Constructive Theology at the University of Durban-Westville is not a new theological fad intended to eventually occupy centre stage in the quest for an indigenous theology for the coming South Africa. It is much less than that in ambition but also more in bridging the gap or making the connection between theology and society. First called an institute for religion and society, then briefly an institute for pastoral leadership and development, the Centre began operation in 1995 after a three-year planning process. The initial preparatory meetings involved theological and religious educators from other faculties and departments in KwaZulu Natal but the initiative lacked mobility until a definite attempt was made by one proactive faculty. The United Church Board for Global Ministries in the USA offered to sponsor a fully qualified individual who would act as director of the Centre for an initial three-year period. This proved to be the catalyst in the Centre being finally constituted and housed in the Faculty of Theology.

Almost immediately the Ecumenical Theological Education Programme for Women, on the closure of the Federal Theological Seminary in Pietermaritzburg, moved to incorporate itself with the CCT. The Centre’s work on women in church and society was consolidated to a new level which recently culminated in a workshop led by Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung. The official voice of the Centre, its Journal of Constructive Theology, seeks to promote dialogue among persons of faith working “on the ground” by publishing reflections relevant to the unfolding process of social transformation (1994). Most of the activities of the Centre revolve around its programme areas (discussed below) which are indicative of the Centre’s location in praxis.

Women in Church and Society

The gospel affirms the dignity and worth of all humanity made in the image of God but in South Africa males are more like God than females. It is indeed idolatry for one gender to dominate an institution and so the male chauvinism “alive and well” in the church must be abrogated. It will
initially be a painstaking exercise but male Christians are obliged to work towards overcoming the ideological barriers to women’s freedom. Deliberate and affirmative action is necessary to counteract the patriarchal notions of society which are reflected in religious teachings used to subordinate or inhibit women. The local church is composed of leaders and members who are often unwilling to understand, too rigid to adapt traditional practices or downright antagonistic about taking steps towards an ecology of mind on the issue. Is language always inclusive? Are women’s perspectives authentically committed? Do women have space, resources, and access to skills as males do? One way in which a centre can be equipped for solidarity with women is by embarking on training workshops and planning projects, empowering women themselves to communicate their concerns. Women have yet to be positioned in “power” within church structures. Many women’s organisations exist along racial lines and the necessity of them uniting into a federation for holistic emancipation is now urgent.

Of particular focus will be the triad of oppression suffered by black women workers. The working experience of black women in South Africa is quintessentially one of low wages for monotonous work, extended working hours and disgusting living conditions. That they continue to exert themselves as a “surviving force” determined to overthrow shackles of their oppression in such a situation of extreme deprivation is a human miracle. The system of apartheid had subjugated black women to the status of minors with no stake whatsoever in the control of the means of production or in the distribution of capital. Black women remain the “pillars of capitalist exploitation,” the silent majority who, though unjustly paid, must toil even harder to survive.

The further systematic non-inclusion of women in general in the social, political and professional structures for emancipation demands an urgent correction of this sexist imbalance. Knowledge that the average urban black woman is employed as a domestic worker for almost twelve hours a day, seven days a week, in conditions of extended family separation with no social security or proper wage should challenge artisans of the new humanity in South Africa to see oppression collectively as well as individually. Against this background then the CCT hopes to challenge South Africans to recognise the fundamental unity of humankind, the dignity of all and the need for the concerns of women to be urgently addressed. Concurrently a process whereby women begin “doing theology” constructively will hopefully unfold.