


'Deliver us from patriarchy': A gendered perspective of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and implications for pastoral care

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The church is a fertile ground for nurturing and protecting patriarchy. Within the Christian church, gender equality remains a theoretical notion, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) is no exception in this regard. Written from the perspective of African women's theology, this article critically reflects on and interprets gender issues in ELCSA leadership structures by exploring the gender biases involved in the running of the church and the implications of these biases for gender questions about reformation and pastoral care in ELCSA congregations. Findings indicate that the gender gap in ELCSA structures is neither biblical nor constitutional but is protected by the presence of wives of bishops, deans and pastors who are placed strategically in women's leagues, particularly the Prayer Women's League (PWL). In addition, qualifying the bishops, deans and pastors as ex-officio members of these groups constitutes an obstacle to achieving gender equality in the Church's leadership structures and has implications for pastoral care in the ELCSA.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article is written from a Christian-anthropological perspective. By reviewing literature from social sciences, practical and systematic theology, it integrates sociological and African traditional assumptions of gender and religion that hinder the African church's reformation praxis, thereby affecting pastoral care.

Keywords: reformation; patriarchy; Prayer Women's League; Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa; pastoral care; African women's theology; gender gap; church leadership.

Introduction

Female membership in the African church is almost 80% (Mwaura 2005:401–412); however, rather sadly, gender inequality remains a problem. If, in 2005, women made up 80% of church membership, according to Mwaura, in 2019, female membership could be more than 80%. According to the Pew Research Center's 2018 report, more women than men are religious (Cox & Diamant 2018). Chen-yang (2013:112) confirmed this in a study of the gender gap in Protestant churches, where women always outnumber men. Arguing from a Chinese context, Chen-yang notes that local congregations serve as women's social space, leading to the feminisation of Protestantism. The church in Africa is also dominated by women. For example, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA)¹ parish in Gauteng where I serve, women constitute almost 85% of the membership, according to the parish/congregational register (Ekukhanyeni Membership Register 2019).² However, based on the church attendance every Sunday, the gender ratio is approximately 10 women to one man, meaning that some men just register as members but do not attend church services. Although women dominate numerically, the leadership and executive positions in ELCSA are in the hands of men who control the day-to-day running of the church, as well as the strategic positions and processes.

The ELCSA was established on 18 December 1975 at Tlhabane, Rustenburg, during the Constituting Assembly, which took place from 15 to 20 December 1975.³ The ELCSA has two influential offices, that of the presiding bishop and of the general secretary, who are both voted into office. The offices of the presiding bishop and the general secretary are responsible for church-wide administration while diocesan bishops, their general secretaries and deans are responsible for church administration in their dioceses. The presiding bishop of ELCSA, his deputy, president and chairperson, deputy

1. In this article, church refers to the body of Christian believers.

2. As part of the clergy serving in the ELCSA Mamelodi West Parish, I have access to the church register.

3. Read the history of ELCSA online at <https://www.elcsa.org.za/history-.html>.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

president and chairperson, general secretary and general treasurer, as well as lay clergy are all male (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa [ELCSA] 2019:7). Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa has membership across four Southern African countries, namely, South Africa, Swaziland, Lesotho and Botswana,⁴ and the leadership of key portfolios is in the hands of men (ELCSA Directory 2019:97–157; ELCSA Church Council Meeting 2019). Today, the ELCSA is divided into seven-plus-one mission circuits, each headed by a bishop, while the circuits are headed by deans. The ‘plus one’ is the Lesotho Mission Circuit, which was launched as part of the ELCSA.

It is important to note that the ELCSA Directory, minutes and other key records of the church, parishes and congregations do not contain gender statistics or information about the gender gap in the church executive or membership, hence the significance of this study.⁵ Previous researches stress that women remain marginalised and excluded from decision-making structures within the broader church (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2014:114), and in this case, within the ELCSA (Phaliso 2012). The results that were announced on 17 February 2019 reveal that all the important portfolios and the councils in the Central Diocese comprise 90% males (Announcement: Diocesan Election Results [ELCSA-Cd] Ref: des-cd/B14/2019). This means that the few men in the church make decisions for women who are generally the majority; this information is based on empirical studies (Cox & Diamant 2018; Chen-yang 2013) and church records. According to the participants in Gunner’s study, male leaders in church structures tend to ignore issues that affect women, both in church and society, because they do not want to lose power (Gunner 2015:33). Absence of women in leadership positions in the ELCSA silences them and deters their participation in the reformation of the ELCSA congregations and parishes. This has implications for the kind of pastoral care extended to congregants and the wider Christian community served by the ELCSA.

I am a member of the clergy of the ELCSA, and I often facilitate Contextual Bible Studies (CBS) with women from different prayer leagues. In the CBS spaces, women raise their voices to contest and protest against patriarchy. They freely interpret the Bible from their lived experiences and disapprove of the chaos that is being witnessed in the ELCSA as having its roots in patriarchy. I do not intend to use CBS information in this article, as this is a non-empirical study. However, I will rely on my personal observations of how patriarchy hinders and deflects the reformation and pastoral care agenda of the church, as a member of the ELCSA and its clergy. Some of the data come from the ELCSA records such as minutes of meetings and reports. Thus, this article is written from an explicitly feminist standpoint theory,

4. See Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) at <https://www.elcsa.org.za/home.html>.

5. I sent e-mails to different offices of ELCSA requesting for formal gender statistics of the church members without any success, which suggests that they probably have no database with such information. As a result, I relied on church and diocese meetings to obtain the gender statistics.

as conceptualised by Sandra Harding (1987), which argues that knowledge emanates from a social position. A feminist standpoint theory legitimises the subjective knowledge, complexity and contradictions (Harding 1993). In feminist research, researchers are gendered and their gender shapes their experiences of reality in a gendered cultural context (Fanow & Cook 1991). The feminist research looks at the world from a subjective gender dimension, through the eyes and experiences of a woman (Harding 1987). Thus, this article reflects on and interprets gender issues in ELCSA’s leadership structures from the perspective of African women’s theology. In particular, the study explores the gender biases men and women display in running the broader church, which help to maintain the strategic positions that men occupy. It also examines the implications of these biases for gender issues in relation to reformation and pastoral care in the ELCSA.

Gender and the church in Africa: A perspective from African women’s theology

Research, particularly by female and male theologians, confirms that the majority of members in any church are women (Cox & Diamant 2018; Chen-yang 2013). Nonetheless, church leadership continues to be in the hands of men who are the minority (Gunner 2015; Mwaura 2005; Phiri 1997a). Hadebe argues that whenever the church is confronted with a need for gender analysis, there is resistance (Hadebe n.d.). According to Hadebe, resistance occurs because the church in Africa is a fertile ground for the oppression of women, as it promotes patriarchy as the norm in Christianity. Patriarchy is an ideology that gives power to men and legitimises the oppression of women in all sectors of society (Sultana 2010). Those who dominate church leadership and management positions in the church are men. As a result, church leadership has the potential to repress the opposite sex, systematically and institutionally. Gender research reveals that women constitute the majority in Christian churches across the continent (Falola & Amponsah 2012), as well as globally, but they are ‘absent from the power structures of the churches, which are male dominated’ (Mwaura 2005:411). The ELCSA has been under male leadership since her inception in Africa. In this church, women in leadership positions are outnumbered by men (ELCSA Church Council Meeting 2019:7; ELCSA Directory 2019:97–157), making the Evangelical Lutheran churches in Africa a playground for patriarchy.

Patriarchy in the African church is nurtured by androcentric biblical interpretations that are gender biased. According to Hadebe, when confronted with issues of gender equality, church leaders often fear that conceding to a gender analysis of the church structure will change the status quo, even though the structure is unjust towards women. Such fears, according to Hadebe, may be categorised as fear of loss, fear of change and fear of the unknown (Hadebe n.d.). The church in Africa resists gender analysis by hiding behind the Bible

and culture⁶ (Chifungo 2015:148). This resistance to gender analysis is promoted by both men and women in the church. However, not all women in the church accept and promote patriarchy, as some, particularly those who have gone through theological education, raise their voices to protest the use of the Bible and culture to justify their oppression and exclusion from leadership (Dube 2004; Nadar 2004; Phiri 1997a:16).

Some of the initiatives in this regard include the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as the 'Circle') by Professor Mercy Oduyoye. The Circle aims to encourage women to study theology and apply gender analysis to the Scriptures and culture in order to create a liberating theology for women (Phiri 1997b). Such a theology allows women to take their rightful place as equal participants, able to use their gifts without restriction, in both society and the church. The Circle has produced books that challenge the religious and cultural legitimisation of women's oppression, and some of them are now used as textbooks in various universities and seminaries. At the peak of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic, Circle theologians through their research raised the voices of women and showed that women's marginalisation aided their vulnerability to HIV infection. Thus, the Circle takes on issues affecting women and presents the theological re-reading of key texts to transform situations of oppression to that of liberation (Dube 2004; Nadar 2004).

At the grassroots level, Prayer Women's Leagues (PWLs) or *Manyano* movements are used as critical spaces for women to reflect on their faith and share experiences that enable them to resist patriarchy (Haddad 2004:4). Haddad (2004:8) described the PWL movement as a site of struggle for survival and resistance against the patriarchal, ecclesial and colonial forces in the missionary church. The PWL is a space where religious women are safe to interpret the Bible in a way that liberates them; a space where all are equal before God who created them in the image of God; and a space where, without exception, their theology of liberation gives them dignity and voice. In the ELCSA, the PWL is the backbone and pillar of the church but, unfortunately, its potential is not fully utilised, hence the slow pace of transformation in congregations and parishes.

Women and patriarchy in church

Although women explicitly resist patriarchy in CBS spaces, they appear to support patriarchy by voting men into positions of executive power in church. The reasons for this are puzzling, as the resistance does not seem to fit into the gender justice debate in the broader Christian Church. The gender justice issue in the church in Africa is complicated by women's refusal to vote their fellow women into positions of power. As women are the majority in church, clearly, they are the ones who vote men into positions of power. African

women theologians have long observed that 'women are not only victims but also perpetrators of oppression against themselves' (Kamaara & Wangila 2009:131). Women resist gender transformation by supporting traditional gender constructions that tend to oppress them. In contrast, Hendricks and Rutoro (2008:45) argued that it is the men who oppose the inclusion of women in church leadership, while the majority of women support the inclusion of women. However, the authors do not justify how women support the inclusion of women in church leadership positions. Thus, it is possible that women only support female inclusion theoretically, but in practice, the opposite is the case. Gender ideology has socialised women to internalise the notion that men are born leaders and women are designed to be followers and servants of men. In addition, gender stereotypes have constructed women as ineffective leaders; hence, men resist being led by women who, according to patriarchal norms, are inferior to them (Mwaura 2005:412). Although the ELCSA allows the ordination of women, it maintains a theology that nurtures patriarchy by consistently normalising the appointment of male bishops and a predominantly male Church Council (Executive Council [EXCO]) that relegates women to the periphery of church leadership.

African women theologians who critique patriarchy in the broader church argue that theology must be practised also from the women's perspective (Okure 1993:77). Okure and other African women theologians have developed a methodology, which adopts feminist interpretation of the Bible in the following fashion. Firstly, these women theologians identify the situation of African women in the context of their cultures and from a critical point of view, relating it to how Jesus handled such situations and integrating socio-cultural sources and the Bible. Secondly, they select a particular text of the Bible for theological analysis. Thirdly, they apply their theological reflections to the experiences of women in the church and search for more insight from the Gospel (Okure 1993:77–82). It is worth noting that African women theologians allow women's experiences to dialogue with Scripture, and on the question of church leadership, they seek answers from the Scripture to understand how Jesus handled the question of female leadership in the church. For African women theologians, the Bible is the critical tool for their theologising, and this is followed by women's life experiences because their theology is linked to their daily lives (Kasomo & Maseno 2011:157). Their methodology 'challenges cultural socialisation and rejects the assumption that the roles of women and men have already been fixed, either by the creator or by the culture' (Kanyoro 2001:45). African women's theology is relevant to this study because the starting point for Lutheran theology is Martin Luther's *Sola Scriptura*, which places Scripture over church tradition (Marty 2007:17). My gendered hermeneutics of the ELCSA's leadership structure therefore argues that the ELCSA betrays Martin Luther and other church reformers by prioritising church tradition that elevates male supremacy over the teachings of Scripture on gender equality.

6. Culture in this article is defined as a way of life, which includes the system of beliefs, values and assumptions of a particular group of people.

Gender gap in Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa leadership

The gender gap in African church leadership positions emanates from colonialism and missionary theology that placed women in subordinate positions and men in leadership positions. Oyewumi (2002) showed how the colonialist thinking constructed the social divide worldviews that promote unfair domination such as human over subhuman or non-human, masculine over the feminine and civilised over 'barbaric'. Such worldviews legitimised male hegemony and the 'patriarchalising' of African gender contexts through the Western scholarship that teaches biological determinism (Oyewumi 2002). A comprehensive analysis of the archaeology of African communities reveals an inclusive religion, which allowed both men and women to take religious leadership roles as prophets and prophetesses (Mwaura 2005). The ordination of women in most Christian churches is contested for fear that it would give women power and authority over male congregants (Hadebe n.d.).

Although Lutheran theology emphasises the priesthood of all believers, the church follows a hierarchical leadership structure. The ELCSA, which was born from the merger of former regional churches that were established by various mission societies, has a presiding bishop who is the overall executive leader of the ELCSA, followed by the general secretary. Each diocese then has its own bishops and deans. All the leaders elected to the executive positions of the seven-plus-one diocesan office such as bishops and the majority of the deans in the ELCSA are men. However, there are a few female deans in various dioceses – one in Botswana and one each in the Eastern and Northern dioceses (see ELCSA Directory 2019:157). This number is certainly inadequate, given that the ELCSA began to train and ordain women in the 1970s. The situation indicates not only a slow reformation but also the rejection of reformation.

Research has shown that electing a woman into a leadership position in public office is an efficient way of enhancing the representation of women's interests (Tamerius 2010). Women in leadership positions represent the voice of the masses in church who happen to be women. They understand the lived experiences of women on the margins, which can influence and guide the pastoral care provided by the church. The Constitution of the ELCSA, which was amended in 2011, uses gender-inclusive language for church leadership positions including executive leadership posts such as that of the bishop. This indicates that women are allowed to take up executive leadership positions in the ELCSA church at large. It is, however, shocking to note that although the ELCSA constitution recognises gender inclusiveness, the church leadership in the ELCSA remains male dominated. The gender gap in the ELCSA is not a constitutional, doctrinal or Gospel issue but seems to be one of resistance and the fear of being led by women. Religious leadership is still categorised as a masculine role by many men and women, because religion

itself is patriarchal (Stopler 2008). Feminists, particularly religious feminists, identify naive interpretations⁷ of religion and culture as the basis for the oppression of women (Nyengele 2004; cf. Oduyoye 1995). In the African context, religion and traditional culture are complementary because they safeguard the hegemony of patriarchy in families, religious spaces and the broader society. The shaping of the public and private understanding of gender roles in African communities is influenced by religion and culture (Ebere 2011). Some naive interpretations of the Bible, particularly of Pauline letters,⁸ are used by some to justify male leadership in church, family and society, as normative. Thus, churches in Africa are led by men, who make decisions on how women, who are in the majority, should worship their creator.

The ELCSA is no exception, as membership is predominantly female while leadership is predominantly male. The ELCSA leadership does not reflect proportionately the female population, as women are still underrepresented at all levels of executive leadership in elected office. What contribute to this 'gender gap' are the traditional social constructions of family and community (Logan & Bratton 2006). Patriarchal ideology has a negative influence on ecumenism in Africa as well as on how women and men make decisions about leadership positions. Ebere (2011:1) rightly argued that there is a strong tendency towards greater conservatism among African women than among men with respect to ideology, electoral preferences and political attitudes. The absolute leadership in administrative offices of the ELCSA clearly denies women's participation in important decisions that affect the future of the church, thus affirming the view that 'Christianity reinforces the depersonalization of women' (Oduyoye 2004:72). The United Nations (UN) Women Report observes that lack of leadership skills in those in high office is a threat to gender equality, because they unintentionally justify the ideology that uplifts men and undermines women (UN Women Report 2015). Although the church is primarily informed by Scripture alone, the naive interpretations of the Bible could be the reason as to why the church continues to struggle with issues of patriarchy. In addition, Southern Africa is a subregion of a patriarchal Africa, whose states are being led mostly by traditional old men who have internalised the idea that patriarchy is a norm and therefore explicitly resist transformation. The church in Africa, including the ELCSA, also continues to struggle with gender issues at the executive level. Remarkably, two countries, Swaziland and Lesotho, where the Lutheran Churches are member churches of the ELCSA, are absolute traditional monarchies. In a monarchic state, the king is the head of state and presides over the constitution. In such states, women are given some leadership positions such as ministerial posts, but they cannot be sovereign over the state.

7. Naive interpretation of Scripture in this article means a simplistic or literary approach to interpretation, which ignores the historical origins, language and expressions of the text being interpreted.

8. The text of 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 says, 'For God is not a God of disorder but of peace – as in all the congregations of the Lord's people. Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church'.

Gender and leadership offices in Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa

It is important to identify the gender gap in ELCSA's administrative offices as unconstitutional and contradictory to the reformation objective that prioritised equality in all spheres. The aim of the reformation was to make the Gospel accessible and comprehensible to the people as a liberating and uniting message. The division of the church where there is inequality between men and women disrupts the ecumenism of the church. Patriarchy is used to justify this inequality. In patriarchal ideology, women are expected to submit at all times to men who make decisions on behalf of women and children, and about how women and children should be cared for. African women theologians have long observed that the leadership of the African mainline church is patriarchal and hierarchal in such a way that it excludes women (Phiri 1997a:19).

What is interesting is that the ELCSA has a gender policy that informs the church and has gender-specific programmes, including the ordination of women. Many women undergo theological education and training for ordination, and quite a number of women are part of the ordained ministry, which is a prerequisite for elective positions of executive leadership in the ELCSA. However, women in ELCSA are still stereotypically placed in lower positions. The highest positions that women currently occupy in the ELCSA are that of dean, ordained minister or project manager of a specific project run by the church. In addition, other strategic positions such as presidents of the General Assembly, Synods and chairpersons of councils that are not necessarily for ordained leaders but for lay leaders, regrettably, are taken by men through votes. Phaliso describes the exclusion of women in the ELCSA as worrying. She noted that women's issues are muted in the ELCSA and that women use church associations to resist patriarchy and to survive (2012:361). She further shows that in order to close the gender gap in the ELCSA leadership, there is a need to train more female pastors because the challenges faced by women within society and in church spheres can only be addressed by other women, as men have little or no interest in addressing them (Phaliso 2012:361).

Although it may be argued that men possibly have women's interests in their leadership agenda, their interest in women's issues is theoretical because they do not have first-hand experience of what constitute women's issues. As a result, the dictum of feminism, 'the personal is political', an idea that was first introduced by Carol Hanisch in the 1970s and originally published in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, correctly highlights that personal life and personal politics cannot be separated or ignored. Sandra Harding's (1993) standpoint theory, which held that marginalised groups have an advantage in being able to spot biases that the dominant group cannot see, should not be ignored if the church is to be reformed and transformed. Standpoint theory

gives voice to the voiceless and marginalised groups by allowing them to challenge the *status quo* as the outsider within. This is what this article aims to achieve. As an African woman theologian and clergy, I have observed, for several years, that the ELCSA EXCO is male biased, and it silences women in the day-to-day running of the church. Women are treated like children and only acknowledged when their votes and financial contributions are needed. In a recent informal conversation, an elderly woman asked me a critical question about gender injustice in ELCSA when she said:

'[W]hy do we allow men who happen to be the minority in our church make decisions about the church and us; when will we ever have a woman represent us the majority by leading the church?' (Member of ELCSA Prayer Women's League, female)

This is a question that many women, even those who participate in CBS, and some liberated men grapple with silently and in their safe spaces.

'Deliver us from patriarchy' – Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa Prayer Women's League resisting patriarchy

Women may not question their exclusion from top leadership positions, publicly and explicitly, but in their private and safe spaces, they do question the dominance of men in top and executive leadership offices, as the comment from the elderly woman quoted above shows. The ELCSA PWL is a group of (ELCSA Constitution of PWL):

[W]omen who are fully contributing members of a congregation of ELCSA, who are involved in the spreading of the gospel, who partake in the sacraments and lead an exemplary life. (n.d.)⁹

Women use the PWL as a safe space to resist patriarchy. Their motto, 'bear one another's burdens' is taken from Galatians 6:2a (ELCSA Constitution of PWL n.d.). The motto explains that women use this space as a safe place to resist certain forms of oppression in their communities (Haddad 2004). According to Haddad (2004:10), the PWL uses prayer to God as a means by which its women unburden themselves to God in the absence of the 'sites of the struggle in their own safe space'. On the other hand, only few women in the PWL openly resist patriarchy. There is a tendency to engage in spiritual escapism in PWL spaces, because even the few men and women who try to facilitate transformation are resisted by women in the safe spaces of the PWL. For example, my radical stand against patriarchy in the church has been resisted by some women, who prefer to be led by men. However, some women have shown appreciation of and solidarity with my approach and have consistently invited me to conduct CBS with them on specific gender justice themes. In the CBS spaces, some women have raised the concern that male leaders somehow tend to access their safe space (PWL conferences and meetings).

9.The Constitution of the Prayer Women's League of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa from <https://elcsased.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/elcsa-pwl-constitution.pdf>.

The ELCSA PWL Constitution states that the parish pastor can attend all meetings of the League as an ex-officio member at the parish level. At the circuit level, the dean shall be the ex-officio member of the League. At the diocesan level, the bishop shall be the ex-officio member of the League in the Diocese, and church-wide, the presiding bishop shall be an ex-officio member of the committee (ELCSA Constitution of PWL). This reveals that the absence of women in executive leadership positions in ELCSA administrative offices subjects women to male leadership imposition and interference. Thus, male leaders still have the power to control PWLs' activities because the constitution allows them to be ex-officio members at PWL meetings. This then means that PWL meetings are no longer safe spaces for women to resist patriarchy, because those who benefit from patriarchy are able to access that space. Although from a liberative perspective, ex-officio membership should be used as an opportunity to facilitate transformation that can help to break the patriarchal attitudes and biases, particularly by the relatively liberated male and female pastors, it is not the case in the ELCSA because ex-officio membership is used to protect its exclusive and oppressive system.

I cannot help but argue that ELCSA is a fertile ground for patriarchy. In spite of the presence of female clergy, who are much fewer than their male counterparts, Phaliso stresses the need to train more female clergy in the ELCSA in order to close the existing gender gap in leadership (Phaliso 2012:367). The patriarchal leadership structure in the ELCSA continues to influence the day-to-day administration of the church, both directly and indirectly. The ELCSA constitution is gender inclusive but loopholes that accommodate and nurture patriarchy and the silencing of women remain.

In addition, patriarchy is nurtured in the ELCSA by those churches that continue to assign leadership positions in the PWL to the wives of pastors, deans and bishops. These women are seen as church mothers because it is assumed that their husbands are the church fathers. This ideology is dangerous, as it implements a family structure in the church where leadership of the family consists of a father and mother who make final decisions about the day-to-day running of the 'family'. If this is the case, then, church matters could be discussed and solved in 'pillow conversations' in the clergy's bedroom. Although it may be argued that spouses of clergy in the ELCSA are no longer automatically given leadership positions, old practices or habits 'die hard', and women continue to promote them. Moreover, wives of pastors, deans and bishops are members of the PWL, which means that their presence implicitly or explicitly influences the decisions of the league. I have observed that when the spouses of church leaders are present during CBS with PWL members, women choose their words more carefully when responding to questions. I sometimes sense the silencing of significant experiences and emotions because of the presence of the wife of a pastor, dean or bishop. However, when these leaders' wives are absent from the meetings, women often show signs of freedom in their responses to CBS questions by freely questioning or criticising the *status quo* in the church. I enjoy such CBS sessions because even the quiet

members of PWL have something to say. This shows that PWL meetings cannot be regarded as safe spaces if the clergy or their spouses are present.

The wife of a religious leader in particular, who is forced to be submissive to her husband because of naive interpretations of Scripture, cannot oppose or query her husband's wishes, especially in public. Phaliso confirms that 'some women are not comfortable with *pastors'*, *Deans'* or *Bishops' wives* in the leadership as they tend to be their husband's spies' (2012:367, *emphasis added*). Enabling the wives of male leaders to play leadership roles in the PWL amounts to a false representation of gender inclusion because, in fact, those wives are being used as instruments to protect patriarchy and their husbands' interests. No doubt, male leaders use their wives as their mouthpiece. Silencing women through this strategy therefore works for the ELCSA and the broader Lutheran church in Africa because the women share leadership with their husbands and often help to subvert gender justice. A male leader who places his wife in a leadership position cannot claim that she represents women. The first wave of feminism dismisses such a claim, arguing that women's submission to their husbands was an obstruction to the progress of the suffragette movement¹⁰ (Lorber 2010). The common assumption is that religious women respect the religious gender constructions that emphasise women's submission to their husbands (Dube 2007:367). As a result, women tend to represent their husbands' interests. Phaliso (2012:367) rightly stated that male leadership in the ELCSA 'played a big role in trying to mould the women's league the patriarchal way to suit and to give male dominance comfort'. Strategies used by the leadership of the church are aimed at excluding women from participating in important decision-making processes.

The dominance of male leaders in the ELCSA and the broader Southern African Lutheran Church is noticeable also in the leadership of the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa (LUCSA). This Communion of Lutheran Churches has 15 member churches in 10 Southern African countries, according to the LUCSA official website.¹¹ Of the 15 member churches, none of the church leaders or bishops is a woman, which means that the male-dominated council is patriarchal and androcentric. The Communion's all-male council, which is made up of the bishops of the 15 member churches, meets to make decisions about transformation, development and the projects of the church, which concern mostly women. Consequently, they ignore female agency and the fact that women are capable of making decisions about issues that affect them without undue male interference.

Implications of patriarchy for pastoral care

Feminists in religion have long identified religion as a 'safe space' for binary gender constructions (Oduyoye 2001:18).

10. The suffragette was a period of first-wave feminism during the 19th and 20th centuries when women questioned their exclusion by law from voting and from social norms.

11. See the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa at <https://www.lucsa.org/>.

Although ELCSA has progressively embraced gender equality by ordaining female clergy, the church is still struggling with gender imbalance at the leadership level. The underrepresentation of women in the ELCSA leadership is a challenge to the progress of the church, because men cannot honestly address issues that explicitly affect women. The concerns of women, which include the struggle against domestic and gender-based violence, domestic abuse, gynaecological problems, motherhood, child abuse, incest, poverty and the many other ills that affect women and girls, require a pastoral caregiver to sensitively understand implications for these to the dignity of women from an insider's perspective. The male leadership in the ELCSA overlooks this reality by assuming that the policies and programmes they approve as the leaders of the church are the best for women. The majority of ELCSA women are traditional African women who may have different priorities from those of men.

The PWL's active standpoint on pastoral care asserts that women prioritise the well-being and welfare of congregants and the community (Chisale 2018a). Although the reformation recognises the 'priesthood of all believers', it is clear that men's and women's priorities still differ, with men prioritising clerical politics and women drawing from their maternal instincts to prioritise issues that matter to congregants and communities in their everyday lives, such as caring for people, pastoral matters, and healing and growing the church. By this, I do not imply that pastoral care is feminine but that although men have a tendency to care, they have different priorities from women. For effective pastoral care, therefore, women and men should work as partners (Chisale 2018b).

Making women partners with men in leadership positions has the potential to create a safe space for women to add their voices to the direction of pastoral care and the ecumenism of the church. The reformation challenged the church to allow people to read the Bible by themselves and in their own language, for the sake of liberation. As such, the exclusion of women from executive leadership positions in the church constrains and contradicts both the goals of the reformation and the pastoral care of the church.

Pastoral care should be liberative for all congregants, both male and female. The culture that we live in requires that we reinterpret Scripture in a way that is contextually relevant to our lives. The Scripture shows that Jesus included women in his ministry and he allowed them to speak about their experiences authentically in a world where they were generally ignored, demeaned and misunderstood (Mk 5:33). The aim of pastoral care is to liberate and empower the pastoral care seeker. How then can women be empowered and liberated if the curriculum, content and approach to pastoral care are authored, signed and approved mainly by men who dominate the clergy and the executive leadership of the church?

Large Christian churches like the ELCSA are supposed to lead by example by lobbying, encouraging and allowing women to take up executive leadership positions in the church.

From a justice theory perspective, the majority should not be led by the minority. The question by the woman who asked why men should lead women who are in the majority in the church is relevant and significant to the church's reformation agenda. As women are in the majority in the church, they should participate in leading the church. Accordingly, African women theologians have campaigned for 'the end of sexism and the establishment of a more just society of men and women who seek the well-being of the other' (Phiri 2004:16). The gendering of executive leadership in the Lutheran church, particularly the ELCSA, undermines women's vocation to lead the church. If reformation is to be progressive, we need to see a change in the executive leadership structures, from patriarchy to gender equality. While a certain amount of progress has been made in achieving gender equality on the structural level at the ELCSA through the ordination of women (Froschauer 2014), the voices of female pastors are suppressed because they are few, and some of them are married to male pastors. As a result, they may be forced to protect their husbands' interests. The gender gap in ELCSA leadership has serious implications for the pastoral ministry of the church, which is a crucial component as well as the backbone of every church.

Conclusion

It is important to stress, in conclusion, that reformation did not end with the death of church reformers, but it is an ongoing process. As we continue reading the Bible in our own languages and contexts, the Gospel's liberation story reminds us of the significance of ecumenism and unity in the work and pastoral ministry of the Lord. The ELCSA's constitution is gender inclusive, but that is merely theoretical because some loopholes are used to protect and nurture patriarchy. This study critically considered the ELCSA leadership from the perspective of an African female theologian. The study has shown that the leadership of ELCSA is unrepresentative, as men occupy most of the executive leadership positions in the church. It also emerged that the PWL of the church has the potential to promote gender equality in leadership positions but there are limitations in its ministry. In addition, the gender gap in ELCSA is not a constitutional but a resistance issue, which has serious consequences for the pastoral care ministry of the church. Men and women resist women's leadership because of the gender ideology that naturalises leadership as a male characteristic. Although the ELCSA is a progressive church, the gender gap in the executive leadership negates the gains of reformation in the church.

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Authors' contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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