

Tool 6: How are churches responding to gender in church and society?³⁰



“There are some within the Church who deal with the gender issue as a matter of charity – some kindness which the church must show women. I believe that the Church must deal with the gender issue because it is fundamental to our calling as the Church which liberates and sets free....”

Rev. Bongani Blessing Finca³¹

³⁰More details on the information in this and the next tool as a combined detailed report is available from NCA www.kirkensnodhjelp.no and PACSA www.pacsa.org.za. It offers examples of some of the initiatives and includes more stories of change.

³¹From a speech delivered at the Decade conference, 1994 (*Women in God's Image*, PACSA, December 1998).

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Background and introduction

In 2007-8, **gender audit studies** were done in selected churches in three Southern African countries – Malawi, South Africa and Zambia. Gender audits were done amongst churches and a number of faith based organisations (FBOs) in Lesotho and Zimbabwe in 2012³².

The audit **aimed** to get a better understanding of how far churches had progressed in achieving gender equality and use the information to talk about what further work can be done.

In 2013, a **follow-up study** was done in all five countries, to learn from members of churches about the extent to which their ideas about women, men and the gender had begun to change,

³²The churches surveyed were:

- Malawi: Roman Catholic; Anglican; Baptist; CCAP Presbyterian; Living Waters.
- Zambia: Roman Catholic; Anglican; Kabwata Baptist; New Apostolic; Bread of Life; Jehovah's Witnesses.
- South Africa: Roman Catholic; Anglican; Methodist; Evangelical Lutheran; Uniting Reformed.
- Lesotho: The Anglican Church of Lesotho, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Lesotho Evangelical Church, Methodist Church of Southern Africa and the Roman Catholic Church. The Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL) also included the Student Christian Movement and itself (CCL).
- Zimbabwe: CCAP, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Zimbabwe, Anglican Diocese of Central Zimbabwe, United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, Presbyterian Church of Africa.

A second audit study was done in Zambia in 2008, as the churches in Zambia had felt that the 2007 audit was not truly representative of the church landscape in Zambia at the time.

What is a gender audit?

It is a participatory process that involves leadership, staff and members in reviewing their organisation with a gender lens. It looks at whether the needs, views and gifts of both men and women are being integrated fairly into all aspects of:

- the work of an organisation and
- its organisational structures and culture.

and to try to find out what sorts of things help to bring about positive change in churches³³. The **purpose** of this was to learn from their journeys and relate them to what is happening in our own churches.

This tool sums up the main ways in which the churches and FBOs in the five countries have changed how they do things, how they talk about gender related subjects, and what sorts of activities they have introduced to work towards greater equality between men and women in their churches and in society.

It also sums up changes in the ways they are speaking into wider social issues that relate to gender, such as gender based violence, sexuality, HIV and contraception and leadership.

Do your own audit research

This tool includes some questions to help you reflect on what happens in your own church or faith based organisation (FBO). You can use these questions to do a similar gender audit in your own church, and then use it to advocate for gender transformation in your church or FBO.

Church governance and leadership

Overall, in 2013 more churches are debating the question of increasing the numbers of women in leadership positions than in 2007.

What has remained the same?

- Most church pews continue to be filled by women.
- Women's organisations mostly do the service and healing tasks and men's organisations perform most or all senior leadership roles and take responsibility for spiritual authority.
- Women's and men's organisations do not work together to tackle social issues like gender based violence.

"In our church women are involved – they clean the church, do the food, arrange the flowers and teach the children. Sometimes a woman will do a reading or say the prayers. But mostly those jobs are done by men. Women are allowed to sit on the committees but often they are very silent in the meetings."

Busi

³³ The full report and the report on Zambia's journey specifically are both available from NCA www.kirkensnodhjelp.no and PACSA www.pacsa.org.za.

- There are few women in senior minister positions in the clergy hierarchy, and very few women study theology.

What has changed?

- In most churches in all five countries there are lobby groups advocating for greater women's participation in church leadership and/or ordination.
- More churches have begun to ordain women as clergy, and more women have been allowed into theological training.
- Some men's and women's organisations have started to tackle difficult subjects like gender based violence.
- Some women's organisations have begun women's economic empowerment and skills training projects.
- Some churches apply equal conditions of service to both men and women staff and clergy.

What still needs to be done?

- Men's and women's organisations need to support each other's work more and share responsibilities.
- Men's and women's organisations should move away from making general statements against gender based Violence (GBV). They need to organise joint GBV activities, challenge the norms that create fertile ground for GBV, directly address abusers and create safe spaces for victims.
- Churches need to help women stop stigmatising themselves and each other, and encourage more women to stand for leadership positions. But they need to be better supported to grow into those positions.
- Clergy conditions of service need to be the same, and clergy need to be positioned on merit and not on gender.
- Many women pastors and priests feel unsupported, lonely or undermined. Senior church

"Our denomination, Brethren in Christ, is a member of both the Council of Churches in Zambia and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia. Our church has made a big change from the time we started talking about gender and how to empower women. We have seen a lot more women taking up key leadership roles in the church; we have women pastoring congregations and others studying in various theological colleges and schools. So far, the whole process is moving on well, though we still face some challenges, because some people have not yet accepted such a change, but we thank God for the positive changes that are taking place."

Pastor Isaac Soko

"A few years ago when I worked as a pastoral assistant, I realised that the more I wanted to be creative, the more I was reminded of behaviour rules for women. The restrictions became so oppressive that I had to resign....I still believe that God wants me to serve as a woman in my own right and not under someone else's shadow."

Phumzile Zondi
Women in God's Image Journal, PACSA, Dec 1998

leaders need to educate their members to accept ordained women and support them to develop their unique ministries.

- Theological institutions need to introduce gender training across the board, as has been done in Zambia. They should not tolerate discrimination against women in the same way they do not tolerate racial discrimination.



Time to talk

What happens in your own church?

Men's and women's organisations

- What roles do the women in your church play; and the men?
- Do you have a women's organisation? What is its vision and role?
- Do you have a men's organisation? What is its vision and role?
- Do the men's and women's organisations ever work together? What issues do they work with?
- How could the women's and men's organisations be helped to see their roles and develop their respective ministries differently?

Leadership in practice

Examine how many men and women are active in different leadership structures in your church, and what roles they play. Are any women in senior leadership, and how do they use the power of their positions?

Think about the last church meeting you attended:

- Who spoke and who made the decisions? Who was silent? Why?

Read the following two stories, and talk about them using the questions that follow:

Support for pastors' wives

"Being at the monthly meeting of pastors' wives enables us to release pressure and talk about our lives. We have good friends there, because you cannot really talk to the women in the church honestly, because you are the priest's wife. The presence of

three gogos (grandmothers) is particularly valuable, including Rosemarie, who is a Bishop's widow, because they have been through a lot and we really lean on them. We pour out our hearts at these meetings, read Scripture and pray. The support group has been meeting monthly for 15 years, and we have built really strong friendships and support. I often feel very alone and cannot share my own problems with other women in the church – but this has built my character.” Ruth Nwaou, Clergy wife in Zambia



Anglican women priests at the 20th anniversary of the ordination of women priests.
Source: www.anglicanchurchsa.org

Support for pastors' husbands

"I remember the most special year in my life – as a pastor in a parish in Southern Germany. My husband...stayed at home and cared lovingly for our 3 children. I felt elated. Having it all. A deeply fulfilling job, thankful parishioners, happy children and every evening the pleasure of joining the family at the dinner table. ...

My husband's experience was diametrically different to mine.... He has no romantic memories of that time. Of course, my husband understood that my erratic absence was the nature of the work and beyond my control. But he became increasingly depressed and resentful.... When we returned to South Africa I had to ask my Church to release me from congregational ministry."

Renate Cochrane, *Women in God's Image*, PACSA, December 1998

- How are these two stories similar? How are they different?
- How were the difficulties of being a pastor's spouse dealt with in each situation?
- Do you know any women pastors and men pastors? What are their home and work situations like?

- How would you feel if you were a woman, or a man, in this position?
- What do you think church leaders need to do to ensure adequate support for both pastors and their wives/spouses? What would be the benefit to the church?

Churches engage with gender equity

Overall, more churches are talking about gender and accepting the need to change. They are being influenced by their governments to talk about gender, but they mostly do not speak up publicly to declare gender injustice a sin, or admit their own involvement in undermining women. Two exciting exceptions are Zambia and Lesotho.

In Zambia, all three national Church Mother Bodies (the Council of Churches in Zambia, Zambian Episcopal Conference and Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia) declared in a joint **public statement in 2009** that gender injustice is a sin and that the Church has not been just in its treatment of women and men. This Declaration also committed all their members to work together to bring about real change in their churches and in wider society. Each Mother Body also has a practical Programme of Action. They have also developed a joint Training Curriculum that is used in workshops and formal theological training across the country and in all denominations.

The church Mother Bodies in Lesotho have gone further by participating in a wider interreligious gender Declaration, in 2011. This is similar to the Zambian one, but there is no clear evidence of how this has been taken further into any kind of plans of action.

What has remained the same?

- Most churches still understand gender to be about women's issues only. This can make the men feel excluded, or can make gender justice seem a side issue.
- Very few churches have gender policies or gender structures and personnel, or enough funds to do the work effectively.
- Very few church leaders challenge social and cultural practices that undermine or disadvantage women.
- Religious experience and language is centred mostly around men's experiences and is taught mostly by men, although a few churches, mostly in South Africa, have begun using more inclusive language for God's people.

What has changed?

- More churches and church Mother Bodies have developed gender policies, or are busy developing them. More churches are talking about the need for gender justice, and many are having debates about things like leadership and gender based violence.
- Language and religious experience – more churches have become sensitive about the use of the male nouns and pronouns (e.g. *He, man, sons of God*) as the norm, but very few are questioning the fact that God is assumed to be male. However, some South African churches have set up committees to revise the liturgies or language of worship to include women into the people of God and re-look at words used to describe God.

“One woman recently came to me about her decision to leave her husband and children and walk out because she would be better off without her husband. My husband and I supported this decision because the husband had not changed his behaviour despite attempts to persuade him. It meant that we lost out on his tithe money, but we could not stand by and watch.” Ruth Nwaou, Clergy wife, Anglican Church in Zambia

What still needs to be done?

- Churches need to allocate staff and funding to take forward the gender justice work. Senior leaders need to support the staff, so it is taken seriously by members.
- Churches need to talk about how gender transformation will benefit both men and women. (Resources are available from EHAIA and PACSA.)
- Churches need to have the courage to question deep-seated beliefs that are leading to the suffering of both women and men in the church and badly affecting marriages and relationships. Given that churches are filled mostly with women, it does not make sense that churches give power, authority and privilege to the few men who attend.
- More churches need to grapple with the language used to describe and address God, so that all their members can relate to God freely.

What happens in your own church?

How deeply is gender embedded?

Policies and Statutes:

- Does your church have a gender policy? Does it have a gender committee or group?
- Is gender ever discussed in relation to practice and preaching?
- How much money is allocated to gender work in your church? Is it enough?
- How could you begin to introduce discussions about gender and develop a gender policy?

Teachings and Language:

Next time you attend a service, take note of the Scripture texts that are read, and how they are interpreted in the sermon.

- What was the theme of the text?
- How was God's image interpreted in the reading, and did the language include men and women?
- Who were the active people in the text? Did the women in the stories have names? And the men?
- Were women's experiences reflected in the Scripture or in the sermon?

Churches respond to gender in the home and society

While women's status in marriage has not improved overall, and domestic abuse seems to be as strong as ever, there have been some exciting initiatives in relation to speaking out about GBV and developing a more inclusive and supportive approach to HIV.

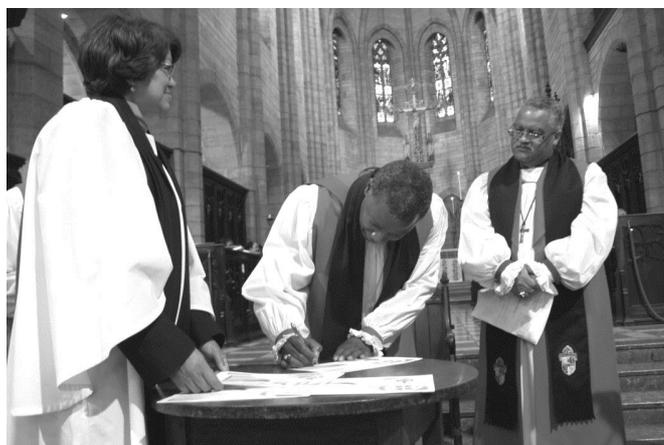
What has remained the same?

Many women continue to experience marriage as oppressive:

- Most churches have a theology of marriage which supports the wellbeing of both partners, as well as the purpose of procreation. However, many married women do not experience wellbeing but abuse. Men continue to be regarded as household heads regardless of their behaviour, and women are expected to be obedient and remain in abusive partnerships, sometimes because they are financially dependent.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

- All churches seem to be concerned about the gender-based violence in society in general.
- Most churches see the problem as outside in society and not within the church, and most do not help individuals deal with abusive relationships.



Male and female Bishops and clergy in the Diocese of Cape Town signing a pledge to fight GBV in their churches and society

Source: Rev Cheryl Bird

HIV and AIDS

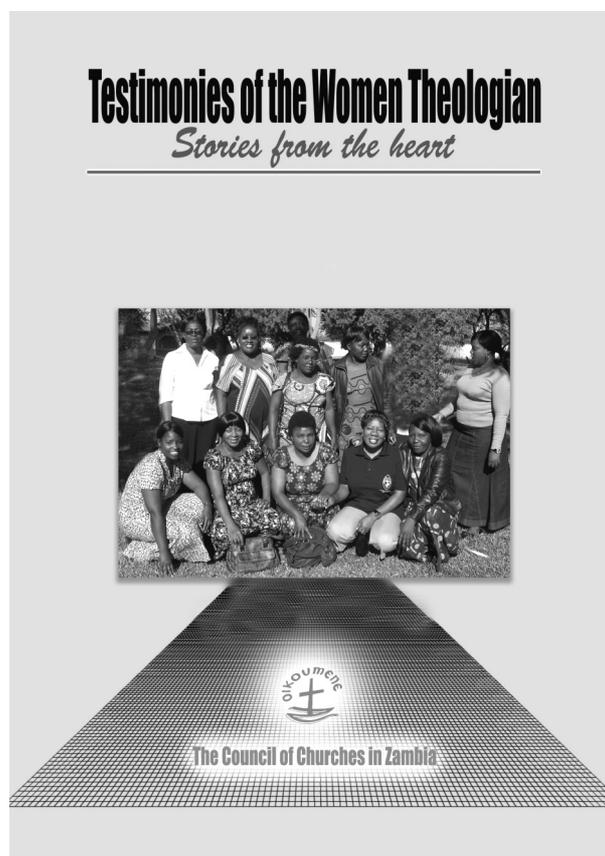
- Most churches have developed policies and structures in response to HIV and AIDS, and many talk about HIV in a way that counters stigma.
- But most do not make the connections between gender-based violence and HIV and AIDS.

Children and youth

Some churches do now have specific programmes on HIV for children and youth, whereas others don't.

What has changed?

- The silence about gender based violence has been broken. Many churches and ecumenical organisations speak out against it publicly through statements or pastoral letters, participate in demonstrations, run workshops on it or have policies against it. Others have programmes for victims, like safe houses or counselling.
- Some Mother Bodies and churches are taking time to listen to young people when developing programmes for youth around HIV and AIDS.
- Some churches are seeing the links between GBV and other social problems.
- Both informally and formally, some church leaders have taken a tougher line in domestic violence cases, disciplining perpetrators and even reporting cases to police.
- There is evidence of some steps to prevent gender based violence by promoting healthy relationships and families. Some churches encourage families to sit together rather than men and women sitting separately, to emphasise the importance of families worshipping together. Others openly encourage husbands to share household chores.
- The ecumenical structure in Zimbabwe offers conflict response training to clergy, with a strong emphasis on gender based violence and domestic violence.
- Many churches now have coordinated HIV programmes. A few even make the links between GBV and HIV and Aids.



Source: Council of Churches in Zambia

What still needs to be done?

- GBV actions need to not just focus on the wider society, but also focus inside the church and how the imbalance of power between men and women becomes fertile ground for abuse.
- Public statements on GBV need to hit home, and clergy need to have the courage to confront abusers, even if it means risking losing their tithe contributions.
- Churches need to open up spaces for victims of domestic violence to ask for help, because women find it hard to go against cultural norms that expect them to be silent.
- More economic empowerment programmes for women are needed.
- There is a need for more church leaders to listen to the specific problems of youth in relation to gender.
- Church HIV programmes need to make the links between HIV and AIDS, vulnerability of women and gender based violence if they are to have real impact.



Time to talk

Read the stories below. Talk about some that interest you.

- How you would respond in each case?
- How would others in your church respond?

"The church is finding it difficult to deal with divorced people. When divorced in the church you become isolated.... For example if she was involved in a certain committee while married, she would be withdrawn when she is divorced. Nobody becomes interested in choosing you because they think 'What can you say? You failed to keep a husband.'" Sarah

"When I was pregnant I did an HIV test. I told my husband my status and he beat me badly. My mother called the pastor. When he came, he scolded me for being unfaithful and not supporting my husband. I am not safe at home and am now staying with a friend." Thuli

"When someone is dying, church people come in large numbers. But while we are alive, when we really need them, where are they?" Zandile

"Men, especially men who have been displaced from their families, often go to church looking for family. But what do they get if they are HIV+ or if they have multiple sexual partners? Judgement. And a sense that they don't belong there."

Ayanda

"To avoid conflict and going late to church, I help in bathing my two young children, iron my wife's clothes and my children's. I don't leave these things to be done by my wife. This has really helped us as a couple and family to live in peace. However, I do these things because I love and care for her. She is my closest friend, helpmate and suitable partner." Pastor Isaac Tembo, Lusaka, Zambia

"I recently met a nurse who told me she was a pastor's wife. She also told me that she was studying towards a degree in Adult Literacy at the University of Zambia, as she wanted to be of better service to her husband in his ministry. I was surprised, because in my experience men often don't encourage their partners to improve their education levels. Her husband refers women from their church and community to her for help, and appreciates the contributions she is able to make to the ministry of the church." Jacqueline Mithee-Kabalo, Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia.

"Young men are very angry. They think life is about fighting, competition, money. Thank God for last month's church youth camp. Youth that have been sexually abused told their stories. Each time they want to tell their families, they are blamed. There is one girl whose family just didn't hear her and supported the uncle who was abusing her. If you are a youth and a lady, you are the one who is wrong." Justina Zulu, Council of Churches in Zambia

- What are your own experiences? Share them with a supportive group or person that you can trust.
- Do you know of any other positive stories of the church responding to a gender-related situation? Share it. What was the outcome of this for the people involved and your church?

What happens in your own church?

Marriage, Gender Based Violence, Children and Youth

- Listen carefully to sermons and other teachings in your church about marriage, divorce, relationships, youth and the family. How are Bible texts used, and what advice is given to men and women?

- How do your church leaders relate to the youth? Do you think young people feel able to speak to their elders?
- When your church speaks out about gender based violence, listen carefully to what is said. Is the focus on society only, or also the church itself? Are people encouraged to talk to each other about GBV?
- Are there any church programmes on gender and / or HIV? Is there any support from your church for women and girls, or men and boys, experiencing gender-based violence, living with HIV? How do leaders and members in your church talk about HIV and AIDS? Is the tone about punishment and judgement, or is there a more loving approach that offers support?

Thorny ethical issues related to sexuality and reproductive choices

There has been a greater openness to talking about HIV and embracing those infected. But some other issues related to sex and sexuality still seem to be difficult and controversial. These are condom use, contraception, abortion, teenage pregnancy, and sexual identity and orientation.

What has stayed the same, and what has changed?

Contraception: In many churches, reproductive choices in rural churches are still made by men. But only the Catholic Church legislates on these matters. Churches remain divided on condoms, though some encourage their use by couples.

Abortion: In 4 of the 5 countries, all the churches consider abortion to be sinful, without considering the circumstances that may lead women to consider this as an option in the first place. Some South African churches are more liberal, but most churches hold strong views that abortion is taking a life.

Teenage pregnancy: This is still not accepted. Girls are punished for it by churches, but mostly the fathers are not. Some churches offer programmes for young mothers.

Sexual Identity and Orientation: This is perhaps the most difficult issue for churches. Most consider homosexuality a sin and only a few have begun to grapple with the questions being asked by wider society. The only churches that have begun to do this are in South Africa.

What still needs to be done?

- Churches need to give more time to grapple with these thorny questions. They will not go away if they are ignored. Church members are part of the wider society and are influenced by the conversations taking place outside the church.
- Some people, especially youth, feel excluded because they are not being listened to by church leaders, and end up just leaving the church.

- If churches want to help children and young people think more deeply about sex and sexuality in their lives, they need to be prepared to talk about sex. This may best be done under guidance from a professional, and with support from parents.



Time to talk

Sexual orientation³⁴

(Read through Footnote 34 before you answer this question.)

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu is a strong supporter of a United Nations' campaign calling for compassion for and understanding of homosexuality as fundamental to the true message of the Gospel of Love, saying he would rather go to hell than to a homophobic heaven. He said in a speech:

"I would not worship a God who is homophobic and that is how deeply I feel about this."

- What do you think he is trying to say?
- Do you agree with his point of view?
- Based on what characteristics of God do you think he is basing his argument?
- What do you believe Jesus would say to homosexuals if he were alive today? On what do you base your opinion?

What happens in your own church?

- Find out what your church leaders, and what the ordinary women and men in your church think about:
 - Abortion
 - Using condoms to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS

³⁴We said in the last Tool that sex is defined biologically and gender is defined by social beliefs.

Most often, people have been grouped as either male or female. But not everyone identifies themselves as either male or female. Scientific research shows that:

- About 10% of any population of most animal species, may have male and female organs or hormones. The term for this is *intersex*.
- Some people live in a body that they do not really feel comfortable in. E.g. someone may look like a man but inside, feel more like they should be a woman. This is called *transgender*.

Some people are happy in their bodies as male or female, but they are not attracted to the opposite sex (heterosexual). Instead, they are attracted to the same sex. This is called *homosexual*.

Many people believe this is a sinful choice, but others believe that people are born like this and cannot change.

- Who makes decisions about sex and contraception in their relationship, and do both partners have control over their own bodies and decisions to keep them healthy.
- How do you think it would be different if women were involved in making decisions about things that directly affect their bodies?
- What is the official position on homosexuality in your church? Do you know any homosexual people? If yes, do you know how they feel about the way the church relates to them?

Read what the women below have said.

"Some priests forbid unmarried mothers from receiving communion or having their children baptised, and sometimes the grandmother was also punished in this way." Julie

"The church demands I buy floor polish and pray. The way of the cross to atone for my sin of pregnancy." Alice

- How are unmarried mothers treated in your church?
- And unmarried fathers?
- How do you think the church should deal with teenage pregnancies?

Struggles and sticking points

This section sums up some of the difficulties of gender transformation in churches, and highlights some of the sticking points along the way.

Sometimes women are their own worst enemies. Many women struggle with self-confidence and lack confidence in other women. They were raised to believe that men are natural leaders, and that it is their God-given duty to support and obey their partners. They also find it hard to accept new ways of doing things, because change is challenging.



Women often do not know who turn to
Source: Wikimedia creative commons

On the other hand, most churches still do not offer spaces for men to talk through their concerns about gender transformation, or share with each other about their own life struggles. These spaces are vital if the struggle for gender justice is to be fought by women and men together rather than against each other.

A number of churches claim there is not enough money to concentrate on gender issues in their church, and yet there is money for other things. There are many activities that don't cost very much, like talking in a

sermon about changing the way we talk and treat each other, or ensuring that women are nominated for election into positions of leadership and supporting them to develop as leaders. Gender justice is about a mindset, not about lots of projects. It is about earnestly listening for the movements of the Holy Spirit, considering what will be best for everyone in the church, and not just one group, and how best God will be glorified.

Many gender justice subjects are talked about in churches now, such as leadership of women, ordination and gender based violence. But many of the crucial issues in society as described above are not talked about in many churches. Until they are, the church cannot move forward on them.

The audit research has shown that the process of raising issues and drawing everyone in to conversations about them takes time. It takes even more time for people to begin to change their mindsets and to begin to do things differently.

Conclusion

This tool outlines the main findings of the 2013 research. The next tool sums up the main lessons that have been learnt in the process, which are designed to help you develop a gender audit study in your own church or amongst your member churches.

You will find some guidelines on how to design your own gender audit in Practical Toolkit 1. These are based on the questions set in the above sections headed "What happens in your own church?"



aafcap_bg_BW. Source: Source: Wikimedia creative commons

Notes

Please send your feedback for this tool to gendersa@nca.no or consultancy@pacsa.org.za

