

WOMEN AND CHRISTIANITY IN CAMEROON: THE CASE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CAMEROON SINCE THE BASEL MISSION ERA, 1886-2010

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ABSTRACT

In Cameroon like elsewhere Christianity from the foreign mission years through the independent churches has had a gender paradox. Within the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC), a patriarchal culture has marginalized women since the Basel Mission era in spite the fact that women have been predominant in the church. The Basel Mission from whose ecclesiastical mould the PCC emerged reproduced in its organization and work the patriarchal characteristics of the society. Apart from marginalizing women in the missionary profession, it spread Western notions of domesticity and narrowed the space available for women to participate in the leadership of the PCC when it became autonomous in 1957. The PCC therefore inherited sex-segregation from its founding mission and further entrenched it in its system. After upholding the tradition barring women from the ordained ministry for some decades, the PCC was forced by feminist tendencies to institutionalize women's ordination and to empower women for leadership in the church. This article attempts to provide insights into the evolutionary dynamics of women's role in the PCC, showing how female leadership has historically changed and developed. It submits that opportunities for female leadership in the PCC are more limited than for males, and these limitations have produced a composite picture of women that at least suggests leadership marginality.

Keywords: *Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, Basel Mission, Women's Ordination, Female Leadership, Marginalization.*

Introduction

The intertwining of women and Christianity has been with us since the inception of this faith tradition. In the early Christian era, women exercised significant roles, given that the period is replete with examples of women who committed themselves to the Great Commission task in ways that made their participation in the continuous growth of the church indispensable. In religion historian Elizabeth Clark's words, women served as "owners of the houses in which early Christians gathered and as patrons of monasteries, churches, and the poor throughout the patristic and medieval periods" (Clark, 2001: 398). Clearly, Christ's liberating teachings exemplified a more egalitarian form of Christianity before the trajectory of women's demotion set in following the institutionalization of the church. From this moment through to the emergence of various brands of Protestant faiths, as scholarship reveals, there was a struggle within the church on roles for women (Bendroth, 2008: 307). As centuries passed, the church remained in the path of patriarchalization in which women were further pushed to the margins of power and leadership (Johnstone, 1992).

In Africa in general and Cameroon particularly where there had been a culture of female involvement in traditional religious matters as priestesses and ritual experts, the white missionary era was a moment when women began losing religious status and power. The Basel Mission and other mission agencies that labored to plant Christianity in Cameroon patriarchalized the mission church, with a second-class citizenship status offered to female faithful. This explains why scholars of women in the history of Christianity in Africa associate the white mission agency era with female demotion. In the slow process of granting autonomy to its mission church in Cameroon, the Basel Mission, just like other mission bodies, left behind a female-hostile legacy that was inherited and perpetuated by the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC). So, both the Basel Mission and the PCC resisted including women in leadership positions. Following the rise of Christian feminism, the demand for inclusiveness in ecclesial ministry and authority, as was the case in the early Christian church, gained propensity. The PCC was obliged by this international crusade for women's empowerment in Christian organizations to rethink its gender policy. This amounted to the opening of the ordained ministry to women and the implementation

of other gender policies that were intended to roll back the exclusion of women from its power structure. Tacitly, therefore, the PCC recognized the damage it had done to women and opted to dismantle the structures that have kept women at the margins of the Eucharistic ministry and authority. This revision of church policies towards gender and its degree of effectiveness in the ecclesial empowerment of women cannot be examined without engaging it with existing scholarship, especially the Christian feminist debate.

The twentieth century was marked by a rich scholarly debate about the intentions and effectiveness of Christian feminism as a movement for women empowerment in the church. While observers of Christian feminism admit that feminist ideas created awareness among Christian women and roiled Christian organizations, there are two opposing paradigms on the intentions and effectiveness of the association of the female folks with the church power structure. The first school is the egalitarian, which advocates a level playing field for men and women in Christian organizations (Wood, no date: 3). Subscribers to this school argue that similar opportunities ought to be opened to both sexes in all matters of church life, especially in the leadership structure (Japinga, 1999: 43). In intellectual terms, therefore, the level playing field empowerment approach was forcefully peddled and justified.

In the 1970s, the Christian feminist debate took a new twist, specifically from those who doubted the capacity of women to function properly in the positions of church leadership that were resulting from the female empowerment crusade. Referred in Christian feminist literature as complimentarianism, exponents of this school, while accepting the feminist ideal of knocking down ecclesial gender biases, pressed that men have an advantage to monopolize power in non-child related positions. In his controversial work, Golberg (1973) supports this anti-egalitarian approach when he stresses that the radical assigning of leadership positions to women can amount to women's frustration since they are doomed to failure. Overall, complimentarian theorists hold that the admission of women into leadership positions would be disruptive to the church. This radical pessimistic attitude towards the inclusion of women in the power structure of the church was what caused some scholars to herald a utilitarian backing against female demotion in Christian organizations. The utilitarian perspective simply accords more credibility

to the egalitarian paradigm by insisting that the church's utility is diminished by the absence of full female involvement in church administration.

Although I subscribe to the egalitarian school, this paper generally builds on the paradigmatic Christian feminist debate, a field of marked scholarly disagreements: egalitarianism, complimentarianism and utilitarianism to analyze the gender question in the PCC. This unfolding debate has the potential to richly inform the analysis and conclusions of this essay. This explains why the essay seeks to sustain and enrich this gender debate from the Christian faith perspective by examining the evolutionary dynamics of women's roles in the PCC from the era of the Basel Mission. I use the PCC as a Christian organization for the testing and enrichment of the Christian feminist debate. Surely, the persisting voices for and against the empowerment of women for leadership in the PCC is a clear manifestation of the current Christian feminist theoretical disagreement among scholars of women in Christianity. In 2015, my research on female pastors in the PCC finally featured in the maiden edition of the *Ibadan Journal of Gender Studies*. The findings of the study revealed that clergywomen were confined at the margins of the church's leadership, despite their call for leadership inclusiveness. This study which pays particular attention to the dynamics of women's association with the church's power structure took its inspiration in some substantial part from this previous research. The paper opens up with an examination of the Basel Mission gender policy, showing how it was handed down to the PCC in 1957. It further analyses how the PCC attempted to pursue the gender perspective inherited from the founding mission, before accepting to redefine it in the 1970s. The final section of the paper critiques the implementation of the new female empowerment approaches, arguing that they failed to drag women out of leadership marginality.

The Basel Mission Era

During the period that preceded the involvement of the Basel Mission in mission work in Cameroon, women enjoyed an acclaimed status in traditional religious affairs in spite their subjection to men in the patriarchal household. In all its features, the traditional religious system accommodated both men and women. Clearly, there was equality of opportunities for women and men in the religious leadership, with very significant roles assigned to women. The religious

beliefs and practices of the numerous ethnic groups that were important for enabling the people to cope with the complex world in which they lived did not exclude women. In their capacity as priestesses, women performed rituals, offered sacrifices and involved in many other religious activities that affected all aspects of life, from farming to hunting, from travel to courtship, and from birth to death.

Motivated by the Western culture in which Christianity was packaged and exported to Cameroon, Basel Missionaries who began work in the territory in 1886 saw the association of women with religious leadership as “going against the norm”. Upon its birth in 1815, the Basel Mission in the course of its structuring underwent a process of “patriarchalization” in which women were excluded from positions of leadership and authority. As Xiang-yu notes, the primary aim of the Basel Mission was to “train young men in the task of carrying the gospel of peace to the different parts of the world” (2012). Evidently, the association of women in mission work was not envisaged by those who founded and structured the Basel Mission. Its theological college which was opened in 1816 trained only men as missionaries for deployment to the mission fields. Expectedly, there was a favourable environment for this male-dominated mission agency to engage with a largely male-dominated Cameroonian society, in spite the association of women in traditional religious clerical leadership.

The foregoing represents the context in which the mission work of the Basel Mission became a preserve of men. Consequently, the institutionalized church they fashioned did not envisage leadership roles for women. In this section, I argue that leadership in the Basel Mission Church in Cameroon conformed with the Western authority structure that privileged men to women’s detriment. This kind of structure that was replete with patriarchal practices had the potential of disempowering women and rolling back the religious status they enjoyed during the pre-Christian mission agency era. In her scholarly paper on Women and Development in Africa, Gordon admits Western threats to women’s status in the continent in these words: “European expansion to Africa during the colonial period both undermined sources of status and autonomy that women had and strengthened elements of indigenous male dominance or patriarchy” (1996:250)

The Basel Mission took over from the English Baptist Mission in Cameroon following the German annexation of the territory earlier in 1884. While in the territory, the Basel Mission developed separate educational systems for both boys and girls by creating boys' and girls' schools. Dah notes that the principal intention for opening girls' schools was to "produce Christian wives and Christian mothers" (1983: 138). Understandably, it was not a Basel Mission policy to empower women to function as teachers and catechists. Clearly, there was no effort to emancipate women in the politics of the church that was being established by the missionaries. Rather, they pursued a gender policy streamed towards strengthening gender inequality. Apart from barring women from its ordained ministry, the Basel Mission did not allow female Christians to receive theological education. This explains why enrolment into the theological institutions that were opened in Cameroon remained the preserve of male Christians. No wonder women were completely excluded from the Basel Mission Church in Southern Cameroons given that the ordained ministry was a pathway to holding clerical and administrative positions. In preparing the church for ecclesiastical autonomy, which was granted in 1957, the white missionaries gradually transferred leadership to men in the example of Reverend Pastors such as Abraham Ngole, Aaron Su, Jacob Shu, Jeremiah Chi Kangsen, among others. So, during the early years of Presbyterian Church in Cameroon's autonomy from the Basel Mission, women had no decision power in the male-dominated hierarchy of the church. In fact, female Christians were not associated with church administration and responsibility concerning church buildings, church growth, and financial matters.

Although women were not empowered for leadership in the missionary church, they were the target of the civilizing activities of the Basel Mission. The latter felt that the home was the centre of women's lives and went ahead to promote a domestic empowerment ideology for Cameroonian women. This tallies with Atem's (2011: 17) view that the Christian civilizing culture of the Basel Mission in Cameroon was intended to train girls and women for their tasks as Christian housewives and improve on the diet of the family. Having examined the missionary strategies of the Basel Mission, Rev. Dah puts it more succinctly when he says that the woman was expected to learn home management subjects since "the home was her sphere" (1983: 138). Hence, early wives of the missionaries often invited young Cameroonian women and girls to

their homes for the teaching of crafts. This marked the beginning of work among women in the territory which was perhaps intended to knock down gender inequalities. But it was only after the First World War that the opening of three girls' schools was envisaged. It was against this backdrop that three missionary wives (Marie Walcher, Martha Heiser and Adelheid Hummel) were commissioned to initiate domestic science in Victoria, Buea and Bali respectively (Werner, 1969: 66-67). While the work in Buea and Bali did not immediately progress beyond the planning stage, Marie Walcher successfully opened a proper girls' school in Victoria by 1930.

Later in 1936, the Basel Mission posted two female missionaries to Cameroon, namely, Anni Murer and Else Bleher. By this time, the Basel Mission women empowerment policy took two dimensions: formal education in the form of girls' schools and informal education which was provided through training courses. Female missionary Bleher was commissioned to join Adelheid Hummel in organizing courses for women in the Bamenda Grassfields. These courses, as Keller Werner (1969: 106) observes, provided the potential for the opening of the Marriage Training Centre for girls in Bafut in 1937. During the turbulent Second World War era when the school in Bafut was closed, domestic science training was temporarily halted following the ousting of white missionaries. After the war, Lina Weber reopened the girls' school in Bafut and eventually transformed it into a full female primary school in which attention was given to domestic science and farm work. A third girls' school was established in Kumba in an effort to heighten the number of women that were receiving training in skills like sewing, weaving, child care, home management, farming and many others.

Expectedly, the offering of courses for girls and women as well as the operation of the girls' schools in Bafut, Victoria and Kumba enabled women who left these institutions to be happily married to the mission's teachers and indigenous clergymen. They had the capacity to function properly within the concept of the Christian home. This was evidence that the missionaries were succeeding in their domestic policy whose goal was to carve out different spheres of activity for men and women. Clearly, the education the Basel Mission provided to female Christians overtly sanctioned and promoted the place of marriage and child-rearing as the main calling of

Cameroonian female Christians. The necessity of monogamy and the importance of marital affection were promoted among female Christians.

Sadly, the white women the Basel Mission sent to Cameroon to work among indigenous women did not understand the domestic science courses they offered as a launching path for other income earning work. In fact, the Western Christian domestic policy lacked the potential to enable women to have access to resources because their capacities for full participation in the community were not developed. This accords credibility to Bettina's observation that the women empowerment approach of the Basel Mission reproduced in its work the patriarchal characteristics of the society at large which were detrimental to women (2008: 196). This problematic way of improving the status of Cameroonian women was unable to challenge the long established religious patriarchy.

In response, some female Christians managed to circumvent the confines of patriarchy in its various manifestations in the Basel Mission work in Cameroon. They began the reconstruction of the female Christian identity, though their activities did not receive freer scope. Strategically, some female graduates exploited the Christian home oriented mission school not only to delay marriages but also to use the domestic skills they acquired to gain new economic opportunities. Indeed, some graduates from the girls' schools in Bafut, Kumba and Victoria did not limit themselves to home management as the missionaries had intended. Their entrepreneurial ambitions pushed them to use the skills they learned in dressmaking, needlework and cooking to establish an independent source of income. Irrespective of this unintended outcome, it is clear that Basel Mission work, on the overall, amounted to demotion in women status. The Basel Mission era, I believe, was a moment when women lost power and status in Cameroon. The authority hierarchy of the missionary church along with its ordained ministry remained the preserve of male Christians. In this light, the unavoidable conclusion is that the Basel Mission handed down to the PCC a tradition of Christian women's inferior role in the church.

Transition from the Basel Mission to the PCC: Persistence or Abandonment of the Domestic Empowerment Policy?

After seventy-one years of male-dominated mission work in Cameroon, the Basel Mission finally resolved to yield to Henry Vein's missiological vision of the "indigenous church". As Wilbert Shenk (1985: 33) observes, Venn saw the emergence of self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting churches in the mission fields as the goal of mission. In order to implement this mission thought, the Basel Mission started training and arming more indigenous workers (pastors, teachers, health personnel, administrators and finance experts) with required skills to enable them replace the white missionaries. However, an intended gender consciousness was completely absent from the Basel Mission vision of an independent church, causing preparations for autonomy to focus only on male Christians. Following the end of the Second World War, it became official Basel Mission policy for leadership to be gradually passed down to the trained male Christians at the different levels of church organization as well as at the helm of educational and medical institutions.

By 1957, the goal of creating an "indigenous church" had progressed, resulting in the emergence of the PCC from the ecclesiastical mould of the Basel Mission. The PCC thus became one of the mainline Protestant churches in Cameroon (Hallden, 1968: 25). Although the Basel Mission had wanted to establish a vibrant church in Cameroon, the PCC was not self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing at independence (Dah, 2007). But in spite this problematic autonomy, the PCC had to pursue the mission work of the Basel Mission in Cameroon. With Buea as its headquarters, the PCC has an ascending hierarchical organizational chart comprised of Congregations, Presbyteries and the Synod (Lang, 2012). In the Presbyterian system, therefore, governance is exercised by the Christians through representatives whom they elect and who are called presbyters or elders. They hold to the unity of the church, and the institution is administered through a series of ascending administrative units and institutions (Nku, 1982). Although leadership in the church was/is shared between the ministers and laity, key positions such as Moderator, Synod Clerk and Presbytery Secretaries remained the province of the ordained ministers, who unfortunately were all male (Atem, 2011: 26). This made gender

equality to be absent within the PCC leadership given the fact that women were excluded from the ordained ministry.

This makes it evident that the PCC inherited this arbitrary rule against women in its leadership structure and specifically in the pulpit from the Basel Mission. Across the church's congregations, female Presbyterians continued to sit in pews and listened to male pastors as their mothers and grandmothers had done during the Basel Mission era. Bettina (2008: 1994) observes that the Basel Mission just like other missionary societies reproduced in its theological work the patriarchy in which women were trapped. It is important to mention that the female missionaries who were stationed in Cameroon by the Basel Mission were excluded from the ordained ministry. They were either missionary wives or single female missionaries who merely offered training courses for girls and women while their male counterparts were in the heart of ministry due to the theological education they had received. On the overall, the mission service of the Basel Mission in Cameroon can be best described as patriarchal and oppressive to women. This tradition of oppressing women and barring them from the priesthood and key leadership positions was handed down to the PCC.

During the first three decades of its autonomy, the male-dominated PCC leadership took measures to empower women through the already criticized "Christian Home" approach. The intention was to use women churned out from the girls' schools in Bafut, Victoria and Kumba to provide training in domestic sciences to Presbyterian women and girls. This pursuance of the domestic specialization of women was manifested through the creation of more girls' schools in Fotabe and Mankon. That was not all. In 1961, the Christian Women Fellowship (CWF) was created as a means by which female Presbyterians could achieve economic, social, and religious empowerment (Lawyer, 2013: 29). With its branches established in Presbyteries and Congregations across the national territory, the CWF engaged in various women empowerment activities that made women not only to aspire to their traditional roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, but to function in congregations as singers, with no administrative functions in the church's hierarchy. Another aim of this female Christian movement, as Lawyer notes, was "to lead the Christian women and girls (of 18 years and above) of the PCC to a fuller understanding of their faith and to enable them serve the Lord with joy in their homes, congregations,

community and nation as a whole” (Lawyer 2013: 29). To put it more succinctly, the CWF, apart from its Christian Home oriented goals, was intended to build women spiritually.

The foregoing dual mission of the CWF which waived any effort towards associating women with the ordained ministry and church leadership had to be attained through work done in women’s work institutions and CWF groups spread across presbyteries and congregations. It was catered for by a Women’s Work Department (WWD). The latter had a steady staff in the offices and over a hundred voluntary and part-time workers at the grassroots. Linked to the WWD were women empowerment groups and institutions, namely, the CWF, the Home Management Centre in Bafut and the two Christian Women Centres known nowadays as Church Centres headquartered in Bamenda and Kumba. In an effort to ensure that the PCC was not departing from the domestic women empowerment policy, the Basel Mission sent female fraternal workers such as Sr. Rose Mary Peter, Maria Schlenker, Sr. Marie Ringli and Miss Anna Frank to coordinate the activities of female Presbyterians. But these female fraternal workers dispatched by the Basel Mission worked in close collaboration with Cameroonian women such as Elizabeth Gana, Roseline Tanga, Margaret Morikang, Rachel Song, Frieda Maliva, Ophelia Ndifor, Catherine Chofor, Naomi Tamufor, Catherine Ntumngia, Regina Anjeh, Anna Ngwa Yingfuh and others (Gana, 69).

With this Basel Mission-PCC domesticity empowerment partnership running its course, CWF activities in most of its forms swiftly revealed that the old tradition of training girls and women to fit well into the so called “Christian Home” was still a norm within the PCC system. The activities of the movement ranged from spiritual growth through Bible studies, singing, needlework, cookery, crop farming, livestock development, general hygiene, to many other income generating initiatives (Lawyer, 2013: 31-36). It is relevant to point out that these empowerment activities were promoted in the entire PCC system through seminars and leadership courses that were organized by the WWD in association with the CWF at national, presbytery, zonal, parish and congregational levels. Apart from providing female Presbyterians with an entrepreneurial prowess which was a launching path to self-reliance through self-employment, the empowerment agenda also gave women the best training as mothers, with a capacity to build their children’s personality. Clearly, PCC’s pursuance of the domesticity policy

which largely focused on heralding the “Christian Home” enabled women to function properly as Christian housewives and imparted in them an entrepreneurial spirit which served as a basis for their engagement in the local economy.

In spite this acclaimed success, partly justified by the current increase in the membership of the CWF, the Christian Home empowerment policy, a Basel Mission legacy, lacked the potential to fully associate women with the leadership of the church. It only went as far as permitting women to serve as leaders of CWF movements and as elders in presbyteries and congregations. Besides, a few of these women were able to tap from this empowerment policy to challenge men in elections to local leadership positions in congregations, especially the post of Presbytery Chairperson, which had become the preserve of men as was the case in the Basel Mission era. This pushes me to disagree with Linda Lawyer’s celebratory submission that, through the CWF, the PCC was able to bring women on board its leadership. Rather, the sad reality is that the gender policy of the PCC during its first decades of autonomy was intended to empower women to challenge the patriarchy in society, while accepting and abiding to male domination of leadership in the church as an unchallengeable divine principle. Little wonder women were completely excluded from theological education and the ordained ministry of the PCC. More revealing is the fact that the first constitutions of the church conditioned that only the ordained could occupy key administrative positions in the church such as moderator, synod clerk, presbytery secretary, and presbytery treasurer (Read 1957 Constitution). From 1957 to the early 2000s, all these key leadership positions were occupied only by male Presbyterians. Interestingly enough, the emergence of Christian feminism resulted in controversies over women’s right to ordination and leadership in Christian organizations, necessitating the revision of the problematic Basel Mission-inherited gender policy.

Rethinking the Gender Legacy of the Founding Mission

The persistent exclusion of women from most of the important administrative positions in the PCC since its autonomy in 1957 was evidence that administering this church had been largely a male preserve, and it was more responsive to the interests of men than of women. Amazingly, the male leaders rarely challenged the culture of male dominance, most, if not all, believing that the gender arrangements inherited from the Basel Mission could not be changed. But they were

totally wrong as they failed to smell the feminist revolution that had strayed into Christian circles, amounting to Christian feminism. Though a Western construct, Christian feminism forced the African Christian community to consider afresh the role of women in their relationship to men in the church (Felix, 1994: 159). Motivated by this new Christian gender debate and building on gender justice supportive Biblical texts, recovering of women's Christian history, the pursuance of a gender policy by the World Council of Churches (WCC)¹, and the reality that women simply were not a minority in the PCC, some female Presbyterians called for a rethinking of PCC's gender policy.

As these few feminist voices which called for women's empowerment for leadership began to surface in the PCC, opposition from those men and women who wanted to safeguard the inherited Basel Mission gender legacy quickly emerged. At this time, the highest decision-making organ of the church, that is, the Synod, was hugely dominated by men. Constitutionally, any rethinking and revision of the gender policy had to be done in the Synod. Evidently, a rough ride was expected as the leadership of the church did not yet see anything wrong with the fact that marginalized women were kept down and disempowered. It is relevant to note that central to the debate on empowering female Presbyterians were three opposing issues. First, some people felt that the sections of the constitution which conditioned that only the ordained could hold the most influential positions (moderator, synod clerk, presbytery secretary and presbytery treasurer) be revised in view of permitting the laity to have access to these positions. This was because there was a strictly observed tradition barring women from the ordained ministry, a situation that made it impossible for them to occupy any of these posts. The second dimension of the debate was the argument that the laws barring women from the ordained ministry be knocked out from the constitution as a stepping stone for women to become pastors in view of occupying key positions. Hence, advocates of this postulation argued for expanded roles for women in ministry and seminary education. But there was a third category of Presbyterians who opposed the revision of the inherited gender policy, arguing that there were some positions that could not just be occupied by women. To put it another way, these conservative and backward looking Presbyterians opposed all reforms that could either open the ordained ministry to women or associate them with church leadership.

With this kind of entrenched and unfolding ideological dichotomies, it was obvious that rethinking the gender policy and ultimately empowering women for leadership in the PCC was going to be a tortuous long trip. Clearly, the PCC was on the course of an unprecedented gender crisis that, inevitably, had to be the subject of discussion in the top-most organs of the institution, especially during Synod and Synod Committee sessions. This marked the beginning of women's long trip to church leadership which was not just a confrontation with a particular ecclesiastical power, but a struggle against deeply rooted patriarchy in the church (Lehman, 2012). Within the PCC system, some Christians saw the marginalization of women in leadership as a practice that encouraged female dependency and immaturity and in many cases militate against women growing up and becoming fully involved in the decision-making circles of the church.

Though slow and halting, the attempt to try and provide women with more access to leadership was running its course. Towards the close of the 1960s, the PCC just like many other churches began stressing the theme which arguably is at the heart of the Christian ethic, namely the obligation to relieve oppression, to liberate victims of unjust domination and promote gender justice. This was a pointer to the fact that global Christian feminist liberation and empowerment ideas were gaining roots within the PCC. The church now had some feminist oriented female members who were determined to change the church, radically. They refused to ignore the liberating message that the church bear about gender justice. Consistently, these women together with the few men who had joined them exposed the damage that the church and its founding mission had done to women in the ordained ministry and other structures that kept women in a narrowly defined "place". This confirms Bendroth's (2008: 310) observation that for women all over the world, Christian feminism had a fundamental, permanent effect on church policies towards gender. Trapped in these controversies over women's right to leadership, the PCC authorities were obliged to take concrete measures aimed at eliminating decades of arbitrary rules against women in the church's power structure.

In 1971 under the tenure of Moderator Jeremiah Chi Kangsen, the Synod lengthily discussed the gender conundrum that was roiling the PCC. Expectedly there were voices for and against women's empowerment for leadership. As I have observed elsewhere, the demand for women's ordination as a stepping stone for participation in leadership attracted a lot of criticism during

this Synod meeting (Lang, 2015: 147). But the advocates remained steadfast in battling this missionary-inherited practice excluding women from the Eucharistic ministry and power structure. In further response, critiques maintained that ordination of women had no justification in either church tradition or its understanding of scripture; because Christ called only men to the apostolic succession. They added that women cannot live up to the task of clerical leadership, contending that their admission into the power structure would be disruptive to the church, given that they are doomed to fail. The advocates for the inclusion of women in the ordained ministry built on doctrinal texts such as Galatians 2:28 and Acts 2:17 as well as PCC's membership in the gender-friendly WCC to support the elimination of laws barring women from theological education and leadership.

What finally emerged from this gender debate was the adoption of a policy of gender justice in the PCC. The new gender approach opened the ordained ministry to women as a step towards their eventual participation in the leadership of the church as parish pastors, presbytery secretaries and treasurers, synod clerk, moderator and other positions that were/are the preserve of the ordained. This knocking down of the law excluding women from ordination and clerical leadership represented the success of the Christian feminist doctrine of the level playing field for men and women in the church advocated by egalitarian theorists. But given that some male and female conservative voices persisted in opposition, the implementation of this Synod resolution was slow, timid and halting as discussed in the next section.

Critiquing the Implementation of the New Gender Policies

In practical terms, the implementation of the new gender policies whose intention was to empower women for leadership had to begin with the selection and enrolment of female candidates into the Presbyterian Theological College where they could receive theological training in view of ordination into the priesthood. However, the enrolling of women into theological education started only in 1987 (Atem, 2011: 28). This delay resulted from a combination of factors: sustained opposition from conservative Presbyterians, men's desire to protect their clerical leadership, the financial crisis that engulfed the PCC in the 1970s, and,

perhaps, the need for caution in implementing such a reform that did not yet enjoy unanimity among Presbyterians, though constitutionally binding.

The consistence with which feminist Presbyterians advocated for the practical application of the above reform was indicative that the church could not remain indifferent. Besides, the founder and Prioress of the Emmanuel Sisterhood (a PCC nunnery in Bafut), Sister Madeleine-Marie Handy together with Rev. Dr. Ruth Epting, a Basel Mission female pastor who was sent to Cameroon to teach in the Presbyterian Theological College Nyassoso as an ecumenical co-worker, questioned why the PCC was training only male pastors at a time when the church's constitution permitted the training of women (Interview with Ruth Epting, 2008). These two feminists pressed for the full application of the 1971 Synod resolution. The outcome of this crusade was that in 1978, for the first time in its history, the PCC ordained Handy as its pioneer female pastor given that she had received theological education in Paris (Lang and Nkumbe, 2014: 9). Later in 1987, in spite a few persisting odds, the new Moderator of the church, Right Reverend Henry Awasom, invited female candidates to register for the competitive entrance examination into the Presbyterian Seminary in Kumba. This was how the seminary received its pioneer female students who began their career path into ministry through theological education in view of eventual ordination for possible engagement in the leadership structure of the church. From 1987 through 2010, the seminary churned out 66 female pastors against 306 male pastors (Lang, 2015: 165). From these figures, it is obvious that the number of female enrolments did not equal that of men. The apparently slow progress of women's ordination in the PCC is a signal that the old-gendered division of labour, with men in clerical leadership and women in silent service, is still very much in operation. Irrespective of this disturbing composite picture, it is pertinent to analyze whether this ordination of women did translate into their engagement with the leadership structure of the church. It was already pointed out that the new gender approach opened the ordained ministry to women as a step towards their eventual participation in the leadership of the church, especially in positions that were/are the preserve of the ordained.

Since the practical opening of the ordained ministry to women, its transition to female involvement in leadership has been stalling. While most of the ordained clergywomen swiftly

assumed leadership as Parish Pastors, with powers to manage congregations in collaboration with their close associates, access to appointive and elective administrative positions at Presbytery and central administration levels remained herculean for these female pastors. I have argued elsewhere that female entrance into the ordained ministry was a problematic principle for placing women in positions of authority in power. The case I am making is that ordained women could access positions such as Presbytery Secretary and Presbytery Treasurer only through appointments made by the Moderator, a position that has always been a male preserve since the autonomy of the church in 1957. Are the men who dominate and take decisions at the central administration of the church committed to the implementation of the 1971 gender policy? In the light of the historical development of the church's power structure since the adoption of this policy, it is clear that men are hesitant to bring more women on board the leadership of the church. Credence to this submission accrues from the fact that since the PCC began ordaining women as a prelude to their leadership empowerment, only three of them have served as Secretaries in presbyteries. Presently, the church has over 29 presbyteries spread across Cameroon with 28 of them manned by male Presbytery Secretaries.

Could it be that female PCC pastors lack the capacity to serve in these administrative positions? Building on the performance of most of these clergywomen in their parishes and taking into consideration that some have pursued theological education to the doctorate level, it would not be tenable to argue that they lack the leadership capacity to function in these positions. Presently, the church has at least two female pastors who have obtained doctorate degrees in theology and who are lecturing in the church's seminary in Kumba. These highly qualified female pastors, I believe, are simply caged in an entrenched patriarchal culture, with the leadership structure manned by power-thirsty clergymen and male laity who are bent on maintaining women outside the realms of clerical authority. It is not surprising that elective positions such as Synod Clerk and Moderator have never been occupied by women. The Conference of PCC Female Pastors and Students which was created in 1997 as a lobby tool has so far failed to roll away the hurdles on the path of women's access to leadership in the church.

Earlier in 1988, on the basis of what can be best described as international pressure from ecumenical partners, the PCC accepted to take measures not to only empower women for leadership through the ordained ministry, but to use other mechanisms. This pressure came particularly from the WCC through its Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998). Building on the existing relationship between the WCC and the PCC, the latter's authorities could do nothing but to sign on to this programme.² Through the programme, the WCC intended to eliminate the teachings and practices that marginalize women in its member churches. By so doing, the PCC made a commitment to further bring women on board its leadership at various levels from 1988 through 1998. Under the Coordinator of Catherine Muke Chefor who had been at the fore of the PCC's WWD, the PCC initiated activities that tallied with the objectives of the WCC programme. During the ten years, therefore, many seminars and workshops were organized alongside with lectures and leadership courses. Apart from targeting women, Chefor and her team involved men in the hope of changing their attitude towards women. When the programme was evaluated in 1998, the church's leadership jubilated that it was very successful in empowering women during the decade. The truism was that the programme had empowered some women, arming them with a daring attitude to challenge men in elective positions at the local level of the church's power structure. A few of these women became chairpersons in congregations and presbyteries. But these were very isolated cases given that although the church had trained women through seminars and workshops, there was huge hesitation to give them leadership positions. For instance, positions such as moderator, synod clerk and secretaries and treasurers in presbyteries remained under the full control of men. It is obvious that the programme lacked the capacity to dismantle what Atem describes as ecclesial marginalization of women within the PCC's structure.

Perhaps, due to the failure of the above programme, the gender issue was again the subject of a fierce debate when the PCC leadership decided to craft a strategic plan for its ministry and mission beyond the year 2000. In 2000, the new strategic plan was launched as the *Agenda 2000 and beyond Programme*. The latter, just like was the case in 1971 when there was a rethinking of the gender policy of the founding mission, acknowledged the persistence of ecclesial patriarchy and its demotion of women's status. It was in the light of this recognition of consistent women's

marginalization in the PCC that another commitment was taken in the new programme to heighten women's association with the power structure of the church, not only through ordinations and appointments that were the sole prerogative of the male-powered central administration, but to explore other options.

It was in pursuance of this strategic plan that the PCC, for the first time in its history, designed a particular programme in 2005 for the empowerment of its female faithful. Captioned as *Women's Education and the Empowerment of Women Programme (WEEP)*, the new approach had as target, as Atem puts it, to enable women "discover and recognize the talents and quality of power embedded in them". This laudable programme, as its central objective reveals, was bedeviled from inception. Instead of first of all ensuring that the talents and quality of leadership inbuilt in women were enhanced and exploited for the better stewardship of the church, efforts were rather made to empower women for political, economic and social roles in the wider Cameroonian society. This approach, I believe, was hypocritical because such a church with an entrenched tradition of patriarchy which had harmed women's status was trying to educate the wider society on matters of women's empowerment. In fact, it is the church, the government, the street and the entire society that marginalize women in Cameroon. The PCC, under the new programme, had to shake things up. Logically concrete and workable measures would have been taken to roll back the patriarchy in the power structure of the church before focusing on the wider society. This hypocrisy can be best described as "pot calling cattle black" or better still a church that had placed women on the fringes of power calling for their empowerment in society.

Clearly, the financial resources that were provided by Bread for the World for the implementation of this programme were misused in carrying out activities that were not intended to directly battle the patriarchy in the PCC. Although the WEEP which was experimented in the Fako Division in the South West Region yielded some empowerment benefits such as increased female representation in church congregational group leadership in the experimentation, this achievement, I argue, was limited to the base of PCC's power hierarchy. The programme, in the light of its meager achievements, was unable to enable the empowered women to ascend from the base to the top of the administrative structure of the church. More to this is the fact that the

empowerment of female Presbyterians through this programme was mostly beneficial to the elite class of women who quite often spoke and acted on behalf of the majority female folks in ways that amounted to marginalization.

Within the *Agenda 2000 and beyond Programme* which was the handiwork of a consultation held in Kumba in 1999, the PCC, among other things, resolved to offer equal opportunities to men and women in employments and appointments. Amazingly, the same document went on to stress that by 2005, the church would have appointed at least three female principals and two vice principals in its schools as well as three presbytery secretaries. Evidently, this administrative empowerment task did not reflect the commitment taken by the church to ensure gender equality in matters relating to employments and appointments. It is true that from 2003 to 2005, three female pastors had been appointed to the position of presbytery secretary and one as presbytery treasurer. This was grossly insignificant given that the PCC had over 25 presbyteries at the time. Besides, the church had about 40 female pastors with the capacity to serve as secretaries and treasurers in the presbyteries. This is a pointer to the fact that there was persistent hesitation to place women in administrative positions. Female Presbyterians including pastors, teachers, nurses and those in other professions have remained confined at the margins of the church's power structure. Positions such as Moderator, Synod Clerk, and the departments of the church such as communication, finance, presbook, medical, prescraft, education, scholarship, constitution, theological seminary, lay training and evangelism, etc have never been occupied by a woman. In the church's history, therefore, only the Women's Work Department has been successively headed by women, for obvious reasons. The Synod Office in Buea which hosts the central administration of the church is undeniably a male-dominated environment, with women serving as men's secretaries, liaison officers, cleaners and in other insignificant positions. Generally, the gender perspective of the *Agenda 2000 and beyond Programme* did not reform the marginalized status of women within the PCC administrative set up.

Conclusion

This article has examined the evolutionary dynamics of women's role in the PCC, showing why and how female leadership has historically changed and developed. During the era of the

founding mission, the enhancement of a “Christian Home” was prioritized, causing the Basel Mission to adopt and pursue a domesticity gender policy that excluded women from the power structure of the missionary church. As the study reveals, female Christians sat in pews and performed various domestic tasks in homes, while male white missionaries in association with some indigenous male folks broadcast governance over the church. It was this predominantly male-dominated missionary church that gained autonomy as the PCC in 1957. Even though the latter was roiled by the Christian feminist movement that advocated for Christian women’s empowerment, the Basel Mission domesticity gender approach was inherited and perpetuated, at least for a few decades. The plethora of women empowerment reforms that were initiated such as female ordination, the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998), and the gender perspective of the *Agenda 2000 and beyond Programme* all failed to dismantle the patriarchal culture in the PCC. However, a few women gained empowerment and were associated with the leadership of the church, though mostly at the base of the power structure. But this study found that in this women empowerment question, it was perhaps more of an issue of class than gender, since only women of wealth and affluence had the means to serve the church in leadership capacities. Most of these affluent women have emerged as leaders of the WWD and CWF which are narrowly defined female leadership avenues. That notwithstanding, women, irrespective of their leadership potentials, remained at the margins of the churches leadership structure from top to bottom, with men bossing them.

In light of these revelations, this paper concludes that opportunities for female leadership in the PCC are more limited than for males, and these limitations have produced a composite picture of women that at least suggests grossly neglected leadership marginality. As a way forward, and given that this female exclusion from the church’s power structure is peddled by the male folks, I suggest that the current constitution of the PCC which does not openly discriminate against women be revised in view of enshrining into it a leadership quota system for both men and women regarding employment and appointments. Concerning elective positions such as Moderator and Synod Clerk, it is necessary to introduce a constitutional clause forbidding both positions to be held by people of the same sex. To put it another way, if, for instance, the Moderator is a male, let the Synod Clerk be a female. With hindsight, I know how daring these

recommendations are, but they can be brainstormed and implemented if the church is truly committed to the task of women's empowerment in its ecclesial leadership. In the 1980s when the PCC was visited by an injurious conflict accruing from the monopolization of top positions by Presbyterians of North West extraction, the constitution was revised, amounting to the current tradition of rotation of the positions of Moderator and Synod Clerk between the North West and South West Regions (Lang 2013: 48). This same approach, if carefully discussed and cautiously implemented, can lay to rest the gender conundrum in the PCC.

NOTES:

1. Created in 1948, the WCC ultimately called for an international forum on "The Life and Work of Women in the Church", during which its member churches were called upon to empower women for leadership. In 1961 when the PCC became a full member of the WCC, it had to join the struggle for inclusion of women in the ordained ministry and leadership. Hence, the PCC signed on to the gender policy of the WCC as a member church. This placed the PCC on the path to revising its gender policy. For more on the women empowerment approach of the WCC, read Zohreh Abdekhodaie, "Letty M. Russell: Insights and Challenges of Christian Feminism", Master of Theology Studies Thesis, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2008.
2. The launching of this ecumenical decade was motivated by the United Nations Decade for the Advancement of women from 1975 through 1985 under the theme: "Equality, Development and Peace".

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