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14 | Re-imagination of an inclusive and liberating Church in Esther Mombo's Theology

Exploring the inclusion of single women ordination in Presbyterian Church in Rwanda

Nagaju Muke

Introduction

The chapter begins with a description of who Esther Mombo is, it highlights her main strengths and contributions to the larger world knowledge and terms how her inclusive and liberating theology can be applicable to the Rwandan context especially in the Presbyterian Church which is still struggling with persistence of patriarchy and gender inequality that deny single women ordination. This is a qualitative study that used questionnaires method. Seven (7) respondents were purposively selected from the seven presbyteries (two presidents and two deputy presidents of presbyteries, one ordained pastor one who is doing pastoral internship and one lay theologians). The main findings emerging from this study revealed some strengths and weaknesses of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda towards the inclusion of single women in the pastoral ministry.

Who is Esther Mombo

Professor Esther Mombo was born in Biringo village of Kisii County, Kenya. She is a Kenyan theologian who was born into an 'ecumenical environment in East Africa'. Her father was a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and her mother was a member of the Religious Society of Friends. She was brought up by a Quaker grandmother whom she considers to be her first pastor, and theological educator. Esther attended St Paul's University, formerly known as St Paul's United Theological College in Kenya and got a Bachelor of Divinity (BD). She did her Master at the Irish School of Ecumenics, an Institute of Trinity College Dublin,

and in 1998, she got her PhD from Edinburgh University. In 2007 she was given an honorary doctorate by Virginia Theological seminary in honour of her role in supporting women in Theological Education.

Mombo' Contributions of an inclusive and liberating Church and gender equality

After completing her PHD, she joined the St Paul's university and worked as a lecturer in 1999. The same year, she was appointed as academic dean and was responsible for all the academic programs including curriculum development and admission of students. In her responsibility to develop curriculum, she introduced courses like gender and theology, African women's theologies, Law and society, to name but a few. The aim of these courses was to bring issues of marginality into the centre of Theological education. The introduction of these courses was also about engendering theological education. By introducing gender to theological education, it was about interrogating power issues in theological education which marginalized those that the system did not approve of like women.

It is important to note that when she joined the university, there was only the faculty of theology with one hundred students of whom 85 % were men. So, the number of female students in theology courses was fewer than men. Mombo's great achievement is the way she enabled the increased enrollment of female students into theology. The process of engendering theological education provided for an increase of women's enrolment. This was because of de linking theological educating from ordination, Theological education was to be provided for to all the people of God. The reasons for this was to help women from the churches that were not ordaining women to have women theologically empowered as the debates of ordination go on.

For Mombo theological education must not be held captive to clericalism. That is, it must be available to those who are not seeking ordination. Second, theological ordination must have a "gender sensitive" curriculum that includes experiences of women, particularly, those on the margins (Mombo, 2016 cited by Corey, 2021:219).

In 2006, I was one of the female students and I always remember her statement which said "why do our churches have more women in the

pews than at the pulpit”. In her search, she found that the reason of having more women in the pews than at the pulpit was the exclusion of women in the study of theology and their subsequent ordination. Theological education according to her was an investment, and churches invested in men. Some churches also were not open to ordination of women, so they had no reason to send them to study.

In this regard, Esther Mombo was not concerned about having a big number of women only, but her main concern was liberating women from a culture which exclude them from pastoral ministry. Therefore, she advocated and raised her voice to building an inclusive Church where both men and women will see themselves as children of God. Her passion for gender equality has opened new space for female students and continues to transform the curriculum to impact both men and women as future church leaders.

She encouraged women including myself to undertake studies that could help them take positions of leadership. Esther Mombo is reputed for her exemplary academic ability in the fight of gender justice as observed in Virginia Theological Seminary awarding her an honorary degree in 2007 for her efforts in bringing gender inequities and gender justice to the forefront of church and society.

Mombo worked in top management at the same university for fifteen years, rising from academic dean to Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs (DVCAA) from 2007 to 2013. Being involved in various administrative posts at St. Paul’s University, helped the institution to move from a theological college to a fully-fledged private ecumenical university with good infrastructure and many faculties. This position gave her more power to transform many things at the university. She was involved in different activities such as fundraising both locally and internationally, which enabled many more women to join the college. Consequently, the numbers of women increased from 10 when she started in 1999, to over 100. These women are found in many churches and serve as senior leaders and academics in theological education and I am one of those women who currently work as lecturer and dean of the faculty of theology at the Protestant Institute of Arts and Social Sciences (PIASS) in Rwanda. So, I consider her my role model and her

legacy is like a seed planted in different countries of the world that will produce fruits for the future generations.

Despite her commitment to serve students and to hold the position of being deputy vice chancellor of academic affairs, she faced many challenges from both men and women who did not think women could lead. This was due to the stereotypical roles identified with women which were accepted as ideal. In order to overcome the mentioned challenge, Esther worked hard to prove to both men and women that the position of leadership in the university was not a gendered position, but one that was based on skills and qualification.

Mombo has contributed in the liberating theology by empowering students with the knowledge that became appropriate means to liberate themselves and to stand on their own feet. Her main strength is inclusion of women and other marginalized groups and made St. Paul's University an inclusive community for men and women, lay and ordained, young and old. Mombo challenged various communities to expand their borders and make room for those who are outside and she made space for others (Corey, 2021:118).

Esther Mombo and Ecumenical involvement

In addition to her theology and academic involvement, Esther is a member of numerous ecumenical committees and boards, including the World Council of Churches' Commission on Education and Ecumenical Formation where she served as co moderator until the 11th assembly, and the All Africa Conference of Churches' Advisor on Education. She has served both the Anglican Church and the Quaker church in different boards including the Inter-Anglican Doctrinal and Theological Commission, Theological education in the Anglican Communion. She has served the Project for Islam and Christian Muslim Relationship as both a council member and Trustee. She has served the boards of Friends World Committee of Consultation and the American Friends Service Commission.

She is a founder member of Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians St. Paul's chapter in Kenya. This chapter started among students of theology has grown to be a national chapter. Esther was

installed as a Lay Canon Theologian at the Southwark Cathedral in 2017. She has also served the university as the Director of International Partnerships and Alumni Relations at St. Paul's University. As a teacher, her courses have been known to embody both academic knowledge and the lived realities on the practice of theology. In her academic leadership she stresses using differences lenses to do theology. The lenses of HIV, COVID-19, violence and others. Her leadership is holistic such that she brings others on board. Mombo is a gender activist, working with religious groups on issues of gender and patriarchy in as far as the later affects women's full participation in church and society and has made footprints in her written work.

Esther Mombo as scholar and her contribution to the world knowledge

Professor Esther is known to be a theologian and scholar who has many publications, to mention few:

- (1) A Conversation about COVID-19 and the Ecumenical House, 2022. *The Ecumenical Review* 74(3):463-474.
- (2) *Society and Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities for People with Disabilities*, 2012. In book: *Disability, Society and Theology* (pp. 157-168).
- (3) *Missiological challenges in the HIV/AIDS era: Kenya*, 2005. *Theology today* (Princeton, N.J.) 62(1):58-66.
- (4) *Doing Theology from the Perspective of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*, 2003. *Journal of Anglican Studies* 1(1):91-103.
- (5) *Decent care and HIV: A holistic approach*, 2000. In book: *Restoring Hope* (pp. 96-101).
- (6) *Reflections on Peace in the Decade to Overcome Violence*, 2011. *The Ecumenical Review* 63(1). Other recent publications include:
- (7) "I banged the table three times." *The empowering Spirit and Women in the AINC in The Holy Spirit in African Christianity*, Editors David Ngaruiya and Rodney L. Reed. Langham London 2022 (pp. 91-104).
- (8) Damaris Parsitau and Esther Mombo 'Mama I Can't Breathe! Black/African Women of Faith Groaning for Social Justice and Gender Equality: *Brill Mission Studies* 38 (2021) 448-469, 2022.
- (9) *Integrity in Higher Education A Feminist Perspective*. Editors: Christoph Stückelberger, Joseph Galgalo, Samuel Kobia. *Leadership with Integrity Higher*

Education from Vocation to Funding. Globethics.net Education Ethics No. 8 (pages 55-68) 2021.

- (10) In search of Women in the Archival Sources: The case of Maria Maraga. In *Christian Interculture Texts and Voices from Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds*. Eds. Arun W. Jones. Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania University Press (pages 63-80) 2021.
- (11) Et al. Religious Fundamentalism and Attitudes towards Sexual and Gender Minorities and Other Marginalized Groups among Religious Leaders in Kenya. *Pastoral Psychology* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-009429> 2021.

The list of her publications goes on but before I end this section, it is important to note that the journey to inclusive and liberating church was not easy according to Esther. It meant dealing with myths about women and church leadership, such as the fear about women in positions of leadership. It also involved redefining feminism, which had a negative connotation. In a male-dominated institution, most of whom were clerics, Esther, as a lay woman had to lobby among colleagues to support the inclusion of women. She also stated that she was inspired and encouraged by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. It became a very important source in terms of dealing with the triple patriarchal heritage of African women. Those who have written about Esther and her theology describe her in poignant words as in these texts. The issues raised are these of Esther commitment to create a community that is inclusive of all the people of God. A space where gender justice is felt by all.

Gender equality in the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda

Rwanda is probably best known for being the first country in the world to achieve the target of 50 per cent of parliamentarians being women (currently women in parliament are 61.25%). The government is committed to gender equality, the empowerment of women and promoting the rights of women (Abbott and Malunda 2016:561). In the same way, the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda (EPR) is one of the Protestant churches in Rwanda which promotes the gender equality, because in EPR men and women have the same right in leadership position and decision making. The EPR constitution said that the delegates of the General Assembly are men and women who are equal in number (50% of men and 50% of women) and participate equally in

expressing their view points. So, EPR promotes gender equality because both male and female have to be represented in all its organs. When asked how EPR promotes gender equality especially in pastoral ministry, respondents stated that:

The EPR has promoted gender equality than any other church here in Rwanda said the respondents. In leadership and decision making, EPR is a church which is led by elders in collaboration with a pastor with various commissions and department and both women and men participate. Like men, women hold some high positions. Today the deputy president of EPR is a woman. Out of 7 presbyteries leaders, 1 is a woman and 2 deputy presidents of presbyteries are women. Among elders and deacons both male and female are chosen even though women have a small number due to their illiteracy.

In the pastoral ministry, many years ago, EPR accepted the ordination of women, this is why it has a good thirty (30) ordained women (pastors) and eleven (11) theologians who are doing internships to become pastors. When it comes to the selection of pastor's candidates to join theological studies at Protestant Institute of Arts and Social Sciences (PIASS), each presbytery has to select 2 candidates (male and female) who will do entry test. Among those who succeed the test, the female candidates are selected before and given priority than men candidates. In the rural parishes, women pastors are appointed in the parishes which are accessible than men pastors. Therefore, EPR has a large number of women in ministry. Women and men are offered the same opportunities to attend theological education, allowing them to pursue ministry later. Many women are pastors in different parishes. Like men, women are appointed in different positions of the church, they are part of delegates to represent the Church in different international organizations or meetings and are paid the same salaries.

Women ordination and inclusion of single (unmarried) women in the pastoral ministry

The debate over whether or not females should be ordained into the pastoral ministry seems to be a matter of concern in Christian denominations for some time now. Though some people have views that

affirm female ordination, others are strongly opposed to the whole notion of female ordination (Osei-Bonsu 2015:32). But women ordination in the Presbyterian Church is no longer an issue because the first woman was ordained since 1981 her name is Renate Nzayizaba and the second was Josephine Mukagasana who was ordained in 1987. It is clear that EPR supported and promoted equality of men and women in pastoral ministry. However, in the Presbyterian Church there are still visible influence of patriarchy system working strongly from the parish to the headquarter level. When asked why EPR excludes single women in the pastoral ministry, respondents confirmed that single women are allow to join theological studies but they are less considered and cannot be ordained before marriage, hence, they are discriminated and excluded from the pastoral ministry. This exclusion is due to Rwandan culture which portrays that unmarried women are more exposed to many temptations and sexual harassment while married women are protected by their husbands and more honored in the society.

In addition, participants of this study stated that EPR does not exclude single women in the pastoral ministry only, but both single male and female are excluded in pastoral ministry. This is EPR's policy and church discipline which highlight that it is good to do pastoral ministry while one is married. In this regard, it is believed that two persons (wife and husband) may share ideas, joy and pains. A single pastor either male or female may face various problems in pastoral ministry due to lack of a partner in the ministry. Parishioners of opposite sex may feel excluded by their pastor because it will be difficult for them to be welcomed in her compound (house) due to suspicious myth or mistrust. Other reasons of excluding single people in pastoral ministry are based on Bible text where Jesus commissioned two by two disciples (Luke 10:1). The assumption is that two are better than one in pastoral ministry but the question is: what about Paul in I Corinthians who discusses the commitment to ministry when one is single and we do not know if Paul was married or not. The theology of marriage and ministry is good but is also discriminatory since even Jesus at thirty-three years old was not married. We see many women in the New Testament wanting to follow Jesus leaving their marriages. So one needs to problematize this cultural specific issue of marriage and ministry. The Catholic nuns and sisters are not married but they serve.

Furthermore, EPR is also influenced by Rwandan culture which describes unmarried persons as people who are not mature enough for taking big responsibilities such as pastoral work, hence, they cannot handle marriage issues. Therefore, doing pastoral work by a married person is better because the pastor will share at some extent pastoral difficulties with his/her spouse, joy, and various thoughts and feelings when it is necessary. It is believed that the realities in ministry can be better handled when one is married. For instance, offering pastoral counselling to couples requires one to be married because couples would feel more comfortable with a pastor who relates to marriage settings.

The Strengths and Weaknesses of EPR in building an inclusive community

The focus in this section is to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of EPR in building an inclusive community where men and women are equally treated in the ministry. Respondents affirmed that the strength of EPR is mainly visible in the way it offers equal chance and right in education and leadership positions to both men and women. No gender segregation or discrimination is practiced, so their structures and systems are well established. Women pastors are favored in many cases for scholarships, studies, working places or placement sites, etc. The EPR constitution considers women and men equal by policy and legally and some church leaders understand and well appreciate the role of women in ministry. Other strengths point that EPR is among the top, if not the first in Rwanda, to welcome women in the pastoral ministry. This is encouraging, and positively impacts other churches that are still on the way. Both women and men are trained and ordained when meeting the criteria.

Although participants mentioned strengths of EPR, they also outlined some weaknesses including the influence of Rwandan culture which remains a problem especially in some parishes' perception toward building an inclusive community where men and women are not equally treated in the ministry. Some parishioners have misunderstanding of women capacity of leading the Church and their leadership in general. Due to the influence of patriarchy, some parishioners perceive women leadership in a negative ways. This may be one of the reasons why EPR

still has a small number of women in pastoral ministry when comparing to men. Another weakness relies on the factor that more than hundred years of mission, EPR did not think on changing or reviewing its policy of ordaining single women and men for pastoral ministry. Unfortunately, on this journey, flexibility is non-existent. If the regulations were set years ago, they were never reviewed to check their relevance in the current period.

Challenges faced by single women in EPR

In this study, many challenges were described. Respondents confirmed that single female theologians lived in fear of being excluded during ordination while waiting for a fiancée. Often, these women rush into marriages to meet the criteria for ordination. This means, they can get married without giving it much thought and preparations. The culture does not support women courting, and so if the woman does not have a fiancée the case is even more complicated, not to mention the pressure from their families and society. This pressure of the society create in her, the feelings of guilt and shame, she thinks that she is not beautiful reason why she doesn't have a spouse, she thinks that she is unworthy, hence, self-stigmatized.

Furthermore, respondents mentioned other challenges are related to instability in the ministry. Lack of spouse implies denial of ordination. So, they said that the instability is due to the fact that she is not sure if tomorrow she will get a spouse. As result, there is a risk of receiving any candidate without true love; risk of bad marital family due to conditional marriage and risk of being adultery due to effort of trying to find her spouse on due time of pastoral internship. This often results in future complications in the rushed marriage. It causes distress and discourages the individual because she feels as she does not deserve to be a minister, hence, loose of pastoral interest. Single women who are denied ordination due their marital status feel humiliated, confused and oppressed by her own Church (EPR). They regret and think why they wasted time when they decided to go for theological studies. They feel low self-esteem and questioning God's calling. They were looked down by society starting from their own families and sometime they can be depressed.

Respondents also stated that single women in particular, feel frustrated because culture does not allow them to approach men for courting or say “please would you like to marry me”? If a woman take a step to approach a man for courting, it will be a scandal because men will laugh at her by thinking that she is a crazy woman. So, women stay in a dilemma and don’t know what to do since they are not allow to look for the persons to marry them, therefore, they have to wait until the persons (men) come.

Like single women, men who are denied ordination because of being single in EPR also face challenges and feel frustrated, ashamed and dishonored. They are guilty of not fulfilling their duties and responsibility required by the society. They feel rejected, discriminated and they see that there is no place for them in pastoral ministry. In African communities, it follows that failure to get married is like committing a crime against well-established community beliefs and practices (Mbiti 1975 cited by Maseno 2021:1). So, in order to fit into the community, the woman must be married because a young person’s maturity is fully recognised with marriage (Oduyoye 1993 as quoted by Maseno 2021:4). In Rwanda, respondents of this study affirmed that not getting married became like a crime, offence and wrongdoing while it is a choice or lack of a partner. For the man who in a patriarchal society, people blame him and think that it is his fault of staying single at the age of maturity. There are many sayings to describe their faults such as “*bavuga ko arwaye, ari ikirembe, atazi gutereta, ari ikimara*”. These saying portray a single man as a sick person and inactive sexually. But for a woman, it is a big issue “*abavuga ko ari igishagabo, iwabo batera umwaku ariyo mpamvu adasabwa, ari mubi, baramuroze, arwaye intinyi n’ibindi*” She is described as dominant, her family is cursed, witched and she fears sexual intercourse. All these sayings related to cultural norms make the single people to be marginalized in the society and even in the church. In this regard, Petria Theron (2015:56) warns us when she says that “culture could be an obstacle in the realisation of gender equality with the effect that people, especially females, can neither reach their full potential, nor experience their inherent dignity as people created in the image of God”. She suggests that the church could be instrumental in the transformation of cultural norms and practices which promote discrimination against women.

From the above statement we see that the status of being single person is a challenge to the Rwandan society and particularly to the church. This view is similar to what was reported by the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR 2012:3) which said that in Rwanda, marriage was considered a sacred social obligation for each man and woman vis-à-vis their family in order to perpetuate the lineage. Moreover, the NISR shows that things have changed with time. Formal education, through the monetarised employment and financial autonomy has served to reduce the role of marriage as a determinant step toward adulthood and social consideration and integration. Furthermore, the report stated that due to studies and unemployment many young nowadays tend to delay their marriage and therefore, remain single to a higher age than in the past even if this is not their choice and despite the negative perception of this on the part of society. With time, we are even observing people who never get married, a status traditionally unacceptable but now more and more widely accepted (NISR 2012:4).

In this regard, if then the Rwandan society is changing its perception in such a way it accepts single people at some point, thus, the EPR needs a double action to address the issues faced by both single men and women. Many of them are not stable and confident in the single status. They seem to be uncomfortable and feel underestimated and try to find alternative ways. Church discipline and structure systems lead them to be involved in marriage without being prepared but to meet ordination conditions. Consequently, they will have dysfunctional marriages that end up in conflicts or divorce.

Solutions on how can EPR build an inclusive church

The last question asked to the respondents was to propose solutions on how can EPR build an inclusive church where single women will fully participate in the pastoral ministry. Most of the respondents suggested that EPR should annul rules which prohibit single person ordination. In this regard, Faith Lugazia said that although the African culture has some elements that were oppressive to women, Christianity as a new religious culture was supposed to be gender inclusive. That is why she stated that much work still needs to be done, hence, reformation to African

women is relevant in order to provide fully participation of women in the ministry (Lugazia 2017:11). Thus, open ordination of single men and women should be accepted and marriage can be done after ordination, no limit of years. The church discipline and rules that deny ordination of single persons need to be reviewed and reformed. It is not wise to limit people based on a single aspect because single women have potential for ministry and can be of a good impact in many areas.

One of the respondents replied that to include the single men and women in EPR pastoral ministry will be a long process that requires to review the theology of pastoral ministry in Presbyterian Church and the admission of single women and men ordination for pastoral ministry has to be voted as a decision of General Synod of EPR. He stated that there is also a need of changing mindset process which requires training of ministers, church leaders and lay people to recognize the pastoral ministry of single women and men in Presbyterian Church.

Therefore, it is proposed that EPR review its practice and policy of ordination of married people only. It happens to keep something standing for years but only to find out that, depending on the period, it is no longer relevant or it is doing more harm than good. Also, it would be helpful to see what is to gain from this policy. The church should look at both equality and equity. The EPR should allow single people to be ordained because other churches are doing so. It has to learn from others churches that share the same doctrines like the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) and the Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA). Consequently, the church is supposed to be a safe place for all its members, which means that it should be a place where women (single) feel that they are accepted as who they are. This also implies that the church must become a safe and inclusive space where women feel that they are an integral part of the community of believers.

They must neither feel judged, looked down upon nor discriminated against (Mupangwa and Chirongoma 2020:2). Therefore, all respondents proposed that in order to be an inclusive community, the Church (EPR) should know that marriage is a gift and call from God not everyone is made to be married. So, single women should be ordained and do the pastoral ministry like others.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has highlighted the exclusion experienced by the single (unmarried) women within the EPR. This was a qualitative research using questionnaires, in which the study found some of the challenges faced by single women of being ordained as a pastor. The main findings emerging from this study reveal some strengths and weaknesses of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda towards the inclusion of single women in the pastoral ministry. Its strengths relies on the fact that EPR is among the top, if not the first, to ordain women for the pastoral ministry. However, it was realized that EPR still struggle to include single persons especially women in the ministry. The denial for ordination is mainly related to culture norms that considers single as non-mature person and stereotypes put on women, hence, they feel excluded, discriminated and marginalized in the Church. The study proposed that EPR should review its practice and policy of ordination and allow single persons to be ordained. Therefore, the study on the topic of re- imagination of an inclusive and liberating Church in Esther Mombo theology posits that Esther Mombo contribution to liberation and inclusivity in her theology has made an impact not only to women but also to men as it aims at transforming the church to be an inclusive and liberating community. So, her theology is applicable in the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda in the way it will build an inclusive church where both women and men, single and married can serve God with their full potentials.

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