

Religious Gullibility and Female Leadership in Pentecostal Churches in Zimbabwe: A Feminist Inquiry

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Abstract

The research is a religious feminist inquiry into the role of Pentecostal Churches' understanding of female leadership in the creation of gullible Church congregants. The article argues that most Pentecostal views on female leadership have roots in patriarchy, where male leaders contribute to the gullibility of congregants who become customised to accept male leadership in their Churches without questioning. The research adopted a qualitative approach using a case study research design. The research found that the issue of female leadership in most Pentecostal Churches is represented by women who are not critical of the patriarchy all its tendencies. The research revealed that women who assume leadership roles in most Pentecostal Churches are those who ride on their husbands' backs since they are so positioned as wives of influential male leaders such as Pastors, Elders, Deacons, Bishops and Archbishops. In essence, therefore, these women in leadership do not in any way significantly question patriarchal leadership styles and decisions. Thus, instead of helping other women to contest for power in the Church, wives to male Church leaders tend to make congregants gullible to accept the *status quo*. The research recommends that women in Pentecostal Churches should resist and question female representation by women who do not stand up for their concerns and rights.

Keywords: Pentecostal Churches, religious feminist theory, female leadership, gullibility

Introduction

Pentecostal Churches in Zimbabwe have made commendable efforts in promoting female leadership, regardless of their status. This is evidenced by the number of female leaders with titles such as Pastor, Elder, Deacon or even Bishop. While this chapter acknowledges that Pentecostal Churches have made efforts to accord females some leadership positions, it argues that this recognition of women is inadvertent since the majority of females who occupy leadership positions in Pentecostal Churches are married to the Pentecostal Church or Ministry founder or other male leaders in the Church. The research argues that women who are married to Charismatic founders of Pentecostal ministries occupy very prominent leadership positions not by merit but either by patronage or by marriage.

Female leadership in Pentecostal Churches occurs by default. It happens when married women assume positions of authority or power because of their husbands who could be the Church or Ministry founders. Being the wife of a Pastor, Deacon, Elder, Bishop or Archbishop automatically places the women into positions of power. For instance, a Bishop's wife automatically becomes Mother Bishop, with the same authority as her husband. This is the case with a Deacon's wife, who also has to be ordained as a Deaconess. Similarly, a Prophet's wife is elevated to the position of a Prophetess. Such women do exert tremendous influence, for they may have a free hand in the running of the organization and setting up projects that benefit the Church. By virtue of being wife to an influential male leader, nobody questions the merit or competence of the female leader. This is an instance of gullibility on the part of the congregation or followers, who are quick to accept the authority of women who would not have earned their leadership. The Church accepts the women not because they are competent in their positions, but because the followers cannot question the authority of the female leader, due to her connectedness to the male leader. Furthermore, when patriarchy is framed as a biblical ideal, it is not only at odds with the teachings of the Scriptures and the purposes of God's covenant people. It also becomes a deadly spiritual disease that chokes all life around it. This has led to a brand of female Church leaders who are not competent because of the selection method that is used. The main part of the article is divided into four sections.

- The first section is on the background, context of Pentecostalism and its brief historical development in general.

- The second section deals with the female leadership selection procedure in Pentecostal Churches in Zimbabwe.
- The third section is a discussion of the findings of the research.
- Finally, the article ends with a conclusion and recommendations.

Methodology

Methodology, according to Haralambos and Holborn (1995), is about how researchers go about their research. It is the practice and techniques used to gather, process and manipulate information that can be used to gather, process and manipulate information that can then be used to test ideas and theories about social life. The chapter utilizes the qualitative research approach. Mason (2001: 15) argues that ‘qualitative research is a systematic, rigorous, flexible and contextual and strategically conducted’. Creswell (2007: 36) concurs and maintains that qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a test of interpretive material practice that makes the world visible. Qualitative research, according to Carter and Little (2008: 213), utilises text data (not numerical) and analyses in their textual form (rather than converted to numbers) for analysis, with the objective to understand the aim, action and behaviour of a situation. Using the qualitative research design, the study presents the Pentecostal female leadership selection procedure as an unfair representation of women. This study utilises in-depth interviews and participant observation techniques to collect data. Participants were drawn from the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (Forward In Faith Ministries, ZAOGA-FIFMI) and the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM-Z) Pentecostal Churches in Zimbabwe. A sample of twenty (20) female leaders and five (5) male leaders were purposively selected. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornbill (2009), purposive sampling allows greater depth of information from a smaller number of chosen cases. The study also took note of core rudiments of ethical practices with regard to consent, anonymity and confidentiality, along with avoiding harm, deception or exploitation.

Theoretical Framework

The qualitative research was also informed by the religious feminist theory, which maintains that women are their own liberators. The theory is useful in

the sense that it is the lens through which women leadership in Pentecostal Churches can be reviewed using religious views. These views are very much in accord with the agenda of numerous religious feminists who advocate a reinterpretation of Biblical scriptures and reflection on them in order to encourage women to avoid being gullible. According to Harrison (2007), religious feminist theory surveys ways in which women can be represented in Pentecostal denominations dominated by men. It seeks to dislodge patriarchal traditions that have systematically excluded women from occupying powerful positions in the Church alongside, or even ahead of men. The theory also helps in exposing the place of women in the creation of a gullible Church following. Thus, through the religious feminist theory, the article maintains that there is a need to interrogate traditions that prejudice women from fully representing other women in areas that are male dominated.

Pentecostal Churches and Female Emancipation

The term ‘Pentecostal’ is taken from the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2: 1-13 (Anderson 2010). The followers of Jesus Christ, male, female, married or single and widowed were ‘filled’ with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues in the Upper Room in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-13), which is one of the views of how the Church was founded. The pouring of the Holy Spirit onto Jesus’ followers was believed to be open to all, regardless of gender, social status or age, as indicated in Joel 2: 28. This is the primary New Testament text basis for the support of women in ministry among most Pentecostals, which is priesthood for all Pentecostal Christian believers, despite one’s biological makeup (Clifton 2009; Stanley 2007). Most Pentecostal revivals are traced to Topeka Kansas under Charles Perham in 1 January 1901, and the Azusa Street, Los Angeles, under William Seymour in April 1906 (Anderson 2010). Men and women replicated the acts of the first-century apostles: speaking in tongues, healing the sick and prophesying (Miller & Tetsunao 2007). Therefore, the New Testament is important as a source upon which Pentecostal Churches base their formation.

Important to note is the fact that, although the spiritual outpouring came at a time in history when, culturally and socially, women were not afforded great freedoms, Lee and Gorh (1999) allude that both men and women were fully involved in the core leadership of the revival. As alluded to by Chant (1999), six of the twelve elders at Azusa Street Revival were women. From

here, women experiencing Spirit baptism, planting churches, travelling as evangelists and working as missionaries have been mirrored all over the world (Clifton 2009). The names of women who have enormously contributed to global Pentecostal Christianity include Lucy Farrow, a woman from Azuza Street, who took the gospel message to Liberia; Maria Woodworth-Etter, who pastored and founded a Church in Indianapolis, the present-day Indiana Church known as Lakeview Christian Center, and Aimee Semple McPherson, founder of International Church of Foursquare (Lee & Gorh 1999). Sarah Jane Lancaster and her 'sisters' pioneered Pentecostal Christianity in Australia (Clifton 2009: 172). These women provide a sample of genuine and credible women leaders in the Church.

There are many Pentecostal Churches that were initiated by Africans without any relationship with the mission Pentecostal Churches. They are self-financing, self-governing and supporting. Churches such as the Zimbabwe Africa OGA (FIF), the Apostolic Faith Mission, the Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministries are popularly known for propping up women into leadership positions through the positions held by their husbands either as Church founders or leaders.

However, according to (Mwaura 2005), there have been female religious leaders, particularly in the Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Africa, who have gone on to establish and lead Churches of their own. One of these female leaders' distinguishing characteristics is that they assign prominent roles to other women within the Church. As Spinks (2003) argues, Pentecostal Churches established by women go on to attract other women because they seem to contrast cultural marginalization of women in Africa's traditionally patriarchal society.

While this trend has happened elsewhere in the world, in Zimbabwe the situation is slightly different because most of the Pentecostal Churches were founded by men who also made their wives co-founders. Thus, the wives do not necessarily have any say in the running of the Church or Ministry. Incidentally, their role is to support the men by making sure that the followers are agreeable to the founders' principles and dictates. The wives often make public passionate appeals to the followers to accept their husbands' leadership by appearing to represent all women's interests in the Church. For instance, a Church founder's wife is always displayed hugging her husband on large billboards advertising the Church or its forthcoming crusade or conference. The impression so created is that the couple love each other and that the

followers should follow suit. Thus, in the Church, no follower would dare question the authority of the Church founder and his wife without being treated as being possessed by evil spirits. Followers gullibly agree to be led by the founder and his wife. This kind of leader-congregants relationship is what we refer to as leadership gullibility, where women who are married to Archbishops, Pastors, Evangelists, Deacons and other such titles enjoy occupying leadership positions based not on merit, but on their marital status or patriarchal patronage. Examples are Eunor Guti, wife to the founder of the Archbishop of the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa, Ezekiel Handinawangu Guti; Maureen Berry-Shana, wife to Goodwill Shana, founder of the Word of Life International Ministries; Florence Kanyati, wife to Apostle Langton Kanyati, founder of Zoe Life Changing Ministries Interdenominational; and Ruth Makandiwa, wife of Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, the founder of the United Family International Church (UFIC). All these women have gone on to be accorded the same leadership relationship that their husbands have within the Churches. They are closely identified with the titles of their husbands as Archbishop, Apostle, and Prophetess, respectively.

Excerpts of Women Leadership in the New Testament

As has been highlighted in the introduction, this article is about women leadership in Pentecostal Churches in Zimbabwe. It emerged from the research that the kind of women leadership in existence emanates from the gullibility of Church followers. However, this is in direct contrast to the women leadership in the New Testament. A few women and how they contributed to the development of Christianity have been singled out. The women are Mary the mother of Jesus; Joanna, wife of Chuza; Prisca, wife of Aquila (1 Corinthians 16: 19; Acts 18: 2ff, 18:18, 26); and Junia, wife of Andronicus (Romans 16: 7).

In the synoptic gospels, we hear of Joseph and Mary who were the parents of Jesus. Unlike Mary, we rarely hear of Joseph except in Matthew when he had a dream that he should keep Mary as his wife, despite the fact that she was already pregnant. As we know from the scriptures, Mary was Jesus' mother and first disciple. Her preparation to be Jesus' disciple started well before Jesus was born. Mary had a strong faith and solid relationship with God; perhaps that is why God called her to be the mother of the Messiah. As God invited Mary to fulfil this call, God did not impose this role on her; Mary acting as an agent decided to accept it, when she said, 'Here I am, the servant of the

lord, let it be with me according to your word' (Luke1: 38).

From the passage above, one can appreciate the fact that Mary was an active and assertive woman who made her own choices (Aquino, Machado and Rodriguez 2002: 21). Also, she knew the signs of her time and the struggles of her people. In Mary's song, the Magnificent (Luke1: 46-55), she praises God and celebrates the merciful acts of God. A close look at the content of this song presents the idea of a Mary who was aware of social injustices, but celebrated the acts of God in reversing the social order in favour of the poor and oppressed (Bond 2002). Thus, this side of Mary's life challenges Pentecostal women, especially those women married to Pentecostal leaders. Given Mary's example of woman leadership, the questions to ask are twofold: Are women in 21st century Pentecostalism active and assertive to make their own choices, independent of their husbands? Are they prepared to know their reality and to study as much as they can so that they can become effective disciples who can challenge social injustice and can reverse social order in favour of fellow women who are oppressed?

Right from the onset, Mary knew that her son was going to be someone special for humanity (Luke1: 31-33), and her relationship with Jesus expanded from the role of motherhood to role of discipleship (Luke 1: 41-52, 8: 19-20). It is important to highlight that both roles are important in the life of a woman and her family. There are women who are young mothers and who are very busy with their young children. At this point in their lives, their role of motherhood is very important, because they are nurturing the future generation, the leaders of tomorrow. This is a demanding stage of life and sometimes women feel overwhelmed by the task of taking care of their children. However, for those who think that women should be only mothers, Mary brings here a challenge, because she teaches that women can be more than mothers; they can be disciples too (Bond 2002). According to Acts 1: 12-14, Mary was a committed and an active disciple of Jesus' movement, involved in the original group of disciples who started the church. The unique thing that is all the gospels depict Mary as a disciple, not Joseph, and this can indicate that in a leadership couple, women can participate actively, while men can also be supportive.

Next is the leadership of Joanna, the wife of Chuza. Joanna appears twice in the New Testament (Luke 8: 1-3, 24: 10). The first occasion presents that, while Jesus was travelling in different cities proclaiming the good news of the reign of God, the twelve disciples, Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of

Chuza, and many others were with him.

Joanna was married to a man who was an important personality in the courts. He was Herod's Steward. Joanna was most likely an important woman and probably rich. The passage shows that some of these women provided resources for Jesus and his group. Joanna was most likely giving of her money to support Jesus and his movement. Furthermore, apart from supporting the ministry through money, she was giving herself as a minister in the Jesus movement. She travelled with Jesus, the twelve disciples, and other women, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Looking at her financial status, why would Joanna leave her rich, comfortable and influential life to go with Jesus who did not have money or accommodation? (Luke 9: 58) Why would Joanna join the Jesus Movement, knowing that she was going to live an uncomfortable life? This is probably because, in the Jesus Movement, she would be called Joanna the human being, the woman (Luke 24: 10). She was no longer the possession of a man, but a person in her own right (Mooney & De Hammod 1989: 34-36). Jesus gave her new status along with a new abundant life that was much better than her previous influence and riches. It can be deduced from Joanna that women can be more than wives; they can serve as disciples.

Joanna was a faithful disciple of Jesus up to her death. The second occasion where Joana is mentioned is during the resurrection of Jesus (Luke 24: 10), but it can be assumed that she was also present along with other women at the time of Jesus's crucifixion and burial Luke (23: 49, 55). Certainly, it was risky to follow Jesus at those moments, but Joanna was brave enough to do that because He had given her so much. He had given her a new sense of personhood and a new vocation as a disciple and in this way, He transformed her empty existence into something new and complete. The Bible does not mention Chuza as a follower of Jesus, but his wife was a disciple who, though married, chose to move with other unmarried women like Mary Magdalene. Together they would champion the cause of the gospel.

Likewise, Matthew (28: 7) recognizes women as the primary witness of the final events of Jesus' earthly career and resurrection. Mary Magdalene and another woman also named Mary are said to be sent by an Angel with a message that Christ has risen. Scott (2011) observes that this has great significance, because in the contemporary culture of the time, women's testimony was not to be trusted. However, Scott notes, Jesus entrusts women to be those who will witness and testify to those events. In making women the primary

witness, therefore, Jesus redeemed the traditional view of the untrustworthiness of women. Witherington (1998) contends that the women witnesses of resurrection are treated by Jesus not as emissaries to the disciples, but as true disciples who are worthy of receiving special revelation about Jesus.

On the day of Pentecost, it is recognized that Jesus shared his Spirit without gender discrimination. Acts (2: 1-4) records that there were women in the upper room, together with the disciples when the Holy Spirit was poured out and all of them began speaking in tongues. Historians of early Christianity fail to notice the important role women played in founding and promoting house churches. Since the house church was a decisive factor in early Christian development, it provided the leadership and determined the form of church life. In the house churches early Christians celebrated Eucharist (Acts 2: 46, 20:7) and preached the gospel (Acts 2: 5). Wealthy women converts exercised a decisive influence over these gatherings. Acts 12: 12 refers to a specific prayer meeting in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Paul greets Apphia who, together with Philemon and Archippus, was leader of the House Church in Colossae (Philemon 2). The church at Philippi was founded by a business woman, Lydia, from Thyatira (Acts 16: 14).

Women Leadership and Gullibility in the Church

Presently, women married to prominent men in Pentecostal Churches are strategically placed to assume leadership positions. However, due to the dominance of men in formal leadership positions, women tend to be leaders of women groups or ministries within Pentecostal Churches. This echoes sentiments that women can only lead other women and not men, which is a position that some Pentecostal Churches accept without questioning. Lagerwerf (1990: 44) acknowledges the existence of Women for Women Ministries, which is an example of Church gullibility. In Zimbabwe, such Ministries are Gracious Women's Fellowship led by Eunor Guti, wife of Ezekiel Handinawangu Guti; Precious Stone Ministry led by Rutendo Utaunashe, ex-wife to Utaunashe; and Maureen Berry-Shana, wife to Goodwill Shana. These women ministers are playing a significant role in spreading Pentecostalism, though credit is rarely given to them, but rather to the Charismatic founders, their husbands. Incidentally, the women are contributing to the gullibility of their Church members by presenting the image of women leaders by default in the Church. The women take the lead in bringing together other women in the

Church to be addressed by their men at conferences and workshops. In the process, they achieve gullibility. However, the majority of these women leaders are not assertive or independent, as they abdicate their power to their husbands, even in matters that have nothing to do with men. They consult their husbands even on sensitive female issues that touch the lives of women and require female participation and decisions. In return, the men pass critical decisions on female matters, which have a negative impact on ordinary and already disadvantaged women, who in turn just passively accept, because decisions would have come from 'Men of God.' Unfortunately, the decisions do not affect married women who enjoy the privilege of being their husbands' supporters and keep them in power and control of the Church. Meanwhile, ordinary women and men who have gullible faith in the leadership of the Church-founding couples continue to follow them without raising questions.

Recommendations

The research makes several recommendations. To begin with, there is a need for raising the critical consciousness of women regarding the role they play in the growth and future of Pentecostal Churches in Zimbabwe and the world at large so as to eradicate leadership gullible behaviour among Pentecostal congregants. Chimhanda (2008: 15) postulates that consciousness raising subscribes to the tenet of liberation theology dealing with the empowerment of women to be proactive agents of their own (her) story.

It is further recommended that, since some women have climbed the ladder of social mobility through their marital status, they must not lean on their husbands, fight to end the plight of women in general. Like other models, women leadership in the social and political world has always been limited by patriarchy. Wives of charismatic church leaders get access to authority and power primarily through their relationship with powerful 'Men of God', which is a privilege that can be utilized rather than be abused (Soothill 2010: 90).

Another recommendation is that the study proffers is that, as studies have shown, women are gifted with alternative leadership skills that are essential in Churches. Married women must utilize their opportunity to reconstruct discourses that hinder women from accessing administrative leadership in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, rather than blindly accepting the *status quo*.

The research also recommends that women must be their own liberators because, at times, women are their own oppressors and their own worst enemies, particularly when wives of male leaders work in cahoots with their male counterparts. Therefore, women must rise above the occasion and start to liberate themselves from whatever has enslaved them. Otherwise, it will be a total waste of time debating women leadership, while the same women participate in the gullibility of Pentecostal congregants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is evidence of women leadership gullibility among Pentecostal Church members, where women married to male founders automatically assume leadership positions based on marital status and patron-age, rather than on merit. The research also observed that gullibility in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism is buttressed by women leaders who ceremoniously represent other women in leadership and help in swaying Church members towards accepting the authority of Church or Ministry founders without question. The article also concluded that Pentecostalism has created new hope for women by allowing them to have very influential positions, although they are within the confines of male boundaries. Reality on the ground shows that, although women are accommodated in Pentecostalism, they do not have access to the reins of power in terms of them occupying critical leadership positions such as Pentecostal leaders. This research has provided some recommendations that in some way will help the Pentecostal movement and Christians at large to cultivate and formulate new identities and new ideologies for the sake of both women and men in helping to eradicate leadership gullible behaviour among Pentecostals.

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