



# Partners, Not Rivals

## *Gender Inequality and Its Implications for Women's Participation in Pastoral Leadership in Church of Christ in Nations*

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### Abstract

Gender equality is a biblical and universally recognized moral principle. Women, however, find it difficult to flourish in the religious space because many doors are closed to them as a result of the persistent widespread belief that they are inferior. Women, despite forming the larger percentage of congregational membership in churches, still occupy the smallest space in pastoral leadership. The Bible is often used as a tool for the restriction of women, ignoring both that God's grace liberates men and women bringing them to work together in partnership and that as God's image bearers, women have an innate need that requires them to perfect themselves through full participation in church. Sometimes the search for answers to the question of what women's place in the church is, raises tensions that pitches men and women into rival camps of opinions rather than ministry partners. Using an African feminist theological framework, this article examines the implications of gender inequality on women's participation in pastoral leadership in Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN). Findings show that cultural worldviews have modified the biblical hierarchy of relationship of equal image bearers of God and equal rulers of creation such that male leadership is assumed to be normative in every sphere of life. In COCIN, cultural practices and biblical interpretations have been uncritically applied to limit women from assuming ecclesiastical positions, including leadership. Education and re-education that accepts the interface of theology and culture, and 'two-winged' theology, empowering congregations' participation and embodying the mission of Christ are recommended as way forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) is a Nigerian denomination founded in 1904..

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**Résumé**

L'égalité des sexes est un principe moral biblique et universellement reconnu. Cependant, les femmes ont du mal à s'épanouir dans le domaine religieux, car de nombreuses portes leur sont fermées en raison de la croyance persistante et largement répandue selon laquelle elles sont inférieures. Bien qu'elles représentent la majorité des membres des congrégations religieuses, les femmes occupent toujours une place mineure dans la direction pastorale. La Bible est souvent utilisée comme un outil pour restreindre les femmes, ignorant à la fois que la grâce de Dieu libère les hommes et les femmes en les amenant à travailler ensemble en partenariat, et qu'en tant que porteuses de l'image de Dieu, les femmes ont un besoin inné qui les oblige à se perfectionner en participant pleinement à la vie de l'Église. Parfois, la recherche de réponses à la question de la place des femmes dans l'Église suscite des tensions qui opposent les hommes et les femmes dans des camps rivaux plutôt que dans un partenariat ministériel. S'appuyant sur un cadre théologique féministe africain, cet article examine les implications de l'inégalité entre les sexes sur la participation des femmes à la direction pastorale au sein de l'Église du Christ dans les Nations (COCIN : *Church of Christ in Nations* en anglais). Les résultats montrent que les visions culturelles du monde ont modifié la hiérarchie biblique des relations entre les êtres humains, créés à l'image de Dieu et égaux en tant que maîtres de la création, de telle sorte que le leadership masculin est considéré comme la norme dans tous les domaines de la vie. Au sein de la COCIN, les pratiques culturelles et les interprétations bibliques ont été appliquées sans discernement afin d'empêcher les femmes d'accéder à des postes ecclésiastiques, y compris à des postes de direction. Il est recommandé, pour aller de l'avant, de mettre en place une éducation et une rééducation qui acceptent l'interface entre la théologie et la culture, ainsi qu'une théologie « à deux volets », qui renforce la participation des congrégations et incarne la mission du Christ.

**Resumo**

A igualdade de género é um princípio moral bíblico e universalmente reconhecido. No entanto, as mulheres têm dificuldade em prosperar no espaço religioso porque muitas portas lhes estão fechadas, devido à crença generalizada e persistente de que são inferiores. Apesar de constituírem a maior percentagem dos membros das congregações nas igrejas, as mulheres ainda ocupam o menor espaço na liderança pastoral. A Bíblia é frequentemente usada como uma ferramenta para restringir as mulheres, ignorando tanto que a graça de Deus liberta homens e mulheres, levando-os a trabalhar juntos em parceria, quanto que, como

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portadoras da imagem de Deus, as mulheres têm uma necessidade inata que as leva a aperfeiçoar-se por meio da participação plena na igreja. Às vezes, a busca por respostas para a questão de qual é o lugar das mulheres na igreja gera tensões que colocam homens e mulheres em campos opostos de opiniões, em vez de parceiros no ministério. Utilizando um quadro teológico feminista africano, este artigo examina as implicações da desigualdade de gênero na participação das mulheres na liderança pastoral na Igreja de Cristo nas Nações (COCIN: *Church of Christ in Nations* em inglês). As conclusões mostram que as visões culturais do mundo modificaram a hierarquia bíblica da relação entre portadores da imagem de Deus e governantes da criação, de tal forma que a liderança masculina é assumida como normativa em todas as esferas da vida. Na COCIN, as práticas culturais e as interpretações bíblicas têm sido aplicadas acriticamente para limitar as mulheres de assumir cargos eclesiais, incluindo a liderança. A educação e a reeducação que aceitam a interface entre teologia e cultura, e a teologia “de duas asas,” capacitando a participação das congregações e incorporando a missão de Cristo, são recomendadas como caminho a seguir.

**Keywords**

Christian equality, gender, gender inequality, inequality, partnership, pastoral leadership

**Mots-clés**

égalité chrétienne, genre, inégalité entre les sexes, inégalité, partenariat, direction pastorale

**Palavras-chave**

igualdade cristã, gênero, desigualdade de gênero, desigualdade, parceria, liderança pastoral

**Introduction**

Gender equality poses a critical concern influencing every sphere of life — including the religious. In the context of pastoral leadership, this concern has theological and socio-cultural implications that necessitate the re-examination of traditional understandings of leadership with the view to challenge long-held Scripture interpretations, historical church practices, and societal norms often used to limit participation in leadership roles on the basis of sex.

Discussions on gender often stir negative sentiments because gender discourses are assumed to be an affront on presumed male authority, and thus male identity. In a class on feminism, a student asserted that feminism is evil and a rebellion against God. He argued that gender inequality is divinely

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ordered because God has always put the woman in subjection to the man. This discussion pitched the class into different groups with some agreeing silently with him, and some with the feminists arguing that patriarchy is the problem because it has promoted male dominance, and women have been systematically oppressed and put in a disadvantaged position. This affirms the view of Noko in his Foreword to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF)'s action plan for churches that "religious discourse is one of the most powerful and surreptitious forms through which cultural systems feed and maintain unequal gender relations."<sup>2</sup>

In Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in Nigeria, there has been an increase in women's participation in ministry functions and leadership roles; however, pastoral leadership is still in the male domain. The notion of a subordinate role of women is widespread in traditional myths of creation and cultural practices, leading to the exclusion of women. The question of the equality of men and women in leadership has been an issue of heated debate, and in some cases scriptural arguments have been advanced to support and justify the restriction of women from full participation in pastoral ministry, particularly in the aspect of leadership. Biblical equality is grounded on the truth that God made humanity in his image (Gen 1:26–27, 9:6; Jas 3:9). This means that

no matter our race, sex, age, ethnicity, ability, intelligence, health, wealth, whatever: all people are made in the image of God, by God. We are equally made in his image, equally blessed by him, loved by him, and created for him to rule his world as his representatives (Genesis 1:28).<sup>3</sup>

### **COCIN and women leadership**

Pastoral leadership — the oversight of a congregation, particularly by ordained ministers — is a limited space for women. Traditional principles play out in COCIN's organization of leadership. The role of men and women in COCIN is marked by gender division of labour and leadership, the kind that fosters a power dynamic that favours men over women. Women are viewed through cultural, rather than biblical-missional lenses. Kaunda and Pokol observe that in COCIN, "women theologians are employed to teach and train Pastors for ordination but they are not ordained nor given churches to pastor

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<sup>2</sup> Ishmael Noko, Foreword in *"It Will Not Be So Among You" (M. 10:43): A Faith Reflection on Gender and Power*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Claire Smith, "The Challenge of Feminism (2): God's Better Solutions."

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because they are women.”<sup>4</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, this inequality is the result of what COCIN ‘inherited’ from her founding mission, and the patriarchal cultural context in which the church exists. Furthermore, “the leadership structure of the COCIN, which is a reflection of its missionary legacy, has not provided women with equal space to prove and distinguish themselves in the church as co-workers and co-priests in the expansion of God’s kingdom, and the building up of the believing community.”<sup>5</sup> This observation finds support in Kaunda and Pokol’s assertion that instead of dismantling African patriarchy, the Sudan United Mission (SUM) missionaries “exported Christian and Eurocentric patriarchy and sidelined the experience of African women based on their biblical interpretation, which prioritized and assumed male experiences as normative for African Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> In their discourse of the *Suum-ngi* creation myth, they argue that European Christian missionaries’ “so-called divine order of humanity” entrenches “racial categorization and gender dichotomization” and reinforces human domination. The practice of exclusion of women from ordination and key leadership in COCIN mirrors and reinforces conventional reading of the creation myth. Therefore, the myth of creation must be interpreted in light of the current efforts to build a world grounded in justice, equality, inclusiveness and belonging for all.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, using the *Suum-ngi* creation worldview of the Kadung people, they had argued that the ‘founding fathers’ of COCIN, whom they describe as a “patriarchal missionary party,” and their subsequent handing over of ecclesial leadership to indigenous men (a reinforcement of the *Suum-ngi* worldview), contributed to the exclusion of women from leadership responsibilities in COCIN.<sup>8</sup>

At one time or the other, women have assumed leadership roles in both socio-political and religious spheres. In the early church, women held leadership positions that contributed to the advancement of the gospel. Female leadership in the religious space is not alien to African women. Studies by some notable scholars demonstrate that a considerable number of African independent

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<sup>4</sup> Chammah Kaunda and Benjamin Pokol, “African Christianity, Myth of Creation, and Gender Justice: An African Feminist Re-inculturation Perspective,” 16; citing COCIN, *General Conditions of Service* (Jos, Nigeria: COCIN, 2008), 6–65.

<sup>5</sup> Rahila Jakawa, “Pastoral Ministry to Single Women in the Church of Christ in Nigeria, Gigiring Regional Church Council, Jos,” 102.

<sup>6</sup> Kaunda and Pokol, “African Christianity,” 15–16. citing Chammah J. Kaunda, “The Public Religious Speech Acts That Does Justice: Reclaiming the Narrative of Resistance in the Zambian Context of Heterosexism,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 155 (2016): 196–215.

<sup>7</sup> Kaunda and Pokol, “African Christianity,” 8–9.

<sup>8</sup> Chammah Kaunda and Benjamin Pokol, “Re-Inculturating *Suum-Ngi* Creation Worldview within Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in Nigeria: An African Feminist Missiological Perspective,” 7–8.

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churches were founded by women. Women assumed leadership positions, reflecting the prophetic role which they had occupied within their traditional religion.<sup>9</sup> Nguvugher traces the presence of COCIN women in public leadership to results of the inter-mission conference held in Miango (Plateau State, Nigeria) in February 1941 to discuss women's issues. SUM was represented by Mrs Olsen, who later became the secretary handling women's work in SUM. Further developments were informed by men's own unity and fellowship, a need that was underscored by the trauma of the war. Seeing the gains of fellowship, husbands began to allow their wives to associate with other women and fellowship, even away from home. As a result of this, "women began to move along this pathway of leadership and responsibility."<sup>10</sup>

The formation of women's fellowship widened the scope of women's participation in the Church. As more opportunities opened for women to gather in fellowship, Miss Bassie Barnie was saddled with the responsibility of organizing that of COCIN women. Barnier helped women to prioritize evangelism in keeping with the vision, mission, and activities of the SUM.<sup>11</sup> Under her leadership, the women had a sense of freedom and equality. They were resolved in their desire to let their light shine in order to bring glory to God as commanded by the Lord. So, as God's work progressed among the women, gifts of leadership were spotted.<sup>12</sup> Miss Barnie was assisted by indigenous women and in 1972 when she left, one of them took over the mantle of leadership. Subsequently, more women leaders emerged and the fellowship keeps progressing to higher heights. Today, the fellowship accounts for 80% of members of COCIN.<sup>13</sup>

Right from its inception, evangelism and mission have undoubtedly become core elements of the COCIN women's fellowship. According to Kangdim, motivated by the Great Commission mandate (a biblical demand and expectation to see the purposes of God and his salvation made known to humanity), missions and evangelism have become the main pre-occupation and 'watershed' of the existence of the fellowship.<sup>14</sup> With the election of Mrs. Naomi Mankilik in 1997, the fellowship witnessed a more robust and organized women

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<sup>9</sup> Loreen Maseno and Elia Shabani Mligo, *Women Within Religions: Patriarchy, Feminism, and the Role of Women in Selected World Religions*, 2-3, 6, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Dauda Chentu Nguvugher, *A Woman of Passion: The Life and Contributions of Mrs. Naomi John Mankilik to COCIN Women's Fellowship and COCIN Community Mission*, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Jordan Rengshwat, Pauline Lere, and Gode Nuhu, "Impact of COCIN Women's Fellowship (CWF) 1942-2019," 92-93.

<sup>12</sup> Nguvugher, *A Woman of Passion*, 50-52.

<sup>13</sup> Nguvugher, *A Woman of Passion*, 57-59; Yosi Maton, *ZME and Church Growth*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Jotham Kangdim, "Biblical Perspective of COCIN Women Fellowship's Engagement in Missions and Evangelism," 83-84.

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fellowship which built on the efforts of past leaders. Spurred by the challenge received from the conference she attended in South Africa, themed "Making a Difference," Mankilik challenged women to seek the lost, declaring 1998 as "the year of Evangelism."<sup>15</sup> This evangelistic and mission-mindedness informed the founding of the Warari and Sarari mission fields by the women's fellowship.<sup>16</sup>

### **African feminist theology and gender equality**

The 1960s witnessed the rise of liberation theologies, with feminist theology consolidating itself, particularly in the West. In 1989, a group of African women gathered in Ghana to examine the impact of religion and culture on women. Using the analogy of the inability of a bird with one wing to fly to demonstrate the limitation of a theology that is predominately male to be effective, the women emphasized that women's voices are the other wing that will make African theology to fly.<sup>17</sup> This initiative, which marked the founding of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, has as its main aim building the capacity of African women to contribute their knowledge, through critical thinking and analysis, to address issues of social justice using "a theoretical framework based on theology, religion and culture."<sup>18</sup>

Religion and culture have remained the main sources of women's disadvantaged positions in both church and society. Undergirded by hermeneutics and theology of liberation, African feminists' pursuit for gender equality is a struggle for gender justice in the context of religion and culture.<sup>19</sup> It is a cause "framed by an ideology and concern for the liberation of women"<sup>20</sup> as well as the pursuit of human flourishing. They also draw from the ideals of gender justice, which calls for "the ending of and, if necessary, the provision of redress for inequalities between women and men that results in the subordination and oppression of women. It is fostering radical justice and equality for all human beings"<sup>21</sup> because "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."<sup>22</sup> African feminists are concerned with the search for gender equality in opportunities, not an abolishing of distinctives between men and women, because the equal value of men and women is grounded in their shared

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<sup>15</sup> Nguvugher, *A Woman of Passion*, 94–95.

<sup>16</sup> Nguvugher, *A Woman of Passion*, 110.

<sup>17</sup> Teresa Hinga, "African Feminist Theologies, the Global Village, and the Imperative of Solidarity Across Borders: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," 80.

<sup>18</sup> Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, "Vision, Values & Mission."

<sup>19</sup> Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "Introduction: Treading Softly but Firmly," 2.

<sup>20</sup> Phiri and Nadar, "Introduction: Treading Softly but Firmly," 5.

<sup>21</sup> Liza Lamis, "Empowering the Church for Gender Justice," 32.

<sup>22</sup> Teresa Hinga, "African Feminist Theologies," 85.

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human dignity, necessitating equal participation in society, equal rights and responsibilities, and the elimination of gender-based injustice.<sup>23</sup> Okure argues that “seen in its proper perspective, the women question today is a humanity issue. The issue concerns the nature, status and role of women in church and society in relation to men, ‘the other half’ of humanity.”<sup>24</sup>

African feminism engages in critical assessment of the role of culture and religion in moulding the lives and destinies of women, and its theological engagement “shaped and influenced by the historical, religious, cultural, and theological milieu in which [women] live.”<sup>25</sup> Like feminists in other contexts, African feminist theologians see women’s experiences as source for theological reflection. They believe strongly that theology is not only shaped by abstract doctrines and academic discourses, but also by lived experiences of people, especially women who are positioned at the centre of family, community, and religious life. Women’s experiences include, but are not limited to, “sexual exploitation, oppressive hierarchical structures in the churches, oppressive customs and marriage structure.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, cultural hermeneutics must be used to deconstruct oppressive cultural ideologies and to intensify advocacy for a just society that enables all to flourish regardless of gender, ethnocultural identity, social status, context, and vantage point. Kanyoro’s feminist cultural hermeneutics calls Christian men and women into a pilgrimage of justice, which involves advocating for women’s ascension into leadership positions that determine the policies address gender discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

Feminist hermeneutics brings the story of marginalized to the centre of theological discourse, enabling the retrieving from culture what is empowering, and the deconstruction of what is oppressive. As a theology of hope, it calls all to a core-partnership that dismantle systemic structures of injustices, and a reconstruction of structures and systems to embody the values of ubuntu,<sup>28</sup> an African philosophy that emphasizes mutual respect, interdependence, and the dignity of every member of the community. Coming from a community-oriented context, African feminist theologians argue for cooperation and

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<sup>23</sup> Chimwemwe Harawa-Katumbi, “The Bible, Gender Equality and Teaching Theology in Malawi,” 106; citing Pelle Billing, “Defining Gender Equality,” 24 April 24 2009, <http://www.pellebilling.com/2009/04/defining-gender-equality/>

<sup>24</sup> Teresa Okure, “Contemporary Perspectives on Women in the Bible,” 4.

<sup>25</sup> Teresia M. Hinga, “Between Colonialism and Inculturation: Feminist Theologies in Africa,” 26.

<sup>26</sup> Loreen Maseno, “African Women’s Theology and the Re-imagining of Community in Africa,” 3.

<sup>27</sup> Dorcas Juma, “Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics and a Theology of Women Empowerment: Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro’s Global Pilgrimages of Justice,” 128.

<sup>28</sup> Hinga, “African Feminist Theologies,” 84.



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mutuality, rather than hierarchy in relations between men and women.<sup>29</sup> Oduyoye maintains that “cultural hermeneutics enables women to view the Bible through African eyes and to distinguish and extract from it what is liberation.”<sup>30</sup> Maseno notes that African theology gives prominence to community, yet fails to examine those aspects which repudiate African women’s full humanity.<sup>31</sup> In doing theology from an African feminist perspective, African women challenge the patriarchal culture so dominant in Africa, recognizing that “African culture is a double-edge sword that provides deep religious and cultural roots for community life, while at the same time it also binds women.”<sup>32</sup> According to Kanyoro, African women theology employs the tools of feminism because feminist methodology critically interrogates cultural socialization, and challenges the presumption that roles of men and women are predetermined either by divine ordinance or cultural tradition.<sup>33</sup>

African Christian theologians therefore argue for the re-imagining of community to include women’s concerns as “a distinct group with inherent varieties within this category”<sup>34</sup> and are resolved in their stance that in doing theology (in partnership with their male counterpart), women are seeking for the expression of their theological views and rightful places in church. Affirming this resolve, Kaunda and Pokol assert that African women theologians are urging their male counterparts to engage in theological dialogue aimed at retrieving life-affirming resources from African religio-cultural heritages that uphold the full humanity of women and the integrity of all creation.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, highlighting its transformative nature, Kosomo and Maseno state that African feminist theology promotes inclusive, meaningful, and empowering relationships that allow both men and women to flourish, while rejecting the limiting of women’s full humanity and acceptance as equals.<sup>36</sup>

### **Implications of Gender Inequality for Pastoral Leadership in COCIN**

Put in context, gender inequality in pastoral leadership has significant theological, ecclesial, and cultural implications for how COCIN understands

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<sup>29</sup> See Teresa Okure, “Feminist Interpretations in Africa,” and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*.

<sup>30</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Maseno, “African Women’s Theology,” 2.

<sup>32</sup> Letty M. Russell, “Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye: Wise woman bearing gifts,” 51.

<sup>33</sup> Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, “Engendered Communal Theology: African Women’s Contribution to Theology in the 21st Century,” 168.

<sup>34</sup> Maseno, “African Women’s Theology,” 1.

<sup>35</sup> Kaunda and Pokol, “African Christianity,” 7.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Kasomo and Loreen Masebo, “A Critical Appraisal of African Feminist Theology,” 161.

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and exercises her mission, identity, and image in the wider society. As a church with a strong foundation in evangelical faith, COCIN must address the conflicts that often result from the intersection of theology and culture.

Theologically, the broader witness of Scripture supports the inclusion of women in pastoral leadership. The Bible upholds the equal value, gifting, and calling of both men and women. This is affirmed in Chemorion's assertion that cultural worldviews as reflected in the works of conservative scholars has modified the biblical pattern of relationships such that hierarchical male leadership is assumed to be normative in every culture. The portrayal of the male as ruler and head, big and strong, and the female as the tail, small and weak and to be ruled over, is a notion that assumes a gender-based hierarchy. This, however, does not find support in the creation account in Genesis and other texts of the Scripture because men and women are equally created in the image and likeness of God. Both share equally in the human condition of fallenness, are equally redeemable, and equally included in the new covenant. They are equally capable of receiving the Holy Spirit and of being empowered for life and ministry.<sup>37</sup>

This implies that COCIN must revisit Bible texts that highlight the equal worth of men and women as well as supporting female leadership. First, understanding that by virtue of being created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–28), men and women reflect equal dignity, value, and capacity for leadership and responsibility including in the spiritual space. Second, the countercultural ministry of Jesus provides a model for pastoral leadership. Jesus saw women as capable of understanding, accepting and dispensing spiritual truth, which was a marked departure from the Jewish thought and practice of his day. Third, the power of the gospel and life in Christ has brought equality that does not respect ethnocultural identity, social status, or gender: “There is neither Jew nor Greeks, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28 NIV). Fourth, several biblical examples reveal that God has often called and used women throughout redemptive history to lead, teach, and shepherd. Women demonstrated capability for spiritual and political leadership (e.g., Exod 15:20–21; Judg 4–5; 2 Kgs 22:14–20), theological competence (e.g., John 4; Acts 18:26), courage and trustworthiness (e.g., Esther; Romans 16:1–2), faith and trust (e.g., Ruth 1:16–17; Luke 1:38), and loyalty and commitment (e.g., John 20:1–3, 11–19). Fifth, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given without gender distinction. Biblical texts including 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12:6–8, and Ephesians 4:1–11 speak to the diversity of spiritual gifts and the unity of the body of Christ. These gifts are distributed by the Spirit as the Spirit wills — not

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<sup>37</sup> Diphus Chemorion, “Created Equal: A Fresh Look at Gender Equity in Genesis 1–3,” 36–37.

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according to gender, status, or hierarchy. This has significant implications for the partnership of men and women in leadership and participation in the church. The body of Christ is healthiest when all gifts, regardless of the sex of the recipients, are recognized and released for the building of the church. As Kaunda and Pokol rightly point out, because human beings share a “common *origin*, common *essence*, and common *destination*,” maleness and femaleness should only be seen as portraying variation in creation, rather than hierarchy of functions.<sup>38</sup>

Because Scripture affirms both the ontological equality of men and women and their essential equality in Christ, a re-evaluation of both ecclesiastical and cultural systems that restrict women's access to pastoral leadership is necessary. From the perspective of African feminist theology, the pursuit of gender equality in pastoral leadership is not merely a question of theological integrity, but one that is deeply rooted in the demand for justice within both ecclesial and cultural systems that have historically excluded women from decision-making and leadership roles in the church. Within COCIN, the persistence of patriarchal interpretations of Scripture, often reinforced by uncritical acceptance of cultural norms and traditions, has contributed to systemic barriers to women's participation in pastoral leadership despite constituting the majority of congregational membership. Undoubtedly, the restriction of women from pastoral leadership not only contradicts the inclusive nature of the gospel but also weakens the church's capacity to minister holistically to its diverse congregations. African feminist theology, therefore, calls for a re-reading of Scripture that affirms the equal dignity and divine calling of women and a contextual ecclesiology that recognizes the historical and spiritual contributions of women to the church. It challenges a revisioning of policies, liturgical practices, and leadership structures, particularly in churches such as COCIN where spiritual leadership is a male-dominated space. Ignoring this transformative approach undermines justice and righteousness and the opportunity to embody the Church's mission through shared leadership.

Furthermore, the rich heritage of African communal values provides a constructive resource from which COCIN can draw a framework for partnership in pastoral leadership. Historical witnesses show that in many pre-Christian African societies, women held significant leadership roles across spiritual, social, and communal spheres. Women served as priestesses, custodians of shrines, healers, and even political rulers.<sup>39</sup> These roles granted both authority and cultural legitimacy, allowing them to shape spiritual

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<sup>38</sup> Kaunda and Pokol, “African Christianity,” 17; emphasis added.

<sup>39</sup> Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, “Women as Healer: The Nigerian Yoruba Example,” 161.

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practices and influence communal structures, reflecting a complementary understanding of gender. Thus egalitarianism cannot be said to be 'un-African'.

### **The Way Forward**

The following proposals provide a starting point to moving forward.

1. **Theological re-examination and education:**

Education and re-education that underscore and awaken a commitment to the role of the Church as agent of justice advance gender equality. The contents of theology taught in sermons and theological education centres such as Extension Theological College (ETC), Extension Bible School (EBS), and in the public space must reflect a proactive effort to repair the imbalances that exist in COCIN, giving rise to a communal theology that see men and women in solidarity and partnership. Along with this, churches must recognize that doing theology devoid of the faith story of African women makes theology incomplete and contextually inept.<sup>40</sup> To foster inclusive pastoral leadership, theological institutions must integrate gender-inclusive curricula, thus equipping church leaders with the essential resources to address gender inequality from both biblical and contextual perspectives.

2. **A Two-winged theological discourse:**

For the mission of the church to be transformative, it must uphold a theology that is shaped by the experiences, insights, and voices of both men and women in their cultural contexts. African feminist theology does not reject African culture; rather, it seeks to engage both cultural traditions and biblical texts to uncover aspects that support justice, equality, and human dignity as well as reassert liberative elements inherent within African cultural and spiritual traditions. According to Oduyoye, a two-winged approach invites men and women into a dialogue that seeks to create a "new community of men and women" that reflect a partnership rather than taking or handing over.<sup>41</sup> Phiri and Nadar assert that "African Indigenous Religion and Christianity are both replete with resources that bring healing to women and African

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<sup>40</sup> Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, "Beads and Strands," 39.

<sup>41</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Search for a Two-winged Theology: Women's Participation in the Development of Theology in Africa – The Inaugural Address," 34.

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community from the multiple sources of oppression that otherwise deny health."<sup>42</sup> Nadar affirms the pivotal role of the Bible in the lives of women in Africa, and calls for a breaking from traditional modes of oppressive reading and engagement in critical ways of reading the biblical text until a liberating message is found.<sup>43</sup> As Oduyoye contends, any interpretation of the Bible that does harm to women and other vulnerable groups, including interpretations which defend or even dismiss abuse, must be rejected.<sup>44</sup> COCIN needs to critically engage in a two-winged inquiry that asserts the partnership of men and women working in solidarity to construct a cultural and theological praxis of gender equality using the lens of "Christ as the norm for the fullness of the human being."<sup>45</sup> The church must be aware that the intersection of African cultural heritage and Christian theology provides a platform to explore core church concerns, such as gender equality in pastoral leadership.

**3. Empowering congregations' participation:**

COCIN must engage local congregations in discussions, teachings, Bible study, and activities that promote gender equality in leadership through the various groups such as men's fellowships, women's fellowships, and youth fellowship, Boys and Girls Brigades, and others. Church elders and fellowship groups leaders should be equipped to critically reflect on gendered power structures through teachings and dialogue grounded in the lived experiences of women in the church. Just as traditional myths, especially of creation, have influenced biblical interpretation in COCIN, oral traditions, proverbs, and indigenous knowledge systems can be reinterpreted in ways that affirm the dignity and leadership potential of women in church. Open dialogue and reflection should be encouraged within congregations to challenge entrenched stereotypes and encourage affirmation

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<sup>42</sup> Phiri and Nadar, "Introduction," 9.

<sup>43</sup> Sarojini Nadar, "Texts of Terror: Conspiracy of Rape in the Bible, Church and Society: The Case of Esther 2:1-8," 78-79.

<sup>44</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 12.

<sup>45</sup> Maseno, "African Women's Theology," 6.

Editors' note: Maseno here miscites Mercy Oduyoye, *Who Will Roll the Stone Away? The Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*, Risk Book Series 47 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 27.

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of women's pastoral calling. Such communal participation in leadership fosters transformation and nurtures theology *from below*, enabling communities to resist gender injustice in both institutional and daily expressions of faith.

4. **Embodying the mission of Christ:**

The Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20) is not merely a call to proclaim the gospel, but a mandate to embody the holistic mission of Christ, living as a transformative presence in the world led by the Holy Spirit who calls and empowers believers, regardless of sex. As Bwire points out, in the Great Commission, Christ sends us to all nations with a transformative gospel. Gender equality is part of this transformation, marked by renewed relationships and godly and informed choices. These in turn lead to character growth and the flourishing of the body of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>46</sup> Establishing gender-inclusive policies that provide theological education and leadership training for women provides an enabling environment for the realization of this mission. Similarly, appointing women in higher decision-making spaces would make their voices heard and presence visible in the church.

## Conclusion

Theological reflection and the realities of contemporary African ministry require prompt attention to gender equality in pastoral leadership. In light of the historical yet unbiblical constraints on women's roles in church leadership, COCIN needs a critical re-evaluation of cultural assumptions and scriptural interpretations. Gender equality in pastoral leadership is a theological and missional necessity, affirming the equal calling of all believers and enabling the Church to fully embody the gospel's transformative nature.

Embracing an African feminist theological approach offers a transformative lens through which the church can affirm the full humanity and leadership capacity of women. By fostering a gender-inclusive theological education that bridges theology and culture, alongside adopting a *two-winged* model of ministry in which men and women serve as equal partners, empowering congregations' participation and embodying the mission of Christ, COCIN can more faithfully live out the liberating message of the gospel, dismantling barriers and fostering true partnership in pastoral leadership. Moving forward requires

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<sup>46</sup> John Peter Bwire, "Practicing Biblical Equity in African Society," 190.

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adopting an approach that is biblically grounded, culturally sensitive, and justice-focused to enable effective engagement with diverse communities and embody God's image. As Oduyoye rightly states, "partnership of women and men, ordained or not, is the true image of the Church of Christ."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 86.

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<sup>48</sup> Editors' note: A 2001 reprint edition is available from SWL Press in Accra-North, Ghana.

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<sup>49</sup> Editors' note: Simultaneously published for minority world markets by Orbis Books in Maryknoll, New York, USA; a 2012 reprint edition is available from Wipf & Stock in Eugene, Oregon, USA.