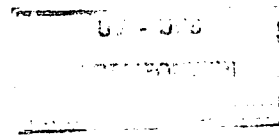
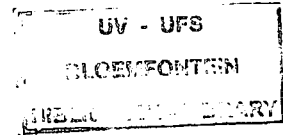


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**THE CIRCLE OF CONCERNED AFRICAN WOMEN THEOLOGIANS  
(1989-2007): HISTORY AND THEOLOGY**

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Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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in the

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Department of Ecclesiology

at the

University of the Free State

Promoter: Prof Dr J.W. Hofmeyr

Bloemfontein, May 2010

Declaration

I hereby declare that this is my own work and that all sources used have been duly acknowledged.

(Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler)



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Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler



## **Abstract**

This thesis is about the history and theology of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (CIRCLE) from 1989 to 2007. The Thesis begins the history from 1989 because this is the time when the Circle was officially launched. The year 2007 is the cut-off point because this research was finalized during the third convocation which ended in that year. The thesis uses a gendered analysis with a feminist bias. Thus experiences of women were a major source for the thesis. This thesis argues that the Circle is an African born in ecumenical surroundings. The Mother of the Circle is Mercy Amba Oduyoye. However, ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) also played a role. The numerical, leadership and administrative growth of the Circle was the product of collaborative work by many members of the Circle. The continental leaders of the Circle gave shape and direction to the Circle while pioneering Circle women and their direct disciples became key agents in promoting the Circle in their various geographical areas.

Since its establishment, the Circle has made significant contributions, especially in the field of academia. This is evidenced by a pool of publications by the Circle and its members. The other major contribution to academia is the production of Circle theology. This theology is the voice of African feminists in Africa and beyond. It is characterized by its creativity and distinctiveness as it emphasizes the role of culture and religion in the formulation of African Feminist theology. This theology is diverse and includes evangelical as well as liberal feminist reflections.

Using Malawi as a reference point, the spread of the Circle into various geographical areas is conditioned by several factors. In addition, Circle theology can not be applied uncritically to a given context of women. Circle theology as an elite theology must come to terms with the many contradictions in the lives of grassroots women that may be a challenge to appropriating Circle theology summarily. Since Circle theology is valuable in partially solving the problems women face today, there must be an effort to process the theology and make it a liberative tool for grassroots women today, based on their context.

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**Abbreviations**

AACC	All Africa Council of Churches
BACOMA	Baptist Convention of Malawi
CCAP	Church of Central Africa Presbyterian
DRCM	Dutch Reformed Church Mission
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
EBCOM	Evangelical Bible College of Malawi
EDICESA	Educational Information and Documentation Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa
IFES	International Fellowship of Evangelical Students
IPC	International Planning Committee
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
NEGST	Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology
NIST	Nairobi International School of Theology
PACAnet	Pan African Christian AIDS Interfaith Network
PCEA	Presbyterian Church of East Africa
PROCMURA	Programme for Christian – Muslim Relations in Africa
PTE	Programme for Theological Education
SCOM	Students Christian Organization of Malawi
TRS	Department of Theology and Religious Studies
VVF	Vesico Vagina Fistula
WCC	World Council of Churches
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association
ZAWO	Zambezi Women's Organization
ZEC	Zambezi Evangelical Church

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In August 1988, Mercy Amba Oduyoye assembled a group of African women in the WCC offices in Geneva to strategize the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Circle). Most of them were academics in the area of religion and culture. An additional small number came from those working in ecumenical organizations. These formed the International Planning Committee (IPC). The composition of this committee is laid out in chapter 2. However, there were no women that belonged to an Evangelical denomination in this committee; although it cannot be denied that a number of them had an Evangelical piety. According to Denise Ackermann, the vision Mercy had about the Circle can be summarized in this way:

In the [nineteen] eighties, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the mother of African women theologians, had a dream. She saw groups of women gathering together all over sub-Saharan Africa talking and writing theology. Experience had shown Mercy that it was not easy for women to become theologically literate. Theological training and subsequent employment had consistently been a male preserve. Moreover, it was not easy for women to get in print. Why? Publishing required training, the confidence to write and opportunities to have articles accepted by journals which were edited solely by men.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the first step of the Circle was to write and publish as well as increase access of women to employment, their emphasis on utilizing women's experiences in producing such literature necessitated a critical stance on the position of women in the church and in society in general.

### 1.1 The Problem Statement

There is neither a comprehensive history of the Circle nor a study on how Circle theology has impacted academia and the dignity and the role of women in church and society. Neither is there a detailed study on the relevance of the Circle to a given context.

### 1.2 Hypothesis

The Circle is an African baby born in ecumenical surroundings. Though it has impacted women in academia and the role and dignity of women in Africa, it was not the only force. Circle theology, though key in liberating women, is not easily appropriated by women of all contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> "Claiming our Footprints. Introductory Reflections," in Denise M. Ackermann et al (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000, p. 6.

### **1.3 Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this thesis is to write the history and theology of the Circle and to show how Circle theology impacts on academia and the dignity and role of women in church and society as well as to show its relevance to Malawi through the following objectives:

- Documenting the history of the Circle
- Examining the theology of the Circle
- Analyzing the impact of Circle theology on academic theology
- Assessing the impact of Circle theology on women in church and society
- Evaluating the relevance of Circle theology to Malawi

### **1.4 Justification of the Topic**

Firstly, I have chosen to write the history of the Circle because I am a student of historical theology, and I have a passion to document histories of women in church and society. Thus it is also a contribution to gender and feminist studies. Secondly, the task of the Circle is to research and publish as well as to uplift the dignity and the role of women in church and society. This thesis puts in print contributions of Circle women towards this task. By highlighting the achievements and failures of Circle theology, women in the coming generation will have a reference point on how best to continue with the mission of African women's liberation in church and society. Thirdly, by showing the relevance of the Circle to Malawi, I provide a reference point on how and how far Circle theology can be related to women in specific contexts in Africa.

### **1.5 Arrangement of Chapters**

This thesis has eight chapters: chapter 1 introduces the work and its methodology; chapter 2 presents the birth of the Circle in 1989; chapter 3 traces the growth of the Circle from 1989 to 2007; chapter 4 describes and analyzes Circle theology; chapter 5 provides the story of the Circle in Malawi; chapter 6 analyses the relevance of Circle theology to Malawi; chapter 7 assesses the contributions of the Circle to Africa; chapter 8 concludes the thesis by reflecting on the achievements and further bridges that the Circle should cross.

### **1.6 My Position as a Researcher**

Due to the fact that I write a feminist piece, "researcher self-disclosure" is a good practice. Shulamit Reinharz writes: "Several studies, including those I have discussed earlier such as Christine Webb's work with gynaecology patients, argue that 'researcher



self-disclosure' during interviews is good feminist practice."<sup>2</sup> One reason for such an exercise is that the reader is able to judge how my position and conceptualization influence my work.

Firstly, I write in the discipline of historical theology. Secondly, I write as a critical feminist theologian, belonging to the Evangelical Christian tradition. My Evangelical background has its roots in my involvement with an international Christian organization known as Campus Crusade for Christ in Malawi (CCCM). I am also a member of the Baptist Convention, one of the Evangelical churches in Malawi. As regards my feminist persuasions, I belong to that movement that promotes full humanity [and dignity] of women as intended by God but that this cause should not rob men of the same.<sup>3</sup> Secondly I write as a member of the Circle. My position as regards the Circle is that Circle theology should be relevant to the grassroots. Since I am a Malawian, I have included a chapter on how relevant Circle theology is to the grassroots women of Southern Malawi.

In addition, I am member of an Anglophone Circle, with no knowledge of French and Portuguese. This means that the thesis includes limited information on the non Anglophone Zones of the Circle.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.7 Methodology

I have used different sources, theories and epistemologies for this thesis. Every aspect of methodology in this thesis has a bias towards the female gender. Thus much of the data is on women's experiences. Further, engendered theories and epistemologies with a female bias are used as shown in the preceding paragraphs.

### 1.7.1 Primary Sources

I used group and personal interviews as well as participatory observation in collecting the primary data used in this thesis. To achieve this, firstly, I interviewed members and non members of the Circle who are all women. I purposely selected women only as interviewees because it is their experiences that are the focus in this thesis. In most cases informal open-ended questions were used. Opportunities to conduct focus group interviews availed themselves as I participated in the following Circle or Circle related conferences over the past four years: A Circle Conference on the Biographies of Women

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<sup>2</sup> See Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> See Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1999, pp. 18-20.

<sup>4</sup> The Continental Circle has three main regions: Anglophone (English speaking countries), Francophone (French speaking countries) and Lusophone (Portuguese speaking countries).

in Johannesburg (this was the first ever Circle conference I attended); the Continental Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, an Anglophone WCC Conference with almost all participants as Circle members on Being Church, and PACAnet (Pan African Christian Aids Interfaith Network) meetings in Botswana and Tanzania. I was a member of the PACAnet board during this period. PACAnet meetings enabled me to interview women from Malawi, Kenya, Uganda, Burundi and Congo that were not necessarily members of the Circle.

Further, I read unpublished theological materials on women's anthropology in theological libraries. In addition, I consulted archival sources lodged at the Institute of Religion and Culture in Ghana, and at the University of KwaZulu Natal. These archival sources were in the form of letters, documents, Circle Directory, etc.

### 1.7.2 Secondary Sources

Apart from primary sources, I used books on feminist theology and general feminist works. In addition I have used works on African theology, Liberation theology and church history to provide a broader background to the study. However, the majority of books I have used are works on or from the Circle. These books can also be classified under primary sources because they give fundamental information for the thesis.

As far as books written by other feminist theologians are concerned, the motivation was to gain knowledge as regards women's issues that are not only pertinent to the Circle. However, I have not dwelt much on them, because my focus is not to make a comparative study but to show the context within which the Circle was born. Some of the books in this category are: Elisabeth Fiorenza Schüssler's work "A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins;"<sup>5</sup> McEwan and Isherwood's "An A to Z of Feminist Theology;"<sup>6</sup> Lancaster's book on "Women and the Authority of Scripture: A Narrative Approach;"<sup>7</sup> Becher's book on "Women, Religion and Sexuality;"<sup>8</sup> Parson's "Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology;"<sup>9</sup> and Douglas's work on "Sexuality and the Black

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<sup>5</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM, 355 pp.

<sup>6</sup> See Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, 266 pp.

<sup>7</sup> See Sarah Heaner Lancaster, *Women and the Authority of Scripture: A Narrative Approach*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press Int, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> See Jeanne Becher (ed), *Women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*: Geneva: WCC, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> See Susan Frank Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 268 pp.

Church."<sup>10</sup> Some of the major books on feminism appear in the "Literature Review" section of this thesis. In addition, I have consulted books on Church history to have a feel of the different aspects of the writing and interpretation of history.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.7.3 Epistemology

I have used a critical feminist approach based on a theology of suspicion, retrieval and praxis. It utilizes suspicion in that it is critical to ideologies that are viewed as prescriptive. Thus, it rejects the claim that any knowledge can be absolute and authoritative. Consequently, the thesis is critical to knowledge that is realized through 'deductive' and 'inductive' means. Thus both androcentric theologies and Eurocentric feminist ideologies are critically examined in how these influence women's liberation.

Further, praxis is used as a means of justifying feminist theology. Women's experiences are considered as a means for justifying knowledge as well as knowledge itself. It is the experiences of women that produce knowledge concerning women's place in church and society. Further, since there is no unitary woman, feminist knowledge is pluralistic. Thus critical feminist approaches, by nature, entail a lack of objectivity. For this reason, this thesis also utilizes some aspects from a Neo-Positivist Feminist approach in order to balance up such biases.

Further, the thesis uses a theory of 'retrieving' and 'remembering' women's stories and experiences. This is done in documenting the history and theologies of the Circle and those that have shaped women in the past. The process of 'retrieving' requires one to look beyond what is visible. Thus it is an exercise of re-imagining women in texts that have inhibited women's experiences.

### 1.7.4 Theories

This thesis uses four theories without necessarily applying a particular theory in totality. Two theories are based on feminist theology. I have, however, included one feminist theory from secular feminism because its paradigm is also relevant to feminist theology. I have left out theories developed by Circle women because they are the subject of this study.

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<sup>10</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church. A Womanist Perspective*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Books on Church History include: Mark Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity*, Grand Rapids, 1996, 328 pp.; Elisabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present*. Melksham: Cromwell Press, 1995, 419 pp.; Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 1232 pp.

I use a complementary approach in utilizing the theories stated in the preceding paragraphs to make sure that the study benefits from "stronger and broader interpretative bases."<sup>12</sup> The first theory is developed by Rosemary Radford Ruether. It states that feminism should promote the full 'humanity' of women and that this should not be achieved at the expense of full humanity of men [children, the poor].<sup>13</sup> The underlining principle for this theory is that we are all created in the image of God, and equal in the 'fallen state,' all needing redemption.

The second theory is developed by Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza. It states the importance of naming tangents of oppression such as androcentric Bible texts, patriarchy, kyriarchy, and androcentric scriptures in constructing feminist theology.<sup>14</sup> Indeed this thesis has named some tangents of women's oppression in Africa as well as in Malawi.

Thirdly, feminist theory is critical and activist on behalf of women, seeking to produce a better world for women—and thus, it argues, for humankind.<sup>15</sup> The story and theology of the Circle is therefore presented from the perspective of what has been achieved and what can still be done to create a better world for women and men from women's perspectives.

A theory from secular feminism that I use in this thesis, is the "Feminist Theory" developed by Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley.<sup>16</sup> It states that the major "object" for [feminist] investigation, and the starting point of all its investigation, is the situation (or the situations) and experiences of women in society. Secondly, it seeks to see the world from the distinctive vantage point (or vantage points) of women in the social world.

### *1.7.5 Theoretical Framework*

This thesis is written in the discipline of Historical Theology. It is a contribution to African Church History, Gender Studies and African Feminist Theology. As a historical theological study it follows institutional, thematic and geographical developments from

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<sup>12</sup> See Ogbu U. Kalu, "Daughters of Ethiopia Constructing a Feminist Discourse in Ebony Strokes," in Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, *Women, Religion and Health, Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2006, p. 274.

<sup>13</sup> See Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk; Towards a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 18-20

<sup>14</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins. In Memory of Her*, New York: Crossroads, 1999 (1983), p. xxviii.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 447. Also see paper by Rosa Salinas-Hultman, "Hispanics, Catholics and Women in the 'Americas.' Possibilities of the Hispanic American Women's Perspective." University of Linköping, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley, *Contemporary Feminist Theory, Sociological Theory*, Singapore: McGraw Hill, 1992, pp. 447-496.

the beginning of the Circle to the present. In doing so it mainly uses a bottom up approach in research design and processes. The top bottom approach is used where the bottom up approach can not fully provide the required information. As a history, it follows a postmodernist view in as far as it seeks to liberate the causes that limit women's roles in church and society. As a historical theological study, it is also a contribution to feminist theology and methodologies.

### 1.8 Literature Review

The first major systematic work on the Circle was written by Carrie Pemberton.<sup>17</sup> Although her focus is on Circle thinking, she includes historical information about the Circle, especially on the Circle's pioneer women. Her approach to the study is from the First World missionary perspective. Thus her study establishes that the Circle has absorbed certain ideas of white North American Feminism. One of the ideas she outlines is the Circle's usage of theological tools supplied by Western feminist analysis. She also establishes the relationship of Circle theology and history to global institutions such as EATWOT,<sup>18</sup> the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation among others. She argues that the Circle has connections to African American Womanist theologians as well as other non-white feminist movements. Carrie Pemberton hails from an Ecumenical tradition (Anglican). My study departs from this earlier work in that it provides historical information on the Circle. Beyond the work of pioneer Circle women, it traces the story of the Circle until 2007. Secondly the study makes an application to Malawi. Thirdly my approach to this study is different as I write as an African woman theologian belonging to the Circle and to an Evangelical denomination.

As this is a feminist study, there was need to understand the movement. For some of the key issues raised in the feminist movement, I have benefited a lot from reading Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's book "A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins."<sup>19</sup> The author assesses the feminist theology in the early Christian origins. She writes to two audiences: the church and the academy. She writes in the discipline of biblical studies and explores the problem of women's agency in ancient Christianity in the light of the theological and historical questions raised by the feminist movements in church and society using critical Bible studies. In her book she highlights problems such as patriarchy and androcentrism as being opposed to women's liberation. She briefly

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<sup>17</sup> Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking: African Women Theologians in Dialogue with the West*, Leiden: Brill, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians.

<sup>19</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York: Crossroads, 1999 (1983), 357 pp.

alludes to some of the approaches used in women's liberation especially in the area of feminist Bible reinterpretation.<sup>20</sup> Further, she has highlighted how women's views on the validity of the Bible influence their feminist analyses. Those women that believe that the Bible is corrupted and unredeemable, for example, seek a reconstruction of feminist theologies outside the Bible. There are differing views even among those who believe that the Bible is valid. Some, for example, do not acknowledge that the Bible is androcentric while others do. This is where the current study makes a contribution. These differing views colour the approach women use in seeking a liberating theology for women. One of the central arguments advanced by Elizabeth Fiorenza Schüssler is that women were active participants in the early church, but that the biblical text excludes them or misrepresents them. Two of the approaches she suggests to recover the agency of women in the early church are: (1) Viewing history as a perspective history and not an objective one, thus the authors of the biblical text wrote from the perspectives of oppressive forces such as kyriarchy, patriarchy and androcentrism. Because of the perspectives above, the Bible authors overlooked or explained away information that accords women leadership roles. (2) Analyzing the agency of women from the perspective of seeking human dignity and equality. This current study also affirms that Circle history is perspective and thus must be interpretative.

I have also used a book by Jeanne Becher on "Women, Religion and Sexuality."<sup>21</sup> This is a compilation of findings produced and coordinated by the World Council of Churches on the study on the position of women in church and society in different religions. The book contains twelve articles based on religious traditions such as Buddhism, the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and Islam. The study has limited analyses because it was done in the initial stages of a study on women. Critical analyses at this juncture were avoided not to scare off cooperation of these religions to deal with the issue of women in the later stages. This work forms an important part in providing an example of the role of women in church and society.

The book by Susan Douglas Franzosa and Karen A. Mazza on "Integrating Women's Studies into the Curriculum"<sup>22</sup> has helped me to appreciate the fact that feminism is key in transforming gender inequalities in the academic world. On this subject, the authors highlight four major areas that require transformation to realize gender equity in acade-

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<sup>20</sup> See also, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone. The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1999 (1984).

<sup>21</sup> See Jeanne Becher (ed), *Women, Religion and Sexuality. Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*, Geneva: WCC, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> See Susan Douglas Franzosa and Karen A. Mazza, *Integrating Women's Studies into the Curriculum*, West-Port: Greenwood Press, 1984.

mia: Knowledge selection, knowledge construction and knowledge distribution, knowledge transmission and knowledge production. In this book they discuss how these subjects would achieve gender equity in academia. They argue that feminist scholars should question why particular knowledge is selected and other knowledge is left out. Of importance here is to evaluate whose interests are served by such a selection. They further argue that feminist scholars should question methodologies of doing research that exclude women as subjects. It is also at the heart of feminist scholars to analyze how culture and ideological and historical factors influence distribution of knowledge. Feminist scholars seek to encourage scholars to present knowledge from different view points and encourage critical analysis in academic work. This book has guided my understanding of why the Circle has given itself the task to produce books on women.

Other books I have used are on the Circle. These are also primary sources to this study and therefore I highlight only a few here as the rest will surface in the writing of the thesis. Key to this subject are works written by founding Circle women.<sup>23</sup> In the task of constructing Circle theology, many have tried to briefly document the beginnings of the Circle although not in detail. Denise Ackermann, for example, sketches such beginnings of the Circle in her introductory article to the book "Claiming our Footprints."<sup>24</sup> Similar sketchy histories of the Circle have been done by early Circle women including the founder, Mercy Amba Oduyoye.

The limitation of these theological works is that they are based on specific women's issues in a given context. They do not discuss the different feminist approaches and methodologies used. There are some Circle writings that highlight questions raised in the wider feminist movement such as patriarchy. A few women in the Circle do not specifically highlight questions raised by the wider Feminist movement. It is therefore often difficult to assume that Circle theology is addressing women's issues in the same way other feminist discourses do.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye is one of the Circle women that have written widely on the Circle. In writing her first major work on African Women and Patriarchy, she is one of the few women in the Circle that names problems such as patriarchy similar to those in

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<sup>23</sup> Examples are: Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa. African Women and Patriarchy*, Maryknoll: Orbis 1995, and Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2006. See also Musimbi Kanyoro, "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2002, pp. 15-38.

<sup>24</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, "Claiming our Footprints. Introductory Reflections," in Denise M. Ackermann, Eliza Getman Hantie Kotzé, Judy Tobler (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000, pp. 5-15 [6].

the wider Feminist movement. She however argues that no particular feminism is universal. Thus, in her work on the Akan women, she emphasizes that she does not pretend to write about "all of Africa, West Africa, or even Ghana."<sup>25</sup> Her study, she argues, is on the Akan of Ghana and specifically the Asante, one of the streams of the Akan people.<sup>26</sup> Again, her study is not an analysis of African Women Theologies, which in this study I call African feminism, neither is her work a historical account of the movement: she dwells on the Yoruba of Nigeria, the ethnic group she has come into contact with through marriage, and the Akan of the Asante of Ghana to where her childhood roots are traced. The former is patrilineal while the latter is matrilineal. She begins her work by uncovering the traditional heritage of women in these two peoples through the study of myths, folktales, culture and religion as regards women. She then shows how such a heritage reflects the behaviour system of these women and challenges women in these cultures to revisit their subordinate position through reading the biblical texts, revisiting their church traditions, and rethinking their culture to realize their own liberation.<sup>27</sup>

Her work is important for this thesis as it sheds light on how traditional culture is an obstacle to the liberation of African women. Mercy Amba Oduyoye is also a model of studying theological feminism in the wider context of other feminist movements. She is aware of the relationship of Circle theologies to other feminist theologies. For her, Circle theologies are part of a liberation struggle in solidarity with other women, which started in the 1960s.<sup>28</sup>

Mercy Amba Oduyoye also points out the importance of one's experience in the commitment to developing feminist theologies. Thus she writes "with a heightened consciousness of the centrality of my ego, formed in the womb of a largely matri-centred environment, I can not be thrown into an overly patriarchal pot without seeking a way of crawling out."<sup>29</sup> She also writes, "Perhaps it is my bi-national (not dual citizenship) living experience as well as intellectual nature of my studies in religion that point me to these links."<sup>30</sup> It is therefore important to note that Circle theology agrees with other feminists that one's experiences spur one to be engaged in the transformation of gender inequalities in church and society. Mercy Amba Oduyoye has also written a number of works that can not all be reviewed in this section. Some are referred to in the course of this study.

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<sup>25</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Her work contains 229 pages.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 1-4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 11.



I also reviewed the works written by Malawian women on the Circle. I have chosen to review work from Malawi because of the special slant of this thesis to Malawi. In Malawi, the first major work on women theology appeared in 1997 and was written by the first renowned African woman theologian in the country, Isabel Apawo Phiri. Her work was on the Chewa women of Nkhoma Synod (previously known as Dutch Reformed).<sup>31</sup> Her work informs this study in that it shows how patriarchal forces transmitted through missionary Christianity, local women's culture and gynopathy, limit the position of women in the Church and society. Isabel Apawo Phiri is well aware that women's challenges to liberation vary from context to context. Thus her work is local and does not claim to be a theology of all women in Africa, nor in Malawi or even central Malawi, but for a particular group of people, the Presbyterian Chewa women of central Malawi.

Since the writing of Isabel Apawo Phiri, many works have arisen in Malawi, all of which are also local and on specific issues. Some of these are writings by Malawian women studying abroad. Apart from Malawian women writing on Circle theology, some have written on other general subjects. In this group are Fulata Moyo and Chimwemwe Katumbi. Fulata Moyo wrote her MA thesis around 1990 concerning the role of Livingstonia Synod in Malawian politics,<sup>32</sup> while Chimwemwe Katumbi wrote on the Christian faith and traditional medicine in Livingstonia Synod.<sup>33</sup> Further, since the 1990s, there has been a rise in women writings in Malawi, especially in the Departments of Theology and Religious Studies as a requirement for their undergraduate studies.<sup>34</sup> These writings have contributed to the raising of various issues that bring inequality to women in Malawi, ranging from culture to religion.

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<sup>31</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000(1996); Zomba: Kachere, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Molly Longwe has also written on Baptist Women in Central Malawi. Her work is on Baptist girls' initiation among the Chewa. See Molly Longwe, "From *Chinamwali* to *Chilangizo*: The Christianisation of Pre-Christian Chewa Initiation Rites in the Baptist Convention of Malawi," MTh, University of Natal, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Chimwemwe Harawa Katumbi, *The Interaction between Christianity and Traditional Medicine in the Livingstonia Synod*, MA, University of Malawi, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> This started with the University of Malawi in 1994. Since 2007 Mzuzu University followed, and Livingstonia University in 2010.

## Chapter 2: The Birth of the Circle (1989)

This chapter argues that the Circle is an African baby, born in an ecumenical surrounding. There were other movements addressing the issue of gender inequalities in church and society before the Circle was born. The mother of the Circle and those that launched the Circle were in one way or the other in touch with earlier voices of women's liberation. These early women's liberation movements coloured the theology of the Circle. However, Circle theologies are distinct from other women's liberation movements in that they are theologies formed in the context of African culture and religion. This chapter justifies this proposition.

The Circle is an African firstly, because it is widely accepted that the Circle is a movement born by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Ghanaian married to a Nigerian, Modupe Oduyoye. Secondly, the birth attendants who became the first organizing team of the Circle were African. They were called the International Planning Committee (IPC) and came from different nations of Africa. Some of them were African women in the Diaspora. The IPC organized the first Africa wide Circle Conference, held in 1989, in Ghana. This conference and the following Africa wide Circle conferences are called Convocations. Further, the Circle was formed to deal with the liberation of African women.

Because the Circle was born in Africa and for African women, Circle theologies are also called either African feminist theologies or "African women's theologies."<sup>1</sup> The latter is a commonly used definition by the Circle. They are distinct from other feminist theologies developed elsewhere, but also belong to a wider family of feminist theology, which is further categorized as liberation theology.<sup>2</sup> They are African feminist theologies written by African women with the aim of empowering African women.

Even though these theologies are written by African women, it is not all women in Africa that are concerned with women's issues in church and society. Circle theologians, by definition, are concerned with women's issues. This does not imply that African women theologians outside the Circle are not concerned with women's issues.

Circle theologies are also much differentiated because of differences in religious and cultural contexts. These African women come from different countries of Africa. However, African cultures are grouped into two major categories: matrilineal and patrilineal cultures. Thus there is a way in which African culture can be classified as one. This is why there is much similarity within the theologies of Circle women. The major element of differentiation in Circle theology is how women reinterpret culture and

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<sup>1</sup> A quote from Isabel Apawo Phiri, "HIV/AIDS. An African Theological Response in Mission," *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the New Millennium," *Agenda* 61, 2004, p. 16.

religion to empower women. Chapter 5 shows the major theological interpretations within the Circle.

## 2.1 Mercy Amba Oduyoye as an African

There are two kinds of Africans, those that are born from African parents that live abroad and those that are born and raised up in Africa. Mercy Amba Oduyoye belongs to the latter. African women that belong to the former group are Africans by name because they are socialized in a non African cultural environment. Mercy Amba Oduyoye was not just born to an African family but was raised up in an African cultural environment. She also received her early theological training in Africa.

For Africans, growth of an individual is linked to an extended family. In the life of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, it is the role of her mother, father, grandfather, siblings and husband that were crucial in her growth and development.

### 2.1.1 Her Mother, Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah

Mercy Amba Oduyoye was born to an African mother, Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah. She was educated by her uncle. However, her grandfather also played a major role in her mother's life. The grandfather of Mercy Amba Oduyoye was J.E. Turkson of Asamankese. He is the one who took care of her mother since her father died at an early age.<sup>3</sup> Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah's father died after an accident that occurred at the time he was helping his friend to build a house in Abease, Ghana. A branch from a tree fell on him and hurt him badly. Since the accident, he became sickly and eventually died.<sup>4</sup> Mama Mercy's uncle sent her to school early. She was put in a Wesleyan kindergarten at a very tender age and was looked after by Wesleyan deaconesses (sisters).<sup>5</sup> After kindergarten, she went to WeGeHe (The Wesleyan Girls High School) which was well recognized for its academic excellence, hence Mercy Amba Oduyoye's mother had a long Methodist heritage.

To appreciate the role of her mother in shaping her Africaness and spirituality, Mercy remembered her mother after her death in a special way. At an opening ceremony of the Institute of Religion and Culture held in the premises of Trinity Theological Seminary in Ghana, in 2005, Mercy organized a special unveiling ceremony of an inscription about her mother, Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah: This was a practical step by Mercy Amba Oduyoye to honour her mother as someone important in her life. Apart from this inscription, for a period of time, she set up, in one of the rooms, photos depicting some memorable

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<sup>3</sup> Nana Adwao Atta-Konadu, *The Helper's Ministry*, 2002, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Nana Adwao Atta-Konadu, *The Helper's Ministry*, 2002, p. 6.

moments in her mother's life. The inscription clearly shows that her mother was not just relegated to domestic roles; she was an activist in her Methodist church who worked hard towards liberation of women in her church. The inscription reads like this:

The Hearth  
 To continue the ministry  
 of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah  
 1912-2005  
 Spouse of Charles Kwa Yamoah  
 And mother to many  
 Unveiled by Mrs Sophia Duker

This inscription is placed in the house that has been a home for the Institute of Religion and Culture for some time. At a conference held in South Africa at Kempton Park, Mercy reported that Circle activities in Ghana are really those that are organized by the Institute. The placement of this inscription at the Institute speaks volumes concerning the role of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah in the establishment of the Circle. The Circle in a way is "to continue the [her] ministry."<sup>6</sup>

The inscription is but a partial summary of what the mother was as a model to Mercy Amba Oduyoye and beyond. It gives a glimpse of the reasons why Circle women should not wonder at how Mercy was able to create the Circle that has impacted many lives. When one looks at the developments and history of the Circle, it is clear that no person other than a self-starter would be able to accomplish this task. According to Mercy, the Circle has only been possible because of God. It is logical to say that God also used her mother to model Mercy into such a challenging position. Her mother was in many ways a self-starter in doing women's ministry in her church.

The role of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah was not only visible in the church but also in her dedication to her family. In the document signed by Mercy A. Oduyoye, Kojo Ewudzi, Essie T. Blay, Essie J. Cobbina, and Joseph A. Yamoah on Saturday, June 4th, 2005 titled "Resolution", one of the statements about Mercy Dakwa Amoah was that she was a dedicated mother to her family.

2 Corinthians 5:1 And whereas Mama was a dedicated mother to her children and her family-and whereas; she kept her family close to her heart.

Not only did she extend love to her own children but she also extended her motherhood to others that were not her biological children. This is also testified in the Resolution:

and her love and compassion was to all humanity; and whereas, she became mother to many successful young men and women whom she raised like her own.

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<sup>6</sup> These words are in the inscription above.

Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah also contributed positively to women taking up leadership in society by helping her children to take up such leadership positions. This is also testified in the Resolution, where it is clear that her children occupied key positions in society as is visible from the record of Mercy's siblings.

Mrs Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah had seven other children apart from Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Interestingly, all her children grew up into key positions in church and society. This is a testimony of how she and her husband were efficient in raising up children as is visible from the record of their profile below.

Kojo Ewudzi Yamoah served in the Police Force of Ghana, providing security to the people of Ghana. Her brother Dr Eggie Harris became a doctor and served in the United States of America. Johnny B. Yamoah had a blossoming career as Captain with Ghana Airways. Mrs Essie F. Bobbina served on the Board of Ghana Cocoa Industry. One of her children became Professor of Agriculture in the University of Ghana, Prof (Mrs) Essie T. Blay. Sister Essie Ewusiwa Yamoah served in Tema General Hospital in Ghana. Sister Martha Yamoah served in the University of Ghana Hospital.

From the survey of the employment profile outlined, it is clear that Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah was a woman of gender equality. It was not only her sons that attained high profile in church and society, but her daughters too. Her feminism was not to rob boy children of their talents.

The profile of her children shows that she influenced her children to be partakers in the liberation of social, economic, political and religious lives of the people of Africa. She was not like those stereotyped missionaries that moved with the Bible under their armpits everywhere and had no regard for issues of justice in society. She oriented her children towards issues of justice. Mercy's leadership in the Circle is therefore not an anomaly in the context of her family.<sup>7</sup>

Mercy Dakwaa Amoah also had grandchildren. These are Lillian, Norman, Charlotte, Ofosu, Abena, Ntsifoa, Yamoah, Kingsley Yamoah (Dorik), Mrs Nana Adwoa Asiam, Mrs Essie Saint-Claire Ebow Yamoah, Mrs Joyce Ewuradwoa Boham, Faustina Yamoah, Caroline Yamoah, Mercy D. Yamoah II, Charles K, Yamoah II, Dr Kofi Kweenu Yamoah, Kojo Ewudzi Yamoah II, Kojo Dodom Yamoah, Nanya Blay, Johnny Blay, Mokoia Blay, Kweku Cobinna (Coma), Osa Kojo Cobinna, Dr Ekua Cobinna, Mrs Catherine Allo, Dr Josephine Amoah, Mercy Amba Yamoah II, Essie Y. Yamoah, Aba S. Yamoah, Kobbie John Yamoah, Jeremia Nana Kofi Yamoah, Dzifa Sena Kpodza and Afefa-Delali Kpodza.

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<sup>7</sup> Details extracted from poster, Celebration of Life, 4.6.2005.

There is no doubt that even these grandchildren are well positioned in church and society.

The role of the mother of Mercy Amba Oduyoye in establishing her children in leadership positions is also stipulated in the Resolution document:

and whereas she held a position of valour to defend her children and to safely situate them in lives dedicated to goodness and service to their communities.

Indeed what Mercy Dakwaa Amoah did and was to church and society deserves such a statement stipulated in the Resolution:

And whereas; she was a lady of great character and a woman of high holy standards; and whereas, she was a woman of deep spiritual ambitions; and whereas, her message was universal ... in the loving memory of Mercy D. Yamoah. Blessed are the Dead which die in the Lord from henceforth; yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours, and their works do follow them. (Revelations 14:13.) For we know that if our earthly treasure house of this Tabernacle dissolves, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in heavens.

Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah provides an example of how independence in a marriage relationship can be a source of transformation of gender inequalities in church and society. She was able to achieve progress of her own and that of her own children without sabotaging her family. She went beyond the traditional roles of just being a wife and was active in church and society as can be viewed from this statement in the Resolution:

And whereas, she held her responsibilities as a leader and the spouse of the President of the Methodist Church of Ghana in highest esteem, she immersed herself during the era of "Mass education."

However, she carved out her own space in life and that was acknowledged. Some of the areas where she created her own space are as follows:

In the effort to spread literacy in the Gold Coast; her ground work resulted in the establishment of the "Women's Training Centre" at Kwadaso. She exhibited undying love for the women's fellowship of the Methodist Church of Ghana, being the founder of many. Be it therefore resolved, we accept death as the permissive will of Almighty God. And commend our family and friends to the loving care of Jesus Christ through His servants, the people of God.

Part of the reward for creating her own distinct role is the record of her name and extracts of her achievements kept in the archives of the church as evidenced from this quote from the Resolution:

and let it further be resolved that the copy of this resolution be entered into Mama's memorial and submitted for entry into the permanent records at the Methodist Church of Ghana. Done by the order of: The Children of the Rev Charles Kingsley and Mrs Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah.<sup>8</sup>

Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah was a committed pastor's wife. In 1940, when her husband was posted to his first ministerial station in Achinacrom near Ejiso in Ghana, she found no women's fellowship there, and was the first to start it in nearby places such as

<sup>8</sup> Details from the "Resolution," 4 June 2005.

Aslaninpon, Kwaso, Berposo and others.<sup>9</sup> Again, when Mercy Amba Oduyoye's parents moved to Trinity College in Kumasi, she also started a women's fellowship in places such as Suame Pankromo and other villages.<sup>10</sup>

But of all the work that her mother did, Mercy Amba Oduyoye considers the founding of Kwadaso Women's Training Centre as the most significant one. She started this work in a bungalow at Affiduase, where a missionary, Miss White, lived. The target for the school was the wives of ministers and women leaders of the church. This school was a distance from Affiduase; however, Mama Mercy was able to commute to the place to teach when it was her time.<sup>11</sup>

### *2.1.2 Her Father the Very Rev Charles Kwa Yamoah B.D. London*

Just as Mercy was modelled by her mother in some aspects, she was also modelled by her father in other aspects.

Rev Charles Kwa Yamoah was a successful minister and theologian as evidenced from the comment extracted from his tribute.

And by his lectures and sermons, he won deep affection, admiration and respect of many students who became preachers of the gospel and teachers on our nation's educational system.<sup>12</sup>

These remarks are in the context of his career as tutor at Trinity Theological College and Principal of Akropong Trinity College (Ashanti). During these years, he influenced the minds of many towards a better understanding of God's work. He also lived his teachings by maintaining an outstanding ministry, which even saw him becoming the president of the Methodist Church in Ghana. Evangelizing, pastoral work and teaching characterized his ministry. Apart from these, he was an expert organizer and wise administrator. Above all, he was a man of God and of choice Christian character.

As a person, he had much charm. He was good and generous to friends and colleagues. He had love for his master Jesus Christ. In one of his conversations, he had this to say:

In my funeral service the less said about me; and the more about my saviour, the better.<sup>13</sup>

In all this, the mother of Mercy is seen as playing an important role. This is well summarized in this quote:

<sup>9</sup> Nana Adwao Atta-Konadu, *The Helper's Ministry; A letter to my Grand Children*, Circle meeting 17-21 January 2002, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Tribute to the Very Rev Charles K. Yamoah B.D. by the Very Rev T Wallace Koomson, G.M. K.C.B.

<sup>13</sup> Tribute to the Very Rev Charles K. Yamoah, Friday, January 23, 1987.

Mrs Mercy Yamoah a product of Wesley High School has been most helpful to the husband and during his years of Trinity [Theological College] and travelling, always humble as a dove giving as much help as any husband could ask for.<sup>14</sup>

Mercy's commitment to the work of her husband and of the Lord was unswerving. An example is given in this quote:

Mercy had to undergo a minor operation. Before she regained consciousness, she started reciting certain passages from the prophet Ezekiel which the husband was at that time teaching. Her mind was with her husband as he taught in the classroom as trainer of ministers and school teachers.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that Mercy's ability to lead and inspire the Circle is influenced by this rich heritage from her father as well. Rev Charles Kwa Yamoah was born on 1st June 1905 and died on 12th January 1987. He was the third President of the "Conference" of the Methodist Church, Ghana, from 1973 to 1977.

The funeral ceremony was mostly in the hands of the church because he was a high-ranking church leader in the Methodist Church. The Rev Dr Jacobs A. Stephens Bachelors, MA (London) STM, MSC, who was president at the time of his death, was among the officiating clergy.

The past president, the very Rev T. Wallace Koomson K.G.B. also took part in the service. He was the secretary of the Conference then. The Rev Dr H.E. Brew-Riverson, Bachelors, MA (London) was also present. The Rev Emmanuel A. Ashley, the chairman of Accra District, the Rev Kodjo Hazel BD, (London), chairman of Winneba District and Rev Justice K.A. Dadson, BA (Hons) (Legon) MTh (Princeton), who was at the time the Assistant Secretary of the Conference were also present.

Rev Charles Kwa Yamoah was not only respected in his church tradition but also beyond, as was visible at his home calling service. Representatives from former students of WESCO organizations for example were also present.

### *2.1.3 Her African Theological Training*

After completing her teaching course at Kumasi in 1952, Mercy Amba Oduyoye taught at a Methodist Girls Middle School in Kumasi from 1955 to 1959. Then she enrolled in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ghana in Legon in 1959. This experience in theological progress would probably not have happened without Noel Q. King, who inspired her to study theology. He was at that time one of the professors in the Department.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Tribute to the Very Rev Charles K. Yamoah, Friday, January 23, 1987.

<sup>15</sup> Tribute to the Very Rev Charles K. Yamoah in a Brief Biography of the Very Rev Charles Kwaa Yamoah BD (London) in Souvenir Programme for the Home Call of the Very Rev Charles Kwaa Yamoah (B.D. London).

<sup>16</sup> Interview Prof. Noel Q. King, Ndangopuma, Zomba, Nov. 2002.



Her decision to study theology was also supported by her mother and father. It is amazing that, although her mother had wanted to study theology, she never told her about this. However, Mercy Amba Oduyoye's mother admits that she may somehow have transferred, unknowingly to her, her vision to study theology.<sup>17</sup> The other two lecturers that taught Mercy Amba Oduyoye were Professor Christian G. Baëta, a Ghanaian and Kwesi A. Dickson, also an ordained Ghanaian Methodist minister. Even with the background of ordained ministers as her early mentors, she has remained unordained. Kwesi A. Dickson is among those that pioneered African theology.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.2 The Circle with Mixed Parenting

The Circle has a mixed background because its theologies are cooked by women from an ecumenical surrounding. Even though Mercy Amba Oduyoye did her undergraduate theological training in Africa, her postgraduate studies were done abroad. She has for many years worked and served in ecumenical surroundings which exposed her to the wider feminist movements. Apart from such an exposure, her husband was also exposed to ecumenical surroundings.

### 2.2.1 Her Husband, Modupe Oduyoye

Mercy Amba Oduyoye's ecumenical background has also been seasoned by her husband of many years, Modupe Dube. In relation to the development of the Circle, Modupe played a role as someone also involved in ecumenical institutions that had a relationship to the bodies Mercy Amba Oduyoye worked in. He worked with the All African Council of Churches and the World Christian Students Federation for example, which had contact with the World Council of Churches where Mercy worked at the dawn of the Circle.<sup>19</sup>

Mercy met Modupe in the context of both of them being actively involved in the Lord's work in their respective countries: Modupe Dube in Nigeria and Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Ghana.

Both of them occupied key leadership positions in a Christian youth organization known as Student Christian Federation. Mercy Amba Oduyoye was the treasurer of the Student Christian Federation of Ghana while Modupe Dube was the General Secretary of the Student Christian Movement in Nigeria. This was in 1966. Mercy and Modupe met

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<sup>17</sup> Nana Adwao Atta-Konadu, *The Helper's Ministry*, 2002, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth R. Ross, "The Theology of Hope," in Kenneth R. Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi: Theological Essays*, Mambo-Kachere, 1995, pp. 65-80 [70].

<sup>19</sup> Modupe's full name is Adedoyia Modupe Oduyoye.

each other first at the West African Student and Youth Christian Leadership Conference in Accra. Their second meeting was in Nigeria in the following month, September 1966.

Another encouragement to Mercy from Modupe in establishing the Circle is in the area of his proficiency in writing and publishing, the main focus of the Circle. His talent was a positive motivation in her publishing work. Modupe's key training is as a linguist. He is a master of many languages including Arabic. This has enabled him to be a seasoned author and publisher, a talent that is very much needed to fulfil the Circle objectives, which Mercy Amba Oduyoye is passionate about.

This does not imply that Modupe published Mercy Amba Oduyoye's books or that without Modupe Mercy Amba Oduyoye would not have published as Carrie Pemberton argues.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from his skills in publishing, he has attended many ecumenical events: the All Africa Christian Council (AACC) assemblies in August 1969 in Abuja; August 1974 in Lusaka and the 6th Assembly in Addis Ababa in September 1977. He has also attended many conferences such as that of the World Christian Students Federation in Argentina in August 1964, way before he met Mercy. He attended the Quadrennial Conference of the World Student Christian Federation in Ohala, USA in December 1963. In 1960, he attended a conference on missionary evangelism in Strassbourg in France, and in the same year he also attended a World Christian Students Federation General Committee meeting.

Modupe Dube is also experienced in issues of Inculturation. While in Nigeria he spent one month doing an African Bible Translators' Course in 1967 when Mercy took up employment with the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Probably this too could easily be interpreted to mean that the focus on culture and religion was inspired by Modupe Dube. This is contrary to the fact. Coincidences do exist in life. It is clear that Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Modupe Dube are good partners in that they both had a wide experience of the Ecumenical world way before Mercy got employed by the WCC.

Apart from his profound role in the AACC and World Christian Students Committee, he has been active in many other organizations. Between 1981 and 1984, he was a

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<sup>20</sup> Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 64. – In fact, Circle books took priority as opposed to publishing her own. Carrie Pemberton undermines the capability that Mercy Amba Oduyoye has in publishing. A glance at books and articles written by Mercy and widely acknowledged on the globe is a proof for the lack of credence of such remarks. Her remarks indirectly undermine all women who have achieved well in professions, which are similar to their husbands'. To such women Pemberton suggests that it is actually their husbands who did the real work. It could also be said about her that the book she wrote was written with much help from her husband and that is why there are flaws in the text.

member of the UNESCO Committee for the "Access by Third World Countries to Foreign Copy Right Works."<sup>21</sup>

In the period between 2001 and 2005, he was in the standing committee of the WCC/Vatican study committee, "The Contribution of Africa and her Peoples to the Religious Heritage of the World." All such exposure to ecumenical contacts was useful to Mercy in her endeavour to establish the Circle.

### 2.2.2 *Mercy's Work and Theological Life*

Mercy Amba Oduyoye's exposure to ecumenical surroundings also happened during her further training in Theology abroad. Her studies at the University of Legon concluded in 1963, and the same year she proceeded with her postgraduate studies in Dogmatics at Cambridge University in Britain.<sup>22</sup> This was yet another place to develop non-traditional forms of theology. It was also around this time when there was a rise in liberation theologies in Europe.<sup>23</sup> Van den Bosch states some of them.

In the struggle for liberation and freedom from patriarchy, hierarchy, sexism, racism and economic exploitation; the ecumenical movement named men and women equally as constituent members of the Church as the body of Christ and allowed women's issues a place in the ecumenical and theological agenda; the liberation movement helped expose the damage done by cultural, political and religious imperialism.<sup>24</sup>

However, even though there were such movements at this time, Mercy Amba Oduyoye saw that they did not tackle the root issue of marginalization of women. Thus she organized the Circle to act as a forum where to articulate a theology of women's liberation.<sup>25</sup>

### 2.2.3 *The Role of Letty Russel*

The other root of exposure to global feminist theologies was through Letty Russell. Mercy Amba Oduyoye learnt a lot from Letty Russel whom she has closely related to for years. Letty Russel worked with the World Council of Churches on the study of "The

<sup>21</sup> This information is based on a personal interview I did with Modupe Dube, Sept 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Written Interview by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Circle meeting, Kempton Park, Johannesburg 13.10.2003.

<sup>23</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye came from a privileged family because she was not the only member of her family that went abroad for further studies, a rare opportunity at that time. Her father also had gone to study for three years in England, ten years earlier than her in 1953. Her father studied for his further theological studies at Richmond College in London, where he received the Degree of Bachelor of Divinity. Mercy's father also took her mother with him to London, at the time of the study. Her father's theological career may also have encouraged Mercy to do theology (Nana Adwao Atta-Konadu, *The Helper's Ministry. A Letter to my Grand Children*, Circle Meeting 17-21.1.2002, pp. 7 and 15.

<sup>24</sup> H.M. van den Bosch, "African Theology: Is it Relevant for Global Christianity?", *NGTT*, 2009, pp. 530-537 [537].

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Community of Women and Men in the Church."<sup>26</sup> She was Professor of Theology, has taught at Pacific School of Religion and at Yale Divinity School. Mercy Amba Oduyoye is not the only person that has benefited from Letty Russel; many Circle women were in touch with Letty at Yale Divinity College during the student exchange visits that Circle women were engaged in. Others met Letty Russell at Circle or other ecumenical conferences and workshops. She died in 2007 while her husband, Hans Hoekendijk, had died in 1975.<sup>27</sup>

That the IPC and Mercy Amba Oduyoye were an international group; that among them were African women based in the West, meant that from the beginning the Circle was exposed to other feminist movements. This exposure inevitably influenced them in the processes of constructing Circle theologies.

#### *2.2.4 The Role of the International Planning Committee*

The international composition of the Circle from the beginnings has continued into the later years. This is both at continental and national level. National Circles are also often international because they are usually linked to academic institutions. Such institutions often have international students. At such academic institutions, students are exposed to feminist theologies from the West. This situation and the international composition of the student body are a reason that Circle theologies are flavoured with Western feminist theologies. In addition, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and the International Planning Committee members were in touch with other feminist theologies in the world as they all were members of ecumenical bodies. As mothers, they set the pace of Circle theology with that background. Such background makes Circle theology hybrid because it borrowed some aspects from worldwide feminist theologies in constructing Circle theologies. However, since Circle women are African, Circle theologies have an African slant. In addition, Circle theologies emphasize the importance of the Bible and African culture in developing theologies. The emphasis of the Bible is lacking in some of the other feminist theological movements. Thus Circle theologies are distinct from such feminist theologies.

#### *2.2.5 The Role of Brigalia Bam*

Brigalia Bam is the first member of the IPC that had a significant influence on the birth of the Circle. She, a South African, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye conceived the idea of the Circle while they both worked with the World Council of Churches. Brigalia Bam was also member of the International Planning Committee. A crucial time in the realization of

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<sup>26</sup> Letty M. Russell, *The Future of Partnership*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979, p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

the Circle was when Mercy Amba Oduyoye met her close friend, Brigalia Bam. Mercy Amba Oduyoye met Brigalia Bam for the first time in 1967 when Brigalia was also working with the WCC. During this time, WCC was also working on women's issues in different religious groups.<sup>28</sup> Brigalia Bam met Mercy Amba Oduyoye at this time because Mercy had come there on a programme on cooperation between men and women in the church. Mercy, at this time, did not feel the need to look at women specifically. She was working with the youth in the Youth Department of WCC. Brigalia Bam, however, encouraged her to take the issue of women seriously and that with time she would realize that although men and women belong to the same churches, women are faced with challenges that need special attention.

In the 1980s, Brigalia Bam was on a Board that coordinated the project of women writing feminist theologies. This oriented her to feminist theologies globally. To her dismay women from Africa were not participating in the programmes. There were women from Latin America and Asia in addition to those from the West, but there were no participants from the African Continent.<sup>29</sup> This made Brigalia Bam and her colleagues invite Mercy Amba Oduyoye to Harvard to be involved in this research. At this invitation, Mercy Amba Oduyoye agreed to be involved in writing African women's theologies. According to Brigalia Bam, although there were many feminist theologies at that time, Mercy maintained her identity as an African Theologian and wrote a distinctly African theology. She made it clear in her writings and public persuasions that African Women's Theologies cannot be understood unless they are looked at from the perspective of both Culture and Religion. This stand was new in the theological thinking then where many women wrote from the perspective of Western Feminist Theologies. This was in the 1980s when feminist women such as Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote theologies. Letty Russell was also influential in the study of Women Theologies at that time. Thus Mercy was the first African Woman Theologian to create African Feminist Theologies. Brigalia Bam was the first African woman that supported her in this vision.<sup>30</sup> It is this that also testifies to the fact that Mercy Amba Oduyoye is the mother of the Circle. This is because the model of writing Circle theologies in the realm of religion and culture has been the pillar of Circle theologies. Before establishing the Circle in 1989, Mercy Amba Oduyoye was already active in writing an African Feminist Theology. In 1985, for example, she wrote an article on "Women

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<sup>28</sup> Jeane Becher (ed), *Women, Religion and Sexuality. Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*, Geneva: WCC, 1991, p. ix.

<sup>29</sup> Oral presentation, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Brigalia Bam, Pan African Conference, Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, Accra, Trinity College, 12.9.2005.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Theologians and the Early Church,"<sup>31</sup> where she states the problem of how church history excluded the experiences of women. At this time Mercy Amba Oduyoye already had read works by feminist theologians such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. She quotes her in the above article.<sup>32</sup> Thus the Circle is not the only mouth piece that has contributed to the liberation of women in church and society. The struggle for women's liberation is earlier than the Circle. The earlier paragraphs only mention a few: WCC and First World Feminist Movements.

### 2.3 The Role of the UN Decade for Women

It should also be noted that the Circle was only born after the UN decade for Women in the 1970s. This movement also had an imprint on the life of Mercy Amba Oduyoye and might have contributed to her passion to found the Circle. Thus it makes sense that the beginning of the Circle was a fulfilment of what Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Brigalia Bam had had in mind many years before the institution of the Circle. Although the 1970s were a period when much focus was put on women's voices through the UN Decade for Women, Mercy by that time was already clear that she needed to do something for Africa, in appreciation for the good things that God had given her. She believed that all the good things she enjoyed in life came from God. Brigalia Bam also thought about what one could do to show appreciation to God. Whereas Mercy Amba Oduyoye was focused on starting something that would reach all Africa and involve women in theology, Brigalia Bam wanted to establish an Institute.<sup>33</sup> It is interesting that Mercy Amba Oduyoye is currently the founder and Director of the Institute in Religion and Culture. Brigalia Bam has been involved in training upcoming parliamentarians and her main involvement is in the area of politics.

The other drive that led Mercy Amba Oduyoye to start the Circle was that she was aware that she was "one lone" woman in the theological field and found herself among men! "She decided to have a community of women in theology and this was the embryonic stage of the Circle."<sup>34</sup> The Circle in its embryonic vision was already aimed at transforming gender inequalities. This was complementing the efforts by other gender activist movements in the world. One of the areas where Mercy Amba Oduyoye sought to bring equality was in the area of equal representation of women theologians over against male

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<sup>31</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Women Theologians and the Early Church. An Examination of Historiography," *Voices from the Third World Women*, Colombo: EATWOT, vol viii 3, pp. 70-71.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70

<sup>33</sup> Written Interview by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Circle meeting, Kempton Park, Johannesburg 13.10.2003.

<sup>34</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Ecumenical Review*, pp. 1-4.

theologians in Africa. The Circle has further developed this passion to include the promotion of the engagement of African women theologians in paid employment.

## 2.4 The Role of Theological Institutions

Theological institutions have remained key to the development of the Circle since the beginnings. Theological institutions that offer training to women which is the same as that offered to men are crucial in this development.<sup>35</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and members of the IPC were able to produce the vision of the Circle because they had some theological orientation. Those that did not have such a background were at least enlightened in issues of culture and religion. The fact that these women had theological training to that accessed by men, made them acquire paid employment in key organizations. At this time such training was possible mostly through secular universities, though a few church based seminaries also offered such training.

### 2.4.1 Finding others: 1980-1987

Mercy's vision to begin the Circle was only realized in the 1980s, after a long and independent effort of making friendships with other African women, some of whom were not theologians, as seen in the group of founding members of the Circle.<sup>36</sup> However, even though the initiative to find other women between 1980 and 1987 was Mercy's own project,<sup>37</sup> it had to take her collaborative spirit with others to establish the Circle.

Mercy was convinced that she needed others to achieve this goal, and this inspiration was typically Akan, the ethnic group she comes from, but also African in general. An Akan proverb says that it is not good to be a lone star. She, therefore, from the start organized the Circle in collaboration with others. The first collaborative effort was finding others to join the Circle. Mercy felt that she was the only African woman who wrote African Feminist Theology at that time, and was such for many years.<sup>38</sup> This put her in a dilemma as an Akan woman and she wanted to change the situation. She knew that the only way to change the situation was to find more African women to write feminist theologies. This situation led to the dominance of theologies by men. Women were inadequately represented in print. This period is referred to by the Circle as a period

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<sup>35</sup> Not all theological institutions in Africa offer equal training to men and women. Some institutions offer "wives' courses" which do not adequately equip women on equal terms with male theologians. See Rachel Fiedler, "Theological Education for Women in Malawi", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, vol. 35, 2009, Supplement, pp. 119-134.

<sup>36</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Revisiting the History of the Circle," 2002, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Written Interview by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Circle meeting, Kempton Park, Johannesburg 13.10.2003.

<sup>38</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Ecumenical Review*, pp. 1-4.

of the 'dearth of African women theologies.'<sup>39</sup> Mercy wanted to work with other African women theologians to correct this situation.

According to an Akan wisdom saying, a person that is unable to co-opt others on the road to the goal would be seen as a fool. Mercy refused to be a fool by working hard to find other women to write theologies with her. In this she has not only become wise as an Akan woman but also as an African woman, because in Africa we believe in this proverbial saying "I am because we are."<sup>40</sup> In other African contexts, such as Malawi, indeed, a person that is a 'loner' is even considered to be a witch or a wizard. Mercy worked hard to find other women theologians by searching through theological colleges, seminaries and Departments of Religious Studies in Africa. The instrument used in finding others was through speaking to women about the Circle at conferences where such women were found. Further, letters were written to colleges, universities, and churches for lists of women that could become part of this network.

## 2.5 The Role of the Institute of Church and Society

One of the first meetings where she started getting connected to other African women theologians took place in Ibadan, Nigeria and another one in Port Harcourt in the same country. At these meetings Mercy was able to make ties with other African women theologians.<sup>41</sup> Through casual conversations at such meetings she also came to know African woman abroad.<sup>42</sup>

In 1980, Mercy was able to organize the first meeting of African women theologians at the Institute of Church and Society in Ibadan.<sup>43</sup> Mercy was assisted in organizing this meeting by Isabel Johnson who was on the AACC women's desk and Daisy Obi, who was with the Christian Council of Nigeria as a director of the Institute of Church and Society.<sup>44</sup> This meeting was an independent effort by Mercy. Dr Constance Parvey of the WCC, however, took advantage of the meeting. This happened because he was looking for a venue to hold an All African Regional Conference of WCC, concerning the study on "The Community of Men and Women in the Church," which was proposed at the fifth Assembly of the WCC.<sup>45</sup> At this Conference, there were no papers to publish.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Revisiting the History of the Circle," paper presented at a conference on Biographies of Women, Kempton Park, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Written Interview by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Circle meeting, Kempton Park, Johannesburg 13.10.2003.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Ecumenical Review*, pp. 1-4.

<sup>43</sup> Written Interview by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Circle meeting, Kempton Park, Johannesburg 13.10.2003. Also Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Ecumenical Review*, pp. 1-4.

<sup>44</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Ecumenical Review*, pp. 1-4.

<sup>45</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Revisiting the History of the Circle," 2002.



Although Mercy's meeting was an independent effort to that of Dr Constance Parvey, together the meeting was well animated as WCC's effort.<sup>47</sup> After the African Regional Conference of WCC was finished, Mercy Amba Oduyoye with the help of Daisy Obi, a Nigerian, and Isabella Johnstone, a Sierra Leonean, held their women theologians' meeting.<sup>48</sup> But even then, the idea of the Circle was not hinted at.

## 2.6 The Role of the Programme for Theological Education (PTE)

The first formal discussion of a possibility of an Africa wide Circle of women theologians took place at a PTE meeting in Accra, Ghana. John Pobee organized the meeting. It was at this meeting that Mercy Amba Oduyoye called the women together outside the conference programme and shared with them her vision to start the Circle. At that conference, there were more than ten women interested in joining EATWOT, but it was not possible for all because EATWOT had quotas, which were restrictive. Mercy took this opportunity to challenge the women as to why starting a Circle, which would be their own women's forum, was necessary. This would allow many more African women theologians to join and associate with other women theologians. The women received Mercy's challenge with much enthusiasm.<sup>49</sup>

In 1987, after Mercy completed her teaching contract at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, she became the Deputy General Secretary of the WCC. The vision of the Circle at that time was alive and was widespread. Her appointment was to work in the Programme Unit on Education and Renewal. Mercy was able to lobby for support to establish the Circle even in some of the departments of the WCC.<sup>50</sup> At that time Brigalia Bam was still in Geneva. Mercy started searching for funds in 1988 to hold the first Circle meeting. She was able to call together the first group of African Women Theologians that became the birth attendants of the Circle that was officially born in 1989. These were the International Planning Committee.

In August 1988, the first members of the Circle, who are considered to be the founders of the Circle, met in Geneva upon invitation by Mercy Amba Oduyoye. These formed the IPC. Mercy was at that time living in Geneva and working with WCC. All the invited women were members of EATWOT with a high dose of academicians teaching in a

<sup>46</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Ecumenical Review*, pp. 1-4.

<sup>47</sup> Written Interview by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Circle meeting, Kempton Park, Johannesburg 13.10.2003; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Ecumenical Review*, pp. 1-4. – The Women of the World Council of Churches also focussed on gender issues that were

<sup>48</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Ecumenical Review*, pp. 1-4.

<sup>49</sup> Interview Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Kempton Park, 14.10.2003.

<sup>50</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Revisiting the History of the Circle," 2002 and Interview Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Kempton Park, 14.10.2003.

University. Being part of EATWOT oriented them to feminist theologies in the Third World but also to First World theologies. They were oriented to feminist theologies of the First World through their theological education. This advantaged them to lead the movement of African feminism in Africa. Mercy Amba Oduyoye refers to Circle theology as an "irruption within an irruption"<sup>51</sup> because at the time she established the Circle she belonged to EATWOT,<sup>52</sup> also involved in developing theologies of Africa. In fact she was elected as President of EATWOT in 1997.<sup>53</sup>

Mercy joined EATWOT in 1976, the first African woman to do so. During this time she was not working with WCC. She was a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. In the same year, Brigalia Bam held a conference of women seminarians (in 1976), and Mercy also had this list of women seminarians.

## 2.7 The Role of EATWOT

EATWOT was the organ that produced the first Circle members. Its agenda was "to develop new models of theology which interpret the gospel in a more meaningful way to the peoples of the Third World and to promote their struggles for the fullness of humanity."<sup>54</sup> All members of the IPC were members of EATWOT. These women were mostly in the Diaspora. This means they learned to write feminist theologies as members of EATWOT through the Women's Commission.<sup>55</sup> Through this forum, members of IPC were oriented to First World Feminist Theologies as well as other Third World Theologies. Thus they had enough experience required for the planning of the launching of the Convocation of the Circle in September 1989, in Accra, Ghana.<sup>56</sup> Even in later years key Circle women like Philomena Njeri Mwaura and Mary Getui were members of EATWOT.

Apart from being members of EATWOT, the members of IPC were also members of other organizations or and academic institutions that promoted the cause of liberation for

<sup>51</sup> See Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (eds), *Irruption of the Third World. Challenge to Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983.

<sup>52</sup> Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, founded 1976 in Dar es Salaam.

<sup>53</sup> Carrie Pemberton mistakes this position to be that of General Secretary (Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 61).

<sup>54</sup> "Report of the EATWOT Women's Commission Conference, St. Lucia Park, Harare, Zimbabwe, 21<sup>st</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> June 1999", in Philomena N. Mwaura and Lilian D. Chirairo, *Theology in the Context of Globalization. African Women's Response*, Nairobi: EATWOT Women's Commission, 2005, pp. 96-106 [102-103].

<sup>55</sup> Even in later years key women of the Circle were members of EATWOT.

<sup>56</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women of Faith Speak out in an HIV/AIDS Era," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverly Haddad, Madipoane Masenya (ngw'ana Mphahlele), *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003, p. 5.

women in church and society. Brigalia Bam was at that time working as the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. Brigalia had to travel all the way from South Africa to attend this meeting. Sr Betty Ekeya was a lecturer at Egerton University in Kenya. She is a devout Catholic and an ex nun.<sup>57</sup> However, she has not retained ties with the Circle since her return to the USA. Sr Bernadette Mbuy-Beya was serving in her community of Sisters in Lubumbashi in Zaire.<sup>58</sup> The other Catholic women were Sr Rosemary Edet who was teaching in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Calabar in Nigeria,<sup>59</sup> and Sr Teresa Okure. Sr Rosemary Edet died in 1993. At the 1996 conference a moment of silence was observed to mark her death. This is in many cases done in Africa. Hence this observance of her death had nothing to do with Carrie Pemberton's claim that Africa faces challenges of lack of communication, as such, people heard of her death only at such an occasion.<sup>60</sup> Sr Rosemary Edet was instrumental in the organization of the Nigerian conference in 1990.<sup>61</sup> She was also among the founding members of EATWOT. She was Vicar General of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus and had a PhD in Religion and Culture from the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC.<sup>62</sup>

The number of Catholic women as pioneers of African Feminism at this time was high, because, although the Catholic Church does not ordain women to the ministry of the Priesthood, Catholic Sisters from some congregations are given chances to advance their education for women. In 1988, she organized an International Planning Committee (IPC) to strategize on the launch of the Circle. One of the members was her close friend Brigalia Bam, whose contribution to the Circle has been shown in earlier paragraphs. Other members were Catholic Sisters. Since Feminism originated in the Liberation movement, Roman Catholic women had to be in the majority because the wind of liberation touched the Roman Catholic Church earlier than the Protestant churches.<sup>63</sup> Carrie Pemberton lists

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<sup>57</sup> Interview Sr Annie Nasimiyu, 14.7.2005, Kempton Park.

<sup>58</sup> Sr Bernadette Mbuy Beya. She later becomes the Regional Research Coordinator of Francophone Africa in 1996. She is an Ursuline Sister. At this time she was Mother Superior of a small community of five in Lubumbashi. She was working as the Director of the Institut Superior des Sciences Religieuses. She did post graduate studies at Lumen Vitae, the Institut des Sciences Religieuses in Brussels. She was at this time working as an urban community health coordinator (Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 99).

<sup>59</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2002, pp. 15-38 [22].

<sup>60</sup> See Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 114.

<sup>61</sup> Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 93. All Sisters occupy or have occupied senior positions in their religious communities (p. 92).

<sup>62</sup> Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 114.

<sup>63</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, "The Meaning of the Term *Liberation*," in Deane William Fern, *Third World Liberation Theologies. A Reader*, New York: Orbis Books, 1986.

four Sisters as leading members of the Circle: Sr Teresa Okure, Sr Rosemary Edet, Sr Bernadette Mbuy-Beya and Sr Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike. All the Sisters were faithful members of their Catholic Church at the time when the Circle was being established.

They are convinced of the importance of making the Catholic religion relate to the hearts, minds, cultures and societies of modern Africa. They all use the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the papers generated by the African Synod of 1994.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to these there was Sr Betty Ekeya. This advancement of education for these Catholic Sisters was not only in the area of theological training; as such some of the Sisters in this group had further training in Biology and Philosophy among others.<sup>65</sup> Some have been given opportunity to major in theological training like in the case of Sr Annie Nasimiyu-Wasike who joins the Circle later. Although she was not in the pioneer group, she has become one of the leading religious in the Circle.<sup>66</sup> Sr Annie Nasimiyu-Wasike was the Mother Superior of the Congregation of the Little Sisters of St Francis (LSSF) in Kampala. Her order was started by Mother Kenna, an Irish woman, in 1923. It was one of the earliest African congregations. In 1952 the order became independent and became a Pontifical Congregation. Sr Annie Nasimiyu-Wasike was Senior Lecturer at Kenyatta University.<sup>67</sup> The fact that these Sisters had post graduate training enabled them to make a considerable contribution to the Circle. Their major contribution was in the area of mentoring other women to research, write and publish on women's issues. The other advantage Sisters had in becoming members of the Circle is that their church was at the point of renewal instigated by Vatican II.<sup>68</sup>

Apart from Roman Catholic Sisters, there were other women in the IPC. Rose Zoë Obianga was a linguist. Her theology was that of practice as she was very much involved with her church in Cameroon.<sup>69</sup> There were also Grace Ereme and Elizabeth Amoah. At that time, Elizabeth Amoah was teaching at the University of Ghana in Legon.

Musimbi Kanyoro was a linguist but she also was very much involved in church work. She had worked in Bible translation with the United Bible Societies in Africa, and at this time she was working on the Women's Desk of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). The Women's Desk was commissioned to work on women in church and society.<sup>70</sup> The LWF is one of the ecumenical bodies that have a history of promoting women's

<sup>64</sup> See Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 92.

<sup>65</sup> Interview Sr Annie Nasimiyu, 14.7.2005, Kempton Park.

<sup>66</sup> See Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 92.

<sup>67</sup> See Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 116.

<sup>68</sup> See Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 99.

<sup>69</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2002, pp. 15-38 [23].

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. "Revisiting the History of the Circle,"

liberation. Musimbi Kanyoro was advantaged by this. She is an international speaker. She was involved in the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 and in the Beijing Conference in 1994.<sup>71</sup>

Musimbi Kanyoro had not been invited to the meeting. She learnt of the meeting when she met Mercy.<sup>72</sup> However, she became Mercy's chief collaborator. She writes; "There are facts about the Circle which can only be told by Mercy Amba Oduyoye or myself."<sup>73</sup>

When these founding members met, they became the International Planning Committee that organized the official launch of the Circle in 1989.<sup>74</sup> This is the beginning of collaborative teamwork in promoting theology of transforming gender inequality in church and society.

### 2.7.1 *The Birth of EATWOT*

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians had a Catholic beginning with a prior aim of strengthening churches in the Global South ("Third World"). Both women and men constructed theology together, but later there was a provision of the Women's Commission. EATWOT is a forum that was developed within Liberation Theologies, spearheaded by Fr Sergio Torres, a priest from Chile.<sup>75</sup> Some refer to this theology as the theology from the Underside of History.<sup>76</sup> EATWOT was launched in 1976 in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. According to the schedule of meetings, the first EATWOT continental conference was to be held in Africa. In the year 1977, it was indeed held in Accra, Ghana. The next meeting was planned to take place in Asia and in 1979, the EATWOT conference indeed took place in Sri Lanka at Wennappuwa.<sup>77</sup> By this time, women were more developed in their thinking.<sup>78</sup>

### 2.7.2 *Circle Theologies as an 'Irruption within an Irruption'*

From 1976 to 1986, African Women Theologians had cooperated in doing theology together with men within this forum of EATWOT. However, in 1986, at the regional Conference of EATWOT, which took place in Mexico, women expressed their discontent

<sup>71</sup> Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 129.

<sup>72</sup> Interview Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Kempton Park, 13.10.2003.

<sup>73</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Revisiting the History of the Circle," 2002, p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. "Revisiting the History of the Circle,"

<sup>75</sup> See Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 41.

<sup>76</sup> Interview Bishop Kalilombe, Postgraduate Colloquium 2003, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Malawi.

<sup>77</sup> Virginia Fabella (ed), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1980.

<sup>78</sup> Interview Bishop Kalilombe, Postgraduate Colloquium 2003, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Malawi.

over theologies that sidelined women. This expression from women came as a surprise to the men present then.<sup>79</sup> Pemberton expresses this incident in this way:

During the opening prayers at New Delhi, African American Women were amongst the delegates, including Jacquelyn Grant. She called on a Mother God as "Our Creator, God our Sustainer, God our Liberator."<sup>80</sup>

Male participants objected, calling her audacity un-theological and unbiblical. Grant's illicit use of the maternal in relation to God was followed by Marianne Katoppo, an Indonesian theologian, who appealed for a fresh regard for inclusive language in "Our language about God and before God."<sup>81</sup>

According to Bishop Kalilombe, the incident at Oaxtepec, Mexico, in 1986 was a significant move in the establishment of the Circle. He also recollects that the African Women Theologians in EATWOT were also encouraged by women especially those from Latin America who were also developing their own women theologies and were already advanced at that stage. The Latin American women called their theology *Mujerista* theology.<sup>82</sup> *Mujerista* are women who are concerned about the justice for Latin American Women and participate in the Liberation struggle for these women.

Latin American women come from diverse cultures, races and languages.<sup>83</sup> Besides Latin American women, Asian women were also getting organized in doing their own women theologies. It was therefore only African women who were not yet organized in any way.<sup>84</sup> Apart from *Mujerista* Theology, the black minority in America also had their own theology. Black Feminist Theology is commonly called *Womanist* Theology. The women that adhere to this theology consider themselves to be responsible, outrageous, audacious and courageous to fight for the liberation of Black women's culture and history.<sup>85</sup>

African Women Theologians became an "irruption within an irruption" because they felt, while their male African counterparts were doing well as regards challenging the

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*.

<sup>81</sup> See Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking*, p. 50.

<sup>82</sup> See Keti Geneva Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in Letty Russel (ed), "Feminist Interpretations of the Bible," in Letty M. Russel, *Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*, London/New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985. *Mujerista* is derived from the Spanish word *mujer* – woman.

<sup>83</sup> See Susan Frank Parsons (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, Cambridge University Press. 2002, p. 27.

<sup>84</sup> Interview Bishop Kalilombe, Postgraduate Colloquium, 2003, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Malawi.

<sup>85</sup> See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. Womanist Prose*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983, pp. xi-xii.

First World theologies, they had not contended with the deeper issue, that of women.<sup>86</sup> In their struggle for independence, social and economic justice, and against racial discrimination, women felt that at the base of all these injustices the female gender was at stake. Since men were failing to address this, women felt they needed their own forum where they could do theology. However, tracing the origins of the Circle from EATWOT would be very simplistic. We should also be aware that EATWOT had already made a provision for women to meet separately before the general EATWOT conference takes place.

The EATWOT Women's Commission was established at Oaxtepec at the same time when the women voiced their concern. However, the Circle was timely because the women's commission was restrictive due to the fact that it followed a quota system. In this setup not all women concerned with women's issues could join EATWOT.

## **2.8 Conclusion: A Reflection**

The genesis of the Circle is often linked to three viewpoints. The first one is that it was started by EATWOT and WCC. The second theory is that it was born through the activities of the general movement of Women's Liberation, which began in Europe in the 1960s. The last theory which is defended in this thesis is that it was born by an African woman though in an Ecumenical environment.

The historical development shown in this chapter clearly answers these claims. In fact, discussions on these arguments go further and show that there was much collaboration as women consolidated themselves through Ecumenical movements (in this case EATWOT and WCC). However, this collaboration does not deny the fact that Mercy Amba Oduyoye is the mother of the Circle. The arguments for this have been already spelt out in the above discussions. In summary, she is the one who conceived the idea and even the parameters within which African Women Theologies should be done. It was also her plan to involve others, as such she engaged an International Planning Committee. And further it cannot be denied that the earlier contacts were achieved mainly through Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Further, while there was the possibility of copying theologies of other Third World countries, Mercy created her own slant of theologizing where Religion and Culture would be the only parameters. This theme was conceived by her during the Harvard days and was put forward at the International Planning Meeting.

Circle theologies have a different agenda and dialogues within a context that is African. The Circle is further concerned about issues of Religion and Culture (a two winged theology) in Africa. This is different from some feminist concerns of Europe and

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<sup>86</sup> Interview Bishop Kalilombe, Postgraduate Colloquium, 2003, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Malawi.

other Third World countries as already discussed. Secondly, the Circle is concerned about researching and writing from a faith point of view. Theologians in the Circle have a religion. Christians and Muslims believe in God. Traditionalists also believe in God in other ways. These are not dialogues with atheism as is the case with some feminist writing in Europe.

Issues that are of paramount importance, such as those articulated at EATWOT about the gender of God, are not of central concern in Circle scholarship. The major task was to address inequalities that lay in the suppression of the African specificity in constructing women's theologies.

At funerals or weddings, where African theologies are also expressed, the space is open to African people from all religious backgrounds. One does not go to the funeral because the deceased belonged to his/her particular religion. Even if she/he did that, there will be many people at the funeral that do not belong to that particular religion.

The same goes with ecumenism at initiation ceremonies. Those giving instructions and the initiates in a traditional initiation come from a variety of religions.

However, from the story of the Circle, it is clear that the Circle developed within an ecumenical setting: The role of EATWOT was strong. Mercy Amba Oduyoye is married to Modupe who has a vast interaction with Ecumenical bodies such as the All Africa Council of Churches and World Student Federation that for years have associated with the World Council of Churches. Her parents belong to a church that is a member of WCC, and it is within this background that Mercy Amba Oduyoye has been nurtured.

Immediate to the formation of the Circle is her own involvement in the ecumenical activities for a long time. This is mainly through the World Christian Students Federation, the World Council of Churches and EATWOT.

Whatever position one has on the birth of the Circle, it is clear that the Circle is growing and maturing. In the following chapter I document and reflect on the growth of the Circle from 1989 to 2007.



### Chapter 3: The Growth of the Circle: 1989-2007

Even though this chapter documents and assesses the growth of the Circle from 1989 to 2007, not all details on the growth of the Circle reach the period of 2007. This is because the geographical sample for this thesis is widespread and it has not been always possible to catch up with all the information on the status of Circle chapters in various countries. As such this chapter tries to reflect on such growth in relation to the available materials on the subject from 1989 up to 2007.

The humble beginnings of the Circle that culminated in the 1989 Convocation have led to an impressive movement in Africa. The Circle has attained growth in geographical coverage, leadership as well as administrative development. After the first Convocation in 1989, Circle women from Africa and beyond gathered at the second Convocation in 1996.<sup>1</sup> This second Convocation was followed by a third Convocation in 2002.<sup>2</sup> The fourth Convocation was held in 2007. Each Convocation elected a new continental leader: Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, Isabel Apawo Phiri and Fulata Lusungu Moyo in that order from the first to the fourth. This chapter provides an interpretative historical and theological account of the developments that occurred during the first three convocations from 1989 to 2007. Even though the fourth convocation took place in 2007, it is the same year when Isabel Apawo Phiri concluded her term as continental leader. Since the thesis ends with the reign of Isabel Apawo Phiri, the year 2007 is the cut off point for this thesis.

#### 3.1 Developments in Leadership

The move of the Circle to choose a woman other than the founder of the Circle marks a real growth towards the independence of the network. It marked an assertion that the Circle is a movement that is for all Circle women and that its life was beyond the boundaries of the life span and ethnicity of a founder. Further, it is a testimony of selfless life as

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women of Faith Speak out in an HIV/AIDS Era" in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverly Haddad and Madipoane Masenya (ngw'ana Mphahlele) (eds), *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2003, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> The 2002 Circle Convocation took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where 140 Circle members drawn from 25 countries met. The conference was opened on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2002, in the Africa Hall of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). The President of Ethiopia and chairman of the HIV/AIDS council, His Excellency Girma Wolde Giorgis officially opened the meeting. Apart from the Circle participants, there were influential church leaders in attendance at the opening ceremony. Among these were: His Holiness Abba Paulos, Patriarch of Ethiopia, Archbishop of Axum and Echeque of the See of St Tekle Haimanot, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewhdo Church, Rev Itessa Gobena, President of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesu, and Pastor Seyeum, the General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Fellowship.

well as a lack of selfishness by the founder that was useful in the advancement of the network.

It is clear that Mama Mercy, mother of the Circle, made unique contributions to the Circle even way before she became the continental leader. Her achievements and contributions to the Circle have been described in the previous chapter. After attaining her role as a continental leader and in the years that followed, she continued to make admirable contributions as will be observed in this dissertation.

At the second Continental Circle Conference held in Nairobi in 1996, Mercy Amba Oduyoye was replaced by Musimbi Kanyoro, a Kenyan. In the year 2002, Musimbi Kanyoro was replaced by a Malawian, Isabel Apawo Phiri. At these three convocations, the Circle really rotated the leadership. However, at the fourth convocation in 2007, the unexpected happened when another Malawian was elected to be the continental leader of the Circle. There was much hope that the leadership of the Circle would leave the hands of Anglophone and go to either Francophone or Lusophone Africa. Again, even though Anglophone leadership continued, it was indeed unexpected that this leadership role went to Malawi for the second time. One of the reasons is that the Circle still wanted to capitalize on the support of the World Council of Churches and since Fulata Lusungu Moyo was at that time (and still is) coordinator for the Women's Desk at WCC, she was the right person to provide the needed link to WCC.

### *3.1.1 The Circle under Musimbi Kanyoro*

Her family background is that of a typical African family in her times. She comes from a family of seven girls and three boys.<sup>3</sup> Her father died in July 1994 and was buried in Bwase, his village. Even though Musimbi Kanyoro hailed from a large family and was a girl, her opportunities for education were not negatively affected. She completed her early education and studied at the University of Nairobi. The University of Nairobi was a college of the University of East Africa before it became a separate institution. At this college she completed her undergraduate studies in 1976. After this she was privileged to go to the USA for postgraduate studies, from where she returned in 1982. This road to education had prepared her for a senior post. Indeed, it is not surprising that in 1988 she took up an international and global position in Geneva, Switzerland. At the time she was being elected as Continental Coordinator of the Circle, she was still based in Geneva.

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<sup>3</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women of Faith Speak out in an HIV/AIDS Era," pp. vii – viii.

### *3.1.2 Leadership Change (1996) and the Impact on the Circle*

From the conception period in the early 1980s to 1995, leadership of the Circle had been in the hands of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. A change in leadership at the 1996 Convocation was bound to have some effects. One effect was that Musimbi Kanyoro's leadership was received with mixed reactions in some quarters. This, however, was from other quarters rather than from Mercy Amba Oduyoye who herself had foreseen this transition and even planned for it.

It is clear from earlier discussions that Mercy Amba Oduyoye saw Musimbi Kanyoro as a strong candidate to take over her role. She had met Musimbi in Geneva and knew that she would be an able leader of the Circle given the chance. Musimbi Kanyoro had several plusses to her being a leader. She came from another part of the continent, different from Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Mercy coming from West Africa and Musimbi Kanyoro from East Africa. It was natural for other women to receive such leadership from another part of the continent.

Secondly, Musimbi Kanyoro came from Kenya, where prominence of Circle women in ecumenical organizations at international level was second only to that of women in West Africa. There was Musimbi with YWCA and Nyambura Njoroge with the World Council of Churches at that time.

For the progress of the Circle, a leader with an ecumenical and international environment was needed to link the Circle to sources of funding. As such, the fact that Musimbi Kanyoro was working for YWCA, an ecumenical body, was an advantage. It was also helpful to be able to organize Circle activities taking advantage of the Ecumenical environment and support base just as Mercy Amba Oduyoye had done.

Such advantages were in addition to the fact that Musimbi Kanyoro had moved with Mercy since the International Planning Meeting to this stage. On the grassroots level, however, some Circle women expected that Mercy would continue to coordinate the Circle. This is shown in that, even though Mercy was in tune with Musimbi Kanyoro's succession to leadership at the 1996 conference, the election of the coordinator was done in her absence.

Others envisaged that Nyambura Njoroge would lead because she was at that time taking an appointment with the WCC to work in the PTE (Programme for Theological Education) Department which earlier in the life of the Circle had supported Circle work. Some even thought that the Circle had been started by this office. To them it was automatic that the coordinator of that office should coordinate the Circle as well.

Further, there are two possible reasons that made Circle women vote in the absence of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Firstly, they might have thought that Mercy Amba Oduyoye would block a move to replace her. Secondly, they might have thought that she might

influence others to vote for Musimbi Kanyoro whom she had groomed for leadership. This was probably the group that wanted Nyambura Njoroge to be the Coordinator. In fact, the dissensions were unnecessary as all the three candidates would have made able leaders of the Circle at that time. And the three continued to work together in the promotion of the Circle regardless of who was picked as a leader. It must be recognized that each of the three had advantages in promoting the cause of the Circle. Nyambura Njoroge from her vantage point of working with the WCC was key in sourcing funding for women to advance in their theological education. Mercy Amba Oduyoye knew avenues of funding that might be necessary to keep the Circle running. Musimbi Kanyoro's advantages have already been articulated.

In the absence of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who was temporarily out of the meeting room, without astonishing her, it was Musimbi Kanyoro who was chosen. Some of the reasons for choosing Musimbi Kanyoro are the following: She was a candidate of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who was a close friend to Mary Getui who was chair of the local organizing committee at that time. While Nyambura Njoroge would have likely scooped more votes from the grassroots because of her linkage to Circle women at Limuru, the presence of Limuru women in the organizing committee was not prominent. The experiences of 1996 are still remembered by those that were close to the issue, but for the majority of the Circle members it is not an issue any more.

### *3.1.3 The Role of Mercy Amba Oduyoye in the Appointment of Musimbi Kanyoro*

Leadership development in the Circle often occurs in the context of modelling. This kind of modelling is mainly by assigning roles to women which would bring them into noticeable visibility among fellow Circle women. Even before Musimbi Kanyoro was elected as the leader, it was very much envisaged by some members of the Circle that she would become the leader. Musimbi had been the right hand woman of Mercy Amba Oduyoye and she knew things about the Circle and Mercy that others did not know.<sup>4</sup> Musimbi's presence at the IPC also gave her some advantage over other women that were active in the Circle. These factors in Musimbi's life show that she had been well modelled by Mercy to take up leadership. Thus the selection of Musimbi Kanyoro at the 1996 Convocation was not surprising to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, though it was to some. Similarly those that were key at the 1996 Continental Conference also ended up in positions of one kind or another.

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<sup>4</sup> A remark by Musimbi Kanyoro, Biographies of Women of Faith Conference, Johannesburg, 2001.

### 3.1.4 Leadership Changes in 2002

At the 2002 Convocation Isabel Apawo Phiri was elected as continental coordinator for the Circle for the period of 2002 to 2007. She was then director of the School of Theology at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg.<sup>5</sup> Since 1989, Isabel Apawo Phiri had exhibited leadership abilities to such an extent that it was not surprising that she became Circle coordinator. She had successfully facilitated the establishment of Circle chapters not only in her home country Malawi but also in the Southern Africa region. Namibia and Durban Circles are examples of chapters that she had organized. Isabel also became director for the Centre for Constructive Theology in 1997. Her leadership position broke new ground in South African universities where it was not customary at that time to have a woman of colour serve in such a position.<sup>6</sup> Her experience with the Centre for Constructive Theology gave her contact with grass roots people. She was part of the academic community as well as member of the community where being infected and affected by HIV/AIDS was most pronounced. This experience has been an invaluable resource to construct theologies of transforming gender inequalities in the HIV/AIDS era.

### 3.1.5 Issues of Leadership at the 2002 Conference

Isabel Apawo Phiri became the first continental coordinator who did not reside in Geneva at the time of her appointment. Mercy Amba Oduyoye had been coordinator when she was working in the WCC office in Geneva. Musimbi Kanyoro was also working in the YWCA office in Geneva at the time of her appointment.

The advantages of Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro were that they were able to use their workplace to advance the cause of the Circle. This was possible because the Circle was not seen as a different thing in the context of their work. It could also be done in the context of them doing their duties as employees of their ecumenical bodies. Most importantly, they enjoyed their links with persons of power in the Ecumenical world as is shown by Musimbi Kanyoro. From the department of PTE, John Pobee and Ofelia Ortega offered Mercy much support in her Circle work.<sup>7</sup> "The Africa Desk of the WCC was another partner recruited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye. The Circle's accounts were managed by the staff of the Africa Desk. The two executives, Lal Swai and Richard Murigande, initially gave their support and thereby began an important tradition ...

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<sup>5</sup> Provisional Addis Ababa Circle Report, p. 3, accessed 6.3.2006.

<sup>6</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Transformation in South African Universities: The Case of Female Academics in Leadership Positions in Theological Institutions," in Roswith Gerloff (ed), *Mission is Crossing Frontiers*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003, p. 414.

<sup>7</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2006, p. 29.

Another very prominent supporter of the Circle was the WCC Sub-unit on Women. Mercy had established this link way back in the 1980s, when the Circle was just a concept."<sup>8</sup> Other people that assisted the Circle from Geneva were: Annah Karin Hammer,<sup>9</sup> Aruna Gnanadason,<sup>10</sup> Evelyn Appia<sup>11</sup> and Janet Thomson who worked with the Africa Desk, and also assisted Mercy Amba Oduyoye with Circle work.<sup>12</sup> Others that worked with Mercy were: Annelies Hoppe, Brigitte Constant, Diana Chabloz, Doris Appel and William Temu.<sup>13</sup>

The other advantage of working in Geneva was that the finances of the Circle were kept in Geneva using WCC office resources. The fact that Isabel Apawo Phiri became coordinator of the Circle and yet was not in Geneva, posed questions regarding where the funds would be kept and also how far earlier connections would be available to her. There were different views concerning how Circle funds should be kept. Some members had the opinion that Geneva should keep the funds.

On the other hand, others found no problem for Isabel to keep the funds in South Africa, also using the structures available to her through her employment. Indeed, the administration of funds moved to South Africa where Isabel was employed as lecturer in the University of KwaZulu Natal in Pietermaritzburg. Earlier on, the Circle had been coordinated from Ghana by Joyce Boham. Isabel Apawo Phiri engaged Lilian Siwila and Bridget Masaiti as her Circle office assistants to help with Circle work.<sup>14</sup> The recruitment of an office administrator had been mandated at the 2002 Continental Conference. Isabel Apawo Phiri was mandated to "find either full time volunteers to support her or several part-time volunteers and possibly outsource or employ someone for the administrative and secretarial tasks of the Circle."<sup>15</sup> This was a necessary step as the feeling that the Circle had grown too large to be effectively managed by a volunteer continental coordinator was ever growing. This feeling was visible as early as in Musimbi Kanyoro's time. She felt that membership of the Circle "had grown beyond the abilities of a volunteer coordinator."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. She started the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. She is a member of EATWOT, and member of the Association of Asian Women Theologians. See Aruna Gnanadason, *No Longer Silent: The Church and Violence against Women*, Geneva: WCC, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. She worked with the Ecumenical Decade for Women in Geneva.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Provisional Addis Ababa Circle Report, p. 12, accessed 6.3.2006.

<sup>16</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2006, p. 36.

The election of Isabel Apawo Phiri legitimized further the principle of rotational leadership practiced by the Circle. In fact it could be predicted that the next continental coordinator of the Circle would come from either Francophone or Lusophone Africa, but more likely so from the Francophone region which had been more involved in continental and other Circle meetings than the Lusophone one. But when Isabel Phiri's term of office came to an end, the expected did not happen, as Fulata Moyo from Malawi, who was working as the Women's Coordinator of the WCC in Geneva, was elected instead.

### *3.1.6 Challenges to the Change of Continental Leaders*

Whereas it is envisaged that the Circle is committed to a rotational leadership as seen from this history, the question that needs to be addressed is whether it was the right time to have a change in continental leadership or not. This implies the question whether or not Mercy Amba Oduyoye had been given enough time to realize her vision concerning the Circle. The answer to this is already unfolding, as the momentum of the Circle in Ghana supersedes other local circles. Is it that Mercy Amba Oduyoye had more concern where the Circle should be in the future or not?

Under Mercy Amba Oduyoye two things seem to have been central to the Circle: the establishment of local chapters and of zonal institutes,<sup>17</sup> concentrating not only on classroom theology, but also on grassroots theology. The second disadvantage of change in leadership was in the area of funding. Is it possible that Mercy Amba Oduyoye had connections to funding that were prematurely discontinued with the change in leadership? It is very common that financial partners sometimes give funding because of the person who leads the institution. Did this change of leadership cause a mishap in funds that would have rendered the Circle more effective?

This also can be assessed fully when relating some of the experiences of the Circle in later years. The 2005 regional conference in Johannesburg nearly got cancelled due to difficulties in raising funds for the air tickets of the delegates. Even in 2006, some of the publication work was slowed down because of lack of funds. Has this anything to do with abrupt change of leadership without much thought?

Already the chances of holding more Circle conferences are growing dim. Prominent Circle members who are influential in attracting funding are already questioning the value of whether it is necessary to bring Circle members to a conference/meeting to present papers to each other as was the case before. This questioning culminated in the proposal that for future conferences individual women should no longer present papers

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<sup>17</sup> Report Circle Study Commissions, Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, Trinity Theological College, Legon, Ghana, 20-25.3.1998.

but that monographs produced at the local chapter level should be displayed.<sup>18</sup> With the realities of Circle history where only a few local chapters are well established and have enough mentors, few local Circles brought a monograph to the 2007 Continental conference. However, this decision is important in measuring the kind of progress in local Circle developments in different regions.

In the establishment of local chapters, Mercy Amba Oduyoye shows a model of what she envisaged local chapters to be. She established an Institute of Religion and Culture in the premises of Trinity Theological College where women in Ghana as well as in Nigeria (at the zonal level) come to read papers. This seems not to have any parallel in local chapters outside Ghana. Did Mercy Amba Oduyoye envisage such a development to take place in other Zonal areas or regions?<sup>19</sup>

### *3.1.7 Leadership through Collaboration*

The Circle has led through collaboration since its inception. It is a strategy that was first employed by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in developing the Circle and continues to be emulated by the consecutive Continental Circle leaders.

Coupled with the art of collaboration in leading the Circle was also the art of delegation. Mercy Amba Oduyoye employed this art again at the time the second Convocation was being organized. She worked with a coordinating committee. The coordinating committee included those who became "linguist coordinators" for the different regions of the Circle. Sr Bernadette Mbuy-Beya was not a leader here for the first time as she had been a member of IPC. She later was chosen to coordinate the Francophone Zone; Dr Teresa Hinga became linguist coordinator for the Anglophone one. Some women in the committee became coordinators of the different Zones: Rev Phina Olga Kgosana became Zonal Leader for the Francophone region; Eva Benedict Pedro Gomez became Zonal leader for the Lusophone one; Rev Grace N. Ndyabahika became Zonal leader for Eastern Africa. Rev Dr Nyambura Njoroge became coordinator for one of the study commissions that will be reflected upon later in the chapter. This is the Commission on Theological Education and Ministerial Formation. Mercy Amba Oduyoye was very instrumental in organizing this conference. She was given the role of General Coordinator, a position which suggests that Circle women wanted her to continue to oversee the Circle even after passing on leadership to Musimbi Kanyoro.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Oral Presentation, Malawi Circle, 13.7.2006.

<sup>19</sup> The story of the establishment of the Institute of Religion and Culture is documented elsewhere in the dissertation.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Musimbi Kanyoro to Friends, Circle, c/o World YWCA, 16, Ancienne Route Grand Saconnex, Geneva, Switzerland, 12.4.2001.



Even though the Circle had not yet appointed Joyce Boham, a Ghanaian, as the administrator of the Circle, Mercy Amba Oduyoye co-opted her to coordinate communication that took place in the organization of the 1996 Convocation together with other Circle women. She did this through Planning Committee meetings specifically organized for the conference.

In addition a meeting of Circle women in the Diaspora took place in Geneva to plan for the same 1996 Convocation. The planning group consisted of Musimbi Kanyoro, Nyambura Njoroge, Rose-Zoë Obianga, and Sr Justine Kahungu, from Lubumbashi, Mary Getui and Mercy Amba Oduyoye. The meetings were also graced with the presence of one man, John Pobee, who was at that time still with the WCC.<sup>21</sup>

The art of collaboration and delegation continued even during the period of Isabel Apawo Phiri. Isabel worked with the Circle linguistic coordinators as follows: H el ene Yinda, Research coordinator for the Francophone Region; at this time she was working with YWCA and was based in Geneva. Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde was the research coordinator for the Anglophone Region, who was at this time teaching at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The coordinator for Lusophone Africa was Felicidade Cherinda, who was working with Igreja Presbiteriana de Mo ambique in Maputo.<sup>22</sup> These leaders were elected to assist Isabel Apawo Phiri in the work of the Circle. In addition, she was much assisted by Sarojini Nadar, Fulata Moyo and Lilian Siwila who were at the University of KwaZulu Natal where Isabel Apawo Phiri was also professor at this time.

The meeting of Circle women in the Diaspora took place in 1995. The consultation was for 15 women to help them prepare for their contributions to the 1996 Conference. It is another example of a collaborative effort that the Circle enjoyed through the efforts of WCC. The collaboration was very natural because the WCC through the Ecumenical Theological Education Desk was also interested in theological training for African women. The Circle was in turn strengthened in that theological training was important for enabling the women to write theological papers. This was a consultation conference for African women theologians who were studying or teaching theology outside Africa.

For Mercy Amba Oduyoye the 1996 Continental Conference was to be the conclusion of the gestation period of 7 years and the beginning of what she prayed would become a biennial event.<sup>23</sup> The spirit of cooperation by the Circle and Mercy in particular was seen in how she was able to agree on a proposed programme by PROCMURA<sup>24</sup> to hold a joint

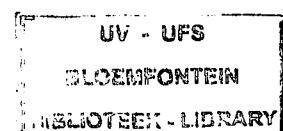
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<sup>21</sup> Letter from Mercy Amba Oduyoye to Rev Janice Nessiboo, Women's Coordinator, PROCMURA, 14.7.1994.

<sup>22</sup> See Provisional Addis Ababa Circle Report, p. 41, accessed 6.03 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Programme for Christian – Muslim Relations in Africa.



workshop in Nairobi, Kenya. Using women's wisdom, Mercy Amba Oduyoye consulted with Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge about the programme. They finally agreed that the joint meeting should take place preceding the Continental meeting.<sup>25</sup>

This joint project of Christian/Muslim relations in Africa attracted ten participants, five Muslim women and five Circle women. This was the time when Mercy Amba Oduyoye was the Deputy General Secretary of WCC. She was able to take advantage of her position to facilitate such meetings as such projects did not contravene what her office stood for.

This collaborative leadership is also seen at the selection of candidates to the Continental Conferences. At the 2002 Convocation for example the selection of participants to attend this Pan African conference was a joint effort. Those who wanted to attend were to submit researched papers within the proposed themes. These papers were read by different Circle women that are competent in different fields of feminist theologies.

### *3.1.8 Leadership through Advocacy*

In preparation for the Continental Conference of 1996, there was need to do more advocacy work. To sum up the activities that were done in the advocacy programme a quote will suffice:

In preparation for the 1996 Institute, a survey will be undertaken to ascertain the progress made by theological institutions in Africa in the recruitment and admission of women to the faculty and the student body. We need to know the curriculum changes that have taken place to indicate inclusion of women in religion and culture. The visit is also aimed at strengthening the networks especially in Sierra Leone, Gambia, Benin, Togo, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Kenya where the 1996 Institute will be held.<sup>26</sup>

Such an exercise was made possible through personal visitation but also through sending invitations to various institutions. Some of these letters came from John Pobee's office, but others came from Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Nyambura Njoroge.

The same attribute of leadership through advocacy is what shaped the changes in the dates and themes at the 2002 Convocation. As it can be remembered from this history, continental conferences were to be held after every seven years. In this case, after the 1989 Convocation, it was high time for the 1996 continental conference. After 1996, another continental conference was to take place in 2003. This would be the time when the seven-year period after the 1996 conference would have elapsed.<sup>27</sup> The next Continental Convocation after the 1996 one, on the contrary, was held in 2002 from 4th

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<sup>25</sup> Letter from Mercy Amba Oduyoye to Rev Janice Nessiboo, Women's Coordinator, PROCMURA, 14.7.1994.

<sup>26</sup> Report on the 1996 Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, no date, no author, accessed 14.9.2005.

<sup>27</sup> Letter, Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, Ghana to Teresa Hinga, 20.12. 2001.

to 9th August. The announcement was in December 2001 and this meant that there were only 8 months to prepare for the conference.<sup>28</sup>

It is not just the shift in the date that was peculiar to this meeting. The venue and focus of the meeting also changed. Firstly, the normal focus for the meeting had been to evaluate the effectiveness of the study commissions instituted in the earlier period. However, this was only attended to briefly, "one day prior to the conference." The reason for this was to allow as much time as possible for deliberations on HIV/AIDS.<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, the venue for this conference was originally to be Yaoundé, Cameroon but was shifted to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia.

### 3.2 Growth in Geographical Coverage

The analysis of the growth of the Circle in Africa is restricted to the Anglophone region for the same reason that I was not able to use sources related to the Francophone and Lusophone Circles because of the language barrier. Further, some Anglophone countries are covered more in depth than others. This is so for many reasons. Firstly, some countries have more active Circle chapters than others, and those which are more active have more easily found a place in this thesis. Secondly, some countries have more Circle theologians and therefore these are more active than others in matters of the Circle. However, this story has also given space to countries where growth of the Circle is limited.

It is clear that penetration of the Circle into other African countries took place around special Circle personalities. It can not be denied that the achievements between 1989 and 1996 in the development by the Circle were shaped by "the sustainable effort to discover and cultivate African women doing theology" by Mercy Amba Oduyoye but also through collaborative efforts of some members of the International Planning Committee (IPC) and those that were convened at the Convocation. Some of the members at the IPC became less active in the Circle after the Convocation and delayed the spread of the Circle to countries of their origin. One of such members is Betty Ekeya who is currently in the USA. She was a former Catholic nun by the time she attended the Convocation.<sup>30</sup> The same goes with those that came to the Convocation. Not all women became actively involved in the Circle after the Convocation. This was against the wish of the Convocation as stated below.

So for the moment the most important task is to get a couple of people who will make things happen in the countries represented here. There is no need to found a new

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Provisional Addis Ababa Circle Report, p. 7, accessed 6.3.2006.

<sup>30</sup> Interview Sr NN, 15.7.2005.

association at home, but it is important to get a women's caucus of whatever existing Theological Association you belong to. Those who do not belong to any association but would like to do their theology in community need to seek out our sisters and work together as a Circle of Concerned Women Theologians. Those who find themselves working or studying abroad should seek out and assist one another as well as make approaches to women of African descent who are doing theology.<sup>31</sup>

The fact that some women did not go back home to make things happen is seen in the history of the local chapters in different countries by those represented at the Convocation. However, even though not all women that attended the Convocation started a Circle Chapter in their countries of influence, Mercy with many other sisters, established local circles in different countries of Africa that did so.<sup>32</sup> This was possible because the Circle is an African network and does not restrict the organization of the Circle chapters within a country to members of the Circle in that country alone. There is room that Circle women from other countries open chapters in countries that are not their own.<sup>33</sup>

The women were challenged to establish local (country) chapters as well as to hold Zonal meetings (meetings that call together delegates from more than one country) in different areas as part of inculcating transformation of gender inequalities. These local circles and Zonal meetings became coals of fire where pots of transforming gender inequalities were placed. These pots boiled at different intensities depending on the place, but most especially on the personalities that managed the pots. The climax of the Zonal meetings is the Institute for Religion and Culture established by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Accra, Ghana.

The participants at the 1989 Convocation became leaders that started local chapters in different African countries. These were often assisted by Circle women who were involved in the International Planning Meeting under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye.

It is interesting that the representation at the Convocation also tallies with the speed at which local chapters were established in different countries. The countries that were more represented started chapters earlier. Indeed, the first countries to set up local chapters after the 1989 Convocation were Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and Zaire.<sup>34</sup> These had been established by the year 1990.<sup>35</sup> The first reason for this is that the particular

<sup>31</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Talitha Qumi. Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> This agrees well with the fact that Isabel Apawo Phiri opens Circle chapters in South Africa though she comes from Malawi. More details in the later chapters.

<sup>34</sup> Document, 1996 Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture History, accessed 14.9.2005.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

countries had a reasonable number of women that could start the ball rolling in terms of becoming local chapters. While the reasons why Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria got organized faster into chapters can easily be linked to these countries' progress in education for example, it is also true that these countries were privileged in having one of their country women represented at the International Planning Committee (IPC) that became a back up to the women to start local chapters in these countries. Of course, other factors also played a part. For example, in the case of South Africa, there were already emerging Black theologies that were present because of apartheid. This had already generated a fertile environment within which to theologize concerning African women in Culture and Religion. Women's theologies and Black theologies all belong to Liberation theologies. South Africa, just as Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria, was also advantaged with progress in accessibility of education to women. This is how as early as the 1980s, Brigalia Bam became the General Secretary of the Council of Churches in South Africa. In addition, South Africa had an advantage equal to Ghana and Nigeria because Brigalia Bam who shared the vision of the Circle with Mercy Amba Oduyoye came from South Africa. Brigalia Bam was also a member of the International Planning Committee and understandably inspired the early genesis of the Circle in her country of origin. As regards Zaire, Sr Mbuy-Beya, also a member of the IPC, came from Zaire and inspired the genesis of the Circle. In the other countries: for Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya, this IPC connection is obvious and already reflected on earlier. From this analysis, it is clear that the genesis of local or country chapters happened around personalities. These were greatly inspired by those that belonged to the IPC. They had received the vision and could easily relay it into their own countries of origin. Formation of chapters in countries that did not have a representation at IPC was usually done by those that caught the vision from those that were at IPC. Some caught the vision at the first Convocation. However, it is clear that in those countries where there was no woman that was part of the IPC, the genesis of the country's chapters was delayed.

### *3.2.1 The Birth of the Circle Chapter in Ghana*

The first local chapter in Ghana was at Accra. The first Coordinator of this Chapter was Rachel Tetteh. The participants at this local chapter were mainly secondary school teachers and women from the churches within Ghana who were mainly invited by Rachel Tetteh. The Circle met regularly at the Methodist headquarters in Accra.

Some of the first women that belonged to this chapter were Rabiātu Ammah and Elizabeth Amoah. When Rachel Tetteh passed away, the Accra chapter stopped func-

tioning as a chapter on its own. The members did not meet as regularly as before.<sup>36</sup> However, it is the establishment of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture that has made a profound contribution to the development of the Circle in Ghana and Nigeria.

### *3.2.1.1 The History of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture*

Mercy Amba Oduyoye founded the Institute in 1999 at Trinity College Campus in Legon, Ghana with the intention of promoting research on women in religion and culture, and of developing a theology in which women and men are equal.

The time she was convener of the Study Commission on Religion and Culture, she committed her life to this. The starting point was when she convened a meeting, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, with her colleagues in the study commission. After this meeting she began the Institute in Ghana primarily for Ghanaian women.<sup>37</sup> Though the Institute started in 1998, it was officially only inaugurated on the 13th of October 1999 at Trinity College.<sup>38</sup> The college had been requested to provide 8 rooms for the conference in the women's hall.<sup>39</sup> This was in the year 1998. She was given room number 25. By 1999, the number of women participating in the programme had increased and she had to ask the college for an additional room. The college again considered her request and granted her an additional room, room number 21. The work continued to grow, and in 2002, Mercy again approached the College Board to provide another room for the women. The college now was alerted to the need for more space for the Institute. Mercy Amba Oduyoye decided that a centre for the women should be built on a separate location within Trinity campus to cater for the growing numbers of women participating in the Institute. The Board of Trinity College agreed to this proposal and the building began in 2003. The Board asked Mercy Amba Oduyoye about the name of the building and she decided that the building be called Talitha Qumi Centre. This name was chosen so as to keep its relationship to the vision of the Circle.<sup>40</sup>

The name had its origin from a Bible study on the story of the centurion's daughter. This story is about Jairus' daughter who was brought back to life by Jesus. This Bible study was done at the 1989 Convocation and since then the title Talitha Qumi has

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<sup>36</sup> Ghana chapter is about the activities of the Institute of Religion and Culture at the Trinity Theological Seminary. The Theological Seminary accommodated them till later, when the Institute felt there was need to construct a facility to house the Institute. Comment, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Malaka-le Theologies*, 12.7.2005.

<sup>37</sup> Interview Mercy Amba Oduyoye, The Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, Accra, 14.9.2005.

<sup>38</sup> Circular Letter, Mercy Amba Oduyoye to Persons Invited to the 2003 Institute of Women in Religion and Culture Meeting, 8.9.2003.

<sup>39</sup> Letter by Mercy Amba Oduyoye to Rev Dr Dan Antwi, Principal, Trinity College, 12.8.1999.

<sup>40</sup> Oral Presentation, Rev Afo Blay, Pan African Conference, 12.9.2005.

appeared in different places, including titles of Circle books. The funding for the building has largely come from the Presbyterian Church of USA and individual donors.<sup>41</sup>

The first Institute was the inauguration in 1999. Apart from women from Ghana, there were about 15 who were invited internationally to the meeting as guests. These were Sallie Cuff, Denise Ackermann, Daisy Nwachukwu, Mercy I. Omoigi, Anneke Geesense-Ravestein, Omega Bula, Gae Han, Christina Landman, Oguntoyinbo-Atere, M.I. Ereme, Grace Akwa, Mbenda Ngo, H el ene Yinda, Justine Kahungu Mbwiti, Hannah Wangeci Kinoti, Sr Annie Wasike Nasimiyu, and Puleng Lenka-Bula.<sup>42</sup> Already at this juncture, the issue of women's health was of primary concern.<sup>43</sup>

The next Pan African Meeting took place in 2001, again at Trinity Theological Seminary.<sup>44</sup> In 2003, another Conference took place from 4-9 October. The venue was Trinity Theological Seminary.<sup>45</sup> The conference had women from three main groups: African Women Theologians, ethicists and other women theologians.<sup>46</sup> There were 44 invited guests, who can further be grouped into three main groups: Africans, Ghana locals, those of African descent and partners. The African group was made up of Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, Helen Labeodan, Dr Musa Dube, Betty Govinden, Mabel Katahweire, Rev Dr Teresa Okure, Dr Christina Landman, Dr Mary Gouty, Dr Musimbi Kanyoro, Prof Isabel Phiri, Dr Vibila Vuadi, Nyambura Njoroge, Ms H el ene Yinda, Felicidade Cherinda, and Mary Tusuubira. From the Local Ghana Group, there were: Rev Dorothy Akoto, Dr Elizabeth Amoah, Dr Rabiata Ammah, Angelina Wood, and Mrs Rosemary A. Among-Otego, Sr Paulette Ankara, Dina Abbey Mesh, Mabel Katahweire, Lydia Adajahwah, Patience Dickson, Araba Ata Sam, Ama Afo Blay. Women of African descent are Prof Katie Cannon, Detaili Kpodza, Eleanor Scarlet, Hazel A. Camayne, Kathryn Addo, and Elsa Tamez. Women who came as partners were: June Rogers, Anne King, Elizabeth Calvin, Margaret Farley, Letty M. Russel, Shannon Clarkson, Shawn Madigan, Esther Suter and Barbara Schmid.<sup>47</sup>

Whereas the Circle took up the issue of HIV/AIDS after the 2002 Convocation, the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture started efforts on the issue of HIV/AIDS already in 2000. It also held a national conference and collaborated well in the implementation of the Circle Pan African Conference that took place in Addis Ababa, Ethio-

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Document, International Arrivals, Institute Correspondence, 8.9.2003.

<sup>43</sup> Letter from Mercy Amba Oduyoye to Elizabeth Calvin, 17.9.2005.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the Director, Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, Trinity Theological College, addressed to all participants, 8.9.2003.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Document, Correspondence File, accessed 15.3.2005.

pia.<sup>48</sup> After this 2002 institute, the Institute participated in the Yale Divinity School Initiative on HIV/AIDS in Africa.<sup>49</sup> The Institute held another Pan African Conference in 2003 in Ghana.<sup>50</sup>

From 1999 to 2003, "be it retreat, workshop, seminar, national conference or Pan African conference gathering, has featured the concern of women's health with specific emphasis on HIV/AIDS."<sup>51</sup> In 2003, the theme of the Conference was Theological and Ethical Resources to Face the Challenge of the HIV/AIDS Pandemic.<sup>52</sup> The organizer of this institute was Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the Director of the Institute.<sup>53</sup> Joyce Boham was key in making contacts by email as well as phone calls.<sup>54</sup> Prominent women were: Lt.-Col. Mrs Doris Afoul (League of Mercy Secretary) and Captain (Miss) Agatha Easel (Alum Medical Clinic).<sup>55</sup>

Mercy Amba Oduyoye likes to cooperate. She demonstrated this as mother of the Circle in many ways but also as director of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture. The Institute, for example, has a board. The board has the following members: Rabiatu Ammah, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Lorene Nyaka, Isabel Phiri, Elizabeth Amoah, Dinah Abbey Mensal, Esther Offer-Abusage, Irene Dottie, A.A. Akron, J.A. Add, Kwesi Sam Woode, Lilly Oteng-Yeboah, Fr Paul Beke, Sam Addo and Redd Emmanuel Asante.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.2.1.2 *The Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, a Model for Local Circle Chapters*

The institute traces its origin to the Study Commission on Religion and Culture where Mercy was one of the conveners.<sup>57</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye implemented the vision of how these local institutes would look like by developing an Institute that is locally owned and managed without missing the link to the other Circle women and religious women in

<sup>48</sup> Letter by Mercy Amba Oduyoye to Elizabeth Harding, 17.12.2002.

<sup>49</sup> In 2003/2004 Sr Anne Nasimiyu and Dorothy Ucheaga were the first fellows of this programme (Regional Circle Report 2005, p. 24).

<sup>50</sup> Letter of Invitation to Elizabeth Calvin, 17.12.2002.

<sup>51</sup> Letter of Invitation Mercy Amba Oduyoye, to all Participants, 8.9.2003.

<sup>52</sup> Letter of Invitation, Mrs Hannah Agyeman, National Women's Secretary, Apostolic Church, Ghana, 21.7.2003.

<sup>53</sup> Letter of Acknowledgement from Angela Dwamera Aboagye, Executive Director, The Ark Foundation, Ghana, 18.08.2003.

<sup>54</sup> For example, Acknowledgement Letter, Anne Harding Col Territorial President of Women's Ministry, to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 9.9.2003.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. The military titles refer to Salvation Army officers.

<sup>56</sup> List, Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, accessed 15.9.2003.

<sup>57</sup> Interview Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, 14.9.2005.



general who are involved in either written or practical theology. This pattern of involving women in religion from all walks of life has been followed at all the meetings of the Circle. This proves that although the Circle's main emphasis is research and writing, this is not meant to sideline women who can not do academic research, writing and publishing. At the Convocation itself, there were church women that did not or could not write academic papers. At Zonal meetings, it was common to have such church women participate at meetings.

The advantage in the inclusion of non-academics is that it is a learning process for both sides (the academic and those who are not). At the 2005 institute, for example, there were women from different churches and from the Muslim community, mostly from the women's groups that participated in the institute. Some of them were leaders of the women's groups; others were pastors' wives. The result of this pattern is that theological reflection is also adjusted to the level of the participants. Discussion groups, for example, were conducted in groups according to language familiarity. The varieties of local Ghanaian languages were also taken into account. Those who did not understand any of the Ghanaian languages were put in a group that used English for the discussions. The deliberations, although carried out in different languages, were reported to the group in English because in each group someone in that particular language that knew English was included. Both the lectures and the reports from the group discussions were in English, and there were always summaries in vernacular languages.<sup>58</sup> The approach was that the participants were not obliged to articulate theology through an academic paper; sharing experiences orally was also an acceptable form of doing theology. In one of the invitations to the 2003 Institute the invited persons were asked to come and share their experiences.<sup>59</sup> This, of course, applied only to local Ghanaian participants. On the other hand, international guests, unless advised otherwise, were required to write a paper as a condition for them to attend the conference. Should this practice not be followed by local chapters elsewhere? In Malawi, for example, this way of doing theological reflection together with those that are not academics but practitioners of religion would be energizing and fruitful. Those in the academy would be able to learn from those that are not but are involved in grass roots programmes such as Home Based Care services. At Chancellor College of the University of Malawi an example of such theological collaboration exists between the Department of Theology and Religious Studies and other religious groups involved in the effort to combat HIV/AIDS. The Ghana Circle, through the Institute, creates awareness in women about the Circle through regular programmes of

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<sup>58</sup> Personal Observation, Institute of Women in Religion and Culture Meeting, Ghana 12.-16.9.2005.

<sup>59</sup> Circular Letter, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 2003 Correspondence File, accessed 15.9.2005.

the Institute that take place about three times a year and are called Forward Seminars. These seminars are held in different parts of Ghana. However, these are followed by national conferences alternatively to the Pan African Institutes.<sup>60</sup> If such a strategy was adopted and be emulated by other local chapters, there is a possibility that these local Circle chapters would increase their vitality.

### *3.2.2 Nigeria*

By 1996, the Nigeria Chapter continued to blossom. The women were very much ahead in creating theologies of transformation because of the presence of Sr Rosemary Edet who was also co-founder of the Circle as member of the IPC. By 2002, at the close of this period, not only was there an increase in membership of women in the Nigeria Circle, but also an increase in the number of local chapters as well as in the momentum to publish. This section outlines the development of chapters in Nigeria as well as giving a sample of the theologies articulated by Nigerian women during this period that are a contribution to theologies of transforming gender inequalities. I start with the development of the chapters.

#### *3.2.2.1 The State of Local Chapters in Nigeria*

Nigerian women were the first to construct a local chapter after the Convocation. The Circle at this stage was well organized and even had a designed letter head and a stamp.<sup>61</sup>

Some of the notable women in the Circle in the later years come from Nigeria. Dorcas Akintunde who became the Anglophone coordinator of the Circle at the 2002 Continental Conference belongs to this chapter. So does Margaret Umeagudosu who has led and established other local chapters in Nigeria. Her continued influence is seen in the part she played in the Zonal meetings and Circle meetings.

#### *3.2.2.2 The Ibadan Chapter*

The Ibadan Chapter pays tribute to Mercy Amba Oduyoye who revived their chapter when it was losing momentum. Mercy Amba Oduyoye came in 2000 to encourage the women to be involved in the Circle. This meeting took place at the Institute of Church and Society in Ibadan. About 17 women attended. Among them were Shadetaiwo and Kikeedewor who were very keen about the Circle. Kikeedewor is not a trained theologian. Most of the participants were in some kind of ministerial work. Kikeedewor was a teacher and a business woman then.<sup>62</sup> These earlier women invited friends such as Ruth

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<sup>60</sup> Letter to Prof Amoah from Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Correspondence File, accessed 15.9.2005.

<sup>61</sup> Comment by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Malaka-le Theologies Conference, 14.7.2005

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Oluwakemi Oke and Helen Labedeodan Adekunbi joined the chapter in 2000. Her interest in the Circle is to research and write about women's issues. Helen Labedeodan Adekunbi's work in the Circle has made significant contributions to the discipline of biblical reinterpretation in the Circle.

### *3.2.2.3 The Benin and Abuja Chapters*

The other chapter in Nigeria is the Benin Chapter, which came from Ibadan Chapter. Mercy Idumwonyin leads this chapter. The third chapter in Nigeria is the Abuja Chapter in Abuja Federal Capital Territory which was not well developed at this time. Although different leaders lead these Circles, Margaret Umeagodosu is the founder of Abuja, Nsukka and Benin chapters. Margaret Umeagodosu invited women to the Circle through public lectures at church women's meetings organized by different churches.

### *3.2.3 The Beginnings of the Circle Chapters in East and Central Africa*

In the beginning Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda formed one chapter. Naturally these countries share much in common. Swahili, though most spoken in Tanzania and Kenya, is also a language known to many of the Ugandans. Notwithstanding the notion that there were not many African women theologians in these countries so as to deserve local country chapters, it was really the feeling of oneness that made them form a joint Circle chapter in the beginning. The woman that led the East African Chapter is Sr Annie Nasimiyu from Kenya. She was also a member of EATWOT at that time.<sup>63</sup> The formation of local country chapters in East Africa was also challenged in the beginning because of factors that are unveiled in the discussion of each East African country below.

#### *3.2.3.1 Kenya*

The local chapter in Kenya is one of the successful stories of Circle chapters in Africa. This is partly due to Kenya's progress in theological training. Women study theology in Kenya through a variety of openings. Some go to secular universities such as Kenyatta University, while others go to interdenominational theological colleges such as Daystar where denominational policies regarding theological training for women do not play a role. A few go through Church led theological institutions, which are more restrictive. One of the prominent theological colleges led by the church is St Paul's Theological Seminary in Limuru, Kenya.<sup>64</sup> The rise in theological training for women in Kenya as opposed to other countries in East Africa is due to an early rise in literacy levels in this region, much above literacy levels in other countries. These high literacy levels are

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<sup>63</sup> Interview Sr Annie Nasimiyu, Kempton Park, South Africa, 14.7.2005.

<sup>64</sup> It is now called St Paul's University.

evidenced even in the fact that more Kenya women have enjoyed privileged positions in the Ecumenical bodies abroad than women from other countries in East Africa. Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge for example worked in such Ecumenical bodies. It is also not surprising that a Kenyan, Musimbi Kanyoro, became the Coordinator of the Circle after Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Further, because of pronounced theological training for women in Kenya, Kenya Chapter is more established than other local chapters in East Africa. This can be seen in its leadership in fulfilling goals of the Circle, number of chapters in Kenya but also in the presence of Kenya Women Theologians at wider Circle meetings, whether regional or Continental meetings since the Convocation in 1989.

The Kenya chapter also benefited from the fact that Musimbi Kanyoro was a close friend of the Coordinator of the Circle, Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Nyambura Njoroge who has achieved much in promoting women in ministerial formation comes from Kenya. The Kenya Chapter was not only organized soon after the Convocation but also became more established already by 1996. Indicators that back up the argument that the Kenya local Chapter was more established by 1996, can be seen firstly in its leadership in the East Africa Zonal meetings that will be discussed later, secondly in the number of chapters in Kenya by 1996, but also in the presence of Kenya Women Theologians at the 1996 continental meeting.

It should be recalled that at the 1989 Convocation the number of delegates from Kenya was second to those from the host country Ghana. Apart from other advantages that Kenya had in establishing the Circle as shown earlier, the presence of women belonging to EATWOT also becomes significant. Women that belonged to EATWOT found the agenda of transformation through the Circle not difficult to grasp because they were already accustomed to doing this kind of theology.

Notable Circle women in Kenya during this initial period 1989-1996 that belonged to EATWOT were the likes of Hannah Kinoti.<sup>65</sup> She is remembered for promoting many Kenyan women to study religion at Kenyatta University, especially encouraging women to research, write and publish on women's issues. "Hannah was a very hard working person who dedicated her life to helping students to achieve academic excellence."<sup>66</sup> Indeed, those that followed Hannah Kinoti continue to be women that influence others to have a theology of transformation. One of her students was Constance Ambasa Shishanga who also became lecturer in the same Department of Religions and Culture at Kenyatta

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<sup>65</sup> She wrote the foreword for Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (eds), *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, Nairobi: Acton, 1996.

<sup>66</sup> Constance Ambasa Shisanya, "Professor Hannah Wangeci Kinoti: Your Seeds are Germinating in Kenya," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002, pp. 327-345 [333].

University.<sup>67</sup> Hannah Kinoti was a highly motivated Professor in the Department of Religion and Culture at Kenyatta University. Her other contribution to the Circle is that at the time the Circle was organizing local chapters in Kenya, she was the chairperson of the Department of Religion and Culture at Kenyatta, the home of one Kenya chapter. She held this position for six years from 1990-1996.<sup>68</sup> Hannah Kinoti is one of the few African women theologians that earned their PhDs well before the establishment of the Circle.<sup>69</sup> Hannah Kinoti attained her PhD in 1983.<sup>70</sup>

Theological training is vital in the agenda of research and writing that is the hub of the Circle. Esther Mombo, the master mind behind the Limuru Chapter, which is based at St Paul's Theological Seminary there, also belonged to EATWOT. Mary Getui Nyanchama who played a major role in organizing the 1996 Continental Convocation, and Philomena Njeri, a prolific researcher,<sup>71</sup> are both members of EATWOT Women's Commission. In this commission Philomena Njeri is not only a member but she has chaired it for five years. The advantage of belonging to this group is that they were already familiar with theologies of liberation, which are in line with theologies of the Circle. Sr Annie Nasimiyu, who led the East Africa Chapter, was also a member of the Kenya Chapter and of EATWOT. The advantage of belonging to EATWOT shared by Kenya women would not have been there if women in Kenya had had limited access to further education. Belonging to EATWOT was advantageous in that these women could easily belong to the Circle since they were already abreast with theological research and writing through their involvement with EATWOT. Contact with other winds of transformation through EATWOT was also clear. These women did theology together with women from other Third World countries that were also in the process of transforming gender inequalities. Kenya was more represented in EATWOT probably because one of the EATWOT meetings took place in Nairobi.

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<sup>67</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2002, p. x.

<sup>68</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002, p. 335. – Hannah Kinoti was born on 1 August 1941 in Nyeri District in the Central Province of Kenya. She died on 30<sup>th</sup> April in 2001.

<sup>69</sup> Constance Ambasa Shisanya, "Professor Hannah Wangeci Kinoti: Your Seeds are Germinating in Kenya," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*: Pietermaritzburg, 2002, pp. 327-347 [333].

<sup>70</sup> Hannah Wangeci Kinoti, "Aspects of Gikuyu Traditional Morality," PhD, University of Nairobi, 1983. Hannah Kinoti earned her BA at Makerere, where Prof Noel Q. King was Professor, having moved there from Legon.

<sup>71</sup> See for example Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "Women's Healing Roles in Traditional Gikuyu Society", in Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (eds), *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, Nairobi: Acton, 1996, pp. 253-269.

In Kenya, there are two main local chapters that had been established by 1996, Kenyatta University and Limuru. The above members of the Circle discussed here are those that come from Kenyatta University. This does not mean that it is the more powerful one but that I was not privileged to meet members of the Limuru Circle, with the exception of Esther Mombo who has been mentioned in the earlier paragraphs. One of the notable activities of transformation established through the Limuru chapter is promoting women in theological training and ministerial formation for women. This is where the achievements of Nyambura Njoroge can not be underestimated. She has established a library to promote women's issues there and has also run seminars for women ministers to empower them further in ministry.

Even though there is a well established Circle in Kenya, Circle women continue to face the challenge of reaching out to women from the Evangelical interdenominational colleges. These are women who belong to interdenominational colleges such as the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST), Nairobi International School of Theology (NIST) and Daystar University who need to be sensitized in other ways of reading their Bible, culture, and church tradition in such a way that men's theologizing that promotes women's submission and suppression are transformed to liberate these women. This is possible as already a minority from such Evangelical colleges have started trickling to the Circle. Mary Mumo is one of such recent Circle members in Kenya coming from an Evangelical College. She is a lecturer in Old Testament at Nairobi International School of Theology (NIST). Her journey in theological training and ministry is a typical story of women from the Evangelical churches in Kenya.<sup>72</sup>

The Circle also has a task to transform theologies that suppress women in ministerial formation. In the Anglican Church, there was a lag in accepting women to serve in the same capacity as their fellow male students even if they graduated from the same college in the same class and course. Often the women were ordained to be deacons and not full ministers. This is changing in some dioceses of the Anglican Church after an active promotion of ordination of women to the position of ministers by some bishops.<sup>73</sup>

Histories of some Circle women in the Kenya chapter are interesting. Mary Getui played a major role in organizing the 1996 Continental Conference as member of the local committee and also helped in organizing the Southern and East African Zonal meeting in 1994. For the 1996 Continental Conference she was the chairperson of the local committee. It was very handy for her at this time to serve in this role because she

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<sup>72</sup> Interview Mary Mumo, Nairobi International School of Theology, 8.2005.

<sup>73</sup> Interview Circle women in ministerial formation, Addis Ababa, 2002.

was the Head of the Religious Department at Kenyatta University. She had taken over from Hannah Kinoti since headship in this department follows a rotation system where one can only serve for a specific term. Mary Getui's role in the Circle has been broad. Apart from being a seasoned researcher and writer, she was elected as coordinator of the Kenyatta University Circle after Sr Annie Nasimiyu stepped down in 1992.<sup>74</sup> As a Circle member, she has edited books such as *Violence against Women*,<sup>75</sup> which came out in 1996, as well as one on *Conflicts in Africa*.<sup>76</sup>

Mary Getui is another woman from an Evangelical church that joined the Circle during this period. In the beginning of the Circle it has been observed that the majority of women came from mainline/classical churches. Women from Evangelical churches are mostly late arrivals. One of such women is Mary Getui. She joined the Circle soon after the 1989 Convocation. By that time she was already a member of Kenyatta University. It is clear that Mary Getui was among the first Circle women in Kenya that Nasimiyu recruited in the years 1989, 1990, 1991 and 1992. This was at the time when Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania belonged to one chapter, as there were too few women theologians in these countries at this time to warrant separate Circles.<sup>77</sup> However, different from Mary Tusuubira, who traces her Evangelicalism from an Ecumenical Evangelical Church (Low Church Anglican), Mary Getui comes from the Seventh-day Adventist Church which belongs to the denominations that are classified as Evangelical. These are churches that arose from Postclassical Missions and are widely treated as Evangelical.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand Mary Getui is an example of Evangelical Ecumenical women in the Circle. Although she hails from a church that is historically classified as an Evangelical denomination, she shares much with Ecumenical Christianity. Firstly, she joined the Circle at the inspiration of women from the Ecumenical churches: Mercy Amba Oduyoye and also a Catholic Sister, Sr Annie Nasimiyu. Definitely, if she held onto conservative Evangelical leanings of her denomination, she would have treated the invitation to the Circle by these women as unwelcome. Mary Getui has been a close ally of Mercy for a long time to the extent that they know each others' family members and visit each others' families. Mary

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<sup>74</sup> Interview Constance Ambasa Shisanya, Circle meeting, 13.7.2005.

<sup>75</sup> Grace Wamue and Mary Getui (eds), *Violence against Women: Reflection by Kenyan Woman Theologians*, Nairobi: Acton, 1996.

<sup>76</sup> Mary Getui and Hazel Ayanga (eds), *Conflicts in Africa: A Women Response*: Nairobi: Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, 2002.

<sup>77</sup> Interview Sr Annie Nasimiyu, Circle Conference, Kempton Park, 13.7.2005.

<sup>78</sup> For the sequence of revivals and the consequence on missions see Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions. From Hudson Taylor to Present Day Africa*, Oxford et al: Regnum, <sup>2</sup>1995, pp. 11-31. The mainline churches of Africa almost all go back to the earlier revival, the Great Awakening (1734/1792) which produced the classical missions.

Getui has learnt much from Mercy Amba Oduyoye about the Circle. Mary Getui easily identified with Sr Annie Nasimiyu in many ways, as she belonged together with her to EATWOT. Again they share a common ground as lecturers at Kenyatta University. With this background, Mary was better prepared to structure the Circle from an academic point of view rather than from a religious point of view. Here Mary Getui's Evangelical-Ecumenical leaning is also visible in her involvement with Ecumenical bodies such as WCC and EATWOT. With these organizations she has been involved in seminars and even published with them.<sup>79</sup>

### 3.2.3.2 Tanzania

The Tanzania chapter had a slow start. After being part of the East Africa chapter, it struggled to establish its own chapter. One of the reasons why Tanzania has had a slow start in establishing a chapter is the Evangelicalism factor. The majority of women belonged to the Lutheran Church that held ideas which suppressed women. The other factor is that since the majority of women theologians that came to the Circle meeting were from one church, this took away the steam to meet as a research and writing group. Instead there was a glowing sense of church fellowship, far from the Circle's intentions of building a chapter.

By 2002 this chapter was not active. However, there have been efforts to strengthen the local Circle. In 2002, a research was done by Nyambura Njoroge concerning women in theology. The agenda of the Tanzania Circle for the coming years is to start working with issues that are pertinent to violence against women, HIV/AIDS, and counselling. They also are working on having an annotated bibliography of literature by women on women. The project was scheduled to finish in the year 2004. Tanzania women are also working hard on upgrading studies of women in the country so that they can have a stronger Circle. One of the women that have progressed in postgraduate studies is Blandina Sawayael. She has since returned to Tanzania.

### 3.2.3.3 Uganda

The situation in Uganda was similar to Tanzania in terms of establishing a local chapter, because the first core group consisted mainly of ministers from the Anglican Church.<sup>80</sup> This presented a challenge to function as a Circle with objectives beyond just being a "fellowship" of one church. Although the Circle started with 23 women, because of the element of fellowship among the dominant group, with time some women began to stay

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<sup>79</sup> For an example of such publications, see: Mary Getui, "Africa, Church and Theology: Do they Need Each Other?" *Ministerial Formation*, January 1999.

<sup>80</sup> Interview Circle woman from Uganda, Kempton Park, 12.7.2005.



away. If the Circle in Uganda on the other hand had more focussed on the academic objectives of the Circle (research, writing and publishing), such marginalization as the Catholic women faced would not have happened. At the heart of this marginalization was also an aspect of Evangelical conservatism that likely influenced Anglican women in the Circle then. The Anglican Church in Uganda has been part of the Anglican Low Church Movement that shares conservative Evangelical leanings. In addition the Ugandan Anglican women have, most likely, been influenced by the East African Revival, at that time spearheaded by Bishop Festo Kivengere, an Anglican Archbishop himself. This Evangelical tendency seems to have contributed to the slow development of the Circle in Uganda, since the pioneer Circle women had belonged to an ecumenical movement. The Evangelical and Ecumenical movements have a history of contradictions in matters of theological interpretation, the former being conscious of "liberal" interpretations of the latter.<sup>81</sup> Though the differentiation between Evangelical and Ecumenical is real and important, there is also much cooperation and overlap, and there can be no clear delimitation.

One of the early members of the Circle in Uganda was Grace Nyabaika.<sup>82</sup> She attended the 1989 Convocation with Mabel Katahweire who at the time of the Convocation lived in Mukono. After this conference Mabel Katahweire has remained silent. The Circle dwindled and was only restarted in Kampala in 1996 by Sr Teresa, after she had met Mercy Amba Oduyoye.<sup>83</sup> This was after belonging to the East Africa Circle under Sr Nasimiyu.<sup>84</sup> Even though Uganda did not start with a big bang in forming the Circle, the IPC invited many women from Uganda to attend the Convocation. In fact, in 1980 the largest number of women theologians came from Makerere University.<sup>85</sup> Soon after the Convocation, the Uganda women who attended the Circle belonged to the East Africa chapter under Sr Nasimiyu. After the Circle gained its autonomy, Ugandan women coordinated the chapter.

The shying away of non-Anglican women from the Circle in Uganda related more likely to the 'Evangelicalism factor' mentioned above. Churches in Uganda had become more Evangelical in practice including the Roman Catholics. In this environment, to belong to the Circle, which was a gender group, could not easily be accepted.<sup>86</sup> The

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<sup>81</sup> This dichotomy resulted in the formation of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa as different from the All Africa Conference of Churches, both based in Nairobi.

<sup>82</sup> Interview Circle woman from Uganda, Kempton Park, 12.7.2005.

<sup>83</sup> Interview Sr Teresa, Kempton Park, 12.7.2005.

<sup>84</sup> Interview Sr Annie Nasimiyu, Kempton Park, 12.7.2005.

<sup>85</sup> Interview Circle woman from Uganda, Kempton Park, 12.7.2005.

<sup>86</sup> Interview Ugandan man, Kampala, 28.4.2006.

position of women was much restricted by policies that were engineered by Evangelical enthusiasm. A case in point is the experience of women in the Anglican Church. Mary Tusubira (néé Mary Barongo) struggled to become a pastor in the Anglican Church. Though she shares an Evangelical leaning, this did not distract her from seeking a transformation of gender inequalities in her church.<sup>87</sup> Because of its Evangelical leanings her church was not open to ordaining women as ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Therefore her ministerial aspirations met with many obstacles. Her life depicts the picture of so many African women theologians especially from an Evangelical background that remain aflame for God's work but are relegated to the background because of patriarchy engineered by a literalistic and thereby wrong reading of Scripture and culture.

The Uganda Circle grew when Mercy Amba Oduyoye procured scholarships for some Evangelical women to study for higher theological degrees. In the case of Mary Tusubira's theological training, she was the one that obtained a scholarship for her to do postgraduate studies. Increasing opportunities of Evangelical women to do higher theological training were already envisioned by Mercy Amba Oduyoye as a solution to transforming the deep rooted gender inequalities among Evangelical women. With increased theological training they would read the Bible with a fresh look. In the undergraduate courses, Evangelical women are mainly exposed to theologies that are deliberately tailored to their church's policies including those that promote women's unequal access to ministry in the church.

By 2002, the Circle in Uganda was not very active. The reason that has contributed to the decline is related to leadership and the composition of the first core group of the Uganda Circle. Due to the fact that women who could lead the Circle had gone abroad to access higher education, the Circle in Uganda had been weakened.

The Circle in Uganda has these goals: to invite women to become members of the Circle; to look into issues of HIV/AIDS; to encourage publication of books on women by women; to network with the Ministry of Gender and women's organizations; to start fund raising for the Circle.<sup>88</sup> By 2005, Uganda had experienced a sudden rise of Circle members as women who went for further studies had returned to their countries.

#### *3.2.3.4 Malawi*

The story of the Circle in Malawi unveils key roles men have played in the establishment of the Circle. The first meeting, though not officially referred to as a Circle meeting, took

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<sup>87</sup> Though Evangelicalism often objected to women's ordained ministry, since its beginnings it has had branches that promoted the full inclusion of women into ministry. A prominent example here is the Salvation Army which never made distinctions. The first General was a man, the second a woman.

<sup>88</sup> Focus Group Presentation, 2002 Circle Conference, Johannesburg, South Africa.

place at Chigodi Women's Centre near Blantyre upon invitation by the then General Secretary of Blantyre Synod, Rev Dr Silas Ncozana in 1990. However, this first meeting lacked the support of an academic setting that is necessary for the development of the Circle. These women, coming from the same Presbyterian background, likely understood themselves as a fellowship group rather than as an academic group. The lack of an academic setting robbed the group of opportunities to have interdisciplinary exchanges that are useful in Circle theologizing. At the Chigodi meeting, Christine Manda was present, who had attended the Convocation.<sup>89</sup> However, when we talk of the official Circle in Malawi, Isabel Apawo Phiri, a Presbyterian of Nkhoma Synod in Central Malawi, is the mother of the Circle. She had also been one of the participants at the Convocation of the Circle in 1989, but was absent at the Chigodi meeting because at that time she was doing her PhD in South Africa at the University of Cape Town.<sup>90</sup> She established the Circle when she came back to Malawi. She was then a lecturer at Chancellor College of the University of Malawi in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. One important factor that comes out in the genesis of the Circle in Malawi is the reality that Circle chapters are best organized around institutions of higher learning. While the first meeting held at Chigodi is an important historical event in the genesis of the Circle in Malawi, the fact that it did not prosper shows that these earlier women were not linked to an institution of higher learning. On the other hand, it was easier for Isabel Apawo Phiri to start the Circle when she was lecturer at Chancellor College.

She started the Circle in 1993. Here she even had support from women academics in other fields that were interested in researching and writing concerning women's issues. These were Nyovani Madise, Flora Nankhuni and Linda Semu, all from the Sociology Department. She even did research together with them. In the experience of beginning the Circle in Malawi it is clear that one of the reasons why local chapters struggle to start in some areas in Africa is that of "cultural conservatism." In Malawi this was visible when people were angered by the research findings of Isabel Apawo Phiri and her friends regarding sexual harassment on Chancellor College campus. Her house even got stoned for this research.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> For more details see Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, pp. 138-139. Her paper was: Christine Manda, "A Testimony against Polygamy," in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Talita Qumi. Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam-Woode, 2001, pp. 152-154.

<sup>90</sup> Her PhD has been published as: Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy. Religious Experiences of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere 2000<sup>2</sup>(1996), Zomba: Kachere, <sup>3</sup>2007.

<sup>91</sup> Isabel Phiri writes in detail about this incident. See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Marching, Suspended and Stoned: Christian Women in Malawi 1995," in Kenneth R. Ross (ed), *God, People and Power in Malawi: Democratization in Theological Perspective*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1996, pp. 63-105.

The chapter at Chancellor College started with a bang when about 50 women came together at its launch.<sup>92</sup> The first meeting consisted of students, staff members and also church women from the surrounding community. Not all who participated were trained in theology, there were others who were there simply because they were women concerned from a faith perspective. There was also a student that spoke.

The second Circle conference took place in 1994. At this time Fulata Moyo was also present. She had just finished her Masters course at the University of Zimbabwe. The meeting took place at Isabel Apawo Phiri's house in Chirunga. This was a follow up meeting to the first one because at the first meeting women had been challenged to do more research on the theme: "Violence against Women."<sup>93</sup> In 1995, the Circle presented the findings from the research that had been done. The research was on rape and sexual harassment in educational institutions with Chancellor College as a case study.<sup>94</sup> Isabel and three other Circle members, Linda Semu, Flora Nankhuni and Nyovani Madise, presented the paper at the University of Malawi research dissemination conference. The four had done this research together.<sup>95</sup> Although this was a joint paper, it was Isabel Phiri who was attacked most. Her house was damaged and also her name. Since this time the Malawi Circle did not hold any further meeting till 1996. In 1996, Fulata Moyo started the ball rolling again capitalizing on her post as the Secretary of the Diploma Board for Theological Studies.<sup>96</sup> From this vantage position she was able to lobby women to participate in the Circle. This was after Fulata Moyo had attended the 1996 Nairobi Circle meetings.<sup>97</sup>

From 2004 to 2005 Rachel Fiedler was the coordinator of the Chancellor College chapter. At the 2004 meeting, there had been more women from the Presbyterian side than before. However, in 2005 the number of women from the Evangelical side increased. This could have been due to the fact that Rachel Fiedler is from the Evangelical tradition. The theme for the 2005 meeting was Gender, Health and Religion. The other chapter in Malawi is the Blantyre Chapter where Getrude Kapuma is the Coordinator.

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<sup>92</sup> Focus Group, Isabel Phiri and Fulata Moyo, Malaka-le Theologies, 14.7.2005.

<sup>93</sup> Focus Group, Isabel Phiri and Fulata Moyo, Malaka-le Theologies, 14.7.2005.

<sup>94</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Stand up and be Counted. Identity, Spirituality and Theological Education in my Faith Journey," in Denise M. Ackermann et al (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000, p. 149.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>96</sup> This Board relates theological colleges and seminaries through the Department of Theology and Religious Studies to the University of Malawi, so that the diplomas and degrees are awarded jointly by the University and the Board.

<sup>97</sup> Focus Group, Isabel Phiri and Fulata Moyo, Malaka-le Theologies, 14.7.2005.

Fulata Moyo went to Pietermaritzburg to do her PhD, which she completed in 2009.<sup>98</sup> She did not return to Malawi, though, as she accepted the appointment to the Women's Desk of the WCC in Geneva. In 2008 she was elected as the Continental Coordinator of the Circle.

### 3.2.3.5 Zambia

The local chapter in Zambia traces its origin to Juliet Matembo, Omega Bula, and Rev Peggy Mulambya Kabonde.<sup>99</sup> They were all members of the United Church of Zambia. Rev Kabonde recalls the time she joined the Circle in 1989, that she was a very young lady. At that time she had a Diploma in Theology from the United Church of Zambia Theological College. Among them it was Peggy Mulambya Kabonde who presented a paper at the Convocation. Her paper was entitled "Single Women Parents in Africa."<sup>100</sup> In her presentation she demonstrated a good knowledge of how this social problem is being dealt with in the Western World. She refers in her work to Denmark, Norway, Sweden, England and so forth. In this her main concept of transformation is that all culture-dictated stereotypes of male/female should be challenged and that everyone including women and all that are at the fringe: children, sinners, the poor should have full dignity as Jesus showed in His ministry and life.

The Circle in Zambia struggled in its beginnings for the same reason that many of the pioneers of the Circle were not academics. They were mainly involved in the practical life of the church. These positions do not inspire them to research and write. Rev Peggy is an exception to this trend. Although at the time of the Convocation she had just started her work in the church, she was already interested in researching and writing.<sup>101</sup> Being involved in the Circle at this early stage, according to her, shaped her position in the church but also helped her to write and publish. Already in the early stages of the Circle in Zambia, she wrote articles in *Groaning in Faith* and *Talitha Qumi*.<sup>102</sup> She also has one in *AMKA*.

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<sup>98</sup> Fulata Moyo, *Women, Sexuality Envisioned as Embodied Interconnected Spirituality and Sexual Education in Southern Malawi. A Quest for Women's Sexual Empowerment in the HIV/AIDS Context – The Case of Kukhonzera Chinkhoswe Chachikhristu (KCC) among Mang'anja and Yao Christians of T/A Mwambo in Rural Zomba*, PhD, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2009.

<sup>99</sup> Focus Group, Rev Peggy Mulambya Kabonde and Lilian, *Malaka-le Theologies*, 14.7.2005.

<sup>100</sup> Peggy Mulambya Kabanda, "Single Women Parents in Africa," in Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and Musimbi Kanyoro, *Talitha Qumi, Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam-Woode, 2001, pp. 183-191.

<sup>101</sup> She has an important position in the church. At the time of my interview, she was a minister of a large congregation in Ndola, Zambia. In addition to this role, she is a part time lecturer in Ndola, Copper Belt.

<sup>102</sup> Peggy Mulambya, "Single Women Parents in Africa," in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Talitha Qumi. Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam-Woode, 2001, pp. 192-198.

Another member of the Zambia Circle is Omega Bula. By 2000 she worked with the United Church of Canada on secondment. Before this she worked at Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation. She is a social worker by profession. Rev Juliet Matembo is one of the few women in Zambia that is a teacher at a college. She comes from the Southern Province. She is a Tonga and she is now a lecturer at the United Church of Zambia Theological College.

The Zambia local chapter was established in 1990. This first meeting was attended by highly influential women. Among them was Rev Sampa Bredt, the General Secretary of the Christian Council of Zambia.<sup>103</sup> The stability of the local chapter in the beginning was troubled by migration of Circle women to other countries for further studies. However, those that were in the country still kept the Circle alive at the individual level. Those that went abroad continued to be committed to the Circle objectives wherever they went.<sup>104</sup>

Though the stability of the local chapter has been troubled by migration of Circle women to other countries for further studies, the local chapter is still alive as Zambia women belonging to the Circle continue to be committed to the Circle objectives wherever they go. A few women now in the country have decided to call a national meeting to look at how to work in the coming years.<sup>105</sup> In the earlier years there was also an attempt to strengthen Malawi and Zambia local chapters through a cooperate project with Malawi, which had also lost its Circle leaders to further studies abroad. Key women leaders of the Malawi chapter who went abroad for further studies included Isabel Phiri and Fulata Moyo.

By 2005, the Zambian Circle had more new members. Lilian Siwila and Kuzipa Nalwamba were among them. The fact that more women are joining the Circle shows that the Zambia Local Chapter has potential to grow. Other women in the Circle include: Mabel Kafwamba, who is a student at the United Church of Zambia College, Rev Jane Nyirongo, Mrs Kafwimbi from a Pentecostal church, Bridget Masayiti and Mary Mwiche teaching at an interdenominational Evangelical College. The Circle in Zambia has many members even though they are not all in Zambia at the same time because of going abroad for further studies. Of all the Circle members in Zambia, Rev Peggy Mulambya Kabonde is the most articulate in the theologies of transforming gender inequalities in the era of HIV/AIDS. Her works will be referred to in the theological chapters.

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<sup>103</sup> The second Circle meeting took place in Kitwe in 1997 and only four women attended. Focus Group, Rev Peggy Mulambya Kabonde and Lilian Siwila, Malaka-le theologies, 14.7.2005.

<sup>104</sup> Anecdotal comment, Rev Peggy Mulambya, Malaka-le Theologies, 14.7.2005.

<sup>105</sup> Anecdotal comment, Rev Peggy Mulambya, Malaka-le Conference, 2005, 14.7.2005.

### 3.2.4 Southern Africa

The history of the Circle in Southern Africa begins with Mercy Amba Oduyoye's long time friend, Brigalia Bam from South Africa. Brigalia Bam started the National Circle in 1991 after the Convocation. She was at this time the General Secretary of the South African Christian Council.<sup>106</sup> The participants came from both black and white communities. Brigalia Bam's attempts to develop local chapters were short lived because she concentrated much on empowering women in the secular society as young politicians. This is why, in the later years, she has not been involved in developing local chapters in South Africa. Her work in politics is classic in transforming gender inequalities in South Africa.

After attempts by Brigalia Bam to start local chapters in South Africa in the earlier period, Isabel Apawo Phiri,<sup>107</sup> who was a sojourner in South Africa, continued to develop local chapters there. She started this exercise when she was in the Cape Town Chapter, being a PhD student at the University of Cape Town.<sup>108</sup>

According to Denise Ackermann, the Cape Town chapter of the Circle was formed on the 6th March of 1992.<sup>109</sup> The Cape Town Chapter was inter-religious even during this early period. There were Jewish women, Muslim women, Hindu women as well as Christian women.<sup>110</sup> Najma Moosa is a Muslim theologian that became a member of this Circle. She had paternal grandparents who hailed from India. Her family comes from the Kanam ethnic group, who speak Gujarati.<sup>111</sup> The watershed to women doing theology in South Africa came way before the establishment of the Circle. This is because South Africa was earlier on influenced by Black Theology. The main concern of Black theology

is not to deny the value of the African Independence, but its main concern is with the black people in South Africa, who are denied government - a minority which itself also claims to be Christian. For Black Theology, liberation is not simply a matter of the saving of the soul: rather salvation is the liberation of the whole person from all the

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<sup>106</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the New Millennium," *Agenda* 61, 2004, p. 18.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Stand up and be Counted. Identity, Spirituality and Theological Education in my Faith Journey," in Denise M. Ackermann et al (eds), *Claiming our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000, p. 152.

<sup>109</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, "Claiming our Footprints. Introductory Reflections," in Denise M. Ackermann, Eliza Getman et al (eds), *Claiming our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000, pp. 5-15 [6].

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Najma Moosa, "The Flying Hadji," in Denise M. Ackermann et al (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000, p. 98.

forces which oppress and exploit, so that people may be free to be truly human in the way that God intends them to be.<sup>112</sup>

Indeed a conference on Black Theology was held in 1984, in Cape Town. At this conference, women remarked that women are oppressed in church and society and that Black Theology should also take the liberation of women seriously.<sup>113</sup> The roots of Black Theology in South Africa were in the context of apartheid, the official policy of the South African government from 1947 to 1994.<sup>114</sup>

Although Isabel Apawo Phiri does not come from South Africa, she started most of the existing Circle chapters in the South. She started the Namibia Chapter, Pietermaritzburg Chapter, Durban Chapter, as well as the KwaZulu Natal Chapter in addition to the Cape Town chapter she had started in the earlier period.

#### 3.2.4.1 *The Durban Chapter*

From Namibia, Isabel Apawo Phiri went to Durban in August 1997.<sup>115</sup> Here she launched the local chapter in 1998. It became a vibrant chapter and at one time 200 women belonged to it. During this time, Isabel Apawo Phiri was professor at the University of Durban-Westville and Director of the Centre for Constructive Theology. Her involvement with the University and the Centre for Constructive Theology gave her the opportunity to write on current experiences of women and girls as will be seen in the following chapters.

#### 3.2.4.2 *The Cape Town Chapter*

The Cape Town Chapter continued even during this period. Since the beginnings of this chapter members have come and gone. By 2000, regular membership at Cape Town Chapter was 17 women.<sup>116</sup> The chapter at this stage was still inter-religious, being composed of Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and Christian women. Sarojini Nadar, who later on becomes a right hand woman of Isabel Apawo Phiri during her time as Continental Circle Coordinator was also member of the Cape Town Chapter at this time. Sarojini Nadar describes herself as a fourth generation South African Indian. Her parents converted from

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<sup>112</sup> John Parrat (ed), *A Reader in Christian Theology*, London: SPCK 1987, p. 7.

<sup>113</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the New Millennium," *Agenda* 61, 2004, p. 17.

<sup>114</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Healing from the Traumas of Crime in South Africa: Interaction of African Religion with Christianity as Perceived by African Female Traditional Healers" in *The Lutheran Federation*, 2005, p. 25.

<sup>115</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the New Millennium," *Agenda* 61, 2004, p. 19.

<sup>116</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, "Claiming our Footprints. Introductory Reflections," in Denise M. Ackermann, Eliza Getman et al (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000, p. 6.



Hinduism to Christianity when she was only two or three months old.<sup>117</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri had started this chapter with the help of Denise Ackermann, and when she moved from Cape Town, Denise Ackermann coordinated the Circle. She is a white South African and an Anglican. Apart from Denise Ackermann, Prof Elna Mouton was also instrumental in the life of the Circle during this time. She is a white South African from the Reformed tradition. In this section some of their theologies of transformation will be discussed.

The context of South Africa is complex because South Africans outside the Academy (particularly women) live under the triple oppression of race, gender and class.<sup>118</sup> Black theology has limitations in that it has been unable to deal with the popular struggles of the black working class who are the most exploited.<sup>119</sup>

South African chapters are reflective of the multi-racial aspect of the Circle. Since apartheid was also cemented by religion, Circle women in South Africa face many challenges in writing theologies that will serve all women in this context. The reality is that of conflicting theologies.

Non-white Circle women feel white Circle women have enjoyed better positions in life, and participated in the oppression of others. In this, women from non-white ethnicities reinterpret the Bible with the view that colonial interpretations deployed by whites, who sought to oppress women of colour, must be unveiled. Such tensions are sometimes felt among South African women in the Circle and sometimes even verbalized.

The Circle in Cape Town continued to publish during this period. The first book to be published in this period was "Claiming Our Footprints" (1997), which was edited by Denise Ackermann, Eliza Getman, Hantie Kotzé and Judy Tobler.<sup>120</sup> The chapter had published another article: "After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith."<sup>121</sup> This was followed by yet another book by the time Isabel Apawo Phiri became Continental

<sup>117</sup> Sarojini Nadar, "Emerging from Muddy Waters. For the Man in My Life - My Inspiration to Soar," in Denise M. Ackermann, Eliza Getman et al (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000, pp. 15-31 [15-17].

<sup>118</sup> Sarojini Nadar, "Power, Ideology and Interpretation/s: Womanist and Literary Perspectives on the Book of Esther as Resources for Gender-Social Transformation," PhD, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2003, p. 2.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 3. Also see Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

<sup>120</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, Eliza Getman et al (eds), *Claiming our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000.

<sup>121</sup> Elna Mouton, "After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith," in Denise M. Ackermann et al (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000.

Coordinator. The book was edited by Azila Reisenberger. The title was "Women's Spirituality in the Transformation of South Africa." Denise Ackermann was the coordinator for the Cape Town Circle at this time when Isabel Apawo Phiri had left Cape Town.

Although Isabel Phiri started the Circle, Denise Ackermann has become the leading force of Cape Town Chapter. Another African Women Theologian in this chapter who is actively involved is Prof Elna Mouton.

When I visited Cape Town in 2002, it was an exciting time to meet Prof Elna Mouton in her splendid office at the Reformed Theological Faculty of Stellenbosch University. She was most delighted when she found that the aim of my visit was to talk to her as one of the African Women Theologians. She was grateful that even though she is a White South African, I had singled her out as an African Woman Theologian.<sup>122</sup> White African Women Theologians have sometimes felt alienated because of colour and religion. Prof Elna Mouton was probably one among many white South African women who feel alienated from the black African Women Theologians or vice versa. This is because Black African Women Theologians are predominant in the Circle. The other reason is that South Africa went through apartheid that alienated black, coloured and white South Africans from each other. A similar reaction was evident when I visited Denise Ackermann, a retired Professor at the University of Western Cape. She showed concern over the fact that she has been involved in the Circle for a long time, but was not told of the meeting on the Biographies of Women of Faith that was held in Johannesburg.

Other significant women involved in the Cape Town Chapter are Sarojini Nadar and Eliza Getman. Eliza Getman joined the Cape Town Chapter in 1998 while she was still a student at the University of Cape Town, doing her Masters in Religious Studies. Wilma Jacobson introduced her to the Circle. Wilma is one of the editors of "Women Hold up Half the Sky."<sup>123</sup> She is an Anglican Minister.<sup>124</sup> Eliza Getman is an American married to a South African.<sup>125</sup> Thus she is a member of the Circle through marriage. She is committed to writing and publishing. She is also a grassroots person and is very much involved in her local congregation of the Anglican Church. She preaches on Sundays and

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<sup>122</sup> Interview Prof Elna Mouton, Stellenbosch University, International Office.

<sup>123</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, J.A. Draper and E. Mashinini (eds), *Women Hold up Half the Sky – Women in the Church in Southern Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1991

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Eliza Jane Getman, "Ground Cover" in Denise M. Ackermann et al (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000, pp. 62-67.

helps with other duties within her church. She is also a seasoned editor and helped to edit one of the Circle books: "Claiming Our Footprints."<sup>126</sup>

She has three boys. By 2001, regular membership at Cape Town Chapter was about 20 women. She moved from Cape Town to Edinburgh where she met Olivia Nasaka, a Ugandan who is also a member of the Circle. Olivia Nasaka was doing her PhD then at the University of Edinburgh. Olivia is now back in Uganda and is an ordained minister of the Anglican Church.

#### 3.2.4.3 Pietermaritzburg

Isabel Apawo Phiri launched the Pietermaritzburg Chapter in 2001.<sup>127</sup> The role of the Pietermaritzburg Chapter in the Circle is far reaching. Members of the Circle: Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar have been involved in editing Circle books.<sup>128</sup> One of such books is "Her-stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith."<sup>129</sup>

Eliza Getman joined the Pietermaritzburg Chapter in 2004. It was very encouraging for her to see some of the familiar faces at the chapter, such as Sarojini Nadar, who had known one another at the Cape Town Chapter.

Pietermaritzburg Chapter, by 2005, had around 40 members with about 50% attendance at most meetings of the local chapter. The chapter is very creative in its form of leadership. It follows a rotational style of leadership where, every six months, new leaders are elected. The leadership team is made up of a coordinator and a secretary. Their effort to build strong relationships is shown, for example, in the way that they are able to organize a yearly celebration in the form of a dinner, towards which members of the Circle contribute. Some of the key players at the chapter in 2005 were Isabel Phiri, Beverly Haddad, Lilian Siwila, Sarojini Nadar and Fulata Moyo.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye was invited to this Circle and even planted a tree to commemorate the occasion. The chapter has had many projects such as being involved in engendered theological training. They even have published a book entitled: "In Her Name." The chapter tries to meet once a month, except during holidays of the University, since many members come from this neighbourhood. The chapter also has inter-Circle

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<sup>126</sup> Denise Ackermann, Eliza Getman et al (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000.

<sup>127</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women Theologies," *Agenda 61*, p. 19.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories. Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002

meetings. In 2005, their aim was to have a joint Circle project with the Cape Town Chapter.

#### *3.2.4.4 Botswana*

The local chapter in Botswana started only in 2003. Ironically, Botswana's well-known African woman theologian Dr Musa Dube is one of the key African Women Theologians on the continent. Though Musa Dube has become popular in the Circle, she was not one of the first participants at the International Planning Meeting or at the 1989 Convocation in Accra. Further no one from Botswana was at the Convocation meeting. Therefore the message derived at the Convocation, where Women Theologians were challenged to start local national chapters, could only have come to Botswana women indirectly. This goes a long way to explain the delay Botswana has experienced in organizing itself into a local Circle. At the 2002 Circle meeting, therefore, a Botswana woman, who was in attendance then, could only say that there was no local chapter in Botswana. Only a year later was the Circle in Botswana organized. According to Musa Dube, the road to establishing a Circle in Botswana was important. She decided to embark on mentoring Botswana Women Theologians who could participate in the Circle. At this time, although there was no organized Circle in Botswana, Musa Dube was very active in researching and writing. Her contributions are found in several Circle books and other works in Africa and abroad.

According to Musa Dube, training is key to establishing the Circle. Musa Dube facilitated the beginning of the Circle at the end of 2003. When referring to her writing skills, she dates her dream to write not to her Circle involvement but to her early childhood years. She narrates that even in her primary school days she won a prize for writing.<sup>130</sup> Further, her writing skills have been developed through her teaching career at the University of Botswana. Her passion to write has been slightly different from many African Women Theologians. As a New Testament scholar, she was faced with a challenge at realizing that most New Testament books were written by white people and prescribed to Africans. To her, the conscientization to research and write was a political agenda: to make a contribution to books and scholarship that would not only be for Circle readership but also in-depth research and reading that would be referred to in NT scholarship beyond the borders of the Circle. Apart from New Testament scholarship, she has been widely involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In this fight she has been able to utilize her scholarship in New Testament to develop resources that would be used in the fight against the epidemic across Circle boundaries.

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<sup>130</sup> Interview Musa Dube, 2005.

Thus, through the WCC, Musa Dube has been much involved in theological training, especially in constructing syllabi mainstreaming HIV/AIDS. Through this involvement she has influenced not only women but also men, especially in theological institutions.

#### 3.2.4.5 *The Namibia Chapter*

Isabel Apawo Phiri established a local chapter in Namibia between 1996 and 1997, when she was a lecturer at the University of Namibia. Women from the Lutheran Church were predominant in this chapter.<sup>131</sup> The progress of this chapter has been limited judging from the participation of Namibian women at regional and study commission conferences. The factors that have led to a low vitality of the chapter in Namibia are highlighted in the testimony by one member of the Namibian Circle. She argues that the departure of Isabel Apawo Phiri left them without one who could really develop the Circle. The second reason is that although there are many women who consider themselves Circle members, they find the goal of the Circle, which is research and writing, a challenge. The last reason given was that some women feel they like to meet as a group and share about their ministry experiences rather than writing for publication.<sup>132</sup>

#### 3.2.5. *The Place of Zonal Circle Meetings in the Spread of the Circle*

Apart from the local chapter development that took place in different areas, the Convocation instituted Zonal meetings to take place in different countries before the 1996 Circle Continental Conference. This required the election of Zonal leaders to coordinate the work. In this, members of the IPC played a major role together with some emerging leaders in the different areas. In Southern Africa, Rev Phina Olga Kgosana was chosen as leader of the Zonal meetings there. She had not been a member of the IPC. Southern Africa here includes the Anglophone countries of the south: Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Rev Grace Ndyabahika was chosen to lead the Eastern Africa Zone.<sup>133</sup> She also had not been a member of the IPC. Her area included Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. For the Western Africa Zone, Dr Rabiatu Ammah, a Muslim, was chosen. She was already a lecturer at the University of Ghana in Legon. She too had not been a member of the IPC. For the Francophone Africa Zone Ms H el ene Yinda was chosen.<sup>134</sup> Francophone

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<sup>131</sup> Interview Isabel Apawo Phiri, Kempton Park, 14.7.2005.

<sup>132</sup> Interview member of Namibia Circle, Kempton Park, 14.7.2005.

<sup>133</sup> She contributed: Grace N. Ndyabahika, "Women's Place in Creation," in Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (eds), *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, Nairobi: Acton, 1996, pp. 23-30.

<sup>134</sup> She wrote, among others, H el ene Yinda, *Cercle des Th eologiennnes Africaines Engag ees: Femmes Africaines. Le Pouvoir de Transformer le Monde*, Yaound : Editions Sherpa, 2002.

countries include all countries that are French speaking. These countries include Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Congo. For Lusophone Africa, Ms Eva Gomez was chosen as leader. Lusophone countries are the Portuguese speaking countries. Circle women that were part of the IPC whether within the country or abroad always assisted these leaders.

In addition to the Zonal leaders, the Convocation also elected communication secretaries for the particular regions. Regions were bigger than Zones. For example, the Anglophone Region included countries that are in West Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa. Whereas Regions were organized along the lines of colonial languages, Zonal meetings were different. They were organized in accordance with their proximity to each other. That some Zonal areas were grouped along colonial language lines was just a coincidence.<sup>135</sup> Communication secretaries were appointed to work together with the Zonal coordinators in communication of activities of the Circle within their particular regions. In the Francophone region, the communications secretary was Sr Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, who had been a member of the IPC. For the Anglophone Region the communication secretary, Dr Teresa Mbiri Hinga, had not been a member of the IPC.<sup>136</sup>

The inclusion of members of the IPC was crucial in the development of the work during this period so as to enforce a process of mentoring between those in the IPC and the new leaders involved in the Zonal conferences. Indeed this process of mentoring produced many able leaders.

In the West African Zone, for example, Rhodah Ada James and Margaret Umeagudosu became prominent leaders. Their inspiration came mainly from the late Sr Rosemary Edet who was a Nigerian and a member of the International Planning Committee. In Ghana, the women had the advantage of having the founder of the Circle, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and a key member of the International Planning Committee, Dr Elizabeth Amoah. Through the guidance of Mercy and Elizabeth Amoah, Rev Rachel Entrue Tetteh, Rev Dora Ofori Owusu and Ms Rebecca Iwuchukwu became prominent leaders. While less is heard about Rhodah Ada James, Margaret Umeagudosu has contributed a lot to the growth of the Circle in Nigeria. She is the founder of the local chapter in Nigeria.

In the Eastern and Southern African regions, Nyambura Njoroge, Isabel Apawo Phiri, Denise Ackermann and Mary Getui Nyanchama became prominent. Although it was Teresa Hinga who was elected to be Communications leader for the Anglophone region, her move outside Africa is the reason that her involvement in the Circle activities in this

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<sup>135</sup> A product of such cooperation between Zones along language lines is: Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (eds), *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, Nairobi: Acton, 1996, in which the Eastern and Southern African Zones cooperated.

<sup>136</sup> Provisional Addis Ababa Circle Report, p. 3, accessed 6.3.2006.

region at this time was short-lived. Mary Getui Nyanchama played a major role in the Zonal meetings in the absence of Teresa Hinga. She was greatly assisted by Nyambura Njoroge. Contributions of Nyambura Njoroge after the Zonal meetings have been in the area of editing Circle books as well as leading a study commission on ministerial formation, which will be discussed in the upcoming chapter. Isabel Apawo Phiri became a key catalyst in the Southern region Circle but also at the continental level. Her life story and her contributions to the Circle will be found in the story of the Circle in her country of origin, Malawi, in South Africa where she has been a considerable number of years, and in the context of her being the continental coordinator of the Circle from 2002 to 2008.

### *3.2.5.1 Zonal Meetings as a Medium for Discipling Agents in the Agenda of Transformation*

The other push in the genesis of country chapters was through group work. This was especially done through Zonal meetings where two or more countries collectively engaged in research and writing and presented their works at one chosen venue. This was most beneficial to countries that were not so well established in terms of having their own local chapters. Such meetings became a learning environment and an inspiration for establishing chapters in their own countries. The other advantage of these Zonal meetings was that the countries that met were close in terms of geographical proximity. This allowed a larger number of women to attend these meetings than if the meeting had been held far from them, as was the case with the Convocation. After the Zonal meetings, it is clear that there was much learning that took place in terms of research and writing to the point that other countries were stimulated to do research and writing in their own countries as a chapter.

One of the countries that did research and writing at the country level was Kenya. The Kenya Circle did its own project on Women and Culture, which focused on violence against women.<sup>137</sup> In fact, just as Kenya was leader in the East Africa Chapter, it also became the first to publish research papers on their own. Further, the Kenya Chapter became central in the genesis of country chapters in other East African countries.

### *3.2.6 Zonal Meetings as Hotbeds for Developing Local Chapters*

The period after the inauguration of the Circle was pregnant with activities that were aimed at taking the Circle to many women and many lands in Africa. The architect of this historical period was Mercy Amba Oduyoye with a collaborative effort of women that

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<sup>137</sup> Document, 1996 Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture History, no date, no author, accessed 14.9.2005.

caught the vision but more so those that were in the International Planning Committee, although some of the members in the International Planning Committee were less active at a group level. A decision that was made at the Convocation was that local/national chapters should be formed in different countries.

To strengthen these local chapters, the leaders selected at the Convocation were to participate in Zonal/Biennial Institutes/Regional Conferences in different areas. According to the decision, these regional meetings were to take place before the continental meeting to be held in 1996. The interchangeable usage of the words: Regional Institutes and Zonal Institutes is neither confusing nor giving opposing meanings. They are appropriate. These meetings are Institutes because they were vehicles of learning. This learning was achieved through group mentoring, through lectures and focus group discussions. Those members that were knowledgeable of the issues and how best to tackle them became mentors for the beginners. These meetings were Zonal as well as Regional because they involved more than one country and more or less followed language and geographical positions of the particular countries.

### *3.2.7 Zonal Meetings 1989-1996*

There were four meetings of this nature and because they were meetings that took place in the middle before the following continental meeting in 1996, they were called Biennial meetings. All of these meetings took place in 1993 and 1994. Before the Zonal conferences, there was a main Planning Committee that took place in December 1992 in Accra, Ghana. Here the International Planning Committee was involved. It was given the mandate to coordinate the Zonal conferences with the local Circle women. Thus before each Biennial Institute there was again another Planning Committee. This Planning Committee was usually composed of one or two people from the International Committee and the others came from the country where the meeting was to be held. Such arrangements also provided opportunities of mentoring new members of the Circle into how they can organize Institutes.

The other task of the planning meetings was to set up the agenda of the institutes as well as the particular issues to be addressed. The theme and proposed list of issues were always sent before the actual institutes because the delegates to the institutes had to research and write papers to read at the institute where they would be subjected to intellectual scrutiny to improve their quality for publication. This process required editorial work of those that were experienced in writing papers that would qualify for publication. The writing of a paper was a condition for being selected to attend a conference. It is because of this that some Circle members have not attended institutes even though they are registered members.



### 3.2.7.1 Manzini Zonal Meeting

In 1992 the first Zonal meeting took place when there was a Regional meeting in Manzini, Swaziland.<sup>138</sup> At this conference, the Circle cooperated with EDICESA,<sup>139</sup> an organization that later on also cooperated with the Eastern and Southern African Conference that took place in Nairobi in 1994. Other three Zonal/Regional conferences followed. The theme for these meetings, with the exception of the one for Francophone Africa, was 'Women in the Household of God.'<sup>140</sup>

### 3.2.7.2 The West African Zonal Meeting

The West African Zonal meeting was set to take place in 1993 in Lagos, Nigeria. However, because of political strife in Nigeria, the venue was shifted to Accra, Ghana. The meeting date also shifted to December 16-21, 1993.<sup>141</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who was the coordinator of the Circle then, led the planning group. However, as she usually does not work in isolation, her sisters accompanied her from Nigeria as well as from Ghana. From the Nigeria side, Rhodah Ada James and Margaret Umeagudosu were responsible for the local arrangements in the earlier place when the meeting was to take place in Nigeria, Lagos. The suggested number was firstly 15 and then it climbed to 27.<sup>142</sup> In fact the list presented to Mercy at the end of it all was 33. At this occurrence, Mercy Amba Oduyoye did not hesitate to hammer on what the agenda of the Circle is, namely to research and write. She presented her view to the local organizing committee there in this way: "But please stick to our decision that only those that have written papers should attend the conference, otherwise the reason for our existence will be defeated."<sup>143</sup> She also highlighted the difference between what the Circle and other Church women groups are doing. In this she was referring to the fact that if the Circle held conferences where all women are welcome whether they write or not, there would be no difference with other church women groups.<sup>144</sup> This is also why she explains that even though in the beginning women who did not write were invited to the meeting in Nigeria, it was only to enable them to get to know one another as women face to face but also to identify African women writing theologians.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ecumenical Information and Documentation Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Letter by John Pobee to Elizabeth Amoah, 10.9.1993.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Letter by Mercy Amba Oduyoye to Margaret Umeagudosu and Rhodah Ada James, Geneva, 16.6.1993.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

Even when the venue changed, they worked hard in making sure that the women from Nigeria came to the meeting. The women were really brave to come to the Convocation in spite of the political upheaval in Nigeria then. But even then, some women from the Calabar region that earlier wanted to attend the meeting could not come because of the political events there. The cancellation was a disappointment to some but this is where Mercy also demonstrated her leadership abilities and concern for others. To her, to pray for the peace of Nigerians was crucial and she was willing to postpone the meeting to a later date and even change the venue.<sup>146</sup> The key person on the Nigeria side was Sr Rosemary Edet, but by that time she was very sick and had been flown to USA for medical treatment. The meeting was to take place at the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus Generalate, 7 Amore Str. off Toyin Str, Ikeja, Lagos.

On the Ghana side, Dr Elizabeth Amoah led the planning committee. Having been in the International Planning Meeting meant that she had experience in organizing meetings of this nature. She worked with Rev Rachel Entrue Tetteh and Rev Dora Ofori-Owusu. However, in terms of communication, Mercy often wrote to Dr Elizabeth Amoah and Rev Rachel Entrue Tetteh.<sup>147</sup> In the end, it was decided that only 30 delegates come to the conference because of reasons related to the cancellation of the earlier venue and the postponement of the meeting in Ghana. Mercy Amba Oduyoye wrote: "You will recall that it has been proposed to hold in Nigeria a consultation on 'Women in the Commonwealth of God.' Unfortunately the political developments of last July did not make it wise to go ahead with it. Consequently it lost a substantial part of the deposit made on board and lodging. We now propose Ghana as venue. There will be 30 persons maximum." At that time Ghana was planning to send 17 and many were already working on their papers. But just as in the case of the Nigeria chapter, Mercy insisted that the local organizers of Ghana limit the number of delegates. Mercy wrote: "My heart bleeds to think we can not say to all that are interested: come."<sup>148</sup> The conference was in the end held in Accra, Ghana. According to the programme made by the planning committee, Sr Rosemary was to take a major role. She was the moderator of the conference. Apart from that she was to speak on the topic 'The Household of God: Biblical Exegesis on the Place of Women in the Kingdom of God.' She was also supposed to close the session, as it was customary that the host country carries out that function. However, the fact that she was picked to close the session amidst other Nigerian Circle women shows the respect she commanded from the Nigerian Circle as well as among those from other countries to come to the

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<sup>146</sup> Letter to Sisters by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 24.3. 1993.

<sup>147</sup> Letter from Mercy Amba Oduyoye to Rachel Tetteh, Geneva, 3.6.1993.

<sup>148</sup> Conference Programme, The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians Biennial Institutes Project, Session Zonal Conferences (West Africa), 18-23 July 1993 Lagos/Nigeria.

conference. Sr Rosemary Edet has since passed on to be with the Lord soon after. To signify her importance, there was a special call at the 1996 conference to remember her death.

The other key player on the programme was to be Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Rebecca Iwuchukwu was to speak on 'Women and Religion in Africa.' She was to present this paper on the second day of the conference, on the 19th July 1993. Rev Rachel Tetteh was to lead worship and do a Bible Study on 'Participation and Inclusiveness in the Commonwealth of God.' Other Circle women were to lead workshops. There were five workshops planned for the Institute. The workshops were heavy on issues of Culture and Religion. In terms of Religion, African Traditional Religion was more pronounced than Christianity and Islam. Three sessions were on African Traditional Religion. These were: 'Women Rituals,' to be presented by Ms Rebecca Ganusah, 'Religion, Taboo and Women' to be presented by Dr Margaret Umeagudosu, and finally the one on 'Witchcraft and Spirit Possession from the Women's Perspective' by Dr Elizabeth Amoah.<sup>149</sup>

There was only one workshop that alluded to the Christian Religion and the Muslim Religion. The topic for this workshop was 'The Earth Belongs to God: Women's Response' to be presented by Sr (Dr) Rosemary Edet. The high dosage of African Traditional Religion in the discourses at the West African Zonal conference resonates well with the common perceptions by Africans that Western Africa is strong on African Traditional Religions. This might have been very attractive to the participants. The last workshop: 'Violence against Women' was a crosscutting theme for all religions. Deaconess Ekundayo presented this seminar.<sup>150</sup>

### *3.2.7.3 The Eastern and Southern Africa Zonal Conference*

The Institute took place in 1994, January 4-8 in Nairobi, Kenya. The venue of the conference was the Methodist Guest House, a place that hosts many ecumenical meetings. The theme of the conference was 'Women in God's Kingdom.' The title of the theme reads differently from the one adopted by the West African English Speaking Conference, but in essence they both mean the same. The interpretation of 'Commonwealth of God' is that religious women have a common right and responsibility to the World. Further, since we belong to God, the earth is a common home. The word Commonwealth is also Kingdom.<sup>151</sup> Again at this conference, cooperate leadership was visible in the Circle in both working as a team but also cooperating with other groups. The cooperating organization at this time was the Ecumenical Information and Documentation Centre for

<sup>149</sup> Conference Programme Document, 18-23 July, Nigeria/Lagos.

<sup>150</sup> Conference Programme Document, 18-23 July, Nigeria/Lagos.

<sup>151</sup> Memo from WCC to Musimbi Kanyoro from Mercy Amba Oduyoye.

Eastern and Southern Africa (EDICESA). The conference attracted women from 11 African countries and women from two Nordic countries to set the Institute in process.

Just as at the West African Zonal Meeting, the focus of the Institute was African Traditional Religions. The papers were to hinge on the theme of environment and women's health. In addition to this there was a strong emphasis on the Bible. In fact there were already suggested passages on which the women needed to theologize. The following were the topics: a workshop was to deliberate on the sub theme 'Environment'. The suggested topics under this theme were: The Earth Belongs to God: Women's Perspective; the Sacredness of Nature in African Religion, Christianity and Islam; the Symbolic Living of Africans in their Traditional Natural Environment; the Goddess in African Religions and their Influence on Women; Women's Priesthood in Relation to Nature; Totemism; Sacred Places and Objects (like rivers, hills, mountains trees, etc).

In the second workshop, again Traditional Religion relating to women's well-being was tackled. The topics under this theme were: Religion and Women's Health, Taboos and Women's Well-being; Effects of Rituals on Women's Well-being; Sexuality and Women's Well-being; Women and Spirit Possession; Witch Craft and Witch Hunting: Women's Perspective; African Symbols of Hospitality: the Place of Women; Women in the African Traditional Religions; Religious Pluralism in Africa: Women's Experience.

The last workshop was on 'Biblical Perspectives on the Commonwealth of God.' Under this theme, the following topics were suggested: Participation and Inclusiveness; Dignity and Worth; Justice; Biblical Exegesis of the following suggested verses: Proverbs 9:1-6; Wisdom's Feast; Gen 16 and 21:1-2; Gen 22:1-19, Sarah and Hagar; Isaiah 55:1-3 (Mt 11:28-30); 1 Kings 17:8-16; Mt 25: 31-41, the Last Judgement; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34; Hospitality in Corinthians; Romans 8, Creation and Groaning; Eph 2:11-12 Breaking down the Walls.<sup>152</sup>

The picture shown in the various issues that the women dealt with in the area of tradition and the Bible confirms that the perception that these women were mainly writing to vie for positions in the church is wrong. In fact, topics on women's participation in the church at this institute were few and at the Western Africa Zonal meeting, there were no topics to that end. Papers for this conference were sent to Dr Nyambura Njoroge and Musimbi Kanyoro who at that time were already working in Switzerland.

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<sup>152</sup> Letter from Musimbi Kanyoro to Mary Getui and Teresa Hinga, 21.9.1993.

The participants at this meeting came from Swaziland, South Africa, Tanzania, Angola, Zambia, Uganda, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Kenya.<sup>153</sup> There were about 50 women who attended the Institute. The funds for the conference were raised both locally in Nairobi and internationally.

The key player for this conference was Mary Getui Nyanchama, as Teresa Hinga, who had started with her, had left for the USA. Mary Getui Nyanchama joined the Circle in 1994.<sup>154</sup> Her role in coordinating the Anglo African Institute in Kenya is crucial.

#### 3.2.7.4 *The Francophone Zonal Meeting*

The Institute was held in Douala, Cameroon, 25 - 31 July 1993.<sup>155</sup> The theme of the conference was "African Hospitality and Christian Women," different from the two other Zonal institutes in other regions. The Institute attracted 40 women from Francophone countries: Senegal, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Madagascar, Burundi, Rwanda, Zaire and Cameroon. Interesting at this conference was also the use of drama in theologizing. There was a drama on men's solidarity with women and what the church could do about it. The coordinators of the Institute were Rev Louise Ngo Tappa and Dr Rose Zoë-Obianga from the International Planning Committee. Again the spirit of cooperative leadership was strong here in that the organizers worked with FEMEC and WCC. The papers at this conference were being prepared for publication by Ms Colette Bouka-Coula and by Rev Sr Justine Kahungu who had been a key presenter at the 1989 conference. Each Zonal Institute was also undertaking the process of editing. There were three teams in total doing the editorial work, but also two teams coordinating the publication of AMKA.<sup>156</sup> Out of this, two issues of AMKA were published.<sup>157</sup>

Editorial work was important even at this stage of Zonal Institutes. Nyambura Njoroge, as regards the East Africa Zonal Conference, insisted that there should be a workshop entitled Revisiting Circle Writing Style. She suggested Ms Joyce Tsabede and Isabel Apawo Phiri to lead this workshop.<sup>158</sup> Nyambura Njoroge's role at this meeting was also to make sure that brief updates of local chapters were given. Using a cooperative model of leadership, she decided that a specific Circle member would prepare each local update and that each one would present the brief report for 10 minutes at the conference.

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<sup>153</sup> Document, Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Process of Creating Biennial Institutes of African Women in Religion and Culture, nd, no author, The Institute of Religion and Culture, Ghana, 14.9.2005.

<sup>154</sup> Interview Mary Getui, The Institute of Religion and Culture, Ghana, 14.9.2005, Ghana 14.9.2005.

<sup>155</sup> Letter from Mercy Amba Oduyoye, WCC, 16.7. July 1993 to Monsieur le Pasteur Harry Henry.

<sup>156</sup> "1996 Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture," no date, no name, accessed 14.9.2005.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Letter for Nyambura Njoroge, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 19.11.1993.

The presenters were: Musimbi Kanyoro, who would present an update on the Circle and its Historical Background; Denise Ackermann who would present South Africa (Cape Town and Johannesburg Chapters); Teresa Hinga on East Africa; Ms Kathindi on Namibia and Mercy Amba Oduyoye on West Africa Circles.<sup>159</sup> There has also been publishing in Francophone Africa.<sup>160</sup>

### 3.2.8 *The State of Local Chapters 1989-2007*

There is a remarkable picture showing the developments of local/country chapters under different leadership over the years. This pattern shows an increase in the number of chapters during the period of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a decrease in the vitality of some of the local chapters organized earlier, but then a wave of new local chapters during Musimbi Kanyoro's period, some of which had collapsed by the time Isabel Apawo Phiri rose to the position of Continental Coordinator. Yet even then new local chapters continue to develop. There are many contributing factors to this. The task of this section is to show this remarkable pattern and suggest possible reasons as to how local chapters at different times were positively or negatively affected. The rationale for this exercise is to search for a model that would hopefully improve the vitality of local chapters in the future. A recap of the developments of the Circle will show that during the reign of Mercy Amba Oduyoye local chapters were many. The earliest are those already pointed out: Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya. Of course, at this earlier period Kenya was with Uganda and Tanzania part of East Africa because of the limited number of African women theologians then. This was in the years from 1989, after the Convocation, to 1992. After 1992, more local chapters were developed. Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe chapters are examples of those organized between 1992 and 1994.

During the period after Musimbi Kanyoro became continental coordinator, some of the earlier chapters organized in the first phase began to lose vitality and some even stopped being operational. These were the Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Zambia chapters, because of reasons already shown earlier. Surprisingly, even though some chapters became non-functional, there were new chapters that got organized during this period. These were the Namibia Chapter, which started in 1996, the Durban chapter, which organized itself in 1997 and the KwaZulu Natal chapter in 2001. What is interest-

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> One of the titles is Hélène Yinda and Kä Mana, *Pour la Nouvelle Théologie des Femmes Africaines. Repenser la différence sexuelle, promouvoir les droits des femmes et libérer leurs énergies créatives*, Yaoundé: Editions CLE-CIPRE, 2001. Another title is Hélène Yinda, *Cercle des Théologienne Africaines Engagées: Femmes Africaines. Le Pouvoir de Transformer le Monde*, Yaoundé: Editions Sherpa, 2002.

ing in this new development is that almost all the new chapters in Southern Africa were organized under the influence of Isabel Apawo Phiri, a Malawian. She kept establishing chapters as she moved in these areas in Southern Africa after leaving Malawi in 1996. It is not denied that in this endeavour she was assisted by other Circle members. The pool of Circle members that Isabel brought together in Namibia for example, were the result of the influence of Musimbi Kanyoro. The majority of them came from the Lutheran Church at the time when Musimbi Kanyoro was working as Executive Secretary for Women in Church and Society with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). About this time she writes: "Through my involvement I was also able to garner the participation of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and recruited as many Lutheran women theologians as I could. I persuaded them to write, facilitate a process whereby they could meet and think together, as well as mentor one another."<sup>161</sup>

In the period when Isabel Apawo Phiri was Continental Coordinator, the chapters that were at the brink of dying during Musimbi Kanyoro's period faced the same threat. These are the Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Zambia chapters. The reasons for this situation are beyond continental leadership, as they mainly relate to the availability of theological training of the women in these countries. There are of course new chapters that have been developed: The Botswana chapter started in 2003 by Musa Dube, and the Pietermaritzburg chapter which was launched in 2002. These chapters were still in operation by the year 2007.

Among the earlier ones, the local chapters that seem to have grown from strength to strength are Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi and Kenya. Further, the newly established chapters like Pietermaritzburg are also growing strong. What are the possible reasons for this landscape? I would suggest the following:

### 3.2.8.1 *The Circle Develops around Personalities*

Circle chapters are established around personalities. It is clear that those local chapters that thrive are built around personalities that keep to the vision of the Circle to establish local chapters and make them operational. Firstly all the local chapters that have a long history of viability like Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi, Kenya, or Pietermaritzburg, are linked to such personalities. Mercy Amba Oduyoye has been an inspiration to Nigeria and Ghana circles. In fact, Elizabeth Amoah spends much time with Mercy Amba Oduyoye to lobby women around Ghana to join the Circle. In Nigeria, Mercy is assisted very much by Dorcas Akintunde who is the current linguistic researcher for the Anglophone region. For the Circle in Kenya, Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge have inspired the

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<sup>161</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudzi wa Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2006, p. 30.

Circle for a long period of time, even though, for the most part, both have maintained an active link with the Kenya Circle through email, visitation and even practical projects such as supplying women's liberative books to the Limuru local chapter. For the Malawi Circle the same can be said of Isabel Apawo Phiri. She sees to it that the Malawi Circle is vibrant. In Malawi, Isabel has been assisted much by Fulata Moyo and Rachel Fiedler who have been local coordinators of the Circle and have maintained its viability. In Kenya, Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge were assisted much by the able leadership of Ester Mombo at Limuru chapter, and Mary Getui and Grace Wambui at Kenyatta University. By 2007, Nyambura Njoroge had returned from Switzerland to live in Kenya.

When we look at the case of Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia, the late development of local African Women Theologians had an impact on the development of the Circle. It is clear that the fact that the local chapters lost able leaders to study abroad or to migration to other countries has impacted negatively on the vitality of the local circles from which these women came. Bella Mukunyora left Zimbabwe, and in Botswana, Musa Dube was busy developing women theologians by mentoring them.

#### *3.2.8.2 The Level of Theological Training Determines the Vitality of the Circle*

That some local chapters are vibrant, even though some of the leaders have migrated to other countries for various reasons or even passed on, has been possible because the remaining leaders were able enough to carry on with the Circle. Of course it is clear that this is also linked to the number of African women theologians in a particular area. Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria have high numbers of theologically trained women. This of course depends on the level of training these women have. From the evidence of this history, it is clear that if in a local chapter there are women who have attained at least Masters level in theology, there is a possibility that the local chapter will continue. This level of education is strategic in maintaining the Circle, in that one is able to mentor others in the process of research and writing, which they have already passed through. This may explain why the Circle in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania is less active. It can already be envisaged that, if a woman with a Masters degree, who is a member of the Circle, goes back to one of these countries, the vitality of those local Circles will improve. This is why, for example, the coming back of Lilian Siwila to Zambia after writing her PhD will definitely improve the momentum of the Circle there.

#### *3.2.8.3 Change of Focus at the Convocations of 1996 and 2002*

The drastic decision to have study commissions, using a thematic approach, seems to have killed the agenda of Zonal meetings, with their geographic approach, proposed at the 1989 Convocation. Since the role of Zonal meetings was to encourage and strengthen local chapters, a laxity in conducting them has cost the Circle the possibility of having



more vibrant local chapters. Zonal meetings developed leadership in different geographical regions to the benefit of local chapters in that particular part of Africa. In fact, the dream at the 1989 Convocation was to have Biennial Institutes before the next continental conference. With the institution of Study Commissions, Zonal meetings could hardly take place. Musimbi Kanyoro outlines one of the reasons why it was hard for Zonal meetings to take place, in this way: "Zonal leaders found it difficult to function because the Circle had no financial infrastructure to support their travel. Some of the newly elected leaders were not fully aware that all Circle work is voluntary, and when they realized they were expected to volunteer long hours, their commitment decreased."<sup>162</sup> The Circle meetings were mainly those specialized in different areas of theologizing in relation to the Study Commissions. Such conferences were those held in Johannesburg: firstly on "Biographies of Women" and later "On Being Church." It is only those Circle members who could research and write within the particular Study Commission that would take part. Other Study Commissions did not even hold a meeting. This led to Circle members in different localities being inactive.

### 3.3 Administrative Development

The need for the consecutive Continental Circle leaders to communicate effectively with the mother of the Circle partly led to the administrative development of the network. There was need for an office that would coordinate such communication. Even though there was change in leadership at the 1996 Convocation, and in 2002, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and the consecutive leaders Musimbi Kanyoro and Isabel Apawo Phiri needed to continue to share their vision for the Circle. Central to this vision was the understanding that the Circle, though it had a new guardian, still had the mother, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, living in Ghana. For good shepherding of the Circle, it was clear to both Musimbi Kanyoro and Isabel Apawo Phiri that the Circle administration must continue to be near where the real mother was. Mercy Amba Oduyoye knew exactly the birth of the Circle, she knew the ties that her child had and it was wisdom that the Circle should be hosted near her.

Before Mercy Amba Oduyoye retired from the World Council of Churches and returned to Ghana, the administration for the Circle was moved from Geneva to Ghana in 2001. A full time administrator was recruited to be supervised by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah, also from Ghana.<sup>163</sup> At this time, Musimbi Kanyoro wrote:

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>163</sup> Letter from Musimbi Kanyoro to Friends, Circle, c/o World YWCA- 16, Ancienne Route Grand Saconnex, Geneva, Switzerland, 12.4.2001.

My role as Coordinator now remains to be that of a Board Chair or Board President. I will make sure that the coordinating committee that you elected in Nairobi in 1996 meets for their deliberation and follows-up on the plans agreed upon. I will also support the various coordinators with infrastructure to do their work. Research Reports will be written by the coordinators and compiled in Ghana by the Liaison Officer.<sup>164</sup>

At that time, the Circle "maintained their account with the World Council of Churches and because it is situated here in Geneva, I will be the person who communicates with our donors as well as liaise with the World Council of Churches Africa Desk in matters of custody for our account."<sup>165</sup> The researchers were found at that time through the research coordinators.

If you need to be associated with Research or get support for publishing your work, correspond either with a specific theme leader or with Mercy Amba Oduyoye as the Research Coordinator.<sup>166</sup>

The organization of the Circle in 2003 was done by the Ghana Office with the administrative expertise of Joyce Boham.<sup>167</sup> This was not strange because at this time she led the administration of the Circle.<sup>168</sup>

Since 1996, Joyce Boham had been developing a data base for Circle contacts. This is what led to the Preliminary Directory.<sup>169</sup> She was also the mastermind of logistics for workshops related to the Circle. Regardless of where the meetings took place, Joyce worked tirelessly in conjunction with the local organizing committee. Some meetings took place in Geneva and some in Ghana as well as in South Africa. Apart from Circle meetings elsewhere, she also helped with the Institute of Women and Culture meetings.<sup>170</sup> One of such meetings, by the International Press Services, took place in Zimbabwe on how to report issues of gender, religion and culture. The objective was to make a manual. Musa Dube represented the Circle in 2000.<sup>171</sup> The manual came to fruition in the year 2001.<sup>172</sup> The IPS had reports from various countries in Africa and these were put together in one publication. After the Zimbabwe meeting, the IPS also asked her to organize a similar workshop to make sure that the delegates were well

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Email correspondences by Joyce Boham.

<sup>168</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women of Faith Speak out in an HIV/AIDS Era," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverly Haddad and Madipoane Masenya (ngw'ana Mphahlele) (eds), in *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2003, p. 6.

<sup>169</sup> Interview Joyce Boham, 16.9.2005

<sup>170</sup> For more information on the Institute of Women and Culture, read in the upcoming chapter and also see: Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experiences of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, Blantyre: CLAIM, 2000, p. 17.

<sup>171</sup> Interview Joyce Boham, 16.9.2005.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

catered for.<sup>173</sup> She began her work with the Institute in 2000 and with the Circle in 2001.<sup>174</sup> The institute was still viable in 2007.

### 3.4 The Constitution

At the 2002 Continental Conference, views were aired whether the Circle should continue to have informal leadership with a loose network, as it had been since 1989. "Since its conception, the Circle has worked with limited resources and only volunteer coordination. A desire for a more permanent structure with paid staff was expressed and the new committee was charged with the responsibility of exploring that possibility."<sup>175</sup>

By then the Circle had already engaged Joyce Boham as "a liaison officer." She thus became the first Circle member of staff to be remunerated.<sup>176</sup> The leadership of the Circle elected at the 2002 Pan African Circle Conference took up the responsibility of working out the first draft constitution in 2005. The draft was circulated in three languages by the regional Circle coordinators in order to get feedback. The English-speaking Circle studied the draft at the 2005 regional conference.<sup>177</sup> The second draft constitution with corrections on the first was circulated again to Circle members in December 2006. The 2007 continental conference adopted the third revised constitution.<sup>178</sup>

The proponents of formalizing Circle administration were challenged with the realities of funding for such a venture. One of the problems was to get a permit of the Circle as a registered entity in countries that opted for formalized administration of the Circle, especially over concerns to where the Circle coordinator would be based. This was one of the challenges and hence institutionalizing the Circle met with mixed reactions. Some members were of the view that registration in certain countries would not be easily attained. The advantages of having a formalized Circle structure are seen in the face of raising funds. If the Circle is legally registered in a particular country, the accessibility to funding for the Circle might improve.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The Circle has developed geographically and yet, from this history, it is true that this growth shall always be attached to able leaders, especially those working in the academic

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Provisional Addis Abba Circle Report, p. 12, accessed 6.3.2006.

<sup>176</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2006, p. 36.

<sup>177</sup> Circle Newsletter no 6, April 2006, p. 2.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

world. In addition there are other factors that promote the growth of the Circle. One such factor is where a particular Chapter has a woman who is among the founding members of the Circle or at least has been mentored by them for a period of time. The role of the pioneering women of the Circle was very instrumental in developing the Circle but as their influence got reduced due to their displacement from key positions, the Circle should brace itself for new changes in its focus and geographical growth. There is also a possibility that these displaced key members of the Circle might implement the Circle ideas in efficient structures of their own besides the official Circle. The growth of the Circle is not only in its geographical spread but also in its ability to construct theologies that deal with world crises. The Circle's move to tackle women's issues relating to world crises has earned the Circle a good reputation to their brothers. Circle theologians can now collaborate with male theologians on issues of gender theory and masculinity, which are also related to different crises in Africa. One area where such collaboration between male and female theologians can be done is in the fight against HIV and AIDS. Such collaboration is a sign that the Circle is moving towards maturity.

In the following chapter I analyze the theology of the Circle. This is important so that the relationship of these theologies to Malawi can be appreciated. On the other hand, theologies of the Circle are part and parcel of the history of the Circle and therefore they must be documented in a more systematic way.

## Chapter 4: Circle Theology

The Circle was born in Africa. However, her theologies are not a completely new innovation. They are part and parcel of contextual theologies. The context of Circle theology is that of African women. Further, Circle theology is feminist theology in Africa and borrows a leaf from similar feminist theologies elsewhere on the globe. This is also reflected in its methodology. The earliest feminist theologies are popularly called First World Feminist Theologies.<sup>1</sup> All other feminist theologies including Circle theology are later generation feminist theologies.

### 4.1 The Place of the Circle in Relation to Contextual Theology

Circle theologies fall under the discourse on contextualization theology.<sup>2</sup> The word contextualization is related to inculturation, and sometimes these words are used interchangeably although they do not mean exactly the same. Martin Ott reflects on the three sociological terminologies on which the meaning of inculturation is based. These are enculturation, referring to primary socialization an individual goes through; acculturation referring to secondary socialization; and transculturation that refers to the process of mutual transfer of culture when the gospel is preached to people.<sup>3</sup> When the early missionaries preached the gospel, there was a common assumption that there would be a one-way transfer of culture, that of the missionary and that of the gospel to the people receiving the gospel. The culture of the recipients was sometimes considered demonic. This meant that the African culture was completely condemned with no possibility of it having an inspiration to the Christian message. By reinterpreting the Bible, culture and power balance, Circle women are questioning the way European Christian thought systems influenced the way African women learned the Christian message. The Circle is creating a theology that is relevant to African women by critically analyzing these received theologies and making the Christian message more relevant to African women and their culture.

The processes of inculturation and contextualization in general started a long time ago. This process dates back to John Mbiti and Kwesi Dickson, who led a movement of African Theology in reaction to earlier theological works, which were Eurocentric. In fact, for Kwesi Dickson the principal task in this process of inculturation was to study the

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<sup>1</sup> See Susan Frank Parsons (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> For more details on contextualization, see Martin Ott, *African Theology in Images*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin Ott, *African Theology in Images*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000, p. 25.

nature of the theological task that faced the African Church in its time.<sup>4</sup> In this, he critically looked at reinterpreting received theology in relation to the questions that Africans posed. These were questions relating to how Africans can make the church authentic in the African context.<sup>5</sup> While the Circle acknowledges these efforts of African men, the women are also searching for an African Feminist Theology that would be authentic to the African women in their context.<sup>6</sup> This specificity in developing feminist theologies was not only developed by African women. Asian women, Latin American women and women from other third world countries did the same as is evidenced in this thesis. "Inculturation Theology" is what is also often called African Theology.

African Theology belongs to two paradigms: political theology and cultural theology. Political theology is more related to Black Theology, a theology that takes the class and race of the Black people into consideration when constructing theology. This theology is within the context of the past history of apartheid. This is not a dominant theme in the Circle although some traces of it occur in the writings of some South African women theologians. These women write from the perspective of how apartheid affected women in church and society. In this, white South African women are viewed to have had a privileged position compared to women of colour. The white minority is seen as believing to have the right to dominate the black majority. This state has brought about the struggle of Blacks for liberation from this oppression.<sup>7</sup> In the Circle, women tackle this oppression from the perspective of women.

Cultural Theology has a different emphasis. "Its main concern is the relationship between the Christian faith and African culture and tradition. This approach begins from the conviction that all cultures are God given, and are part of the natural revelation of God to mankind. African culture, far from being 'pagan' or satanic, therefore provides a genuine, if limited, knowledge of God. It may be regarded as being a preparation for this gospel."<sup>8</sup> Circle theology is largely a contribution to this paradigm. Nevertheless, it is not only that the African culture has a revelation from God for women that is the focus of Circle theology, but also that there is culture that oppresses a woman and that which liberates a woman. The approach therefore does not accept African culture as wholly divine; it takes a selective approach which calls for removing cultural elements that are

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<sup>4</sup> See Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984, p. viii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Mercy was amidst various Feminist scholars when at Harvard. See Chapter on the Birth of the Circle.

<sup>7</sup> See Bonganjalo Goba, "Emerging Theological Perspectives in South Africa," in Virginia Fabella, M.M. and Sergio Torres, (eds), *Irruption of the Third World Challenge to Theology*, New York: Orbis Books 1983, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> John Parrat (ed), *A Reader in Christian Theology*, London: SPCK, 1987, p. 7.

oppressive to women and retaining those that are liberating.<sup>9</sup> Even this selection of what is liberating and what is not lies in the hands of African women depending on the context they hail from as it is shown in this thesis.

A further contribution to African Theology is the exposure of how approaches and methodologies used in constructing African Theology differ or are similar to those that African women use in constructing African women's theology.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.1.1 *The Place of the Circle in Liberation Theology*

Liberation theologies are a group of contextual theologies that are related to Circle theology. The context of liberation theologies is the poor. In one way, women are also placed in the category of the poor because of their disadvantaged status. However, Circle Theology is not a product of Third World Liberation movements that sought to fight against the socio-political oppression of the Third World by the First World countries.<sup>11</sup> The Circle makes a contribution to Liberation Theologies by highlighting methodologies, approaches, models, and case studies of Liberation work among African women. While some of the methodologies are similar to those used in Liberation Theology, the Circle makes a concrete application to African women.<sup>12</sup> Liberation theology for women must therefore highlight the importance of re-reading patriarchal theologies as promoting poverty in Africa. Such re-reading will be informed by the work of the Circle. Even though the Circle provides methodologies, approaches and models from the women's perspective, such discussion also becomes a 'point of academic quest' on how they are relevant to men's liberation. In addition, the Circle presents a theology of women's struggle against gender inequalities. In this theology, women are seen as victims of wrong interpretations of culture, the Bible and of the "power balance." As victims, they seek to oust such injustices, the very target of liberation theology.

Although the movement of Liberation was present as early as the 1950s, the work of Gustavo Gutierrez published in the 1970s sensitized the world to Liberation theologies. The new movement coincided with similar movements in Africa and Asia. For Africans, their goal was to answer the question how the Christian faith could be better understood

<sup>9</sup> This is the task of chapter 5 of this thesis.

<sup>10</sup> See sections of Chapter 5 and 8 of this thesis.

<sup>11</sup> The French sociologists coined the term 'Third World' in the fifties. It refers to countries that are at the periphery of wealthy countries. See Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (eds), *Concilium. Theologies of the Third World. Convergences and Differences*, Edinburgh: Page Brothers, 1988, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> An example is where African Liberation Theologies take the situation of the Africans as an important factor in creating African Theology. See Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (eds), *Concilium. Theologies of the Third World. Convergences and Differences*, Edinburgh: Page Brothers, 1988, p. 9. Circle theology also takes the situation of African women seriously in creating their theology.

by Africans. They realized that their theologies ought to be different from those constructed by their brothers and sisters in the First World, because of the realization that African contexts are different from those in Europe and North America.<sup>13</sup> Thus the African church had theological questions that could not be answered by traditional theologies from the First World. They felt it was time to develop their own theologies. According to Gustavo Gutierrez, "Liberation involves the total person and embraces three different interrelated levels of meaning."<sup>14</sup> Gutierrez' concept of liberation involving the total person, I argue, has some similarity to Circle theologizing: These women argue, for example, that church teachings that promote women into leadership roles of the church but promote subordination of women in the home are not liberating to women. Philomena Njeri Mwaura, one of the key contributors to Circle theology, is one of the Circle women who clearly show this line of thinking. In the research she conducted in the Charismatic and Neo-Pentecostal churches in Kenya, she discovered that women in Charismatic churches enjoy leadership roles in church while they are taught to submit to their husbands in the home.<sup>15</sup> The meaning she provides for the experience of such women is that they are not liberated because their health is at stake especially if they are wives of abusive husbands.<sup>16</sup> This is because these women are not only spiritual beings but they are also physical, emotional, psychological beings. For these women to experience liberation, such liberation must involve the total person (woman). Thus for such women to be liberated they must not only be liberated spiritually by being leaders in the church, but must also be liberated from psychological, physical and emotional trauma that they might face in their homes. However, liberation at the grassroots is also construed differently as will be shown in the Chapter 5.

The three levels of meaning of Liberation stated by Gustavo Gutierrez also relate to Circle theology. Gustavo Gutierrez argues: "In the first place, liberation expresses the aspirations of the oppressed peoples and social classes, emphasizing the conflictual aspect of economic, social, and political process, which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes."<sup>17</sup> This thinking is not unequivocally related to Circle theologies. The Circle is not preoccupied with economic, social and political oppression by wealthy nations. There is a small contribution to fight class oppression in the writings

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<sup>13</sup> See Roberts J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Suffolk: SCM Press, 1985, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, "The Meaning of the Term *Liberation*" in Deane William Fern, *Third World Liberation Theologies. A Reader*, New York: Orbis Books, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> See Philomena Njeri Mwaura "Perceptions of Women's Health and Rights in Neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches in Kenya," *Malaka-le Theologies*, 2005, p. 7

<sup>16</sup> The fuller account of this detail is in Chapter 7

<sup>17</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, "The Meaning of the Term *Liberation*" in Deane William Fern, *Third World Liberation Theologies. A Reader*, New York: Orbis Books, 1986.



of Circle women of South Africa. However, even though such a contribution is small, it is clear that South African Circle women take class oppression as an important issue in their writings. An example of such writers is Elna Mouton. She is a white South African who writes from the position of the oppressed by ideologies of the whites who were in a privileged position in the history of apartheid. Her contribution, which is also echoed by Madipoane Masenya, is that the way the Bible was used by those in privileged positions in South Africa was oppressive. She argues that it was even used to sustain oppression by those in control during apartheid. The Bible, then, was used as a "sword" as well as a "healing tool."<sup>18</sup>

In addition, Circle theology relates to this second level of meaning by Gustavo Gutierrez where he argues that "liberation expresses the aspirations of oppressed people."<sup>19</sup> I argue that this relates to Circle theology because it springs from the aspirations of women who are oppressed and emphasizes how African women can rise above religion and culture that puts them in subjection to men. In this women argue that religion and culture largely put women at the bottom while men are usually at the apex of liberation. This is the whole essence of why Circle women engage themselves in a theology of transformation.

Gustavo Gutierrez puts the second level of liberation in this way: "At a deeper level, liberation can be applied to an understanding of history. Humankind is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for its own destiny. This understanding provides a dynamic context and broadens the horizons of the desired social changes."<sup>20</sup> In this perspective the unfolding of all the dimensions of the human person is demanded as the gradual conquest of true freedom leading to the creation of new women and men and a qualitatively different society. The vision provides, therefore, a better understanding of what in fact is at stake in our times.<sup>21</sup> This argument is also at the heart of the Circle. It is the spirit of the Circle that the transformation they seek today will contribute towards the creation of a new world for their daughters and sons in the coming generation. If they do not engage themselves in this transformation work, the destiny of their daughters and sons as equal human beings will be at stake.

Gustavo Gutierrez finally argues that the word 'liberation' allows for another approach leading to the biblical sources that inspire the presence and action of humankind in

<sup>18</sup> Elna Mouton, "'From Woundedness towards Healing'. Rhetoric or Pastoral-Theological Vision?' 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference: Southern Africa Association for Pastoral Work, Cape Town, 12-14 May 2003. See also Madipoane Masenya, "The Bible as a 'Sword' and a 'Tool for Healing'," *Malaka-le Theologies*, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, "The Meaning of the Term *Liberation*" in Deane William Fern, *Third World Liberation Theologies. A Reader*, New York: Orbis Books, 1986, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

history. In the Bible, Christ is presented as one who brings liberation.<sup>22</sup> This relates to Christian Circle theology where the Bible is used as a source of inspiration to liberate both women and men in the world. It is in this vein that Luke 4:8<sup>23</sup> is often quoted by Circle women as a basis for creating a particular paradigm of women's liberation. Thus the spirit of the Circle to appeal to the Bible as a source for inspiration regarding liberation of women is a contribution to Liberation theology. The women have also provided approaches and models in reading the Bible that are liberating to women. This is shown in chapter 7 where the issue of biblical reinterpretation is addressed. Further, the women address the "masks" in the reading of the Bible that have prevented women from seeing a liberating 'word of God' for them. Some of them are: Failing to recognize women characters in the Bible, condoning Bible culture that oppress women, an emphasis on inclusion of wrong models of women in theologizing, misinterpreting passages or words in the Bible to oppress women and so on. The women have also provided a way to re-interpret the Bible that is liberating to women, but also shapes a liberating destiny of their daughters and sons. These women suggest the following: To recover stories of women in power in the Bible, recover stories of men that affirm women's empowerment and so on. Even though the Circle is providing approaches and models of liberation for women, they provide a point of discussion and example to the liberation of men as well.

#### *4.1.2 The Place of the Circle in Feminist Theology*

Circle theology is related to but also different from other feminist theologies that define themselves as theologies about women and constructed by women. Thus in this thesis, Circle theologies are African Feminist Theologies to distinguish them from the rest. However, Circle theologies are much more related to Third World Feminist Theologies than to European Feminist Theologies that are more linked to dealing with oppression related to Marxist capital/production ideas where women see themselves as being used to gain more capital. The other difference that sets Third World Feminist Theologies apart from European Feminism is that of differences in distribution of wealth and colonial history. On the other hand, some feminist theories developed by European Feminism are often used in an adapted form even by Third World feminist scholars, as is the case with this study. However, Circle theologies are still different from other Third World Feminist Theologies because they are developed from different contexts. Latin American women, for example, have developed their own *Mujerista* Theology. The first organized meeting

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (NIV).

of Latin American women discussing feminist theology took place in 1979 in Mexico.<sup>24</sup> Mujerista Theology is about women crying for justice in a context where justice is denied to them.<sup>25</sup> Right at the beginning Latin American women identified church structures as reinforcing women's oppression through powerful patriarchal concepts.<sup>26</sup> Latin American women at this time were concerned with the fact that men controlled decision-making processes including on what should be binding for faith, conscience and practice.<sup>27</sup> The women were committed to the redefinition of such patriarchal structures in order to create a model of the church that encourages participation of women and men. In this processes, patriarchal structures were relativized.<sup>28</sup> Circle women are also concerned about issues of justice in decision-making in church and society, but their theology is different because they have a different religious and cultural heritage. On another note, Circle theologies are different from Latin American feminist theologies because of their commitment to dealing with social justice as part of the struggle for women's liberation.<sup>29</sup> The other feminist theology related to the Circle is that developed by women from the Black Minority in North America as shown earlier.<sup>30</sup> This women's movement is based on the assumption that White women oppress Black women in America. Further, Black North American women accuse White women as posing themselves to be the norm of the women in America while perceiving Black women as second-class. According to Ogbu U. Kalu, North American Black women's theologies are named Womanist theologies because in the black culture to which these women belong "to say that a girl is acting womanish is to affirm that the person is beginning to exercise agency, act as grown up, and show a creative, adult sense of initiative."<sup>31</sup> This movement of Black women therefore develops this theology to liberate themselves from their disadvantaged position. They also show the White North American women that they are grown up. Again, although a good number of Circle women are black, blackness is not a dominating theme

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<sup>24</sup> See Mary Judith Press, "Feminist Christians in Latin America" in *Voices from the Third World Women*, Colombo: EATWOT, vol. VIII, no. 3, p. 55

<sup>25</sup> See Susan Frank Parsons (ed), *A Companion to Feminist Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> See Mary Judith Press, "Feminist Christians in Latin America," in *Voices from the Third World Women*, Colombo: EATWOT, vol. VIII, no. 3, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>30</sup> See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983, pp. xi – xii.

<sup>31</sup> See Ogbu U. Kalu, "Daughters of Ethiopia Constructing a Feminist Discourse in Ebony Strokes," In Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Women, Religion and Health, Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2006 p. 262.

in the Circle. The only parallel to this is among Black women in South Africa where issues of race and class are still real due to the history of apartheid. However, even among these minority groups, though their theologizing is linked to issues of race and class, the centre of theologizing is religion and culture. This is different from Black Theology, which concerns itself with culture, history and religion.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the rise of different feminist theologies within different contexts demands different names.<sup>33</sup> Our theologies are African Women Theologies. The other common thread connecting feminist theologies is that they have common routes of theologizing together within the framework of EATWOT. Through this forum, it cannot be denied that all feminist theologies are influenced by others. This, however, does not deny originality in the feminism of those that participated in this forum. Thus Circle feminism is different from either Asian or European feminism even though they may have some similarities.

#### *4.1.3 Defining Circle Theology as Feminism and Liberation Theology*

For many readers, the relationship between Feminism and Liberation may be a daunting task to explain. This may be true for the readers of this story of the Circle. After explaining the relationship between Circle theology and Feminism as well as Liberation, one may ask, what then are Circle theologies? I seek to highlight this question in the most pragmatic and simple ways. I propose to see the relationship in this way: (1) We need feminist methodologies, approaches, and models to contribute to the liberation of African women. Our liberation, though, is different from other liberation movements such as those seeking political liberation. However, Circle theologies can also be applied to liberation of women in politics. But the main focus of Circle theology is women's liberation within the spheres of culture and religion in Africa. This is how Caroline Ramazanoglu looks at the relationship between feminism and political liberation. She argues that there is indeed a sisterhood between political liberation and feminism but that there are also differences between those that are committed to political liberation in general and those that are Feminists. Further she adds that the goal of Feminism is women's liberation [women's lib as commonly said in short among feminist women] from oppression by men.<sup>34</sup> In this way we can argue that Circle feminism just like any other feminism provides a partial social theory. This is because Circle theology only targets forms of oppression from patriarchy related to religion and culture. Thus feminist theories cannot "explain the connections between different forms of oppression. But the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the New Millennium," *Agenda* 61, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Caroline Ramazanoglu, "Feminism and Liberation," in Linda McDowell and Rosemary Pringle, *Defining Women. Social Institutions and Gender Divisions* (eds), Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992, p. 176.

problem remains that the oppression of women is complex and occurs in many ways, enmeshed in all the other forms of oppression that people have created."<sup>35</sup> However, feminist theory can also provide reasons for women's liberation from other forms of oppression such as political and social economic causes.

## 4.2 Circle Methodology

In this section, I present methods and epistemologies that the Circle utilizes in formulating its theologies.

### 4.2.1 Data Collection

Data for Circle research is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are largely based on the experiences of women. If it is a Circle theology in the area of Biblical Studies, women's experiences with the Bible text are viewed to be reservoirs for revelation from God. Unless women experience the Scriptures for themselves, there is no revelation from God for them. Thus a Circle researcher collects and recollects women's experiences with the Bible text in constructing such theologies. If the researcher is working in the area of Church History or Mission History, she gathers her information on biographical studies of women,<sup>36</sup> stories of women<sup>37</sup> and even poems about women. A key device used in collecting such women's stories is the personal interview that deliberately seeks to uncover stories, experiences, myths, poems and so on about women. Story telling has an advantage in shifting women's roles from being objects of history to being its subjects.<sup>38</sup> Some of the material, because of its sensitive nature, is collected or recollects mainly through participatory observation.

An important aspect about data collection for Circle research is that women themselves must collect information on women. The assumption is that though men can also write theologies about women, the emphasis in Circle methodology is that women's experiences are best captured by women and not by men. In addition, it is believed by

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<sup>35</sup> See Caroline Ramazanoglu, "Feminism and Liberation," in Linda McDowell and Rosemary Pringle, *Defining Women. Social Institutions and Gender Relations*, Cambridge, 1992, p. 277.

<sup>36</sup> Examples are: Annalet van Schalkwyk, "The Story of Anne Hope: A White Woman's Contribution towards South African Liberation," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories. Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002, pp. 279-304; Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, "'The Mother of African Freedom' – The Contribution of Charlotte Maxeke to the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories. Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002, pp. 304-326.

<sup>37</sup> Use of narrative methodology has much prominence in Circle theology (H.M. van den Bosch, "African Theology: Is it Relevant for Global Christianity? *NGTT*, 2009, pp. 530-537 [537].

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Circle researchers that a woman has a vantage point in entering into the lives of fellow women. This is especially applied when studying issues about women that are best understood by women themselves. An example of this might be the collection of women's experiences of menstruation in a particular church. Although a man might be given the chance to collect such experiences he may not as fully understand the intricacies of the subject as a woman would. In fact, in certain cases, collection of women's experiences is done better when one is an insider. A woman who has gone through the girls' initiation in Chewa society will have a better chance to collect experiences of women in relation to initiation. The key to such an investigation is the secret codes a woman has learned as she underwent the initiation.

Another aspect of data collection is that experiences of women are collected according to their cultural contexts. Even if a wider study of women is carried out, a deliberate reflection on experiences of women in accordance with their cultural heritage is encouraged. It is within this paradigm that comparisons and differentiations of women's experiences in a particular study are done. The underlying principle here is that different modes of socialization and culture have an influence on women's experiences. It is argued therefore that experiences of a particular cultural group of women do not necessarily reflect theologies of all African women. The theologies of women in the Baptist Convention in Southern Malawi may or may not be the same as those of Nkhoma Synod women in Central Malawi. Their theologies are influenced by their different religions and cultures, among other factors. Thus Mercy Amba Oduyoye, pioneering this methodology, says that her work on the Akan women of Ghana is not speaking for African women on the whole continent of Africa, not even for the whole of Ghana.

Further Circle research must always be placed in the realm of religion and culture. Restricting Circle research to religion enables the researchers to differentiate their research from secular feminist research. Religion is enfolded in data collection by restricting research to experiences of women of faith with their religion and their different books of revelation. The dominant groups of women in the Circle are Christians and Muslims. There are also a few African Traditionalists and Jews. Circle theologies are distinctly different from other women's theologies in the West in that faith is part and parcel of these women's theologizing. From the start, Mercy pointed out that there could be no theology for African women if it is not hinged in culture and religion. Circle Women are believers in God as revealed in their respective religious traditions: Islam, African Traditionalist, Christian, and Jewish among others.

The role of faith as an ingredient in constructing Circle theology has two dimensions. The first is that Circle women are women that have a belief in God. This faith they bring with them in constructing theology. It is therefore very common that, although Circle theologies are academic, women often include a paragraph on their particular background

of faith. The assumption is that as they construct a particular theology, they put on the glasses of their faith. The product of their theology is therefore subjectively illuminated by their faith. This makes them insiders when they are constructing theologies relating to their faith, and outsiders when they are dealing with theologies of women in other faiths. Both perspectives (being outsider and insider) have advantages and disadvantages. As an insider you have the advantage that you have much knowledge about the experiences of these people and their faith. This, on the other hand, can be a disadvantage in that it may blind you for certain issues of concern within the faith community you are researching on. Being an outsider does not necessarily imply that you are writing a particular theology objectively. Your subjectivity may be influenced by judgmental attitudes, which often arise due to the fact that many people view their particular faiths as superior to others. One of the advantages though is that you may bring out issues that the people belonging to that particular faith are not conscious about.

The aspect of religion in Circle research is also applied to issues outside the church. This is because it is believed that the church must provide a prophetic role to society. However, even when Circle research is looking at issues of economics, it has to be approached from the religious perspective of the group you are researching on.

The role of revealed texts in religion is very important in Circle research. Christian Circle women for example often refer to the Bible in their research.

The Bible is central in constructing African women theologies because Africans identify with much in the Bible. In fact much in the Bible remains in their memory and becomes the basis for their reflection about God in their everyday life. Whether one is in a village, or studying in a university, the Bible is accepted as the source for the articulation of the Christian faith.<sup>39</sup>

Women often use the motif of Jesus' mission to the women in identifying paradigms to be emulated by church and society. Women rarely use the Old Testament, probably because it contains teachings which are laden with issues that are problematic to women. Examples of this are passages on Levirate marriages, or polygamy, which Circle Women find dehumanizing.<sup>40</sup> Thus they find the motif of Jesus' mission and teaching as a liberating source in formulating their theologies.

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<sup>39</sup> Madipoane Masenya, "The Bible as a 'Sword' and a 'Tool for Healing'," *Malaka-le Theologies*, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> On these two issues (male) African Theology seems to be more willing to compromise with traditional culture. Elna Mouton, "'From Woundedness Towards Healing'. Rhetoric or Pastoral-Theological Vision?" 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference: Southern African Association for Pastoral Work, Cape Town, 12-14 May 2003. See also Miranda N. Pillay, "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman? Towards a Theology of Gender Equality in the Context of HIV/AIDS," *Malaka-le Theologies*, 2005, p. 4.

The Bible as a source, Circle women are aware, must be used carefully because over the years it has been used as a "sword" and at the same time as a "healing tool."<sup>41</sup> The Bible has been used to legitimize slave trade, for example, as well as apartheid, among other atrocities. In fact some have even become sceptic about the use of the Bible in constructing theologies because of its contradictory usage. These argue that the Bible cannot be trusted, as expressed by Elna Mouton in this quote:

Through a lack of credibility on the side of preachers and theological institutions mainly because of repressive ways in which the Bible has been used in the past, many people seem to have lost their trust and confidence in the liberating power of God.<sup>42</sup>

In using the Bible as a source of Circle theology, the common approach is to conduct contextual Bible studies with a group of women. The idea is to document how women experience a particular text. The other way the Bible is used as a tool is by studying sermons by women on women's issues. These sermons bring out women's understanding of the biblical text. In both sermons and contextual Bible studies, being a participatory observer is encouraged although one can equally study Bible studies and sermons collected by others.

The dangers of using the Bible as a resource are many. Firstly, the Bible can be used as an appendix to one's theologies. To avoid this pitfall, one must use the Bible as a source if she is a biblical scholar and is researching on a specific issue in the Bible. The approach here would be how it is understood in the Bible and how it is understood and lived by a particular group of women. If one is not in the discipline of Biblical Studies but in other theological disciplines, then it is imperative that the Bible as a source must be used from the application perspective and never as an admonition or exhortation at the end of a theological piece.

Examples of how the Bible can be used as a source are: In the discipline of Biblical Studies, one must choose a passage for reflection or a particular theme in the Bible that relates to women of a particular context. An example of a topic that relates to a biblical passage would be: A Yao perspective on Christian marriage among women in Mangochi District of Southern Malawi with reference to 1 Corinthians 7; or the relationship of the Leviticus passage on menstruation to Holy Communion among urban middle class women of Calvary Family Church in Blantyre. Such research topics will focus on a particular text and the lived experiences of such a text among women from a particular

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Elna Mouton, "From Woundedness Towards Healing! Rhetoric or Pastoral-Theological Vision?" 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference: Southern African Association for Pastoral Work, Cape Town, 12-14 May 2003. See also Miranda N. Pillay, "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman? Towards a Theology of Gender Equality in the Context of HIV/AIDS," *Malaka-le Theologies*, 2005, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> See Mary Getui, "Masanta: Traditional Healer among Abagushii of Western Kenya," *Malaka-le Theologies*, 2005, p. 9.



context. A research topic on a biblical theme would be like these: The understanding of NT teaching on women leadership among women of Northern Malawi; the relationship between the understanding of women as missionaries in the Assemblies of God church in Lilongwe and in the Book of Acts.

In other disciplines of study, the Bible can be used as a tool of application. In the writing of the history of women in the Baptist Convention, Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler uses the Bible to reflect on the experiences of women in her church. The question she is relating the Bible to is how these women's understanding of the Bible has shaped their history. Further, the analysis of these women's history is guided by categories of leadership among women in the New Testament.

Circle research is restricted to African culture because it seeks to depart from similar feminist theologies that are not African. African culture gives them identity as Africans. Culture here is not the "primitive" culture of the past but the current culture, taking into account the fluidity of culture as well as particular identities of different African cultures these women are exposed to.<sup>43</sup> The argument is that God relates with the real world of women and utters oracles for them in accordance with their social, economic, political and traditional culture. The key questions are not who God is but how God manifests Himself/Herself in their world of social, economic, political and cultural liberation of women and men, from all forms of oppression in their world. In this view, some Circle theologians have even proposed that women must allow God to be born and grow within their hearts to deal with problems between men and women in their contexts. This simply means that they should be "mothers of God." In this expression, Circle Women emphasize that in a world where there is economic, social, political, and cultural oppression, it is because God is not there, and once women are willing to let God be born through them within such a context, compassion, justice, peace and all forms of liberation will flourish. Eliza Jane Getman is representative of this view and argues: "we must allow God to work and grow and be born over and over again in our lives."<sup>44</sup>

Circle theologizing exhibits differences due to political, social and economic contexts women are exposed to. This is because Circle women have been influenced by different colonial powers, some of which were more oppressive than others. For instance, Circle women from countries with prolonged periods of war will probably articulate theologies of women with an influence from such hostile environments. Countries that have experienced such prolonged periods of war and have Circle women include: Angola, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Mozambique. It is not only the theologies that are tainted with such

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<sup>43</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women Theologies," *Agenda* 61, 2004, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> See Eliza Jane Getman, "Giving Birth to God Our Mother: Nurturing a Theology of Birth as Creative Power," *Malaka-le Theologies* 2005.

an environment but also the kind of women's issues Circle women zoom in on. Progress in women's theological training, for example, is a more crucial issue in countries that experienced war than anywhere else.

Similarly, theologies constructed by South African Circle women differ from those constructed by Kenyan Circle women. For a South African Circle woman, political, social and economic as well as religious oppression women went through in the apartheid era becomes central in constructing their theology. Even within the same context of South Africa, a woman of colour will probably articulate different theologies from those articulated by white South African women. In the same way, Circle women are suspicious of theologies constructed by African men because Circle women come from a gender context different from that of the African men. Thus theologies of the Circle are different from African theologies in general. Circle theologies are from the perspective of the women's context, and different from that of their own brothers.

On the other hand, among Circle women, despite differences in cultural contexts, there are marked similarities in their research because, although African cultures are different, in essence they all fall under two major categories: patrilineal and matrilineal. The beauty of this is that in many countries these two categories exist. Since African women share a similar culture, they have a legitimate claim to construct theologies that are indeed African (African women theologies).

#### *4.2.2 Epistemology*

This is about how knowledge is constructed from the collected data. Although women in the Circle use women's experiences in the construction of theology, they do not do that blindly. They use critical inquiry as one of the tools in constructing theology. The role of critical inquiry for Circle theology is imperative. As women collect and recollect women's experiences, they must not be just chroniclers of women's experiences; rather they must task themselves with ordering these experiences in a logical and sensible way that brings out a theology about God and women. To achieve this, women's experiences are subjected to tools of analysis that require much reflection. The tools of analysis are dependent on the academic field under which such Circle research is placed. However, regardless of the academic field, within which the research is placed, Circle researchers use a "gendered analysis" from a woman's perspective. The guiding principle for this analysis is that God intended the world (church and society) to be a place where both women and men are treated equally as created in the image of God. In this respect ordering of women's experiences in a particular context must be designed in such a way that they assess how particular experiences of women reflect that. Therefore, an engendered analysis must be guided by questions such as:

- (a) Are these women's experiences affirming God's oracle about women's equality with men?
- (b) If there are discrepancies, who are the perpetrators of such inequality? (In an engendered analysis, reasons are first and foremost related to issues of patriarchy.)
- (c) What are the areas where women are facing inequality? (These may be, for example, in the area of church leadership and sexuality). Issues of whether women are ordained or not are gender issues if and where only men are ordained. Marriages where a woman is not given the chance to choose a husband (forced marriages, arranged marriages) are also gender issues because they demonstrate that a man is more powerful than a woman. After areas where women are facing inequality are highlighted, women must ask:
- (d) What ways can transform such inequalities from a woman's perspective?

The goal of Circle theology is transformation and that's where such questions are important. Transformation must aim at dignity for both women and men. This is crucial where dignity and power balance can sometimes oppose each other. An example of this contradiction is in the event that men gain economic empowerment at the expense of women's health. This is not God's talk for women according to Circle research. God's talk for women is where God brings both equality and dignity to women and men. A scientific inquiry into these women's experiences seeks to create a theology that will bring balance of power in church and society.

### 4.3 Major Epistemologies in Circle Research

There are three major epistemologies in Circle research: Relational Theology, Biblical Hermeneutics and Cultural Hermeneutics.

#### 4.3.1 *An Interpretation of Gender Relations (Relational Theology)*

It is aimed at bringing equality between men and women in church and society. The crucial aspect of this epistemology is to have a critical analysis of who holds the power, factors that promote such dominance and what could be done to have equal power between men and women. Significant contributions on gender relations in the church and society have been done by historical theologians in the Circle. Philomena Njeri Mwaura, Christina Landman,<sup>45</sup> Mary Getui<sup>46</sup> and Isabel Apawo Phiri are probably leaders in this field. These have based their writings on the experiences of men and women in either

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<sup>45</sup> See for example: Christina Landman, "A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey", Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (eds), *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, Nairobi: Acton, 1996, pp. 99-111.

<sup>46</sup> See for example: Mary N. Getui, "Women's Priesthood in Relation to Nature", in Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (eds), *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, Nairobi: Acton, 1996, pp. 31-39.

African Independent Churches or Traditional Religion<sup>47</sup> or Charismatic as well as Pentecostal churches.<sup>48</sup> Some have written on more than one religious context stated above.

In addition, the subject of gender relations has not been limited to historical theologians. It has also been promoted by other two Circle epistemologies: Biblical Reinterpretation and Cultural Reinterpretation. However, these two epistemologies do not only deal with the issues of gender equality in leadership roles but also address issues of women's dignity in church and society.

#### 4.3.2 Cultural Reinterpretation

In Circle research, culture is viewed as imposing multiple patriarchal forces on the women, thus necessitating reinterpretation. Some of the patriarchal oppression in culture that women deal with is related to one's identity,<sup>49</sup> belonging, marriage stability and religious misconceptions about women. It requires multiple interpretative tools to unsettle these culture related patriarchal oppressions. As the women engage in this game of reinterpreting culture, they grapple with the old issues of continuity and discontinuity of cultural elements in the light of what is liberating and what is not. Daisy Nwachukwu, for example, argues that religious customs that reject the development of a whole person and impede progress should be discontinued.<sup>50</sup>

While this game is easy for some African women, for others it is a nightmare goal to achieve because of conflictual realities in the life of African women which present a challenge in making choices on what is liberating and what is not. Some discontinuities as seen in the later paragraphs might result in a woman being rejected by her kin. Further, women face the realities of "low risk cultural choices" and "high risk cultural choices."<sup>51</sup> While low risk cultural practices require less sacrifice by women, high risk cultural choices refers to choices that would result in a woman sacrificing her means of survival or security. This would include loosing one's marriage or kinship ties among others.

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<sup>47</sup> See for example: Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "The Anthropological Dimension of a Patient's Treatment: a Response to Prof. Bernard Ugeux", *International Review of Mission*, vol 95, pp. 136-142.

<sup>48</sup> See for example: Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "Nigerian Pentecostal Missionary Enterprise in Kenya", Ogbu Kalu, Chima Jacob Koriah, G. Ugo Nwokeji and Obiama Nnaemeta (eds), *Religion, History and Politics in Nigeria*, University Press of America, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> The issue of identity also features prominently in the agenda of African Theology. See H.M. van den Bosch, "African Theology: Is it Relevant for Global Christianity? *NGTT*, 2009, pp. 529-537 [530].

<sup>50</sup> See Daisy Nwachukwu, "The Context of African Women's Life," in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam-Woode, 2001, pp. 118-121, also quoted by Helen Adekunbi Labeodan, "Women Reproductive Health in Nigeria, A Theo Philosophical Approach," *Malaka-le Theologies* 2005, p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> "Low risk cultural choices" and "high risk cultural choices" are my own neologisms.

While this is a reality for African women, this may not be a preoccupation for feminists in Europe or America. In the African context, women that would find it easy to make high risk choices are likely to be those that have other forms of security or survival to replace those that they have chosen against. Urban women, for example, may more easily make such choices as opposed to rural women because (1) they are somewhat removed from the grip of kinship and family to such an extent that the cultural prescriptions of their social group may no longer be binding to them; (2) they are likely to have other means of survival or securities other than those offered through marriage, kinship or family. Employment is an example of such securities. Regardless of the challenge regarding cultural interpretation, the Circle is providing an important model in African cultural hermeneutics that critiques African culture without denigrating it.<sup>52</sup>

#### 4.3.3 Examples of Works Based on Cultural Hermeneutics

The first example of such works was done by Mercy Amba Oduyoye. She reflects on the relationship between women's empowerment and African culture in the context of her first theological work on the experiences of Akan women in Ghana.<sup>53</sup> In this work she analyses these women's culture in relation to what in them is empowering and what is not. In "Daughters of Anowa," Mercy uses the word "empowering" when she argues that informal socialization practiced by the Akan women influences their development.<sup>54</sup> In this, she problematizes the issue of informal socialization in relation to women's empowerment. This is also outlined by other Circle women, especially in their discussions on girls' initiation.<sup>55</sup> Mercy highlights the meaning of "empowerment" further, namely as "liberation." This is done in her theological piece "Introducing African Women's Theology."<sup>56</sup> In this work, Mercy calls the Circle to attention concerning "Life cycles of African women" as affecting women's lives. Mercy refers to the word liberation in the same way as empowerment when she argues that cultural aspects that are liberating to women must be enhanced and those that are not liberating to women must be nullified.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-first Century", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 1997, 99, pp. 4-23.

<sup>53</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995, p. 227.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, pp. 62-70. See Rachel NyaGondwe Banda [Fiedler], *Women of Bible and Culture: Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere: 2005, pp. 121, 145, 183f; Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Coming of Age: A Christianized Initiation among Women in Southern Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere, 2005.

<sup>56</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, p. 30-31.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 30-31. The critical stages that are imbedded in women's life circles are birth, puberty, pregnancy, marriage, divorce, remarriage etc.

Circle women have widely used this definition to analyze culture. Thus the process of continuities and discontinuities of cultural elements to affirm women's dignity is the hallmark of liberation in African Feminism. This may be different from other feminist movements, where such liberation is targeted at the class struggles, for example.

The second example is the work by Nyambura Njoroge on an ethical resistance staged by the Gikuyu women in the Women's Guild of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), established among the Gikuyu people in 1891.<sup>58</sup> In their society, women struggled with a hazardous cultural practice, the circumcision of girls (female genital mutilation). The practice is a health hazard because those that undergo this ritual face death because of the brutality of the act of circumcision. They also face difficulties in delivery, or even death of their unborn child.<sup>59</sup> However, the cultural practice was sanctioned by patriarchy, as it served the interests of men. Thus the cultural element became an ethical issue, as there was a controversy as regards the essentiality of the rite. For some this cultural aspect was essential in nurturing and protecting the network of relationships in the Gikuyu community. This was important as well as a moral responsibility.<sup>60</sup> The centrality of the practice is also seen by how difficult it was to resist it.

Nyambura Njoroge discusses how the medical attempts in hospitals and schools did not manage to wipe away the practice. Thus, even though right from the beginning of mission medical work in the area, there was a systematic teaching about circumcision that was started in 1906 by Dr John Arthur of Thogolo Hospital, there was little change in this cultural aspect. This is because as a missionary and a European, it is likely that locals questioned as to why an outsider would try to solve problems that were outside his experience.<sup>61</sup> Circumcision was also included in the syllabus of the schools with the idea to oppose it. Minnie Watson did curriculum development on this particular cultural aspect. It had to take an active group resistance from women in the same culture (Gikuyu) that reinforced the transformation. Indeed the women staged a protest against the rite.<sup>62</sup>

From the experience of Gikuyu women, it is clear that in reinterpreting cultural issues that have an ethical significance, the urgency of the matter might require much more than dialogue. In this case, the women had to protest the cultural aspect by staging a group

<sup>58</sup> Nyambura Njoroge, *Kiama kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation*, Legon: Legon Theological Studies, 2000, p. 173.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of the then missionary context, see Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions. From Hudson Taylor to Present Day Africa*, Oxford et al: Regnum, 1994, pp. 252-256.

<sup>62</sup> Nyambura Njoroge, *Kiama kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation*, Legon: Legon Theological Studies, 2000, p. 5.

demonstration. This, however, is best done by those from within, in this case, the women of that particular culture that staged the resistance. Such a group in turn forms a source of survival. Secondly, change is effective if solidarity is reinforced (the women resisted this cultural aspect as a group, not as individuals). Such actions might also gradually change notions of what may be culturally binding to women's identity, belonging and family security in that particular culture. This might be a positive development for the liberation of daughters in the future generation. Since some of the cultural elements that oppress women are reinforced by the church, it is important that women participate in the decision-making forum of the church. (Gikuyu women had to approach the leaders of the church that they were rejecting this cultural element).

Another similar example is the Circle writing in relation to the experience of women suffering from VVF (Vesico Vagina Fistula) in Nigeria. VVF is a hotbed for stigmatization and suffering for women, yet it can be prevented by an active demonstration against early marriages. Leakage of urine is experienced especially among women that have early pregnancies, since these woman's pelvic girdles are not sufficiently developed to allow the passage of the baby.<sup>63</sup> Therefore the baby ruptures some of the bladder tissue, causing the condition. Women in this condition are restricted to their private homes, are chased from families and have difficulty in accessing medical help. While Margaret Umeagudosu suggests that increasing access to medical facilities will help these women fight stigmatization, it is clear that this medical approach needs to be complemented with a demonstration against this practice. The traditional pattern of delivering babies outside hospitals (*kunya*) must also be demonstrated against.<sup>64</sup>

#### 4.3.4 Textual Reinterpretation

The second major epistemology used in constructing Circle theology is textual hermeneutics. It is a hermeneutic that involves the reinterpretation of books of revelation used in different religions. In this discussion I will use the Bible text as an example of how textual hermeneutics is done, because the majority of the Circle members are Christians.

An analysis of Circle works regarding biblical reinterpretation shows the opposition against literal(istic) interpretations of the Bible. These Circle researchers align themselves with the view that the Bible is patriarchal due to the androcentric nature of the Bible authors. In this they are in agreement with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Thus the

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<sup>63</sup> See Margaret A. Umeagudosu, "'Act of God?' The Experience of Women Living with Vesico Vagina Fistula (VVF) among Women in Northern Nigeria," *Malaka-le Theologies* 2005.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

majority of the Circle women do not subscribe to the position that the Bible is "thus says the Lord" all the time, but rather that women, in finding meaning for themselves from the Bible, should ask: "what does the Lord say in this Bible passage for women?" This exercise is based on the stance that most Bible interpretations are androcentric and that this hides the Word of God for women in their different situations. The only way women can get meaning for themselves is to find ways of unsettling this androcentric nature of the Bible.

Within this dominant view of biblical interpretation is an Evangelical interpretation that has become visible since the advent of Evangelical women in the Circle. Evangelical women are of two variations. The first group argues that the Bible's position that men should lead over women is ordained by God and must be followed. The second group argues that the Bible does not teach that men are above women and that those who claim that the Bible is androcentric read scriptures wrongly. These show their argument by unveiling women of power in the Bible. Below are some examples of biblical interpretations within Circle writings.

#### *4.3.5 The Androcentric Nature of the Bible and Bible Interpreters*

Women in the Circle explain the androcentric nature of the Bible in many ways. The first argument is that the Bible is androcentric because women are not recognized in the Bible. In the words of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the world of the first century in which the church was born was a "predominantly hierarchical-patriarchal world."<sup>65</sup> This influenced the production of an androcentric Bible text. This view is also shared by other Circle writers. Basing her exposition on Mt 8:14-17, Peggy Mulambya Kabonde shows that the wife of Peter and his mother in-law are neither named nor considered for their part in the ministry. The two women are also not named in Mark and Luke. The argument, which Peggy Mulambya Kabonde puts forward, is therefore that the Bible follows an androcentric pattern.<sup>66</sup> As such it does not always address correctly the issues of women today unless reinterpreted. In relation to service, Peggy Mulambya Kabonde argues that it is not liberating to see the woman (Peter's mother in-law) caring for people soon after being healed. She argues that the state of her health should have been recognized and maybe the very men the mother in-law was providing services to should have been the ones doing the caring ministry.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Women Theologians and the Early Church. An Examination of Historiography," in *Voices from the Third World Women*, Colombo: EATWOT, vol. viii, no. 3, p. 70.

<sup>66</sup> See Rev Peggy Mulambya Kabonde, "Women and Health in Africa in the Face of HIV/AIDS Based on Mt 8:14-17, Malaka-le Theologies 2005.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.



Secondly, Circle women argue that the androcentric nature of the Bible is responsible for the inclusion of wrong models of women in the Bible. In addition to this, the early Bible interpreters who were mainly men constructed theologies basing on such wrong models of women. A common example is how the story of Eve is presented against woman's empowerment. The story is used by such early androcentric biblical interpreters to argue that because Eve is the one who gave the forbidden fruit to Adam, so she made Adam sin. This biblical misconception is taken as a reason why in some churches women cannot be ordained as pastors. The other story is that of a woman caught in adultery where Jesus asks those around to throw a stone at her if they did not sin. Here the biblical writer exposes the sin of the woman and hides that of the man that is later exposed by Jesus. The other layer of this according to this androcentric view is that there is failure to absorb women's wisdom from wrong models of women to promote the dignity of a woman. For example, why not reflect on why this woman committed adultery? Was it due to lack of economic empowerment?

Thirdly, misinterpreting passages or words in the Bible to oppress women is another landmark for the androcentric nature of the Bible as well as that of early male interpreters of the Bible. These Circle women argue that certain male Bible interpreters have interpreted words or phrases in the Bible to undermine women. Beatrice Okeyere-Manu presents an example of this model. She argues that the words "woman as helper" to the husband have been used wrongly to imply woman's subordination to men.<sup>68</sup> The other examples are how verses or words such as these undermine women: Ephesians 5 about women submitting to their husbands; man as head of woman; woman as created from man's rib; God creating man first before woman and Paul's teaching on head covering. Such phrases and concepts have been used to promote patriarchal domination in church and society. This point is also supported by non-Circle members. Phyllis Trible, for example, shows how the passage on how woman was created after man is wrongly used to construct a theology that women are inferior to men.<sup>69</sup>

Fourthly, Circle women argue that the practice of ignoring women that played an important role in the Bible is another product of the androcentric nature of the Bible as well as that of the biblical interpreters. An example is the undue emphasis on male models of leadership in the church. Did Jesus not choose 12 male disciples? Such

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<sup>68</sup> See Beatrice Okeyere-Manu, "Sacrificing Health for Well Being: Sex Work as a Livelihood Option for the Poor Women in Pietermaritzburg," Malaka-le Theologies 2005, p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> See Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation": JAAR 41(1973), pp. 36 -37, cf J. Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond; FBL 88 (1969), p. 9f. For a contrary interpretation of Gen 2 as emphasizing gender equality see: Janet Kholowa and Klaus Fiedler, *Pa Chiyambi Anawalenga Chimodzi-modzi*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1999, pp. 22-25, Translated as: *In the Beginning God Created them Equal*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000, pp. 22-25.

androcentric texts have also influenced androcentric interpretations of the Bible.<sup>70</sup> From the passage of Jesus choosing only male disciples, for example, some theologians conclude that women cannot be leaders of the church or be ordained, because they were not among the Twelve.

#### 4.3.6 *Evangelical Interpretation*

Evangelical interpretation is indeed a force to reckon with in Circle writings. This is a view that is also supported by theologians outside the Circle. Othniel Mintang Yila in his category of the four waves of feminism in the Circle includes Evangelical Feminism. Other categories are: Rejectionist Feminism,<sup>71</sup> Liberal Feminism and Hierarchical Feminism.<sup>72</sup> Evangelical Feminism relies on a literal translation of the Bible text. It accepts that the Bible is valid and is the standard of faith. Those subscribing to this view argue that the Bible is not androcentric, but that the traditional interpreters of the Bible constructed theologies that oppressed women. Further Evangelical feminists argue that passages that portray women as inferior were historically conditioned and are not universally applicable to the Christian faith of today.

Within the arena of Evangelical interpretation lies also what Ogbu O. Kalu calls Hierarchical Feminism. This is part and parcel of Circle writings. It is based on the interpretation that scripture teaches hierarchy in the Christian home and in the Christian church. This hierarchy, however, does not imply that there is an ontological difference between women and men. Both sexes are equal in the eyes of God while maintaining different roles in a functional hierarchy.<sup>73</sup>

##### 4.3.6.1 *Patriarchal Relationships not God's Design*

One wing of Evangelical interpretation in the Circle disagrees with the view that the Bible is patriarchal and androcentric. These try to recover stories of women of power in the Bible. A Circle woman who does this is Rhodah Ada James. In contradiction to the

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<sup>70</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Women Theologians and the Early Church. An Examination of Historiography," in *Voices from the Third World Women*, Colombo: EATWOT, vol. VIII, no. 3, pp. 71-72.

<sup>71</sup> These Feminists argue that both the Bible and the Christian tradition must be rejected. They seek answers for women's liberation through other means not based on the Bible. Some of such solutions include: Seeking structural change in society; viewing history as a massive plot against women; advocating an inclusive language, legalizing abortion among others; The entire Judeo-Christian tradition is sinful and unredeemable

<sup>72</sup> Othniel Mintag Yila, "The Place of Women in the Church Ministry as Shown in 1 Timothy 2:9-15," MA, Nairobi International School of Theology, 1998.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

lack of representation of women leaders in top church structures, she argues that the Old Testament and the New Testament argue for women's leadership.<sup>74</sup>

Beginning with the Old Testament, she outlines the following examples of women who played an important role in the Bible: Miriam was a sister to Moses and Aaron (Micah 6:4, Hebrews 5:4); Deborah was judge and prophet (Judges 4 and 5:4); Esther was the wife of a king and a Jewish girl (Esther);<sup>75</sup> Hannah was a godly mother (1 Samuel 1:28; 2:19); Ruth became an ancestor of Jesus Christ (Ruth 4 and Mt 1:2-6); Rahab, Rebecca and Sarah and many others were women of importance in the Old Testament.<sup>76</sup>

Rhodah Ada James also refers to women who occupied important positions in the New Testament. In the Gospels, for example, she outlines Mary the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:26-55; Luke 2:34-35; 41-52; John 2:3-5; 19:25); Mary sister of Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:17-44; John 12:1-3); Mary Magdalene, a friend of Jesus (Mark 15:40-44; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 8:2, John 19:25; John 20:11-18).<sup>77</sup>

Rhodah Ada James does not only see examples of such powerful women in the gospels, but also in the life of the early church. Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2) is one of them. She also argues that it is not true that Paul promoted the subjection of women. This is seen in his attitude towards women reflected in his ministry, as he often cooperated with women.<sup>78</sup> Rhodah Ada James argues that 1 Cor 14:34-35, which talks of Paul barring women from speaking in church, was culturally conditioned. She argues that Paul was offering appropriate solutions to the problems he was facing at that time. This teaching should not be applied to women in the church today.<sup>79</sup> By highlighting women leaders in the construction of Biblical theology these Circle women are trying to correct past androcentric misinterpretations.

Secondly, such Circle women highlight the role of men in uplifting the positions of women in church and society. Mercy Amba Oduyoye for example argues that certain men's behaviour in the Bible affirms women. If men could emulate these men today,

<sup>74</sup> Rhodah Ada James: "The Scope of Women's Positions in the Church, " in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Talitha Qumi. Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam-Woode, 2001, pp. 192-200 [193].

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 194-196.

<sup>78</sup> A similar position is taken here in Malawi in: Janet Kholowa and Klaus Fiedler, *Mtumwi Paulo ndi Udindo wa Amayi Mumpingo* [The Apostle Paul and the Authority of Women in the Church], Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2001, pp. 7-14.

<sup>79</sup> Rhodah Ada James: "The Scope of Women's Positions in the Church, " in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Talitha Qumi. Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam-Woode, 2001, pp. 197-198.

women would be empowered. Some of the examples she gives are: Abraham, Joseph and Jairus. Abraham was criticized by fellow men when he lied that Sara was his sister. If men condemn fellow men, for example, those involved in activities that demean women, women would experience liberation. An example would be men condemning men who rape girl children and women.

In the case of Joseph, the husband of Mary who became the mother of Jesus, Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that Joseph chose to defend women's dignity even when it meant him going against culture. He demonstrated this when he found out that Mary was pregnant with Jesus even before he had married her. He chose not to dump Mary as Jewish custom allowed, but went ahead and married her. If men were willing to go against culture for the sake of protecting women, women would be empowered. Jairus is an example of a man who takes care of his children. This wisdom could transform men who leave to women the responsibility of caring for children. Paul worked with women on equal level. His list of greetings in Romans 16 shows clear evidence of this.

Thirdly, Circle women argue that where teaching in the Bible does not affirm women's leadership, a search must be made whether such rules were followed or not. In the case of Jesus choosing the 12 disciples, for example, who were all men, one may get the message that He was against women's leadership in church. However, if this is checked by His lived experience, it is clear that Jesus was not anti-women. In fact, he taught positively concerning women's issues. So he was a feminist.<sup>80</sup>

Fourthly, Circle women construct theologies of women by contextualizing texts that exclude women in the church tradition. Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that in the Methodist Church of Ghana, at Easter, the pronouncement made in the church is: 'Jesus is risen, is risen indeed: He showed Himself to Peter'. But the pronouncement should read: 'He showed Himself to Mary and Peter'. This acknowledges the reality that some Bible accounts present the narrative in which Mary was the first person who saw Jesus after the resurrection. She is the one who transmitted the message to Peter and his fellow disciples who were in hiding.<sup>81</sup> Women are also reconsidering the formula in the sacrament of marriage that says: "until death do us part." Circle women argue that if a woman finds herself in an abusive marriage, she must not be forced to stay in such a marriage.

Fifthly, Circle women appeal to Jesus' message in reconstructing theologies that undermine women. In this they argue for inconsistency between Bible passages that seem to oppress women and Christ's message. An example of this model is where the Leviticus

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<sup>80</sup> The same argument is used in cultural reinterpretation. Paul taught about "head covering" but commended women in ministry such as Phoebe.

<sup>81</sup> Helen Adekunbi Labeodan, "Women Reproductive Health in Nigeria, A Theo-Philosophical Approach," Malaka-le Theologies 2005.

passages that stipulate laws of uncleanness are compared to the message of Christ that calls for new life. Helen Labedeodan Adekunbi deployed such a model. In this, she argues that the message of Christ decides what women should follow; and if there is a passage that opposes the message of Christ, then the teaching in that passage must be ignored. The laws of uncleanness in Leviticus must be censored by Christ's teaching that the old has gone and the new has come. Laws of uncleanness belong to the old and need not be followed. The other Bible passage that is used in opposing passages that oppress women in the church is Luke 4:8, which says: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news and set the captives free." Isabel Phiri uses this motif in justifying why missionaries of Nkhoma Synod were wrong in denying women church leadership positions.

#### *4.3.6.2 Patriarchal Relationships as God's Design*

For some Evangelical Circle women, equality between men and women is only in being created in God's image and not in sharing leadership roles. These argue that patriarchal relationships are designed by God. However, this assertion is highly contested by the majority of Circle women. Their protest is eschatological. They argue that the Church is the image of the Kingdom of God, as it is illustrated in passages such as Mt 22:30.<sup>82</sup> For this reason, the church must get rid of distinctions between man and woman that do not reflect His Kingdom. The other verse that forms the Magna Charta of such an inclusive theology is Galatians 3:28.<sup>83</sup>

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In the Kingdom of God both men and women are created in His/Her image and there is no distinction between men and women apart from biological distinctions. Even in God's eschatological dream, at the resurrection, there is neither husband nor wife. Thus there ought to be no distinction between man and woman now. It is for this reason that God uses people (men and women) as He/She likes according to the spiritual gifts showered upon them all. In this showering of gifts, God does not make distinctions as regards which roles women should play and which roles men should play. Thus both men and women can be pastors, teachers, healers, prophets and so on, as God gives them grace.

On the other hand, Circle women have seen that this image of God for the church is far from being realized in today's believing communities. There is often lack of inclusiveness of women, especially in areas related to Church participation. Men have

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<sup>82</sup> "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage."

<sup>83</sup> Othniel Mintang Yila, "The Place of Women in the Church Ministry as Shown in 1 Timothy 2:9-15," June 1998, MA Thesis, Nairobi International School of Theology.

often monopolized power in Church and society. These Circle women highlight the following ways in which patriarchy is expressed in the Christian church:

Firstly, hierarchical structures are viewed as patriarchal and negative to women's leadership in the church. Hierarchical structures are the means by which the Church has systematically concentrated its power at the centre, whereby the majority become followers. In such a model, decision-making is often top to bottom and for one to influence decisions of the church, it is easier to be at the centre. Unfortunately, those on the top of the hierarchy are usually men, the clergy who are ordained. This therefore becomes a challenge to women, as those ordained are mainly men. It follows also that in many churches more men than women access theological training because it is often a prerequisite to the ordained ministry. After the clergy there is the laity and this is the group that forms the majority. Almost everywhere in Africa more women than men are lay members of the congregations. Since hierarchal structures are often patriarchal, and depend on ordination, they are less empowering to women who are denied opportunities to ordination and church leadership. According to Teresa Hinga, such hierarchical structures have a tendency to practice absolutization of power and to centralize decision-making.<sup>84</sup> This implies that women become recipients of decisions, even those affecting them. Some Circle women see these patriarchal hierarchical structures as not empowering to women and also foreign to some African cultures. In such cultures it is viewed by some Circle women that patriarchal leadership has been inherited from the west via missionary Christianity.<sup>85</sup>

Secondly, the majority of Circle women see some church teachings as patriarchal. An example is in the area of marriage with teachings that promote women to be inferior to men. These Circle women see that certain teachings on Christian marriage disregard God's vision of women as equal partners with men. This is visible, for example, in the fact that certain teachings encourage married women to be silent in the church as well as to submit at home to their husbands. In Charismatic ecclesiology, for example, Matthew Ojo, a leading analyst and scholar of Charismatic Christianity in Africa, observes that some of these churches prescribe silence of women literally in their practices. An example is that, although a charismatic family may believe that a couple should have a joint account—which they call the common purse—to which all incomes go and from which all expenses are deducted, the financial responsibilities of the home are left to the husband, and the wife is expected to obey and submit completely to him. In fact, this is seen as a sure and unmistakable mark of a woman's spirituality. The other teaching on

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<sup>84</sup> Oral presentation, Addis Ababa, 4-9.8.2002.

<sup>85</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, p. 49ff.

marriage that Circle women see as sabotaging equality of women is the insistence on the indissolubility of marriage even in the case of dangerous marriage relationships. This is expressed at the time when a couple ties the knot at a wedding ceremony; saying: "until death do us part," and in the time of HIV/AIDS this may well mean that the husband may bring HIV and death into the marriage and that the wife has to submit.

Isabel Apawo Phiri outlines another evil that goes with this silencing of women in such churches using the case of CCAP Nkhoma Synod. Although this practice is dying away, it was common in the past that at their church women group meetings they had a man as a CID. These men were elected by the church to oversee the activities of the women. In this church, where Isabel Apawo Phiri conducted her research, the CID is called *mkhalapakati* (the one sitting in the midst).<sup>86</sup> This was usually a church elder.<sup>87</sup>

Further, in this model of women being subservient to men, some women are more involved in the practical work of the church. Women play the deaconate role of visiting the sick, comforting them and those bereaved. Some women engage themselves in projects aimed at intervening in social problems of the society such as hunger and orphanhood. However, women who are involved in such roles are often not economically recognized by the church. The majority is not paid for their work.

The other dimension that reduces women to subordinate positions is the common understanding that women lead women only. This problem has a long history. In the 1st to 6th century African church, the Catechetical School of Origen, for example, produced women such as Potamiaena who taught women only.<sup>88</sup> This trend continues even in sections of the modern missionary movement.

#### 4.3.6.3 Suggested Reasons for Men's Leadership over Women

Apart from the reasons stated above, some Circle women see that women's confinement to minor roles in the church is a result of the internalization process women have gone through in their respective ecclesiologies. Churches, which have a history of women playing subservient roles, have impacted women negatively to such an extent that some of them have started believing that women ought not to be leaders. This state has been realized through internalization of wrong interpretations of scripture and of cultural and social beliefs that reduce women to second class citizens in church and society. The side effect is that such women become a barrier to the liberation of fellow women who desire to come out of such situations. Such women disapprove fellow women to be leaders.

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<sup>86</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, p. 97.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Though she taught only women during her lifetime, she appeared to a number of men after her martyrdom encouraging them to convert to faith in Christ, which they did.

A delayed start in theological training for women has immobilized them from aspiring to church leadership at higher levels of the church government. Some women who have some kind of leadership in church only have "pastors' wives' training." Unfortunately, this is only accessible to those who are wives of the "to be" pastors of their different denominations. The only possibilities for theological training for laywomen often are secular universities. This, however, is now changing. The challenges to theological training have already been reflected on in detail in the historical chapters.<sup>89</sup>

#### 4.3.6.4 *Seeking an Alternative Theology to Promote Equal Leadership of Women and Men*

Firstly, some Circle women argue that an approach where the church moves from a male centred hierarchy to people centeredness will enhance women's equality with men in participation in church and society. This will unsettle the reality of the majority of the women being at the fringe of the church. In Catholic theology, it would require the church to move in the direction of Vatican II that encourages participatory and authentic Christian communities. In this paradigm men and women have the privilege of participating in decision-making.<sup>90</sup> In this model women are seeking an ecclesiology that must allow both men and women to be actively and strategically consulted, involved and listened to as moral agents capable of critical engagement with church and society. Denise Ackermann, who champions this model, however cautions that she fears that if women are at the centre, they will behave in the same way as men and oppress others.<sup>91</sup>

Secondly, Circle women argue that the church should revisit the role women play in the church through a fresh interpretation of the same verses that are used to relegate women to support roles. The proponent of this model is Prof Elna Mouton.<sup>92</sup> In this argument, she refers to Genesis 3:20. "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living." Based on this Elna Mouton argues that Adam is given enormous responsibility to name Eve as mother of all human beings. By this Adam gave Eve space to become a significant and honourable figure in history. She further argues that this verse can be interpreted in both a historical and a metaphorical way. In a metaphorical way, what Adam did in naming Eve, was to ascribe to her the role of mother of all. Historically, however, Eve has been ascribed female roles as opposed to something more in accordance to the gift God accorded her. Elna Mouton regrets that this

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<sup>89</sup> For a recent discussion see: Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, "Theological Education for Women in Malawi", *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae*, vol. 35, 2009, Supplement, pp. 119-134.

<sup>90</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of Naming. A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996, p. 213.

<sup>91</sup> Interview Denise M. Ackermann, Cape Town, May 2002.

<sup>92</sup> Prof Elna Mouton was lecturer at Stellenbosch University when I interviewed her in May 2002.



verse is among those verses used to promote low positions of women in church and society; yet it has a liberating voice for women.

Elna Mouton argues that women must take the initiative to challenge men to give back to women full motherly roles both in the literal sense and in the metaphorical sense. In the metaphorical sense, it is not only the woman who is to be a mother, but also the whole church as a parent. She desires therefore that the church should build up an inclusive team of both men and women in the leadership of the church. This can be achieved by bringing female experiences into the mainstream of the church through the liturgy. These experiences should aim at converting men and bringing them aboard to explain their own experiences. Such an exercise would encourage healing and bridging the gap between men and women. This liturgy can include prayers to facilitate healing.

Concerning reasons why men do not participate freely in such an exercise of sharing experiences, Elna Mouton uses the analogy that distinguishes men from women, as regards freedom to share experiences. She argues that women are perceived to be "private." They focus on the body and are emotional. Men are perceived to be "public", with reason, and therefore their focus is on the mind. They enjoy being in authority. This distinction has led to an inferiority complex in women and a superiority complex in men. A mutual sharing of experiences by both men and women can bridge this chasm and bring healing for both sexes. Men will learn to share power with women and enhance each other's potential.<sup>93</sup>

Thirdly, Circle women present stories of women who have become leaders in their different churches to inspire other women that struggle to be leaders at higher levels of their church. Central items in these stories are the struggles that women go through; the perceptions from both men and women concerning their struggle, and the means of transforming such structures. Classic examples of women in leadership are those in the area of ordained ministry. Circle women also write concerning women leaders in politics. Their goal is to override the notion that women cannot be leaders.

Fourthly, women show how church women groups can bring transformation to such structures. The leader here is Beverly Gail Haddad, who did extensive work on the

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<sup>93</sup> When I visited Cape Town in 2002, it was an exciting time to meet Prof Elna Mouton in her splendid office at Stellenbosch University. She was most delighted to have me talk to her as one of the African Women Theologians. She was grateful that, even though she is a White South African, I had singled her out as an African Women Theologian. African Women Theologians of white descent have sometimes felt alienated by women of colour at times. A similar reaction was evident when I visited Denise Ackermann, a retired Professor at the University of Western Cape. Denise Ackermann showed concern over the fact that she is not informed about some of the regional Circle meetings in South Africa despite the fact that she has been involved in the Circle for a long time.

[Anglican] Mothers' Union in South Africa.<sup>94</sup> Several Circle scholars have shown how women's groups play a significant role in church. Many other Circle women have used this paradigm in the Circle, like Isabel Apawo Phiri, Esther Mambo from Kenya and Dorcas Akintunde from Nigeria. Some of their work is reflected in this thesis.

Fifthly, apart from writing stories of women in the ordained ministry, women have sometimes used action to realize ordination. The march in the Presbyterian Church in Malawi (CCAP Blantyre Synod) is one of them.<sup>95</sup> In lobbying for the ordination of women, issues of equal treatment between men and women are also discussed. Those elements that discourage ordination for women are challenged. Mary Getui, a Kenyan, gives the example of a church that at ordination commissions the women with such question as: "will you take care of the young girls?" while men are commissioned "to take care of the church."<sup>96</sup> The attempt of churches to ordain women to lesser positions in the church is written against by Circle women.<sup>97</sup>

Lastly, Circle women promote women's exposure to the winds of liberation as one way of unsettling patriarchal hierarchy. Such promotion is done by encouraging women to study at Universities abroad; or to participate at interdenominational meetings such as PACWA. Such an exposure provides an environment of learning from others that triggers liberation among women in contexts where women are subordinate to men.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

The Circle has a rich methodology that can contribute to making Africa a better world to live in. However, it only offers a partial solution to the problem of women oppression in the world, because it only views such oppression from the perspective of women. It also deals mainly with one causative problem of women's oppression, which is patriarchy, while women's oppression is caused by multiple factors. The blame on men as causative agents for the oppression of women has delayed meaningful collaboration between men and women on issues of oppression affecting African women. Currently there is another wing of gender theory, masculinity, which also focuses on men. There is need to harmonize feminist and masculinity theories that deal with oppression and issues of

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<sup>94</sup> See Beverly Gail Haddad, "The Mothers' Union in South Africa. Untold Stories of Faith Survival and Resistance," PhD, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2000.

<sup>95</sup> For a personal appraisal see: Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Marching, Suspended and Stoned: Christian Women in Malawi 1995," in Kenneth R. Ross (ed), *God, People and Power in Malawi. Democratization in Theological Perspective*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1996, pp. 63-105.

<sup>96</sup> Interview Mary Getui, The Institute of Religion and Culture, Ghana, 2005.

<sup>97</sup> Such lesser (non-) ordinations took place in Malawi in the Zambezi Evangelical Church to placate the women who asked for full ordination (Anthony Nkhoma, *Women in Search of Identity: the Case of Women's Ordination in Zambezi Evangelical Church*, Zomba: Kachere, 2005).

gender equality to foster collaboration between male and female theologians in the fight against the evils facing Africa. However, focussing on women's theories is partially important because it is the women themselves that should pioneer their own liberation.

In the following two chapters, chapters 6 and 7, I show the relevance of the Circle to Malawi from both historical and theological perspectives. I have chosen to make an application to Malawi because I come from that context. Further I would like to show the limitations and possibilities of applying Circle theology to a given context. I do this with the intention that Circle theology should reflect on ways of how the Circle can orient its theology to the grassroots women of a given context. This is a valid exercise because the Circle's commitment is not restricted to the production of academic books but should be directed to the liberation of women in church and society.

## Chapter 5: The Birth and Growth of the Circle in Malawi

The first attempt to relate the Circle to Malawi is from a historical perspective. In this chapter I seek to highlight the history of the Circle in Malawi while showing some of the key factors that have influenced this history. I do this with the idea of providing information on how Circle chapters can be strengthened in a given country. Although Circle chapters in different African countries are influenced differently, there is a high chance that many factors I highlight in this section have a bearing on the formation of chapters in other countries in Africa as well.

The story of the Circle in Malawi is restricted to the involvement of women theologians that have studied at theological institutions in Malawi that are linked to the Board of Theological Studies. This means that Roman Catholic and Salvation Army women, for example, are not included in the reflections done in this chapter. There is also more emphasis on women from Evangelical institutions because I am a member of an Evangelical church. In addition, more and more women from Evangelical churches are joining the Circle at the continental level. Further, I have an emphasis on the experiences of women at Malawian secular universities, because such academic institutions are very central in the formation of Circle chapters in Africa.

The story of the Circle in Malawi is determined by the theologies that are advanced by the Circle in Africa. It is a fact that the establishment of the Circle in Malawi lagged behind, compared to some countries, although it is not at the bottom of the scale. Other countries such as Zimbabwe and Zambia are worse off than Malawi in terms of Circle development and growth. Whereas the Malawi Circle started in 1990 officially, Malawi had its own national Circle chapter only in 1994. I emphasize "officially" here, bearing in mind that the Circle existed as early as 1990 even though, at that time, it was not called "Malawi Circle." This concurs with the testimony of Isabel Apawo Phiri when she records the Malawi women theologians' meeting that took place in 1990 at Grace Bandawe Conference Centre in Blantyre, in this way:

The idea of Malawian women theologians coming together to identify their concerns was in response to the inauguration of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture which is being run by the Circle of African Women Theologians. It is not clear to us as to why they did not call themselves the Malawi Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experiences of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, p. 121.

### 5.1 Women's Exposure to Feminist and Liberation Movements

To be a Circle member one must have an academic interest. This is a license that opens doors to liberation, feminist issues and methodologies. These equip one to either become a member or open Circle chapters in one's area. In Malawi such an academic world would be unveiled to any individual upon stepping into the doors of a secular University that promotes feminist ideas. Currently Chancellor College (of the University of Malawi) and Mzuzu University are the key secular academic institutions that do this. To the contrary, most church based theological colleges and seminaries in Malawi do not promote such ideas to their students. At Chancellor College, the genesis of the Circle was only possible through Isabel Apawo Phiri who had been exposed to feminist and liberation theologies when she went to study abroad for her MA in Lancaster and for her PhD in Cape Town.<sup>2</sup> It is this exposure that energized her to start the Circle. In the recent years, Mzuzu University has introduced courses in feminist theologies, liberation theology as well as gender studies. This has created a fertile ground for the genesis of the Circle at Mzuzu University in the coming years.

### 5.2 Presence of Academic Women at the International Planning Committee

Circle history shows this reality in that the earliest members of the Circle, who became part of the International Planning Committee, were mostly those that taught at secular Universities. These were oriented towards feminist and liberation theologies and became fertile to catch the vision for the Circle early. These were likely to digest the Circle's agenda and establish Circle chapters at their institutions of learning. Such exposure had to be at a certain academic level where one is able to research and write publishable papers.

The projected role of what Malawi academic women could have achieved, if present at the IPC and at the First Convocation in 1989, is justified by the history of the Circle documented earlier in this thesis where it is clear that countries that had such representation are thriving better than those that did not. Some examples of this trend are: Kenyatta University chapter, Legon chapter and Accra chapter, among others, where academic women became the agents for establishing and developing chapters.

Similarly, Malawi women might have caught the wind of liberation and feminism had they been present at the First Convocation. Isabel Apawo Phiri participated in the 1989 Convocation, but was still undergoing postgraduate training at Cape Town University and so was not living in Malawi to begin the Circle. The other lady, Christine Manda, who

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<sup>2</sup> This is reflected in two articles: Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Women in Theological Education in Malawi," *Religion in Malawi* no. 2 (1988), pp. 24-28 and Isabel Apawo Phiri, "A Convocation of African Women in Theology, Trinity College, Legon, Accra, Ghana 24-30th September, 1989," *Religion in Malawi*, no. 3, 1991, pp. 39-41.

also attended the Convocation, was not an academic and therefore, even though she got involved with this feminist and liberation movement, she probably was more interested in keeping her church position as the early winds of liberation were too radical for some women. She was a church worker in the Synod of Livingstonia (Church of Central Africa Presbyterian). For Circle history engaging in research and writing was crucial and this goal was probably less appealing to someone who was working in a non-academic setting, the church. If she were an academic in a University college, research and writing a publishable paper would have been compelling to her since such papers are important in one's staff development.

### 5.3 Community Survival

When establishing a local Circle, the goals of the Circle must be in harmony with the women's communitarian survival. This requires that, when someone joins the Circle, she should not become the black sheep of the community. In the Christian community, belonging to a fellowship of believers is important and if this is at stake, it threatens one's survival in terms of emotional and spiritual support. When Isabel Apawo Phiri started the Circle at Chancellor College, there were about 50 women who were part of this group. The number gives an impression that possibilities of having a thriving Circle in Malawi were evident. However, the confessional focus of the group was more important in these women's lives and killed the chapter. The Circle's goal to research and write publishable papers was submerged by the goal to fellowship among believers.

The 50 women were largely keen church women interested in the deepening of their faith, and as such, they considered themselves to have a mission to encourage other women in the group in their faith. That is why it was probably called the 'Zomba Action Group'. These women came from within the Chancellor College neighbourhood. Although some of the members came from the academic staff of the college, their goal to research and write was overshadowed by the confessional focus of having an evangelistic mission to their neighbours.<sup>3</sup> When the central goal to research and write publishable papers on women's issues threatened this fellowship with other believers, women distanced themselves from the Circle. This was when some academic women in the group used a "hammer approach"<sup>4</sup> in dealing with women's issues on Chancellor College campus. This work was on sexual harassment on Chancellor College campus. The work was researched and written at Chancellor College by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Linda Semu

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<sup>3</sup> Bishop Kalilombe suggests that if the Circle is confessional, it faces lack of progress in achieving Circle goals. Comment, Malawi Circle Seminar, 13.7.2006.

<sup>4</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *On Being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005.

and Flora Nankhuni, and then presented at a University research conference at Lake Malawi, where the national radio picked up (largely wrong) bits of information broadcasting that 50% of the girls were raped on Chancellor College campus. This incited Chancellor College staff and students. The stoning of Isabel's house by students was the climax of the staged violence. They were not angry because there was sexual abuse and even rape on campus, but because these women had the guts to speak about such a taboo.<sup>5</sup> This incidence scared some members off the Chancellor College Circle and drove Isabel Phiri into exile, first to Namibia and then to South Africa.

Apart from the academic staff members there were also students. These became part of this group because they were involved with Isabel Apawo Phiri in Charismatic circles.<sup>6</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri and her husband, Marx Phiri, were at that time working with the Students Christian Organization (SCOM) that was linked to the Evangelical Fellowship of Students (IFES).

Although these students were involved in some researching, they were more interested in issues of faith. Further, as undergraduates, they were less prepared academically to write and publish. In fact, even if they did, they would probably not have produced quality papers deserving publication. The confessional element of the group likely stifled the growth of the Circle and commitment to the Circle objective of researching and writing.

#### **5.4 The Role of Discipleship**

For the Circle to develop to the stage where it is self-perpetuating there is need that the one leading the Circle must teach the members of the Circle to research and write. This requires much time for the mentoring process to yield results. The Malawi Circle would probably have been one of the best stories of Circle chapters if Isabel Apawo Phiri had remained a lecturer at Chancellor College. It would have given her enough time to mentor other women. This is seen in her ability to start and strengthen Circle chapters in Southern Africa when she moved to that region. The fact that Isabel Apawo Phiri left for Southern Africa before Chancellor College could have a Circle member that was well-disciplined into the vision for the Circle, had a negative impact on the development of the Circle in Malawi.

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<sup>5</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Marching, Suspended and Stoned: Christian Women in Malawi 1995," in Kenneth R. Ross (ed), *God, People and Power in Malawi. Democratization in Theological Perspective*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1996, pp. 63-105.

<sup>6</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Stand up and be Counted. Identity, Spirituality and Theological Education in my Faith Journey," in Denise M. Ackermann et al (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000, p. 151.

When Fulata Moyo re-joined Chancellor College in 1996,<sup>7</sup> it was difficult for her to consolidate the group as a research and writing group. The group had not been given enough time to learn Circle methodologies since Isabel Phiri had left abruptly to go to Namibia after the negative reaction to her research on sexual abuse at Chancellor College. Fulata Moyo had to re-start the Circle, as at her first Circle chapter meeting held at Chancellor College in 1998, there was no one from Isabel Phiri's earlier group. Fulata Moyo's group was different. It comprised women from other colleges such as EBCOM,<sup>8</sup> Baptist Theological Seminary and Zomba Theological College or former students from such colleges.

The composition of the Circle group, which Fulata Moyo started, had its limitations, too. It had a high dose of Evangelical women that were products of theological institutions that did not study the kind of feminism and liberation theologies promoted by the Circle: Rachel NyaGondwe Banda, Molly Longwe, Late Mrs Banda, Martha Chirwa from the Baptist Convention; Myra Wilson, Ruth Folayan and one student from EBCOM. There was only one lady (Mrs Chinangwa) who came from the Presbyterian Church. She was at that time a student of Zomba Theological College.

The other limitation to this group was the 'Evangelical theology' itself. It tended to be conservative and uncritical to women's oppression in church and society. This was clear from their writings. Even though these women wrote concerning women's leadership in the Church, their papers were non critical of the patriarchal hegemonic relationships that existed within their churches. Most of them, apart from Mrs Chinangwa, were very much at home with the roles they filled in their particular churches. Molly Longwe was a lecturer at the Baptist Theological Seminary and a pastor's wife. Although she is a trained theologian, she had no inclination of becoming a pastor, which would have required her to articulate a theology of transforming gender inequalities that addressed her church which did not and does not ordain women pastors.<sup>9</sup> Martha Chirwa and another Baptist woman (the late Mrs Banda) were pastors' wives. Martha Chirwa was at that time still in training. Mrs Chinangwa was the only lady that sought a feminist theology that would affirm her in her passion to be a pastor.<sup>10</sup>

The EBCOM group was definitely comfortable where they were. It is also clear that papers presented at the Circle meeting hosted by Fulata Moyo were unpalatable to them.

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<sup>7</sup> Regional Circle Report 2005, Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Evangelical Bible College of Malawi, Blantyre.

<sup>9</sup> For a critical analysis of the issue see: Hany Longwe, "Democratization of the Christian Faith: The Influence of the Baptist Doctrine of 'Priesthood of All Believers' on the History of the Baptist Convention of Malawi (BACOMA)," PhD, University of Malawi, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> She achieved this after the CCAP Blantyre Synod finally lifted the restrictions on the ordination of women.



Since this particular meeting, they have not attended later Circle meetings organized by Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler. This is a clear sign that developing a theology of transforming gender inequalities is not for women such as these, so that Fulata Moyo's initiative to develop the Chancellor College Circle dwindled. The group would have gained momentum probably if Fulata Moyo had mentored these women for a longer period of time. However, she left Chancellor College to do her PhD at the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa. Worse still, the leadership of the Circle was handed over to Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler who was also just learning about Circle research and writing. The limitation was that she had less time and also less knowledge of feminist theologies to mentor women in the Circle. She was also more involved in community work, running the Lydia Foundation and writing her PhD. Even though she taught TRS courses part time, she had limited opportunities to encourage women to join the Circle. The increase in interest in Circle writings was mainly due to the exposure Chancellor College students had through the reading of Circle books. Isabel Apawo Phiri's books and Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler's books have often been referred to as among those that have inspired Chancellor College students to get interested in joining the Circle. These books have caught the attention of the students as they have been included in their literature list by lecturers that mainstream gender issues in their courses.

With the return of Getrude Kapuma from South Africa, it was envisaged that another local chapter would start in Blantyre under her leadership. However, it should be noted that rarely have Circle chapters survived if they were not attached to an academic institution. Since Getrude Kapuma is a minister and the possible candidates to join the Circle are also pastors in her own church (CCAP), the composition of the group already presents a challenge to beginning a Circle chapter committed to research, writing and publishing.

### **5.5 The Role of Missionary Christianity**

The rejection of the Circle by some women in Malawi is a reaction to the conflict a feminist rereading of missionary Christianity brings in the lives of women. The origin of such readings of Christianity is the achievement of the missionary churches. In their ambitious project of Christianizing Africans, they imported their own cultures and weaved them into that of their African converts. The Africans have learnt that well, including an androcentric reading of scriptures that shaped missionary Christianity for some time. The Circle is right in rereading such missionary interpretations that have supported or promoted the oppression of women in church and society. However, when such reading is made public or exposed to grassroots women, these women are shocked because such re-readings disturb their earlier "colonial" readings of Christianity.

Women reported that there was fear to join the Circle because those that were related to it faced much ridicule. There was also fear to join a setup that was "feministic" because such feminism was seen as a threat to women's family units. These Circle theologies sought to transform gender roles that are traditionally conditioned as roles for women. One such attempt was to implore men to cook for families just as women do. To some women who have internalized cooking roles as only for women in the home, and that this is central to keeping their Christian vows of marriage, this reversal of roles was a threat. It also contradicted some missionary teaching that the man is the "head" of the family, so that discouraging women from cooking for their families opposed the central teaching that man is the head of the family. Such reversal of roles in cooking meant that women were "heads" as well. The local women do not interpret headship as responsibility, but as power to rule. Whatever the man has put in place, the woman should respectfully adhere to it. Feminist re-reading of "headship" may be in conflict with popular local women's notions of the word. The meaning of the word implies that it is not being male or female that makes one to be head. The head of the family is the person that is responsible in the family. Thus there are families where women are heads and even where children are heads of families.

### 5.6 The Role of Globalization

Among Circle women in Malawi, those that have led the Malawi Circle have been in touch with the World Council of Churches. Thus Fulata Moyo and Isabel Apawo Phiri were both exposed to WCC activities. Isabel Apawo Phiri, the mother of the Malawi Circle, was exposed to "women's issues at the consultations and meetings of the programme on Theological Education (now called Ecumenical Theological Education) of the World Council of Churches from 1983 to 1989."<sup>11</sup> In fact, the inspiration to study the religious experience of the Chewa women of Nkhoma Synod was received at the 1989 Continental Conference.<sup>12</sup> At that time she was lecturer at the University of Malawi, Chancellor College. In terms of scholarship for further studies, Isabel Apawo Phiri benefited from a WCC scholarship when studying for her PhD, and she acknowledges it in her book.<sup>13</sup> The WCC was also a key in the development of women's theologies since its beginnings as alluded to in the earlier sections.

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<sup>11</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy. Religious Experiences of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1996, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., "I acknowledge the financial assistance I received from the programme on Theological Education of the World Council of Churches."

Although this was the period when Mercy Amba Oduyoye "was finding others" (see chapter 2), Isabel Apawo Phiri was not at this stage a likely candidate to participate in the International Planning Committee because she did not belong to EATWOT to which members of the International Planning Committee belonged.

Isabel Apawo Phiri later did her PhD at the University of Cape Town.<sup>14</sup> Her supervisor was Prof John Walter de Gruchy.<sup>15</sup> Fulata Moyo also benefited from her connection with WCC in her development of Circle theologies. She also received her first PhD funding from WCC. Such WCC connections connected women to feminist and liberation theologies that prepared them to write Circle theology. Since connection to WCC in the early years was more available to member churches, women that belonged to non-WCC member churches did not have such a privilege of being exposed to feminist and liberation theologies unless they studied at secular universities. This reality had a negative impact on the development of the Malawi local chapter. The pioneer women of the Malawi Circle were inspired by the theologies of Isabel Apawo Phiri and Fulata Moyo. However, this exposure was just 'the tip of an iceberg', what they really needed to know was how to construct Circle theologies. The mentors did not have enough time to expose fellow women to the theological frameworks of feminism and liberation theologies that were required to develop Circle theologies within a wider theological context.

### 5.7 The Evangelical Nature of Malawi Churches

Some of the major trends in Evangelical theology are negative to seeking women's liberation. The following elements in many Evangelical theologies shape a patriarchal hegemonic relationship between men and women in church and society: 1. Assigning lower positions in church to women than to men, based on a wrong interpretation of scripture. 2. Training men and not women in theology because of the belief that it is men that are called to be pastors. The UMCA trained women in education related to lower roles in the church and society.<sup>16</sup> Being nursing teachers to local women was one of such junior roles. Miss Simpson, for example, worked very hard at the Medical College writing medical text books in Chinyanja for teaching nursing to local women. She died on Christmas day 1935 and a new brick hospital was opened in remembrance of her hard work.<sup>17</sup> The mission also operated a Leper colony which was being funded by the British

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> See Monica Kishindo, "A Survey of Likoma Island from Early Times to 1935," Final Year History Paper 1969/70, University of Malawi, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Empire Leprosy Association and by the Nyasaland Government. By 1931, it had a hundred patients.

Thus Malawian women were disciplined into such subordinate roles portrayed by missionary women. Often those that were educated chose to be teachers. Even then fewer women compared to men qualified to teach. In the 1930s, for example, Mrs Katherine Mkwasho was the only woman who qualified as a teacher in the Anglican Church.<sup>18</sup> It is clear that missionary education programmes were many but this education privileged men more than women.

This subjection of women in church also extended to Post-classical mission churches in varied forms with Charismatic and Pentecostal groups being more progressive in leadership than women in mainline Evangelical churches.<sup>19</sup>

It is sometimes assumed that African Instituted Churches, because they are seen as more culturally relevant,<sup>20</sup> would have more women leaders in the church; but this is not the experience of earlier indigenous churches in Malawi. The major reason is that early Independent churches were not much different from mainline churches. They were break away groups from mainline churches and in many cases behaved very much the same as their mother churches. So whether one is a member of a mainline, non mainline, Evangelical or Charismatic church, women are subjected to a theology that has defined women as subordinate to men.

### 5.8 Church Affiliation

Isabel Apawo Phiri recalls that there were sixteen women who responded to the invitation to participate in the first Women in Theology Consultation held at Chigodi in Blantyre in 1990. These were foremost Presbyterians from Blantyre Synod. Livingstonia Synod sent three participants, Mrs E.C. Munthali, Mrs M. Mwale—products of Zomba Theological College—and Mrs Phiri, a product of Livingstonia School. Nkhoma Synod sent only one participant, Mrs E. Kagundi, a product of Yoswa School (in Nkhoma Synod) for wives of theological students.<sup>21</sup> Thus all participants were from Presbyterian churches, and other denominations were not represented.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches are often more open to female leadership due to their Holiness heritage.

<sup>20</sup> This concept is disputed by Hilary Mijoga, *Separate but Same Gospel. Preaching in African Instituted Churches in Southern Malawi*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000, p. 167ff.

<sup>21</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experiences of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, Blantyre: CLAIM, pp. 138-139.

Catholic women would have joined the Malawi Circle if they had belonged to EATWOT. Through this movement they would have likely caught the wind of feminist theologies. Since Roman Catholic women who were members of EATWOT formed the highest number in the IPC it suggests that there was the possibility that Roman Catholic Sisters would have been part of the Malawi Circle. Further, one of the leading figures of EATWOT was Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, a Malawian. It is interesting that Malawi Roman Catholic Sisters, even with this vantage point, were not found in EATWOT and hence at the Malawi Circle. One of the reasons for this occurrence would be that Bishop Kalilombe, who would have encouraged Roman Catholic Sisters to join EATWOT, fell out of grace with the then Malawi dictator, Kamuzu Banda. This happened when he got involved in the establishment of Small Christian Communities following the Vatican II Council. These activities of Small Christian Communities were seen to be subverting Kamuzuism. So he was forced to leave Malawi. I can imagine that Roman Catholic Sisters would not have been free to join EATWOT where Bishop Kalilombe was active; for fear that they would also become "wanted people" by the Kamuzu government.

Further, Malawi Roman Catholic Sisters were unlikely to be part of EATWOT even without the Bishop Kalilombe factor, because the agenda of EATWOT would unlikely have been supported by the government of the day. Before the referendum to have multi-party democracy in Malawi took place in 1993, it was dangerous to get involved in a movement that was connected to Liberation. EATWOT as a forum for theologies of the underside (liberation theologies) was unwelcome to Malawians who wished not to be in trouble with the government. In fact, there were so many oppressive structures then that EATWOT would become a threat to. Further, Malawi Roman Catholic Sisters would have had problems travelling to EATWOT meetings from Malawi, because during Kamuzu's reign there was much scrutiny and restriction in terms of international travel.

### **5.9 Availability of and Access to Circle Books**

The lag in the development and growth of the Malawi Circle is also attributed to the limited availability of and access to Circle books. Circle books have contributed to the sensitization of women in Africa to join the Circle. Through these books women are exposed to similar experiences of women in Africa that are of concern to women. Circle books also expose women to Circle methodologies and frameworks that women can use to write Circle publications. However, for a long time, the only Circle book which students at Chancellor College were exposed to was the one written by Isabel Apawo

Phiri.<sup>22</sup> Access to Circle books published elsewhere was difficult. On this Musimbi Kanyoro writes:

We hope that our books will receive wider readership now that they can easily be accessed, (through the Web) but this will not happen if we continue to use publishers who are themselves unknown. The first Circle book, "The Will to Arise", published by Orbis in 1992,<sup>23</sup> is in its fifth printing and easily purchased abroad, but not in Africa. Musa Dube's two books, "Other Ways of Reading"<sup>24</sup> and "Post Colonial Feminist Interpretations of the Bible,"<sup>25</sup> are as easily available in Africa as they are in the West. Those published on our continent are not easily available and consequently not widely read.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from the logistical problems in delivering books to Malawi and other countries, the lack of a course on "Feminist Theology" in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies does not encourage the Department and the University to stock books on the Circle. This point is verified by how other departments in Africa have attracted Circle books to their libraries through running "Feminist" studies in the department. St Paul's Theological Seminary in Limuru, Kenya, the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture in Accra, Ghana, as well as the School of Religion in KwaZulu Natal University at Pietermaritzburg are key departments that have attracted Circle books to their libraries through running Feminist courses. It is by reading such Circle books that women in Malawi would have been sensitized to join the Circle.

### 5.10 Less Malawi Representation at Circle Meetings

At one of the Malawi Circle meetings, members acknowledged that there are fewer women in the Circle because of insufficient publicity. This tallies well with that when Isabel Apawo Phiri visited Chancellor College Circle on 13th July 2006; there was a stronger commitment among women to belong to the Malawi Circle. The aspect of 'who explains the Circle to others' is important. When Isabel Apawo Phiri talked to the Circle in Chancellor College at that time, there was much interest, not because new things were explained, but because of who talked about this Circle message. Since Isabel Apawo Phiri is much respected academically, people were able to receive the message from her much more easily. The other aspect of publicity women in Malawi are looking for is in relation to Circle conferences abroad. They see that the Malawi Circle is not growing

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<sup>22</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy. Religious Experiences of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992.

<sup>24</sup> Musa W. Dube (ed), *Other Ways of Reading. African Women and the Bible*, Atlanta/Geneva, Society of Biblical Literature/WCC, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000.

<sup>26</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudzi wa Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, pp. 35-36.

because only a few individuals have attended Circle conferences outside Malawi: Fulata Moyo, Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, Getrude Kapuma and Isabel Apawo Phiri. This implies that if more Malawi Circle women were given the chance to attend regional meetings, the vitality of the Circle would greatly improve. The fact that the same women have attended Regional and Continental Conferences has tended to make the Circle the property of the few. This in turn has not been conducive to the growth of the Circle. However, the goal to have more women attend Circle meetings shall only be realized with increased mentoring of the Circle women in research, writing and publishing. Regional and Continental Circle meetings are key modes of publicity as they inspire women to develop theologies of women which are informed about what is happening within other African contexts. The privilege to travel and present papers would also be an added motivation.

### **5.11 The Role of Isabel Apawo Phiri and Getrude Kapuma**

The case, in which Getrude Kapuma and Isabel Apawo Phiri were involved in the march against the Blantyre Synod because of the restrictive stand on ordination of women in the Synod, was a deterrent to women in ministerial formation to join the Circle in Malawi.<sup>27</sup> To be a Circle member was seen as being aggressive towards one's church. The actions of the church which resulted in suspending Getrude Kapuma, which was followed by her leaving for South Africa, did not encourage women in ministerial formation to join the Circle either. The fact that both Isabel Apawo Phiri and Getrude Kapuma left Malawi because of reasons connected to being members of the Circle negatively impacted the Circle in Malawi.

### **5.12 Enrolment of Female Students in the TRS Courses in Chancellor College**

Although there is now a steady rise of women studying in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Malawi, there has been low enrolment of women in the Department since its establishment. That has impacted negatively on the establishment and growth of the Circle in Malawi. Since the history of the Circle shows that Circle chapters attached to institutions of learning have a better chance of living the ideals of the Circle, it is important to have an increase in the enrolment of women in these institutions both as students and as lecturers in the Department. Some scholars such as

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<sup>27</sup> Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma, "'Troubled but not Destroyed': Women of Faith Reclaim their Rights," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories. Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002, pp. 348-369. – Blantyre Synod has since changed its position and started to ordain women pastors, Gertrude Kapuma being one of them.

Kenneth Ross<sup>28</sup> and Isabel Apawo Phiri<sup>29</sup> have pointed out the problem of low enrolment of female students in Chancellor College. Isabel Apawo Phiri lists, among other factors, low literacy levels of women, lack of opportunities to do theology, and lack of opportunities to utilize theological training in churches.<sup>30</sup>

Kenneth Ross agrees with Isabel Apawo Phiri on the bearing other church-instituted theological colleges have on the enrolment of female students in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. He shows the relationship of these theological colleges to the enrolment of students in the Department of Theology. He argues that the bulk of students must have earned their Diploma in Theology with a 55% mark or above to qualify for entry into the Department of Theology at 3<sup>rd</sup> year level. However, there is also a minority of students in the Department from those with a Diploma in Education who had Religious Studies as a major subject.<sup>31</sup>

The relationship between church-instituted theological colleges and the Department of Theology is that recruitment of students into the latter hinges a lot on the former. From this background it can be argued that the low enrolment of female students in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies is dependent on the enrolment of female students in theological colleges. Since these theological colleges are owned by churches and the selection of students to them is by the churches or sanctioned by them, low enrolment of female students in these colleges will also produce low enrolment in the BA (Theology) degree at Chancellor College. This in turn explains some of the lag in the development and growth of the Circle in Malawi.

#### 5.12.1 Enrolment Survey 1993-2000

The general record of graduates from the Department of Theology and Religious Studies indeed shows that the first graduates in BA (Theology) graduated in 1993, even though the University of Malawi started in 1967.<sup>32</sup> From 1973 to 1991, students in the College could only take Religious Education offered within the Faculty of Education and then move to the Faculty of Humanities.<sup>33</sup> During these years students were being trained to

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<sup>28</sup> Kenneth R. Ross, "Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi 1993-1998," *Religion in Malawi*, no. 9, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Women in Theological Education in Malawi," *Religion in Malawi*, no. 3, 1991, pp. 24-28 [25].

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> In the last years, their numbers have grown considerably.

<sup>32</sup> Document, Graduates of the University of Malawi 1992-1993, accessed 2001.

<sup>33</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Department of Religious Studies 1973-1988," *Religion in Malawi*, no. 2, 1988.



be teachers of Bible Knowledge in secondary schools, which was a popular subject among pupils because it was usually scored highly at Form Four level.<sup>34</sup>

The table below shows the enrolment ratios between female and male students in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies during selected years.

Academic Year	Programme	Women	Men	Total
1992	Mature (third Year)	0	4	4 <sup>35</sup>
	First Year	2	1	3 <sup>36</sup>
1993	Mature	2	0	2 <sup>37</sup>
	First Year	1	8	9 <sup>38</sup>
1994	Mature	0	15	15 <sup>39</sup>
	First Year	2	1	3 <sup>40</sup>
1995	Mature	0	0	0
	First Year	1	2	3 <sup>41</sup>
1996	Mature	0	9	9
	First Year	0	0	0
1997	Mature	1	2	3
	First Year	0	0	0
1998	Mature	0	0	0
	First Year	1	2	3

### 5.12.2 First Year Entry and the University of Malawi

The table of results from 1992 to 1998 shows that the enrolment of women students in First Year was a significant hope to increasing the enrolment of women students in the Department of TRS. In the first year 1992, when the course was instituted, 50% of the students enrolled in the course were female.<sup>42</sup> In 1993 the percentage of women students

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> See Assessment Grade Reports 1993, Chancellor College, accessed 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. The students enrolled in 1<sup>st</sup> year in 1993 graduated in 1995. See 1967-1997.

<sup>39</sup> See Assessment Grade Reports 1994, Chancellor College, accessed 2001.

<sup>40</sup> See Assessment Grade Reports, 1967-1997, Chancellor College, accessed 2001.

<sup>41</sup> See Assessment Grade Reports 1995/96, Chancellor College, accessed 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Assessment Record, University of Malawi, Chancellor College, 1992, accessed 2001.

in the course rose to 100%. In 1994 the percentage of women students in the BA (Theology) course was 66%. In 1995 this enrolment percentage, although it dropped, was at 33%, and 33% seems to have been the average from 1995 to 1998.

This observation is in line with the views of Kenneth Ross, that First Year recruitment during the period of 1993 to 1998 was most promising because at each entry about half of the students were women.<sup>43</sup> Against this positive development, the University of Malawi decided to squash the slot for registering First Year BA (Theology) students after 1998.<sup>44</sup> This change has contributed to low enrolment of women students in the Department of Theology. It is therefore argued that

- (a) The four students enrolled in 1992 all graduated in 1993 because this mature entry course takes only two years. Those enrolling in the course already have a diploma and stay in college for two years to finish their BA (Theology) course. Two other students were enrolled in the programme as first years, registering 50% enrolment of women in that year.<sup>45</sup>
- (b) Even though in 1993 only two students enrolled as mature students in the course, by 1994, 4 students graduated in this course. The other two had been enrolled in 1992 as first years. Both of the students had a pass at the end of their first year, the BA 3rd year.
- (c) In 1994, out of 15 enrolled in the course at third year, 0% were women.
- (d) The record of graduates in 1996 shows that all the 15 male students enrolled in 1994 graduated in 1996. However, enrolment of new students in the third year in 1996 was 9 and 0% were women. The low enrolment of women students in TRS at third year deserves a thorough discussion.

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<sup>43</sup> Kenneth R. Ross, "Theology and Religious Studies at the [University of Malawi 1993-1998," *Religion in Malawi* no. 9, 1999, pp. 3-9 [4].

<sup>44</sup> This slot has now been reintroduced, after much lobbying, and in 2007 the course has 7 students, an all time record for first year entry. This year Mzuzu University also started its first BA (Theology) course, with 28 students in First Year, five of them women. Third year entrance has three students, all women.

<sup>45</sup> These were the 2 women from Blantyre Synod selected by their church to study theology which would prepare them to work in the women's work in their church.

### 5.12.3 *Low Entry into the Department of Theology and Religious Studies (TRS)*

Isabel Apawo Phiri rightly argues that low literacy levels of women have a bearing on their access to theological education.<sup>46</sup> This implies that even though the University of Malawi would put in place recruitment procedures that students of theology enrol at the first year level,<sup>47</sup> there would still be few women getting admitted to the Department of TRS. The underlying reasons for this have widely been applicable to secular disciplines of study as well. It is a problem that is not specific to theological training but to a wider range of disciplines. Sociologists have attributed the lag women suffer in accessing higher education to the way girl children are socialized. Girl children are socialized differently from boy children with the girl children's paradigm for training traditionally being repressive in the area of accessing higher education. Theologians have also pointed out the fact that women are socialized in churches to occupy positions junior to men. The latter has been shown in earlier paragraphs.

### 5.13 **Local Experience**

Some women in Malawi have sought or not sought liberation because of the experiences within their churches. The experiences of women from two Evangelical churches: Zambezi Evangelical Church and Baptist Convention, reinforce an old paradigm that women's experiences per se are a reservoir for conscientization.

#### 5.13.1 *Women in Zambezi Evangelical Church*

From the first women's issue Alice Khota mentioned at the Circle meeting, it is clear that she is concerned about roles ascribed to women after graduating from theological college. She is concerned about power balance in this church that is tilted towards men and not women. Alice Khota has never gone abroad to attend women's meetings that would spark this attitude. She had never read any of the Circle books. Her conscientization about women's issues is from her own struggles with power balance in her church. This paradigm is clearly seen in the experiences of women in the Zambezi Evangelical Church that have attended the Evangelical Bible College of Malawi (EBCOM). The following is a sample of women that have attended the college in relation to the space that is given to them in the Zambezi Evangelical Church.

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<sup>46</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Department of Religious Studies 1973-1988," *Religion in Malawi*, no. 2, 1988.

<sup>47</sup> After much pressure the slot for First Year admission was reinstated around 2006. Its omission was most likely due to administrative inertia.

All the women that graduated from this college served in women's work. They did not become pastors or coordinators of ministries that comprised men and women. In this church, Mrs Deborah Kumpoola, the first woman to graduate in theology from this college, appeared in 1977.<sup>48</sup> She attended the main stream programme where both women and men learn the same subjects. She came to this college not as a wife of a "would be" pastor. If she had, she would have followed the wives' programme which follows a different (and lower level) syllabus. If she had been in the latter course, serving in women's work would have been more acceptable to her. The problem is that the training

Name	Marital status	Year	Role in Church as of 2005
1. Mrs Deborah Kumpoola	Widowed	1980 Diploma	Coordinator of women's group (Chiyanjano)
2. Miss Jennie L.C. Makapola	Single	1986 Certificate in Biblical Studies	What she is doing is not known.
3. Mrs Alice Khota	Widowed	1995 Certificate in Biblical Studies	Coordinator of Girls' Brigade
4. Mercy Chilembwe	Widowed	1996 Certificate in Biblical Studies	Coordinator of wives' programme at EBCOM
5. Mrs Monica Frank	Married	Withdrew on maternity grounds	
6. Miss Grace Kasenda	Single	Withdrew, reasons not known	
7. Mrs Mkwezalamba	Widowed	2003 Certificate in Biblical Studies	Coordinator of wives' programme at EBCOM

she went through aimed at producing pastors, evangelists and Christian workers. Her question is how come, women who have undergone such training are not given the chance to serve in these posts?

### 5.13.2 *Women in the Baptist Convention*

Even if the levels of literacy could be raised and scholarships be arranged for women to study theology, women desire to further their theological training if they see women who

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<sup>48</sup> See Anthony Nkhoma, "Women in Search of Identity. The Case of Women's Ordination in Zambezi Evangelical Church," BA, University of Malawi, 2005, p. 5.

have gone through theological training engaged in key leadership positions in the church. In the Baptist Convention, the beginnings did show a paradigm shift from junior and missionary conditioned roles to more prominent ones. However, this development was no cause for women in this church to aspire for further training in theology. Most of those that occupied key positions in the church were much less educated than women who had earned theological degrees in the later years. Lack of theological training did not limit them to serve as pastors in different churches. Mrs Mellia Makina never even went to a high school but was the pastor of Mwanafumu Baptist Church. Mrs Agnes Lufani just received a theological training related to being a pastor's wife, attending a six weeks' 'wives' course. She, however, became a renowned church planter and leader of women's groups.<sup>49</sup>

The other roles that women occupied in the church were those of being *alangizi* (counsellors) and holding administrative posts such as treasurer or secretary of the church. Such roles were not linked to theological achievements. Added to this, even in the highest post, that of General Secretary for the Convention, which women in the Baptist Convention could wish to occupy, the first woman that occupied it, had no theological training of any sort. She is a nurse by profession. Her name is Margaret Nyika. She became by chance the first woman to be the Acting General Secretary for a few months. She was appointed to stand in the place of Akim Chirwa, the General Secretary of the Convention, in 2000 when Rev Akim Chirwa went abroad for a time.<sup>50</sup>

The other aspect to the relationship between theological training and women's roles in the Baptist Convention is how women, who have theological training, are sidelined by the church. By the time Margaret Nyika was Acting General Secretary, there were women such as Rachel Banda, Molly Longwe and Grace Matupi who had theological training. Whereas it is a policy for the Baptist Convention that the General Secretary should always be a pastor, it is interesting that even in the event that this rule was broken,<sup>51</sup> the Convention did not choose a woman with theological training. Sidelining women who had theological training was not only happening at this level but at other levels as well. Women who graduate from theological colleges, even those that went through the Baptist Seminaries, are not given positions even at the lowest level of working in the women's department. These women end up being self employed. These usually work hard to do things on behalf of the church through their own self initiated projects with little remuneration. It is possibly true that women are sidelined in

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<sup>49</sup> See Rachel NyaGondwe Banda [Fiedler], *Women of Bible and Culture*, p. 186.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> The current General Secretary, Simon Mkamanga, never had any theological education; in Baptist polity that is not required.

employment within the church because of the question whether it is worthwhile for a woman to receive money for doing a job in the church. Rachel Fiedler initiated a project to look after orphans in order to create space for ministry at the fringe of the church as well as earning some income.

When women are offered employment in the church, it is usually not attached to a salary. Rachel Fiedler was appointed as "Development Desk Worker" and the letter of appointment said that she will not receive any income from the Convention until she raises money for the projects and will then obtain her salary from there. Such actions do not attract women in this church to seek theological training. Ordination for women, who have attained the required theological training, could promote women's interest to do theology. The General Secretariat led by Rev Fletcher Kaiya as General Secretary and Rev Chinkwita Phiri as the President, tabled the motion to allow women's ordination, but it was rejected.<sup>52</sup> Some of the arguments against this were that the Baptist Convention should not emulate what other churches are doing but should consult Scriptures regarding women's ordination. A committee was set up to construct papers on the issue. Until now this committee has not met and deliberated on the issue. At the 2008 Annual General Meeting the issue came up again, as a congregation in Blantyre wanted to call a woman as their pastor. The issue was discussed and in no way decided.<sup>53</sup> In 2009 at each of the six Regional Annual Conventions the issue was discussed again with one speaker opposing and one supporting the ordination of women. Again, no conclusions were reached.<sup>54</sup>

The wave of women pastors in the Jali area in the 1970s and 1980s has all vanished. They became pastors without theological training, and neither were they ordained. They were not even chosen to be pastors of the congregations; they became pastors by starting churches and by members affirming their mission work by ascribing the title of pastor to them. This is why, while they were widely accepted as pastors by women, many male pastors did not recognize them. These therefore did not encourage others to do theological training.

An important role model that has inspired women in the Baptist church to study theology at a higher level is that of Molly Longwe who is a lecturer at Lilongwe Baptist

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<sup>52</sup> See Hany Longwe, "Democratization of the Christian Faith: The Influence of the Baptist Doctrine of "Priesthood of All Believers" on the History of the Baptist Convention of Malawi (BACOMA)," PhD, University of Malawi, 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Klaus Fiedler could not attend the meeting since the date was moved, so he published his plea for ordination of women: Klaus Fiedler, *Baptists and the Ordination of Women*, Zomba: Lydia Print, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> At the South East General Assembly Funwayo Mafuleka, pastor of Zomba Baptist Church, spoke in support of women's ordination, Rev Chipande of Liwonde Baptist Church spoke against it, and I was given the opportunity to speak from the women's perspective.

Theological Seminary, where formation of pastors that can play a role in accepting women as pastors is done. Some of the pastors that studied under her did not at first accept to be taught by a woman. This attitude changed quickly and she is now a model to the Baptist Convention women to study theology and the students (almost all male) rate her as probably the best teacher there.<sup>55</sup>

### 5.14 Contacts with Women Exposed to Winds of Change

In the Zambezi Evangelical Church (ZEC), the beginning of the women's organization known as Chiyanjano in 1945 was a breakthrough for the women of this church. Through this organization the women saw themselves as deaconesses, missionary interpreters and leaders of the organization.<sup>56</sup> Part of their fulfilment was the fact that Chiyanjano was also very centralized and women felt some achievement in the event that they got elected to important positions. Further they played important roles at funerals, Sunday worship and girls' initiation ceremonies.<sup>57</sup> The establishment of ZAWO (Zambezi Women's Organization) gave opportunity for women to learn vocational skills.<sup>58</sup>

However, contact with other women that were conscientized on women's liberation has made women to be less contented with participation at church women organizational level alone. They look for more. This, of course, attracts resistance from men. This was felt by women both during theological training and after.<sup>59</sup> It is interesting that after Mrs D. Makupola's graduation she was given the responsibility to coordinate Chiyanjano in 1981. Mrs Alice Khota, who was the second to enrol in theological training, became her assistant Chiyanjano coordinator in 1999. Mrs M. Chilembwe, the third to join theological training, became the deputy coordinator for Chiyanjano replacing Mrs A. Khota who became Deputy Youth Coordinator. She also became a lecturer, but only for women, at EBCOM.<sup>60</sup>

Whereas the other three women accepted whatever positions were granted to them, even though they would have loved much better positions, the fourth woman to enrol in theological training did not want to settle for less. After graduating in 2003, she said that her vision had then widened. She was prepared to serve in any capacity, even as a pastor,

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<sup>55</sup> She is now doing her PhD with the University of KwaZulu Natal in Pietermaritzburg, concentrating on the role and position of pastors' wives in the Baptist Convention. Her MTh from the same University has been published as: Molly Longwe, *Growing Up. A Chewa Girls' Initiation*, Zomba: Kachere, 2007.

<sup>56</sup> See Anthony Nkhoma, *Women in Search of Identity. The Case of Women's Ordination in Zambezi Evangelical Church*, Zomba: Kachere, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-13.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16-17. – There are female lecturers, though, also in the general programme at EBCOM.

if she would be given the opportunity. In 2004, she was appointed to coordinate the women's programmes to replace Mrs M. Chilembwe. She is currently training with a South African College in early child development and still aspires to be an ordained pastor one day.<sup>61</sup>

As time goes on, women are less content to settle for subservient roles in the Zambezi Evangelical Church. Mrs Mary Chaomba, the fifth woman to enrol at EBCOM, graduated "with a vision to serve the church in pastoral roles."<sup>62</sup> In fact, she enrolled in the college to train as a pastor; however, she has been appointed to serve as coordinator for Chiyanjano in the North.<sup>63</sup>

There is enough evidence that the desire for ordination which started with the first woman who enrolled at EBCOM is a hotbed for further training and Circle membership.

It was, however, in 2002 when Chiyanjano, defying all odds, boldly stood up to challenge the church's stand on the ordination of women.<sup>64</sup>

The awakening call has been heard and men are slowly heeding the call. They have, at the moment, allowed three women to be "set apart" for ministry.<sup>65</sup> These women were set apart on June 22, 2003 at a function named "Mapatulidwe a Makodineta (Setting aside/ordaining [Women's] Coordinators)." This minimal decision can not be maintained for long. Time is approaching when ZEC will fully ordain women. This desire for ordination in Zambezi Evangelical women seems to go together with their search to upgrade their theological training. If this trend continues, there will be an increase in the number of women in the Malawi Circle from Zambezi Evangelical churches.

### **5.15 Participation of Men in Women's Issues of Liberation**

Against the above restrictions imposed on women to do theological training, it is clear that there is a clear voice from some men in key positions in the church who are encouraging women to have theological training at a higher level. Of these men, it is those that allowed and supported their wives to study theology at a higher level. In the Baptist Convention, Akim Chirwa, Hany Longwe and Klaus Fiedler are examples. Akim Chirwa allowed Martha Chirwa to study theology even as an independent student at Zomba Theological College. Apart from encouraging Molly Longwe to do theological training, Hany Longwe opened space at the Baptist Seminary for women to do theology. This is

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18. She graduated with a certificate in Biblical Studies (Chichewa).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 17. The three women are: Mrs D. Kumpoola, Mrs M. Chilembwe, and Mrs A. Khota.



what enabled Liddah Kalako to go through Seminary training.<sup>66</sup> Since then, more women have studied theology at the Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>67</sup> From the discussion above, it is clear that enhancing women from Baptist churches to enrol in a Department of TRS of one of the universities or in other colleges of higher learning can not be arrived at with one approach.<sup>68</sup> The increase in the number of women studying theology would not have materialized without the sponsorship Klaus Fiedler organized for them from Germany.

The increase in the number of women trained in theology in Blantyre Synod (CCAP) can be traced to the time when Rev Silas S. Ncozana was the General Secretary from 1985 to 1995.<sup>69</sup> It was during his time that the first meeting of "Women in Theology" was convoked in Malawi. It was also during this time that Blantyre Synod deliberately invited Female Reverends from abroad to work in their Synod with the intention of sensitizing women to positions of leadership even at the level of the ordained ministry. Among these women were Peggy Reid, a Canadian minister, and Rev Jane Kamau from the Presbyterian Church of East Africa.<sup>70</sup>

Since the period of Silas Ncozana, Zomba Theological College has contributed positively to the development of Malawi Circle leadership through involving women at leadership level and recruiting them as students. Isabel Apawo Phiri was recruited to teach some courses at this college. Fulata Moyo taught courses on sexuality together with her late husband, Solomon Moyo. Rachel NyaGondwe Banda (Fiedler) taught at the wives' course but was also enrolled at the college in the Diploma course. Martha Chirwa earned her first degree (BDiv) from the same college. Climax to this is that currently two Circle members, Mrs Mercy Mgeni and Mrs Jannie Chalimba, are employed in the Women's Department as staff. They are both very active in the Circle.<sup>71</sup>

### 5.16 Exposure to Liberation and Feminist Movements

I put this factor in establishing the Circle in Malawi last because there are few women that are exposed to liberation and feminist movements. Delving into feminist and libera-

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<sup>66</sup> Before entering the Seminary she was an evangelist, church planter and pastor. She entered the Seminary as a widow and died two months after completing the course (Hany Longwe, *Christians by Grace – Baptists by Choice. A History of the Baptist Convention of Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere, 2010, pp. 114, 174, 245, 268-273).

<sup>67</sup> Currently there are five women among the over 40 students, two of them doing the Diploma in order to continue to the BA (Theology) course in third year.

<sup>68</sup> Several women studied at the African Bible College in Lilongwe.

<sup>69</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri "1995: The Struggle of Women in the Church and the University of Malawi" Paper, no date, no publisher, accessed 2.3.2006, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, p 138.

<sup>71</sup> Jannie Chalimba is working for her MA (Theol) with the University of Malawi on Women in Blantyre Synod.

tion theologies is viewed as delving into non-orthodox teachings. Women view such theologies as alien to the African way of theologizing. One of the reasons why two female students at Chancellor College refused to join the Malawi Circle was that they were afraid that the Circle would make them "lukewarm Christians." They both came from a Charismatic background, one from Calvary Family Church, the other from Living Waters. Throughout their days in Chancellor College they resisted the challenge to join the Circle. This is contrary to the wishes of the Malawi Circle, which is looking forward to the time when Charismatic women would desire to be part of it. However, the position Charismatic women pose shows that, although Malawi Charismatics are among the first to provide theological training to women that are not pastors' wives, it does not follow that they would be interested in the Circle's agenda to research, write and publish. Women such as Rose Morleene Mbewe from Calvary Family Church or Bertha Chunda from Living Waters are happy just to take up their double roles of being pastor and pastor's wife. These have gone through a theological training that is not just a wife's course, but the same as that of men in their churches. The kind of theology that these women are exposed to is that of men being 'heads' and women as supporters to these men. To begin a theology of re-imagining such roles will require in depth mentoring from those representing official Circle theology. This is unlikely to be achieved in the near future because up to 2005, there was no Circle convert among women in the Calvary Family Church.

### **5.17 Similar Women's Issues but Different Ways of Tackling them**

Regardless that these women are exposed to a theology that does not encourage them to write about patriarchal hegemonic relationships between men and women in their churches, through their day to day experiences in their church, these women are coming to grips with the challenge. Rose Morleene Mbewe is an example of such women who are awakened about patriarchal hegemonic relationships in her church through her own experience. She was born on the 9th of October, 1956 in Zimbabwe. Her grandparents happened to be in Zimbabwe because they worked on the mines. Her parents were Christians.

Some of the issues of patriarchal oppression against women that she has observed are that women in her church have been influenced by the one party system and fail to speak out on crucial issues affecting their lives in the church. One of the issues Rose Mbewe brings out is that women in her church are looked down upon by the church (men and women). She bases this observation on her own experience as a pastor's wife but also as someone that is married to an Apostle of the church. She notices that more often than not, members of her church follow decisions made by her husband rather than by her.

Her reaction to such an experience is passive. She has chosen not to confront these oppressive members of her church and concentrates on what she considers as more important in her ministry. What she forgets is that it is not just the service that is important in a person's life but also her or his dignity before God and men. This disrespect by church members concerning her wisdom on church matters robs her of dignity before people and God.

Since in research and writing women are breaking the pattern of suffering silently, these women can easily be attracted to the Malawi Circle if they are made aware of it. Since these women love their churches and their faith, the Circle is a safe place to speak out concerning women's issues. Further, in the Charismatic tradition, it is the Holy Spirit that unsettles patriarchal hegemonic relationships between men and women. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to both men and women as He wills, regardless of gender. Further, the church's view on theological training for women is positively supportive to women. In fact, the necessary qualification for one to train in theology is that she or he should have a calling from God. Therefore there are, in the Charismatic churches in Malawi, growing numbers of women pastors.<sup>72</sup>

Pastor Carol Chaponda's experience helps us to highlight the latter argument. Her conversion experience has been the only thing that has earned her pastoral duties. Her conversion experience is attributed to the prayers of her husband who was already a dedicated Born Again Christian. Her husband based his prayers on 1 Corinthians 7:16 which reads: "How do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" Although Carol Chaponda was brought up in a Christian family, she had not yet known the Lord personally. One day she went to attend "Lunch Hour Prayers" at Red Cross in Blantyre. There she was converted to Christ through the founder of Living Waters Church, Stanley Ndovi.<sup>73</sup> When he preached, she was so troubled in her heart that she decided to give her life to Christ.

Her walk with the Lord amazed many people because of her transformed life after she committed her life to Christ. Although theological training in some churches is seen as a prerequisite for ministry, Pastor Carol Chaponda began her ministry right away after her conversion, without theological training. The first pastoral responsibility was doing charity work, where she gave people clothes, food and many other things according to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. At one time she gave away all her dresses except one. Since she did not run a paid ministry, she relied on her business to earn a living. Her giving out

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<sup>72</sup> The same applies to the Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination in Malawi.

<sup>73</sup> About him see Khetwayo Banda, "Apostle (Dr) Stanley Ndovie's Contribution to Malawi's Socio-Religious Development," MA module, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Mzuzu University, 2009.

things at the prompting of the Holy Spirit made her break rules of running a business and therefore she was left with only a small capital that was insufficient to cater for her family. Even in this situation, the spirit of God continued to ask her to give away items from her small business. This made the business to go down, and it brought financial problems to her family. Her children found it difficult to survive on this small income. This was the kind of life she lived from 1986 until 1990.

The role of the Holy Spirit was very central in her charity work. She sought to be obedient to the prompting of the Holy Spirit even when it was difficult to do so. She recalls one such instance when a mentally disturbed woman perpetually visited her begging for food. This was a test to her because it was during the time that she did not have much to live on. She thanked God that she did not resist the prompting of the Holy Spirit and gave her food. In fact, the woman's visits became so frequent that she became part and parcel of the family. Mrs Chaponda stayed with the woman from 1991 till 1994. At the end of the stay, the woman confirmed to Pastor Carol Chaponda how right she had been in following the leading of the Holy Spirit.

"Woman, God has tested you but you have passed the tests. He has given you wisdom, and on this place he has established a fountain of healing. Never let any jar draw water from it." These sayings resonated well with what Mrs Chaponda saw in her dream. "This place has been opened and set free, many people will come to this place to seek your help."<sup>74</sup> This was the beginning of her healing ministry. Because she had been obedient to the Holy Spirit, her ministry was widened. The first fruit of this ministry was her own healing from breast cancer after failing to receive any help from the hospital. It was only through prayer and fasting that she got healed in a dream, in which she saw people singing. On the other side she saw people crying and yelling "Have Mercy on her, Lord."<sup>75</sup> When she woke up, she saw a group of people surrounding her, requesting her to go to the hospital. She saw a big opening on her breast and told the people that there was no reason for her to go to the hospital because she had already been healed in the dream. This healing was however not instant, it was only after a few months that the condition really got better.

Again this ministry of healing got widened, and not only did she run a healing ministry, but she was also engaged in witnessing and teaching people about prayer. This is what led to the establishment of the "Chisomo School of Prayer." She prefers the word "school" to "church" because she did not limit the ministry to members of the church. The school attracted people from all walks of life (the rich and the poor). When new

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<sup>74</sup> See J. Banda, Student TRS 200 End of Year Essay, 2004.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

members came to the school, she first told them about Christ. After this, when one accepted Christ into their life, she taught them Christian foundation lessons such as prayer and the Bible. She also emphasized the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Thus she encouraged people that the Holy Spirit is the revealer of all truth.

### **5.18 Conclusion: Key Determinants in Establishing the Circle in Malawi**

This chapter has shown that the establishment of the Circle in Malawi has been determined by: (1) Women's exposure to feminist and liberation movements. (2) Discipleship work of Circle women leading Circle chapters: if these leaders had been able to give ample time to the discipleship of local women, the Malawi chapter would have developed more strength. (3) The church affiliation of women in Malawi also contributes to their freedom to join the Circle. Since the Circle is preoccupied with unsettling patriarchal hegemonic relationships, some women, because of their church backgrounds, do not see this Circle objective as important for their lives in church and society. Most of these women have suffered from indoctrination into support roles by the leaders of their churches. (4) Low participation at joint meetings of the Circle either locally or abroad. These are avenues where women are exposed to the Circle objectives and approaches that would inspire the women to join the Circle.<sup>76</sup> (5) Low enrolment of female students at Chancellor College has also contributed to the lag in the development of the Malawi Circle. At the continental level, it has been shown that Circle chapters that are attached to academic institutions have more vigour than those chapters that exist away from such institutions. The women theologians at Chancellor College would have inspired the Circle to be committed to its goals of research and publishing. (6) Local experiences in church and society have also barred women from aspiring to write regarding unsettling relationships in the church and society. For some women in such churches, women do not need theological training for them to be leaders at higher levels of church government. (7) Contact to winds of change in general has a bearing on women joining the Circle. (8) Survival considerations: Christian women in Malawi view survival in personal faith, church and society as an important aspect of their lives. If any of such survival has been established, it must be sustained regardless of changing circumstances, unless other alternatives present them with the same or better ways of survival. (9) Pneumatological considerations: whereas the Circle is seeking liberation through cultural reinterpretation, biblical reinterpretation, and redefining patriarchal power relations, some women, especially those in Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, rely on the Holy Spirit

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<sup>76</sup> Chimwemwe Katumbi, a lecturer at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Malawi attended for the first time a Circle meeting in Ghana in 2009, but she did this from Scotland where she was on a 9 months teaching assignment of the Scottish – Malawian Partnership.

to transform patriarchal hegemonic relationships between men and women in church and society. The above factors are not conclusive but highlight the real struggles the Malawi chapter faces in its efforts to establish a live chapter.

In the following chapter, I seek to show how Circle theologies relate to the theologies of grassroots women in Southern Malawi. I have restricted my discussion to issues of marriage because I relate Circle theologies to women of Evangelical churches where the institution of marriage is very central. Secondly, Malawi, just like other countries in Sub Saharan Africa, has a high HIV/AIDS infection rate. This pandemic is linked to the marriage institution. One of the misconceptions Evangelical churches have is that monogamous heterosexual marriages are safe. This chapter shows how theologies of women in these Evangelical churches dispute such claims from cultural and economical disempowerment perspectives.

## Chapter 6: The Relevance of Circle Theology to Malawi

It is clear that Circle theology is very much variegated with patches of Evangelical theology as well as the more liberal theology that perceives human social relationships to be androcentric.<sup>1</sup> However, the grassroots Christian women in Evangelical churches in Malawi mostly follow a traditional and an Evangelical feminist view of human social relationships as shown in this chapter. It is also true that these grassroots women's theologizing is changing, including more liberal aspects of Circle theologies.

In one way, these Christian grassroots women seem to differ from more liberal Circle women in seeking transformation of their situations to live more fulfilled lives. These women show that they have little interest in dealing with issues of patriarchy in their daily Christian experience. On the other hand, these grassroots women are embracing glimpses of Circle theologies in their life experiences. In this chapter I shed light on these mixed perceptions of grassroots liberation in Malawi with selected examples gleaned from experiences of women in the following aspects of life: through their marriage counselling sessions called *ulangizi*, bridal showers, *mwambo*, traditional initiation ceremonies, casual sexual relationships (grasshopper tradition), and ritual observances. I use story telling<sup>2</sup> and description of activities of women's experiences as approaches to unveil liberation theologies of grassroots women in Malawi. Such an approach allows the grassroots Christian women to speak about their own theologies rather than the author speaking on their behalf. In these stories and descriptions of women's experiences, the women are carving out their own theologies that must be taken seriously.

### 6.1 A Christian Malawian Cultural Reinterpretation

The Circle argues that African culture is patriarchal and needs to be rid of elements that are oppressive to women. These patriarchal elements are present in matrilineal as well as patrilineal societies. In patrilineal societies, the husband and his brothers are in charge of a woman. This patriarchal reality is also called kyriarchy.<sup>3</sup> A kyriarchal arrangement is clear in that the father or the uncle is the ruler of the woman, her children (if any) and her property. Among Christian women in Southern Malawi, matrilineal communities are

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<sup>1</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York: Crossroads, 1999 (1983).

<sup>2</sup> See Annalet van Schalkwyk, "Writing Southern African Women's Stories of Transformation – Some Methodological Aspects," *Journal of Constructive Theology* no. 6 (2), 2000, 21-37; Annalet van Schalkwyk, "Sister, we Bleed and we Sing: Women's Stories, Christian Mission and SHALOM in South Africa," PhD, UNISA, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> "Kyriarchy" is a neologism coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

common. In both patrilineal and matrilineal communities the man is the leader in the home.<sup>4</sup> Liberation for these women is in most cases defined differently from how it is defined by the more liberal Circle thinking. For example, in most cases liberation for grassroots women is defined as economic and social security of family and marriage based on holding onto the male figure, be it husband, uncle or sexual partner. It is also defined in terms of how one has a sense of cultural identity with her family and kinship. This kind of liberation is shaped through the informal community and church based education programmes that are crucial in the formation of Christian women's well being. Such programmes usually sanction hegemonic social relationships where men are rulers and accord them a higher degree of dignity as opposed to women. This is in conflict with the majority voice of the Circle that subscribes to the idea of an egalitarian relationship between men and women. However, there are also small inroads of change into these perceptions among grassroots women in Malawi. These changes often tally with the desired goals of more liberal Circle thinking. On the other hand, there is no proof that these changes directly result from an interaction between Circle thinking and grassroots women's ideas. The changes that occur in these grassroots women's lives might have a broader origin that has not been dealt with in this dissertation.

#### 6.1.1 Preparing Girl and Boy Children for a Christian Marriage

Christian girls and boys in Malawi are groomed for Christian marriages through a variety of ceremonies. The first programme is called *ulangizi*. It is a programme aimed at preparing female and male children for marriage. Among Christians in Southern Malawi there are two major programmes on how girls and boys<sup>5</sup> are prepared for marriage. The first one, which is usually done first, is through an initiation programme commonly referred to as *bwalo chinamwali* (if not organized by the church) or *ulangizi* (if organized by a church).<sup>6</sup> In this section, I tailor my discussions to girls' *bwalo* initiation programmes. The second is the one that takes place just before one gets a church wedding either at *chinkhoswe* ("engagement")<sup>7</sup> or a day before the wedding.<sup>8</sup> Such *ulangizi*

<sup>4</sup> In patrilineal societies the father is dominant, in matrilineal societies the mother's brother is.

<sup>5</sup> For initiation programmes for boys see: J.C. Chakanza, "The Unfinished Agenda: Puberty Rites and the Response of the Roman Catholic Church in Southern Malawi, 1901-1994" *Religion in Malawi* no. 5, 1995; Felix Chingota, "A Historical Account of the Attitude of Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian towards Initiation Rites," *Religion in Malawi*, no. 5, 1995; Patrick Makondes, "Christian Initiation Rites in Southern Malawi," MA module, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Malawi, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> See Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Coming of Age: A Christianized Initiation among Women in Southern Malawi*, Kachere Series: Zomba, 2005, 91 pp.

<sup>7</sup> *Chinkhoswe* is sometimes indeed translated "engagement," and occasionally it means exactly that. But traditionally *chinkhoswe* was the wedding ceremony of the Chewa, and it is seen so even today by most



sessions are referred to as bridal showers and marriage send offs. At such occasions, usually women teach girls (the brides to be) and boys (the bridegrooms to be) regarding marriage. These sessions are available in all patrilineal and matrilineal societies of Malawi. There is another forum where marriage instruction takes place. This is called a marriage counselling session.<sup>9</sup> It is usually organized by churches and is open to all that are married either through a traditional marriage or a church wedding.<sup>10</sup> The Synod of Livingstonia for example has such marriage counselling programmes for men and women.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, *bwalo* initiation programmes are common in all matrilineal societies and in the few patrilineal societies of Southern Malawi.

The body of knowledge provided to the girls and boys is largely androcentric. It is knowledge that is carefully selected by the instructors to serve the interests of men (a husband or a partner). This is against the liberal voice in Circle theologies. In these programmes the messages are usually aimed at promoting male leadership in the home. The other knowledge regarding the welfare of the girl is largely omitted or cryptic. The goal of these sessions is to make them obedient to their husbands.

### 6.1.2 Initiation Ceremonies

The first organized contact to teachings that promote patriarchal relationships is through the (*bwalo*) traditional initiation ceremonies. The majority of Christians still sends their children to these ceremonies although their churches discourage them to do so.<sup>12</sup> To avoid punishments from their churches, parents secretly send their children to the initiation programmes. Some do this by sending their children to have the initiation ceremonies away from where their churches are located. Initiation programmes for girls

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who undergo it. For an argument to abolish church weddings in favour of a Christian *chinkhoswe* see: Klaus Fiedler, "For the Sake of Christian Marriage, Abolish Church Weddings," *Religion in Malawi*, no. 5, 1995, pp. 22-29.

<sup>8</sup> I am producing two booklets, one in Chichewa "Kulandira Mwambo" and one in English, "Marriage Instructions."

<sup>9</sup> Currently Towera Mwase is studying the different kinds of pre-marital instructions for her MA at Mzuzu University.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of traditional and church marriages, see Klaus Fiedler, "For the Sake of Christian Marriage Abolish Church Weddings," *Religion in Malawi*, no. 5 (1995), pp. 22-28.

<sup>11</sup> Mathews R. Gomezgani Phiri, "A Study on the Pre-Marriage Counselling in the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia Ekwendeni Presbytery," BA, Mzuzu University, December 2009. Although the title suggests that the programme is for the unmarried, it is for married people. The preposition 'Pre' is used to mean that these married people have never undergone such a programme since they got married.

<sup>12</sup> The Catholic church excommunicates those that attend such ceremonies. See J.C. Chakanza, "The Unfinished Agenda," *Religion in Malawi*, no. 5, 1995. Other churches punish their members in one way or the other.

are patriarchal because the teachings and activities done at these programmes are androcentric. Girl children are subjected to patriarchal cultural practices and teachings that are oppressive to their well being as shown in the paragraphs below.

One of the oppressive practices is deploying a hyena (*fisi*) at the end of the girls' initiation to come to test whether the girls can dance well in bed.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, such a practice is often sanctioned by the parents of the girl. The *fisi* (a man) is usually hired by the girl's mother's side, and he must come only once at night and must remain unknown. This practice is fading away not because women take such practices as unholy, but because of the threat this practice has through HIV/AIDS. As mothers are becoming increasingly aware of the health problem in the HIV era, the solution is found in substituting the *khundabwi*<sup>14</sup> medicine for the *fisi*.<sup>15</sup> There is evidence that there are now many girls' initiations without a *fisi*.

The other oppressive practice is that women must never ask the husband for sex and must accept a husband's immoral ways. These two practices are promoted through the following initiation songs: The first song promotes the idea of women accepting an immoral husband.

Tsegulire, tsegulire!	Open for me, open for me!
Ndakana, ndakana.	I have refused, I have refused.
Apanja, apanja	Those outside, those outside
Mulibe mwambo.	Have no behaviour.
Anyumba, anyumba	Those in the house, those in the house,
Mulibe mwambo.	You do not have behaviour. <sup>16</sup>

The interpretation of this song is that if a man sleeps outside, and comes very late, the wife should not refuse him entry into the house; she should not leave him outside because "an animal can kill and eat him." If this happens the woman would regret her action. The wife is further instructed not to be jealous of her husband's extramarital affairs.

The second song dissuades a wife from asking her husband for sex.

Mwana mnyamata usagone 2x	Young man, do not sleep 2x
Utozona?	Are you sleeping?
Ona dina.	See my vagina.
Tandileke. 2x	Leave me alone.
Ndamwa mowa.	I drank beer. <sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See J.W.M. van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2001, pp. 197-195.

<sup>14</sup> It is a herbal medicine usually provided by the chief which makes the girl child mature. See Molly Longwe, *Growing Up. A Chewa Girls Initiation*, Zomba: Kachere, 2006, p. 42.

This has become a widespread practice now in the Chewa area around Lilongwe. The idea, advocated in the teaching of various churches, that neither the *fisi* nor the medicine are needed, has found less support. *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Coming of Age. A Christianized Initiation among Women in Southern Malawi*. Zomba: Kachere, 2005, p. 82.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

The teaching is that even though a woman sometimes desires her husband, she should not request sex from him. She must wait till her husband desires her.<sup>18</sup>

Redefining the majority of teachings and practices promoted by traditional initiation ceremonies has remained a problem to Christian Malawian women. This is because, to go against such practices, has negative social-economic consequences to the women as will be shown below. The only clear redefinition is as regards the hyena tradition. This is because there is a clearly defined remedy - *khundabwi*.<sup>19</sup> Further, the hyena has no financial gains for the women. It is therefore true that the hyena (*fisi*) tradition seems to have been greatly reduced not only because it may spread HIV/AIDS. If such was the case, then immoral practices that seem to be sanctioned by traditional initiation would have also disappeared. This dilemma points to the need of assessing approaches women use in re-imagining their traditional culture to achieve women's liberation. There are three approaches to this: The laissez faire approach, the rejectionist approach and the selective approach.

#### 6.1.2.1 *The Laissez Faire Approach*

In the 21st century Malawi Christian world view, this approach seems to be frequently applied to teachings and practices relating to the moral life of grassroots Christian women and men in church and society. Regardless of counter teachings against immoral teachings and practices, there is little tangible morality change among the grassroots Christian women and men. Again, the social economic realities in which women and men are trapped seem to provide a major resistance to behaviour change. Thus, the more popular approach Christian women and men employ as regards immorality is a laissez faire one. Unlike Christian women who are often caught up in immoral practices for economic gains, Christian men are caught in the same to satisfy their egoistic tendencies.<sup>20</sup> It is a means to portray their masculinity over women. The men also have the means to achieve their egoistic tendencies because they are economically empowered.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The song itself is ambiguous, but the standard prose explanation leaves no ambiguity: "He should not sleep but see his wife's vagina and sleep with her. It teaches that sometimes it is a woman who desires the man, but sometimes the man is not interested. It teaches that a woman should not request a man for sex; the man should desire sex by himself (Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Coming of Age. A Christianized Initiation among Women in Southern Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere, 2005, p. 74).

<sup>19</sup> See Molly Longwe, *Growing Up. A Chewa Girls' Initiation*, Zomba: Kachere, 2006, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> Proverbs such as "Mwamuna ndi tonde azinunkha" (The man is a billy goat. He must stink [behave like one]) promote this behaviour. This proverb is well known, but it is not contained in the large collection of Chewa proverbs: J.C. Chakanza, *Wisdom of the People, 2000 Chinyanja Proverbs*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> For an inquiry into Malawian concepts of masculinity see: David Mkwambisi, Joshua Valeta, Edgar Lungu, Macdonald Gomani, *Masculinity, Alcoholism and HIV/AIDS in Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere, 2010 (forthcoming).

They also have the environment in which to harness their immoral behaviours. It is interesting to note that Circle theologians rarely address this male cultural orientation.

#### 6.1.2.2 *The Rejectionist Approach*

This approach to culture was promoted by some missionaries that brought the church to Africa.<sup>22</sup> This was the same in Malawi. Missionaries who employed such an approach were the Southern Baptist missionaries that brought Baptist Convention churches to Malawi in the 1960s. In the beginning, grassroots Baptist Convention women were expected to choose between following their traditional culture or the Baptist church. This was visible when Mrs Blanche Wester began the first congregation in the Jali area of Zomba.<sup>23</sup> One of the conditions for membership was to stop getting involved in traditional dances. However, even though they managed to temporarily discourage women from participating in initiation programmes, that often demeaned women's dignity, they robbed women of cultural elements that were useful to their dignity. Cultural teachings about respecting elders were compromised.<sup>24</sup> The other church that deployed a similar approach is the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM). Isabel Apawo Phiri quotes Mrs Stegman's paper presented at a conference of missionary women to reflect on the reasons for opposing initiation programmes in this way:

There are many things in the ceremonies which were in conflict with demands of Christianity. Emphasis was that a 'pagan girl' was accompanied by much cruelty and degradation. Therefore in order to rescue Christian girls, the church thought of banning *chinamwali*.<sup>25</sup>

Although the pioneers of this rejection approach were some of the early missionaries, it is also common among Charismatic and Pentecostal movements of the 21st century. Just as

<sup>22</sup> Very often, though not always, initiation ceremonies were rejected. In other cases they were ignored, and sometimes they were actively christianized. In the Leipzig Lutheran Mission on the slopes of Kilimanjaro, Bruno Gutmann, the veteran missionary there, strongly supported the right to circumcision (including for girls), while opposition to (male and equally female) circumcision came from a group of educated Christians, mostly teachers (Klaus Fiedler, *The Gospel Takes Root on Kilimanjaro. A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Old Moshi-Mbokomu 1885-1940*, Zomba: Kachere, 2006, pp. 16-17, 43-46.) For an extended discussion of various attitudes to circumcision in East Africa see: Klaus Fiedler, "Bishop Lucas' Christianization of Traditional Rites, the Kikuyu Female Circumcision Controversy and the 'Cultural Approach' of Conservative German Missionaries in Tanzania" in Noel Q. King and Klaus Fiedler (eds), *Robin Lamburn – From a Missionary's Notebook: The Yao of Tunduru and other Essays*, Saarbrücken, 1991, pp. 207-217.

<sup>23</sup> Rachel NyaGondwe Banda [Fiedler], *Women of Bible and Culture. Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*, pp. 31, 42, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Missionaries coined their own teachings by introducing the Ulangizi Booklet (*Buku la Alangizi*, Lilongwe: Baptist Publications, nd).

<sup>25</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy. Religious Experiences of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, p. 62.

missionaries failed to provide an adequate alternative solution to the 'evils' of traditional culture, Charismatic churches have also failed to provide such solutions through spiritual warfare.<sup>26</sup> There is little evidence that Charismatic solutions have reduced the immoral behaviours that traditional culture is promoting. Thus, the problems of immorality are for Christian women and men of all Christian movements. It seems that behaviour change as regards immorality is not an issue that can be dealt with by spiritual weapons alone, but material ones must also be used. Economic and social empowerment of women must accompany spiritual reform programmes to provide a comprehensive answer to this problem. However, there is also no evidence that economic empowerment reduces immorality among women, though there are many HIV and Aids projects that try to use this approach to reduce the prevalence of infection among women.<sup>27</sup>

### 6.1.2.3 *The Selective Approach*===

In this approach, grassroots women disagree with the view that all culture is evil. They uphold the fact that certain elements of culture must be kept and others discouraged. However, what guides their choice of what must be kept and what must be removed seems to be based on what is useful for their daily survival. Thus, although immorality is dangerous in the era of HIV and AIDS, women continue to be involved in immorality for their socio-economic survival.<sup>28</sup> Underlining the above approaches is the desire to inculcate traditional initiation programmes into those that are acceptable to the theologies of particular churches. Below is an example of such attempts of inculturation.

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<sup>26</sup> Spiritual warfare seems to be effective only to areas such as witchcraft and not in solving problems of immorality. Rhodian Munyenyembe's work shows how Charismatic movements have excelled in dealing with witchcraft. See Rhodian Munyenyembe, "Christianity and Socio-Cultural Issues. An Evaluation of the Charismatic Movement's Contribution towards the Contextualization of the Gospel in Malawi," MA, University of Malawi, 2006, p. 90.

<sup>27</sup> Chimwemwe Kalalo found out in her research that not all women opt for extramarital affairs for economic gain. See Chimwemwe Kalalo, "Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Context of HIV/AIDS: The Involvement of the Anglican Church in the Upper Shire Diocese in Southern Malawi," MA, University of Malawi, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> The Circle puts issues of economic empowerment at the centre of their theologies. For example see: Sophia Chirongoma, "Women, Poverty, and HIV in Zimbabwe. An Exploration of Inequalities in Health Care," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Sarojini Nadar (eds), *African Women, Religion, and Health. Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2006, pp 173-186. Latin America Feminism also puts this element at the core of their theologizing. See Mary Judith Press, "Feminist Christians in Latin America," in *Voices from the Third World Women*, vol. viii, no. 3, p. 56.

#### 6.1.2.4 Inculturation and Traditional Initiation

Churches in Malawi have a long history of inculturating traditional initiation programmes into forms that are palatable to their faithful.<sup>29</sup> In the experience of Baptist women in Malawi the women resisted earlier attempts by missionaries to Christianize initiation. They only sanctioned Christianized programmes when the locals became satisfied that such modifications would not jeopardize their children's ethnic identity. When the missionaries devised a way of instructing children by using a booklet, hence booklet *chinamwali*, the local women did not patronize it for a long time. They felt that the essence of what makes them women in this matrilineal society was sacrificed in the name of Christianizing the rite.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the *bwalo chinamwali*, it excluded drama, singing, dancing, and clapping of hands among other things. The initiates on the other hand were given a challenge to become Christians. For the local Baptist women this was a shock. It was not only that they were forbidden to participate in traditional initiation but that the alternative was not local. The booklet rendered the initiation ceremony dry and dull (and very short).<sup>31</sup> It also created a feeling that they would miss out on certain central teachings that identified them as women in this matrilineal society.

It is interesting that the Baptist women whom the missionary women consulted in the formulation of the booklet *chinamwali* were all not from the Zomba region. Mary Galatiya, the first Baptist Convention pastor's wife in Malawi, was part of this group. She is a South African and had lived many years in South Africa. Agnes Njolomole Phiri came from the central region, was probably more aligned to the effectiveness of the *chilangizo* in Nkhoma Synod, which had its own *ulangizi* booklet.<sup>32</sup> The fact that the booklet was constructed without any relationship to the *bwalo chinamwali* reduced its credibility. This is probably why there are only two churches I know in the Zomba area that have ever held the booklet initiation.<sup>33</sup> The fact that the authors did not explain to instructors the dangers of going to *bwalo* initiation, assumed that African children were a tabula rasa as regards initiation ceremonies.

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<sup>29</sup> Many churches have inculturated traditional initiation rites; Isabel Phiri describes these for the Chewa of Nkhoma Synod (Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy. Religious Experiences of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000, pp. 62-68; Molly Longwe for the Baptist Convention congregations in the same area (Molly Longwe, *Growing Up. A Chewa Girls Initiation*, Zomba: Kachere, 2006, pp. 71-81).

<sup>30</sup> See *Buku la Alangizi*, Lilongwe: Baptist Publications, nd.

<sup>31</sup> Molly Longwe, *Growing Up. A Chewa Girls Initiation*, Zomba: Kachere, 2006, p. 97f.

<sup>32</sup> For many details of *chilangizo* in Nkhoma Synod, see Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy. Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Nkhoma Synod*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000, pp. 62-68).

<sup>33</sup> There are well over a hundred Baptist congregations in the wider Zomba area.

It is clear that Baptist women in this culture found the booklet *chinamwali* inadequate. Their rejection of the booklet was not in relation to whether it was patriarchal or not. What strengthened their identity was liberating. This is shown in that women in this region did not use it even though the church did have women holding the position of an instructor (*mlangizi*). Most of those that held such posts were pastors' wives.<sup>34</sup> This meant that during this time when there was only this booklet initiation, local women in this church mainly participated in *bwalo chinamwali* that reinforced their cultural identity.

In recent years, the booklet *chinamwali* has died a natural death in Southern Malawi. Instead the local women have developed their own initiation ceremony called *chinamwali cha pa tchalitchi* (church initiation). This *chinamwali* is very popular among Baptist Convention women in the South East Region because of its closeness to *bwalo chinamwali*. During my Masters Programme, I was able to document a complete initiation programme of this type.<sup>35</sup> However, since then, I have seen the dynamism of this initiation programme in its ability to change and adapt to different shapes without losing the flavour of the traditional initiation ceremony. Just as the *bwalo chinamwali*, this church *chinamwali* still deploys dance, drama, songs, hand clapping, and sometimes traditional medicines and rituals as an approach of instruction for the women. This is what is more accepted by women in this region than the initiation programme organized by missionaries.

One of the reasons why this church initiation is well accepted by the women is that, although it is different from the traditional one, it has important components that reinforce these women's cultural identity. The instructor in this church initiation takes time to tell the girls some of the passwords to tell others who might want to know whether they were properly initiated. From the reactions of the group, those that took their children to church initiation were really contented. There was no *chitekwe*<sup>36</sup> and she did not encourage much dancing for the initiation ceremony of the girls but the girls knew all they needed to know that constituted their cultural identity.

The women use a selective approach in analyzing culture; however, it is not the questions raised by the wider feminist theological movement that inform their choices. It is not clear whether they see patriarchy, androcentrism and patriarchal hegemonic relationships between men and women as guiding their quest for liberation. It is clear that

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<sup>34</sup> See Rachel Banda, "Liberation through Baptist Polity and Doctrine. A Reflection on the Lives of Women in the History of Women in the Baptist Convention of Malawi," MA, University of Malawi, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> See Rachel Banda, "Liberation through Baptist Polity and Doctrine," pp. 234-273, later published as: Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Coming of Age: A Christianized Initiation among Women in Southern Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere, 2005, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> *Chitekwe* is an ad hoc and informal dance performed before the real rite begins.

economic security, social security, marriage security and cultural identity inform their selection.

### 6.1.3 *The Paradox of Grasshopper Marriages*

In this type of marriage relationship a woman stays married only occasionally, usually at night, to a man without the knowledge of either the society or the wife to this man. Such a marriage exists especially among single women (mostly divorced or widowed).<sup>37</sup> A critical analysis of this tradition shows that this form of immoral behaviour does not directly originate from the traditional initiation teachings. At initiation programmes, men are encouraged to be immoral while women are discouraged from being immoral. Girls are clearly dissuaded from engaging in immoral behaviour through the following song.

Mtsikana woyendayenda, ee!	The moving girl, eeh!
Mwana wafera panjira.	The child has died on the way.
Anafera panjira.	She died on the way.
Mwana wachigololo	The fornicious child
Anafera panjira.	Died on the road. <sup>38</sup>

Through this song, women are traditionally taught that immorality is deadly. This song accompanies a drama where a little girl is faked to have died because she was immoral and was never afraid of sleeping with men older than her.<sup>39</sup> The song and drama further teaches girls to abstain from sex outside marriage. The only place for extra marital sex for women in traditional teaching is related to the hyena tradition, to widowhood cleansing and avoidance of *tsempho*.<sup>40</sup> The *kachiwala* immorality seems to be a new phenomenon to these women and men. It also has a new approach. Rather than promoting men's immorality alone, it also promotes women's immorality. This new face to immorality seems to address a particular societal problem that revolved after the genesis of traditional initiations. They are a new phenomenon of an emerging new culture.<sup>41</sup> An example of emerging teachings in the context of the new culture is expressed in this song.

(1) Usandiyang'ane	Do not look at me
Mwamuna wako	Your husband
Samagona ndi ine	Does not sleep with me

<sup>37</sup> See Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, "Kachiwala Tradition," unpublished.

<sup>38</sup> Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Coming of Age*, p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> The *alangizi* interprets the drama in this way: "The girl that you see lying dead on the road has died because of promiscuity. She had sex with a man and because she was young, she died and was dumped on the road" (Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Coming of Age*, p. 73).

<sup>40</sup> For a thorough discussion of all the taboos and customs related to *tsempho* and the *mdulo* complex see chapter 6 of J.W.M. van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> For comprehensive orientation on cultural change read Rhodian Munyenyembe, "Christianity and Socio-Cultural Issues. An Evaluation of the Charismatic Movement's Contribution towards the Contextualization of the Gospel in Malawi," MA, University of Malawi, 2006.



(2) Mwamuna wako	Your husband
Anali kwathu	Was at my place
Andigulira Gesha ndi mafuta,	He bought me Geisha [bathing soap] and [cooking] oil
Atakaneneyo ndi wabodza	The one who will report (this) is a liar

In both songs, grassroots Christian women do not condemn women's immorality because sex is a means for women's economic liberation. It does not matter whether it is a sexual relationship that is outside marriage. Both songs talk about a woman having extramarital relations with someone's husband. Promiscuity that earns them material security is one of such ways of survival. The *kachiwala* practice is also supported by the belief that single women occasionally need sex for them to have "vitamin K" to keep their health.<sup>42</sup> Such promiscuity is organized to the greater extent by women but supported by patriarchal structures that omit women in programmes of financial security. In both cases women conscientize each other not to question the woman the husband has an affair with. The women should, if anything, deal with their unfaithful husbands and not the woman in question. The wife does not confront the husband or if she does, chooses not to divorce him because she does not have material security to survive on her own. Patriarchy therefore promotes this behaviour.

In the second song, women sensitize each other against revealing each others' extramarital affairs even if one may know the man involved. Because the women are impoverished, they feel entitled to earn their economic gains through such a relationship. This again explains why women do not tell their women friends about the extramarital relations that their husbands might be having. It explains the fact that immorality is a well protected phenomenon in our culture because of poverty promoted by patriarchal decisions at grassroots level and beyond. This means that the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa is also a poverty issue and not only a moral one.<sup>43</sup>

The view that promotes immorality of women to achieve economic success is alien to traditional teaching. In traditional initiation sex is viewed as a tool for economic prosperity only in the context of marriage. This is shown in this song below. It teaches women to treat their bodies carefully when married because their vagina is capital for material gain.

Namu idyani,	In here, eat,
Namu idyani,	In here, eat,

<sup>42</sup> See Rachel NyaGondwe Banda [Fiedler], *Women of Bible and Culture*, p. 185. Some people ascribed Liddah Kalako's death to the lack of Vitamin K. – The concept can also be applied to men: The father of the first female ordained pastor in Livingstonia Synod (CCAP) spent 7 years in South Africa as a migrant labourer. He became sick there, loosing weight etc, and had to return to Malawi. He was a strong Christian, and the reason attributed to his illness was lack of Vitamin K (Ruth Nyondo, *The Life and Work of the Rev Martha Belida Mwale*, BTh, University of Livingstonia, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Sophia Chirongoma shows this in her research. See Sophia Chirongoma, "Women, Poverty, and HIV in Zimbabwe. An Exploration of Inequalities in Health Care," in Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *African Women, Religion, and Health. Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, pp. 173-186.

Muli malata [zigayo, nyumba etc]<sup>44</sup>      There are iron sheets [grinding mills, houses etc]  
 A rich married woman might have attained her riches through her vagina. It is not a song that teaches women to use their bodies for economic gains outside marriage. The disadvantage of this teaching, however, is that such teachings socialize men into an attitude of treating their wives as sex objects. Further, women that are not in a monandrous relationship might seek other sexual partners for material gain.

#### *6.1.3.1 The Pulling Factors of Kachiwala Practices*

The first reason why this tradition thrives among Christians is that it provides economic advantages. The main reason why women's economic empowerment could be an answer to dealing with immorality among Christian women and men is that money determines the demand and supply of sexual promiscuity among Christian women and men. There is a high demand from grassroots women for extramarital relations from men because women lack economic empowerment. This economic empowerment can easily be supplied by men who usually have the lead in economic empowerment. Although the same experiences might be present among women of other religions, these discussions are based on experiences of Christian women in Malawi.

The second reason is that the Christian message of abstinence and being faithful in marriage promoted by the churches is overcome by the traditional mindset of the believers. Christians in this portray that they are not completely distanced from their other anti Christian cultural teachings. Christians may also be crying for a theology of the church that deals with both the soul and the body. In this case, the church should help in some way in empowering her members economically as well as spiritually.

The third reason is failure to condemn Christian men that are perpetrators of this behaviour. Christian women fail to condemn their immoral husbands for fear of being censored by their churches and losing material (and marital) benefits. Since the Bible condemns extramarital relations, a Christian woman who reveals to the church that her husband is promiscuous faces rejection within her church community. If the husband is a pastor, he might lose his post. For the sake of maintaining her husband's monogamous marriage, a woman allows him to maintain an outside relationship with a woman she knows. Socially, since the marriage will remain monogamous in the sight of the society, the woman is well accepted in her church.

The fourth reason is that Christian men are still being controlled by wrong notions of masculinity that promote immorality and control of women. The men are also controlled by wrong concepts about women. These also may have their origins in the traditional culture. One of such wrong perceptions about women is that women are sex objects.

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<sup>44</sup> These words are substituted with any material goods in various stanzas.

### 6.1.3.2 An Example of a *Kachiwala* Marriage<sup>45</sup>

A mother of one child from a rural village in Zomba lives with a man for material security. She lost her parents to HIV/AIDS in 2003. Being the first-born she was left with four siblings to care for. Since she never went to school and could not find regular employment, she decided to accept this occasional marriage to a man who at that time had two wives. The man is able to buy maize for her and even buys school items for her siblings. She goes to a Baptist church and has only one child from this marriage. This is the first marriage she has ever had.<sup>46</sup>

It is interesting that women sometimes encourage each other to have such a marriage. In a Baptist association meeting that took place in Southern Malawi, I decided to have a group discussion with widows alone. When I inquired how frequently such marriages occur, I was surprised that the women agreed that it is the only way they can provide for the needs of their children.<sup>47</sup> In fact, the women did not see the *kachiwala* tradition as evil; it was just a means of coping with the loss of a husband.<sup>48</sup> As if this was not enough, I was alarmed to see that one of the widows had the strength to even tell the group as to how she attracts grasshoppers to herself.<sup>49</sup>

### 6.1.3.3 Hazards of the *Kachiwala* Tradition

It is obvious that *kachiwala* "marriages" are potential carriers of HIV/AIDS; however, group interviews with women generally show that this threat is not taken seriously.<sup>50</sup> Some of the responses of one group of twelve illustrate this. Two women explained that HIV/AIDS should not be feared. The basis of this understanding rested on their literalistic interpretation of the Bible, arguing that HIV/AIDS was already prophesied in the Bible, that it would come in the end times. One of the two women passionately encouraged her fellow women not to be afraid because either her or them one day will catch the disease, as it is prophesied in the Bible. To this, a third woman explained that it is only through prayer that, if she gets the virus, she would not get sick quickly. A fourth lady echoed this

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<sup>45</sup> For additional stories of women experiencing such marriages, read the Appendix.

<sup>46</sup> I learnt of her story when I was counselling her in her spiritual life, 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Widows group, Domasi Baptist Association, August 2004.

<sup>48</sup> See Chimwemwe Kalalo, "Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Context of HIV/AIDS," p. 64.

<sup>49</sup> The woman said "There is a day when this man met me on the road and requested me that he come home at night. Since I was not well supplied with household items I decided to take him in. I went home and cleared my house. I made tea ready and put it in the bedroom and put on my nice clothes I usually have."

<sup>50</sup> Chimwemwe Kalalo made very similar observations in her research: "Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Context of HIV/AIDS," p. 78.

and said, "This is why some women stay on for years with the disease while the others die quickly, because of prayers."<sup>51</sup>

A fifth woman explained that HIV/AIDS should not be feared because it came for human beings, not for dogs or rocks. She continued to say that, for this reason, everyone should be prepared to get infected because it is a disease that has come for them as humans.<sup>52</sup> From this it is clear that grassroots women take a victim's approach to liberation. This is different from Circle thinking which advocates that women should change their status for the better.

#### *6.1.4 Cultural Practices and Immorality*

Among many Christian women and men of Malawi, observance of cultural practices still persists. Most of such cultural practices have been ably dealt with by many scholars.<sup>53</sup> In this section, I point out only three practices that specifically influence Christian women in Southern Malawi.

##### *6.1.4.1 Widowhood Cleansing and Immorality*

For a long time in Africa, singlehood has been a condition that is frowned upon. Every woman is expected to get a husband and keep him as much as she can. When a woman is single after marriage through divorce or death of her spouse, the society makes sure that she gets the message that she is incomplete without a male partner. This androcentric perception is a basis of the so many attempts women use to keep a husband in the relationship. Some of these attempts have been described in the earlier paragraphs. In this section, I highlight one way women are asked to use to keep a new husband after the death of a husband. This practice is patriarchal because it serves men.

On the 16th of June 2001, I went into the rural areas of Zomba conducting my research. "Missing Links in HIV/AIDS Education among Rural Baptist Women of Southern Malawi. The Challenge of Culture and the Bible. A Case Study of Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi." When I told a Baptist pastor's wife in that area about my impending marriage to Dr Klaus Fiedler, she responded by this statement.

If you want him not to die as your first husband did, you must sleep with another man before marrying him so that this other man must cleanse you of the impurities of your

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<sup>51</sup> Group interview through participatory investigation, 12 Baptist convention women in Jali, Zomba June 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. It is interesting that there was no woman who argued against these views in the group. This is a fatalistic viewpoint.

<sup>53</sup> See J.W.M. van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2001.

late husband [Jande Banda]. If you have ever slept with a man after the death of your husband, then you are already safe and your new husband will be safe.<sup>54</sup>

After this experience I decided to check with other Baptist Convention women in Zomba district. I interviewed two. One of them hailed from Jali area while the other came from the periphery of Zomba municipality. They both worship in one of the urban churches. These said "the tradition of sleeping with another man before remarriage is *kuchotsa fumbi*." It is clear that this tradition is sustained by patriarchy. It serves the many men that would be involved in cleansing widows including those that are infected.

The man who does it is called a "*fisi*." He is a "*fisi*" because he comes at night just like hyenas do. The woman is not supposed to recognize him. A relative of the woman, such as a grandmother, usually arranges for this "*fisi*." Sometimes, the widow is told the same night the "*fisi*" comes, without prior agreement with the widow. In certain cases, the widow agrees with the "*fisi*" and just informs the relatives about his coming.

One of the two respondents explained that the "*fisi*" is also needed when a couple has lost a child, before the man can resume sexual relations with his wife who traditionally refrains from marital relations with her husband as a mourning ritual.

A *fisi* is also required in some cases where the husband has been unfaithful. He is considered to be "hot" while the wife is considered to be "cold", and "hot" and "cold" cannot mix. It is then the duty of the husband to look for a *fisi*, usually his friend, to sleep with his wife so that she is rendered safe for him to have sex with. This request goes with a confession to the *fisi*: "Sindinachite bwino kunyumba kwanga" (I have not done well at my home.) He then begs the friend to "put things right" in his home by sleeping with his wife.<sup>55</sup>

#### 6.1 4.2 Abstinence after Delivery

Another cultural practice that promotes immorality among men and women in Southern Malawi is "abstinence after delivery" (*kudika*). The practice promotes immorality in that during this avoidance period a man may enjoy sexual relationships outside marriage and still keeps the wife. The woman, on the other hand, is not allowed to have sexual partners outside marriage. The initiation into *kudika* takes place after the child is born, preferably during the time the woman completes her period of seclusion (*chikuta*), which usually lasts as long as the child's umbilical cord takes to fall off, around 7 days on average.

At one mock initiation, all the 42 women that participated agreed that they taught or have seen their friends teaching about 6 months abstinence from sex after delivery. One

<sup>54</sup> Name of pastor's wife withheld. - Chimwemwe Kalalo records her very similar experience (Chimwemwe Kalalo, "Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Context of HIV/AIDS").

<sup>55</sup> These rules are part of the *mdulo* complex. For details see: Joseph DeGabriele, "When Pills don't Work - African Illnesses, Misfortune and *Mdulo*, *Religion in Malawi*, no. 9, 1999, pp. 9-23.

woman also told ways of how she could help her husband deal with his emotions during this time of sexual avoidance. She encouraged her friends to assist the husband to have non-penetrative sex by folding one of her legs so that he can discharge through the fold. There is no teaching on how the woman should relieve her own sexual emotions. The other teaching given is that the woman should always have a cloth tied around her waist covering her vagina for the 6 months period. This is to help her to prevent the husband from having sex with her. The other reason is to prevent the child from having a "split head" (*liwombo*).<sup>56</sup> This teaching is harmful because it encourages a husband to be involved in extramarital affairs, since to some masturbation is not an option. This practice in turn breeds HIV/AIDS, as a husband may seek sex with other women during that period.

#### 6.1.4.3 Six Months Abstinence

Only a small percentage of women at the mock initiation were reluctant to ignore the avoidance tradition (*kudika*). These strongly believed that the woman would harm the man since she will not be pure before 6 months.<sup>57</sup> They even lobbied for a 4 months avoidance period as the minimum period of abstinence. When this idea was conveyed to the group, one lady shared her experience of how she never followed this rule of abstinence except when she was menstruating. She argued that, regardless of the fact that she did not follow the practice, her children are grown up and her husband is still alive.

Following this testimony was a discussion that women follow the tradition less because they receive a different message from the hospitals. After delivery, medical people tell women that after the 6 weeks post natal check up they are free to resume marital relations, if the doctor certifies their health.<sup>58</sup> Many women resume sex earlier than the traditionally prescribed period. The approach they use in redefining culture here is what is liberating to them or not. Since the medical position is liberating to the women and men, they choose to follow it.

#### 6.1.5 Bridal Shower and Marriage Send Off

The other occasions where such patriarchal hegemonic relationships are shaped is at the Bridal Shower and Marriage Send Off. A bridal shower is a pre-wedding session that

<sup>56</sup> Open fontanelles.

<sup>57</sup> It was reported that the *Chilangizo cha Mbanja* [marriage instructions at the time of the wedding] given in CCAP congregations in Zomba Presbytery teach an eight months' period of sexual abstinence (*kuthundira mwana*) after a woman gives birth (Richard Gadama, Women's Role in Zomba Presbytery: The Case of Zomba CCAP Congregations, MA module, Mzuzu University, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Chimwemwe Kalalo, "Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Context of HIV/AIDS: The Involvement of the Anglican Church in the Upper Shire Diocese," MA, University of Malawi, 2006.

takes place usually a week before the wedding. At this session only women are invited to attend. The session is largely for the bride; however, the bridegroom may also be invited at the time when "communication" and "budgeting" are being treated. These two topics require the bridegroom to be present because they involve both the bride and the bridegroom. At a "send off," both the bride and the bridegroom are asked to attend. Both men and women attend this session.<sup>59</sup> There is more sympathy for a send off than a bridal shower among those that would like to transform patriarchal relationships, however, observations of what happens at a "send off" show that presence and participation of men at this function cements oppression of women rather than their liberation. The women are often controlled by the voices of the men calling the women to be submissive and subscribe to ideologies that support men rather than women.<sup>60</sup> The women that are often very vocal at promoting women's liberation at the 'bridal shower,' become apologetic and often succumb to patriarchal ideologies at a marriage send off. The main reason for such behaviour is that women do not want to risk their reputation as faithful Christian women among men, some of whom are leaders of their particular churches. Thus both at bridal showers and marriage send offs, women face patriarchal oppression because the instructors are reluctant to go against the perceived official teachings of the church (and of their culture).<sup>61</sup> It is true that those invited and giving instructions at the bridal shower are not from one church, but the leader of these sessions is often a leader in the church of which the bride and bridegroom are members. As such, this leader feels obliged to make sure that the teachings at these sessions are somehow in line with what her church would sanction.

#### 6.1.6 *Mwambo*<sup>62</sup> Sessions

The second occasion when women are drilled in support of patriarchal relationships is during *mwambo*. The women are not alone at this occasion. This is the time when the men *alangizi* participate. In some churches, they allow only couples that themselves had a church wedding to take part in instructing the newly wed couple. For the five couples that I referred to at the beginning of this section, indeed both men and women instructed the couple. With this membership that is gender balanced one would think that there

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<sup>59</sup> A send off is not different from a bridal shower except that the audience is both men and women.

<sup>60</sup> This I personally observed at two send off sessions that took place in Zomba. At both sessions, the men preached and were much more prominent in giving advice than the women.

<sup>61</sup> At one bridal shower, a woman vehemently warned the leader of the bridal shower against reinterpreting the woman's role in the bedroom, because she argued that it would be against the Women's Guild values. The other woman retorted and argued for a reinterpretation of the practice and threatened that she was not afraid of being disciplined by her Women's Guild.

<sup>62</sup> *Mwambo* means custom but here it refers to marriage instructions given just after the wedding.

would also be a balanced engendered teaching given to the couple. But to the contrary, women's oppression is promoted. This is clear from the analysis of wedding instructions presented in this section.

A group of instructors were selected by the church to carry out *ulangizi*. With all of them the church did not demand a church wedding or even a "blessed" wedding<sup>63</sup> to participate in the instructions.<sup>64</sup> The central area of concern at this function is to prepare the couple to have a good relationship with each other, with in-laws and their own family. However, this "good relationship" seems to be based on the woman adhering to patriarchal teachings. The woman even at this function is reminded of her primary responsibility to serve her husband.

At marriage related ceremonies like bridal showers, marriage send offs, *mwambo*, the following are the key teachings given to women. The teachings clearly promote male dominance in marriage, although currently some changes are occurring.

#### 6.1.7 *Mwamuna ndi Pamimba*

One common patriarchal instruction to the woman is transmitted in a proverbial saying, *mwamuna ndi pamimba* (a husband is his stomach).<sup>65</sup> The teaching is androcentric. This proverb appeals to the woman to look well after her husband. It shapes the women to occupy household roles of providing for her husband and children (if any). Such an instruction is often linked to the teaching that a woman should not complain if a husband is not much at home. Thus the woman resigns from seeking assertive roles and places much emphasis on cooking and caring for her family to keep her husband. With this patriarchal ideology, women groom their girl children to learn skills of raising their families such as cooking and looking after future husbands. Such a perception has also contributed to the lag in the numbers of girls accessing higher education. This has led to the fact that the man is advantaged over and above a woman in terms of economic progress. Access to education has opened opportunities for paid jobs to men and not to women who do not have the required education. When the uneducated girl marries such a

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<sup>63</sup> A blessed wedding (*ukwati wodalitsa*) is, of course, also a church wedding, but it is ranked lower than a "proper" church wedding (*ukwati woyera* - "holy wedding"), which must take place somewhat early in or even at the beginning of a marriage.

<sup>64</sup> In the Baptist Convention, church weddings are encouraged but are not a must for someone to serve in leadership positions. Some pastors in this church are not even married in church (Rachel NyaGondwe Banda [Fiedler], *Women of Bible and Culture*, pp. 172-176.)

<sup>65</sup> In the most comprehensive collection of Chewa proverbs (J.C. Chakanza, *Wisdom of the People. 2000 Chinyanja Proverbs*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000), this proverb is no. 1052 "*Mwamuna mpamimba, nkhope siisintha*. - For the man it's the belly, the face does not change." The meaning attached to the proverb is: "A man works better on a full stomach. This is mainly expressed for ladies" (p. 225).



privileged man, she often suffers from domestic violence, because the man knows that the girl's survival rests on his economic securities. In this setting, men often use their economic empowerment to oppress women (wives) both physically and psychologically. The women become helpless to leave an abusive marriage for fear that they may not survive economically without their husbands. Women who have paid employment outside the home are detracted from being competent in their profession as they spend much time caring for home and husband. However, to these Christian grassroots women liberation is keeping the home and the man at home. That is more important than their own economic advancement.

#### 6.1.8 *Mwamuna ndi Wamkulu Mbanja*

Another proverbial teaching at such functions that has shaped patriarchal imbalances of power between men and women in Malawi is "*Mwamuna ndi wamkulu mbanja*" (The husband is of higher authority in a marriage).<sup>66</sup> This is often used at such a function probably because it resonates well with literalistic interpretations of Ephesians 5:22-23 quoted below: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour." (NIV) Such interpretations emphasize a woman's submission to her husband and forget the opening phrase in Ephesians 5:21, which demands submission of husband and wife to each other. The verse reads, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (NIV).<sup>67</sup>

The *alangizi* therefore feel obliged to highlight this proverbial teaching so that they please the men who represent the official statement of the church concerning a marriage. In this official teaching, the man is the head of any family.<sup>68</sup> *Mwamuna ndi wamkulu mbanja* is not only said in a proverb but it is often sung during the wedding and at this function. The song begins with a question: "*Wamkulu ndani mbanja?*" and this is quickly followed by an answer, "*Wamkulu ndi mwamuna.*" Such a perception renders women powerless. The women are often told not to follow those women that profess not to follow a husband's idea. They argue that those that advise women such practice in actual fact do not really do it to their husbands at home. Contrary to their teaching, they respect their husbands and that is the basis for a strong marriage. In Circle thinking, the concept

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<sup>66</sup> In one family, the husband has a girlfriend known to his wife. The husband has openly run this relationship and has even told the wife that he does not love her any more but the wife has continued to stay in this relationship hoping that one day things will change.<sup>67</sup> Translators and interpreters who want to get away from the implication for husbands make verse 22 to be the final statement of the section "Living as Children of Light," starting in 4:17 as in the NIV.

<sup>67</sup> Translators and interpreters who want to get away from the implication for husbands make verse 22 to be the final statement of the section "Living as Children of Light," starting in 4:17 as in the NIV.

<sup>68</sup> Pastor's wife's talk, bridal shower 1.10.2006. Such teachings are also present at bridal showers.

of 'headship of man over woman' has often been critiqued. It is also a concept that is viewed to promote HIV and Aids infection of women by their husbands.<sup>69</sup> It is also true that this concept of headship of a man over a woman is slowly being challenged by grassroots Christian women.

This teaching is sometimes being reread by the women at the bridal shower and even during the wedding. The song: *Wamkulu ndani mbanja? Wamkulu ndi mwamuna* expresses this. This teaching has at some occasion been changed to: *Wamkulu ndani mbanja? Wamkulu ndi Yesu* (The highest authority in marriage is Jesus). This new teaching calls for both the bride and the bridegroom to respect each other in marriage, and even more to respect Jesus Christ. This redefinition tallies with Circle thinking on the position of women in marriage. However, it is an urban phenomenon that I have not come across among rural women in Southern Malawi. These hints at the possibilities of bridal showers and marriage send off ceremonies as channels through which feminism can easily be promoted to local women in Malawi. These urban women, as they visit rural areas, might become a useful channel in doing ground work for feminism in the rural areas.

#### 6.1.9 *Banja Nkupirira*

The lady is often encouraged to stay in the marriage even if she might face troubles there. The bride is told not to pack her possessions and go to her parents' home once there is trouble in her marriage. This teaching is hard to resist among Christian women because it is also sanctioned by the church, especially in the marriage vow "till death do us part."

An example here is a lady who is married to a Baptist leader in the Southern region. She has lived in an abusive marriage for several years but has refused to leave the husband because to her, marriage is to be endured. In another case, the woman boasts of the fact that she endured hardship in her marriage because she is now enjoying the riches of her children after the husband has died. Unfortunately, she is infected because the husband died of HIV/AIDS. Such experience illustrates that the meaning of liberation for these grassroots women is constructed differently from women in the wider feminist theological movement. These women's liberation is based on how much they are able to endure suffering and gain future rewards. This eschatological liberation is also (wrongly) cemented from the book of James that promotes perseverance among Christians to refine their character and gain eternal glory (James 1:3-12). However, there are also glimpses of change among grassroots Christian women in this orientation of '*Banja nkupirira*'. Some

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<sup>69</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "A Theological Analysis of the Voices of Teenage Girls on Men's Role in the Fight against HIV/AIDS," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 2004, p. 20.

women have chosen to leave an abusive husband.<sup>70</sup> However, in all the cases where women have divorced their husbands, the women had the means of economic survival.

Women are slowly rereading the teaching (*banja nkupirira*) by changing it to the new slogan *banja ndi kunjoya* (marriage is enjoyment). This reinterpretation tallies well with the Circle's advancement of women's dignity in marriage. However, this rereading seems common among urban Christian women who are exposed to winds of feminism through media or interaction with other women that are attuned to such liberation movements. The women in the urban settings also have financial securities that rural women do not have and so they are more flexible to shake off oppression. The teaching on *banja ndi kunjoya* implies that a woman should make choices to leave an abusive husband. However, I have not heard an instructor at either a bridal shower or marriage "send off" to explicitly advise the bride on divorcing her husband. Among rural women, it is rare to hear of a woman that has divorced her husband because of suffering abuse, especially in the case of a wealthy husband. The new reinterpretation of *banja ndi kunjoya* as opposed to *banja ndi kupirira* makes sense mostly among urban and economically empowered women.

#### 6.1.10 Bedroom Instructions

The other venue where women and men receive marriage instructions is through bedroom instructions. This discussion of theologies at bedroom instruction is based on an empirical study of Christian women in Malawi. However, it is my participant observation of five weddings in Zomba District between 2002 and 2006 that informs the hub of this analysis. To counteract the limitation of one method, I also have read books on marriage and conducted interviews. Among the five weddings I participated in, only one of them had bedroom instructions at the end of a combined *chinkhoswe* and wedding. The couple chose to combine both wedding and *chinkhoswe* to reduce costs. Three couples underwent bedroom instructions a day before their wedding. These were getting married for the first time. One couple had bedroom instructions at the *chinkhoswe* as well as at the wedding. This happened because they had a "blessed wedding."<sup>71</sup> Before then only one of the four couples had received bedroom instructions at the *chinkhoswe*.

In a typical bedroom instruction ceremony, a selected group of women are usually left alone to give instructions to the girl in seclusion. The women are called *alangizi*. Their number ranges on average between two and five. These are women that are culturally

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<sup>70</sup> In a Baptist Church in Lilongwe, a pastor's wife divorced a promiscuous husband. A Presbyterian woman with some leadership roles in her church also divorced her promiscuous husband.

<sup>71</sup> See Klaus Fiedler, "For the Sake of Christian Marriage Abolish Church Weddings," *Religion in Malawi* no. 5, 1995, pp. 22-29.

qualified to do this work in this women's context. The instructions are carried out verbally accompanied by drama, singing and the introduction of equipment to use in the bedroom. The girl is taught to serve the husband. In liberal Circle understanding this is about women organizing their own oppression. However, for the majority of Christian women in Malawi, this is about how a woman can achieve a more fulfilled life in marriage. The woman being counselled is presented with a long piece of cloth, two pairs of safety pins, small pieces of cloth, a razor blade, a bottle of Vaseline, a pail, a basin, beads of assorted colours (red, black and white beads must always be among them because of specific meanings), a teapot or flask and two teacups. These are all presented one at a time with instructions attached to them. Patriarchal dominance is usually promoted in these women's transformation, the very problem, liberal Circle theology seeks to address. The following are the uses and instructions accompanying each item:

#### *6.1.10.1 A Long Piece of Material*

The marriage relationship is characterized by the enormous work the woman is commissioned to do usually at night. The long piece of material and the two pairs of safety pins are for covering the marriage bed. The long piece of material should preferably be made of flannel to act as an absorbent for fluids spilt during lovemaking. Hence the material should be placed on top of the bed sheets where the couple is going to make love. The idea is that the mattress and the bed sheets should be protected from being soiled by sperms or vaginal fluids. Since the couple is expected to move in all directions during lovemaking, the safety pins are there to secure the long piece of cloth onto the mattress or mat. It is the responsibility of the woman to set up all this. The man is to be served.

#### *6.1.10.2 Small Pieces of Cloth*

The number of pieces of cloth varies from marriage to marriage based on the economic status of the couple. However, the minimum number is five, two for the woman and two for the man, while the fifth is used to collect hair during shaving each other's genital areas. The two pieces of cloth for the man are used as follows: After lovemaking, the woman takes one piece of cloth and wipes off the fluids from her husband's penis. She then takes the second cloth for the husband, wets it a little in water (Here is where the basin is used. In it water is placed for this purpose.) and wipes off her husband's penis. While the woman cleans the husband's penis, she wipes her private parts usually by herself. She uses the two pieces of cloth ascribed to her in the same way and order as they are used for the husband. The fifth piece of cloth is used only occasionally when the couple grows hair around their private parts. It is here when the razor blade is used. The long piece of cloth and all used pieces of small cloth are put into a pail of water mixed with a detergent for washing. Washing up is done in the early morning and everything is

dried inside the bedroom. The woman is forbidden to dry the linen outside because they are not supposed to be seen by anyone else.<sup>72</sup> Even in this case, it is the woman that serves the man. The egalitarian arrangement envisioned by liberal Circle theologians is not in focus here. The elder women do not teach the woman that her husband should help with the cleaning up after lovemaking. Even the cleaning up of his own penis is done by the woman. The only exception is that sometimes the woman is told to tell the husband to shave her private parts. This is not in the light of an egalitarian relationship but it is because of the difficulty to shave oneself. This service is minimal compared to how the woman serves the husband.

#### *6.1.10.3 A Bottle of Vaseline*

When the woman has finished wiping off the fluids from her husband's penis with the second cloth, she scoops a bit of Vaseline from the bottle and carefully lubricates her husband's penis taking care of parts that may have been bruised in case of too much friction during lovemaking. This acts as medicine to heal or protect the husband from developing wounds around his penis. There is no consideration that the woman might need the man to also put Vaseline on her vaginal area in case she is bruised. It is the man that must be served. Again the man is the ruler and the woman his servant, a fact that is known from the perspective of one who has been exposed to feminist theology, but not by these grassroots women. For these women it is a joy to serve the husband, especially as it is observed when these instructions are given to the girl or woman.

#### *6.1.10.4 A Teapot or Flask and Two Teacups*

For the Christian women in Africa, the nutritional needs of the man are central to her everyday chores. The girl is advised to prepare tea for the husband before the night and keep it in her flask. If she does not have a flask, she must make tea for the husband in the night (this is where she needs a teapot). Many girls in the village can not afford a flask, so they cook at night. The girl is told to serve her husband this tea after they have made. The girl must do that because, apparently, the husband has used too much energy during lovemaking, and that must be replaced. There is no consideration that the woman has also lost energy, especially since she is taught to dance as much as she can during

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<sup>72</sup> This point is also repeatedly emphasized in the girls' initiation teaching. One song goes: "*Machakala ndataya kuti? Taya khonde.* – Where do I throw the monthly period linen? Throw it on the verandah." The song, emphasized by accompanying actions, uses the technique to display what is wrong in order to teach what is right. This is underlined by the standard prose explanation: "The monthly period linen you should dry in your bedroom, they should not be seen by others, you should respect your parents, and you also need to take care of yourself" (Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Coming of Age*, p. 83).

lovemaking.<sup>73</sup> She therefore must serve him tea after each occasion. The woman must also take tea at each occasion, hence the two teacups, but the focus is the man. There is no advice that the man should make tea for the woman in the bedroom.

#### 6.1.10.5 *Beads of Assorted Colours*

The woman is portrayed as an object to entice a husband towards sex. The woman is taught to wear beads which her husband can play with during lovemaking. These beads together with all the equipment stated above are bought by an aunt or a grandmother or any elderly relative who is entrusted with this activity in her family and brought to where the bedroom instructions are taking place. This relative accompanies the *alangizi* during the bedroom instructions and provides the *alangizi* with the equipment. The beads have a special importance during lovemaking. The girl is told how to put them on around her waist. In most cases, the girl already knows, because all along she has been wearing beads for decorative purposes. At the bedroom instructions, the beads have a deeper meaning. The first meaning is that of regulating sexual activities between her and her husband. The *alangizi* firmly advise the girl how to tell the husband when it is safe to have sex with her or not, using red, black and white beads in this way: The girl is told to display red beads at a special place, usually on a wall in her bedroom, when she is menstruating. These red beads are a warning to the husband that she is menstruating and that it is not safe for him to have sexual relations with her. The girl is firmly told not to let the husband have sex with her during this time. She is warned that if they make love to each other during this time, the husband would suffer from *kanyela*, a deadly slimming disease.<sup>74</sup> When the girl's menstrual fluids turn blackish, she should remove the red beads from the wall and replace them with black beads. This, though, is not a safe period either for the husband to have marital relations with his wife. It is only a sign to the husband that he should get set for marital relations with his wife because soon it will be safe to resume sex. It is usually within 24 hours that the wife's black menstrual flow stops. This is the end of menstruation and the girl removes the black beads and replaces them with white beads. It is now safe for the husband to resume sex with his wife. According to liberal feminist thinking this is probably one of the rare opportunities where a woman can

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<sup>73</sup> This is a major teaching in all girls' initiations.

<sup>74</sup> The song about this runs: "*Chinyela, chinyela chitha amuna. Akazi natsala. – Chinyela, chinyela finishes (kills) the men. Women remaining*" (Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Coming of Age. A Christianized Initiation among Women in Southern Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere, 2005, p. 86.] – *Chinyela* is the local version of the more widespread *kanyela*.

use this teaching to liberate herself, at least temporarily, from an abusive sexual relationship.<sup>75</sup>

The second importance of beads is to provide pleasure during lovemaking. The girl is told that before going to bed, she must wear beads around her waist for the husband to play with before and during lovemaking. The girl is told that the beads give pleasure to her husband as well as to her. Her husband's playing with the beads also arouses sexual feelings in her to be ready for marital relations. Some women indeed put on beads all the time, day and night, but some put them on only during the night. Among those that put on beads at night, some do not put them on every night but just occasionally. The girl is often instructed to put on beads occasionally. Occasional usage provides extra pleasure to the husband since they are not always there. When he sees them occasionally, it is something special and she becomes more attractive to him.

#### *6.1.10.6 Reinterpreting Bedroom Instructions*

The above bedroom instructions originate from traditional culture. However, Christian women in Malawi have made little attempt to reinterpret the instructions. These women seem not to consider a patriarchal marriage arrangement as oppressive to women. Unlike liberal Circle women, these Christian women seem to enjoy this patriarchal hegemonic relationship enhanced by the teachings of their female elders (*alangizi*). Even in the case where the boy marrying the girl attends the instruction, the presence of the boy does not change the content of the instructions. The *alangizi* have continued to promote their traditional patriarchal education within their teaching on Christian marriage as described above. In the event that a prospective bridegroom attends the bedroom instructions, the *alangizi* informs the boy about the reason why he is asked to be present at these instructions. The reason for his presence is firstly that he will not be surprised at the things that the wife will do in the bedroom. Secondly, that the girl is accountable to the man concerning the instructions that she has received. Although the boy is present at the bedroom instructions, there is no man among the *alangizi*. The men are meant to instruct the boy without the presence of the girl and other women. This practice cements the idea that men ought not to be accountable to their spouses about sexual matters.

In addition to the instructions above, at each of the five bedroom instructions, the *alangizi* asked the girl to stand and dance the sexual dance in their presence in case she was not attuned to this dance. The boy is not asked to dance because it is assumed that he knows it all or that he does not need to dance since the woman will dance for him. This is

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<sup>75</sup> Fulata Moyo, "Red Beads," Malaka-le Theologies: Women, Religion and Health, A Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians Pan-African Conference, Kempton Park, South Africa, July 10-15, 2005.

not even seen as sexism against the girl in the eyes of grassroots women or the girl. Even if the girl did, she has no power to reject what has been asked of her. She dances so that she is not a black sheep in the community having dishonoured the elder women. At all the occasions, the girls made an impressive dance before the *alangizi* and the boy. This shows that girls are taught about this dance earlier than their wedding day. Some of them have learned the dance at the initiation camp, and those that do not attend initiation ceremonies, are taught by the elder women individually before the wedding day.<sup>76</sup> For a grassroots Christian woman, being able to dance for a man during lovemaking is liberation. She defines liberation as marriage security, which is presumably achieved by following these bedroom instructions well.<sup>77</sup> This is contrary to liberal Circle theologies that perceive such teachings as oppressive to women.

#### *6.1.10.7 Reasons for Lack of Reinterpretation*

The lack of reinterpretation of traditional teachings about marriage by Christian women in Malawi is firstly due to the fact that patriarchy in the African culture has a long history and is well internalized by women who teach marriage instructions. Secondly, Christian women value marriage and are willing to keep these teachings that are understood to contribute to solid Christian marriages. The *alangizi* are those that have learnt these teachings over a period of time. They feel they must be faithful to the teaching of their elders even though at times they may realize dangers embedded in them. Even though these *alangizi* may be exposed to the church teaching that orients them to equality between men and women, the fact that churches also promote the teaching of the man being head over the woman, may encourage these women to continue with their patriarchal teachings. This notion makes the church *alangizi* uneasy to reinterpret any of the instructions. Further, an attempt to reinterpret this tradition would be costly to the church in that the elders of the girl would not send their girl children to the bedroom instructions conducted by the church. This is because even parents support these patriarchal teachings, and they believe that disregarding them would be a threat to their child's survival. The third reason is that the *alangizi* do not have the kind of theological training to reinterpret this tradition in the light of what is oppressive in it or not. Unlike women in the Circle and those from the wider feminist theological movements, they are not aware of the fact that these teachings are oppressive to women. The women have barely any contact with women from other countries that may orient them to such kind of feminist theological approaches. They probably are not literate enough to read Circle books that

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<sup>76</sup> See Rachel NyaGondwe Banda [Fiedler], *Women of Bible and Culture*, p. 183.

<sup>77</sup> Equally seen as a marriage security is the elongation of the labia minora.



would orient them to liberal Circle transformative resources. Much of what they teach is as learned from and passed on to them by the elders.

The dualist understanding among African women concerning the body and the soul also contributes to patriarchal understanding of marriage by Christian women in Malawi. The church often has a dualistic understanding about marriage. Things related to the body are not for the church but those that belong to the spirit. In this case, the bedroom instructions are for the body and must be taken care of by those responsible for this area. In this case it is the elders (*alangizi*) who care for the body. The women therefore uncritically apply traditional teachings about marriage to Christian marriages. The church, because it is usually ruled by men, is also patriarchal and may also like this kind of patriarchal advocacy the elders are engaged in. The church has therefore left it to culture and medical experts to deal with this area of sexual relationships in marriage. The absence of men at bedroom instructions is connected to this. Since men are custodians of the spiritual side of marriage as leaders of churches, it is not proper for them to attend such functions of the body. Their presence at such functions would suggest that the church is also for the body. However, the introduction of 'marriage send offs'<sup>78</sup> by women is bringing change to this earlier concept. It can be argued therefore that women are redefining this dualistic approach to marriage practiced by the church and that they are proposing a new church model that would view the body and the spiritual side of marriage as one. However, for these women, to ably fulfil this agenda, they require adequate theological orientation as well as the stamina to present theologies that address the role of the bride and bridegroom in carving out an egalitarian relationship in marriage. This would be the starting point of their liberation in the light of Circle theologies.

## 6.2 Biblical Reinterpretation and Grassroots Women

One avenue through which the Circle seeks to achieve women's liberation in church and society is through Biblical reinterpretation. In this section, I seek to show how interpretation of scriptures by grassroots women enhances their liberation. Further, I seek to investigate a possible relationship to the Circle's biblical reinterpretation. For the purposes of this section, I limit my discussion to a biblical reinterpretation that takes place among the grassroots Baptist Convention women of Southern Malawi. I have chosen two areas where Bible reinterpretation is taking place: Permanent marriage and forgiveness in marriage. I have chosen these two areas because of their bearing on HIV and AIDS. I

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<sup>78</sup> At marriage send offs, both men and women are involved in teaching *mwambo* (marriage instructions) to the bride and bridegroom

have used story telling in analyzing models of biblical reinterpretation used by these women. Through their stories, these women show how they interpret the Bible. Further, I have used contextual bible studies for the same purposes.

### *6.2.1 Rereading "Until Death Do Us Part"*

As regards the above sacramental vow, grassroots Baptist women articulate two kinds of interpretation: The first one is that marriage should be permanent even with an immoral partner. The other equally weighty view is that the woman should divorce the unfaithful partner. An explanation given for this choice was that bringing HIV/AIDS into the family is to bring death and so divorce in the event of unfaithfulness fulfils the sacramental exhortation "Until Death Do Us Part." The two views testify to the reality that even in a single denomination there can be multiple biblical interpretations.

#### *6.2.1.1 Divorcing an Immoral Partner*

An example of this biblical reinterpretation is portrayed by this story: In an Umodzi<sup>79</sup> meeting at Zomba Baptist Church a woman stood up explaining why she left her first husband. Her husband was in the habit of drinking and coming home late. For a long time she did not expect him to be unfaithful to her. However, one night he did not come home the whole night. Only in the early morning did he appear with not even underwear in his hands. He knocked at the door and the wife went to look and was astonished to see her husband at the door naked. Even though he pleaded for pardon from the wife, the wife refused to remain married to him, as she felt that this was too dangerous in the era of HIV/AIDS. In this experience, the woman defined her own liberation as having good health as opposed to having a permanent marriage.

#### *6.2.1.2 Keeping an Immoral Partner*

The story of Woman 4 in the appendix shows that there is a possibility of keeping an unfaithful partner in marriage. Further, the story affirms that God forgives a sinner. However, the woman sacrificed her health by holding to this kind of interpretation. Further, this story encourages a theology of church solidarity with the suffering, even with those that die of AIDS as a result of sexual infidelity. It is a theology that discourages stigmatization and discrimination and brings healing to the affected community. This story shows that women do not always take material gain as a form of liberation. In this case, receiving spiritual rewards was liberation to these women.

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<sup>79</sup> Umodzi wa Amayi is the Baptist Convention women's group. Sometimes it is also called Mvano, the name used in the CCAP Blantyre Synod.

The first biblical interpretation that seeks to preserve life is the more dominant in Circle thinking. The second interpretation that promotes spiritual liberation above women's dignity and health is rarely if ever articulated.

However, in the above discussions, it is clear that there is a relationship between Circle theology and grassroots Christian women's theologies of Liberation. Often, grassroots theologies are not in tandem with Circle thinking. However, there is a clear testimony that ideas of Circle thinking are sometimes being expressed by grassroots Christian women. This testifies against the assumption that Circle thinking is only for elitist women. Grassroots women might benefit from an exposure to Circle theologies.

### 6.3 Relational Theology

In Malawi, the issue of power balance between men and women is real. The first area concerns equal access to theological training and consecutive employment for those that have received such training. It is clear that although women are slowly getting access to theological training and employment, they have a long way to catch up with men.

The place that has the fewest women as compared to men is that of the ordained ministry. Slowly, some churches are ordaining women. The first church to ordain women was Assemblies of God and even now there are more ordained women in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches than in mainline churches.<sup>80</sup> Many churches are still not ordaining women. Among these, some have started discussing the possibility of ordaining women, others have not. Women are least represented in this area because this engagement is linked to administering the sacraments. There are cultural and theological reasons that are used to deter women from participating in such a role. One such reason is that women are considered unclean due to the issue of blood during menstruation and child birth. There is ignorance that seminal fluids also make men unclean according to the Levitical laws.<sup>81</sup> Some men are aware of this fact but have chosen to cast a blind eye on it.

Women are a little more represented as lecturers at secular universities and theological colleges than as ordained ministers. This is because less emphasis is placed on ordination for one to be a lecturer. However, because few women have received higher theological training, the number of women lecturers is smaller than that of men. At Chancellor College of the University of Malawi, two out of six lecturers are women. At Mzuzu

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<sup>80</sup> In the CCAP Livingstonia Synod women are deterred from becoming pastors as they, different from men, will only be approved to go for theological training if they are married (Joyce Mlenga, *Women in Holy Ministry in the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia: The Case of Livingstonia and Ekwendeni Congregations*, PhD Module, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Mzuzu University, 2008).

<sup>81</sup> Leviticus 15:16-18 shows an example.

University, one out of six lectures is a woman. This trend is similar at theological colleges.

Other women are involved in development work. They are involved in the caring ministry such as orphan care projects. However, there are more women than men in this area when the particular development work is done on a voluntary basis. Women seem to be more willing to work as volunteers than men. This is because women theologians at times do not have the privileges of working in paid employment. Thus when development projects attract funding, often leadership roles are given to men.

The other area where women are disadvantaged is in the case when they have equal opportunities to work, but women's work is not rewarded. A classical example is the experience of pastors and pastors' wives in Malawi. Often, churches pay pastors and not pastors' wives, regardless that a pastor's wife works with the women of that church.

In addition, pastors' wives receive less training compared to pastors. Even though pastors' wives work with women, they also have the same spiritual needs. The women would benefit greatly from the services of a pastor's wife who has adequate training.

On the whole, women in Malawi are a long way from achieving equality with men in the area of leadership roles in the church=.

## **6.4 Integrating Circle Theologies**

It is clear that, though there are glimpses of Circle thinking being expressed by the grassroots, there are also conflicts between Circle theologies of liberation and grassroots theologies. To resolve such conflicts, a dialogical pastoral approach must be deployed if Circle theologies are to influence grassroots women's liberation. The following are some of the avenues through which Circle thinking can be disseminated to the grassroots women in Malawi.

### *6.4.1 Identifying Structures*

There is need for a cautious effort to discover structures within church and society through which Circle theologies can be integrated. One must firstly analyze particular structures and investigate whether it is possible to integrate Circle teaching through them. These should be structures that allow some flexibility, but also where women are given access to teach. It is even more effective if a Circle woman has access to such structures.

#### 6.4.2 Women Structures

Women in churches in Malawi are active in educating young girls and fellow women. The key forums for women are the women's organizations. In the Baptist Convention it is called Umodzi wa Amayi.<sup>82</sup> This organization has weekly meetings for women at the congregational level but also joint meetings with other congregations either at associational, regional or national level.<sup>83</sup> At such meetings women have much flexibility to teach each other principles of Christian living ranging from topics that are more solemn to those that are very relaxing and interactive. The Bible is taught at these sessions, and in fact, rarely do women use written manuals. They have much freedom to use what they have developed personally. The fact that earlier teaching manuals are less accessible in the churches because of the high costs of publishing is a blessing in disguise to the women because they can develop their own materials. This is where biblical reinterpretation can take place. If women leaders of the Umodzi are taught a biblical hermeneutics that aims at transforming gender inequalities, they can easily incorporate this in their teachings. An example here would be to develop Bible study materials that centre on women stories in the Bible with an interpretative tool that enhances women.

#### 6.4.3 Public Church Structures

Churches in Malawi run Sunday services at which sermons are an important means of transmitting message to the people. This structure can also be used to integrate Circle messages. One way to do this is to include women stories or passages on women as texts for preaching. The liturgy of the Sunday service can also be used to transmit Circle theologies especially in churches where there are opportunities to share one's experience. In some Charismatic and Pentecostal churches this is regularly possible, but also in many Baptist churches. Such churches usually have an open time for the congregation to share testimonies. This is a good time when some of the women's experiences can be shared. Most churches also have youth and adult Sunday Schools that can be important structures to transmit Circle theology. It is not always possible to use these public structures of the church to transmit Circle theologies that touch on sensitive issues of women. The Sunday pulpit, even Sunday School, is traditionally viewed as not the place to transmit sexuality issues. For sexuality issues, the church uses other more accommodating structures.

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<sup>82</sup> See Rachel NyaGondwe Banda [Fiedler], *Women of Bible and Culture: Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere, 2005.

<sup>83</sup> Associations vary in size, but 15 congregations is a reasonable average. Malawi is divided into six regions. The total membership is not recorded, but may be around 150,000 people, all included.

#### 6.4.4 Public Society Structures

It is a common perception among church members in Malawi that the church's mandate is to take care of the issues of the spirit in a human being, while society must take care of cultural issues. In the Baptist Convention in Southern Malawi, there is an emerging perception in one congregation that the church must not initiate girls but the girls' elders in her society must initiate the girls.<sup>84</sup> If this perception grows into a fact, the future of the church initiation programme recorded in this thesis is dim. The perception is based on the idea that the church must train its members about God but that society should teach girls about culture. The elders and the society at large conduct this teaching at the *bwalo* initiation. Whereas the church initiation is private, the *bwalo* initiation is public. For such a society, integration of Circle theology at a society level must take place through the *bwalo* initiation programme. The challenge for the church to use this structure is that some Circle theologians might not see this as a safe place to integrate Circle theologies. They might fear the danger of their church not sanctioning this practice, because most churches in Malawi discourage their members to participate at such occasions. For Circle members to penetrate this structure, they need to train traditional leaders in Circle theologies so that they in turn can use them in training girl children at the *bwalo* initiation.

The society has other programmes that are not church based. These also can be used as a medium for integrating Circle theologies. The National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE), for example, could be such a medium. This means that Circle theology should not target church structures only but also non church structures. For this to be successful, Circle theology must continue to adapt itself to the issues of the day. An example here is the production of an HIV/AIDS booklet that distils Circle theology to the grassroots understanding.<sup>85</sup> These booklets have been utilized by church based communities as well as outside the church.

#### 6.5 Conclusion

Grassroots Christian women follow a multifaceted approach to women's liberation. The key approaches described in this chapter include secular, traditional and religious approaches. The secular approach enables women to carve out their own liberation through means that are opposed to their religious experiences. In this case, the use of economic empowerment to gain liberation apart from keeping religious virtues is an

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<sup>84</sup> Focus Group Discussion, 7.10.2006.

<sup>85</sup> An English translation of the *Chenjerani* Booklet is attached as an Appendix. See Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Chenjerani. Matenda a Edzi Alikodi*, Zomba: Lydia Print, 2006, 24 pp. In Tumbuka: Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Tichenjere! Edzi Yiriko Nadi*, Zomba: Lydia Print, 2006.

example of secular approaches to liberation. The traditional approach is gleaned from these women's past. The reliance on the worldviews that were gained through traditional informal training as a means of liberation is characteristic of the traditional approach. Yet this traditional world view is often applied wrongly to the liberation of grassroots women of the 21st century. The religious approach to liberation seems to lack much support among Christian grassroots women. This might be because issues of women's liberation might be perceived as worldly and therefore requiring worldly solutions.

On the other hand, in these approaches, Christian grassroots women show that they are committed to bringing liberation to their world. Yet the women seem to struggle in achieving this goal. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians can provide some solutions to their struggles. This emphasizes the need to avail Circle thinking on liberation through strategic structures that are pro-women liberation.

After dealing with one country in two chapters, I will move to an overall assessment of the work of the Circle in Africa.

## Chapter 7: Contributions of the Circle to Africa

In this chapter, I outline some of the achievements of the Circle in the period from its conception to 2007. The Circle is not the only mouth piece that has advocated change in the area of gender. It is evidenced from this chapter that some of the issues the Circle sought to address were already being addressed before the Circle was organized. Thus I do not claim that the contributions I include in this chapter are solely the achievements of the Circle. I am aware that there are other fora that have contributed to the same causes. I also do not claim to present all the contributions of the Circle, because the Circle is geographically widespread and it would be financially impossible to ably collect all achievements of the Circle in Africa. What I present in this chapter are some of the achievements that I have managed to collect through interviews and participatory observation in places that I have been able to visit. In addition, I have read some of the contributions through Circle publications. It should be recalled that at the first Circle convocation, the Circle clearly outlined its areas of focus.<sup>1</sup> I have taken these ambitions into perspective as I present some of the contributions of the Circle in this chapter.

### 7.1 Production of Literature

One area where the Circle has made notable contributions is in the academic world. One of the concerns for organizing the Circle was that in Africa there were few books in the academic arena of theology that were written by women. This created what African women theologians called 'the dearth of literature on African women by African women'.<sup>2</sup> The women sought to change this situation by committing themselves to publish for the academic study of religion and culture.<sup>3</sup> Over the years, Circle women have published theological books or articles that have transformed this landscape of theological literature in Africa. With such literature on women available, some theological institutions have introduced women studies. Mzuzu University has developed a full course in African Feminist Theology.

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<sup>1</sup> These goals are well summarized. They included the following areas: To create a forum for women's issues, to publish women's theologies, to research on women's issues, to include women's issues in academia, to promote cross cultural studies on contemporary women's issues and so on. See Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Talitha Qumi. Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra: Sam Woode, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Talitha Qumi. Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam-Woode, 2001, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



### 7.1.1 Circle Women as Authors

Mercy Amba Oduyoye is one of the earliest African women that wrote such theology even before the inception of the Circle. One of the earlier women during this time that wrote was Chief (Mrs) Ogundipe, who wrote on the ordination of women in the Methodist Church in 1977.<sup>4</sup> At the same time Mercy Amba Oduyoye wrote the book "And Women, Where do they Come In?"<sup>5</sup> This is another testimony that shows that there were movements before the Circle that promoted women's liberation. Major fora that did this were EATWOT and the World Council of Churches.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye's contribution to writing theology has inspired many to embark on the same. Many women would never have written a book or an article had they not been inspired by the Circle and its theological literature. At a special Circle conference "Malaka-le<sup>6</sup> Theologies: Women, Religion and Health in Africa," held in Johannesburg at Kempton Park from 12th to 15th July 2005, one could not doubt that Mercy Amba Oduyoye's writings had made a profound impact on the participating women and their lives, but also on men and other women in Africa in general. This was shown at a round table meeting that was aimed at celebrating the life of Mercy Amba Oduyoye in a special way. Nyambura Njoroge, the mother of a Theology of Lament, chaired this meeting. Mercy's literature was seen to have visibly encouraged other Circle women to write.

Miranda Naomi Pillay from Tanzania, for example, encountered Mercy's writings way before she met her in 1995, the year when Mercy went to the University of Western Cape where she was given an honorary doctor's degree.<sup>7</sup> Mercy's book was for Miranda Naomi Pillay the first work from the Circle she ever read. Thus it made sense to her when Denise Ackermann, the pillar of the Cape Town chapter, introduced to her Mercy as a person and as the author of the Circle. She is now a strong member of the Circle.

The other Circle woman that read Mercy's writings before becoming a Circle member is Beatrice Okeyere-Manu. Beatrice was inspired by Mercy Amba Oduyoye's book "Daughters of Anowa," through which she nurtured her heart regarding issues of gender inequality.<sup>8</sup> She read this work between 1989 and 1996. After this period she was

<sup>4</sup> Chief (Mrs) G.T. Ogundipe, *The Ordination of Women*, Lagos: Methodist Church Nigeria Literature Bureau, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> The full titles of the books are: Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *And Women, where do they Come in?* Lagos: Methodist Church Nigeria Literature Bureau, 1977; Chief (Mrs) G.T. Ogundipe, *The Ordination of Women*, Lagos: Methodist Church Nigeria Literature Bureau, 1977. See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa, African Women and Patriarchy*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995, p. 223.

<sup>6</sup> At the conference Mercy told the story that one day she had problems opening a drawer and decided to break it open. Her housemaid told her: "Malaka-le," use a gentle approach. And she opened the drawer without breaking anything.

<sup>7</sup> Interview Miranda N. Pillay, Kempton Park, South Africa, 14.7.2005.

<sup>8</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa. African Women and Patriarchy*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995.

privileged to meet Mercy personally in 2003 at the same time as Lilian Siwila.<sup>9</sup> This was the time when Mercy came to Pietermaritzburg and came to Isabel Apawo Phiri's class as a guest.

Philomena Njeri Mwaura from Kenya was also introduced to issues of gender inequality through Mercy's writings. For her, it was Mercy's book "Hearing and Knowing" that stirred her to be engaged in issues of gender inequality.<sup>10</sup> After this, she met Mercy Amba Oduyoye personally at the 1996 Convocation in Nairobi, Kenya. She then met her again, two years later in 1998, again at a conference in Nairobi. Then she has been meeting her at EATWOT as well as at Circle meetings.<sup>11</sup> Mercy's encouragement to other Circle as well as non Circle women can ably be expressed in these words by her close companion, Elizabeth Amoah:

She is indeed a wise African woman theologian who has contributed tremendously in the area of theology, the study of religion and culture, missiology, and to the academic world in general. – Mercy has written, and published several books and articles on a variety of themes in these areas. She has ... mentored several scholars in and outside the African continent.

By 2002 the Circle had published 31 books.<sup>12</sup> This shows that the Circle's commitment to publish was taken seriously. The 31 books were celebrated in style at the Addis Ababa Convocation. The Circle women treated themselves to traditional dances led by an Ethiopian dance group. They also displayed the books under the leadership of Dr Dorcas Akintunde.<sup>13</sup> The women were so energized with the production of these books that they encouraged each Circle chapter to have at least one publication presented at the following 2007 Pan African Circle conference.<sup>14</sup>

The track record for publications continued to grow after 2002. Papers presented at the 2002 Convocation formed the first additional books to the list.<sup>15</sup> In addition to this, there were many manuscripts either at the printer or nearly off the printer during this period.

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<sup>9</sup> Lilian Siwila is from Zambia and plays a major role in the period between 2002 and 2007 while Isabel Apawo Phiri is Continental Circle Coordinator.

<sup>10</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*, New York: Orbis, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Interview Philomena Njeri Mwaura, Kempton Park, South Africa, 15.7.2005.

<sup>12</sup> See Provisional Addis Ababa Circle Report, p. 7, accessed on 6.3.2006.

<sup>13</sup> I was present at the display.

<sup>14</sup> See Circle Newsletter no. 9, 2006, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> One of them was, Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverly Haddad et al, *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003.

### 7.1.2 Circle Women as Editors

This track record of publishing would have not been there without able and committed Circle women who edited the many manuscripts. The manuscripts were usually those that were presented at Circle conferences or workshops. Some originated apart from organized conferences and workshops. These arose from occasional appeals for papers by the Circle leadership. Some of the notable editors of Circle books are as follows.

#### 7.1.2.1 Mercy Amba Oduyoye

In this thesis alone, she has edited four monographs. These include: "The Will to Arise,"<sup>16</sup> "People of Faith and the Challenge of HIV and Aids,"<sup>17</sup> Talitha Qumi, "Proceeding of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989."<sup>18</sup> While the above three books were edited with others, she was a co-editor of one book included in this thesis. This monograph is "Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God. Proceedings of the Pan-African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Theologians."<sup>19</sup> Through cooperative editing, Mercy Amba Oduyoye was able to mentor others in this art.

#### 7.1.2.2 Musimbi Kanyoro

Musimbi Kanyoro has edited a number of books. In this thesis, I have referred to the following: "Grant Me Justice. HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible,"<sup>20</sup> "Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God,"<sup>21</sup> "The Will to Arise,"<sup>22</sup> and "Talitha Qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Mercy A. Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992.

<sup>17</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah (eds), *People of Faith and the Challenge of HIV/AIDS*, Ibadan: Sefer, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Talitha Qumi, Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam-Woode, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God. Proceedings of Pan-African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*, Accra-North: Sam Woode, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Grant Me Justice. HIV/AIDS and Gender Re-readings of the Bible*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (eds), *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, Nairobi: Acton, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *The Will to Arise*: Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Talitha Qumi, Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam Woode, 2001.

### 7.1.2.3 Nyambura Njoroge

Nyambura Njoroge has edited some Circle books. In this thesis, I use three books edited by her. These are: "Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women,"<sup>24</sup> There were also "Women Looking from Afar"<sup>25</sup> and "Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God."<sup>26</sup> Of these monographs, "There were Women Looking from Afar," is not a Circle book although it is addressing women's issues. This work also shows the multiple organs that have promoted women's issues apart from the Circle. In this case, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches also played a role in promoting women's liberation in Africa.

### 7.1.2.4 Musa W. Dube

Musa Dube is a seasoned editor. This thesis contains only a few of the works that she has edited. However, even though she is a seasoned editor, much of her editing work has been to non Circle monographs. Here I only present Circle books that she has edited and are included in this thesis. These are: "Grant Me Justice. HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible,"<sup>27</sup> and "Other Ways of Reading."<sup>28</sup> Musa Dube edited the latter on her own. Other book she co-edited include: "Talitha Cumi! Theologies of African Women."<sup>29</sup>

### 7.1.2.5 Denise Ackermann

Denise Ackermann is one of the first women in the Circle that edited Circle Books. In this thesis I include the following books: "Claiming Our Footprints"<sup>30</sup> and "Women Hold

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<sup>24</sup> Nyambura Njoroge and Musa Dube, *Talitha Cumi! Theologies of African Women*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Nyambura Njoroge and Irja Askola (eds), *There were also Women Looking from Afar*, Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (eds), *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, Nairobi: Acton, 1996, pp. 23-30.

<sup>27</sup> Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Grant Me Justice. HIV/AIDS and Gender Re-readings of the Bible*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Musa W. Dube (ed), *Other Ways of Reading - African Women and the Bible*, Atlanta/Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature/WCC, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Nyambura Njoroge and Musa W. Dube (eds), *Talitha Cumi! Theologies of African Women*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, Eliza Getman and Hantie Kotzé, Judy Tobler (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints. South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000.

up Half the Sky.”<sup>31</sup> Denise is among the Circle women that have mentored Isabel Apawo Phiri into Circle research and writing.<sup>32</sup>

#### 7.1.2.6 Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar

In this section I have deliberately treated the two Circle editors above because they have collaborated in editing some of the Circle books I have used in this thesis. I start with the book on African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye,<sup>33</sup> Her-Stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa,<sup>34</sup> and On Being Church.<sup>35</sup> However, there is one book that I use in this thesis where Isabel Apawo Phiri did not co-edit with Sarojini Nadar. This is: “African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities.”<sup>36</sup>

#### 7.1.2.7 Other Circle Editors

Under this section, I include names of Circle women who edited only one book that I have included in this thesis. Mary Getui edited Conflicts in Africa.<sup>37</sup> Other Circle editors in this category include: Hazel Ayanga,<sup>38</sup> Christina Landman,<sup>39</sup> Devarakshanam Betty Govinden,<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Amoah,<sup>41</sup> Beverly Haddad and Madipoane Masenya (ng'wana Mphahlele).<sup>42</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, J.A. Draper and E. Mashinini (eds), *Women Hold up Half the Sky - Women in the Church in Southern Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1991.

<sup>32</sup> I got this impression when I visited Denise Ackermann in South Africa.

<sup>33</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar: *On Being Church. African Women's Voices and Visions*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverly Haddad, Madipoane Masenya (ng'wana Mphahlele) (eds), *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> See Mary Getui and Hazel Ayanga (eds), *Conflicts in Africa: A Women Response*: Nairobi: Circle, 2002.

<sup>38</sup> She co-edited with Mary Getui the monograph *Conflicts in Africa: A Women Response*: Nairobi: Circle, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> She edited this book in the same year the study commissions were set up. Christina Landman (ed), *Digging up our Foremothers. Stories of Women in Africa*, Pretoria: UNISA, 1996.

<sup>40</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah (eds), *People of Faith and the Challenge of HIV/AIDS*, Ibadan: Sefer, 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverly Haddad, Madipoane Masenya (ng'wana Mphahlele) (eds), *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003.

The record of editorial work in the Circle seems to have been achieved through much collaboration. It is also true that some of the Circle Women have done more editing than others. This is true even in the establishment of Circle chapters, where some Circle members have helped to start more Circle chapters than others. This is natural in any field of expertise.

## 7.2 Study Commissions

The source of some manuscripts that were edited into books was from study commissions that were organized at the 1996 Convocation. The Convocation elected leaders for the commissions with the mandate to encourage research related to their commission and make publications from researched papers that were of academic quality.<sup>43</sup> The Commissions were organized based on four specific themes with their specific objectives as detailed below.

### 7.2.1 *The First Study Commission*

Musa W. Dube Shomanah and Musimbi Kanyoro were to coordinate this study commission on African Biblical and Cultural Hermeneutics. Musa Dube comes from Botswana and is another prolific writer, especially in the discipline of New Testament. In relation to this objective of the Circle, Musa W. Dube presented a paper outlining the importance of developing African women theologians that would acquire enough prerequisites to be efficient Biblical interpreters. Musa Dube asserted that Biblical languages were important in the exercise.

The success of this commission on Biblical Reinterpretation is seen in the production of "New Ways of Reading" edited by Musa Dube and others.<sup>44</sup> The book provides some insights on how a re-reading of the Bible can bring about the transformation of gender inequalities in church and society. Works on biblical interpretation are also found in other Circle books, in the form of chapters. This section presents some of the common methodologies of the rereading of the Bible Circle women use. This is another contribution of the Circle to biblical scholarship. In the beginning I present a methodology of feminist biblical interpretation by an American female theologian, Cheryl Barbara Anderson. Cheryl Barbara Anderson's argument is that though methodologies of biblical reinterpretation can be used in isolation, for a fuller meaning of the text; a multifaceted approach should be used. Although Cheryl Barbara Anderson is an African American Theologian,

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<sup>43</sup> See Report by Nyambura Njoroge 13.4.1998.

<sup>44</sup> Musa W. Dube (ed), *Other Ways of Reading-African Women and the Bible*, Atlanta/Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature/WCC, 2001.

the fact that her methodology is outlined in a Circle book means that it is accepted as a valid methodology to be used in the Circle. In fact, the preceding passages show how much this methodology is already used by key biblical scholars in the Circle. The difference is more in name such that some women may use all or just some stages of the methodology.

#### *7.2.1.1 Biblical Reinterpretation Methodology (Cheryl Barbara Anderson)<sup>45</sup>*

Cheryl Barbara Anderson uses the following technique in reinterpreting scripture: Firstly, she outlines lessons or meaning in front of the text (within a given faith community). Secondly, she outlines lessons learned in the text; and thirdly, she discusses lessons learned behind the text.<sup>46</sup>

##### *Meaning in Front of the Text*

The beginning here for the researcher is the issue that one has chosen to research on. This might be 'the position of women in the church,' or 'faithfulness in marriage' and so on. After choosing this topic, the researcher must decide on a Bible passage on which her study will be based. The next point is how a particular community is experiencing the problem in the area under study. Cheryl Barbara Anderson demonstrates this model in her study on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. She considers meaning in front of the text as how a particular faith community is experiencing the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This is achieved through telling the story in her own words basing on how HIV/AIDS is a reality in her community. This according to Cheryl Barbara Anderson is the flesh and blood.

##### *Meaning in the Text (Literary Analysis)*

After this stage, Cheryl Barbara Anderson focuses on a particular Bible passage related to the topic under research. She reflects on this passage guided by issues that are crucial in the experiences of HIV/AIDS in that particular believing community. Her choice of Bible passage is that on Naaman. In this case, she retells the story of Naaman under selective issues in the believing community such as that of age and gender, and relates how these issues play a positive or a negative role in the spread of HIV/AIDS.

##### *Lessons behind the Text*

After the exercise on meaning in front of the text, and meaning in the text, the next step is to read what other researchers have written on the same issue. This contextualizes the

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<sup>45</sup> Cheryl Barbara Anderson, "Lessons on Healing from Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-27): An African American Perspective," in Isabel Apawo Phiri (ed), *African Women, HIV/AIDS, and Faith Communities*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2003, pp. 23-24.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23-37.

issue under research. Cheryl Barbara Anderson contextualizes the passage in terms of what other scholars have said on the same issue. She outlines implications of various scholars to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Here redaction and transmission history are a particular interpretation key.

### 7.2.1.2 Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde

Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde is a Nigerian New Testament scholar and member of the Circle. The methodology she uses in biblical interpretation has similar steps to those used by Cheryl Barbara Anderson. The difference is that she begins with the "meaning behind the text", where consulting of commentaries is done. This step is simply a "redaction history rereading of scripture."

Though both Cheryl Barbara Anderson and Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde utilize primary sources in trying to assess how a specific issue is experienced by a believing community, Cheryl Barbara Anderson utilizes stories while Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde uses interviews guided by a questionnaire. Dorcas Akintunde uses these oral interviews to determine experiences of women sex workers in a given community. Cheryl Barbara Anderson calls this procedure "meaning in front of the text." The last stage that Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde adds is that of appropriation. This is the application stage where she interconnects the experiences of women sex workers with the Bible text.<sup>47</sup> In this way, Dorcas Akintunde also supports a multifaceted approach to feminist rereading of scripture. Her methodology also utilizes experiences of women as an important aspect in feminist biblical scholarship.

### 7.2.1.3 Musa Dube

She is a New Testament scholar from Botswana who has written widely in Circle books and other publications. She uses the same methodology.<sup>48</sup> She begins with the same paradigm of "reading in front of the text", then moves on to describing how others have interpreted the text (redaction and transmission history). Cheryl Barbara Anderson calls this: "reading behind the text." The third step Musa Dube deploys is "appropriation" and she uses it in the same way as Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde. It is the step Cheryl Barbara Anderson calls "reading in front of the text." Here Musa Dube relates the biblical context

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<sup>47</sup> Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, "The Attitude: A Model for Contemporary Churches in the Face of HIV/AIDS in Africa," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverly Haddad, Madipoane Masenya (ngw'ana Mphahlele), *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2003, pp. 94-110.

<sup>48</sup> Musa Dube, "Grant me Justice: Towards Gender Sensitive Multi-Sectoral HIV/AIDS Readings of the Bible." In Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Grant me Justice. HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2004, pp. 16-21.



with the context of the believing community.<sup>49</sup> She then uses an engendered analysis to analyze the results.<sup>50</sup>

#### 7.2.1.4 Denise Ackermann

She is a systematic theologian from South Africa. She follows a similar methodology as a tool in reinterpreting scripture. In discussing the issue of Tamar's cry, she begins by setting the context (literary analysis) as well as retelling the biblical story in view of the realities of HIV/AIDS (reading in front of the text) in this believing community. After this stage, she moves on to the "appropriation" stage where the Bible text interacts with the context of the believing community.<sup>51</sup> Just as in the above methodologies, this stage is where a possible theology of transformation is shown. It is a stage where grassroots women can gain insights into how the Bible can be made relevant to their situation. This is how the women can actually have God's word for themselves.

#### 7.2.1.5 Sarojini Nadar

Sarojini Nadar brings a different perspective on the above methodologies outlined by Cheryl Barbara Anderson, Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, Musa Dube and Denise Ackermann. She begins with the step that the majority would deal with last. This step is the "reading behind the text." Using the same redaction and transmission history, Sarojini Nadar surveys works done by others on the topic. This is then used to identify points of identification in reading the text as a woman.<sup>52</sup>

Sarojini Nadar calls this methodology the Tripolar Model. The methodology involves three stages: conceptualization, distantiation and appropriation. Conceptualization refers to extracting meaning in front of the text. Whereas the above Circle women limit this exercise to experiences of women in a believing community without referring to the Bible, Sarojini Nadar guides the telling of the experiences of women in a believing community with questions relating to a Bible passage. Here the reader subjects the Bible text to questions that relate to the experiences of women. Thus she analyses the context of the women.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 16-21.

<sup>50</sup> A gendered approach is from the women's perspective as outlined in the theology chapter.

<sup>51</sup> Denise M Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry: Re-reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of HIV/AIDS Pandemic," in Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Grant Me Justice, HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*, p. 27-34.

<sup>52</sup> Sarojini Nadar, "Barak God: Women, HIV/AIDS and a Theology of Suffering" in Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Grant Me Justice. HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2004.

The second stage she deploys is called distantiation. In this stage, her task is to extract meaning from the text to the intended readers. This exercise tries to bridge the gap in the conceptualization exegesis where questions asked determine answers given. In conceptualization exegesis one can easily miss out the whole message of the passage. Distantiation helps the reader to recover some continuity with tradition.<sup>53</sup> In feminist scholarship, this stage helps women to have a critical eye towards their received theologies. It is a step that affirms an important aspect in education that no reader is a tabula rasa. Since some of the things the women have learned have not brought liberation to them, it is an important stage where women can reconceptualize a theology of liberation.

The last stage is that of appropriation. Appropriation refers to the meaning we get as our context dialogues with the text. This meaning is also influenced by the context of the reader/researcher. For example Patricia Frances Bruce in her article, "The Mother's Cow" interprets a text from the feminist perspective and uses stories of women as means for biblical theologizing.<sup>54</sup>

#### 7.2.1.6 An Example of Biblical Theologies

One of the earliest Circle contributions on biblical interpretation came from Sr Rosemary Edet. In her article "Language of Endearment: An Asset for Women and Theology,"<sup>55</sup> she argues that women enjoy a more affirming language than men. She argues how the Bible talks about how men must love women, in Solomon's Songs of Songs, and to where God is likened to "a hen that gathers her chicks." This means that God has favour with women. In this theology women are active participants in doing theology. They are mothers and caregivers; hence they should be allowed to participate in the decision-making processes of the church. She proposes that there should be a move from emphasizing notions that are oppressive to women to notions that affirm them. Again a selective approach to cultural reinterpretation is reflected here. This approach emphasizes how cultural elements that are liberating should be affirmed to promote women's dignity and transformation of gender inequalities in church and society.

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<sup>53</sup> Patricia Frances Bruce, "The Mother's Cow: a Study of Old Testament References to Virginitly in the Context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa" in Isabel Apawo Phiri et al, *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 194-196.8

### 7.2.2 *The Second Study Commission*

The other study commission was on "African Women in Religion and Culture." The coordinators were Hélène Yinda Mbenda from Francophone and Mercy Amba Oduyoye. There were also Teresa Tinkasiimire and Nokuzola Mndende, a professing African Traditionalist from Zimbabwe. The study commission reminded itself that the subject of Religion and Culture was not new to the Circle. It was there in the beginning, but the challenge facing the commission was to research in this area within an interreligious context as not all women in the Circle were Christians. This was a new thing to the commission. In fact, at the International Planning Committee, none of the members was a Muslim or a Traditionalist, and the subject was approached only from the Christian point of view. With the growth of the Circle, which included an increasing number of women from other religions, interreligious dialogue had to take place.

The study commission decided that they would take the dialogue on "Religion and Culture" beyond private dialogue to public dialogue on issues. A classic example where such a public dialogue took place was in instances where African women theologians from non-Christian backgrounds led the worship in the presence of Christian Circle women.

#### 7.2.2.1 *Examples of Theologies on African Feminist Cultural Reinterpretation*

Some of the works on this topic are included in chapter 4 on theology. However, I also include a few in this section. The first work is by Musimbi Kanyoro, who is renowned in the Circle for pioneering a theology of Cultural Hermeneutics (Cultural Reinterpretation). Her specific area in this discipline, however, is Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics.<sup>56</sup> She looks at transformative theologies of women in the context of reading women's traditional culture.

Approaches of transformation depicted by Musimbi Kanyoro can best be understood by referring to her own testimony, in this way:

In my home village I learned that culture must not be romanticized. It was necessary for us to come to terms with identifying in our cultures those things that were beautiful and wholesome and life-affirming and to denounce those which were denying us life and wholeness.<sup>57</sup>

In this, Musimbi Kanyoro asserts herself as one of the first Circle women to deploy a selective approach to how women in Africa must interpret culture. She is not of the opinion that culture should be completely denounced, as some earlier missionaries supposedly did. She believes that there are certain elements in culture that are good and

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<sup>56</sup> See Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, *Introductions in Feminist Theology: Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics. An African Perspective*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, pp. vii – 99.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

must be harnessed by African women. On the other hand, she admits that certain elements are dangerous to the life and wholeness of women and that these must be rejected.<sup>58</sup>

For Musimbi Kanyoro the Bible is her starting point in theologizing about culture in Africa, because "rural women in Africa love the Bible and take the Bible seriously. For example, they will argue that Levirate marriages are good because they are in the Bible."<sup>59</sup> In this exercise, Musimbi describes the agenda of cultural hermeneutics as not to legitimize culture just because it is found in the Bible, but that "cultural hermeneutics puts every culture to scrutiny with the intention of testing its liberative potential for people at different times in history."<sup>60</sup> This means that even if culture can be found in the Bible text, if it is not liberative, it must not be followed by those that take the Bible seriously. The other facet Musimbi Kanyoro points out is how the culture of the one interpreting the Bible influences Bible meaning. Musimbi argues that:

The culture of the reader in Africa has more influence on the way the Biblical text is understood and used in communities than the historical facts about the text. This leads me to suggest that not knowing the nuances of the culture of modern readers of the Bible has more far-reaching repercussions to biblical hermeneutics than is normally acknowledged.<sup>61</sup>

Musimbi Kanyoro's theology of cultural reinterpretation is not proposed by her alone in the Circle. As a cofounder of the Circle, by virtue of belonging to the IPC,<sup>62</sup> she has influenced many women in the Circle to develop this theology of cultural reinterpretation. As a tribute to Musimbi Kanyoro's role in the Circle, this chapter surveys some contributions of women to this theologizing. It is in the same vein that a deliberate effort has been made to include theologies of another cofounder of the Circle, Sr Rosemary Edet from Nigeria.

Circle women in Africa have been inspired by this methodology of Circle cultural reinterpretation. Musimbi Kanyoro and Mercy Amba Oduyoye<sup>63</sup> are pioneers in this methodology. From Nigeria, Circle women wrote on this theme and had a book published on it.<sup>64</sup> Some of the themes in the book included: "Menstrual blood and priestly roles" by Oluwafeni Abosede Okunola, "Cultural attitude to women's education and economic empowerment" by Kehinde Edewor, "Inheritance in Africa and the rights of a female

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<sup>58</sup> For a fuller exposition of 'cultural reinterpretation' see a later chapter.

<sup>59</sup> See Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introductions in Feminist Theology: Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics. An African Perspective*, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>63</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye's Contribution on this subject is already included elsewhere in this thesis.

<sup>64</sup> Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, *African Culture and the Quest for Women's Rights*, Sefer: Ibadan, 2001.

child" by Ruth Oluwakemi Oke, "Women against women" by Martina Atere, "Dynamism in the Bible and Yoruba culture" by Olutundun A. Orebiyi, "No longer be silent" by Dorcas Akintunde, "Reorienting the African woman today" by Helen Adekunbi, "Tradition, poverty and the church as challenges for African women" by Mercy Itohan Omoigui, and "Cultural values" by Oluwatosin Akintan. Esther Lasebikan gave an overview to the book. The keynote address was given by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who was leader in this field and member of this commission.

Sr Rosemary Edet also edited publications on the same theme.<sup>65</sup> One of them was on "Christ and the Nigerian Womanhood," where she is arguing that there is need to relate Christology today to the life of Nigerian women. She argues that the Nigerian woman's Christology is affected by the traditional worldview because in their cultural context there are elements that are both affirming and distorting the image of a Nigerian woman. Here she agrees with the theology of cultural reinterpretation proposed by Musimbi Kanyoro. For example, that a Nigerian woman is "to be seen occasionally" and "not to be heard frequently" is a less affirming cultural disposition. This might influence an oppressive Christology that relegates women to silent positions in the church. Rosemary Edet redefines this stand by introducing a liberating theology of Christ Himself. She argues that this must be looked at through the eyes of how Christ dealt with women in the Bible. In John 4:27, for example, Jesus did a shocking thing by talking to a Samaritan woman who was considered an outsider; women were also beneficiaries of His power (Luke 8:2; Mk 1:29-31; Mk 12:24-30). She therefore argues that a Christology that will affirm women as complete and acknowledge that male domination is sin, and that this domination came as a result of the fall, should be introduced.<sup>66</sup>

### 7.2.3 *The Third Study Commission*

This study commission was coordinated by Nyambura Njoroge, Vibila Vuadi and Emeline Ndossi. The objectives of the commission were as follows: 1. to investigate theological institutions: Seminaries and Bible Schools in the area of curriculum. Are the biblical languages taught there and at what level? To look at members of staff and their areas of specialization. The ratio of women to men, as well as the names of women and years when they started to teach. To look at the number of women students and the years when a particular Institution started to admit women. To check whether women are allowed to take all courses leading to ordination. The exercise would also look at what

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<sup>65</sup> Rosemary Edet and Margaret A. Umeagudosu (eds), *Life, Women and Culture: Theological Reflections: Proceeding of the National Conference of a Circle of African Women Theologians*, Nigeria: MUA Printers 1990.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-43.

kind of ministry women were involved in after graduation. The goal would be to trace contributions women have made and their challenges to ministry. To check whether the Institution offers gender studies and whether it has accommodation for female students. Does the Institution have women's counters in the Library? In this exercise, a research using a focus group of 10-15 women pastors/theologians would be used to document experiences of women in ministry. The research would also include a survey on what women found most helpful or lacking for their seminary training as regards their practice in ministry. Theological research was also extended to pastors' wives. In this an assessment of the training given to pastors' wives was to be done. This was to be done by studying the curriculum used in training. The commission was also charged to encourage women to write and collect sermons and prepare them for publications.

Again, no particular book from this commission was realized. There have been notable contributions on the issue of what roles women take after theological training included in the book on "Biographies of Women of Faith in Africa."<sup>67</sup> There are also contributions on the themes in the form of articles in other Circle books. An article on pastors' wives by Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler is an example.<sup>68</sup> Other Circle women already wrote on the themes of this commission before the introduction of the commission. Isabel Apawo Phiri had already written on the enrolment of female students in theology as early as 1988. She wrote on women in theological education in Malawi.<sup>69</sup> This was also before the Circle was officially organized, just to show that the transformation that has taken place in the area of gender relations can not only be accredited to the Circle. Other women like Isabel Apawo Phiri were also influenced to write on these issues through others apart from the Circle.

The other contribution related to the theme of this commission was from Nigeria. Mary Edet, a disciple of Sr Rosemary Edet, wrote on "Church Women Organizations."<sup>70</sup> Her approach to women's groups as offering roles for women is positive. She even sees them as mothers of the Church. She relates this theology to Mariology. The church, according to her, was born out of a woman (Mary) because Jesus Christ was born of Mary. Rosemary Edet does not only hail Church women groups as appropriate roles for

<sup>67</sup> From Malawi, see Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy. Religious Experiences of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere 2000(1996). Also Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, "Against the Flow: Stories of Women Pastors in the Baptist Convention in Malawi," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden et al, *Her Stories. Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002, pp. 181-201.

<sup>68</sup> Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, "Pastors' Wives and Patriarchy: Experiences of Church Women in Malawi," *Religion in Malawi*, 13, 2006, pp. 23-27.

<sup>69</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Women in Theological Education in Malawi," *Religion in Malawi*, no. 2, 1988, pp. 24-28.

<sup>70</sup> See Rosemary Edet and Margaret Umeagudosu (eds), *Life, Women and Culture*, pp. 86-94.

women, she goes further to hail other roles in the church that other women would consider non liberating. She argues that Nigerian women are making an impact by involving themselves in Christian child rearing programmes and development work. This to some Circle women would be among the conservative Evangelical Circle theologies. Other Circle women have taken a different approach in issues relating to women's ministry restricted to women's organization and children. The approach shows two sides to the story of the rereading of such church women. One is that they are playing a fulfilling role in church but on the other hand that there is need for such women to find ways of more liberation. Notable Circle monographs on church women groups have been written with these two perspectives in mind. One example is Beverly Haddad who wrote on Anglican women in South Africa.<sup>71</sup>

#### *7.2.3.1 Nyambura Njoroge*

Of the three women who coordinated the commission Nyambura Njoroge has maintained an active role in the Circle. She was best suited for this commission because Nyambura has an extensive experience as an ordained minister of the Word and Sacrament in working with churches, parishes, and ecumenical, international and cross cultural contexts. The goal of this commission was to encourage theological/biblical reflections that promote partnership of women and men in God's mission and in church ministry.

Nyambura Njoroge has a record of involvement in leadership development and Ecumenical theological education discussions. She has significant communication skills in the area of pastoral ministry, teaching and public speaking including preaching. Apart from editing Circle books, she is also involved in team editorial projects of other theological books. She has experiences in gender studies, Bible studies and ecumenical consultations and seminars. She has a record of continuing archival research work in the area of women's involvement in the 19th to 20th century missionary enterprise of the churches.<sup>72</sup> She holds a PhD in African Theology and Christian Social Ethics obtained at Princeton Theological Seminary in America in 1985.

#### *7.2.4 The Fourth Study Commission*

The fourth commission was on Biographies of Women of Faith in Africa which culminated into a book: "Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa."<sup>73</sup> The

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<sup>71</sup> Beverly Gail Haddad, "The Mothers' Union in South Africa. Untold Stories of Faith, Survival and Resistance," PhD, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2000.

<sup>72</sup> Interview, Nyambura Njoroge, Addis Ababa, 2002.

<sup>73</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Betty Devarakshanam and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-stories. Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002.

coordinators of this study were Isabel Apawo Phiri and Devarakshanam Betty Govinden. Even after the monograph, Circle women have continued to contribute to this theme. This thesis is a product of this commission. I was inspired to write a history of the Circle when I attended the 'Biography of Women of Faith' workshop held in Johannesburg in 2001.

### 7.3 Circle and Contemporary Women's Issues

My argument in this section is that although the Circle can not claim to transform the evils of the contemporary world, its contribution has been significant in the area of advocacy for change. In this section, I restrict Circle contributions to advocacy work in the area of politics, secular academic work, secular employment and HIV/AIDS. I have chosen to use examples from Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Malawi for this section. The first area where the Circle has done advocacy work is in the area of politics.

#### 7.3.1 Circle and Politics

Sr Rosemary Edet writes about advocating for political transformation in Nigeria. She does this in the monograph "Life, Women and Culture: Theological Reflections."<sup>74</sup> In this monograph she encourages other Circle women to do the same.

In situating African Women Theology, she states the impossibility of doing theology in Africa without looking at geographical issues, and political issues, as African countries experience different forms of government, economic poverty and independence. She stresses the example of how colonial culture was imposed on African culture and how conflicts that arise from that perpetuate the problem of patriarchy in African cultures. Sr Rosemary Edet argues that this has led to African societies treating women as inferior even in cultures that in the past gave prominence to women. She also highlights how the styles of political leadership imposed on Africans by the colonial cultures have defined the context of women in Africa.<sup>75</sup>

The other contribution in the area of politics is by Sr Mary Juliana Ada. She wrote on: "Nigerian Women in the Making of Nigerian History."<sup>76</sup> She shows how Nigerian women have contributed much to the development of the country. She cements this view by giving examples of women that made a contribution to the country. These include, for

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<sup>74</sup> See Rosemary Edet and Margaret A. Umeagudosu (eds), *Life, Women and Culture: Theological Reflections: Proceeding of the National Conference of a Circle of African Women Theologians*, Nigeria: MUA Printers 1990.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177-179.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*



example, Princess Moremi of Ile Ife who had a prominent position among the Yoruba and is remembered in history for freeing her people from the hands of enemies.<sup>77</sup>

Circle theologies are able to address political issues because women in secular politics suffer from similar forms of patriarchy as women in religion. Both women in religion and politics often suffer from oppressive elements imposed on them by their culture. On the other hand, many people in Africa are religious and thus it cannot be denied that oppressive elements in religion also contribute to their position in politics.

Another contribution on politics is from Kenya. Philomena Njeri Mwaura explains how globalization and economic policies have contributed to the sufferings of women on Kenya. She justifies this point by highlighting the experiences of rural women in agriculture, and their struggle in accessing University education programmes for their children.<sup>78</sup>

### 7.3.2 Circle and Secular Employment

Circle women have also lobbied for the liberation of women in secular employment. Mrs A. Akpan, for example, addresses an area in the secular society where nurses and teachers face marginalization. She argues that women in Nigeria are sidelined because of lack of education, as sons were given priority over girls to access education. This has resulted into inequalities in employment opportunities where women have been restricted only to certain jobs. An example where such inequality is seen is in Nursing and Teaching.<sup>79</sup> These remain the option for the majority of women in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole. Again here Circle thinking provides reasons and solutions for women's oppression in secular employment. It is also true that socialization of boy and girl children impacts on their position in both secular and religious engagements. On the other hand women's engagement in secular employment can be a religious issue as well as certain forms of religious interpretations discourage women from active engagement in secular work.<sup>80</sup> Circle theology therefore makes a useful contribution here by intersecting religious and cultural perspectives with secular employment.

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "The Lives of Kenyan Women under Globalization", in Philomena N. Mwaura and Lilian D. Chirairo, *Theology in the Context of Globalization. African Women's Response*, Nairobi: EATWOT Women's Commission, 2005, pp. 62-75.

<sup>79</sup> Rosemary Edet and Margaret A. Umeagudosu (eds), *Life, Women and Culture: Theological Reflections: Proceeding of the National Conference of a Circle of African Women Theologians*, Nigeria: MUA Printers 1990, pp. 24-32.

<sup>80</sup> Women in the Bible Believers Church (Branham) in Malawi are discouraged from secular work by their teachings.

### 7.3.3 Circle and Literature

Circle women have also lobbied for change in how women are represented in Literature. Bassey A. Okon for example addresses the issue in her article: "The Portrait of Women in Contemporary Literature." Bassey A. Okon argues in this paper that the portrait of the Nigerian woman in literature is viewed in the light of what contribution she makes to the society. In her discussion she refers to different books such as Chinua Achebe's "A Man of the People," Zaynab Alkali's "The Still Born," Buchi Emecheta's "The Joy of Motherhood;" Nancy Harrison's "Winnie Mandela" and in passing, other relevant books. Bassey A. Okon argues that women in such literature are portrayed as subservient to men, for example, as a fruit to be given to man.<sup>81</sup> Again, the Circle in such discourses creates knowledge how such representations in secular Literature can provide models of oppression to women in Africa.

### 7.3.4 The Circle and HIV/AIDS

The area where Circle women have done significant advocacy work is in the area of HIV/AIDS. Notable work related to this issue started with the 2002 Convocation. The original theme was: "Religion and the quest for peace, health and wholeness: African women making a difference."<sup>82</sup> The following were the sub-themes: 1. The connection between women, peace and justice. 2. The connection between peace and women's health. 3. The connection between militarism on the continent and its implications on women. 4. The connection between peace and wholeness in sacred texts (both Holy Scriptures and sacred "Orators" of indigenous religions). 5. The role of religion either in "healing conflicts" or "exacerbating them." 6. The intersection of gender, poverty, racism and religious intolerance. 7. Creating a culture of human rights particularly for children (focus on street children, militarized children (child soldiers), trafficking of children, child enslavement, and sex tourism. 8. Religious resources for overcoming racism, sexism and ethnocentrism on the continent etc.<sup>83</sup>

The Circle wanted to concentrate on the theme of peace because some Circle women were in countries trapped in war. The venue at which the conference was to be held was Yaoundé, Cameroon. However, this theme was replaced by the one related to HIV and Aids. The change was amicably arrived at through discussions between Musimbi

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<sup>81</sup> See Rosemary Edet and Margaret A. Umeagudosu (eds), *Life, Women and Culture: Theological Reflections: Proceeding of the National Conference of a Circle of African Women Theologians*, Nigeria: MUA Printers 1990, pp. 24-32.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

Kanyoro and Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Joyce Boham was a key player communicating about changes with Teresa Hinga, who was the Anglophone leader at that time.<sup>84</sup>

The new goals of the conference are well stipulated in the provisional Addis Ababa Circle report in this way: (1) to provide a safe space for in-depth learning about the challenges of HIV/AIDS poses to women within the African social, cultural and religious Circle members to present to each other their research on HIV/AIDS from a woman's perspective with a view of preparing some of that research for publication. (2) To use the Ethiopian context as a field for learning about how women are affected by history, religion and culture in Africa. (3) To create safe space for practical learning about stigma and HIV/AIDS and to use collective solidarity to make individual and collective commitment to break the silence on stigma and sexuality. (4) To enable Circle members to hold a business meeting and make decisions for the Circle's future including the selection of new leadership to continue the work of the Circle. (5) To give an opportunity for Circle partners to participate and gain first-hand knowledge of the Circle. (6) To celebrate the achievements of the Circle during the past period.<sup>85</sup> The reason for this was to allow as much time as possible for deliberations on HIV/AIDS.<sup>86</sup>

#### 7.3.4.1 *The Road to the New Theme*

There was turmoil due to war in some places in Africa at that time. In fact, the Zonal meeting in Nigeria in 1994 could not take place because of political unrest. The choice of HIV/AIDS over the theme of peace according to Musimbi Kanyoro was "to enable the Circle to prioritize its responses and thereby develop appropriate strategies."<sup>87</sup> The other reason for this change, however, may have been to attract funding for the continental Circle meeting, since projects in the area of HIV/AIDS have easily attracted funding when this issue was very fresh.

The Circle may have felt that it was going to be more difficult to source funding for "peace" projects than for an "HIV/AIDS" project. The easiness in sourcing funds is visible in that the Circle was able to pay for the expenses of the Addis Ababa conference, even including a very expensive accommodation (Hilton Hotel) and conference facilities.

In November 2001 International and African Ecumenical organizations participated in a World Council of Churches (WCC) Global Consultation on the ecumenical response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS in Africa, which was held in Nairobi, Kenya. This consultation produced a plan of action as a guideline for the churches, para-church organizations and ecumenical partners in responding to the plague of Aids. Musa Dube

<sup>84</sup> See Joyce Boham, Circular Letter to Circle members, 6.11.2001.

<sup>85</sup> See Provisional Addis Ababa Circle Report, accessed. 6.3.06.

<sup>86</sup> See Provisional Addis Ababa Circle Report, p. 7, accessed: 6.3.2006.

<sup>87</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2006, p. 36.

and Agnes Aboum participated in this consultation. It was felt that though many Circle women were doing many good things towards HIV/AIDS, it was time to have a systematic response.<sup>88</sup>

#### 7.3.4.2 Examples of Theologies in the Area of HIV/AIDS

In this section, I have limited my choice of examples to the works by Isabel Apawo Phiri, a Malawian but writing from the context of South Africa. From my perspective, she is one of the Circle women that have written the most on the subject.<sup>89</sup> Her contribution in the area of HIV/AIDS is to lobby for change through her writings. She also provides a body of knowledge that can be utilized in the area of academics. On the other hand, since her work originates from her active participation with grassroots people, her work also sheds light on how grassroots people can utilize her approaches to have a safe world in which to live during this era of HIV/AIDS. She also adds another aspect to Circle theology in that she has situated her discussion on HIV/AIDS in a marriage setting. She has dispelled the common understanding that marriage is a safe place for women.

Isabel Apawo Phiri has researched and written extensively and probably more than any Circle member since 2002 in the area of HIV/AIDS.<sup>90</sup> Her works have been both in the area of HIV/AIDS and other topics. As a scholar of African Traditional Religions she has the advantage of applying her knowledge of cultural hermeneutics to discourses on HIV/AIDS.

Her works have been published in Circle books,<sup>91</sup> and in journals such as the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*.<sup>92</sup> Her works have contributed much to theological issues and approaches that would increase protection and care for women in the era of HIV/AIDS.

The following are some of the issues she has covered in her research: in November 2002, her article appeared in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* dealing with violence against women.<sup>93</sup> In this she argues that violence against women is a result of

<sup>88</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women of Faith Speak out in an HIV/AIDS Era," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverly Haddad, Madipoane Masenya (ngw'ana Mphahlele) (eds), *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> There are more contributions from Circle women on HIV/AIDS, like Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "Stigmatization and Discrimination of HIV/AIDS Women in Kenya: A Violation of Human Rights and its Theological Implications", *Exchange*, vol 37, 2008, pp. 35-51.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> For example, Isabel Apawo Phiri, "The Church as Healing Community: Voices and Visions from Chilobwe Healing Centre," in Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *On Being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions*, World Council of Churches, 2005, pp. 13-27.

<sup>92</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "A Theological Analysis of the Voices of Teen Age Girls on Men's Role in the Fight against HIV/AIDS", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 2004, p. 20.

<sup>93</sup> See James R. Cochrane et al (eds), "Overcoming Violence against Women and Children," Special Issue, Nov. 2002, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*.

patriarchy. Isabel outlines some of the beliefs that promote this: the belief that a wife is property; being single is a curse; when HIV infected men have sex with a virgin, they will be cured of HIV/AIDS.<sup>94</sup> She suggests approaches for overcoming such violence in this way: By telling stories of violence; raising self esteem in that women, too, are created in the image of God; creating solidarity with each other such as in church women's groups; marching as a group of church women against abuse; acquiring skills to create awareness of gender issues; engendering of theological curriculum provision of counselling and support services to those who are abused.<sup>95</sup> In another paper Isabel outlines the fact that HIV/AIDS is a gendered pandemic and quotes Philippe Denise and Beverly Haddad.<sup>96</sup>

Isabel Apawo Phiri problematizes the conception of masculinity and sexual identity constructed by society based on biological sex characteristics influenced by culture and Bible. Isabel Phiri is wise but also as clever as a serpent. She demonstrates this by tactfully redefining notions of Evangelical theology that often oppress women through a literalistic interpretation of the Bible. She turns such notions around and shows how they can be used to empower women in the fight against HIV/AIDS. She proposes approaches to deal with HIV/AIDS gleaned from such notions. An example is where the social construct that men are head of the family is turned around to promote a sense of responsibility, so that men can use their power to choose to refrain from risky sex that will infect the wife, other women and their children.

Another central notion that Isabel Apawo Phiri addresses is the conservative Evangelical conviction that "gender issues" or discussion of them are disruptive to families because they concentrate on women alone and not on both men and women. She argues that such convictions are dangerous in the era of HIV/AIDS. Her contribution to this therefore is in developing approaches that would unsettle such convictions.

Isabel Apawo Phiri is also one of the few women who show the danger of ignoring masculinity issues in dealing with HIV/AIDS. She argues that an HIV/AIDS intervention that ignores men and targets only women and girls is not adequate. However, she turns this notion around and refocuses on women. For example she sides with the girls who

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 24, 26.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "A Theological Analysis of the Voices of Teen Age Girls on Men's Role in the Fight against HIV/AIDS in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa," in Steve de Gruchy et al, *Special Issue, The Agency of the Oppressed Discourse: Consciousness, Liberation and Survival in Theological Perspective*. 120, November 2004, p. 35. She quotes P. Denis, "Sexuality and AIDS in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, March 2003, pp. 63-77 and Musa W. Dube, "Preaching to the Converted: Unsettling the Christian Church. A Theological View: A Scriptural Injunction," *Ministerial Formation*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, April, 2001, pp. 38-50, and Beverly Haddad, "Gender Violence and HIV/AIDS: A Deadly Silence in the Church," *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*, 11.2003, pp. 93-106.

object to dangerous forms of socially constructed masculinity such as that being man means having girlfriends. To crown it all, Isabel outlines the approach where both men and women become agents of change seeking justice basing on the character of God who in Jesus sides with the oppressed.<sup>97</sup>

Isabel Apawo Phiri's major work in constructing theologies of transforming gender inequalities is in the area of the family.<sup>98</sup> Here she bases her theologies on Bible studies and focus group discussions with communities in the area of the family. Her works on family relationships are revealing. She has shown through her research the dangers of family structures in Africa in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In this, she agrees with S. Baden and H. Wach that in Sub-Saharan Africa "marriage is a major risk factor for any African woman to contract the HI-virus."<sup>99</sup> In fact she further argues that it is heterosexual multiple relationships that are crucial in Africa in terms of the spread of HIV/AIDS rather than homosexual relationships.<sup>100</sup> And that as long as literalistic interpretations of the Bible teachings and African cultural practices continue, HIV/AIDS would be difficult to curb in Africa.<sup>101</sup> She therefore advocates a theology of transforming this paradigm to prevent HIV/AIDS infection through marriage. In this discussion, she unveils key preconceived ideas that promotion of "family" or "marriage" is an answer to HIV/AIDS. She actually hits hard on this and shows how family or marriage can be equally dangerous spaces in the era of HIV/AIDS.

Isabel Apawo Phiri also proposes a new theology that deals with HIV/AIDS. This theology is the mission-oriented theology which acknowledges the centrality of the Bible as authoritative within the church.<sup>102</sup> An example of this reflection is where she proposes that there should be a shift from a theology that sees HIV/AIDS as a punishment from God to a theology of God who is in solidarity with all who are affected or infected by HIV/AIDS.<sup>103</sup> Often literalistic interpretations would be such that divorced women or women single from birth would be hotbeds for transmitting HIV/AIDS; worse still that those that are infected are immoral.

Theologies of transforming gender inequalities in the Circle have also touched on the role of the church in HIV/AIDS prevention and care. On this front, Isabel Apawo Phiri has also made contributions. She proposes that dealing with HIV/AIDS requires censor-

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<sup>97</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "A Theological Analysis of the Voices of Teenage Girls," pp. 34-45.

<sup>98</sup> Public Seminar, Circle Meeting, Lydia Foundation Building, Zomba, 13.7.2006.

<sup>99</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "HIV/AIDS: An Anglican Theological Response in Mission," *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 56, no. 4, 10.2004, p. 423.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

ing structural sins within the church that promote the spread of the pandemic. On the same front of creating a theology of the church in transforming gender inequalities, Isabel Phiri articulates a "theology of sacredness of life" which mandates taking responsibility to protect those that have already been infected so that the infection is contained. She outlines cases where poverty forces women to have multiple partners and contract HIV/AIDS.<sup>104</sup> The church must devise ways of dealing with poverty issues to encourage transmission of the virus to her members.<sup>105</sup> The underlying theology here is that the church should not blame the victim through literalistic interpretations of the Bible, but that they should also share the blame that they are often perpetrators of this discourse.

One of the prominent theologies of Isabel Apawo Phiri is the theology of healing in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In fact Isabel's key area of focus is the theology of healing reflected in many of her writings.<sup>106</sup> In this she proposes that prayer is an essential tool in dealing with HIV/AIDS.<sup>107</sup> This also comes in handy when many programmes dealing with HIV/AIDS are donor driven, mostly seeking to help with the physical needs, like through relief programmes for orphans and widows. She advocates that the spiritual side of a person is also important in dealing with HIV/AIDS. However, it should be recognized that spiritual resources alone are not enough in dealing with HIV/AIDS, as those that are infected by their spouses may as well be prayerful. A theology of spiritual healing is important because it gives hope to the dying.<sup>108</sup>

### 7.5 Establishment of Partnerships

Another contribution of the Circle is in the development of strategic partnerships between the Circle and other academic institutions in the First World. An example is a partnership between Yale Divinity School and CIRA (Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS).<sup>109</sup> The Yale Divinity School partnership started in 2002 and ended in 2005. The contribution this partnership has brought is enormous in the area of research methodologies. In the beginning the partnership was intended to cater for Circle women who had PhDs. However, two Circle women that went to Yale Divinity School on this programme did not have PhDs.<sup>110</sup> The 2006 Circle Newsletter records the following Circle women as

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 428.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Comment, Isabel Apawo Phiri, Bible Study Group, Pietermaritzburg 7.3.2006

<sup>107</sup> See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "HIV/AIDS: An Anglican Theological Response in Mission," *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 56, no. 4, 10.2004.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p. 429.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

having benefited from the partnership: Fulata Moyo from Malawi, Sylvia Amisi from Kenya, Vuadi Vibila from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike from Kenya, Dorothy Ucheaga from Nigeria, Therese Tinkasiimire, from Uganda, Constance Ambasa Shishanga from Kenya, Isabel Apawo Phiri from Malawi, Dorcas Akintunde from Nigeria and Hazel Ayanga from Kenya.<sup>111</sup> The CIRA partnership continues to cater for Circle members who are registered as PhD students and have reached proposal stage. The first beneficiaries of this programme are Lilian Siwila from Zambia and Bongiwe Dumezweni from South Africa, who were expected to join the programme by December 2006.<sup>112</sup>

### 7.6 Circle and Women Educators

The other contribution of the Circle to the academic world is in the area of improving education for women theologians. This would contribute to an increase in the number of women lecturers and tutors in seminaries and theological schools.<sup>113</sup>

Apart from finding schools and scholarships for students, the Circle has helped sharpen the skills of women theologians that are already in tutoring careers. This has been achieved through encouraging women to research and write.

The Circle has also upgraded women's studies by securing scholarships for them. In the first period, such scholarships were provided by WCC. Through this facility, the Circle has made strides in training women to a higher level. In the area of biblical studies for example, key biblical scholars in the Circle emerged in the names of: Sarojini Nadar, Madipoane Masenya, Dorcas Akintunde and Musa Dube. All, apart from Musa Dube, have at one time or the other belonged to a church that is historically classified as Evangelical.

Apart from improving education for women theologians, Circle women have committed themselves to work towards an inclusion of women's studies at African universities and other tertiary institutions.<sup>114</sup> This has been done in institutions such as KwaZulu Natal and Limuru Theological Seminary in Kenya.

### 7.7 Contribution to Practical Ministry

Circle women are not only academic theologians. Some are actively involved in transforming their communities. In this section, I only select a few examples. Cecelia Asogwa

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam-Woode, 2001, p. 14.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 3.



from Nigeria shows how instrumental Circle women are in providing practical help to their communities in Nigeria. Her paper "Doing Theology is Empowering the Marginalized to Live their Faith as Persons Created in God's Own Image"<sup>115</sup> is based on this work. She argues that women in Nigeria are being empowered through theology done as envisioned in the programmes stated by the Women Development Education Centre. These projects include: Forty Women Self Help Associations; Training Workshops etc.<sup>116</sup> Although Cecelia Asogwa proposes a theology that accepts roles traditionally ascribed to women by their churches, on the other hand, it is common that women engage themselves in development work not by choice but because they have been squeezed out of the church's prominent roles. Such women who find themselves in this situation are oppressed. On the other hand, those that see these roles as best fitting for them are liberated and must comfortably take up those roles. This can best be explained by this quote:

Women's liberation should neither aim at forcing women to be leaders, nor should women's liberation be limited to the occupation of leadership roles. It is about attaining their full potential as God has equipped them ... Such support roles were liberating to women, because they did them not out of being oppressed but out of choice.<sup>117</sup>

There are notable development projects that Circle women are engaged in to the extent that it is difficult for me to include them all in this chapter.

### 7.8 Redefining Church Policies

The other area where the Circle made a contribution is in lobbying and advocating for the ordination of women. Women have done this by being ordained themselves, writing on ordaining women and marching against the ban on ordination. This issue began to surface in the Circle with the first Convocation in 1989. Women committed themselves to transforming church policies that barred women from such key positions.<sup>118</sup> It was common in some African churches that church policies deterred women from serving in key positions such as in the ordained ministry. Such roles in these churches were reserved for men only. This was systematically achieved, for example, by not allowing women to enrol in church related seminaries. If they did, such women often were given a lesser role to play apart from administering the sacraments.

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<sup>115</sup> Rosemary Edet and Margaret Umeagudosu, *Life, Work and Women*, pp. 194-195.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72-85.

<sup>117</sup> See: Rachel NyaGondwe Banda [Fiedler], *Women of Bible and Culture: Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere, 2005 pp. 46-47.

<sup>118</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *Talitha Qumi. Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Accra-North: Sam-Woode, 2001, p. 3.

This was against the background that women are equally gifted to do pastoral work. Bassey I. Ude articulates this in her article on "The Emerging Spirituality of Women in Nigeria."<sup>119</sup> Her argument is that women have spiritualities, spiritual gifts that need to be utilized in the church, and not suppressed. She gave an example of some established churches which bar women from leadership and suppress women's spirituality which is supported in African Instituted Churches and even in the New Testament.<sup>120</sup> This approach is key in redefining traditionally ascribed roles for women that are less empowering.

The case of Mary Chinkwita of Nkhoma Synod, outlined by Isabel Apawo Phiri in her research, is an example of squashed hopes for women's ordination. She was called to the ordained ministry but was given women's work as her ministry. She was frustrated and left the ministry.<sup>121</sup> The Malawi Circle has registered much progress in this area. A few churches have started ordaining women. Although such a change can not only be attributed to the Circle, it can not be denied that the Circle has directly and indirectly contributed to this change. Blantyre Synod began to ordain women when women asked the church to do so through a march. Two women in the "march" were members of the Circle. One of them is now an ordained minister of the same church. Although such changes are taking place in some churches, other churches continue to deny women ordination.<sup>122</sup> Some churches that are not ordaining women have started tabling the issue in their assemblies.<sup>123</sup>

The issue of ordination was a cause for concern even before the genesis of the Circle. M.G. Okure wrote on ordination in Nigerian Churches under the title: "An Authentic Experience of the Ordained Woman."<sup>124</sup> She herself was an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria and became the first woman minister in this church in Aba Imo State. As the first woman to be ordained, the road to ordination had not been easy, but after she was ordained in 1982, she has faithfully served the church including being chosen to represent her church in various important fora. From 1982 to 1985, she

<sup>119</sup> See Rosemary Edet and Meg. A. Umeagudosu (eds), *Life, Women and Culture: Theological Reflections: Proceeding of the National Conference of a Circle of African Women Theologians*, Nigeria: MUA Printers 1990, p. 209.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 147-161.

<sup>121</sup> For details of Mary Chinkwita's case, see Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, pp. 57-61.

<sup>122</sup> In the Baptist Convention a church in Southern Malawi informed the Convention that they wanted a woman pastor, but the Convention has turned down the request. This is because the issue of ordaining women is still being discussed.

<sup>123</sup> Will there ever be a woman priest in the Roman Catholic Church?

<sup>124</sup> Rosemary Edet and Margaret A. Umeagudosu (eds), *Life, Women and Culture: Theological Reflections: Proceedings of National Conference o Circle of African Women Theologians*, Nigeria, pp. 120-127.

was appointed to chair the Board of Christian Education for the Synod. In the same year she was appointed as the Consultant for African Women of the member churches. Her contention here was that the church should be prepared to change in a changing society. Further, that the church must change because it is an institution that has brought the most radical changes in the world. This means that the traditional understanding that only men should be leaders needs to be challenged.<sup>125</sup>

Dr Margaret Umeagodosu presented her paper on: "Gender Warfare in the Church: Debate on the Ordination of Women in Igbo Christian Churches."<sup>126</sup> She argued that those who see women as subordinate misinterpret the Bible, and perhaps their own worldview as regards women is distorted. Her reinterpretation on this issue is from the biblical perspective. She revisits women leaders in the traditional Judeo-Greco Roman culture as models that support women to become leaders in church and society even in cultures that are oppressive to women. She also adds that Paul who is viewed as suppressive to women has to be seen in how he worked with women (Rom 16). He treated them as equals, and even taught equality as seen in Gal 3:28.<sup>127</sup> In relation to Igbo churches in Nigeria she argues that women are given freedom to lead churches, but this was not so in most established churches because of the missionary influence from their mother churches.<sup>128</sup>

The other contribution on the same issue of ordination is by E.M. Uka. In her presentation on "Grounds for the Ordination of Women to Priesthood: A Socio-Theological Perspective,"<sup>129</sup> she uses the same approach as Margaret A. Umeagodosu on how Paul's letters should be understood. His words that suggest oppression should be judged from what he did concerning women and also said about women elsewhere in the Bible. In addition, she tries to argue that the idea of ordination mystifies the office of "ministers", and yet there is no ordination in the Bible. We are all called to serve (1 Cor 4:4). She also adds that in certain mother or missionary churches, women are ordained and therefore it is illogical, when in their daughter churches in Africa, women are refused ordination.<sup>130</sup>

## 7.9 Conclusion

The Circle is mainly an academic forum. Thus its major contribution is in the area of academics. The other contributions are linked to this cause. The Circle's engagement in

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-146.

<sup>126</sup> Rosemary Edet and Margaret A. Umeagodosu (eds), *Life, Women and Culture*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162-176.

<sup>129</sup> Rosemary Edet and Margaret A. Umeagodosu (eds), *Life, Women and Culture*, pp. 162-176.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-19.

contemporary issues, partnership, higher theological training and practical ministry arises as areas where Circle women promote their academic research. This is probably why, often, its theologies are not in tandem with grassroots women as shown by the Malawi example. This academic ambition has resulted in the need for women to seek avenues where such academic knowledge can be utilized; hence their pursuit of opportunities to lecture or tutor in institutions of higher learning and in the ordained ministry.

The bulk of feminist research methodologies are an important tool that the Circle has generated. It has become widely used in academics not only in the area of religion and culture but also in the secular world. It would, however, be an overestimation that theologies of such academic nature would harmonize with liberation theologies of grassroots women. However, the movement will continue to be nurtured in an ecumenical environment although it was born and brought up by African women.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

### **8.1 The Birth of an African Baby**

The thesis has established that the Circle was conceived by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in the context of an ecumenical surrounding. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and the first core group of Circle leadership were all connected to ecumenical institutions. They were all members of EATWOT. Some also belonged to other ecumenical bodies such as the WCC. These women became the birth attendants of the Circle. They were also assisted by male birth attendants such as John Pobee. Thus the Circle started as an ecumenical network even though such ecumenism was restricted primarily to the Christian tradition. Though the role of ecumenical bodies in the formation of the Circle is clear, it would be an overstatement to suggest that the Circle was not born by African women theologians. Likewise, even though Circle theologies are similar to other feminist theologies, they are different. Circle theologies emphasize the role of culture and religion in the formation of their theologies. This emphasis sets them apart from other feminist theologies. Circle theologies are Third World feminist theologies but are different to other Third World theologies because they deal with women's issues in a different context, that of Africa.

Though the Circle is open to women of all faiths, there were no women of other religions at the beginning of the Circle. Muslim women, for example, who surface in the Circle in the later years, were not part of the first core group of Circle leaders. This could be the reason why participation of women of other religions in the Circle has been limited. The lack of participation of women from other religions could not have been deliberate, but these women were not found at the ecumenical bodies to which the early Circle leaders belonged. Women from churches that are classified as Evangelical were also absent from the list of the first leaders of the Circle. These were excluded because they were not members of ecumenical bodies where the first Circle leaders belonged. In addition women from Evangelical churches and from other religions were absent from the first group of Circle leadership because only a few of them were members of academic institutions where all early Circle women leaders belonged.

These churches lagged behind in training women in theological education. The first Circle women leaders were not just any academic members but mostly those that were oriented to theological and or religious studies training. As such Catholic women were dominant in the first leadership pool of the first Circle leadership. Catholic women were all nuns or ex nuns. These were exposed to religious or theological studies as part of their formation. The number of women from Evangelical churches has increased in the later history of the Circle because Evangelical churches have increased opportunities of theological training for women. This is also happening among women of other religions

but at a much slower pace than that of Evangelical women. Women who label themselves as Traditionalists were also not part of the first group of Circle leaders. Their number remained small in the later histories of the Circle. This is because there are few that label themselves as Traditionalists in Africa, although many adherents of other religions, Christians included, often act like Traditionalists.<sup>1</sup>

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is not the only Circle in the world. The word Circle is used by other networks as well to denote an association. The birth of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was necessary because it has enabled more African women to research and write on women's issues in the area of religion and culture, an activity that was much restricted by the quota system on which the EATWOT women's Commission operated. Under the commission, only a few African women theologians could become members.

This thesis has further established that Circle theology is a differentiated Feminist theology of Africa. This matches with the nature of membership of the Circle. Although all are African women, their religiosities colour the feminist theology they construct. Thus in this thesis, a classification of dominant feminist theologies has been attempted. There are broadly two categories of Circle theologies: Mainline and Evangelical Feminist theologies. As such the application of Circle theologies to grassroots women must begin with an investigation of what category of Circle theologies are being applied; there must also be knowledge of the religious context of the grassroots women where such an application is being made. Are these women from mainline churches or Evangelical churches? As such the Malawi case study is only true to women of a certain religiosity, that of Evangelical piety. On the other hand, Circle theologies have a common thread in that they all are constructed within the framework of African culture and from the perspective of the female gender. This, however, does not mean that they view culture in the same way. Their views are also coloured by their religiosities.

The thesis has shown also that the Circle is not aimed at creating a matriarchy but a society where there are going to be balanced relationships between men and women. The Circle is about enforcing equal partnership between men and women in religious contexts and in other societies. Thus Circle theology can also be called a Theology of Gender. Circle theology only offers a partial view on how relationships between women and men are influenced. It does not investigate all factors that condition the relationships between men and women in societies. However, this thesis has established that women in Africa are slowly being liberated. It is also true that the Circle is not the only force that has contributed to liberation of women in Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> A perceptive study of this phenomenon is: Bregje de Kok, *Christianity and African Traditional Religion: Two Realities of a Different Kind*, Zomba: Kachere, 2004.

## **8.2 An African Baby Growing Up**

The Circle has fulfilled one of its primary goals: to research and publish. The focus will remain the academic area and it shows much visibility in structures related to academia. Thus the thesis has established that geographical growth in various African countries has often been linked to academic institutions. Academic institutions are more interested in research and writing, because in many cases, this activity is linked to promotions in their academic career. Non academic institutions have other more pressing needs than research and publishing. This means that they are less likely to attract members of the Circle where much emphasis is placed on research and writing. Countries that have less representation of Circle women at academic institutions have limited growth of the Circle.

Further, the growth of the Circle requires adequate mentorship by experienced Circle women. Thus displacements of key Circle women in some countries have contributed to the slow growth of the Circle in other countries.

## **8.3 Further Bridges to Cross**

The thesis has established that the Circle has made significant contributions towards liberation of women in academia, church and society. The Circle must critically reflect on her contributions in order to bring an even more meaningful liberation to African women in this and future generations.

Firstly, although the main contribution of the Circle is in the area of producing theological literature on African women in general, it is mainly theological literature of academic nature that has been produced. The Circle must reorient herself to other ways of producing literature that would trickle down to the grassroots women. These other ways of producing literature in the form of popular publications was already envisaged at the beginning of the Circle. A publication in the name of AMKA was specifically designed for such kind of publications. However, translation of such booklets into a vernacular language of the readers would even be better. Such translations would render liberation messages readily available to the grassroots. In addition, such an action would also enable Circle women to be more accountable to the grassroots women regarding the information they have collected from them. Such translation would also be the starting point of widening the Circle beyond academic women theologians. This is important because a good number of grassroots women are also concerned about women's issues. In this way they can loosely be referred to as a grassroots Circle. The Circle must recognize this reality and identify religious as well as societal structures within which they can translate their theologies.

This thesis has shown that Circle theology can not be 'wholesomely' translated to grassroots women. Circle theology is academic and elitist and often contradicts with the theologies of grassroots women. Thus Circle theology must first study the grassroots theologies of a particular context such as Malawi before applying them. Even in the processes of translation of Circle theologies to grassroots, Circle women must apply the required sensitivity.

The thesis has established that apart from the Circle's contribution to academia, they have also contributed to the liberation of women in church and society. However, I see that the latter is more a coincidence than something which the Circle has consciously worked on. However, this area of liberation is also very important and must not only be considered an issue of academic interest but of practical importance as well. This means that the Circle must find ways of how they can promote liberation of women in all aspects of the society as well as their religion in practical terms. This is a challenge about how to combine academic interests with community interests. In many cases, these two areas can not effectively be combined. Communities sometimes do not consider academicians as practical people in a constructive way. Thus they may often not be taken seriously in issues requiring practical interventions. Thus it is not uncommon to view Circle women as fall outs in their respective communities. Further, the critical stance taken by academics is often an impediment for them to be taken as serious members of the same communities they critic. This means therefore that Circle women must find ways of working through people that are well respected by their communities to bring about practical liberation in their respective communities.

Secondly, the Circle should brace herself for new changes in its thematic focus. The Circle over the years has mainly dealt with research and publications on African women by highlighting women's issues without a comprehensive reflection on the relationship of women's issues to men's issues. There have been few voices from the Circle on this relationship. The mother of the Circle has been one of the minority voices on this issue. As the Circle grows and matures, this perspective from the mother of the Circle must be embraced by the Circle to reach greater heights. This has become urgent in the wake of masculinity studies that have begun to surface and grow at a fast rate. For this reflection to be meaningful, the Circle must also begin to find ways of integrating male theologians into the Circle. This is happening already at grassroots level where for example marriage instructions are carried out by both men and women. The setback is that in most cases when women engage men in addressing women's issues, men's ideas tend to dominate. Since the Circle has grown, there is a high possibility that their voices would not be swallowed up by men's voices if such integration would take place.

As a matter of fact, Circle women are already integrating themselves with male theologians. There is much cooperation between Circle women and male theologians in



doing research and publishing on issues of common interests. However, the Circle must assess the dangers and the benefits of engaging into such cooperation beforehand.

## Appendix: English Translation of the Chenjerani Booklet

*I have included this text as an appendix because it vividly exhibits the kind of theology that some grassroots women in Malawi adhere to. Further, some stories referred to in the thesis are included in this text. The booklet was originally written in Chewa (Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, Chenjerani. Matenda a Edzi Alikodi, Zomba: Lydia Print, 2006), then translated into English (Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, Be Careful. AIDS is Real, Zomba: Lydia Print, 2006).*

# Be Careful, Aids is Real

## Lesson 1

### Let's take part in the fight against Aids

#### Aim

To spread the message that can help people to avoid getting infected but also to look with love at those who are already infected:

- 1 To distribute little booklets or tracts to warn people against any customs that may spread AIDS.
- 2 To lead to avoid such customs that spread the illness.
- 3 To lead how one can take care with love of those

#### Be careful, Aids is real

We Malawians have the habit of attributing all deaths to witchcraft. If someone dies, we say he was bewitched. The bad thing is that, even when we know that someone died of Aids, we say that a witch killed her or him. Malawians, let us wake up and believe that Aids is real and that many people die of it.

#### Story 1

In one of the towns of Malawi there were two farmers of who had died of Aids. Both were women, one was very thin and the other one was quite fat. The woman who died quickly had children but was not married. She had not been to school much but she knew that what she was suffering from was Aids. She had also had TB and several other illnesses.

She was a Christian, and it was amazing how strong she was in attending prayers whenever she was able to go there. She was a woman who loved her children very much, and after knowing about her infection she asked who could care for her children once she died. She was aware that one day she would die and leave her children alone. And she found a group that would look after her children once she died.

#### Learning

- 1 That the woman recognized that she was suffering from Aids helped her to prepare for her future. It is good to believe that Aids is real as a person who does so can prepare for the future well before death.
- 2 If the medicine called ARV, which does not cure Aids but helps people to live many years more, had been available then as it is now, she might still be alive. The

goodness of the ARV medicine is that the mother could have continued to look after her children, but now they do not have any parent any more.

## Story 2

The second woman did not believe that she was suffering from Aids. Her husband had been sick for a long time and then he died suddenly before his wife. The couple had only one child, and after the death of her husband she returned with the child to the village.

Although her husband had been sick for a long time and had died, she did not want to be tested to find out if she was suffering from HIV/AIDS. She was often sick, and then she was found with TB. Though the TB medicine helped her a bit, she was not well at all. She got malaria again. Again and again she was admitted. She was convinced that someone had bewitched her. She frequently talked about being bewitched, and her relatives did the same. She died, and at her funeral some people shouted that she had been killed by magic.

## Learning

- 1 To believe that she had been bewitched and not to agree that she was suffering from Aids did not help her at all, because she could not prepare for her child's future.
- 2 Not to believe that she was suffering from HIV/AIDS made her worry again while she was sick and she also infected her new husband. Although the new husband was sick as well, she also sent the virus into her husband's body.

If a woman recognises that she is infected with the HIV virus that will lead to Aids and she finds a man who would like to marry her, she must make sure that the man she wants to marry is also tested for the virus. She can not recognize this by looking at the man. Many people look completely healthy but are still infected. To really find out, you need to go to a hospital or to MACRO to be tested. There they can easily find out if the virus is in the blood. This must be done before you get married or start living together.

If you know the man is infected and you still want to marry him in spite of the virus, you must find a way to protect yourself. This can only be done by always using a condom when having sex. If you are a Christian you must use the condom in marriage because the bible teaches us not sleep with any man we are not married to. Neither does it allow a man to sleep with any other woman than his wife. When both are infected, each must remain faithful to the marriage. If one of you has sex outside marriage, that will make the infection worse quickly.

\* To give the virus to someone is a great sin as it kills him or her. Love your neighbour and stop the habit of adultery.

## Do you know?

In the whole of Malawi there are about 11 million people. Among these 11 million people, those who are infected with HIV/AIDS are mostly young people between 15 and 24 years. They count for 60% of all who are infected. Among those young people, those who are infected most are the girls, for any one young man infected there are five young women carrying the virus. The reason for this is that young men spread the virus, as any one of them may have many lover girls, be careful. Make sure to avoid the virus if you want to stay healthy and have children of your own.

Even among the adults, more women are infected than men (55 women for 45 men). Of pregnant women, often more than 30% are infected. Women, make sure that you do not get pregnant when you are infected, as you may pass on the virus to your child who will be born

infected. And as parents you will have to bring up a child who is frequently sick and may not live long.

## Lesson 2

### Avoid customs which promote Aids

We Malawians are people with many customs (*miambo*), and we are often praised for that. But we need to keep our eyes open as there are some custom that promote Aids.

To cherish and keep the custom of our ancestors is primarily a good thing. Many of these customs help us to be really human, give respect and avoid trouble. For example, a child used to pay respect to its mother and father, and to other adults. This is one of the good customs we want to keep. But there are also customs we need to avoid as they promote Aids. This booklet will deal with several of such customs by the way of stories.

### Story 3

There was a woman who loved God very much. In the providence of God her husband died. After some time, God in his wisdom provided a new husband who wanted to marry her. In the district, many were very happy about her impending marriage. Her wedding was to be a church wedding. Everything was fine but before the wedding, an elderly woman who also served God, called her and explained to her that since her husband had died, she needs to brush off the dust (*kuchotsa fumbi*) so that her new husband would not die as well. And she emphasised that to find such a man "to brush off the dust" could be found without any problem. And what she said was said out of love and not out of hatred. The widow, because she loved the Bible and served God, refused to follow the advice "kuchotsa fumbi." She recognised that it would be sin to "brush off death." She told the woman who advised her that the Bible forbids such a thing. The woman became afraid and apologised that she had made a mistake being one of the women with a responsibility to serve God.

### Learning

*Kuchotsa fumbi* (to brush off death) is sin.

*Kuchotsa fumbi* can bring Aids to the widow if the one to have sex with her is infected. And if the widow's husband died of Aids, then she may also be infected. So if the one who is to "brush off death" is not infected, he may get the virus from the woman whom he is supposed to "cleanse." Widows, be careful, don't get the HIV/AIDS virus from the man who is to "brush off death" from you, he may be infected and in turn infect you.

*Kuchotsa fumbi* can not cleanse the death of the other man. If we live with Jesus, he will give us abundant life (John 10:10), and Jesus has power bigger than Satan's (1 John 4:4). We who believe in Jesus pray to God to give us abundant life and to protect us from death. In Romans 3:23 we read that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and in Romans 6:6 we read that the reward of sin is death. These verses speak of physical as well as of spiritual death.

It is true. If we receive Jesus we finish spiritual death because we have received eternal life. We read about this in 1 John 5:11-13. In these verses we read that the one who has Jesus has eternal life. "He who has the Son (Jesus) has eternal life."

Be aware of wrong advisors who do not follow the word of God. Know that to brush off death (*kuchotsa fumbi*) is a custom of Satan and a custom that can transmit the virus. Do believe, in Jesus Christ there is no need *kuchotsa fumbi*. He is enough to give abundant life and eternal life as well.

This is just one example of many customs which make women and girls have sex with men outside of marriage so that they can avoid death or illness or something like that. Another such customs often takes place at the end of the girls' initiation (*chinamwali*) when the girl is forced to have sex with a *fisi* (hyena) to find out if she has learned her lessons well. If such a *fisi* is HIV positive, he will just spread that to the girls. In case such a man is a Christian, he also commits the sin of adultery. And if the girl is a Christian, she commits the same sin if she allows a *fisi* to have sex with her.

Mothers, be careful. Do not send your daughters to such initiations where the *fisi* comes. Your daughter may get infected by the *fisi* and develop HIV/AIDS. These days many churches have girls' initiations with good instructions but without the *fisi*. Send your daughters there. If you send your daughters to such an initiation, you avoid HIV/AIDS.

## **Other customs which we must oppose**

### **To marry the late husband's brother**

Be careful, even though the widow may have led a very good life, her husband may very well have died of Aids. If you do want to marry your late husband's brother, be tested first, both of you, to make sure that none of you has the HIV/AIDS virus. And if you, the brother-in-law, thinking that in this way you will get your brother's property, that property belongs to the widow and the children. If your brother has given you something while he was still alive, be content with that.

### **Question**

Which are customs (*miyambo*) that can bring HIV/AIDS?

### **Answer**

To brush off death (*kuchotsa fumbi*), to enter death (*kulowa kufa*), hyena (*fisi*), marrying the deceased's brother can bring HIV/AIDS.

## **Lesson 3**

### **Forgiveness and HIV/AIDS**

As Christians we believe that if we sin against each other, we must also forgive each other. In the Lord's Prayer we say these words:

"Forgive our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us."

Elsewhere Jesus said that we should forgive each other 70x70 times, and that means without end.

### **Story 4**

A woman in this country had a good marriage, she had a good job. The Lord blessed the marriage with children. All went to church, and even their wedding had been a church wedding. The bad thing was that though the wife was very faithful to her husband, her husband was a hypocrite who had girl friends again and again.

Because his wife was a strong Christian, she stayed with her husband although she knew that he was an adulterer. She thought that she must not leave him in spite of his adultery because at the church wedding she had promised not to leave him until death would separate them. Every

time when she found out through letters or other testimony that her husband had yet another sexual affair, she forgave him.

Her parents tried to persuade her to leave her husband and to return to them, but they did not achieve anything. When she realised that her parents wanted her to leave her husband, she started to hide his adulterous behaviour and the parents believed that her husband had changed.

After a while the husband fell sick and came close to death. As the good and loving wife she was, she looked after him in hospital. One day she left him to go out briefly, and when she came back she found another woman sitting at her husband's bedside and from the way they talked it was obvious that they were lovers. The wife forgave him and did not reject him at all.

The husband got better, and the wife observed that every day he was taking some medicine. She asked him what medicine it was, and he answered that he had headaches and that this medicine helped him. He did not tell her that the medicine were ARVs which extend the life of those who are infected with HIV.

After some time the wife fell sick. She was found with TB. She got treated, and then TB started again. When she got TB for the third time, she died. Her husband was in good health. He is so even today, because the ARVs have extended his life.

### **Question**

What are ARVs?

### **Answer**

ARVs is a medicine which those infected by the HIV/AIDS virus can take to extend their life. This medicine is given only to those who have been tested (VCT) and have been found HIV positive. For several years this medicine was so expensive that even people who knew about it could not afford it. But now in Malawi, as in some other African countries like Botswana, this medicine is available free of charge. In Malawi people in Chiradzulu got the ARVs free starting in 2003, in other parts only towards the end of 2004, and now they are available in hospitals everywhere.

But the sad thing is that, although the medicine is available, many people do not want to get tested and do not want to know if they have the virus. Be careful, you need to know that to have your blood tested is nothing to be afraid of. Only if you are tested first, can you receive the necessary medicine (ARVs), which will help you to extend your life on earth and to look after your children. Though they help most people, it is true that they do not help each and everyone. But how do you know that they would not work for you? Be careful, go and get tested and choose to receive the medicine, so that you may live.

### **Question**

Where can you have your blood tested?

### **Answer**

Ask at the hospital next to you and they will help you. There are also other places like MACRO where you can be tested easily. There are many places where they offer VCT (Voluntary Counselling and Testing). You may also get information from the radio and in other ways.

### **Question**

Do you think that the wife of the adulterous husband had understood well what forgiveness means? What does it really mean to forgive an adulterous husband?

**Answer**

Really, everyone who knows Jesus must forgive, and the wife of a husband who is not faithful to her has the freedom to continue living with him as she promised (though her husband broke his promises). But she must tell her husband always to use a condom when having sex with her. If he does that all the time, he may avoid passing on the virus to her. If the husband refuses to use condoms with her, this means that he does not love her, even if he is tested and does not have the virus, he must still use condoms all the time if he does not stop his adultery.

To demand condoms does not mean that the wife is not willing to forgive. She does forgive indeed as she continues the marriage. To allow yourself to stay with a promiscuous husband and not to use condoms all the time is like you want to die by killing yourself, because an adulterous husband is chasing death and he may kill you by that.

**Question**

Why do women in Malawi insist not to use condoms with their adulterous husbands?

**Answer**

They are afraid that that may end their marriage, because many husbands simply refuse to use condoms.

Women be careful! What is better? That your marriage ends or that you die and leave your children (they will also marry one day) and your parents? What is better?

If you think that to leave your husband is big, because you have promised to stay with him until death, then what about your husband bringing into the marriage the virus that will kill you? If this is so, then your sin of leaving your husband is much smaller than your husband's sin of bringing death into the family, the sin of killing you and punishing the children who have done nothing wrong? Be careful and do what pleases God.

**Forgiveness in those days of Aids**

1. Do not keep a grudge if your husband (or your wife) commits adultery, but never allow having sex without a condom.
2. Pray for your husband or wife that they may know the Lord, because they commit adultery because they do not know God.
3. If an adulterous husband repents and really changes his life, you must both be tested for HIV before you can reunite and have sex again.

**Lesson 4**

Love those who are suffering from HIV/AIDS.

Those people who suffer from HIV/AIDS encounter many problems. Many of them are rejected and they do not receive enough help, neither physically nor spiritually. This little book will help you to look after them physically.

**Take care of your body**

Those who are HIV positive often fall sick and we must visit them often so that we can take them to the hospital so that their illness can be treated. There is no medicine to cure Aids yet, but anyone who is infected needs treatment when sick with illnesses like TB, fever, malaria, pneumonia, headaches, shingles, wounds and many other things. It is lack of love not to take someone to hospital because he or she is suffering from HIV/AIDS, as their other illnesses can be treated.

**Know this:**

To look after someone with HIV/AIDS without giving them medicine is no love at all.

Many who suffer from HIV/AIDS like to eat just delicious food. That makes some people think that it would be better if they just die. If you are a believer, this is evil thought. Let us be loving and try to give those who are sick as good food as we can manage. To give a patient just delicious food is not helpful. He may not want anything else but we know that what the patient needs is not just pleasing but nutritious food. So for example the patient may want the phala made from ufa woyera but for health reasons phala made from ngaiwa is better. This may help to live longer.

There are specialists who advise that a proper mixture of food for those who suffer from HIV/AIDS goes very well with the ARVs. There are even people who are infected but who do not take ARVs and choose to eat special food only. Some of them are in good health. Let us see what different food stuffs our friends need who suffer from HIV/AIDS. Thereby we can give them valuable help.

*These are the groups of food stuffs required:*

Food that fight the disease, vegetables of all kinds, Chinese cabbage, and fruits like bananas, oranges, tomatoes, pawpaw, mandarins, mapoza. These types of food will help because the illness reduces the defences against any illness. Vegetables and fruits help by adding blood and strengthen the body's defences.

**Food to strength the body's defence:**

In English those are called proteins. You will get proteins from these types of food: Any kind of fish, all beans, eggs, meat, ziwala, ants (*ngumbi*), mice, birds etc. If you suffer from HIV/AIDS, your body loses strength because of the many illnesses. Food of this group strengthens the body.

**Food to give you strength:**

In this group you those foodstuffs that contain starch like nsima, phala, cassava, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, rice and other things. If you are sick, the body needs much energy and that makes weak those who are sick, they can work little and may even have problems walking. Such food as those will strengthen them.

So that someone who is sick may profit from these kinds of food, he or she must be shown love, and they need to be encouraged to eat. Thus you can care for them and show them, even though they have wounds or ulcers. If you care for them at home and they have ulcers, try to wear rubber gloves on your hands and touch them correctly. And do all this with love.

We Malawians like to eat our food with just one type of relish. Though this is our custom, we must make sure that the patient eats different types of food, and every day there should be three types of food, like this for example:

Morning:	Phala of ngaiwa with groundnut flour ( <i>nsinjiro</i> )
Lunch:	Nsima and green vegetable.
Supper:	Nsima and green vegetable, and do not forget to add a piece of fruit.

Groundnuts can be found everywhere. Matemba may not be available everywhere, but if you want to help someone who is sick, you can surely find it, even if at a little distance. If you have access to different foodstuffs, you may follow this plan:



- Morning: Add one cup of milk and one egg to the regular food to give strength, like phala, sweet potatoes or bread.
- Lunch: Nsima with meat, fruit and green vegetable.
- Supper: Nsima with fruit and green vegetable

### **More advice on nutrition**

Margarine and cooking oil are useful to strengthen the body. Orange juice (Sobo) helps to add blood. If you have the money, please help the patient with Sobo and not Fanta or even Coca Cola.

The patient must not drink beer of any kind or smoke. Smoking increases breathing problems and makes the lungs not work properly. Beer damages the kidneys and the liver. The same is true for tobacco. Though you may be receiving ARVs, you need to test if kidneys and liver work properly. If kidney and liver do not work properly, ARVs will not do their good work.

### **Advice on milk**

Those who suffer from TB or Aids should not drink unprocessed milk or eat unprocessed meat (especially beef) because both can help to bring about TB or to make it worse if you are suffering already from TB.

Those who are suffering from advanced Aids sometimes refuse to eat anything at all. How can we look after them in such a situation?

1. You may help them to eat by using a cup and a spoon to feed them. It is very bad just to leave someone in such a situation and let her or him die. For Christians it is the sin of killing if you do not feed the patient. Some people may say: "just let them die of hunger." For Christians this is killing, and the Bible forbids it.
2. In such a situation you should think of taking the patient to the hospital. This is good, because we can not know the time when someone is to die. And in the hospital those who are sick receive better care, and then death will be much better compared to just leaving someone to die without medicine!!

**Be careful, Christians, let us not sin by not taking a patient to the hospital at such a time.**

## **Lesson 5**

### *Family Planning*

In family planning husband and wife agree, right from the beginning of their life together, how many years should pass before they may have another baby, and how many children they may have.

### **The goodness of family planning**

#### *For the wife*

1. The mother remains healthy because the body has time enough to recover before the birth of the next child.
2. The mother can breastfeed the baby long enough without being disturbed by another pregnancy.
3. The mother is spared a pregnancy for which she is not ready yet.
4. The mother has enough time and opportunity to work for the progress of their home.

#### *For the child*

1. The child will breastfeed for a long time.
2. The child will receive enough love and attention from the parents.
3. The child will grow up in good health.

*For the husband*

1. The father can provide well for the family, if he has only as many children as he can look after and provide for.

*For the family*

The whole family will be in good health if the number of children is small enough, so that they can find enough food, have enough clothes and get what they need for school.

*For the country*

1. Those who plan their families have time to work for development, and therefore the country will progress.
2. If families are smaller, there will be enough land and hunger can be kept away.
3. Illnesses caused by malnutrition will become rare, since there is enough food for everyone.
4. The number of students in school will rise because the parents can send all their children to school.

### **Family planning methods**

1. Contraceptive pills
2. Injections (Depo-Provera)
3. Loop (Intra-uterine device)
4. Norplant
5. Condoms
6. Tubal ligation
7. Vasectomy

#### **1. Contraceptive pills**

The wife must take one tablet every day to avoid a pregnancy. Contraceptive pills do not terminate a pregnancy as some people think.

*How they work*

1. They prevent the egg from settling in the womb.
2. It makes the uterus to be soft so that the egg can not nestle.
3. They make the vaginal fluids dry so that the man's seed can not get through and the woman can not get pregnant.

*Advantages*

1. They are very reliable, provided the pills are taken regularly.
2. You can have sex with joy because the wife can not get pregnant.
3. The woman menstruates only a little which may help to avoid illnesses due to lack of blood.
4. The pills reduce the pain during menstruation.
5. They reduce the chance of cancer of the uterus.

*Disadvantages*

1. Some women feel sick and others vomit when they have just started to take the contraceptive pills.
2. Some women stop menstruating, and others menstruate only a little, especially when they have just started to take the pills.
3. The wife has to take them each and every day.
4. Contraceptive pills do not help against sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS).

*Who should not use this contraceptive method?*

1. Women who are frequently sick.
2. Women who have been suffering from diabetes for more than 20 years.
3. Women over 35 who smoke much.
4. Women with a child of less than 6 months.

### **Injections (Depo-Provera)**

For these methods women must receive an injection every three months.

*How they work*

1. They prevent the egg from settling in the vagina.
2. They make the vaginal fluid dry.
3. The egg can not nestle in the uterus

*Advantages*

1. Injections are reliable, provided they are received regularly.
2. They keep the secret. Nobody knows that you are doing family planning.
3. You can have sex with joy because the wife can not get pregnant.
4. They do not disturb the flow of the mother's milk while she is breastfeeding.
5. They reduce the chance of cancer of the uterus.

*Disadvantages*

1. Many women stop menstruating or just menstruate a little.
2. Some women menstruate very strongly.
3. The injections can not protect against sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS).

*Who should not use this contraceptive method?*

1. A woman with a baby under 6 months of age.
2. Women with high blood pressure (hypertension).

### **The Loop**

This is a piece of plastic with medicine inserted into the uterus which can work even for 10 years.

*How it works*

The loop prevents the female egg and the male semen from meeting. So the woman can not fall pregnant.

*Advantages*

1. You do not need to go to the hospital for years in order to do family planning.
2. It is highly reliable.

3. You can have sex with joy because the wife can not get pregnant.
4. It does not stop the flow of breast milk.

#### *Disadvantages*

1. The menstruation is strong
2. The loop allows sexually transmitted diseases easy access to the uterus.
3. The woman has to check regularly if the loop is still in place
4. The loop can not protect against sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS).

#### *Who should not use this contraceptive method?*

1. A woman who has not given birth yet.
2. Women who can easily contract sexually transmitted diseases because they have many sexual partners, for example prostitutes.

### **Norplant**

Norplant is a small plastic device containing and releasing medicine. It is implanted under the skin and can work for 6 months.

#### *How they work*

1. Norplant stops the female egg from maturing
2. It makes the vaginal fluid dry.

#### *Advantages*

1. Norplant is very reliable.
2. The woman does not have to go to the hospital frequently.
3. It works from the first day.
4. You can have sex with joy because the wife can not get pregnant.
5. It helps to fight against illnesses due to lack of blood.

#### *Disadvantages*

1. Some women stop menstruating.
2. Other women menstruate irregularly.
3. A woman can neither start nor stop the use on her own. This can only be done in the hospital.
4. Norplant is inserted by a small operation.
5. Norplant does not protect against sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS).

#### *Who should not use this contraceptive method?*

1. A woman with a child less than 6 weeks old

### **Condoms**

A condom is a rubber sheath which the man wears when he wants to have sex. A condom needs to be used each time a couple has sexual intercourse.

#### *How they work*

1. The condom collects the male semen and prevents it from entering the wife's uterus.

#### *Advantages*

1. The husband takes part in family planning.
2. Condoms can be used soon after a woman has given birth.

3. Condoms protect against sexually transmitted diseases.
4. Condoms do not interfere with the flow of breast milk.

#### *Disadvantages*

1. Condoms need to be used each and every time a couple has sex.
2. Condoms are not that reliable. They can break or come off during sex.
3. Some people are ashamed to buy condoms thinking they are only used by prostitutes.

### **5. Tubal litigation**

When a couple has given birth to all the children they wanted to give birth to, they need to find a way of not having any more children. Tubal litigation entails a small operation during which the fallopian tubes are cut through which the eggs pass. This makes any further pregnancy impossible.

#### *Advantages*

1. Tubal litigation is fully reliable.
2. The women do not need to go to the hospital any more for family planning.
3. The woman can never get pregnant again.
4. It does not interfere with the flow of breast milk.
5. You can have sex with joy because the wife can not get pregnant.

#### *Disadvantages*

1. The woman can never have children again.
2. If the wound is not cared for well, it can lead to infections.
3. Tubal litigation can not protect against sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS).
4. The woman needs to be tested first and then be operated by a really qualified doctor.

### **Vasectomy**

If a couple is convinced that they have given birth to enough children they can think of making the husband infertile rather than the wife.

#### *How it works*

1. It is a very small operation during which the man's tubes are cut below the scrotum. This operation does not interfere in any way with the man's sexual performance.

#### *Advantages*

1. Vasectomy is fully reliable.
2. A vasectomy for the man is a much smaller operation than a tubal litigation for a woman.
3. The husband takes part in family planning.

#### *Disadvantages*

1. During the first three month after the operation there is still the possibility of impregnating a woman. During this time other methods of family planning have to be used.
2. If the wound is not cared for well, it can lead to infections.

**Family planning and HIV/AIDS**

If the wife is infected with the HIV virus, she must not get pregnant any more because she can infect the child. If an infected woman is pregnant she has many problems during pregnancy and when giving birth. Therefore any of the methods described should be used to avoid another pregnancy.

If the husband or the wife is HIV positive or if both are infected, they need to use condoms to avoid infecting or re-infecting each other.

If a couple is infected and has few children, when the parents die they leave only a few orphan children. These can more easily be cared for compared to when a couple leaves many orphans.

If a woman is infected and avoids any further pregnancy, she will live longer and has a better chance to care for her children.

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