



THE UNITING
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
IN SOUTHERN
AFRICA

50 YEARS

OF ORDAINED FEMALE
MINISTRY
1975 – 2025



Celebrating a

Trailblazer

Rev. Lydia Neshangwe

*A Life of Faith, Leadership and Service
in the UPCSA*

Celebrating a Trailblazer: Very Rev. Lydia Neshangwe

A Life of Faith, Leadership and Service in the UPCSA

As the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) celebrates 50 years of ordained female ministry, it is fitting to celebrate the lives and contributions of women who have helped shape the church through their faith, courage, leadership, and commitment to God's mission. Among these remarkable women stands Very Rev. Lydia Neshangwe, a trailblazer whose ministry has crossed denominational, cultural, national, and continental boundaries.

A Journey Rooted in Faith

Lydia Neshangwe was born and raised in Zimbabwe, where she received her basic education. Her journey of faith began within a Christian home, and at the age of 15 she made a personal commitment to the Christian faith.

From an early age, Lydia was immersed in different Christian traditions, churches, and schools. This diverse upbringing shaped her understanding of the richness of the Christian family. Reflecting on this experience, she often says:

"I did not choose ecumenism – ecumenism chose me."

Her commitment to the church was evident during her university years. While studying at

Rhodes University in South Africa, she was ordained as an elder at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Grahamstown, in 1995. She later served as an elder at Lomagundi Presbyterian Church in Zimbabwe.

For Lydia, faith is not simply a personal conviction but the foundation from which ministry flows. She believes that strong spirituality is essential for the church to effectively fulfil its calling and participate in God's mission in the world.

From Research and Teaching to a Call to Ministry

Lydia's professional journey initially took her into the fields of research and teaching. She graduated from Rhodes University in 1996 with a Bachelor of Commerce (B. Com) degree. It was also during her time at Rhodes that she met Paul, who was studying theology and would later become her husband and fellow Presbyterian minister.

After several years in her professional career, Lydia responded to God's call to enter full-time ministry in 2005. This marked the beginning of a ministerial journey that would take her across continents and into positions of significant responsibility within the church and the ecumenical movement.

Lydia and her family subsequently moved to the United States, where she pursued theological studies at Denver Seminary and graduated with a Master of Divinity (MDiv) in 2012. During her theological training, she gained practical ministry experience through internships in various Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations in Denver, Colorado.

Upon returning to Zimbabwe, Lydia completed her probationary ministerial training at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Bulawayo. In 2015, she was ordained as a minister.

Her ministry within the Presbytery of Zimbabwe included serving as Presbytery Clerk and participating actively in ecumenical work. These experiences prepared the way for a ministry that would increasingly extend beyond the local congregation to national, continental, and global levels.

Breaking Barriers Through Leadership

One of the defining features of Lydia Neshangwe's ministry has been her contribution to leadership within the church and the wider ecumenical community.

In 2020, she was elected Moderator of the Council for World Mission (CWM). In 2022, she made history when she became the first Black woman to serve as Moderator of the UPCSA.

Her moderatorial ministry carried the theme "Stronger Together", reflecting her deep conviction that the church's diversity should not divide it but should become a source of strength and witness. As a transnational church serving across four countries, the UPCSA's calling to embody both diversity and unity in Christ resonated strongly with Lydia's own cross-cultural journey.

Her leadership continued to break new ground. As she approached the end of her term as Moderator, Lydia was elected

President of the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), becoming the first woman to hold the presidency in the organisation's more than six-decade history.

These milestones are significant not merely because they represent positions held, but because they demonstrate how women's leadership continues to contribute to the growth, witness, and mission of the church.

A Passion for Developing Leaders

Leadership development occupies a special place in Lydia's ministry. Having majored in leadership during her theological studies, she has developed a particular passion for nurturing leaders at every level of the church and society.

Through her various local, national, continental, and global leadership responsibilities, Lydia has had opportunities to mentor, train and encourage emerging leaders.

Her approach to leadership is rooted in the conviction that leadership is not simply about occupying a position. It is about developing people, building capacity, and enabling others to fulfil their God-given potential.

Her ministry therefore extends beyond what she accomplishes personally; it includes the leaders she inspires and equips along the way.

Building Bridges Across Cultures

Lydia's own life story has given her a unique appreciation for cross-cultural ministry. Born and educated in Zimbabwe, she pursued her university education in South Africa and theological education in the United States. Her ministry has consequently been shaped by different cultures, traditions, and perspectives.

Today, she and her husband serve as colleague ministers at St Columba's Presbyterian Church in Mutare, a congregation characterised by racial and cultural diversity. In such a setting, questions of integration, understanding and building relationships are part of everyday ministry.

For Lydia, cross-cultural ministry is about building bridges rather than walls. Her passion is to help people recognise that differences in culture and background need not prevent Christians from finding common ground in Christ.

This conviction was beautifully reflected in her UPCSA moderatorial theme: "Stronger Together."

A Heart for Orphans

Beyond her ecclesiastical leadership, Lydia has also dedicated herself to the care and protection of vulnerable children.

She is a co-founder of the Zimbabwe branch of Hope's Promise, an international organisation involved in orphan care in Nepal, Kenya, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, and the United States.

As co-Country Coordinator, she contributes to project development, staff development, public relations, and training, all with the goal of serving and protecting the lives of orphans in Zimbabwe.

This aspect of her ministry reflects a deep commitment to practical Christian service. For Lydia, ministry is not confined to the pulpit or church structures; it is also expressed through caring for those who are vulnerable and giving hope to those who need it most.

Family, Life, and the Joy of Service

Behind the public leadership roles is a woman whose life is also deeply rooted in family. Lydia and her husband, Paul, have two adult sons, as well as numerous non-biological children whom they have embraced as part of their wider family.

Their shared ministry as Presbyterian ministers has enabled them to serve alongside one another while also pursuing their individual areas of calling and leadership.

Outside her formal responsibilities, Lydia enjoys reading books from different parts of the world and cooking. She carries with her the wisdom of an African proverb:

"He who never visits thinks his mother is the best cook."

It is a fitting reminder that, alongside the weight of leadership and ministry, there remains room for community, culture, hospitality, and the simple joys of life.

A Legacy of Faith and Courage

As the UPCSA celebrates 50 years of ordained female ministry, the story of Very Rev. Lydia Neshangwe offers a powerful reflection on how far women's ministry has travelled and the possibilities that lie ahead.

Her journey—from a young Christian girl in Zimbabwe, to an elder, theological student, ordained minister, Presbytery Clerk, UPCSA Moderator, CWM Moderator and President of the All-Africa Conference of Churches—speaks of a life continually responding to God's call.

Her story is also a testimony to the importance of creating space for women to exercise their gifts, to lead, to serve and to participate fully in the mission of the church.

Lydia's ministry reminds us that leadership is not only about the titles one carries, but about the lives one touches, the bridges one builds, the leaders one develops and the vulnerable people one serves.

As we celebrate five decades of ordained female ministry in the UPCSA, we honour women such as Very Rev. Lydia Neshangwe whose lives continue to demonstrate that when women are called, equipped, and given space to serve, the whole church is strengthened.

Her story is not only a celebration of what has been achieved; it is also an invitation to the church to continue opening doors, nurturing gifts of Women in Ministry and walking together in faith.

Stronger Together.