

SUCCESS STORY

Unintended Shifts: Elevating Women's Leadership in an Apostolic Faith Community through SASA! Faith

Faith institutions play a significant role in shaping social norms, beliefs and community values. While they can reinforce harmful gender norms, they also have the potential to promote gender equality and prevent gender-based violence (GBV). Recognising this opportunity, the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe, Africa (UDACIZA), with support from the Irish Civil Society Partnership (ICSP), introduced the SASA! Faith methodology in Bikita District in 2023. The programme sought to transform harmful social norms, promote gender-equitable relationships and strengthen women's participation in leadership and decision-making within faith communities.

Kuratidzwa kwaJohane Apostolic Church (KKJAC) in Ward 21, Bikita District, had a long-standing tradition of excluding women from leadership positions and key decision-making structures. The church's constitution and doctrine stipulated that only men could occupy senior leadership roles, leaving women with little opportunity to influence decisions affecting both the spiritual and social life of the church. Although women formed a significant proportion of the congregation and actively supported church activities, their contributions were largely confined to supportive roles, while leadership and authority remained exclusively in the hands of men.

Through the SASA! Faith programme, UDACIZA engaged religious leaders, Community Activists and congregants in a series of participatory dialogues, Bible reflections and discussions on power, justice, dignity and gender equality. The programme encouraged faith leaders to critically reflect on cultural and religious practices that excluded women from leadership while promoting biblical teachings that affirm the equal value and contribution of women and men.

One male religious leader, who also served as the Organising Secretary of KKJAC, became a champion of change. Having participated in SASA! Faith activities, he used his influence to initiate respectful discussions with church leaders about the importance of including women in leadership and decision-making. Although the proposal initially faced resistance because of deeply entrenched patriarchal beliefs and longstanding church traditions, continuous dialogue and engagement gradually shifted attitudes among church leaders.

A significant opportunity for change emerged in February 2025 during the church's constitutional review, a process conducted every five years. For the first time, women actively participated in the review process and, with the support of male champions who embraced the principles of SASA! Faith, advocated for their inclusion in leadership positions. They demonstrated both their willingness and their capacity to serve the church effectively.

As a result, the church amended its constitution and doctrine to allow women to occupy senior leadership positions and participate in key decision-making structures. This marked a historic departure from decades of male-only leadership and represented a significant institutional shift within the Apostolic faith community.

Following the constitutional reforms, three female prophets were appointed to the position of Rabaoma, a senior prophetic role that had previously been reserved exclusively for men. One of the newly appointed Rabaomas came from Ward 21, where UDACIZA had been implementing the SASA! Faith programme, demonstrating the direct influence of the intervention on local leadership transformation.

The reforms also created a more inclusive environment within the church. Women became more confident in expressing their views, sharing personal experiences and participating in discussions that had previously been dominated by men. Their increased visibility in leadership has begun to influence both spiritual teaching and broader conversations on gender equality, encouraging greater respect for women's contributions within the congregation. The experience demonstrates how engaging influential faith leaders and working through existing church structures can result in lasting institutional and social change.

Despite these achievements, some challenges remain. Deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes persist among a small number of church members, and changing long-held beliefs about gender roles requires sustained dialogue and continuous engagement. Supporting newly appointed women leaders to exercise their responsibilities confidently and strengthening acceptance of women's leadership across all congregations within the denomination will remain important priorities.

Building on these achievements, KKJAC hopes to create more opportunities for women to participate in leadership, mentoring and decision-making at all levels of the church. UDACIZA will continue working with religious leaders, Community Activists and congregants to strengthen gender-equitable leadership and promote positive social norms through the SASA! Faith methodology. The experience at KKJAC demonstrates that when faith communities embrace inclusive leadership and recognise the gifts and abilities of both women and men, they become stronger institutions that promote justice, dignity and equality. It also provides a powerful model that can inspire other Apostolic churches in Zimbabwe to review discriminatory practices and create more inclusive faith communities where everyone has the opportunity to lead and contribute.



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