For Naomi Kisting, the church and her community have always been her refuge and source of spiritual sustenance. But far from being a passive member, she herself is a catalyst for critical self-reflection, empowerment and returning to the basic values of the Christian faith - love, dignity, respect and altruism.

An active youth

Born and raised in the southern town of Mariental, Naomi is the second youngest in her family, with six sisters and three brothers. Her mother was a tailor, her father a teacher, and for the young Naomi performing well in school was important. She fondly remembers her favourite teacher, Francis Mensah, now head of the Namibian College of Open Learning, who helped her to set her own sights on becoming a professional one day.

"I was very active in school and the church. At school I was a member of the choir and in the church, I was in all the youth groups. I provided opportunities to develop my interests and she never discouraged me."
had several leadership positions, especially in high school. Although raised Catholic, I also attended the Lutheran church and took part in activities at both churches,” she laughs. She believes that being a member of the Catholic girl’s group, the Bloukring (Blue Circle), provided her with the self-esteem to deal with whatever challenges she may face in life.

**Experiencing women's pain**

Although she was raised in a home that was considered middle class by black Namibians, Naomi grew up impoverished and emotionally scarred as a witness to the severe physical abuse her mother had to endure at the hands of her alcoholic father.

“My mother was such a strong woman, quiet and reserved, but when she had made up her mind about something, nothing would change it. My father was a wonderfully intelligent and gentle man, but alcohol abuse turned him into a monster. When I hear a beautiful male voice singing in church, I think of him,” she says.

A conversation she had with her mother a year before she died, and many years after her father’s death, made Naomi realise that men can cause women not to achieve their goals that they set for themselves and by doing this, can cause lifelong pain and unhappiness in women.

“Women go to their graves with their undeveloped talents. This is why I call upon all women to not look down on each other but take each other's hands and fight against the challenges they face. Don’t look at qualifications, race or background; look out for what you can learn from each other because we all have received different gifts from God; just join this movement based on sisterhood,” she implores.

**Challenging discrimination through community involvement**

She never liked discrimination, especially against the vulnerable, and developed the understanding that something must be done to help and empower people, as well as the passion to become involved.

After successfully completing high school, she taught at the Gochas primary school for four years while studying teaching through distance education. She was then transferred further south to Keetmanshoop, and in 1988 married the young Lutheran pastor, Paul Hatani Kisting.

A year later they moved to Germany for three years where her husband studied church music. Being a career focused person, Naomi took up a secretarial course and on their return, worked for the Okahandjha Secondary School as a senior secretary. In the meantime she pursued an Executive Secretarial Diploma before joining the Okahandja Municipality as Executive Secretary to the Chief Executive Officer. Her leadership abilities were soon recognised by her management and she was made chairperson of the Affirmative Action and Restructuring Committee, and Secretary to the Social Housing Committee.

She was also actively involved in a number of community projects. Her most notable were the building of the Immanuel Old Age Home for 25 residents, and homes for the differently abled. “Most of them were outcasts and lived under terrible conditions - we had to do something,” she emphasises. She further became a founding member of the Namibian Women’s Network, a non-governmental organisation working on violence against women and children, and held the position of chairperson for two terms.

**Resisting the role of “pastors wife”**

Naomi’s involvement in her community at that time was quite independent from the role she was expected to play by the congregation as the wife of their pastor. “You are expected to wear the right clothes at the right time, not to participate in congregation meetings, and if you do, then rather not to say something that might disturb the atmosphere...”

She says that she could never identify with the way her fellow pastoral wives seemed to simply play the role of being the eyes and ears of their husbands, the majority of them finding themselves in a situation where they cannot act as individuals who have their own goals and ideas. “The congregation of my husband had no choice but to get used to the fact that I am different,” she laughs.

Going one step further, Naomi convinced her fellow pastoral wives last year to establish their own association, with the aim of empowering themselves and to empower their families and communities. “I know of so many broken marriages, but they do not share their hardships with anyone, because they are expected to be submissive and respectful wives. They arc supposed to remain silent about what they are going through because it might damage the image of the Pastor,” she says.

**Doing it her way**

When her husband was given the opportunity in 2001 to lead his own flock at the Tanidare Evangelical Lutheran Church in Soweto, Katutura, Naomi again got involved in her own way. She initially spent a lot of time familiarising herself...
with the congregation and the socio-economic challenges faced by its members, who live not only in Soweto but also some of the informal settlements including Hakahana, Otjomuise and Goreangab Dam, which are also part of the Tanidare congregation in Soweto. She came across shocking—and tragic stories of poverty, violence and abuse in all their horrific forms, and the despair in families where the majority are unemployed and living with Aids.

She describes Christians as living in denial. “There is so much poverty and hardship. Although we believe that Christ provides, we also have to realise that He helps those who help themselves, and therefore have to find ways to embrace the challenges.” She initially faced a lot resistance from the church when she called on members to openly discuss and deal with the issues of rape, domestic violence and HIV and Aids in their community.

“They call her ‘The First Lady’

She wants the Tanidare Empowerment Centre to become a symbol that the church can play a more important role in the community and bring healing where needed. “If we really had a 95% Christian community in the country, then things would be different,” she exclaims. The Centre has a Vision 2010, and with Naomi at the helm, there is no doubt it will be achieved!

Naomi Kisting lives by a saying she read on a wall in Berlin and taught the congregation: ‘Small people who stay in small places and do small things can change the face of the world.’ No wonder they call her ‘The First Lady’!