

REFLECTIONS: AFRICA SIX BISHOPS AND CAWLRA

Reflection by:
Ofentse Kwapeng
President of the Anglican Youth Of Southern Africa

The Anglican Church in Africa currently has only six female bishops, a stark reminder of the slow progress in women's advancement within church leadership.

The Revd Dr Florence Li Tim-Oi was the first woman ordained to the priesthood in the Anglican Communion on January 25, 1944, in the Hong Kong and Macao region. In Southern Africa, women were first ordained to the priesthood in 1992.

Bishop Barbara Harris was the first woman bishop in the global Anglican Communion, consecrated in 1989 in the Episcopal Church in the United States.

It is deeply concerning that years later, the continent of Africa only has six women Bishop's to date

The Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) has had hundreds of women ordained since 1992, yet we have only four consecrated as Bishop's. This statistic reflects a deeper issue around gender inequality and the slow translation of women clergy into leadership roles

The gathering coordinated by the Diocese of Highveld, in collaboration with the Africa Six and CAWLRA (Center for Anglican Women's Leadership and Research in Africa), was a transformative experience for me as a young woman still discerning my path in ministry and leadership. Hearing firsthand the challenges faced by ordained women was both eye-opening and saddening, a clear indication that patriarchal structures persist in the Church. Gender inequality and unequal access to opportunities remain a reality when compared to our male counterparts.

The bishops from the Africa Six are truly remarkable trailblazers who are using their voices and platforms to make space for the rest of us. Their leadership brings hope for aspiring female clergy and bishops in the Anglican Church. Knowing that these women are fighting not just for themselves but for all of us is deeply inspiring.

Revd Wilma Jakobsen, one of the first women to be ordained in ACSA, once wrote:

"While women have clearly made a difference in the church, and there are many wonderful stories of women's leadership in creative and significant ministries, I also hear how the Anglican Church continues to be a site of struggle and challenge for women, ordained and lay."

It is disheartening that, even today, women must still fight for space and recognition in the Church.

The "Africa Six" and Their Dioceses:

- Rose Okeno – Diocese of Butere, Kenya
- Emily Onyango – Diocese of Bondo, Kenya
- Vicentia Kgabe – Diocese of Lesotho
- Dalcy Dlamini – Diocese of Eswatini
- Elizabeth Awut – Episcopal Church of South Sudan
- Filomena Teta Estêvão – Anglican Church of Angola and Mozambique

It was a true privilege to be part of this historic conversation, held at St Dunstan's in the Diocese of Highveld. I also had the opportunity to visit the bishops in Kopanong for one of their sessions, where they shared personal stories of their call to ministry and the journeys that led to their consecration.

Bishop Elizabeth of South Sudan shared how her consecration faced legal challenges and how, even after being consecrated, she was not allowed to vest as a bishop.

Bishop Emily of Kenya recalled how she had to work twice as hard as her male counterparts, while men were ordained with only diplomas, she had to earn a degree, yet was still seen only as fit to be a secretary or Sunday school teacher.

CAWLRA and the Work Ahead

The Center for Anglican Women's Leadership and Research in Africa (CAWLRA) was established to address the very challenges acknowledged by the Africa Six bishops, including:

- The need for ethical and transformational leadership in the Anglican Church and other faith-based contexts in Africa.
- Addressing the triple threat faced by women — sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), HIV/AIDS, and teenage pregnancies — which women faith leaders are uniquely positioned to respond to.
- The importance of faith-based, grounded sex education and the urgent need to engage with complex challenges in politics, economics, technology, ecology, religion, and culture.



Too often, faith-based organizations and churches overlook these issues, perhaps because they predominantly affect women, and women remain underrepresented in leadership. Until more women are empowered and included in decision-making both lay and clergy these issues will remain on the margins.

As a young person in the Church, and someone called to leadership and ministry, I recognize that we still have a long way to go. But we will not stop. We will continue to take up space. We will continue to nurture both the Church and the world. The journey is long, but it is not impossible.

To the bishops, to CAWLRA, and to every woman faithfully serving in ministry: thank you for opening the way. You are the reason many of us now believe that our callings are valid and that our voices matter.

