mission churches and have an international character. The other three are Pentecostal. Two –

the Assemblies of God and the Church of the Nazarene – are interracial. The last one, St John Apostolic Faith Mission, can be described as an AIC.

Method of selection

To select the women we combined the methods of cluster sampling and purposive sampling. A cluster sample is defined as a simple random sample in which each sampling unit – in our case the churches of Sobantu – is a collection, or unit, of elements. Cluster sampling is used when it is impossible or impractical to construct a sampling frame in which the sampling units are the sampling elements themselves.²⁰ In purposive or judgmental sampling the investigators use their own judgment about which respondent to choose, and pick only those who best meet the purpose of the study. The advantage of purposive sampling is that the researchers can use their research skill and prior knowledge to choose respondents.²¹

The initial contact – with a woman leader from the Uniting Presbyterian Church by the name of Vera Sikhosana – was initiated by Thulani Mlotshwa, a research assistant who left the OHP in early 2000. Mlotshwa is a minister of the Presbyterian Church. Mrs Sikhosana agreed to help Nokhaya identify other women for the project.

Three other Presbyterian women were interviewed. One of them insisted that Nokhaya first receive permission from the minister of the Presbyterian Church. Once the minister had given his consent, other difficulties were raised. The interview with that woman had to be rescheduled several times. It eventually happened, several months after the first meeting.

Six Anglican women leaders were interviewed. The reason for favouring the Anglican church in the sample was the assumption that Anglicans, given their history of involvement in the struggle against apartheid, might have more to say on political issues than members of other churches. The memory of Victor Afrikander, an Anglican priest murdered in 1990 for his alleged involvement in the ANC, is still alive in Pietermaritzburg. The researcher randomly chose five names on a list provided by the chairperson of the parish council, a woman who had been recommended to her by the parish priest. This woman was also interviewed.

The three Methodist women leaders were chosen in a different way. Nokhaya Makiwane personally knew two of them. The third one was referred to her by one of these two women.

²⁰K. D. Bailey, *Methods of Social Research* (New York, The Free Press and London, Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1982), p. 96.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 99.

One of the remarks made about the previous study on “black clergy under apartheid in the Natal Midlands” was the absence of Pentecostal churches in the sample. Members of three Pentecostal churches are included in the current study. The fact that the researcher herself belonged to a Pentecostal church – the Assemblies of God – was helpful. She first contacted the local minister of the Assemblies of God before randomly choosing a selection of women leaders on a list in her possession. She also interviewed a lay pastor in the Church of the Nazarene. The name of this woman had been given to her by Vera Sikhosana.

AIC members are notoriously difficult to interview. In most of these churches the hierarchy exercises tight control over the faithful. Thulani Mlotshwa, the research assistant in the first project, gained the confidence of several male AIC ministers through his involvement in the Provincial United Christian Churches of South Africa (PUCCSA), a minister fraternal in which a number of AIC ministers also participated.²² Nokhaya Makiwane was less successful. The fact that she was woman may be an explanation for this. She only interviewed a woman leader from the St John Apostolic Faith Mission whom she previously knew personally. Three women from the same church were interviewed by Bernard Likalimba, a student in sociology, born in Malawi, who had been introduced to the leaders of the church by Thulani Mlotshwa.

The shaping of the project

Nokhaya’s understanding of her role as an interviewer and her ability to empathise with the women of Sobantu contributed to the shaping, or rather the reshaping of the project. We started the investigation with a set of pre-formulated questions:

- When and how have the women’s organisations been constituted in the churches under review?
- How did they respond to the segregation policies of the South African state?
- How did they respond to the segregation practices within the churches themselves?
- What has the special contribution of the women’s organisations to the development of the churches been?
- How did they relate to African traditional religion?

Two concerns guided us when we planned the project. The first was the retrieval of the *history* of the black Christian women’s organisations in KwaZulu-Natal. By interviewing elderly women – among those from Pietermaritzburg 17 out of 23 were born before 1941 – we expected to receive new information on the early history of the *manyanos* in KwaZulu-

²²Denis, Mlotshwa and Mukuka, *The Casspir and the Cross*, p. 14.

Natal. We took for granted that the women would be eager to talk about the past. This proved to be a wrong assumption. Some interviews definitely provide information on the foundation and early development of the black Christian women's organisations in Sobantu. But this is not what the women wanted to talk about. They were interested in the present.

Nokhaya's interviewing style allowed the women to take control of the interviews. At the initial meeting she told them the overall aim of the project, namely to retrieve the lost and silenced histories of the Christian women's organisations in Sobantu. She also referred to the above-list of questions given above. In some cases, she gave the women a written summary of these questions.

During the interview itself, she intervened as little as possible in the hope that the women would guide the conversation. From time to time, she would nod or make a brief comment to assure the women of her interest. This method prompted a number of unsolicited topics, such as the role of ministers' wives in the church, the relationship between men and women in the Zulu culture, virginity testing or AIDS.

Our second research goal was to study the impact of apartheid on black Christian women's organisations. Apartheid had been central theme in the study on black clergy in the Natal Midlands. This time we wanted to hear how Christian women (and Christian women's organisations) experienced apartheid in their daily lives. Their stories, we suspected, would be very different from those told by the men we had interviewed earlier. Even if they were not submitted to forced removals, the people of Sobantu were negatively affected by the Group Areas Act which increased their social and cultural marginalisation. Various forms of discrimination were experienced at work. In the late 1980s, they experienced political violence although not to the same degree as the residents of Imbali and Edendale.

Feminist oral history practitioners – in the West – have noted that women often remember the past differently from men. Some studies have found that women's narratives are more likely to be characterised by understatement than those by men. Women avoid the first person and rarely mention personal accomplishments. They do not often place themselves at the centre of public events, they downplay their own activities and emphasise the role of other family members in their recollections. It has also been noted that the women's embeddedness in familial life shaped their view of the world and even their consciousness of historical time.²³

²³J. Sangster, "Telling our stories. Feminist debates and the use of oral history", *Women's History Review* 3/1 (1994). Reprinted in R. Perks and A. Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (London and New-York, Routledge, 1998), p. 89. For a feminist point of view on oral history, see also S. Berger Gluck and D. Patai (eds), *Women's Words. The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New-York and London, Routledge, 1991).

Our research confirms these observations. The stories we collected from the women of Sobantu are definitely different from those of the black ministers interviewed two years earlier in the Natal Midlands. The women we interviewed did not readily volunteer information on their role in the struggle against apartheid. They paid much more attention to the private sphere. For instance it was the effect of violence on the lives of their husbands, children and grandchildren which was of concern to them, not the long-term consequences of the political system associated with the violence.

An important part of the interviews conducted with the male ministers was devoted to the discrimination they experienced in their own churches. The salaries, housing conditions and education opportunities for children were not the same for black and white clergy. Apartheid shaped the very structure of the churches. “The whites had the final say,” one of the informants declared, “even if they were not there.”²⁴

We expected similar stories in the interviews of women leaders. But they had other concerns. The word apartheid – commonly used in Zulu alongside the word *ubandlululo* – appealed to the women interviewed. But they used it in their own way. In their view apartheid, that is discrimination, was, first and foremost, a gender issue. Their problem was not the difference between black and white churches. It was the discrimination suffered by women in churches led by men. Several forms of discrimination were identified: men’s interference in the running of women’s organisations, the excessive power of unelected ministers’ wives, male ministers’ inability to listen to women, resistance to women’s leadership. Several women discussed the influence of Zulu culture on the condition of women. Apartheid, for them, was not only a problem for the church. There was apartheid at home as well. They expressed, sometimes emotionally, the pain caused by gender discrimination.

At the same time, they were at pains to justify their own oppression with cultural or religious arguments. Clearly they did not want to rock the boat. “I do not want to do anything”, said one of them. “This is a problem for our daughters.” The contrast between the high degree of gender consciousness of these women and their apparent submission to the cultural and religious norms of their environment is striking. More research on this should be done.

PART 2 OVERVIEW OF THE RESULTS

The aim of this section is to give a general view of the project’s findings. We shall review specific themes such as the education opportunities of women, their involvement in leadership, their definition of apartheid, the role of uniforms, widowhood, HIV-AIDS and the

²⁴Denis, Mlotshwa and Mukuka, *The Casspir and the Cross*, p. 16.

compatibility between Christianity and traditional African religion. Where possible, direct quotations will be taken from the interviews without, however, mentioning the name of the informants.

Education opportunities for women

The majority of the women interviewed had very little formal education. In some cases this was because their families did not have enough money to send the children to school. In one case, a woman reported that her father had gone to work in the mines and used to write letters home. Her mother once asked her to read one of the letters. By then she was in Grade Three. Seeing that she could read the letter easily, her mother told her that she would not go back to school because she had received enough education for a woman. Clearly there were not enough role-models of educated women to inspire the mother to give more education to her daughter.

In another case a woman reported that when she had reached Standard Eight, her parents told her that she could not go on because there was not enough money for her and her brother to study. Her brother wanted to go to the university. She ended going to a nurses' school even though she too wanted to go to the university. These two examples show that many women have little education because parents prefer to educate boys. This is an example of the cultural oppression of women.

The majority of women who had some education followed what was considered to be a woman's job: nursing and teaching. While in their work places, these women were faced with another challenge, apartheid. One person who was a nurse reported that:

We had same qualifications as whites, but us as blacks we were being made to overwork. Just for example, you as a black person has passed long time ago, and the white person pass when you are qualified already. But if you are to work together with this white person, they would be senior to you. She is going to be made in charge, she would be in charge over you, you would be under a small child whilst you have long qualified. She would be made a sister and you would only be called a staff nurse. As blacks we were getting peanuts, with all your qualification and staff. A white person, a young girl that is newly passed would get almost double the money you are getting. So we were oppressed everywhere.

Leadership qualities

Some women had leadership positions in the structures of the church. However, whether they were elected to those positions or exercised an informal leadership, all stated that they had been appointed by God. Therefore, they had to be humble in their exercise of their leadership roles. Patience was said to be a mark of a good leader, who had to be patient with the people and talk nicely to them.

Leading by example was seen as very important by the women. By being transparent in their behaviour, even during difficult times, they reached out to many people. For example when the community of Sobantu boycotted the payment of electricity bills, one woman lay preacher testified that:

There were some boys that used to live next to the electricity paying office. They used to tell people not to pay. But I never encountered these obstacles. I used to go and pay for my electricity. I made some means for paying for my electricity because I felt guilty of using electricity without paying. Even today I do not owe anything for electricity and God helps because he does not expose you so that the people kill you.

Marriage relationships

Some women felt that leadership also meant maintaining a good marriage relationship with one's spouse. While in the home, the children watch how the parents speak to each other. A woman leader, they said should be respectful of her husband in words and in action. Some admitted that there were cases where woman leaders tried hard to be respectful to her husbands but still found herself being abused by husband who might have been either a Christian or a non believer. They pointed out that when the abuse came from a non believing husband, it was easy to handle. But when it came from a husband who was a believer or even a leader in the church, it was very difficult. In such cases, the woman failed to find people in whom they could confide and ask for help. Their mothers-in-law usually told them to stay in the marriage and endure because, they said, it was what happened to all women.

Raising children

The women leaders emphasised the importance of raising their children in the right way. Leadership was about teaching your children about God and how to pray. Society puts a heavy burden on the raising of a girl child because when she becomes pregnant before marriage, the blame is on the mother. Therefore most women leaders saw the teaching of girls both at home and in the church as a priority. The older women leaders referred positively to the period when virginity testing was done because it ensured that the girls remained virgins until the

time of their wedding. In some churches the ministers argued that virginity testing could not be taken over by the church because it was a cultural practice. The male church leaders argued that the Holy Spirit was supposed to guide the consciences of the girls and boys in the church. If the youth did not listen to the Holy Spirit, nothing could be done about it.

The women leaders also expressed concern about the punishment that parents received when their daughters became pregnant outside marriage. As time went on, these churches ceased to punish parents. The women leaders were unhappy about only the girl's being punished when the boy was known to be from the same church. One woman stressed the need for the fathers in the home and at church to help with the teaching of the boys. The women leaders realised that emphasising only the teaching of the girls was ineffectual.

Some women leaders believed that the babies born of their daughters outside of marriage should be accepted by the grandparents and the church because they had not committed any sin. They argued that these children should be baptised by the church.

Some women leaders expressed deep concern about the raping of girls in the home by family members and at church by church people. This happened during the apartheid era but it was not discussed because the focus was on fighting the whites. In post-apartheid South Africa, rape was more often reported because of the greater freedom of the media, but the church did not discuss the issue. The women wanted to know why that was the case.

Praying for peace

Almost all the churches represented in the sample had a church women's organisation. The women we interviewed recognised that their organisations were the power behind the formal church structures. It was they who prayed for the church and raised funds on its behalf. The call to leadership led to a life of prayer and fasting. The women became prayer warriors in the fight against sickness in their families and in the community.

During the apartheid era, they prayed about political violence. The prayers were not only held in homes and church buildings but also in the streets. For example, during the Seven Day War Christian women and their leaders went into the streets of Sobantu to sing Christian songs and pray. The police did not harass them because they knew that the women wanted peace. They believe that their prayers were answered because none of the praying women was killed. Secondly two months later the violence stopped. Thirdly, as church leaders, they could not take sides with the political parties. This allowed them freedom to travel to the no go areas to bury the dead. The women's organisations took the role of mediators between the fighting political parties. The women were taken violence as a personal issue. In the interviews "they

referred to the fighting groups as “our children”. Thus the people who killed, stole, fought and caused trouble had mothers who cared for their well being. Hence the intensive prayers.

Christian women leaders from various church organisations gathered together on several occasions to pray for peace especially when the elections were approaching. They prayed for peaceful elections and they believe that God answered their prayers.

Raising funds for the church

The women Christian leaders also believe that they are the financial backbone of the church. The money that they have raised has been used to finance revival meetings, to build churches, to pay for the salaries of the black male ministers, to furnish the church and the minister’s house, to buy food for church functions and to help the poor, the sick and the bereaved in the community. In other words, the functional leadership of the church was *de facto* in the hands of the women’s organisations.

Worshipping with whites

During the apartheid era, very few black people had any fellowship with whites. The segregation was based on the laws of the then government. This continued until the early 1990s when apartheid was abolished. But apartheid has been written into the hearts of the people. One woman said she did not want to worship in the white churches because of differences in ways of worship even they belonged to the same denomination. Black people enjoyed long services, loud singing and preaching and different areas for men, women and children in the church. White people did the opposite of what the black people liked. For this reason, she said, she would like to continue having a separate service.

However, the women leaders noted that the educated youth seem to enjoying joining the white churches. It is therefore hoped that change will come with the youth not the older people who grow up under apartheid.

Discrimination in the church

The women interviewed defined apartheid as any kind of discrimination based on race, gender, class and age.

Apartheid taught the black women that:

women are good for having children, washing, cooking for your husband and attending to your in laws. The woman's God given capabilities were not taken into account. Therefore you feel oppressed because you are not doing what God wants you to do.

This mentality continued in the homes where women were valued for their ability to have children and not for what God wanted them to do outside the home.

The women said that apartheid was practiced in the black church in that there was discrimination against women. Women were discriminated against in certain leadership positions. In one church, for example the constitution was changed to allow women to become deacons and elders. But the news of the change was not communicated to the congregation for a long time. The women only heard about it at a circuit meeting where it was requested that all elders should meet. The ministers for these sections deliberately refused to mention the change because they did not want women to become elders and deacons in their church.

In another church, a woman founded a congregation but was not allowed to give Holy Communion, administer baptisms, bury the dead or officiate at weddings. She was told only men could perform those rites. Out of respect she did not argue with the men but she felt that she was being discriminated against.

There was also discrimination when only the wives of ministers, and not other women with leadership qualities, were allowed to take certain leadership positions. Similarly there was discrimination when widows were separated from other churchwomen, when access to the *manyanos* was restricted to married persons and when church leaders were dispensed from the obligation of making offerings to the church.

Powerlessness of women leaders

Many women leaders testified that they had no control over the money that they had raised. The male church leaders did so. The women's organisations had been made powerless by church constitutions which demanded that their decisions had be approved by the male leaders of the church. This affected even fundraising.

The other area of conflict was the appointment of the leaders of the church women's organisations. In most churches, the organisation leader was the minister's wife. The higher the position of the male minister, the higher the position of the wife in the women's organisation. A woman leader who was interviewed protested against this, saying that she was

not the one who was called to the ministry by God. It was her husband. He was also the one who went for theological education. She therefore did not understand why she was also expected to be a leader of the church women's organisation despite her lack of training.

A woman also claimed that, as the leader of the women's organisation, it was not easy to work with the church leaders. A woman leader was treated as a small child. No matter how good a suggestion from a woman leader might be, the "fathers" (*obaba*) did not take it seriously because they did not want to be seen to be guided by a woman. They delayed making a decision on issues raised by women even when they were urgent. The women were made to feel that they did not really need the things that they were asking for.

This attitude was said to exist even in the homes. The women believed that their role was to advise their husbands, especially if the husbands were leaders. But most of the husbands who were church leaders said they could not be told what to do by a woman.

The women leaders added that it was sometimes difficult to work with the women themselves. Some of them refused to accept the leadership of a woman. They would not consider suggestions coming from a woman leader. If a man made the same suggestion, the same women would listen it as if they were hearing it for the very first time. In so doing they undermined the leadership of the women.

The young women leaders faced a similar problem from the older women in the organisation. These older women did not want to accept the leadership of a young minister's wife.

The uniform

Some women leaders supported the idea of having a uniform for women. One woman described her uniform as a shield:

In my heart, when I first wore my uniform, the elderly mothers who were there assured me that whenever I am in this uniform, I was fully equipped as with a weapon. I am equipped in such a way that I can walk at night till morning because I always believe that I am not walking alone. I am equipped with the weapons of my God whom I serve.

During the time of the violence in Sobantu, she felt protected when walking from one section to the other while wearing her uniform. She knew that it was her relationship with Jesus and not the uniform that would take her to heaven, but the uniform showed that she was a woman of prayer and power. This sentiment was shared by many women leaders.

At the same time, some women leaders had reservations about uniforms. In some churches where a minister's wife wore a black coat as a uniform, women found this to be oppressive. Black, they said, was for people who were mourning. Why should they wear such an oppressive colour? Others did not like the idea of a married woman who was a minister being forced to cover her head in church. Others were against the idea of menstruating girls covering their head as a sign of virginity.

In a particular case, a woman was against the wearing of uniforms because it divided the women who were all believers. It was argued that there were some older women who had a relationship with God but did not wear a uniform. In one church the issue of uniform led to a split. Those who felt that all Christians should look the same as children of God left the church. Some women said that white women did not wear uniforms or cover their heads and yet God accepted their prayers. They therefore connected the wearing of uniforms and covering of the head as a tradition based on culture which did not bring anyone to salvation.

Widowhood

Some women resented the fact that the church followed the Zulu custom regarding widowhood. The main issue was the period of mourning. They found that a one-year period of mourning was too long. Mourning is in the heart, they said, and should not be displayed by not going to church, wearing a special uniform or sitting at the back of the church. It was suggested that staying at home for two weeks would be enough. If one was required to go back to work after a short period of mourning, why should one not go to church for fellowship? A widow needed to pray with others in church.

Christianity and African Religion

One woman leader mentioned that when she was sick she did not take traditional medicine but depended on prayer for God to heal her. It had worked for her. Others talked about the controversy that raged in most churches over the performance of rituals with the ancestors. The views on this issue depended on the denomination. One person talked about her God-given gift of healing and prayer. She heard voices telling her what was going to happen to people within her own family and to others. She was not sure if the voices were from God through the ancestors or straight from him. So far the visions had brought healing to many people. Because of this gift, she did not wear black at all so that when her husband died, she wore a different colour from the ones she usually wore. In her church they believed in the existence

of angels and saints. For her this meant that her belief in the ancestors was not incompatible with the beliefs of the church.

Some talked about being asked by the members of their congregation to pray for them during the ceremonies of remembrance of the dead. They refused to do so on the grounds that these rituals were pagan. The minister told the people that if they wanted to perform their rituals, they should leave out Jesus for the two did not go together. This issue was particularly hard for the Christians of the older generation who had grown up believing in the existence of the ancestors and their interaction with the living.

HIV/AIDS

The women church leaders expressed concern at the rate that people were dying of AIDS and the ignorance of the community in dealing with people suffering from this disease. One woman leader spoke of her receiving training to educate the community about AIDS at a time when very little was known about it. She had continued educating the people through Life Line. But she felt this was not enough as she was not reaching the majority of the people that God wanted her to reach.

Another woman leader talked about the way the threat of AIDS was breaking up her son's marriage because her daughter-in-law did not trust her husband. The husband was said to be engaging in high risk behaviour and yet he had not been tested for HIV. Another woman talked about the importance of treating her daughter-in-law as if she was her own daughter. Therefore, would a woman leader be concerned if her son-in-law was engaging in high risk behaviour?

AIDS was experienced a major issue of concern. What should the attitude of the church be? What message did the church have for unmarried couples? Should the church put emphasis on HIV testing before marrying a couple?

Conclusion

The project gives an indication of the issues which concern the leaders of black Christian women's organisations in their homes, in church and in the community. They question many customs the church has always taken for granted. For instance, they are not satisfied with ministers' wives being automatically appointed leaders of the women's organisations. While they support the men's call to ministry, they do not assume that the call includes their wives.

Where they know that God is calling a woman to a leadership position, they take it seriously. The women leaders acted courageously during the apartheid era and they associated themselves with the men who were involved in the violence. By calling them “our children”, they took the responsibility that comes with motherhood. They contributed by mediating the violence until it stopped. In these cases and in many others, the women were less concerned with their position in the formal structures of the church than their actual contribution to its functioning.

The women leaders are aware of the spiritual and financial contribution to the church even though it was not always recognised by the male leadership. But this has not deterred them from fulfilling their God-given duties in leading the church.

From assessing issues of concern to them it appears that the women leaders do not see culture as static but dynamic. For them the needs of the community and of the church necessitate a change of culture. They are prepared to be move on patiently in the hope that the change after which they aspire will happen.