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Reformation is Germane to African Women: An African Lutheran Woman's Imagination

Faith Laguzia¹

Introduction

Reformation, in Africa, is embedded with what South African scholars Sarojini Nadar and Tonyiko Sam Maluleke baptized as “unholy trinity” – culture, religion and gender socialization.² However, its aim was “to reform the church by correcting what was wrong within the church.”³ Furthermore, the language of reformation in doctrines of justification by grace through faith, priesthood of all believers, *Solas* and “Ecclesia semper Reformanda” slogans, to mention but a few, were addressed inclusively for both males and females. The *Book of Concord* defines the church as, “The assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”⁴

Lutheranism was introduced in Africa in the nineteenth century by different missions from Europe, the United States of America, and other parts of the globe.⁵ Missionaries under colonialism, world wars, Radio Voice of the Gospel in Ethiopia,⁶ all had different ambitions. Some of these such as United Lutheran Church of America started to work in Liberia in 1860.⁷ German Lutherans, both, Lutheran Mission and Neukirchen Mission started their mission in Kenya in late 1880s.⁸ Lutherans came to Tanzania in 1886 from Germany under the umbrella of Berlin I, Berlin III known as the Evangelical Mission Society for East Africa (EMS).⁹ North Westerners became Lutherans only after the Church of Sweden and the Danish Mission Society started their mission activities. Others were more influenced by the Berlin Mission. Leipzig was indeed Lutheran (from Saxony) while Bethel was from Prussia, which could not be Lutheran but United.¹⁰ Lutheran brethren arrived in Cameroon in 1918 to help Paris

¹ Faith Laguzia is a Lutheran Pastor and Lecturer at the Protestant University of Rwanda.

² Tonyiko Sam Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar, “Breaking the Covenant of Violence against Women,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 114 (2002): 5-17.

³ Au Sze Ngui, “Implementing Gender Justice” in *Liberated by God's Grace*. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlangsanstalt), 64.

⁴ Martin Luther, “Article V11: The Church,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Theodore G. Tappert, Jaroslav Pelikan, et.al, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 33.

⁵ Faith K. Laguzia, “The Relevance of ‘Smalcald Articles’ in Tanzanian Context: A Lutheran View,” paper presented at the Smalkadian Conference, Germany, June 23rd, 2012, unpublished.

⁶ Radio Voice of the Gospel, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_Voice_of_the_Gospel (Accessed November 2016).

⁷ Jonathan Hildebrandt, *History of the Church in Africa: A Survey*, (Achimota: African Christian Press, 1981), 110.

⁸ W. B. Anderson, *The Church in East Africa 1840-1974*, (Dodoma: Central Tanganyika Press, 1977), 62.

⁹ S. Von Sicard, *The Lutheran Church of the Coast Tanzania 1887-1914*, (Lund: Lund Printing Press, 1970), 55; cf. Wilson Niwagila, *From the Cata comb to a Self-Governing Church: A Case Study of the African Initiative and the Participation of the Foreign Missions in the Mission History of the North-Western Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania 1890-1965*, (Hamburg: Verlag an der Lottbek, 1991), 98; also Carl-Eric Sahlberg, *From Krapf to Rugambwa: A Church History of Tanzania* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1986), 59. Carl-Eric Sahlberg differs with Von Sicard and Niwagila on the arrival of Berlin III, suggesting these missionaries arrived in 1887.

¹⁰ Comment given by Dr. Fidon R. Mwombeki, (January 9, 2015).

Mission in the development of their work. They were joined in 1920 by the brethren Church Mission from the United States.¹¹

Lutheranism was also introduced in the continent through African initiatives. For example, Kenya Evangelical Lutheran Church, Uganda, Congo, Malawi, Rwanda and Burundi Lutheran Churches were born through an Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzanian initiative.¹² Having the same spirit of reforming the Church, the Lutheran Communion in Africa is implementing the legacy of reformation after becoming independent from Christian missionaries. The relevance of women participation in this Lutheran Community is notable.

This critical social analysis paper using intersectional methods claims that although subordination, discrimination and social injustices have been part of women's experience in Lutheranism, the church has continued to reform herself towards full participation of women in the church. Hence, it confirms the relevance of reformation to African Lutheran women. The paper further, argues that experience, understanding, judgment and deliberations of the Protestant Reformation – when dramatically confronted with experiences, questions, and needs of certain times and context – must surrender and reconcile with some of what was claimed to be absolute truth. Since the outcome of reformation is reform, and the Church and constitutes both male and female, then reformation is relevant to all people at all times, particularly to women in the Lutheran communion in Africa.

Key Terms

Intersectional: a term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw to describe overlapping or intersection or social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination.¹³

Androcentric: a term derived from Greek language, meaning “male centeredness.” It considers male to be normative while female is derivative, subordinate, and deficiency.¹⁴

Culture: Niebuhr defined culture from an anthropological point of view that: Culture is the “artificial, secondary environment” which man super imposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical process and values.¹⁵

Kyriarchy: (derived from the Greek word *kyrios* meaning lord and *archein* meaning to rule) is used as a replacement for patriarchy. It means a “socio-political system of domination in which elite educated propertied men hold power over wo/men and other men.”¹⁶

¹¹ Hildebrant, *History of the Church*, 211.

¹² *Full Gospel: History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania 1963-2013*, ed. Godson S. Maanga, Wilson Niwagila, et al, (Moshi: Moshi Lutheran Printing Press, 2013), 133-141.

¹³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersectionality> (Accessed May 20th, 2017).

¹⁴ Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology*, (Pietermaritzburg Cluster Publication, 2004) 11.

¹⁵ Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper Torch Book, 1956), 32.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 20.

Patriarchy: According to Fiorenza, patriarchy is the power of the fathers. It defines women as the other of men, as subordinate to men in power.¹⁷

Unholy Trinity: Is the innovative saying which was constructed by South African Scholars to mean three pillars of the societies namely, culture, religion and gender socialization,¹⁸ on how they have been used in the society to oppress women.

Subordinating culture of the Bible and Liberating God of the Bible

While Biblical culture discriminates against women, the God of the Bible liberates and gives peace among God's people regardless of their gender.¹⁹ God created male and female in God's image; she cared and respected them equally. After the fall, superiority and prejudices of men against women started. Even the name Eve was given after the fall not before (Gen. 3:20) because that was initiative of an already fallen man and not from God. Discrimination against women, therefore, has its beginning much before reformation to the time of patriarchal culture of the Jewish brothers and sisters as we read from the Old Testament.

I give three examples of women who were oppressed by the culture of the Bible. These women are: Hagar (Gen. 16: 3) on race and status; Leah (Gen. 29:31) on sexual abuses in marriage; and Zelophoad's Daughters. (Num. 27:47) on Land rights. The three were liberated by God since God gave them their rights. I conclude that any form of violence to them, whether it is in marriage, through sexual relations in family, or discrimination of widows, be it in use of language, through classism, racism, in places of work, or in the family in the name of culture, should be denounced as sin against God who created woman as well as man in God's Image (Gen. 1:26-27).²⁰ I will start with a critical overview on how culture helped Biblical readers to misinterpret the Bible and how both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament gives justified truth with regard to women in the Bible.

Women's experience, indeed, has not been incorporated into traditional theology. Feminist theology "exposes classical theology as sexist, done from the perspective of male dominance."²¹ Classical theology traditionally teaches that women are declared secondary in the "order of creation," and thus "naturally servile" "moral subversives." They possess not only a secondary, but a morally inferior nature. They are "weak willed", sensual and irrational than the male²². However what is the reality: what does the God of the Bible say about the place of women in creation and her role?

Starting from creation story, **Adam**, in the Hebrew language has no masculine connotation. It comes from the word "*adamah (earth)*" a human made of earth. The

¹⁷ Elizabeth, Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. (New York: Crossroads, 1990), 32.

¹⁸ Maluleke and Nadar, *Breaking*, 8.

¹⁹ When asked to give a talk to International Women's day at a Protestant University of Rwanda on March 8th, 2013, I gave my talk under this theme.

²⁰ Faith K. Laguzia, "Biblical Culture which Violates Women and God of the Bible who Liberates and gives Peace among God's People Regardless of their Gender." Paper presented on International Women's Day at Protestant University of Rwanda, 8th March, 2013 (unpublished paper).

²¹ Rosemary, Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 13.

²² Rosemary R. Reuther, "Theologizing from the Side of the 'Other': Women, Blacks, Indians and the Jews" in *Faith that Transforms Essays in Honor of Gregory Baum*, eds. Mary Jo Leddy, et al., (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 66.

masculine pronoun comes from the fact that Hebrew has no neuter gender, so all words are either masculine or feminine.²³ The differentiation of man (*Adam*) from human person into man (*ish*) and woman (*Ishah*), describes people of separate male and female gender identity. Hence, both were created at once. The mutuality of men and women carries no suggestion of male headship or female submission.

God completing the mutuality of equal partners since all other created beings did not qualify. This equality is expressed in “one flesh” language (Gen. 2:24). Hence, a partner who is called a helper, is not a helper as the culture uses the word, but in Biblical language helper, (*Ezer*) is referred to God and is used 29 times in the Bible. So woman is a helper in the sense that she serves God with the man and not helping man to serve God. The naming of woman (*Ishah*), as “bone from my bones and flesh of my flesh” means neither Eve nor headship or authority but confirms the mutuality of both coming from the same substance. As well, the name Eve appeared after the fall and not before. (Gen. 3:20).

In regards to the fall, feminist scholars say that “when the man was receiving the instructions the woman was not with him (Gen. 2:17), since she was not created yet. Also, the discussion of the serpent and a woman uses “You” Genesis 3:1b in plural form to indicate that both were together. This indicates the culpability of both.²⁴ Both are accountable.

The New Testament portrays a similar negative image of women since it imbued in the same culture and context. Women at the time of Jesus were regarded as subordinate and inferior in virtually every area of life. They were to remain at home, to be good wives and mothers and to take no part in public discourse or education²⁵. Josephus, a Jewish historian wrote that “the woman, says the law, is in all things inferior to the man, let her accordingly be submissive. It was also said: “better is the wickedness of the man than a woman who does well.”²⁶

Jesus, however, through his teachings and actions confirmed that cultural values have no power or authority over God. Women were affirmed by Jesus as worthy and valuable persons who have been called and sent to share in God’s love and service to neighbors. Jesus did not tolerate “male chauvinism,” but instead he recalled the “one flesh” concept (Gen. 2:24), by describing God’s intention of marriage (Mt. 19:3-9). Jesus also rejected ‘sexism’ which confirmed that all sexual sin were committed by women by teaching that “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mathew 5:28). Jesus taught women, and included them in the group of committed disciples. He taught the Samaritan woman Mary of Bethany (Lk 10:38-42),²⁷ who in turn became the evangelizer to her own town people (Jn 4:39-42).

Jesus also had women as devoted disciples. Among them were: Mary his mother, Mary Magdalene, the “other” Mary, Mary of Bethany, Jonah, Susan and Salome.²⁸ There was also

²³ Mukti Barton, “Woman and Man in Creation” in *Women of Courage: Asian Women Reading the Bible*, Lee Oo Chung, Choi Man Ja, et al., (Seoul: Asian Women Resource Center, 1992), 37.

²⁴ David M. Scholler, *A Biblical Basis for Equal Partnership, Women and Men in the Ministry of the Church*. (Valley Forge, PA: American Baptist Women in Ministry, 1997), 3.

²⁵ Scholler, *Biblical*, 3.

²⁶ *Sirach*.

²⁷ What is so vital in this all passage is the point laid down by the writer in John 4:27, that though Jesus broke the law, no disciple was able to ask on why he is breaking the law by talking to a woman or even to ask what Jesus needed from her.

²⁸ Scholler, *Biblical*, 3.

another Mary, the mother of John Mark. It was in her room that the disciples took shelter after death of Jesus Christ, and where Jesus appeared to the group after His resurrection, saying ‘peace be with you.’ It probably was the first congregation gathered for worship and prayers (Acts 12:12ff).²⁹

Jesus’ attitude toward women was in stark difference to how the current culture viewed them. Women were seen as the weaker and inferior sex, but as we have seen, God’s intention was for women to be equal to her counterpart, man and was called to care for creation (Gen. 1:28). The love of Christ who liberates us all from cultural constraints which hinders us from living out the freedom in him is counter cultural where women are included his mission.

The “Unholy Trinity” in the Church of Reformation and the Relevance of Reformation for Women in the African Churches today.

The traditional culture of the Protestant Reformation was in conflict with Christ’s culture of liberation. Though the reformers saw themselves as liberated by the Gospel, they were still influenced by their culture in not letting women participate fully in the church. However, unlike Thomas Aquinas who adopted Aristotelian socio-biology and argued that women are “defective,” that they are incomplete or imperfect in body, will and reason,³⁰ Luther and Calvin respected and loved women as ones created equal to them,³¹ and as wives and mothers to their children. For example, in love and respect for Catherine Von Bora for her dedication, hard work and ensuring the welfare and health of his family, Luther called her the “*morning Star of Wittenberg*,”³² and the boss in the house. Calvin believed a good Christian woman is the one who takes good care of the family and raised children in good ethical and spiritual standards.³³

However, when it comes to women’s participation in church, Luther and Calvin adopted the cultural and theological ideologies of their time and their ecclesiastical traditions. They used biblical injunctions about women’s subordination to discourage women from assuming leadership positions in the church.³⁴ The Bible and the Christian tradition were used to encourage women to find “total womanhood in submitting themselves to their husbands.”³⁵ For example, according to Calvin, women’s subjugation is a matter of divinely appointed social “office” in the order of creation. When a woman accepts her place she can be the good “wife” ... but when she wishes to teach in the church, live her life independently or have authority over men, she subverts the social order and brings chaos

²⁹ Alice Kabugumila, “The Ministry of Women in the Bible: Introduction to the Workshop on Women’s ordination in Goma, 10th-14th January, 2007” in *It Takes Two: The Ordination of Women in the Member Churches of the United Evangelical Mission*, ed. Gesine V. Kloeden, Heike Koch, Liz Vuadi Vibila, et al., (Wuppertal: United Evangelical Mission, 2008), 11.

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. pt 1, q. 92, art1.

³¹ Reuther, *Theologizing*, 68.

³² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katharina_von_Bora, (Accessed April, 20, 2017).

³³ <https://echoesfromthepast.wordpress.com/2008/09/04/john-calvin-on-women-in-leadership/> (Accessed April 19, 2017).

³⁴ Philomena Njeri Mwaura, Notes from her work on Overseas Mission Study Center Seminar, titled: “Gender and Power in African Christianity,” March 15-19, 2010.

³⁵ Marbel Morgan, *The Total Woman*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1973), 86.

and sin into the world.³⁶ Such a view does not consider single women; and even when they are mentioned, they are judged as having made the wrong choice.

Luther goes on to say that although Adam and Eve were equally created beings Eve, having fallen from a high estate through her disobedience, are now in the state of subjugation as punishment for sin. So any complaint against her subjugation is a revolt against divine justice.³⁷ Luther, although embedded in 'unholy culture,' failed to see that Adam was equally responsible because he could and should have said 'no' to Eve since he knew the results of eating the forbidden fruit.

In his commentary on 1 Timothy, Calvin says the following with regard to women in leadership:

for the very reason, why they are forbidden to teach, is, that it is not permitted by their condition. They are subject, and to teach implies the rank of power or authority. ... for γυναικοκρατία (the government of women) has always been regarded by all wise persons as a monstrous thing; and, therefore, so to speak, it will be a mingling of heaven and earth, if women usurp the right to teach. "He therefore commands them to remain in silence; that is, to keep within their limits and the condition of their sex."³⁸

Calvin seems to have forgotten that teaching and all other leadership is about sharing gifts given by the Holy Spirit for the building the church. He is, unfortunately, accepting the androcentric model of the society for the Church of Christ where all are called to be priests to one another.

From a theological-anthropological point of view Luther, with regard to a pastoral role for women, argued that

the Holy Spirit has accepted women for all roles, but chooses competent men for pastoral role because women were required to keep silent in the church (1Cor. 14:34) and As weaker sex (1Pet. 3:7), cannot and shall not occupy positions of sovereignty, as experiences also suggests and as Moses says in Genesis3:16, "you shall be subject to man." Therefore, women do not qualify to pastoral office.³⁹

Taking into consideration the androcentric, patriarchal culture of their time and context, Luther sees the pastoral role as that of power and control than a ministry of sharing the gifts for the building of the Church. The political context and his monastery experiences with priests and nobles made Luther to conclude that women are not able to participate in religious responsibilities because they were weak and less capable of discerning God's directives. Furthermore, due to an unholy trinity, a woman was looked as 'the "other,"' the object whose personhood and worth was determined only in relation to her counterpart man. That is why women, we learn, accepted their status and role in the society because it

³⁶ Reuther, *Theologizing*, 68-69.

³⁷ Martin Luther, "Lecturers on Genesis," in *Luther's Works*, Vol.1. ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, (St Louis: Concordia Press ,1958), 115.

³⁸<https://echoesfromthepast.wordpress.com/2008/09/04/john-calvin-on-women-in-leadership/> (Accessed April 19, 2017).

³⁹ Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church", *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Teachings*, ed Timothy F. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 369-70.

was the only option laid before them. Thus, while the women of that time were committed to the inerrancy of the Bible and a literal interpretation of its text, it is not that they did not oppose the gender bias in the treatment of women in their families, churches and society.

Culture, religion and gender socialization, the *unholy trinity* not only justifies women's social oppression, their reduction to servile labor in the home, denying them education, participation in public leadership, either in society or the church, it also projects on them the fears of "carnality" and induced incapable ideologies when it came to sharing their gifts and talents in the church. Because of the *unholy trinity*, women were always looked at as the lesser and also the dangerous sex.

Why Reformation is Relevant for African Women in the Twenty first Century?

In the twenty-first century, reformation is still relevant, especially to African women since the *unholy trinity* of the reformers and African Lutheran missionaries have been questioned, critiqued, and categorized in order to recover the prospect of the reformation of Church and society. Reformation is an ongoing (*semper reformanda*) event. Men and women are equally given rights and responsibilities following their calls to the church and in society. Due to the emerging needs of the time and context and of course influences from other cultural structures, responsibilities of all Lutherans are revised, reconstructed and reformed in order to allow reformation be relevant for both African men and women.

Let me justify my argument. The Christianity introduced to Africans by the missionaries carried with it both the culture of the Bible and that of the west, with regard to women participation in the church. Armed with a superiority complex and an ignorance of the traditional religions, they enforced a Christianity which was embedded with their prejudices. They did not present a God of love to the people. Mukti Barton suggests that even though Christianity originally preached about the love and respect we need to hold for each other, many missionaries preached love of power. As a result, one half of the population ended up mistreating the other half."⁴⁰ Elizabeth Isichei, went further and confirmed the desertion of missionaries' spouses when they came to Africa. According to her, "the word 'missionary referred to men, and the role played by women was recognized but their entry on the roll is automatic along with their husbands. ... women were not represented in the decision making body."⁴¹ Even when educational opportunities opened up for women in Africa, their curricula was designed "to perfect 'women roles' as they are defined by their denominations and church tradition."⁴² Home crafts schools were for women to learn on how to cook for the family and learn about hygiene. And when theological education became accessible to women, they "continued to be recipients of theology rather than initiators of theology based on their own lived experiences."⁴³ Despite feminist scriptural interpretation of the equal status of women and men, women continued to be kept away from being active participants in the mission of the church.

⁴⁰ Barton, *Women of Courage*, 35.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to Present*. (New Jersey: African World Press Inc. 1995), 80.

⁴² Hazel O. Nyanga, "Women in African Christianity", in *Anthology of African Christianity in Africa*, ed. Isabela Apowo Phiri, Dietrich Werner, et al, (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2016), 945.

⁴³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands, Reflection of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 96-97.

The androcentric attitude also led to worship and liturgy which symbolically enforced the secondary status of women. Mwaura, for example, researched both the Biblical interpretation and Liturgical uses in songs, and said:

Rarely are biblical texts that portray women in a positive light included in the lectionary of Sunday readings. In the language of prayer and song in liturgy, phrases like “faith of our fathers,” “men of God,” “and for us men and our salvation, he came down from heaven...” the “brotherhood of believers” are frequently heard. Parallel inclusion of “mothers,” “women” or “sisterhood” is never done. The term “man” is used generically to represent humanity.⁴⁴

Christianity was practiced such that men served at “a table” in the church to symbolize the spirituality, and women served at “a table” in the home to symbolize material realities.

On the missionaries’ work and women, Oduyoye commented thus: “it is still debatable whether or not the influence of Christianity have been beneficial to the social cultural-transformation of Africa, and especially for the women.”⁴⁵ Other African writers argue that African culture have been a source of oppressing women⁴⁶ and Christianity added exclusion of women in church matters.⁴⁷

With regard to Christian faith and women in Africa, therefore, I boldly argue that it is the Christian tradition along with Kyriarchy culture of the West which legitimates the non-inclusion of women in the life and ministry of the church. My argument flows from the fact that African culture, though oppressive to women in many ways, cannot not be associated with missionaries’ strategies of evangelization. Had missionaries fostered gender inclusive initiatives and work in the leadership ministry and service in the church, women’s participation in the life of the church would have not been an issue to African Christian churches. Church authorities would then have known from the start that participation of gender is the “*opera mundi*” of the Christian faith. In other words, if missionaries were able to convince churches in Africa that dependence on ancestors or spirits for help, or shedding blood of animals for atonement were rituals incompatible with Christianity, and the Africans obeyed, how then would they not listen if they said that in the household of God the participation of both male and female is a must? When Lutheran communion in Africa was established, she was convinced that “The church cannot afford to continue to preach the equality of all human beings and races in Christ and yet allow its practices to be in living contradiction of this truth.”⁴⁸ Communion leadership slowly started to give room for women

⁴⁴ Philomena Njeri Mwaura, Notes from her work on Overseas Mission Study Center Seminar. Title: Gender and Power in African Christianity,” March 15-19, 2010.

⁴⁵ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 98.

⁴⁶ Marie M. B. Bakengya, “Supported by their Call and Motivated by their great abilities and Potential “in *It Takes Two: Ordination of Women in the Member Churches of the United Evangelical Mission* ed. Heike Koch, Liz Vuadi Vibila, et al, (Wuppertal: Verlag de Vereinte Evangelischen Mission, 2008),136. cf. Hoyce Mbowe, Encouraging and Empowering those who are still there” in *It Takes Two*, 204.

⁴⁷ Nyanga, *Anthology of African Christianity*, 944, cf. Oduyoye, *Beads and Strand*, 96-97.

⁴⁸ Thereza Okure, *Seminar of Women Theologians of Nigeria. Institute of Church and Society* Ibadan, (Unpublished Paper) 1981.

to participate in the life of the church, and women began to participate strongly in the spiritual and liturgical life of the church.”⁴⁹

Methodologically, they simply went back to the sources of their religious origin, and found that historically and traditionally women in Africa had a place in the religious life. Women were priests⁵⁰, healers, and prophetesses. They offered prayers and supplications for the life of the family and the community as well. These practices are predominant in African initiated churches and contemporary Pentecostal churches in Africa.⁵¹ In short, the salvific ministry associated with the acts of healing, driving away evil spirits promoting fertility, and encouraging success in life’s ventures were performed by priestess and priests alike. The persons who officiate at communal worship do get professional training under a tutelage of a chief-priestess or priest of a particular deity.⁵² Gender parity in religion was in place and was not an issue on discussion if women may be counted in or not.

Looking critically on Luther’s doctrine of “*Sola Scriptura*,” it is clear that Luther did not mean the Bible to be read literally, and that doctrine informs the need of distinguishing between the text and reading of the text in context. “This hermeneutic of the Bible, therefore, helps readers to see the Scriptures through the eyes of their own context as compared to the context and historical analysis of the context where the scriptures were originally written.”⁵³

Engaging in contextual interpretation of the Bible made a difference to women in Africa. Both men and women realized, for example, that although the Jewish culture of his time did not permit Jesus to work closely with women unrelated to him, Jesus engaged with women. Women like Miriam Magdalene, Joanna, Miriam the mother of James, many more unnamed women who were called ‘other women’ (Lk.24:10) by Luke were disciples of Jesus Christ. According to (Jn. 20:19ff), women were also there in the upper room. Women were also present at the commissioning of Jesus to the disciples (Acts1:8-14).

Though the arguments above “do not make the matter immediately obvious,”⁵⁴ they are indications that women participated in the ‘*Missio-Dei*. “There are evidences that women courageously challenged stereotypes, and claimed their rightful place as priests and assumed leadership roles. They claimed the “*Freedom of a Christian*” on the right of worshipping the living God as truly African and truly Christians – the freedom which makes one slave of Christ (1Cor. 7:22-23). Women, according to Oduyoye, want to live creatively, dispense with ethnic superiority, relativize their own religion, admit the inevitability of

⁴⁹ Philomena Njeri Mwaura, *Empowerment of Women: The role of the Church*. A Paper presented at the African Theological Fellowship Consultation at Akrofi Christaller Memorial center, Akrofi, Akuapem. Ghana. 14-19.

⁵⁰ Daniel Kasomo, “The Role of the Women in the church in Africa” in *The International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 2 no. 6 (June, 2010): 126-139.

⁵¹ Mwaura, P. Njeri. “Gender and power in African Christianity: African instituted churches and Pentecostal churches” in *African Christianity An African Story*. ed. Ogbu U. Kalu, (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, Inc2007), 366; cf. Onyaga, *Women in African*, 946.

⁵² Kasomo, 126-139.

⁵³ Faith K. Laguzia, “Priesthood of All Believers: Reformation Legacy for Gender Parity in the Lutheran Communion in Africa” in *Martin Luther and Africa: Reflection on the Reformation and Christianity in Africa*. (Kigali: Prograph, 2016), 129.

⁵⁴ *Readings in Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*, ed. Barbara J. Machaffie (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 216.

paradigm shifts and accept the duty of each generation to reconstruct the received culture and religion.⁵⁵

The Circle of concerned women theologians, inaugurated in 1989 in Accra, was significant in that it provided a forum where women could express experiences as they strive to participate in their respective churches and society. Through the Circle books on feminism and gender have been printed and are used globally in theological and sociological disciplines. Many South African and Kenyan Christian universities now have a department or faculty of feminist and gender studies. A large number of feminist and gender books by Africans come directly from the Circle, and regional chapters of the Circle or related meetings and conferences have been documented by the members of the circle. Many more initiatives are still taking place today to ensure the full participation of women in the life and services of the church.

With the rise of education levels through increasing educational opportunities, women are key to filling the labour force in the Lutheran communion in Africa. Women have decreased the gender gap, and are increasingly filling leadership roles, bearing to the fact that women have something to contribute by bringing in different perspectives.⁵⁶ On gender participation globally, Anita Wooley, et.al, observes that “gender diverse teams perform better than homogenous ones across a large number of different tasks and increases of expectation.”⁵⁷ The Lutheran communion in Africa today not only accepts material services of women, but are also listening to their voices. Women in the communion now are working in jobs traditionally reserved for men, such as medical-doctors, engineers, architects, pastors, and carpenters. Women are participating in leadership and decision making bodies, and their initiatives are welcomed and shared by both men and women in the church.

The acceptance and affirmation of the leadership of women in the LWF communion, especially in higher decision-making bodies, began in 1984 when Sister Suzanne Telewoda from Liberia headed the body as vice-president for African region. In 1987, Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro headed the department for Women in the Church and Society (WICAS), and in 1997 Pamatha Ishaya from Nigeria took her turn as vice-president in the region. Currently, in 2017, both vice-president for African region and for African region secretary, are women (Rev. Dr. Jeannette Ada Maina from Cameroon and Rev. Dr. Elieshi Mungure from Tanzania respectively). Furthermore, in theological institutions like Tumaini University Makumira, the dean of academic studies in the faculty of theology is a woman (Rev. Dr. Angela Olotu), and there are many more women in various fields in the African Lutheran communion.

Despite these gains, however, there are still some elements of patriarchy within the African Lutheran communion, and androcentrism and kyriarchy continues with some conservative views of Africans that are remnants of missionary traditions. Women in some parts of the African communion are still denied the rights of ordination while others are working under hard conditions. Sadly, often, it is the men in families who are stumbling stones for women to be successful in their given responsibilities. The language of domination and prejudices still remain. Thankfully, things are changing for the better especially since the

⁵⁵ Mercy-Amba Oduyoye, “Christian Engagement with African Culture: Religious Challenges”. In *Uniquely African? African Christian Identity from Cultural and Historical Perspective*, ed. Cox L. James and Gerrie ter Haar, (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2003), 105.

⁵⁶ WEC_GAC on Women Empowement, 2011-2012 (retrieved April 2017).

⁵⁷ Anita Woolley, et.al, “Evidence for Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups”. *Science*, 2010, 330 (2004): 686-688.

younger women of the twenty-first century will not tolerate gender disparity in the church and society.

Conclusion

Reformation for women in the Lutheran communion in Africa is relevant since it draws its mandate from the inclusive language and doctrines of reformation—*Justification by faith, Priesthood of All believers,*” the *Solas and Ecclesia Semper Reformanda* slogans. The legacies of the reformation put them into confrontation and conversation with African worldview and contextual questions and realities.

The *unholy trinity* of culture, religion and gender socialization in the continent during both reformation and missionaries’ era in a way promoted the discrimination of women in the church in Africa. While it confirmed that some elements of the African culture were oppressive to women, it rejected the notion that African cultures were directly involved in discrimination of women in the church since Christianity as a new religious culture was supposed to be gender inclusive. The intersectional method and the practice of contextual reading of the Bible have empowered the women to question, critique, their present place and role in the Church. It has provided women the mandate to participate strongly and boldly in the church.

However, much work still needs to be done. The question of the relevance of reformation to African women in the Lutheran communion, and the reason for the low participation in the number of women in the church leadership while attendance of women in the pews are always in large numbers still needs to be addressed. Continued engagement will help to break of silence among women both educated and uneducated in the church, especially, when it comes to standing boldly and taking strong decisions on the life of the church.

Capacity building through academic education should be encouraged so as to allow women to not only think critically and analyze different matters in the Lutheran communion and society, but also to nurture creativity, innovation, and good governance. In reforming herself, the Lutheran communion in Africa should not only address issues of rights but also fight for a just and an inclusive church.