




Exploring African female Pentecostal leadership in the South African Pentecostal context

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 <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.107.233>

Abstract

Prophetess Christinah Nku is celebrated as the first African female Pentecostal to establish an African Independent Church (AIC), St John Apostolic Faith Mission after breaking away from the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa in 1938. Her church later reached Southern Africa through many splinter groups belonging to Apostolic churches. Three other female African Pentecostal, Pastor Mpariseni Mukhuba, Pastor Irene Tshifhiva, and Bishop Mapula Mphahlele, also established independent African Pentecostal churches in the late twentieth century. Just like Prophetess Nku, all three women face entrenched patriarchy and stereotypes with their communities. The objectives of this article are (a) to explore how the three emulates Prophetess Christinah Nku in the prophetic gift, healing and deliverance, experiencing patriarchy, and elevating the status of African female Pentecostal leaders; (b) determine the biblical and theological leadership function of these four women. The three-step *Magadi* practical theology research method of is used to focus on the above objectives. The article concludes that although the four leaders lived in two different epochs, there latter three emulates the former leader in the prophetic gift, healing and deliverance, are victims of patriarchy and in elevating the status of African female Pentecostal leaders. Lastly, the article shows that, from a Pentecostal re-reading of some New Testament texts, their leadership role and function is biblically and theologically congruent.

Keywords: Pentecostal leadership, prophecy, healing and deliverance, patriarchy, African female church founder

Introduction

It is not surprising that African women usually occupy the leading role in spiritual matters, Amadiume (1997, 165–166, 177, 196) call this phenomenon “the control of religion or culture”. From a Southern African Christian perspective, Mwaura (2013, 411) and Chisale (2020:1) mentions that in Zimbabwean women are the majority in most African churches while Bam (2005) emphasizes the women are the church in South Africa. However, various theologians provide the painful lived experiences of African women. Masenya (2012, 205-240) laments that “Women remain at the periphery of the margins of their communities, regardless that they are in the majority.” Molobi (2006:33-52) does the same within AICs. Viviers and Mzondi (2016, 2, 8) emphasises that generally, Ubuntu inhibits African women. Chisale (2020) also laments concretised patriarchy within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. Phiri (1997) provides how women experience patriarchy from the Presbyterian church in Malawi. Dube (2014) provides a Botswana perspective of women experiences in church leadership while Gabaitse (2014:57–73) details patriarchy in Botswana communities. Mudumeli (2011:48, 137–148) confirms the existence of concretised patriarchy in African Pentecostal churches while



Molobi and Mzondi (2022:8–9) specifically notes stereotyping among African Pentecostals in a South African township as follows:

The stereotyping among the Pentecostal community did not accord them space to function and occupy the power base of “the control of religion and culture.” It was contrary to the practice of allowing women within Manku’s St John Apostolic Faith Mission and its splinter churches in Mohlakeng to occupy and function within the power base of “the control of religion and culture” as they functioned as *Mamosebeletsi* (one who helps others).

The article focuses on addressing the above-mentioned concretised patriarchy and stereotyping by comparing three African female Pentecostal church and para-church organisation founders, Pastor Irene Tshifhiva, Pastor Mpariseni Mukhuba, and Bishop Mapula Mphahlele with the experiences of Prophetess Christinah Nku, affectionately known as *maNku*. In addition, the article is a qualitative study in practical theology. Practical theology is:

an activity of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday, a method or way of understanding and analyzing theology in practice ... points to different spatial locations, from daily life to library and fieldwork, to classroom, congregation, and community, and, finally, to academic guild and global context. (Miller-Mclemore, 2012:5)

To that effect, the article uses the Magadi practical theology research method (Mzondi, 2022:9–11, 13–14) to focus on the following two objectives, namely, determine how the three emulates Prophetess Nku’s prophetic gift, healing and deliverance, experience patriarchy, and elevate the status of African female Pentecostal leaders; determine the biblical and theological leadership function of these four women. The aspects in the first objective are identified from Landman’s work “*Christinah Nku and St. John’s: One hundred years later*” (Landman, 2006)

The *Magadi* practical theology research method (Mzondi, 2022:9–11, 13–14) suits the article because its steps enable to address the article’s two objectives. The steps consist of **Appreciation**, **Accessing-Announcing** and **Presenting**. **Appreciation**—involves searching for is common between events/people/ beliefs; **Accessing-Announcing**—emphasises the common elements between events/people/beliefs while **Presenting** entails finding theological and biblical basis to promote what is identified in the first two steps. This article consists of three main sections: appreciating Prophetess Nku, Ps Tshifhiva, Ps Mukhuba, and Bishop Mphahlele, announcing what is common between the four leaders, and presenting a biblical and theological position on their leadership.

Appreciating Prophetess Nku, Pastor Tshifhiva, Pastor Mukhubu, and Bishop Mphahlele

As noticed in the introduction, African women occupy a central role as diviners and indigenous healers. However, Gabaitse (2012:12–18) and Mudimeli (2011: 167) argue that women are placed at the periphery in Pentecostal churches because of concretised Setswana and Venda patriarchal tendencies and male-dominated hermeneutics (Gabaitse, 2012:11). Molobi and Mzondi (2022) provides African township examples of two Christian evangelical/pentecostal women who were trained at a Bible School but were not allowed to lead a church because according to Resane (2018, 9), that they were only trained to teach Sunday School and lead other women.

The four female Christian leaders discussed in this article come from two different cultural backgrounds and different period. Prophetess Nku (1894–1988) emerged in the early twentieth century while Pastor Tshifhiva (19...–2017), Pastor Mukhuba, and Bishop Mphahlele emerged in the early twenty-first century. The former is a former member of the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) (Landman, 2006) while Pastor Tshifhiva is former members of the Apostolic Faith Mission and Christian Worship Center (CWC) (Newstime Worldwide, 2025), Pastor Mukhuba’s and Bishop Mphahlele’s former churches are not mentioned in the available social media websites. The available literature does not mention that Prophetess MaNku, Pastor



Mukhuba, and Bishop Mphahlele have basic (in)formal theological training but indicates that Pastor Tshifhiva obtained her ministry training at Charis Mission Church a South African based Christian ministry led by Apostle Jerry Makananisa and Prophetess Eunice Makananisa, known for its lively services in Midrand, Gauteng province.

Prophetess Nku was raised in a Setswana culture while other three female pastors considered in the article, who Pastor Tshifhiva and Pastor Mukhuba, are raised in a Venda culture. Gabaitse (2012) and Dube (2014) have explored Seswana cultural effects of women in church while Mudumeli (2011) has covered Venda cultural effects on women in church. Masenya (2005) on the other hand covered some cultural experiences of Sepedi speaking women which includes Bishop Mphahlele's cultural background. The seating arrangement in the service illustrates that Bishop Mphahlele is unable to change continued patriarchy in the church (see the YouTube in the second footnote). Except for two men in the front row, all the men seat attentively in order to listen to her preach but do not want to sit with women.

Gabaitse (2012) and Mudumeli (2011) re-iterate the quest to re-consider the role of women in African Pentecostal churches by re-interpreting the various texts and address identified cultural tendencies used to marginalise them. This position resonates with Kanyoro (2001:68) argument that:

African women theologians encourage the inclusion of women pastors into ordained ministry in order to create an opportunity for women pastors to be pillars for establishing mutuality with women in the congregations. This, they maintain would make it possible for women to be included in the telling of the story of faith to the community of faith.

The task begins by first re-reading Acts 2:1 to argue for a hermeneutics that liberates women in the church from the Setswana, Sepedi and Venda cultural backgrounds. Hence the choice of Prophetess Nku, Pastor Tshifhiva, Pastor Mukhuba, and Bishop Mphahlele and employing the *Magadi* practical theology research method in this article to focus on a comparative historical theological analysis. The *Magadi* practical theology research method (Mzondi, 2022:9–11, 13–14) is liberating for women as it appraises them by re-interpreting the texts on the role of function of women in Pentecostal churches by reading from a socio-historical context of the texts (Dube, 2015:5).

The author of Acts places women at among the 120 disciples and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15–26; 2:1). Gabaitse's study (2012:157) argues that the Acts 2:1–4 shows that the Holy Spirit challenges patriarchy and liberates women. Mudimeli (2011, 163–164) states the following about Acts 2:1–4: "the experience involved both women and men, all were empowered to become witnesses, and all were baptised, including the women." This focus helps to appreciate women in Pentecostal churches, against previous reading that marginalised them. Hence, the article is a male-theologian's effort to contribute addressing subtle and insidious sexism in the church (Morkel, 2015:141).

Against all odds, during the pervasive African patriarchal practices and colonial rule in early twentieth century, Prophetess Nku, founded the St John Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa in 1935. Her spiritual ability to experience visions and dreams (Landman, 2006:12–13) placed her alongside other African women practising as *dingaka* (indigenous healers) in her Setswana culture. Unfortunately, these abilities earlier created tensions between her and Pieter L le Roux, the leader of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (Mzondi M, 2022:84). These tensions lead her to establish her church, and she is widely celebrated as the first female African to occupy a leadership role within the Pentecostal Christian tradition in South Africa (Anderson, 1991; Kgatle, 2019; Landman, 2006; Masondo, 2001; Molobi 2006). She is described as a "remarkable woman" (Kgatle, 2019:1); and a female who founded a church, prophesied, and healed people (Park, 2014: 209).

Unlike the less educated Prophetess Nku, whose background and work are widely covered in several works in the academia, the details, background and work of the other three females



in this article are covered in electronic newspaper, websites, and different social media platforms. Pastor Tshifhiva, a former bank employee, is one of several female African Pentecostals who have established, a flourishing church in 2001, and combined it with an outreach ministry, Divine Truth World Restoration Services, later change to be Divine Truth World Restoration Services for World Peace by Jesus Christ, that was based in Manini, Vhenda, Limpopo Province (Newstime worldwide, 2025). She was gifted in healing and deliverance and her ministry reached South Africa and neighbouring countries and abroad. She was the first female Pentecostal leader to open a religious TV broadcasting channel, called WRS TV Channel, aired on MultiChoice platform (Newstime worldwide, 2025). The first to attract large crowds at different stadiums throughout the country (YouTube videos)¹. Likewise, Pastor Mukhuba, a clinical psychologist who holds a Master degree in clinical psychology from the University of Witwatersrand, founded a church, Unity Fellowship Church in 2004, Soweto, Gauteng Province (Unity Fellowship Church, n.d.) and her healing and deliverance ministry which features on the MultiChoice religious TV programme reaches South Africa and the neighbouring countries. She follows Tshifhiwa's of approach of combining church service with outreach ministry. Bishop Mphahlele is based in Lenting, GaMphahlele, Limpopo Province, where she presides over a large church, New Generation Church, established in 1998 (see Limpopo Provincial Government, 2024—2024-26 years =1998) that has established branches in other parts of South Africa. She also functions in healing and deliverance, combines church service with outreach ministry, and her church services are on MultiChoice religious TV programme (YouTube videos)².

Announcing what is common between the three leaders

The announcing step considers common aspects identified in the lives and ministries of Prophetess Nku, Pastor Mukhuba, Pastor Tshifhiva, and Bishop Mphahlele. Four aspects are covered in this step: experience of patriarchy, prophetic gift, healing and deliverance, and elevating the status of African female Pentecostal leaders.

Experience of patriarchy

Cultural and religious patriarchy continue to inhibit women to assume leadership role in African churches. Dube (2008, 9) argues that women in African Independent Churches (AICs) are mainly prophets without power due to entrenched patriarchy. However, it is interestingly, from a Botswana Pentecostal context, that Gabaitse (2012:60–76) mentions that there is a notable shift in improving women's status and roles, although she contends that more still need to be done. Biri (2015) argues the same from the Zimbabwean context. Bawa (2017) and Attoh (2017) confirm these developments from the Ghanaian and Nigerian Pentecostal contexts. The South African contexts seem different. Mudimeli (2011: 48, 137–148) shows that patriarchy, identified in the community, is still rife among Venda Pentecostal churches and marginalises women from occupying leadership roles in the church. From a continental context. Masenya (2021:8) later argues that: "Within African Christian churches, African culture is used to collude with a specific biblical hermeneutic, also informed by a specific form of death-dealing masculinity, towards the marginalisation of the female voices, especially in ministry."

The shift that Gabaitse (2012), Biri (2015), Bawa (2017) and Attoh (2017), all mention in African Pentecostal contexts could be traced to Prophetess Nku, who emerged and ministered in hostile African and religious patriarchal contexts where women were being expected to be good and obedient wives. In comparison, these female leaders negotiated patriarchy differently. Prophetess Nku elevated her husband to an influential position, he was made the bishop of the church, St John Apostolic Faith Mission, until her death (Landman, 2006: 13),

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CS2tUWt7-Ac>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfeIWxq9aCM>;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFMV6jV8IU0>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbna6yYD3-E>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mECvflJ6drI>



she showed signs of conforming to patriarchy by deciding to appoint her elder son to succeed her as bishop (Landman, 2006:16). Pastor Tshifhiva, who died in 2017, was leading her church, Divine Truth World Restoration Services for World Peace by Jesus Christ, and Pastor Mukhubu, is currently leading Unity Fellowship Church, opted not to elevate their spouses to influential leadership positions. In fact, Pastor Tshifhiva was a widow when she began a church, while Pastor Mukhubu always presents her husband as a supportive person, likewise Bishop Mphahlele.

Prophetic gift

Like Old Testament prophets, being a prophet in African Christian contexts stem from a divine calling. Many women who function as prophets in African Independent Churches (AICs) in Southern Africa are the outcome of Prophetess Nku's prophetic ministry (Molobi & Mzondi, 2022: 8–9). Similarly, many women in the Neo-Pentecostal Churches and the churches classified as the New Prophetic Movement, who are former members of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFM) and other Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, claim are divinely called.

Gabaitse's (2012:95) argument that the Holy Spirit challenges patriarchy and liberates women finds resonance in the work and charismata evident in the four female leaders, namely, prophetic gift, healing and deliverance. Landman's (2006: 12–13) glowing historical details about Prophetess Nku, who established a church in 1938 (Thomas, 1997: 13), shows that she was gifted in prophecy. Remarkably, all her prophecies came to pass. She foretold many accurate events ranging from the establishment of the church, the spread of the church, the split in the church, from the death of his son, a war in Israel, and the death of Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd who was Sout Africa's Prime Minister and an authoritarian, socially conservative leader and Afrikaner nationalist.

She also received divine guidance of the colours of her church uniform, church activities, healing practice and the church she would later build (Landman, 2006:7, 12–13; see Anderson, 1991: 106). Some of her visions occurred when she still a member of the Apostolic Faith Mission, while Pieter L le Roux was the national church leader. Other visions also occurred after she had founded the church, St. John Apostolic Faith Mission.

As observed in the appreciation section, Pastor Tshifhiva and Pastor Mukhubu, were/are not gifted in the prophetic ministry. They mainly functioned in healing and deliverance ministry. However, in a YouTube video in the second footnote above, the banner placed behind Bishop Mphahlele on the stage, mentions "prophetic word". This implies the practice of prophecy in her ministry. Pastor Makhuba also is a gifted singer³. Interestingly the former claimed to have received revelations about Jesus that revealed the root cause of HIV and AIDS and its destruction which occurred on 28 December 2007, at 20:25⁴. Unlike Prophetess Nku, it is difficult to establish the fulfilment of her revelation.

Healing and deliverance

Healing and deliverance may accompany prophetic calling. Prophetess Nku received her healing call in a vision (Landman, 2006; Mzondi, 2022:86). Many people testified about her healing gift (Landman, 2006:14–16) that applied to indigenous knowledge systems: "Mme Manku did her healing through prayer and by dispensing the indigenous wisdom that she received through visions. The only "ancillary" to her healing were the bottles of water she blessed and that thus acquired healing powers" (Landman, 2006:16).

As noted above, her unique healing gift attracted many people, including national Zion Christian Church (ZCC) leaders (Landman, 2006:15). She ended praying for bottled water to

³ <https://music.apple.com/us/song/ke-beya-bophelo-baka-prayer/1798387354>;

<https://music.apple.com/za/song/khuluma-nkosi-yam/1798387356>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_22N1Ihejk



reach many people seeking healing (Landman, 2006:16; Masondo, 2013:163; Mzondi, 2022:86). A practice that is still prevalent among many of her female leaders called *mamosebeleksi* (one who helps others) (Molobi & Mzondi, 2022:8–9).

On the other hand, a google search for the names of Pastor Tshifhiva, Pastor Mukhuba, and Bishop Mphahlele, lists social media posts (Facebook, Youtube, WhatsApp and Tiktok) showing that are also gifted in healing and deliverance. These sources are evaluated below, towards the end of the next section, *elevating the status of African female Pentecostal leaders*. All three claim to be divinely called to heal and deliver people like Prophetess Nku. Pastor Mukhuba uses water and various objects in her ministry while Pastor Tshifhiva did not use water and tangible objects in her healing and deliverance ministry. The Youtube on the second footnote shows that Bishop Mphahlele does not promote the use of tangible objects in her healing and deliverance ministry.

Elevating the status of African female Pentecostal leaders

Prophetess Nku emerged in the early twentieth century while Pastor Tshifhiva, Pastor Mukhuba, and Bishop Mphahlele are contemporaries who emerged in the early twenty-first century. Undoubtedly, Prophetess Nku, Pastor Tshifhiva, Pastor Mukhuba, and Bishop Mphahlele have demonstrated that African women are capable to lead a successful church and have left an indelible mark in Southern African Pentecostal history. The four are standing and counted among African Southern African Pentecostal leaders who have influenced many believers. Across Southern Africa, thousands of women and men are members in one or other of their churches. Although Prophetess Nku's church experienced many schisms.

It serves as the hall mark of *dikereke tsa Postola*. (Apostolic churches) in Southern Africa identified by their various colours from the original blue and white she saw in her vision (Landman, 2006:12). Pastor Tshifhiva is the first African female Pentecostal who entered ministry as a widow and died a widow. Her ministry challenged African stereotypes regarding death and mourning in the Vhenda community. She has left a legacy of saying “fire, fire...” during her healing and deliverance ministry, still practiced by many within Neo-Pentecostal churches that practice healing and deliverance. She introduced and popularised weekend evangelistic outreach and prayer meetings in various stadiums and halls throughout South Africa. Pastor Mukhuba continues the practice of weekend evangelistic outreach prayer meetings in various stadiums and halls throughout South Africa. She also uses her TV programme (Unity in Blessings Network (UBN) to reach many believers throughout Southern Africa. Bishop Mphahlele also continues the practice of weekend evangelistic outreach prayer meetings in Limpopo and Gauteng Provinces and reaches a wide audience through her YouTube videos.

It should be added that Prophetess Nku demonstrated the Setswana idiom that “*mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng*” (this means, in a problem, a mother always tries to find solutions) by not separating her ministry from socio-economic issues. She also provided guidance and financial support to many of her followers (Landman 2006:15) and, although less educated, she had a deep passion for education (Landman, 2012:5; Molobi, 2006:35). Thomas (1997:63) states: “As the church grew, Nku's ministry expanded through the establishment of schools for children and programs for youth and adults. People's lives were transformed, and this directly benefited the community. Nku's ministry was subversive in that it functioned as a hidden transcript that was a response to systems that dominated the poor.”

To demonstrate the importance of land ownership and financial independence she built the first African Independent large church in Evaton (Landman, 2006:12–13). Evaton is a township located in the Emfuleni Local Municipality within the Sedibeng District of Gauteng Province, South Africa, situated southwest of Johannesburg.

The other leaders also demonstrate the same tendency that “*mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng*”. Pastor Tshifhiva and Pastor Mukhuba created employment opportunities for



believers in various divisions of their churches. YouTube videos on footnote 1 above shows that Pastor Tshifhiva was accompanied by well-trained media team a full band using well operated sound system and pitched a large platform under a large tent where she preached, and the band performed. That fact that she also managed and operated a large television channel points to job creation for believers. This demonstrates her ministries' efforts to address some pressing socio-economic issues.

Like, Prophetess Nku, Pastor Mukhuba also bought land to build a large church – the African Prophetic church in Soweto, and she manages and operates it with church TV programmes aired on the MultiChoice platform. She also provides employment to others who assist in managing her practice. This echo's MaNku's positive attitude towards education and is a significant display of her holistic ministry approach. She is also a gifted gospel music singer. Recent developments from the church's website are that the church has bought a large portion of land to relocate from the Soweto property (Unity Fellowship Church n.d.). Bishop Mphahlele is not to be left behind; the YouTube video on the second footnote shows a banner that refers to a TV programme. This implies having people who man the TV programme and its related content, thus providing employment and empowerment to church members who work in the media ministry.

Undoubtedly, Prophetess Nku continues to inspire many of her female leaders called *mamosebelelesi* (one who helps others) (Molobi & Mzondi, 2022:8–9). Pastor Tshifhiva, Pastor Mukhuba, and Bishop Mphahlele inspire and represent many African Pentecostal women leading small to medium size churches in the townships and rural areas of South Africa. Currently, most of them are former members of four South African Classical Pentecostal Churches: The Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFM), Back to God-Assemblies of God (BTG-AOG), Full Gospel Church of South Africa (FGSA), and International Assemblies of God (IAG). Others are former members of Charismatic Churches affiliated to the International Federation of Charismatic Churches (IFCC), the Southern African Union Council of Churches (SAUCIC) and a plethora of Neo-Pentecostal Churches no aligned of the two church formations. They are contributing to the Pentecostalisation of the African church in Southern Africa (Mzondi 2018) through their TV programmes, outreach programmes, and night prayer sessions.

The healing and prophetic ministry of all these female leaders should not be exempted from promoting accountability and sound theological practice as theologians have pointed. The three female leaders belong to a category of New-Prophetic Churches (NPCs). Mukhuba fits within the NPCs while Tshifivha, and Mphahlele fits within the Neo-Pentecostal Churches also abbreviated NPCs in theological discourses.

NPCs are different from Classical Pentecostal Churches and Neo-Pentecostal Churches. The difference is that NPCs mainly emphasises prophecy, healing and deliverance. Classical Pentecostal Churches mainly emphasises baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongue while Neo-Pentecostal Churches manly emphasises speaking in tongues and wealth and health, usually called the prosperity gospel. (Mzondi, 2025:40)

Mzondi (2025:37–41) provides a summary of how several African theologians (Resane, Banda, Kgatle, Mashau, and Ramatshwana) have critiqued the cultic practices of Neo-Pentecostal Churches and New Prophetic Churches in the past eleven years (2014–2025). These theologians have also provided insightful suggestions to resolve these identified cultic practices (Mzondi, 2025: 42–43). Furthermore, Mzondi (2025: 41, 43–44) provides an empirical study that addressed these cultic practices and provides some practical solutions to resolve these cultic practices.

That being the case, this discussed female leadership phenomenon further demonstrate that the Holy Spirit does challenge cultural and Pentecostal concretised patriarchy among Classical and Neo-Pentecostal African churches, consequently, elevating the status of African



female Pentecostal leaders. Such elevation follows several historical attempts, presented in the next and last step of the *Magadi* research approach (Presenting) from the teachings of two Orthodox Church Fathers to current discourses to either allow or prohibit women from being involved in ministry.

Presenting a biblical and theological position on their leadership

The pre-Nicene and Laodicean views of women in ministry

It is important to begin this section by looking at what two influential Church Fathers, Tertullian and Origen have to say. They lived before the Council of Nicaea 325 CE, and both taught about women in leadership roles. Tertullian and Origen disagreed in interpreting 1 Corinthians 11:5 and 1 Corinthians 14:34 regarding the role and function of women in the church (Origen, 2001). According to Origen⁵, women who had the prophetic gift in the New Testament church prophesied outside or *after* the assemblies, in private homes.

Tertullian held that such women may only exercise their gift if they have a veil on their head, as a sign of submission (Tertullian, 1977). They agreed that, just like Phoebe mentioned in Romans 16:5, they can function in the church as deaconesses. The pre-Nicene period the gives us significant evidence that women exercised a wide range of ministerial functions within early Christian communities.

Some early Christian sources confirm to women's participation as prophets, teachers, patrons, and leaders of house churches, reflecting the continuation of the Pentecostal pattern of Spirit-empowered ministry. The Didache for one, assumes the presence of travelling prophets without gender difference (Did. 11–13), while The Shepherd of Hermas presents prophetic authority through female figures such as Rhoda (Herm. Vis. 1.2; 2.4), demonstrating that women could function as imposing intermediaries of divine revelation. Clement of Alexandria also affirms that women and men alike receive instruction and spiritual formation (Stromata 3.6), and Origen acknowledged women's capacity for theological understanding and teaching, particularly within private or catechetical settings (Commentary on Romans 10.17).

The prominence of women in the Pauline communities continued to inform early Christian memory and practice. Phoebe is identified as a *διάκονος* of the church at Cencheae and a *προστάτις* to many (Romans 16:1–2), showing us she was a recognised ministerial leader. Priscilla and Aquila, instructed Apollos in theological matters (Acts 18:26), These few examples suggest that women's leadership was not irregular but fundamental to the formative life of the early church. Nevertheless, Even though some women continued to serve in recognised roles such as widows and deaconesses (Didascalia Apostolorum 3.12; Apostolic Tradition 15), their participation was gradually limited.

The Council of Laodicea (363–364 CE) was a conclusive moment in the formal limitation of women in ecclesial leadership role and it prohibited women ordination (Council of Laodicea, 1999). Canon 11, was a response to existing practices rather than as a reaffirmation of an original apostolic norm. It stated “those who are called presbyteresses or presidentesses should not be ordained in the church”, while Canon 45 ruled “women should not approach the altar” (Canons of the Council of Laodicea). Henceforth, the church's, official prohibition for the ordination of women became a norm. So then, women's participation in ministry was increasingly controlled as charismatic authority gave way to official control.

⁵ Origen's commentary on Romans is only preserved in a Latin version of the monk Rufinus (AD 350-410). The Latin word used to describe Phoebe's service is *ministra*—helper, assistant.



The 1906 Azusa Street experience

The 1906 Azusa Street experience, led by William Seymour, challenged the Laodicean prohibition, as both men and women experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues, like in Acts 2:1, and later became missionaries to various parts of the world (Robeck, Jnr., 2013:46–47). These women became part of the expansion of the church like some women in the early church [Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2–3), Phoebe (Romans 16:1–2), Priscilla (Romans. 16:3f.), Junias (Romans 16: 7), Tryphaena, and Tryphosa (Romans 16:12), and Nympha (Colossians 4:15)]. Paul calls Phoebe, Priscilla and Junias deacons, fellow-workers and apostles, respectively, to show their role and function in some household churches.

The Lucan, Pauline and Petrine corpus on the aspect liberating of the Holy Spirit

Advancing a Pentecostal liberating re-reading of the Bible, Mudimeli (2011:163–164) and Gabaitse (2012:95, 157) take their cue from Acts 2:1–4 to argue for a re-reading of texts to advocate for a Holy Spirit-based liberating interpretation based on what happened in the upper room when the 120 disciples had gathered on the day on Pentecost at Jerusalem. They were waiting to be empowered with the power from above and to baptised with the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:29; Acts 1:4–6).

The Holy Spirit continued from breaking entrenched patriarchal practices among the Jews on the day of Pentecost, in Jerusalem, and later shifted to do the same among Gentiles at Cornelius' house when his household were baptised with the Holy Spirit as Peter was sharing the good news about Jesus Christ (Acts 10:34–48). It is thus safe to conclude that the Lucan corpus confirms the Holy Spirit did not conform to existing patriarchal practices as he baptises all the believers. Rather, according to the author, he changed them and introduced an egalitarian counter-cultural community of believers empowered and baptised with the Holy Spirit.

Their view (Mudimeli and Gabaitse) echo Tertullian's partial view of women in ministry. They posit that the Holy Spirit fell indiscriminately on all in the room that is, female and male. Gabaitse challenges patriarchy and gender stereotypes in African Pentecostal churches in Botswana and on the continent by saying: “[t]he rigidity of Pentecostal hermeneutics in relation to texts that seem to support male dominance and the marginal status of women” (Gabaitse, 2015:5). A Pentecostal re-reading of the Bible also affirms that the liberating aspect of the Holy Spirit who indiscriminately gave all spiritual gifts with diverse gifts, as he wills, was to serve in the house churches (I Corinthians 12:4–11) and this introduced an egalitarianism in the church (Galatians 3:28).

The interpretation of the Holy Spirit as liberating in Acts 2:1 should not end here but should also include the re-reading of three texts from Pauline letters to the mostly Gentile believers in Corinth and Ephesus, traditionally used to marginalise women from ordination, namely, I Corinthians 11:7; 14:14–34, and I Timothy 2:11–15. It should be affirmed that Paul unequivocally taught that all the believers are baptised in the same Spirit (I Corinthians 12:13) and are given diverse spiritual gifts as different members of the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:4–10) in order to edify each other (I Corinthians 12:7). He teaches the same liberating aspect of the Holy Spirit giving diverse gifts to believers who are considered to be diverse parts of the body of Christ in his letter to the believers in Romans 12:3–8.

Peter also unequivocally teaches the liberating aspect of the Holy Spirit alongside the Lucan and Pauline corpus. Although he does not mention the Holy Spirit in his letter to the scattered Jewish believers, he affirms the liberating aspect of the Holy Spirit among them by encouraging them to be good stewards and use their diverse gifts to serve one another (I Peter 4:10–11).

The above-mentioned texts used to marginalise women should be re-read within a three-aspect Pentecostal framework of the Holy Spirit breaking the Greco-Roman and Jewish era



patriarchy by initiating indiscriminate baptism to all the first believers, later making all equal in the church and further giving each member of the local church gifts. Such re-reading allows to accept I Corinthians 11:7; 14:14–34, and I Timothy 2:11–15 as applicable for the first century home churches context and not as being universally applicable today.

I Corinthians 11:7, is about gender hierarchy, I Timothy 2:11–15, is about modesty and women teaching in the household church, and I Corinthians 14:14–34 is about orderly worship. All should be re-read in the light of Galatians 3:28, Romans 12:3–8, and I Corinthians 12:4–10 that introduced the liberating aspect of the Holy Spirit from Graeco-Roman and Jewish cultural practices. The second and third texts addresses some first century contextual issues that caused disturbances in the household churches because of the Graeco-Roman patriarchal practice of allocating different sitting areas for men and women in household churches. This seating arrangement prompted wives wanting to ask their husbands about what was said or taught in church. The instruction was to solve disorder in the church by forbidding wives from talking during the church services.

Conclusion

It is evident, from the literature, that although African women form the largest percentage of various denomination's membership, they are still marginalised due to concretised cultural and Christian patriarchal practices. Mudimeli (2021:4) captures this experience as follows:

[i]n some settings, women's leadership role is more accepted, but in other settings, their roles in church leadership are still restricted. Women continue in ministry, some as evangelists and others in different charismatic ministries, like the laying on of hands for healing, exorcism, and prophesying—even though they do not receive the acknowledgement or titles.

In this article, the literature highlights entrenched patriarchy dominates today in some selected African Pentecostal churches associated with the Batswana and Vhenda cultures. Tracing from the lived experiences of Prophetess Christinah Nku, the first African female Christian from a Classical Pentecostal Church, the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFM), who established a church in the early twentieth century, the article also looked at the lived experiences of three African female Christian leaders, Pastor Irene Tshifhiva, Pastor Mpariseni Mukhuba, and Bishop Mapula Mphahlele who established churches in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

Their experiences were placed within the three-step *Magadi* research method, namely, appreciation, announcing and presenting. The four leader's work and their roles were first appreciated, then compared by looking at four aspects including experience of patriarchy, prophetic gifts, healing and deliverance, and elevating the status of African female Pentecostal leaders. The lived experiences of the four African female leaders highlight the quest of the last section to re-read Acts 2:1-4; I Corinthians 12: 12:4–10; I Corinthians 11:7; 14:14–34, and I Timothy 2:11–15. Hence, the article concludes by presenting a theological and biblical interpretation that demonstrates that the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1–4, by-passed cultural and religious patriarchy and baptised women and men equally. This underscores His intension to break gender inequalities and barriers, both then and now. In addition, the same Holy Spirit continued to baptise later believers (I Corinthians 12: 13) and gave different gifts (I Corinthians 12: 12:4–10 and Romans 12:3–8) to women and men, who are viewed as different parts of Christ Body, the church, to edify each other (I Corinthians 12:7). In other words, the final section of the article, argues that re-interpreting Acts 2:1-4 in this manner helps to understand and re-interpret texts that are used to marginalise women from leadership roles in churches (I Corinthians 11:7; 14:14–34, and I Timothy 2:11–15) as cultural and non- universal directives.

Such re-interpretation takes cognisance that the author also relied on social media platforms (Youtube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Tiktok, as well as electronic media) to consider and



compare the healing and prophetic ministry of three 21st century African female Pentecostal leaders. Considering them enabled to advance a liberating re-interpretation that illustrates that their role and function is biblically congruent.

This highlights the divine intention to dismantle gender-based hierarchies and social boundaries, both within the first-century socio-religious context and in contemporary ecclesial settings. The Pentecost narrative in Acts 2:1–4 thus presents the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as being totally indiscriminate regarding gender, in that way affirming the full participation of both women and men in the life and mission of the early Christian community. This inclusivity is additionally reinforced by Pauline theology, which stresses that the same Spirit endures in baptising all believers into one body (I Corinthians 12:13), allocating a diversity of gifts according to divine initiative rather than human otherness (I Corinthians 12:4–10; Romans 12:3–8). Significantly, these charismata are given to women and men alike, who are portrayed as mutually interdependent members of the *σῶμα Χριστοῦ*, the body of Christ, with each gift intended for the elevation of the whole community (I Corinthians 12:7). Such an ecclesiological idea battles against all hierarchical constructions of ministry based on gender and in its place advances a model of communal participation. Accordingly, this pneumatological and ecclesiological framework requires a critical re-examination of New Testament passages that have conventionally been looked at to exclude women from leadership roles, particularly I Corinthians 11:7; 14:34–35; and I Timothy 2:11–15.

The article thus argues that re-interpreting Acts 2:1–4 through this integrative lens provides a hermeneutical key for re-evaluating obstructive interpretations of such passages. This method supports the consistency of the New Testament witness regarding the Holy Spirit's independent activity in empowering all believers regardless of gender, to be involved in leadership in ministry, and service within the body of Christ.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



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