CHAPTER SEVEN

PROFESSIONAL WOMEN AND THE MESSAGE OF PURPOSE

Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined some of the main reasons why the women in this study joined His People and Grace Bible church. These women were professionals, working in management level jobs and in this chapter I explore some of the key aspects in their professional lives and what ways their faith influenced their work experiences. The chapter begins by looking at the possibilities open to women in the workplace in South Africa, showing how black women in particular were the most marginalised economically under apartheid and that although new avenues had been cleared for them through Affirmative Action (AA) policies they were still the least represented in executive positions. Through a description of one young woman’s life some of the complexity experienced in the changing neo-liberal South Africa will set the stage for a more detailed discussion of the difficulties and opportunities faced by professional women. The generational difference between professional women emerges again, but issues of racism, gender and the emotional stress these women experienced as a result of their career success were general across the age spectrum of the cohort in this study and form the focus of this chapter. These issues will be unpacked with particular reference to the manner in which their churches’ assisted them in coping with the demands of their work environments and thereby helped them improved their life chances at work.

Under apartheid, sexual and racial discrimination condemned black women to the most disadvantaged social group (Bernstein 1985: 7). The work possibilities open to them were limited to agricultural labour, factory work, domestic jobs, petty trade and low level administrative, educational or medical support work (Lawson 1985; Marks 1994). Most women remained in the ‘homelands’1 where they lived

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1 The homelands were made up of only 13.7% of South Africa’s land which meant that the ‘farms’ that previously disadvantaged men owned and women worked were generally not large enough to be financially stainable.
with their children, while the men went to the industrial centres to earn meagre wages as migrant labourers leaving families to live off the produce women grew in the homelands (Bernstein 1985: 8–11). In these homeland villages women built strong social gender support networks and subtly challenged the patriarchal system by taking on most of the day-to-day family decision making process and implementation of these decisions (Donaldson 1997).

As apartheid legislation became increasingly more oppressive and the economic conditions of black people became more desperate women began to leave the homelands migrating to the cities in the hope of finding work, their loved ones and/or a freedom to start a new life away from the confines of the patriarchal system in the rural areas. Few economic opportunities were open to them and the majority of women found work as domestic assistants, cooks, factory workers, seamstresses, prostitutes and ‘shebeen queens’—women who brewed traditional African beer and sold it from their homes where they ran small shebeens (drinking houses/rooms). During the 1970s the gender and racial oppression of black women was examined by Cock (1980) who highlighted the plight of black women working as domestic servants under apartheid showing how they worked long hours sometimes without a days leave for minimal wages often experiencing sexual abuse and physical violence at the hands of their employers. With only a marginal political voice these women had little access to any form of legal protection (Walker 1982). Under apartheid black women had no right to own land, this made them completely dependent on men both in the rural and urban areas. In the urban areas many women lived with men, cooked and cleaned for them, engaged in sexual relations with them, and had their children, not necessarily out of any emotional connection to them but only so that they would have somewhere to live. Kinsman (1983: 41) showed that the altered socio-economic system of African peasant farmers, introduced under colonialism and women’s inability to own land, forced them into positions of subordination in which they worked the fields their men owned. Bozzoli (1983: 139) and Wells (1983: 55) spurred a growing sensitivity to the complex nexus of relations that these women faced and suggested that within their limited material conditions these women exercised a consciousness about the conditions that affected them²

² Simms and Malveaux (1986) gave one of the first detailed explorations of the status of a cross section of black women.