

# Ecumenism from Below: An Exposition of Practical Ecumenism in South Africa by the Women's Leagues

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## *Abstract*

This article explores ecumenism from below as demonstrated by women's leagues in Zimbabwe and South Africa where Christians from different denominations worship together once every week. Ecumenism at institutional theological levels remains a theoretical and theological exercise in many parts of Christendom. Women's leagues are practicing ecumenism through their interdenominational weekly activities with very little regard for church theology. The Easter Sunday reminds us that the gospel preached by the church is the gospel initiated by women who experienced and preached the resurrection to men. In contemporary Zimbabwe and South Africa ecumenism is initiated by women. Without the theological debates conducted by ecumenical institutions, the women's leagues of different churches have been worshipping together at least once a week, mainly in Harare, Zimbabwe and in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa since 1984. This article discusses the ecumenical practices of the women's league in Zimbabwe and South Africa through *Fambidzano/Mubatanidzwa wamazimai/Amabandla ahlangene* ('United or Mixed Churches' in isiZulu/isiNdebele and chiShona respectively). These leagues participate in pastoral care through diaconal work and worship services especially on Thursdays. This paper concludes that the activities of the women's leagues are forms of ecumenism from below as opposed to ecumenism from above by theologians and church leaders which has largely remained at a theoretical level.

## **Introduction**

The church came to Africa already denominationalised from the schisms in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Even though some mission societies that came to Southern Africa were ecumenical in nature, their mission work resulted in the formation of churches along the denominations that already existed in

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<sup>2</sup> See Gustav Gous, 1999. "Ten Memory Marks in the History of Ecumenism," in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism*, ed. Christo Lombaard (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 42-54; DB Barret, (ed.) *World Christian Encyclopaedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); T. Dowley (ed.), *The History of Christianity* (Herts: Lion Publishing, 1977).

Europe. In the contemporary context some of the denominational differences are hostile to each other.<sup>3</sup> For example, some sermons condemn other denominations. Historically, in some extreme cases, there has been no love amongst the disciples from different denominations resulting in condemnations.<sup>4</sup> A publication by the Lutheran Institute for Ecumenical Research says "...an honest look at church history shows that Christians have often been better at hating one another than loving one another, and this hatred has distorted their ability to perceive the truth or the gospel."<sup>5</sup> Several denominations in Africa have ecumenical relations based on the relatedness of church traditions.<sup>6</sup> However, Africans, especially in rural areas, are culturally communal.<sup>7</sup> The communal nature of African life makes church divisions less visible during the week when Christians from different denominations interact at the socio-economic and political level, only to be physically divided by the denominations on days of worship. In this context of division, members of the women's league from different denominations, with a certain level of gender consciousness,<sup>8</sup> worship together, making ecumenism a reality. This paper discusses worshipping together by the women's leagues through the *Fambidzano/mubatanidzwa wamadzimai/Amabandla ahlange*. This worshipping together has a positive effect on other church services where these women participate such as funerals, weddings and Sunday/Saturday services.

Members of the women's leagues in Zimbabwe and South Africa who participate in the *Fambidzano/mubatanidzwa wamadzimai/Amabandla*

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<sup>3</sup> *Lutherans in Ecumenical Dialogue: 2003-2010* (Strasbourg: Institute for Ecumenical Research, 2010), 7-12.

<sup>4</sup> An example are the conflicts between Lutherans and Mennonites in Europe during the Bloody religious conflict.

"The Baptists, who advocated church reforms even more radical than those proposed by Martin Luther or Ulrich Zwingli, were persecuted by both the Catholics and the Protestants and had to flee for their lives. Nevertheless, thousands were killed." (<http://www.dw.com/en/lutherans-reconcile-with-mennonites-500-years-after-bloody-persecution/a-5837683> [Accessed on 20/08/2016]).

<sup>5</sup> *Ecumenical Dialogue*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> James Amanze, "Some Large ecumenical organisations on the African continent," in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism*, ed. Christo Lombaard, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 137-149.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Moyo, "Religion and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Healing and Communal Reconstruction in African Communities," *Alternation* Special Edition 11 (2013), 207-236.

<sup>8</sup> Humphrey Mogashoa, "Some Ecumenical Organisations in Africa," in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism*, ed. Christo Lombaard (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 106-135.

*ahlangene*<sup>9</sup> justify their coming together using the following verses from the gospel of John: "I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one...as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me." Earlier in chapter 17:11 of John we find the following words, "Holy Father keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one."<sup>10</sup> Jesus said these words on the night that he was betrayed. This was towards his last moments on earth before his crucifixion. The words said by a person when they are about to die are revered in many communities. Even though Jesus was speaking to his individual disciples, the Lutheran Institute for Ecumenical Research argues that these words of Jesus are ecumenical and they apply to all Christians. If so, the institute further argues that the church has not discerned these ecumenical words of Jesus. "The truth is that the disciples of Jesus have not always been one. We disciples have been diverse, which can coexist with unity, but we have also been divided: angry, hostile, and mistrustful."<sup>11</sup> This hostility has failed to show the church as a living example of love, love for one's enemies. According to the Lutheran Institute for Ecumenical Research, Jesus instructed his followers "...to love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."<sup>12</sup> The institute goes on to say, "...an honest look at church history shows that Christians have often been better at hating one another than loving one another."<sup>13</sup> In Southern Africa there are efforts towards worshipping and solving socio-economic and political challenges by churches working together. On the other hand there is a continuation of the formation of new denominations almost on a monthly basis.<sup>14</sup> This article discusses the aspect of wanting to be one to fulfil the prayer of Jesus for unity.

I am of the view that there are two efforts at play in the quest for ecumenism. There is the effort by scholarly theologians who are concerned with theological differences and similarities in the ecumenical debate. On the other hand, we have the communities of worship that may not necessarily understand the theological differences or even the similarities yet they find themselves in different denominations. This

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<sup>9</sup> From hence forth this will be referred to as *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlange*.

<sup>10</sup> John 17:11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ecumenical Dialogue*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> John 13:34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ecumenical Dialogue*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> The formation of new denominations is division of the denominations and as such they cannot be said to be one. If the divisions were additions then, in my view, there should be additions of new congregations of the same denomination. This is a debatable issue that requires another paper.

article acknowledges that Sunday is the most divided day where you see people in different uniforms going to different churches. Scott cites Martin Luther King Junior as having observed the same divisions in the American society on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 1963 that “the most segregated hour in this nation is Sunday at 11:00 am.”<sup>15</sup> At times, families are also divided according to denominations and this is apparent on Sundays (at times Saturdays depending on the denominations involved). However, despite these Sunday divisions, social events such as funerals and weddings bring Christians from different denominations to worship together because of the communal nature of life in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The paper further exposes the ecumenical role played by the women’s leagues, especially on Thursdays when they have a me

## Background

As a gender-sensitive male minister I have participated in capacity development projects of the Lutheran church in Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Swaziland and South Africa. I understand the envisaged ecumenical life of the church in Southern Africa. I also teach practical theology in a South African secular university (University of KwaZulu-Natal in the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics [UKZN-SRPC]) whose students are ecumenical and international. As of March 2015, the UKZN-SRPC had students from at least sixteen denominations coming from at least thirty three countries since its establishment. Therefore, I understand ecumenism from local congregations and academic institutions, particularly in Southern Africa.

Belonging to a particular denomination in South Africa does not necessarily depend on one’s theological convictions. The missionaries in Southern Africa partitioned countries/communities for their denominations to avoid competition among the different mission groups. For example, Zimbabwe was divided among the Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Seventh Day Adventists, Church of Christ, the Brethren in Christ Church and the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>16</sup> There was relatively no competition among missionaries, so there would be no two missions in the same community. At times one group of missionaries would give congregations to their counterparts. For example, in Matabo area in Zimbabwe, Anglicans gave St Steven’s and St John’s congregations to Lutherans. The membership was not involved in the

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<sup>15</sup> Scott Williams, *Church Diversity: Sunday the Most Segregated Day of the Week* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press, 2011), 19.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert Moyo, *Jesus is HIV Positive: Listening with Compassion to the Infected and Affected*, (Pietermaritzburg: Master’s Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005), 38.

negotiations for reasons best known to missionaries. Congregants had to conform to the transaction of the missionaries or else they were going to remain without a church. In many parts of contemporary Zimbabwe the concept of being one church for the whole community has been challenged by urbanisation. People moved from their rural areas to seek employment in the urban areas, carrying their church with them. In the cities, one could find churches competing for space and raising the question of theological differences of the then one church setting of the rural Zimbabwean context. The second challenge was the birth of African Initiated Churches that have a different understanding of being church from the missionary churches. Later, there was the introduction of Pentecostals and charismatics.

In most cases, church lay members do not know how they are different from other denominations. For example, Lutherans, Anglicans, Assemblies of God and Family of God Church do not know the theological differences between their denominations. The laity are not the catalysts for denominational divisions. Ministers are the ones who keep on defining how their denomination is different. Church members notice the differences mainly in the colours of their denominational uniforms which are most popular amongst the women's leagues. The uniting activities in which church members participate are forms of ecumenism from below. The informal local and grassroots fellowships are an opportunity that can be capitalised on for greater collaboration among denominations. Grassroots fellowships are composed of people living in the same locality who meet for worshipping outside their denominations as they engage personal and contextual challenges as well as for socialising. The people who meet to fellowship are able to exchange ideas for self-development. Because they live in the same geographical location they are in most cases equally affected by the same communal context.

## **The Concept of Ecumenism**

Other than the high-profiled ecumenical dialogues at international and national levels, in my view, ecumenism also means the physical coming together of Christians to worship as one big family from different denominations. According to Köning, ecumenism is "the movement among churches to get in touch with one another, to get to know one another and to explore avenues of cooperation and unity."<sup>17</sup> In this case, ecumenism means the ability of churches to identify common societal

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<sup>17</sup> A. Köning, *Systematic Theology – Study Guide 2 for THB 301-X; Ecumenical Theology* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1984), 177.

goals and go on to cooperate in communities in response to identified challenges. At local, national and international levels churches cooperate in diaconal work in response to challenges such as disasters (both natural and human made). Crafford and Gous define ecumenism as: "The movement in which every believer and every church as part of the body of Christ on earth, seeks out the 'other' – that is, those on the other side of language boundaries, cultural boundaries, racial boundaries, countries' borders, confessional boundaries, racial boundaries and ideological boundaries, in order to take part in discussion, reconciliation, co-operation, understanding the truth of the scripture and, as an end goal, being one with each other."<sup>18</sup> Ecumenism as physical worshipping together may be very difficult to achieve as the church continues to form new denominations and ministries.

In Zimbabwe, there is an ongoing formation of new denominations and/or ministries, at least on a bi-monthly rate. In South Africa, ministries are being formed on at least a monthly basis. It is now fashionable to form one's church or ministry. The formation of the new ministries does not necessarily mean to say the ecumenical/universal or Holy Catholic church is growing numerically. Most of the new ministries are transferring people from one denomination to another, thereby maintaining the same total number of Christians. The transfer of church members from one denomination to another has increased inter-denominational criticism, especially in sermons. The inter-denominational criticisms strain possible ecumenical relationships. However, Christians should be able to have a common vision and mission which should enable the church to worship together during specific times and events such as Easter, Christmas, weddings, funerals and some Eucharist services. Kinimi understands ecumenism as "...a worldwide reconciliation in Christians' faith to establish co-operation and unity for the proclamation of the gospel to the nations."<sup>19</sup> Kinimi's understanding does not envision only the gathering of Christians in one venue to worship together as one body. Kinimi imagines the cooperation of different denominations in responding to socio-economic challenges that may face communities served by the churches.<sup>20</sup> The women's groups, especially the *Fambidzano*, help each other with employment opportunities, income-generating projects and education on self-development.

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<sup>18</sup> D. Crafford and G. Gous, *Een Liggaam – Baie Lede: Die Kerk se Ekumeniese Roeping Wereldwyd en in Suid-Afrika* (Pretoria: Verba Vitae, 1993), 9.

<sup>19</sup> L. Kinimi, "Towards Defining Ecumenism," in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism*, ed. Christo Lombaard (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 9.

<sup>20</sup> Kinimi, *Defining Ecumenism*, 9.

As noted earlier, the physical worshipping together is curtailed by theological debates by ministers. This is so despite several theological agreements and joint declarations such as the Lutherans and Catholics' Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith of 1999.<sup>21</sup> Since 1965, the Lutheran World Federation through the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France, has been involved in ecumenical debates with Catholics and then later with the Orthodox Church, Anglicans, Methodists, Mennonites and most recently with Pentecostals. The theological debates always acknowledge the progress that has been made in the bilateral theological dialogues, such as the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Lutherans and Catholics. Lutherans and Catholics, through the Institute for Ecumenical Research and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), have acknowledged that the climax of their bilateral agreement should be worshipping together. Bishop Ambrose Moyo of the Evangelical Lutheran Church says the fruits of the bilateral relations should be "when Lutheran and Catholics would come to a point where they can share the Eucharist."<sup>22</sup> Lutherans and Catholics cannot yet share the Eucharist because there are still some theological hindrances that need to be debated and resolved first. In a document entitled, "*From Conflict to Communion*" between Lutherans and Catholics, the PCPCU president, Kurt Cardinal Koch says, "The goal of ecumenical efforts has to be the common supper, but it would be difficult for this document to be the step to it.... We, for example, cannot impose papacy on you; and I can expect from you not to push us to Eucharistic hospitality and church community as these are constitutive questions for the theological basis of our faith."<sup>23</sup> The statement by Cardinal Koch clarifies that theological obstacles have to be overcome before Catholics and Lutherans can finally partake of the Eucharist from the same table. This kind of debate is also present across other denominational relationships. However, this is not the case with the women's leagues which usually meet without the clergy. It is also disturbing to note that the few trained female local theologians who are clergy in congregations do not participate in *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*.

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<sup>21</sup> "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 31 October 1999. Retrieved 2014-01-17.

<sup>22</sup> Lutheran World Federation Communication, *Joint Lutheran-Catholic Publication on Reformation Launched*, Geneva 17/06/2013. <[www.lutheranworld.org/news/joint-lutheran-catholic-publication-reformation-launched](http://www.lutheranworld.org/news/joint-lutheran-catholic-publication-reformation-launched)> [Accessed 14 May 2015].

<sup>23</sup> Lutheran World Federation Communication, 2013

## ***Methodological Considerations***

The data for this paper was produced through in-depth narrative interviews. The participants for the interviews were selected through snowball sampling. Interviews are used as a way of enabling participants to share their experiences and understanding of the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*. The interviews were conducted in different locations in Harare and in Pietermaritzburg. The interviews took place between January 2013 and December 2014. The interviews were done in isiZulu and chiShona in Pietermaritzburg and in Harare, respectively. I used the following open-ended guiding questions to direct the discussions:

- What is ***Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene***?
- What is it that attracts you to ***Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*** meetings?

The study applied purposive sampling, which was coupled with snowballing.<sup>24</sup> Purposive sampling was the suitable sampling style since I had a specific target group.<sup>25</sup> The study targeted members of the Christian women's leagues from Harare and Pietermaritzburg who participate in the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*. Initially, I approached members of *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* from the Lutheran church in Harare in 2013 and in Pietermaritzburg in 2014. The interviewees from the Lutheran church both in Harare and in Pietermaritzburg introduced me to other members of the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* from other denominations. The size of the sample population was determined on the basis of theoretical saturation, which is the point in data collection when new data no longer brings additional insights in response to the research questions.<sup>26</sup> Being referred to potential participants by other women enabled non-Lutheran women to be interviewed. The snowballing enabled me to access fifteen women in Harare and eighteen women in Pietermaritzburg. In total I interviewed thirty three members of *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*.

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<sup>24</sup> L. Cohen & L. Manion, *Research Methods in Education* (4th edition) (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 89.

<sup>25</sup> M.J. Salganik & D.D. Heckathorn, "Sampling and Estimation in Hidden Populations Using Respondent-Driven Sampling," *Sociological Methodology* 34 no. 1, (2004), 200.

<sup>26</sup> Salganik & Heckathorn, *Sampling and Estimation in Hidden*, 214.



## Theoretical Perspective: Feminist Ecclesiology

Feminist ecclesiology refers to a theological and practical paradigm of the church that understands women<sup>27</sup> as the church. The current setting is that women are the majority members of a church that remains dominated by male leadership and power. In other words, the theology and the practices of the church are informed by the minority patriarchs who dictate to the majority who are mainly women. A good example is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe which is composed of 85 percent women yet all the three bishops of the church are men. Rosemary Ruether associates such a church with 'clericalism' and she equates clericalism to patriarchy.<sup>28</sup> Feminist ecclesiology:

...should be a means by which it is possible to discern whether particular ecclesiological discourses describe ways of being church, in terms of theological discourse and women's ecclesial practice, which take into account women's being church and see them as a meaningful resource for the church's theological self-understanding.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Ruether espouses what she calls, "The ecclesiology of Women-Church: Ministry and Community."<sup>30</sup> *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a manifestation of feminist ecclesiology, as will be seen in the interview responses of members of the movement.

Furthermore, feminist ecclesiology engages women and their contextual needs. Watson says "Feminist ecclesiology is feminist in that it takes account of women's lives – of women's experiences of faith and sexuality – as a vital source for the reconsideration of ecclesiology."<sup>31</sup> This theory (feminist ecclesiology) is relevant for this paper as it defines the nature and function of *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*.

## Findings

### *What is Fambidzano/Amabandla Ahlangene?*

In summary, all the women were clear that *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a gathering of women of prayer from different

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<sup>27</sup> This theology understands only women and not men as the church.

<sup>28</sup> Rosemary R. Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities*, (Eugene and Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 75.

<sup>29</sup> N.K. Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Ruether, *Women-Church*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> Watson, *Feminist Ecclesiology*, 11.

denominations who worship together. The responses were clear that the experience is different from their denominational services in that *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a meeting of women alone without men and children. The prayers in these meetings are said to be 'strong' as they are a combination of the prayers of all women of faith from the local community. The women also said that they share in what they learn from their different denominations, which enriches them with knowledge and experiences. They also said that their meetings are a sign that it is possible for Christians to come together in worship in fulfilment of the prayer of Jesus on the unity of His disciples. In Pietermaritzburg three of my interviewees emphasized that *Amabandla ahlangene* are a form of a 'united church' of equals who meet to praise and worship God outside the structural church. It came out also that *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a community of believers keen to bring together all women who believe in Jesus Christ.

### ***What is it that Attracts you to Fambidzano/Amabandla Ahlangene Meetings?***

Besides praying together, the women said that their activities and teachings in *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* are based on the socio-economic needs of women. Women learn about income-generating projects, motherhood, improving one's chances of employability for those who are not employed and basics of entrepreneurship. The meetings have also made it easy for women to be a support system to each other in sorrow and in joy such as in funerals and weddings respectively. In these meetings women are able to share their experiences which they otherwise would not share in the presence of men, pastors and children such as abusive marriages and how to deal with issues of sexual intercourse with their husbands. The women are attracted to these meetings because they are a safe space for them.

The *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a place where women read the bible as women, thereby appropriating it for themselves. Women deliberately read the bible with feminist lenses. The women also engage their challenges such as mothering in a context of HIV and AIDS, unemployment, crime, female domestic abuse, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and political violence. The issues women claim to engage in their meetings echo Watson who stated, "Feminist theology means writing women as church into the process of theological reflection on the nature and role of the church. Recent sociological studies have shown

that many women seek their spirituality outside the church, rather than within it.”<sup>32</sup>

## **Analysis and Discussion**

The activities of women in the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* are what is expected in the regular church. Listening to the explanations of women both from Pietermaritzburg and in Harare demonstrated that *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a movement that is a church on its own ‘outside the church’. Watson said that “many women seek their spirituality outside the church.”<sup>33</sup> It seems as if women are in actual fact not seeking for their spirituality outside the church, instead they are creating a parallel ecumenical church through *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*. In this parallel church women do not have to follow everything designed by males; they can worship in their own way. It seems the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* still does what is done in the church; the major difference is that their gathering is ecumenical and involves only women. Women are doing their own spirituality without the control of males or clericalism. *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a church. Women are church and they are so without men that control the different denominations. Watson says,

It is important to rethink the significance of the boundaries in which ecclesiological discourses take place. By this I mean particularly boundaries of traditions and of existing disciplines. Feminist ecclesiology has to take place both on the brink and within the existing church boundaries. Women’s discourses of faith and theology have to identify the boundaries largely set and defined by men and seek to transcend them.<sup>34</sup>

*Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is constructed outside the male defined boundaries of church traditions and denominations. The *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is existing as an ecumenical church which is yet to be recognised in the male designed types of churches. At least women are doing church on their own and there is no need for any authentication from men. Watson points out that, “Feminist ecclesiology recognises the ambiguity of male-defined boundaries for women and their discourses of faith, theology and spirituality, transcends them and also seeks to find ways of working within them constructively.”<sup>35</sup> As the women read the Bible as community they are beginning to have their

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<sup>32</sup> Watson, *Feminist Ecclesiology*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Watson, *Feminist Ecclesiology*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Watson, *Feminist Ecclesiology*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Watson, *Feminist Ecclesiology*, 10-11.

own communal understanding of the 'Word of God' and they now have hymns and choruses that they sing together. Now there are songs and styles of preaching and praying that cut across participating denominations. These can also be experienced in communal gatherings such as weddings and funerals.

### ***Fambidzano/Amabandla Ahlangene and Ecumenism***

Ecumenism from below is the ecumenism of the community or the people's ecumenism. The women's leagues from different denominations have organised ecumenical worship sessions. These women come together once a month and they sing, read and share the word of God and pray together. The respondents also emphasized that they engage in income-generating projects such as dress making, baking and cooperatives in a variety of businesses and education. During the meetings, they usually take turns to share from the same text which would have been read by whoever will be leading Bible reading on that day. During these meetings more time is allocated to preaching, teaching and testimonies.<sup>36</sup> They also sing hymns and choruses from their different denominations together. The meetings also have space for discussing some contemporary issues as women such as drug abuse, unemployment of women and the youth, diseases in general and development issues. Of note is that the meetings do not discuss ecumenism or ecumenical theology. I take this as a sign that ecumenical theology is a non-issue to these women as they have already achieved ecumenism as evidenced by their interdenominational meetings. The women do not share the Eucharist as they do not have ordained ministers in their midst to consecrate the elements. This may be an area where the women's leagues are bending to the theology of their denominations where the Eucharist can only be officiated by an ordained minister. However, at the end of their worship sessions they always share food and drinks as a community.

The challenge for this movement from below is that clergy is not part of it. Ministers do not play any role, therefore there is no sharing of Holy Communion as noted above. This is a dilemma in that ecumenism from the structural church or ecumenism from above is aimed at communion yet clergy is not participating in *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* which is an opportunity for sharing the Eucharist. Is it true that "ecumenism at institutional or macro level will intimately come to nothing

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<sup>36</sup> Presler, *Transfigured Night*, 127.

unless the church members make it work”?<sup>37</sup> Therefore, ecumenism from above should take advantage of ecumenism from below such as the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*. The *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is fulfilling some objectives of formalised ecumenical dialogues in that the women’s leagues also engage socio-economic challenges during their meetings.

At times individual pastors are invited by the leadership of the movement to teach on a particular subject. The women use the expertise of human resources outside their own ranks to discuss and seek for solutions on topics of common communal or social concern such as drug abuse, HIV and AIDS, road accidents, political violence and teenage pregnancy.<sup>38</sup> The discussions equip the women with knowledge and some skills on how to engage the different challenges both at a personal and communal level. These local forms of ecumenism seek “cooperation and collaboration with other churches, other faith communities, and people’s initiatives on relevant issues of people and life in each specific context.”<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

The activities of the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* are ecumenical activities that fulfil Jesus’ wish for the church to be one. The religious practices of the members of the women’s leagues in communities are located above denominational differences. The lessons from the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* are influencing the wider community in gatherings such as funerals and weddings. Such experiences of people in local congregations are rich for ecumenism which needs to be engaged with by the structures of denominations. “Neither have the institutional forms of ecumenism ‘from above’ entered into adequate dialogue with the less structured and more people driven forms of ecumenism.”<sup>40</sup> These need to be nurtured and promoted, moving towards both informal and institutional ecumenism that enriches the life of the church and communities. By so doing Jesus’ call for oneness would be fulfilled.

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<sup>37</sup> Goosen G., *Bringing Churches Together: A Popular Introduction to Ecumenism* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 147.

<sup>38</sup> D. McLeod, “The Basics of Christian Unity,” in *Ecumenism Today. The Universal Church in the 21st Century*, eds. F.A. Murphy. and C. Asprey, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 108.

<sup>39</sup> World Council of Churches, *Resource Book: WCC 10th Assembly, Busan 2013* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 110.

<sup>40</sup> Kobia S., *The Courage to Hope: The Roots for a New Vision and the Calling of the Church in Africa* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003), 159.

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