

The life and times of Professor Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel: A transformative church leader in sub-Saharan Africa

Charles Flaendorp

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Abstract

This article is an overview of the life and times of Professor Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel, an ordained minister in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. She is currently professor in Systematic Theology and Church Polity at the University of Stellenbosch, and co-minister of URCSA in Scottsdene, Kraaifontein in the Western Cape. She is the current moderator of the General Synod of URCSA, and the vice-president of the World Council of Churches. This article is an appraisal of a remarkable church leader and theologian in recent times. This appraisal focuses on her pioneering work in URCSA, the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, and her work as a feminist theologian in South Africa, the African continent and the ecumenical world at large. The significance of Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel is not only rooted in her leadership positions, the many theological publications, or her lecturing status, but can be found in her active participation in processes to transform society. The information in this article is based on interviews, published articles, books and media sources.

Background

Mary Anne Plaatjies was born in Prieska in 1959, as the second of seven daughters of Johannes Jacobus Plaatjies, a headmaster at several primary schools in the Northern Cape, and Jacoba Johanna Plaatjies, a housewife. She matriculated in 1977 at Bergrivier Senior Secondary School in Wellington in the Boland. She first embarked on a teaching career, after completing her teacher's diploma at the University of the Western Cape in 1978. In 1986 she enrolled at the University of the Western Cape in order to be trained as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. After further studies she was licensed by the curatorium of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. In November 1992 she became the first woman to be ordained as a minister in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa. She is married to

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Rev. Dawid Van Huffel, a full-time minister of the URCSA congregation, Scottsdene in Kraaifontein near Cape Town. Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel became the co-minister in this congregation in 2011. After her legitimisation, she was ordained as Minister of the Word in the combination congregation of Robertson-Robertson East in the Boland region of the Western Cape. She served the congregation and the community with distinction from November 1992 until March 2010 for a period of more than 17 years.¹ In 2010 she was appointed lecturer in Church History and Church Polity at the University of Stellenbosch. She is currently heading the discipline group of Church History and Church Polity.

Apart from her lecturing duties and pastoral care, she also serves in other capacities on numerous national and international structures.² In 2002 she was elected as the first woman to serve as actuary of the Cape synod of URCSA. She served for two terms (2002-2010) in this position before she was elected as vice-moderator of the general synod of URCSA in 2008. In 2012 she was elected as moderator of the general synod, thus becoming the first woman in the Reformed Church to be elected to the highest church position in the Reformed family. In 2013³ she was also elected as one of the vice-presidents of the World Council of Churches, thus becoming the president for Africa.

¹ Prof. Mary Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel obtained the following qualifications: BTh (Hons), UWC, M.Th (Is die kerk middeleeus? 'n kritiese studie oor die geloofs-en kerklike praktyk m.b.t. prostitusie in die NGK familie in die Kaapse Skiereiland.) 1998. UWC. DTh-Vroue in die teologiese antropologie in die Afrikaanse Gereformeerde tradisie. 2003. Unisa. <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/1190>. PhD. Die Doleansie Kerkreg en kerkregering van die Nederduits Gereformeerde sendingkerke en die VGKSA. 2008. Universiteit van Pretoria. <http://uped.tl.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-04022009-190218/>. Plaatjies Van Huffel was appointed co-professor at the Faculty of Theology Stellenbosch University in May 2014.

² External examiner at the University of the Western Cape and the North West University, as well as the Heidelberg College. Member of the "Suid Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns" Member of the International Consortium for Law and Religious studies, CHSSA, serves on the council for the protection and promotion of religious rights and freedom. Member of the Circle of Concerned Women.

³ The World Council of Churches is an ecumenical fellowship of churches founded in 1948. By the end of 2013 the WCC had 345 member churches, representing more than 500 million Christians from Protestants, Orthodox, Anglican and other traditions in over 140 countries. She became the first South African to fill this position after Rev. Alpheus. H. Zulu, of the Church of the Province of South Africa, who had been elected in 1968 as one of the vice-presidents of the WCC. Before 1961, Africa was not represented on the WCC presidency.

A distinguished church leader in the URCSA

Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel received a calling as minister in 1992 to the combination congregation of Robertson-Robertson East in the Boland region of the Western Cape. She co-pastored with Rev. Jimmy De Wet until November 1993. On this calling, she received worldwide recognition. In a letter from the Princeton Theological Seminary, dated March 18, 1993, she was congratulated by the president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Jane, Dempsey Douglass, who wrote:

We want you to know how important it is to all of the churches of the World Alliance of Churches, that your church has now opened its ministry to women. We realise that it is not easy for you as the first ordained woman pastor, but it is an exciting opportunity to which the holy Spirit has led you. We know that God will continue to strengthen you for the tasks which lie ahead. I was particularly interested to notice the text from the Bible on which Dr. Boesak preached the ordination sermon. The story from the Book of Numbers about the inheritance of the daughters is a favourite one for women at Princeton Theological Seminary.

She also received a letter from the Nederlandse Zendingsraad (Rev. D. Spee):

The Netherlands Missionary Council wishes to congratulate you with the ordination. We hope that the ordination of Rev. Plaatjies is a start for more congregations to call women as ministers. Our second joy is that it is especially Mary-Anne who is then first female minister at the end of the Lesotho meeting. She gave an outstanding example of her professional theological knowledge and of her ability for pastoral sympathy with a sermon about Ruth. Be convinced that we are happy about this event as much as you are.

Her ordination as the first woman minister in a Reformed church was not without controversy. The newly constituted congregation in Robertson-East was a socially deprived and economically poor Coloured community, consisted of farm labourers, seasonal workers and mostly illiterate people. Shortly after commencing her duties in the Robertson-East congregation as a female minister, a schism occurred. Approximately 120 people, mostly women, left the congregation to join the Robertson congregation. The reason: To be led by a women minister was problematic to them. It was then that she realised that she would have to deal with stereotypes, especially with regard to

women in the ministry. Van Huffel thus started to systematically break down these stereotypes in this very conservative, newly-constituted congregation.⁴ This incident sparked many media stories in 1994. One such story appeared in a regional newspaper, *Die Burger*, on 23 April 1994. However, she continued to serve the congregation for the next 17 years. The legacy she left behind in the congregation and the presbytery of Zuurbraak is immense. There are physical beacons in Robertson that bear testimony to the legacy of this formattable former Robertson-East URCSA minister. She restored not only the dignity of her congregants, but also those of the community. She established a community service centre with the aim to empower previously disadvantaged groups. She negotiated buildings, designed programmes and managed the community centre with a small staff on very limited funds. She also transcended racial boundaries when she reached out to black became one of the largest welfare institutions in the region. She established the Phumlani Adult Association in the Nqubela Township near Robertson, the Nikithemba aftercare centre, as well as a shelter for the homeless. Her involvement in community upliftment programmes is rooted in her firm belief that the church must act as the hands of God in the world, especially for those in need. This belief has its foundations in the command of the Belhar Confession (1982).

She thus became a legendary figure in the Robertson region. On her experience in Robertson as a minister she commented in an Afrikaans (RSG) radio station interview years later, in 2012: "I realised soon after my arrival that I would not only bring the gospel to these people, but that I also would have to deal with stereotyping and conservatism in an environment of poverty."

It is from her position as minister of Robertson-East that she started to move up in the church hierarchy and make major contributions. She became the first female to be elected in a synodical position as the actuary of a Reformed church in Southern Africa in 2002 at the Cape regional synod of URCSA. Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel did not merely serve as actuary of a regional synod, but in this position she also brought about major shifts in church polity. She started to almost single-handedly challenge some of the century-old church stipulations.⁵ Where she felt that they were outdated or impractical, she proposed amendments to the synod. One of her biggest

⁴ On Saturday 23 April 1994, the Afrikaans newspaper, "Die Burger" reported as follows: "die hele probleem word veroorsaak deur lidmate van die Verenigde Gereformeerde kerk wat blykbaar nie onder die gesag van 'n vroue predikant wil staan nie. Die meeste van die afvalliges is vroue. Plaatjies van Huffel is quoted in the report : "Hoewel niemand dit sê nie, glo ek die verskuilde rede is dat hierdie mense, die meeste is vroue, nie die gesag van 'n vrou kan aanvaar nie. Hieraan kan ek niks doen nie, behalwe om in liefde en vrede met my werk voort te gaan."

⁵ Regional synod Western Cape: Agenda 2002: p280, p287, 288, 289, 293, 294, 289-298 with regard to editorial revision of CO 299, 301, 302.

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contributions to the church order has been her tireless struggle to make the church order more gender sensitive. She became a strong voice in the church on church matters as well as on social and economic issues. She developed a sound knowledge of church history and church polity.

This led to her being elected vice-moderator of the general synod in 2008 in Hammanskraal.⁶ Thereafter, in October 2012, she became the moderator of the general synod of URCSA in Okahandja, Namibia. The election to this office signifies a historical moment in the South African church discourse as she was the first woman in Southern Africa to be elected to the highest office in the family of Reformed churches. The unanimous election to the position of moderator was neither a sympathetic or an emotional choice, or even a sign of tokenism, but based on merit. The Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa needed the leadership of Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel at this time, hence her election was a *sine qua non*. Many believe that her election to the moderator position was a divine appointment. Nico Koopman commented on her appointment: "She has profound theological knowledge in the field of church history and church polity, and years of experience in the church and church leadership. Her election is a very significant moment in the discourse of gender justice in South Africa." (Prof Nico Koopman, Dean of the Faculty of Theology University Stellenbosch, 2013).

She became the voice of the church in South Africa on many issues. Her leadership stretched beyond the church borders as she became a respected South African public persona. She was also given the opportunity to minister to the close family members of the late President Nelson Mandela at his private residence in Houghton after his death, following her election to the position as moderator of URCSA. In 2013 she was elected as one of the vice-presidents of the World Council of Churches, thus becoming the president for Africa. This made her the most influential church leader on the African continent. Her election gave Africa for the first time a bigger voice representation in church issues in the world.

A transformative theological voice

In 2010 Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel was appointed lecturer in Church History and Church Polity in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch. Her appointment came after numerous unsuccessful applications for academic positions at different places of higher education in South Africa. Her appointment was again a *cairos* moment for URCSA specifically. Her appointment as senior lecturer in Church History and Church Polity was more than merely a numerical presence for URCSA in the Faculty of

⁶ The general synod took place in Namibia as the member churches in Namibia as one of the regional synods of URCSA.

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Theology, but it also signified a major historical moment in the relationship between the Dutch Reformed Church and URCSA and strengthened the ties between the two organisations.

She contributed to the transformation of the faculty by bringing the present and the past together. She succeeded in building relationships between staff members of the different churches. This was a major challenge because of the mistrust that had evolved over the years. Although other lecturers from URCSA had joined the Faculty of Theology ever since 2000, her appointment in 2010 was seen by URCSA as highly significant. She came not only as a female theologian, but also as a URCSA church leader. She was uniquely suited for this position in terms of her qualifications, experience and stature.

Her theological framework was founded on three pillars: (i) a theology of dignity especially towards the vulnerable groups; (ii) the theological disciplines of Church History and Church Polity; and (iii) a theology of ecology and justice.

A theology of dignity especially towards the vulnerable groups

Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel started off by operating in an apartheid ideology context, but also in a context where women were still marginalised in South Africa. She herself was part of this vulnerable marginalised group. She challenged the status quo when she enrolled for a theology degree at the University of the Western Cape, with no guarantee that she would be ordained as a minister in the church. After many struggles, she was eventually ordained as the first woman minister in the family of Dutch Reformed churches.⁷ Naturally the media widely reported on this paradigm shift in the church. Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel became the public face of a transformative church. This transformation was, however, a very slow process. In an article in URCSA's official newspaper, she wrote about her experience as part of a marginalised, vulnerable group, a year after her ordination: "Thus far nothing has changed in the church. The theological training could not assist women to transcend centuries of ecclesiastical undertones. Through the centuries, perceptions were created that a minister must be a strong male leader. Children, congregants and colleagues have reduced women ministers to second-hand theologians." (*Die Ligdraer* 1993).

In an interview in "Rapport" on 10 October 2010, she commented on her election as a female church leader to the highest decision-making

⁷ "Die Burger" reported on this significant event in 1993 with the heading "Eerste vrou bevestig in NG kerkfamilie" (first woman ordained in the DR family) "'n Luide 'hoera' aan die Kerkraad van Robertson wat die baanbrekers was om eerste 'n vroue predikant te beroep." (a loud cheer for the Church Council of Robertson who became the pioneers in calling the first woman minister).

structures: "I hope that I am a vision of hope for women in and outside of the church for their own careers. My success story must be the success story of all women." In a published article in *Studia Historicae Ecclesiasticae*, (2011:105-119) entitled "From docile recipients to agents of change", she writes about the institutionalisation of Christian women organisations. She argues in this article that the institutionalisation of Christian women organisations in URCSA played a pivotal role in describing women as docile objects in theological discourse. Christian women's organisations, she argues later, were developed as sites for change. This she says, was due to the influence of ecumenism. She points out that women were generally absent in URCSA during the first part of the 20th century, only started participating in the later part of the 20th century. It is only then that they started to claim their freedom and to resist domination.

In a published article in March 2010 ("From our side – emerging perspectives on development and ethics"), she argued that in spite of the impressive policies for women's empowerment, discrimination still existed in South African society. She started to address the marginalisation of women in her doctoral thesis in 2003. The topic of her thesis was "Women in the theological anthropology in the Afrikaans Reformed churches." In her thesis she proposed a paradigm shift by the church towards women. She took the struggle for marginalised people a step further when she became instrumental in the legitimisation of the first deaf (woman) person to be licensed in URCSA, with full ministerial powers. Under her leadership Bettie Wanza, a deaf woman at the school for the deaf in Worcester, completed her theological studies. Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel also structured a course in Church History and Church Polity for deaf students in URCSA. She guided the students and also acted as promoter for Wanza's trial sermon in 2013. The trial sermon by the first deaf student of URCSA to a deaf congregation of the Dutch Reformed church in Worcester was a momentous and joyous occasion for URCSA. This pivotal process was a tremendous achievement by URCSA and can be attributed to the hard work of Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel.

Once again it was because of her visionary leadership and a strong church judicial motivation at the general synodical commission of URCSA that the application was approved, prior to the amendment of the church stipulations. This application meant that URCSA had to change the oath of licensing, as well as church stipulations with regard to the status of the ministers of the Word in order to make provision for the ministering to the deaf.

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Church History and Church Polity

When Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel was appointed lecturer in Church History and Church Polity in 2010, she started publishing in accredited journals and made important research inputs. She quickly progressed from lecturer to senior lecturer, to head of the discipline group and to co-professor – all within four years of being at the University of Stellenbosch. This is an illustration of her sharp intellect and general giftedness. She is a lecturer par excellence, and is held in high esteem by her fellow lecturers and students.

She made major academic contributions to the URCSA and DRC Theological Seminary in the Faculty of Theology. The DRC and URCSA started a new model for spiritual formation as a joint venture at the Faculty of Theology in 2012. It was Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel who designed the programme (practical training) for theological formation at the seminary and it is in full operation after having been approved by the general synod in 2012. She has proven to be a very strong voice on issues of transformation at the faculty and at the University of Stellenbosch in general. She currently serves on various structures in an advisory capacity. Her contributions in the fields of Church History and Church Polity go far beyond the confines of the University of Stellenbosch. She often addresses contextual issues in the South African discourse at conferences and other public platforms.

Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel is interested in the importance of using hermeneutical keys to understand church judicial matters with regard to church unification. One of her key interests at present is the unification process between the DRC and URCSA. She regards this issue as her biggest challenge as theologian and church leader. She believes that this is a Biblical command. In a recent publication on the church struggle for justice, she addressed this very issue. She was the co-editor of this publication which was dedicated to “students of theology born after 1990 who have to do theology in a faithful and creative way in the aftermath of apartheid.”

In 2008 she obtained a PhD in Church History at the University of Pretoria. Her thesis was entitled: “Die Doleansie Kerkreg en Kerkregering van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk en die Verenigde Gereformeerde kerk in Suider Afrika.” This contribution is a further addition to the Church Polity discipline at universities. In an article in her recent publication: “Reformed churches in South Africa and the struggle for justice”, she discussed the Belhar Confession from a historical point of view. She concluded that the Belhar Confession originated in a specific historical context, like all the other classical Reformed confessions. The socio-political realities in pre-democratic South Africa compelled the Dutch Reformed Mission Church Synod in South Africa to accept Belhar as a confession in 1982. It was a Christian view on racism and suffering. In the article she traces the origin of this racism and suffering back to 1857 when the Dutch Reformed

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church decided to separate Holy Communion services for the different race groups, thus supporting the policy of segregation. According to Professor Plaatjies van Huffel, due to the infringements on human dignity through apartheid laws, the DRMC was led to a confession like Belhar. She concludes that the confession was brought about and accepted at the height of apartheid in South Africa, thus placing it in a historical context.

Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel takes a keen interest in the difficulties that female theological students often have to face at Stellenbosch University. She provides them with advice in her capacity as lecturer and woman minister. She firmly believes that the struggle of women in the ministry is far from over. The Curatorium of the Western Cape Synod frequently refers female students to her for consultation when they struggle with their calling. She is able to help these students by sharing her experiences as a woman pastor in active ministry with them.

A theology of ecology and justice

Professor Plaatjies van Huffel's involvement also stretches beyond the historically defined beacons of the church borders. She believes that the church should not only preach the gospel, but should be actively involved in matters in the world with regard to ecology and justice. In an article entitled "A search for a common understanding with regard to ecology and justice in URCSA", she outlines what the church's viewpoint should be in this regard. She urges URCSA to become advocates in the ecology issues of the day in partnership with other ecumenical structures. She strongly believes that ecology and justice are interrelated concepts. She is concerned about the impact of climate change on the earth, fracking, and the economic policies that are disadvantaging the poor. Under her leadership URCSA has formulated a response to hydraulic fracturing. At the general synod of 2012, a motion on hydraulic fracturing was passed. The synod, mindful of who the owner of the earth is, and mindful of what might be the possible impact on our health, animals and the whole environment as a result of hydraulic fracturing in the area of the Karoo, resolved to actively take up the issue of hydraulic fracturing and other environmental issues on the basis of their Biblical understanding of their responsibility for the earth. The synod has called on every member of URCSA and its institutions to witness constantly and boldly for environmental justice in southern Africa and the world. Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel was instrumental in this response by the synod.

In an interview in "Rapport" on 10 October 2010 she pleads for a paradigm shift on economic injustices. It is her belief that after 18 years of democracy, economic and political justice is but a dream for the poor and oppressed. She would like the church to be the prophetic voice in these matters. The church needs to change from being inward-centred to being

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more outward-focused. Only then, according to Plaatjies Van Huffel, will the church be a true church. In the interview she urged the church to play a more meaningful role in the South African public discourse.

Conclusion

Professor Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel was never elected into any leadership positions merely because of the fact that she was a woman, but rather because of her rare leadership qualities. These qualities have enabled her to empower other women too. She has made important contributions in the church, locally and internationally, and in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University. She has been and still is a pioneer in many spheres of society. She was among the first to address the position of women in the church. This journey started a few years after the Catholic leader Pope John II spoke on the feast of the Assumption in 1988 on the issue of women. The Pope declared: "The hour has come in which women are acquiring in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with the spirit of the Gospel can do so much to prevent humanity from falling" (Lang 1988:7-8).

Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel single-handedly brought about two major paradigm shifts in the church. Firstly, she addressed the position of women in the church through the spoken Word. When she enrolled for theological studies at a time when it was still a closed avenue for women, she paved the way for other women to follow. She challenged the church hierarchy to make provision for women in the ministry. Secondly, she made a major contribution to changing the church stipulation in the church order when she became part of that very leadership whom she challenged. She has proven to be a selfless church leader and theologian whose influence and legacy will continue for generations to come. She is the right church leader in these times of change and continues to contribute to healthy debates regarding church life and society, thus fulfilling her role as a transformative church leader, not only in sub-Saharan Africa, but also in the world at large.

Professor Plaatjies Van Huffel attributes her strength and insight to the grace of God. She sees herself as a humble servant of God, and is always aware of the urgency of the hour. She is the first to point out that her successes can be attributed to the efforts of the commissions she works with. She is one of the most transformative church leaders we have seen in recent times in sub-Saharan Africa and is indeed a gifted spiritual leader par excellence of whom we can say, *O feminea forma, quam gloriosa es!* (O woman, so wondrously fashioned).

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