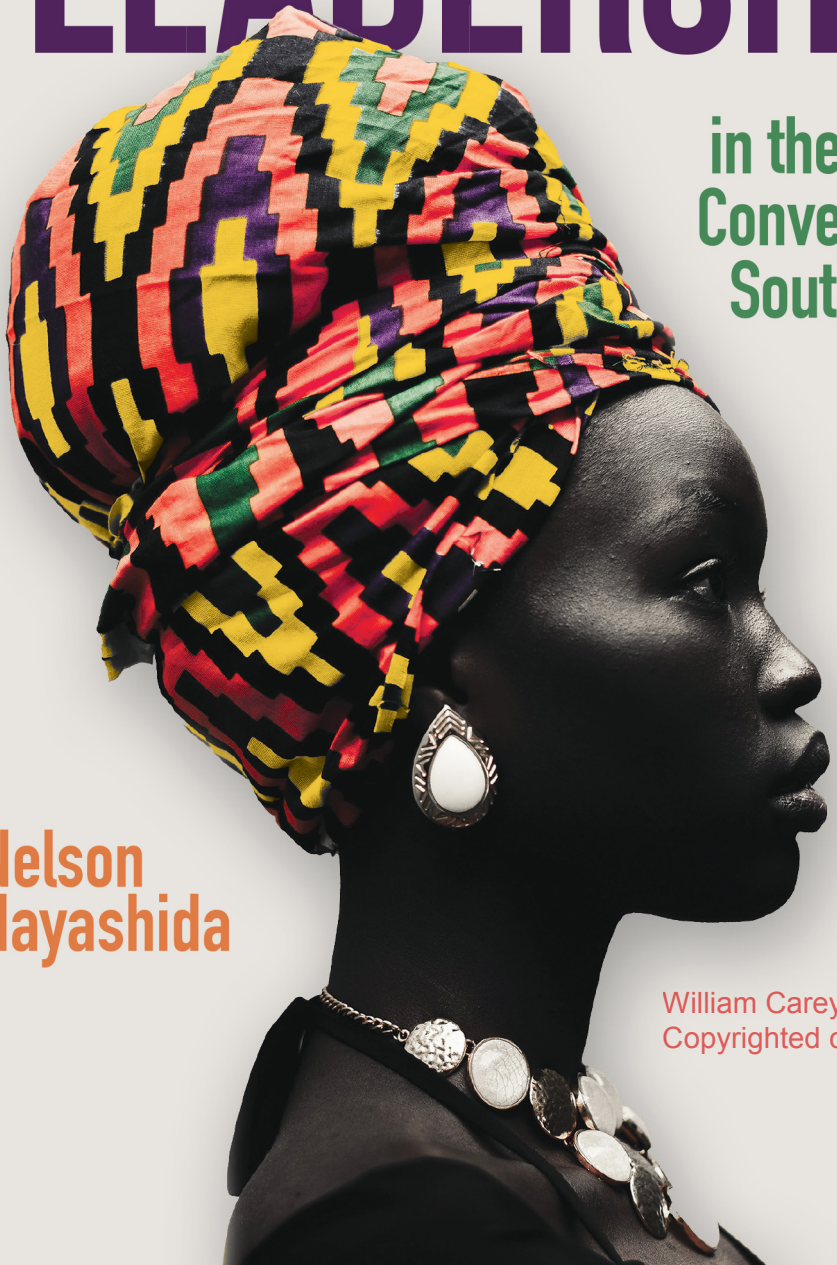
WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP

in the Baptist Convention of South Africa



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Women and Leadership in the Baptist Convention in South Africa
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CHAPTER ONE

THE VIEWS OF FEMINIST, AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMANIST AND AFRICAN WOMANIST THEOLOGIANS IN THE AFRICAN AND NON-AFRICAN MILIEU

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened
Sometimes I wish I could no longer see
All of the pain, the hurt and the longing
My sisters and I, as we try to be free

Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened
Just for an hour how sweet it would be
Not to be struggling, not to be striving
But just sleep securely in our slavery.

But now that I see with my eyes I can't close them
Because deep inside me somewhere I'd still know
The road that my sisters and I have to travel
My heart would say yes, and my feet would say go!
Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened
But now that they have I'm determined to see

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That somehow my sisters and I will be one day
The free people we were created to be.

(Goemans 1997:7)

Riane Eisler (1987:117) reminds us how ancient the oppression of women is. While 'humanism' was admired by men who ruled Greece, it was allowed only up to certain limits. The philosopher Socrates was sentenced to death, for surely he must have been a "radical" for corrupting the youth of Athens. His crime? His notions of equal education for women and justice for women that directly attacked the androcratic premise that might makes right.

Eisler continues (1987:118) that it was Aristotle who gave to Greek and later Western culture the dictum that slaves are meant to be ruled by free men, hence women are meant to be dominated by men -- thereby perpetuating the philosophical foundations of androcratic life. After all, Aristotle argued, anything else violated the "natural," observable order of reality. His influence took deep root in the other major tradition that formed Western civilization -- our Judeo-Christian heritage. Prejudices in interpreting original sin find their source here, as in the "Christian" mythology that ranks God over man and man over woman, child and nature.

Elke Kaiser relates how, in 1996, she met a woman who was regularly beaten by her husband. This went on for years, and she remained in silence and shame. She felt that perhaps she was to blame for her situation, and that if she shared her physical, mental and emotional pain with others they too would blame her. After ten years she spoke out, leaving her husband. As she feared, the pastor of her church joined her family in condemning her, urging her to admit her fault in leaving her husband and return to him. She never returned to

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her husband (1997:9).

The thrust of this chapter will table the discussion on Christian feminist theology with a particular look at the South African situation (African womanist theology). However, Beverly Haddad (1996:199) makes a case for the "prematurity" of it. She argues that for ordinary African women in South Africa, a "theology of survival" is what they live by, and discussions of reconstruction, transformation and liberation is really putting the cart before the horse. For the majority of African women, every day is a struggle for survival in the townships and urban ghetto. They seek a God who rescues them, assists them to find "a way out of no way." This quest for survival takes risk and faith. Many have nothing else.

FEMINIST THEOLOGY -- A DEFINITION

I will define "feminist theology" with the world in view. While South African and African women theologians inform us primarily here, it is helpful to provide the South African and African participation within the spectrum of women's plight beyond even Africa itself, for it has been conclusively observed and recorded that women around the world face similar oppressions and prejudices in the Church.[1] They seek to be released from this bondage from the very institution that pronounces salvation and freedom from sin. See the testimonies of women from around the world in this report (Living Letters: A Report of Visits to the Churches During the Ecumenical Decade -- Churches in Solidarity with Women: 1997).

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Sister Bernard Mncube (1991:358) believes that feminist theology begins with the declaration that in Christ a New Human Being has arisen. This New Human Being includes the female personhood just as it supports and promotes the male personhood. A new social order where mutuality and wholeness is established must be searched for. Women desire a new consciousness, a new way to perceive truth and reality, the opportunity to explore their unique experiences with renewed religious understanding. Feminist theology seeks to allow women to define themselves in their own terms, for their own reasons, without the male-controlling institutional church setting their existential and theological parameters. Women's concerns are therefore the best of liberation theology.

Denise M. Ackermann (1985:35, 41) puts it this way: the birth of feminist theology is signaled "when the private and corporate pain of sexist oppression is reflected on critically and systematically in the light of faith." She warns that if in South Africa a feminist theological expression only reflects a middle-class, white form of rational thought and experience, it is already becoming elitist and in danger of perpetuating the oppressive divisiveness and dualism it seeks to repudiate.

Ackermann distinguishes between 'feminism' and 'emancipation.' Feminism is the effort to recognize all the claims for women's rights (political, legal, etc.) equal to the rights claimed and possessed by men. The emancipation of women is the first step toward their liberation and freedom to make choices in all areas of life (politically, educationally, and professionally) without the limitations of gender. Feminism is the movement beyond emancipation. Feminism nurtures women's critical attitude in asking how so-called free (emancipated) women experience the existing patterns and structures in society. Is

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it right or not to accept the current societal norms and values? Feminist theology, therefore, "asks how a conscientized woman experiences male hierarchical church structures and what may be done to effect change. Feminism tends to be critical of norms and patterns established by history and tradition: religious, theological, scientific, social, political and cultural."[2] Women want to offer their contributions in questioning these patterns, from 'the inside,' on their terms (1985:34).

Virginia Mollenkott (1987:2) speaks of 'mutuality' -- mutual deference and submission, mutual servanthood, mutual concern. This mutuality is taught in the New Testament and expressed in the life of Jesus. In this light men as well as women may be feminists, for they both share a commitment to mutuality and human sexual equality.

Louise Kretzschmar (1991:108) claims that Christian feminism not only precedes the modern feminist movement but is distinctive in a number of ways, even though it can be admitted that secular feminists have influenced Christian feminist thinkers. While feminist theology is imbedded in the Christian faith, it is critical of the Christian tradition's sexism.[3] Feminist theologians claim that women's radically new and uplifted personhood and roles in family and society can be linked all the way back to the New Testament teachings of Jesus.[4] Feminist theology is plainly against discrimination against women (sexism) whether by women or men.

Fifteen years ago Landman (1984:1) prophesied that "one day feminist theology will have repaired the schism in humanity." That "one day" is not today. The struggle continues.

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