

Claiming church as a space for healing and re-authoring pastoral support for those abused in intimate partner relationships¹

Zamantshali Dlamini

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
DlaminiN30@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract

Social Justice frameworks continue to challenge citizenship. The notion of disabling oppressive powers and systems has remodelled a new consciousness around human rights, diversity, inclusion, and liberation for humanity. Within the church landscape, it has also gained traction, uncovering oppressive Christian tradition and patriarchal ideologies that have negatively affected women in various facets e.g., socially, economically, and mentally. Feminist thinkers like Schuller Fiorenza have flagged gender blindness in reading Paul's letters, advocating for radical equality. Joining the voices of many feminist pastoral practitioners who are advocating for liberation, this paper reimagines transformational reading of the Bible particularly the reading of Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 7 as a means of claiming space for women. The paper also envisions braver spaces necessitating pastoral praxis by privileging women's lived experiences. Voices emerging in academic spaces are making a phenomenal contribution to necessitating feminist consciousness and creating awareness about the systemic and structural layers of oppression where the marginalized can embrace their vulnerability and build solidarity support through listening to others' experiences. This contribution is far from changing the landscape, as it disrupts theologies that have for the longest time a seedbed for male domination. Advocacy work around gender-based violence and academic work done on domestic violence has broken the silence about the abuse in the church. Toxic theologies that pinned down women survivors to stay in abusive marriages are the subject that is constantly interrogated as a means of holding the clergy and women accountable. More of such salvific work is geared toward healing men's consciousness because patriarchy harms men with all its forms of oppressive systems, practices, and cultures that perpetuate gendered

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abuse. One critical question of all time is, where to from now? Black women who are survivors of violence in their homes have grasped how situations led to the reality of their oppression, they can name their pain. Yet, they remain stuck in defining what it is like to claim space for their healing and reconceiving change without being harmed. How does the church navigate conversations that affirm women survivors so that they bounce back and thrive in their social circles? What intervention strategies and resources can the church employ in accompanying the GBV survivors toward their healing and wholeness? What alternatives can offer social change? This paper asks a critical question – How can faith spaces as well as community practitioners engage GBV survivors on theological processes and resources to enable debriefing? The paper intends to reflect on how the bible can be a vital tool to affirm those whose lived experiences include gender-based violence mainly in intimate relationships. The engagement thereof makes claims that the church can redeem itself by becoming an invented space for healing so that all those who profess *Imago Dei* can be seen and heard such that they thrive, witnessing to the God of justice.

Keywords

Citizenship; justice; pastoral support; praxis; GBV; survivor; feminist thinking; hermeneutics

Introduction and background

The intersection of gender-based violence and pastoral care provides a meaningful trajectory for ensuring that well-being and justice happen from the church's vantage point. Psalm 147: 3 holds significance for black women whose bodies are battered and subjugated. These are women in need of healing since they continue to go through heinous violations and human suffering. Church ministry calls for healing ways where it serves a community of healing to the wounded and the broken-hearted. Pastoral support has often been dismissed or overlooked in certain settings, and this is problematic and theologically concerning. A female body carries with it unequal treatment and oppression (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007:17).

Across generations, the traumatic narratives of gendered abuse have been recycled and pain reproduced. Moore (2009:175) posits that the body remembers. This means the body keeps score of traumatic histories: "recalling life's journeys, capturing ethereal groanings, calling forth blissful memories, summoning the joys and the pains, the hurts and the

healings” (Moore 2009:175). A stereotype that has a longstanding toxic legacy supposes that the “Strong Black woman is her capacity to withstand suffering without complaint” (Walker-Barnes 2014:43). In the Global South *Wathinta‘bafazi within ‘mbokodo* as a solidarity slogan is popularly sung by within feminist movements during marches, and protests. Women are abused every single day and the notion of *imbokodo* is questionable as it demystifies women’s agency. The meaning behind this *imbokodo* metaphor has always defined strength, endurance, and resilience which often refers to women being strong and unbreakable. In pursuit of justice, women survivors of violence chant this solidarity to signify that “we are solid in our stand for justice (Clark et al. 2019:69). It remains a concern that women’s fate and vulnerability at the hands of abusers, exploiters, and discriminators lead to fatality. The narrative remains: those who have power, abuse the powerless. Firstly, I argue that in a church context, the language of abuse perpetuated in some of the hymns is problematic. There are certain hymns that when put under scrutiny, reinforce and inscribe suffering as a badge of honour. In my engagement, I show how a specific Zulu hymn illustrates how the language of the cross makes women vulnerable.

This paper is part of a larger research project that forms the basis of a PhD dissertation which slightly gleaned on patriarchal language of abuse where I interrogated liturgical prayers and hymns partly. This article has a practical theological approach and focuses on *Thwalisiphambano* (Carry your cross) – a denominational hymnal in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. On the discourse of claiming space, the paper asks the following questions.

- How can Christian women claim spaces of pastoral support in their faith spaces?
- How does the church navigate conversations that affirm women survivors so that they bounce back and thrive in their social circles?
- What intervention strategies and resources can the church employ in accompanying the GBV survivors toward their healing and wholeness? What alternatives can offer social change?

This paper highlights the significance of religious spaces as sites of pastoral support, offering opportunities for listening and creative self-expression to be used is the sharing of pain. This contribution presents alternatives of reimagining churches as invented spaces where Black women survivors

convene in church spaces to pray and worship but also to voice their pain for them to recover from trauma. Manzanga and Magezi (2019:5) argues that the role of churches should shift from only focusing on private spiritual matters. He concurs that the church's public pastoral role is proposed as a church-driven community development initiative to transform communities on GBV issues (Manzanga and Magezi 2019:5). The discourse of claiming space offers a blueprint of what it may mean to claim space for individual and collective wellness. The paper draws inspiration from African feminist values of care as the church reclaims the church as a space where they are equipped and empowered to deal with injustices and the trauma that emanated.

Self-location

Personal reflection allows the researcher to position herself as she interacts with the work and what shapes her understanding of the world she studies. I am a black South African woman of faith. I am an emerging womanist pastoral and practical theologian. I am also an Anglican serving in lay ministry in my local church. My role in ministry is to co-create "pockets" of wellness workshops as a vital fixture in the church calendar. In my earlier career years as a high school teacher, before landing within the theology landscape, I worked as a school counsellor deeply devoted not only to the academic achievements of learners but also to their emotional and psychological well-being. My contribution revolved around care and support for the vulnerable. As a psychology major, with an interest in pastoral care, I constantly reimagine synergies between theology and psychology (positive psychology and human flourishing as they enable transformation).

Researching violence reignited an interest in exploring how churches could also become brave/safe spaces for healing. Pastoral care has a moral obligation to develop theologies of care. Drawing a canvas of knowledge production on claiming spaces, opens a conversation where practitioners can draw inspiration from across disciplines, and disrupt traditional ways of pastoral counselling. Hence, my bone of contention is that the two disciplines have the potential to redefine and strengthen pastoral praxis, accentuating women's lived experiences so that healing, well-being, and

flourishing for all become the norm. This space is life-giving to people (Thesnaar 2010:270). My engagement in this paper emerges from my identity as a “scholar-activist”. This means I centre the work of activism I am involved in as I reconfigure wellness ministry for women survivors hitting unique crisis experiences.

The theology of the cross in the language of worship

Culture and religion have connived in making women endure suffering and abuse. The cultural messages and traditional belief systems continue to enforce that women stay in abusive marriages. This has escalated to a point where in traditional contexts, men view spousal abuse as a measure of marital honour, promoting women’s endurance despite mistreatment (Mudimeli and Khosa-Nkatini 2024:3). *Ukubezela* (to endure) is a theme that overtly runs through Christian and cultural teachings. This also runs through hymns selected as part of worship. A hymn is a cultural product that represents meaning and faith (Kloppers 2020:4). Singing and worship is a meaningful endeavour for Christians. Kloppers (2020:4) posits that every aspect of religion lived by singing hymns and religious songs – as all other forms of lived religion – must be approached with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Hymns are easily accepted as part of the church’s identity. They can be spiritually uplifting and encouraging in how they craft a message of resilience and hope. However, I submit that some hymns have a problematic theology that glorifies suffering. In the words of (Tonsing 2013: 2), he maintains that the hymns tend to shy away from the horizontal aspects of Christian life such as responsibility, love, and service, and concentrate almost exclusively on the exalted Christ, to the exclusion of the human, compassionate, serving, and suffering Jesus, not mention a concern for justice or the well-being of the whole earth. He argues that the content of the Bible is fixed. But the way we interpret it is not. He further posits that the way we judge the relative importance of different passages, where we place our emphasis and which texts we practically ignore, changes and shifts with our theology and context. Hymns tend to have messages. I will show how hymns are permeated with meaning and a patriarchal language of abuse.

In the Anglican Zulu hymn book, Hymn 199 reads thus:

Thwali' isiphambano sakho [Carry your cross]

Ungesabi ubunzima [Do not be afraid]

Yiso esiyokukhulula endleleni yokulunga [The cross will aid in your righteousness]

Thwali isiphambano [Carry your cross]

Wosishiya ekufeni [You will abandon in your death]

Ngoba osithwalayo [The one who carries her cross]

Uyothwesa umqhele [will get a crown in exchange for the cross]

I enjoy Zulu worship songs and denominational hymns as they express my Anglican musical heritage. However, I find myself asking the following questions:

- What does it mean to carry the cross for those who are deeply suffering?
- What implications do such have in the minds of those whose life is a risk due to gender-based suffering?
- What if the very same act of carrying a cross drives women into depression?

These questions express the urgency to act and reflect on how on the burden of faith. It calls for the church to be intentional in claiming spaces to disrupt and figure out life-affirming meanings that encourage wellness in the life of a believer. Christians hold to the belief that Jesus Christ is the one that saves and yet the theology of the cross through atonement and reconciliation specifies a narrative that is familiar to Christianity. Hence the message of the cross is a word of life and liberation (Heim, 2006: 3). Whilst this theological reflection is critical, this paper explores the role of the church in responding and cultivating pastoral support in ways that reinforce wellness ministry as mandatory. The paper outlines this as a means of claiming and reclaiming ubuntu that aids communal healing.

Theoretical framework

Pastoral caregiving offers a theoretical lens through which support is given to those who need care. This pastoral care for individual victims and survivors is characterized by non-judgmental listening, interpretations of scripture that are healing and empowering, and faith-grounded advocacy in the wider community for justice (Cooper-White 2011:812). Pastoral care advocates that all necessary angles be considered. This highlights spiritual, psychological, and emotional support to the abused. In this instance, a communal contextual paradigm of care plays a role in individuals and communities. This allows people of culture to enjoy the freedom of their cultural context, and it creates room for stories to be shared and the enjoyment of being listened to. There is a clear approach to how pastoral support disrupts and distances itself from oppressive cultures and systems. Drawing inspiration from African Feminist Theologies, one can always glean from the root courses of abuses where theology /religion may have been the catalyst for abuse. The church has the opportunity of prophetically and practically responding to the women, children, and the community that have suffered through abuse ensuring that their general wellbeing is catered for.

Methodology

This section engages on pastoral caregiving as a methodology that can be pursued by pastoral caregivers and lay pastoral practitioners. (Doehring 2014) posits that storytelling is the heart of pastoral care. In his reflections, Doehring argues that in the process of storytelling, people become authors, instinctively finding stories' beginning and climax and imagining various endings(Doehring 2014:xiv). He further argues that for pastoral care to be experienced it becomes relational and communal (Doehring 2014:xv). (Kasomo and Maseno 2011:3) posit that stories play a normative role in Africa and therefore are a source of theology. These norms and sources allow clear reflections to be made by scholars in African women's theology. This framework privileges the experiences of women. These stories may emerge from oppressive hierarchical structures in the churches, oppressive customs, and marriage structures (Kasomo and Maseno 2011:3). Practical theology and pastoral caregiving are also viewed as enabling dimensions

that incorporate the diversity of human experience. The process hence has room for praxis. This is the use of creative art where music, poetry, and drawings become self-expressions and reflective appendages in supporting healing.

Caring as remembering

The experiences of abuse can never be ignored. They must be disrupted for the sake of advocating for peace, justice, and wholeness. The act of caring stems from a theological conviction that human care and community are possible because we are held in God's memory therefore as members of caring communities; we express our care analogically with caring for God by hearing and remembering one another (Patton, 2005: 15). Claiming space merely means finding a church as a place and a space for connecting, convening, and sharing narratives of home and lamentations. I am drawing inspiration from the work of Miraftab invented and invited spaces of citizenship. (West et al. 2023) expands this debate and speaks of social space. Work developed by (Zwane 2020) theories also on the work of invited space, invigorated space, and invented space. Zwane has developed the idea of invigorated space which arguably disrupts invited space. Facilitating wellness workshops has been incorporated into my church calendar. The setting convenes by inviting Christian women (primarily black women) from our church and in the neighbourhood to attend. Whilst the invitation is open, it has become evident that the wellness workshops attract primarily women of colour as they navigate emotional and economic abuse, poverty, and domestic violence. This opens the invited space as a communal space for healing and connecting. The space becomes a resource and embodies community-based participatory methodologies of engaging. In claiming the church as a space for healing, it has emerged that when women are seen and heard leads to humanization and human dignity through a process of participatory community development (West et al. 2023:593).

Trauma as a byproduct of abuse

Trauma is often associated with a shattering or rupturing experience within the individual. The trauma experience shatters a sense of identity

and coherence within one's life, it can shatter cognition and language such that a trauma survivor is unable to articulate and understand their experiences, and the trauma event can shatter experiences of time so that events associated with the trauma experience press into the present through hallucinations, nightmares, and flashbacks. The bigger cry is one of redefining their worth, a healed connection with a healed version of themselves and a deeper connection with God, with others, and finding their place again in society. All this is to remind them they do not matter, devaluing them and dismissing their pain. Imagine, being erased and buried alive. Imagine the harm done to one woman, and what it does to the family and the society at large. Traci West argues that Black women are denied an opportunity to have their victimization recognized (West 1999:5).

One notes a moral obligation for Christians to confront and rewrite a different narrative – redefining trauma-informed churches. It is the wisdom of noting that the abuse comes from a dysfunctional cycle of pain and agony. Hence the journey of breaking these chains enabled them to bounce forward and heal. Whilst healing may mean many things to different people, in this context, healing should mean eliminating pain and claiming a new trajectory of hope in how one understands her narrative of pain. This ought to be a journey of human wholeness, as one becomes critical of systems oppressors in the Christian faith. (Hollier 2023) argues that this means churches have the potential to be spaces of respect, information sharing, connection, and hope. There is a deeper need to explore the church as a space of healing and support. There is an opportunity that through resources one imagines that the church becomes a resourceful vessel offering a cushion and anchoring the embodied lived experiences of the survivors. The church could become a portal of resources that connects the carer and the abused.

Understanding the *Word* and living the life-affirming *Word*

This paper does not aim to provide a theological analysis or textual exegesis, as I am not a biblical scholar. Instead, it presents the text and its implications as understood by marginalised black Zulu women readers, focusing on its implications for black South African women. Women in

marginalised contexts have a way of understanding and interpreting scriptures. Sometimes it is how biblical texts are presented and unpacked. Oftentimes, this has invoked the misinterpretation of the bible reading. How do the invited spaces offer inclusive pastoral support? There is a clear need to reread the bible and move away from text interpretations that profess and promote males being the heads and leaders and women being subordinate. The use of inclusive language in the church must be promoted. The misinterpretation of Paul's writing has been a sustainer of ideologies and practices that increase the vulnerability of women to GBV but can equally become a key resource in mitigating and working towards the elimination of GBV. Inspired by the work of Ujamaa I am in favour of the contextual Bible study which becomes a useful tool as it engages readers personally and collectively and within their lived realities. I bring attention to the great egalitarian text, which reveals Paul's understanding of social ideology. Paul in Galatians 3:28, speaks about gender identity and roles. However, we can look at this text and remember the significance of these differences and be mindful of using each to enhance relationships as we seek to conscientious communities about the dangers of patriarchy in society. How these eventually impact, socio-economic, and gender relations. Paul knows the hatred that exists between the Jews and the Gentiles, the socio-religious and ethnocultural stratifications between the freeborn, freed slaves, slaves, between male and female. According to (Gundry-Volf 1997), Galatians 3:28 insists on an all one in Christ and does not declare sex difference in any sense abolished in a new creation of a unified, sexually undifferentiated humanity. Rather, it refers to the diaphanization of sex differences in a new creation where being male or female is no advantage or disadvantage about God and others and where man and woman are reconciled and united as equals. Christ is not portrayed as amalgamizing Christians into a new "one" above fleshly distinction by being himself genderless or androgynous. Rather he equalizes and unites opposites by his death for them, by their coming to belong to him in the same way, through faith, and by indwelling their (differentiated) flesh through the Spirit. Verse 3 speaks of the equality suggested in 3:28 and has to do with the equal capacity for all people to achieve moral goodness despite the stereotypes that certain people (in this case gentiles, slaves, and women). You are all on in Christ. Hence, I argue that this creates an environment where solidarity prevails and thrives, which allows everyone to reclaim their place in

society. Everyone coming from diverse spaces becomes one in Christ and Christ becomes the unifier, a message needed in today's division. The text theologizes for their spiritual freedom from their oppressors, empowering them to 1 Corinthians 7 speaks of mutual submission of husband and wife.

The wellness workshops and retreats endeavours to explore ways of reading the Biblical texts in a manner that is life-affirming. Claasen argues that this challenges harmful interpretations of scripture while also reconstructing and reimagining life-giving interpretations from those same texts: (1) voice, (2) gender-based violence, (3) agency/resistance, and (4) identity (Claassens 2024). She further argues that this is fundamental in exhibiting a constructive role, generating new knowledge that has shaped the field in new and exciting ways (Claassens 2024).

Galatians 3:28 echoes equality between a man and a woman. However, this biblical text is often distorted and hence renders women abused. Women encounter demeaning experiences, and my argument is that this devaluation of women can cause great psychological trauma and self-perception as inferior. It consists of the unequal and unfair treatment of women and girls based on their being female. It is an internalized, ecclesial persecution rather than an externalized, violent one. One has witnessed gross forms of violation where women are subjected to sexual abuse which consequently gets projected as low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and increased risk of depression and anxiety. However, in redeeming human dignity and ubuntu, Ester Mombo postulates that as per Galatians 3:28, we are children of God and not grand-children or stepchildren (Mombo 2022:470). She further argues that the concept of the *imago Dei*, as espoused by post-colonial theologians, re-establishes God at the centre of the ecumenical home because any venture which begins with an understanding and praxis of *imago Dei* puts stewardship rather than injustice in relationships (Mombo 2022:471).

Finding hope in the church

Women who have experienced abuse; are not well and gaining healing is the goal for wellness. I underscore that the life and mission of the church is to anchor people as they deal with contemporary challenges. This should

not be the church's mission to be reactive but to be proactive. There needs to be a certain level of accountability from the church and those who are in the ministry of caring for souls as their pastoral contribution affirms the spiritual well-being and the resilience of gender-based violence (GBV survivors). Congregants must be given coping mechanisms/resources that bring relief in their agony, to relive grief whilst they manage to bounce back in their spiritual life journey.

My submission is that there is no way such traumatic experiences from abuse leave everyone affected fully functional without any traces of dysfunctionality or trauma. One scholar postulates that "The personal experience or witnessing of suffering can cause some to draw closer to God as a source of strength and comfort. For others, this same suffering can be the very thing that causes them to lose their faith completely"(Troupe 2011:200). This paper questions, what role the church plays in redefining its purpose and mission where socially and gendered narratives have shaped endemic violence. What new understandings can be created for the church to claim space for solidarity for the common good? In a quest to reclaim space, in what way can an encounter with Christ manifest healing and flourishing for women and those who have been overlooked in traditional faith spaces?

I argue that the issue of GBV affects not women, but the entire family and the community at large. If not treated or addressed creates intergenerational wounds and scars passed on from one generation to the next. This has for years aggravated mental health issues in society. In the context of South Africa, the normalization of violence has perpetuated pain and multiple oppressions. (Flores 2013:59) argues that the patriarchal dynamics limit the agency and flourishing of women, children, and other marginalized family members. Whilst Flores from the context of the Latinos, I argue that there are resources that could be integrated for the common good. Liberation theologies offer room to stipulate practical processes that are appropriated as part of community engagement that practically make a unique contribution to changing the status quo. This paper reflects on pastoral processes engaged with women of faith in the church context particularly during a time when mental issues such as depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation have become paramount. Okeke and Fokoye (2022: 121) argue that healing processes must enable "participants to find strength and support

in certain human situations through reflection and introspection”. Church continues to be a central space for fellowship and prayer which it offers in its pastoral support approach, in its attempt to amplify its footprints in the lives of the GBV survivors. Faith leaders, standing in solidarity with the broken-hearted have a role to play in shattering underlying root courses. This is an invitation to call upon men, conscientizing all genders in the church spaces about what is made in the Image of Christ. The church needs to claim the space to teach, empower, and equip a breed of redeemed men who disrupt conservative gendered ideologies that may dismantle strongholds that have manifested as abuse.

Creative expressions and GBV advocacy

These are paces claimed with storytelling, as spaces affirming inclusion and participation, distilling and destabilizing spiritual practices that have existed. This paper contributes to the conversation about justice and human flourishing, privileging storytelling processes to create space for pastoral support. This work is a continuation of the submission I made in my thesis where I theorized sacred circles of support for the GBV survivors where praxis is embedded in situating embodied lived experiences. This work envisioned the imaginative use of theological, psychological, spiritual, social, cultural, and/or physical (DeMarinis 1993:13). Churches exist in patriarchal settings and programs thereof are patriarchal spaces riddled with patriarchal ideologies and stained with toxic beliefs. There is a concern about how these spaces exclude and divide others. I contend that it is important to reclaim spaces in the very same patriarchal spaces. The recognition of “women’s spaces” such as prayer meetings, and women’s conferences – changing/disrupting the agenda to enable women agency. These are new forms of women-space, which are situated within the ministry, pastoral care, liturgy, and academic theology (Graham 2013). Some workshops and conferences magnified GBV advocacy work and there is a temptation to have a one-size fits all intervention. Chisale argues that the principle of contextuality is extremely important. She posits the importance of surveying the landscape. Education is key to liberation. The aim of Freire’s model of dialogue for transformation is to empower people through the process of self-awareness or consciousness-raising. It is

a creative way of enabling people to think for themselves so that what they learn becomes authenticated in their lives. For example, seeking clarity on the social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental contexts of congregants and the community which influences how support is received, embraced, and sustained (Chisale 2018). In the long run, these will shape people's lived experiences and interpretations of life.

Theologically, healing refers to the event of being transformed from a condition of death into a condition of life (Magezi 2006:570)) In the next section, I reflect on how one can claim space for healing and pastoral support in the already available spaces where women gather and instead use similar spaces such as invited spaces – retreats, conferences, women's workshops, and marriage seminars as sites that activate agency and participation where all voice their narratives/embodied experiences whilst embodying anonymity. "Praxis-centred" methodology attempts to move the participants toward "reflection-action" exercises that will ultimately bear fruit in the form of empowering and liberating. The church presents unique dynamics for those who have been recently violated and abused and those who bear secondary scars. To reclaim space. May mean also different things as many present unique cases. Hence the healing journeys will not be the same. Friberg argues that "education should be provided to the congregation about physical, emotional, and spiritual symptoms" which may be present who have suppressed and repressed reactions to trauma (Friberg 1995:237).

Centralising Ubuntu as a relational heritage

Black families have a history of doing things communally. Chisale affirms this by stating that Africans believe in communal relationships, the pain of one is the pain of all (Chisale 2018:8). An injury to one is an injury to one ... which also means if one woman gets abused, everyone from the children to the entire family gets affected. Hence, pastoral support becomes a necessary intervention for all connected to the survivor of abuse. There is a need to develop resources that engage. This also encourages that such resources and processes engage everyone affected from a multicultural approach to feed into the diversity that exists bottom up. The theology of marriage is a starting where religion and culture can be appropriated to

promote and defend violent patriarchy. The concept of a family is central to African communities. Whilst there is a great scholarship that critiques cultural traditions like *lobola*. There could be a way to look at culture as a resource or blessing rather than a poisonous chalice. There is potential to strengthen ministry with families. This could be activated through teachings that affirm and teach all genders about marriage and the history around culture which may kill the notion that women are commodified and hence become someone's property. This also shatters ideologies around male dominance and women's subordination. Instead, this may bring all parties to build for the sake of the common good. I argue this may revive and strengthen Black families. Anderson and Foley (2004: 4) emphasizes mutuality as a virtue where love combines affection and justice.

Carving a way forward?

Where to from now?

How do we utilize the concept of invented and invigorated spaces to create capacity, solidarity and activate agency, and to ensure that no one is left behind in their processes of healing? There is a notion of contending with hierarchical structures.

Who qualifies to perform pastoral duties?

Is it a case of a rector, who is the leader?

These questions demonstrate that this concept of claiming pastoral support may be a work in progress.

Theorizing the claiming space discourse needs to extend beyond the church and have the programs of support extending its warm big arms in the secular world. This is a commitment to ensure that the work done in the academy transcends to the wider community, opening its doors to informal groups the kind of work done by Ujamaa Centre as and when it engages with the community. Graham argues that in such localities and informal settings, women become producers and originators of important work. Moreover, she recognizes that women are sources for epistemology for feminist practical theology: they are spaces in which diverse experiences and ways of knowing may be articulated (Graham 2013).

Conclusion

Liberation theologies in the 21st century evoke a kind of participation that shares in communal awareness of oppression and shared experiences of trauma. It is a reminder that cultivating solidarity is vital. Church as communities that are trauma-informed is a step toward strengthening justice practice as an ethic of care. This is premised on the notion that when one hurts, everyone hurts ... Gobodo-Madikizela argues that the essence of empathy is the capacity to feel with and participate in shared reflective engagement with the other's inner life (Gobodo-Madikizela 2008:178). The power of human connectedness equips the other to be a sister's keeper. In Zulu, this is nothing short of *ukubhekelela* (where one is in solidarity with the other: supporting, cushioning empowering, and equipping the other) in the mission of caring and healing those whose stories need tender love. My concluding thoughts on the concept of claiming spaces in the church I contend there is a critical need to disconnect from this research practice trajectory and instead devote an epistemological framework that defines Black wellness and Black Joy for women survivors who have endured traumatic events and experiences. This is a conversation that may necessitate individual and collective agents of joy. The long journey of repair and caregiving requires scrutiny where pastoral caregiving insights nurture joy-affirming practices.

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