

# African Women, Religion, and Health

Essays in Honor of  
Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye



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editors*

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*Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*

PART I

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**CELEBRATING  
MERCY AMBA  
EWUDZIWA ODUYOYE**

## **Beads and Strands**

### **Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle**

*Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro*

#### **RECOGNIZING THE CHALLENGE**

In a chapter in Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye's 1995 book *Daughters of Anowa* entitled "Beads and Strands," she explains her fondness for the art of beadwork. The artists who sort and thread beads envision creating something beautiful. Many others have sought to tell the story of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, each adding their individual beads to make our strand longer and prettier (see, for example, Njoroge 2001, Ackermann 2000, Phiri 1997, and Kanyoro 1997). I consider it a great privilege to add a Geneva-based color of beads to the already beautiful beadwork that is the Circle. I speak from the point of view of one who has worked very closely with Mercy Oduyoye, who founded the Circle in 1988. This "strand" is in honor of Mercy for her immense contribution to the Circle. In her own words, "the Circle is unique in being the initiative and vision of one woman, which gained enthusiastic welcome, and support of EATWOT women in Africa and subsequently that of many more" (Oduyoye 1997, 1–2).

## **BACKGROUND**

The Circle is the space for women of Africa to do communal theology. Musa Dube, a Circle theologian, asserts, “A circle of women describes those who are seated together, who are connected and who seek to keep the interconnectedness of life” (Dube 2001b, 11). Circle members are women who are rooted in Islam, Christianity and African traditional religions. They are indigenous African women and also African women of Indian and European origins. These concerned women are engaged in theological dialogue with the cultures, religions, sacred writings and oral stories, which shape the African context and define the women of this continent. Circle members attempt to reflect together on issues of justice across boundaries of gender, faith and belief.

The Circle is a movement still in its infancy. It is a privilege for us to have the opportunity to record what we do, see and hear. Faithful history has the potential of sustaining and strengthening the foundation on which the future will be built.<sup>1</sup> It is the role of eyewitnesses to keep track of the facts and provide the context and interpretation for those who will come after us.

## **A VISION IS BORN**

In her article, “Reflections from a Third World Perspective: Women’s Experience and Liberation Theology” (Oduyoye 1994), Mercy articulates the ecumenical background that provided the incubatory space for the Circle. For many years, she was almost the only woman from Africa who wrote theology for publication. Her writing, verbal skills and extraordinary visionary mind opened doors for her in the ecumenical and international arena where she is still recognized as a mover and shaker. For many years she was the lone theological voice of African women. Such a role no doubt put her in a dilemma as well as in a position of privilege. But Mercy is not one to brood over these things. She is the emblem of the African woman of whom she writes in her

poem "Women with Beads": "Here I sit, not idle, but busy stringing my beads" (Oduyoye 1995, vii).

The Mercy that I have come to know and admire is one who gets up and "is on the go" even when the going is hard. It is my contention that rather than lamenting the dearth of writings from African women, she was motivated to change the situation. Njoroge (2001, 252) suggests that Mercy began gathering women for the Circle in 1978. This gained momentum during the World Council of Churches-initiated study "The Community of Men and Women in the Church."<sup>2</sup> When I first met Mercy in 1988, she had files, lists, and letters from many African women. All we needed do was to "sort, thread and make them into nice strands" for them to become the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

#### **THE HANDMAID'S STORY**

The Circle was officially inaugurated in 1989 at Trinity College, Legon, Ghana. The road to Ghana was nurtured by the International Planning Committee. The Committee was composed mainly of women from Africa who were then members of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). I joined them during a meeting in Geneva in August 1988. During this meeting, they identified religion and culture as the crucial foci for creating a liberative theology that would respond to the needs of women in Africa. These women then mooted the idea of bringing into being the Circle. According to recorded file notes, the proposed Circle was to be made up of women interested in holding a Biennial Institute for Women in Religion and Culture. They defined the main purpose of membership in the Circle as the commitment to be concerned about the lack of theological literature by women of Africa and the willingness to change the situation. The press release of 25 September 1989 captured the mood well when it stated that this group of concerned African women theologians "will concentrate their efforts on producing literature from the base of religion and culture

to enrich the critical study and empowering practice of religion in Africa.”

The first International Planning Committee consisted of Dr. Mercy Oduyoye, convener (Ghana); Dr. Betty Ekeya (Kenya); Dr. Sr. Rosemary Edet (Nigeria); Dr. Sr. Bernadette Mbuy Beya (Zaire); Dr. Elizabeth Amoah (Ghana); Dr. Brigalia Bam (South Africa); Ms. Rose Zoe Obianga (Cameroon); and Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro (Kenya).

A short word about each one of them, as they were in 1988, will suffice for now until future historians bring them alive in other in-depth studies.

- In 1988 Mercy Oduyoye was Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. She was the first African woman from south of the Sahara to hold such a high position in the WCC. Mercy had served in years past within the WCC Youth Department and had numerous other connections to the WCC.
- Betty Ekeya was teaching religion at Egerton University in Kenya. Shortly after the inauguration of the Circle, Betty left for the United States and has subsequently not been directly involved.
- Sr. Rosemary Edet was teaching religion at the University of Calabar in Nigeria. Sr. Edet continued actively as the Coordinator for the Nigerian Circle until her death from cancer in 1993.
- Brigalia Bam was the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. Brigalia worked in Geneva as the Director for the WCC Sub-unit on Women before her return to South Africa.
- Sr. Bernadette Mbuy Beya was in the Community of Religious Sisters in Lubumbashi, Zaire. She was doing pastoral work. She continues to be active in the Circle at the national and regional level.
- Elizabeth Amoah was teaching religion at the University of Ghana, Legon, where she is at present. She continues to be active in the Circle.

- Rose Zoe Obianga was teaching linguistics at the University in Cameroon. She continues to be associated with the Circle, although not actively.
- Musimbi Kanyoro was the Executive Secretary for Women in Church and Society, with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and was living in Geneva. She was Circle coordinator from 1996 until 2002, when Isabel Phiri, a professor of African theology at the then University of KwaZulu-Natal took over the reins.

### SHAPING THE VISION

This first International Planning Committee undertook several tasks. One was to define parameters for the Circle. The planning committee built on the foundation clearly thought through by Mercy. It was agreed that the Circle should not become an organization with a structure and headquarters. While it was obvious that the Circle would need some funds for its work, it was resolved that it must be driven by the commitment of African women to write and publish and not by external factors such as money. The Circle was to be a space for women to mentor each other by doing communal theology. Thus the Circle was to remain an open-ended forum, always hospitable to new people. Hierarchical structures of leadership such as president, chairperson, or general secretary were not seen as essential. It was envisaged that members would spontaneously take up any task that needed to be done, and apply themselves appropriately to it.

The meetings of the Planning Committee were chaired on a rotation basis by all present. Each one took part in writing the minutes. It was understood, even without discussion, that the Circle would charge no membership fee, and writing would remain the criteria for membership. Circle members were free to write and publish in fora other than the Circle. The important fact was for African women to nurture and support one another as writers. Circle women would engage in debate and dialogue with all other theologians, women and men, in Africa and beyond.

### TESTING THE WATERS

Members of the Committee assigned each other tasks. For example, with the help of their administrative staff, Oduyoye and Kanyoro began to prepare a database of African women who had studied theology. This task was implemented by building on lists already collected over many years by Mercy, Brigalia Bam and other members of the Committee through their work as lecturers. In addition, letters were sent to theological schools asking for lists of their past students. Other ecumenical people also offered names of women whom they knew, and we carried out a search following the clues given. To find such women was difficult, because many had changed their names following marriage, but we did our best.

A questionnaire was designed and circulated widely by ecumenical people traveling to places on the African continent. In addition to the questionnaire eliciting some personal data, it announced a conference and its theme and solicited papers for the conference. Those who responded and wrote a paper earned themselves a paid ticket to Accra, Ghana, to read their paper. In this way, we built up a database with nearly one hundred names of women who had studied Bible texts, Bible translation, religion, theology, ministry, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. These women were all committed to the concept of forming the Circle. They all identified strongly with religion and culture as the overall theme. Sixty-nine women from all over Africa wrote papers and presented papers during the first Circle meeting.

More than two hundred churchwomen from Ghana attended the inauguration of the Circle. The Ghanaian church women who followed the conference day by day keenly supported what we told them about the Circle. The theme for the convocation was "Daughters of Africa Arise." The Circle meeting took place shortly after the All-Africa Council of Churches had held a well-attended women's meeting in Lomé, Togo, with the theme "Arise and Shine." The similarity of the themes meant that many churchwomen easily identified with the Circle, even though they did not then understand or embrace the idea of writing and publishing.

### **BREAKING NEW GROUND IN THEOLOGY**

From the beginning, the International Planning Committee stated clearly that Circle theology was to address issues important to the women of Africa. The suggested subjects were far from the traditional theology we all knew. Sr. Bernadette Mbuy Beya was requested to research “The African Woman and Sexuality.” I remember the horror on her face and her wish to change the allotted subject. The Planning Committee teased her out of this fear by persuading her that being a nun would provide sufficient license to explore the subject with other women in her church. In her recent article, “Violence in the Name of Culture and Religion” (Mbuy Beya 2001), Mbuy Beya reflects back on the early history of the church. She notes the tremendous opportunities that were opened to her and other nuns to work and involve the community around them in discussing a range of issues related to sexuality, including rape, prostitution, and even sexual abuse of women by clergypersons.

The late Sr. Rosemary Edet conducted research on “Christianity and African Rituals.” At that time she was clearly opposed to including female genital mutilation (FGM) in her study. She voiced her reservation at that time, warning us not to buy into the Western wholesale condemnation of African culture. The Ghana Convocation of 1989 did not articulate the subject of FGM. This was to be changed in later meetings, and has now become one of the Circle’s main concerns. During the early years, although women were willing to break ranks with the theology of inculturation—a theology propagated by African men—they nevertheless hesitated to differ with each other.

### **EXPANDING THE VISION: CHRISTIAN OR INTERFAITH?**

The Circle began through Christian women who were actively involved in their churches and committed to ecumenical cooperation. During the initial meeting of the International Planning Committee, discussion was entertained as to whether we should remain a Christian-based group or develop into an interfaith

movement, thereby reflecting the religious diversity of Africa. A number of the members of the committee had studied in secular universities and were familiar with the departments of religious studies in African universities. In African institutions of higher learning, religion and/or religious studies were integrated subjects, and their syllabi often included the study of religious texts and sacred scriptures. We were aware that there were very few women in Africa trained in seminaries because seminary education was linked to ordination and many churches did not ordain women. We also knew that there were less than a handful of faculties of theology on the whole continent. Since our core work was to be research-based, there was a unanimous feeling that it had to be open to religious diversity. The pioneering work of John Mbiti on African religions convinced the group that certain shared cultural norms in Africa transcend faith affiliation.

Rabiatu Ammah, a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies in Ghana, was the first Muslim woman to participate in the Circle. Since then, others from Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa have participated. Other than in Ghana, the number of Muslim women is still fairly small. At a Circle meeting held in Ghana, August 2001, an oral report by Muslim women indicated that university education is still rare among Muslim women in Africa. In addition, Muslim women usually do not study religion at the universities; they study other subjects. In Ghana, however, there are Muslim women in the Department of Religion as professors and students. One would have expected the same in Nigeria, but the Nigerian Circle has not attracted Muslim women.

A category for those who claimed adherence to African religions was not thought of at the Circle's commencement. This was to change following the 1996 Pan African Conference, where some members of the South African delegation under the leadership of Nokuzola Mndende declared that they belonged neither to Christianity nor to Islam but to indigenous African religion. They were welcomed by the leadership and invited to participate as everyone else. However, on the day they were scheduled to lead the worship, some Christian women refused to listen to the message they had to bring. There are still unresolved questions as to whether indeed Islam and Christianity have completely

eroded those African beliefs that lie within each of us. A number of Circle theologians hold the view that since indigenous African religions are an integral part of everyday life, all black Africans share a heritage in them. They argue that it may not be possible to separate religion from culture in this context.

### **THE SEVEN-YEAR CYCLE OF THE CIRCLE**

Another pertinent issue on the agenda of the first International Planning Committee had to do with the design of Circle meetings. As noted above, the Circle inaugurated a Biennial Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture. This concept continues to be confusing both to Circle women and others. The original idea was that the Circle was to work within a seven-year period from 1989 to 1996. The Circle meeting of 1996 would complete the seven-year cycle. Its purpose was to evaluate the work done, stimulate writing projects and publications, and choose a theme for the next seven-year cycle.

Between these seven years, circles would continue to research and meet, present papers, and mentor each other through local or regional institutes. During the institute meetings, women would strategize, formulate and experiment with various methods to enable others to hear African women speak for themselves. These would include holding workshops with communities on the issues of contemporary relevance or visiting and giving lectures in schools and other places of learning. The institutions of theology such as seminaries and universities would be used to create network circles to encourage women to learn from one another about writing for publication. Such small circles would produce books, journals, poems, and letters to newspapers commenting on matters affecting women. Another task in these places of learning would be to build resources on women and culture and on women's theologies for students and researchers. It was anticipated that a plan would be put into place for a strategic study center that would house a library of resources on women's theologies. Within seven years, mobile national, sub-regional and continental events would take place throughout the

whole continent. At the end of seven years, we would come together in a pan-African meeting modeled on the theme of the “Sabbath” year. This cycle of events would then be repeated again, culminating in seven-year continental meetings.

Until 1996, the plan of the International Planning Committee plan was followed, albeit not with as much vigor as anticipated, but with sufficient consistency. I can cite three reasons why I think it worked. First, Mercy Oduyoye was at the steering wheel and she devoted a lot of her time to the Circle, often combining her official duties at the WCC with matters of concern for the Circle as well. She used every opportunity to recruit others and give them specific assignments that were in line with the Circle’s goals. Second, Mercy also wrote about the Circle and spoke extensively about it during her global responsibilities and travels. Third, Mercy is very well connected to other networks of churches, women’s organizations, academic institutions and theological faculties. She gave the Circle international recognition through theological institutions, ecumenical circles, global networks of women theologians, and funding agencies.

And Mercy knows how to tell a story. She writes and speaks with consummate passion. She believes implicitly in what she does. She is a natural fund-raiser. She obtained financial support from donors and well-wishers for African women to meet in Ghana. She recruited and mentored me, and soon I found myself doing the same. I told the story of the Circle and helped to secure funding from various donors, including my own organization.

#### **THE GENEVA SUPPORT NETWORK**

Mercy Oduyoye is a household name at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva. Until 1996, the Circle was basically run from Geneva because Mercy was its driving force. Although the World Council of Churches was her employer, many other organizations in the center claimed a part of her. Her Circle net was cast far and wide, and not only to women but to some men of goodwill, as well. John Pobe, then the Executive Secretary for the

Program for Theological Education (PTE) at the World Council of Churches, was one of those whom Mercy convinced to invest in the Circle. He believed in the concept of the Circle, and supported its efforts on a personal level, and through his unit's work. He attended some of the planning meetings, and shared his ideas freely. He helped raise funding for Circle women to attend international conferences, and he included Circle women in his program as resource persons, or as sponsored participants to ecumenical events. He also encouraged the use of publications written by Circle members.

In his department, other colleagues, especially Ofelia Ortega, were committed to supporting the Circle. Ofelia was also a good conduit for Circle women to engage the WCC with women's theological concerns.

Somewhat providentially, John Pobee was succeeded by Nyambura Njoroge, herself a Circle member who had become part of the Geneva group when she joined the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1992. Nyambura Njoroge not only kept the tradition of supporting the Circle, but also took particular interest in helping to strengthen those women who are currently teachers and students within theological institutions.

The Africa Desk of the WCC was another partner recruited by Mercy 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. Presently it is managed by the newly merged South African institution, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where the current coordinator, Isabel Phiri, is based.

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 but a concept. The Circle was inaugurated during the time of Anna Karin Hammer, the same woman who initiated the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women. Her support for Mercy and the Circle was unwavering. It was, however, her successor, Aruna Gnanadason, who has seen the Circle grow. Aruna is a member of EATWOT and of the Asian Women Theologians. Aruna's support for the Circle has been on many levels: she has supported

Circle events, sponsored Circle women to meetings, and invited and utilized the skills of many Circle women during the Ecumenical Decade, and continues to do so.

Mercy Oduyoye's Geneva network went beyond the people mentioned above. Mercy also worked closely with Evelyn Appia and recruited every other African at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva, whether they were theologians or not. Janet Thompson, a Liberian woman who worked for the Africa Desk, also joined and supported the Circle. The solidarity of women working together went beyond the African staff. The administrative assistants who worked and continue to work with us in Geneva were women ready to be there for us. Annelies Hope and Brigitte Constant worked with Mercy, Diana Chabloz and later Francois Faure worked with John Pobee, and Nyambura Njoroge and Doris Appel work with William Temu. These women are part of the Geneva connection of Circle history, and they form an important part of what we might call "Circle midwives."

I first met Mercy in 1988 when I moved to Geneva. Until that time, I had only read her books. Upon my arrival in Geneva, Mercy took time to share every aspect of the Circle with me. She invited me to join the International Planning Committee and made me a partner. We thought together, designed and carried out things together. 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, facilitating a process whereby they could meet and think together, as well as mentor one another. Countries such as Ethiopia, Madagascar, Tanzania, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe have many Lutheran Circle members because of this partnership. Even in countries where the Lutheran church is very small, such as Nigeria, one still finds Lutheran Circle members. Additionally, like Mercy, I drew others into the Circle, including a number of my male and female colleagues for different types of support. Collette Bouka Coula was among the first we recruited. Recruited originally to voluntarily help us with translations into French, Bouka was from Cameroon and held a doctorate in French and English literature. When Bouka was later

transferred by the LWF to Nairobi, not only did we call upon her to be one of the hosts for the 1996 Pan African meetings, but she also traveled with Circle books and gave lectures, introducing the Circle wherever she went in Africa. Collette has subsequently moved to Ethiopia, where she is still intimately involved with Circle matters.

My involvement in the Circle has been possible with the support of Ana Villanueva who has worked with me since 1989 arranging meetings and other support for the Circle. Without her support, coordinating the Circle would have been a difficult, if not an impossible task. This method of using one's own sphere of influence to enhance the Circle continues to be one of the ways of recruiting Circle members. This is a strategy we learned from Mercy.

#### **AFRICAN WOMEN CLAIM OWNERSHIP OF THE CIRCLE**

The purpose of the continental meetings was to evaluate the Institute's process and the impact of the publications and to put in place new strategies for influencing institutional and attitudinal changes in Africa. The all-African meeting would then set the priorities for the next seven years and also celebrate the communal journey at whatever point had been reached.

Most women understand the Circle and its emphasis on writing. However, very few of them understand the concept of the Biennial Institutes and the seven-year cycle. During the Pan African Conference in Nairobi in 1996, the participants decided that they wanted to have a say in the leadership of the Circle. They felt a need to formalize the structure in a different way, moving it away from those who had volunteered to work with the founder to a system of elected representatives. Although the Circle had strong roots in Geneva, Mercy had just retired from the WCC and moved back to Ghana. The Conference participants opted for electing an International Coordinating Committee made up of sub-regional representatives (Southern Africa, Eastern Africa, Western Africa, Francophone Africa, and Lusophone,

or Portuguese-speaking Africa). They also elected a coordinator for the Committee and two secretaries, one Francophone and the other Anglophone.

The concept of democracy and representation was strong at this meeting. The Pan African meeting felt that the Circle needed to develop its own image and that members should participate in choosing its leadership. They felt that this was an appropriate time to wean the Circle from its mother and founder. I suddenly found myself elected as coordinator. Since I knew that the Circle had succeeded because of Mercy's enormous investment of energy, I was not amused by this election. But there are times when democracy does unexpected things, and this was one of them. Although I had worked with Mercy, she had been the driver. The participants claimed the Circle leadership, but they did not capture the underlying philosophy that had been developed. Reflecting on this event, Mercy told me privately, "I went along with the majority decision, but I still think it lacks dynamism. It was to keep the momentum that I suggested the creation of the study commissions."

The participants present at the Pan African meeting had no idea that everything was done on a voluntary basis. Similarly, it was not clear that Mercy had been using her position at the WCC to travel, recruit and nurture new Circle members. The fact that the Circle had no financial basis to support the new structure was not even debated. The previous meetings had happened in connection with ecumenical meetings enabled by the Geneva-based group, which was largely recruited and nurtured by Mercy Oduyoye. When I was elected to succeed Mercy, I knew that I did not have the kind of wide network that she had, nor the charisma and internal knowledge of the Circle. I knew that we still needed Mercy on the team. I therefore asked immediately for the mandate to co-opt two people whose presence would strengthen the Circle. With that agreement the newly-elected Committee and I decided to invite Mercy back onto the coordination team. We all agreed that she should head the research section since that was our central focus. The big question was whether she would accept our invitation, as she was deeply hurt by the mass decision. She felt misunderstood. She felt that they

did not understand what she had done to establish, cultivate, and nurture the Circle. I knew what Mercy had done and I knew that, as I held a full-time job, if I did not have her with me, it was going to be an impossible volunteer task. I decided that I would take the risk personally to invite Mercy back onto the Committee.

Mercy had moved out of Geneva. In her place, Nyambura Njoroge became the partner that I had been for Mercy. I needed her support to sustain the Geneva connection and thus I requested the newly elected committee to co-opt Nyambura to work with us. This was accepted. Nyambura had shown concern for, and leadership among, ordained women. We all saw the need to have her continue with that, but we enlarged her mandate. In this way we gained two new members: the Research Coordinator, Mercy Oduyoye,<sup>3</sup> and the Theological Education and Ministerial Formation Coordinator, Nyambura Njoroge. When Nyambura joined the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Geneva in 1992, she provided a welcome access to Reformed Churches. This was way beyond our own efforts up to 1988.

#### **A NEW DIRECTION— THE FORMATION OF STUDY COMMISSIONS**

The major changes undertaken by the Coordinating Committee were to inaugurate study commissions on the four priority issues identified at Nairobi in 1996. Again it was Mercy who prepared the proceedings from the 1996 meeting (see Oduyoye 1997). She analyzed the report and brought a strategic approach that began the work in commissions. They were divided into four study commissions, namely Cultural and Biblical Hermeneutics, Women in Culture and Religion, History of Women, and Ministries and Theological Education and Formation.

Each commission included two people trained in the discipline to coordinate the particular study. This involved designing the nature of the study, inviting members from different parts of Africa to carry out relevant field research on the topics identified, and finally to report on the research.

It was also agreed that the two secretaries would be responsible for editing the journal AMKA and that the zonal leaders would convene zonal meetings in their areas between 1996 and 2003, while study commission leaders would work on research and writing. Zonal leaders would also be aware of activities underway in the national Circles in their regions. These changes had some pitfalls. We found that a core group of about fifty women were committed to writing, and each commission leader wanted those writers on their commission. Individual Circle members were expected to choose which commission to align with, but this did not happen.

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.

### **SETTING A NEW DIRECTION**

Although some commissions have continued to produce books, it was clear to me that the 2002 meeting would need to rethink Circle structure. It was important to review the philosophy and history that lay behind the original establishment of the Circle. This required reflecting on our decisions and how we should implement them. One of the recommendations made at the 2002 conference was to look into the possibility of institutionalizing the Circle so that we would become an organization rather than a movement.

The concept of the Circle has attracted many women in Africa, and there is a real desire to be associated with it. However, only a few are willing to sustain and retain the original emphasis on research and writing. Many would like to be associated with the Circle simply to read the writings of African women theologians. They would also like to participate in fora that consider topics of personal interest. The discussion on rites of passage, violence against women, and, more recently, HIV/AIDS has created

such interest. For those women, the Circle remains a safe place to analyze and reflect upon these important issues.

Many women in Africa do want to write, but the daily chores and struggles often consume them. Very few have access to a computer or even a typewriter. Because reference books are scarce, one of the biggest problems is often completing bibliographical references. Following a review of the Circle's work, the 2002 Pan African meeting set out a new direction for its future. Although not wanting to be a grassroots-organized institution, we are often pulled in that direction. Concerns were raised that would impact our future in this regard, requiring serious reflection.

#### CHALLENGES

A second cause for concern is funding. It is time for the Circle to rethink its policy of fund-raising. We need money to enable our meetings to occur, and we need to support research and publication. For fifteen years now, we have proven that we are committed to the Circle. Now we must think of how to sustain the future. We need a promise for tomorrow.

The Circle is also challenged to keep up with technology, which was not so important in the 1980s. Consequently, the Circle has an on-line presence with its own dedicated website, <http://www.thecirclecawt.org/>. Initially developed by Njoroge Njuguna, the website was recently commercially redesigned, and a contract signed with a web-design company in South Africa to maintain and regularly update the site. It is hoped that Circle members will visit the website and update their bibliographies. Circle publications are also posted on the site. We hope that our books will receive a wider readership now that they can be easily accessed, 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, is in its fifth printing and easily purchased abroad, but not in Africa. Musa Dube's two books, *Other Ways of Reading* (2001a) and *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretations of*

*the Bible* (2000), are readily available in Africa, as they are in the West. Those published on our continent are not easily available and consequently not widely read. The question of where we publish is urgent and critical.

**MOVE TO AFRICA:  
RECONNECTING THE CIRCLE  
AND THE BIENNIAL INSTITUTE CONCEPT**

A bold step was made to transfer Circle operations from Geneva to Ghana when Mercy retired. This enabled her to supervise Circle publications, while building the Institute for African Women in Culture and Religion. The Circle list has grown beyond the abilities of a volunteer coordinator. A total of four hundred women associate themselves with the Circle. More than thirty-four books have been published all over Africa in fifteen years. This is truly a reason to celebrate. Joyce Boham was appointed as liaison officer, and thus became the first Circle member of staff to be remunerated. Her task was to facilitate communication with members, manage Circle meetings, and keep Circle records. Since 2002, this work is being carried out by Lilian Siwila and Bridget Masaiti, who are Isabel Phiri's graduate assistants at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Identifying HIV/AIDS as the most pressing concern upon the African continent, the Pan-African meeting was rescheduled from August 2003 to August 2002 to enable the Circle to prioritize its responses and thereby develop appropriate strategies. Women in Africa infected and affected by HIV/AIDS far outnumber men. Stigma stands out as the one single factor that women and others living with HIV/AIDS must fight to overcome. The Circle can initiate straight talk about sex and the stigmas associated with the disease, and thereby assist the process of continuing education. This is imperative if we want to combat this new scourge upon our continent. We are also challenged to discover new ways of speaking theologically about what we have learned and continue to experience in the face of HIV/AIDS.

### **WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE CIRCLE?**

Having tasted the waters, we realize that we have a long way to go in order to bring about the change we have long hoped for. According to Tinyiko Sam Maluleke (1996), the men of Africa who lead the church and who have been the pioneers of African theologies are not paying sufficient attention to the voices of African women theologians bearing new witness of God's presence in Africa. Mercy Oduyoye, however, does not agree with this opinion and has written, "It is our focus on Religion and Culture which got EATWOT Africa under Simon Maimela to initiate a monumental study on Religion and Culture." And I believe that it was the growing international recognition of Circle studies on religion and culture that lay behind my invitation to be a keynote speaker at the 1996 World Mission Conference in Salvador, Brazil.

The Circle keeps growing in members and in depth. Today, we are not only larger and more experienced, but we are also more visible, recognized and respected at international ecumenical fora and among other theologians. We are seen as a voice for African women whose voices would not otherwise be heard. As a result, we are beginning to debate with male theologians, whose ignorance of our work sometimes stands out. One of the best examples is Musa Dube's response to Jesse Mugambi (see Dube 2001b).

With our growing influence comes increased responsibility. People look to the Circle for in-depth and practical involvement in the life of communities. Circle women are challenged not only to respond to the dearth of theological literature from African women, but also to play a significant role in helping to create and sustain viable communities of women and men in the church and in society in Africa. Can we initiate a shift so soon in our short history?

### **CAN WE BORROW A LEAF FROM HISTORY?**

Such reflection upon Circle history, will lead to a new call to take on greater responsibilities. We will have to increase our

efforts to promote research. We will have to continue to promote cooperation across religious and gender borders. Affirming religious pluralism allows Circle women opportunities to explore questions of the well-being of women writing on our various religions in the context of African cultures. Our hope is that through this process of dialogue we shall come to know one another better; affirm the need for justice and human dignity for all women; and most important, become leading agents in creating a climate in which gender-justice will prevail.

Through participating in face-to-face research and educating each other on the forms of worship and dogmas of our faiths, we have managed to become agents of justice to one another. Here we compare notes and listen to each other's stories of living hopefully within a gender-violent world. We share our pain and tears for the continued oppression that we find inherent in our religions and our cultures. We rejoice that our passion for justice is being awakened despite the prevailing barriers that keep us in "our place." We are learning to value each other's writings and to realize that we owe ourselves the power to change. Our ecumenical encounters prompt us to take our African identity seriously, as it is the basis for our unity. We seek to deepen our commitment to the future of our people, especially girl children and women living in the context of pain and death. Perhaps we can once again reflect on Mercy's vision for the Circle "to hold regular meetings where all concerned African women can come together. It can be biennials or triennials or even annuals, but we must continue to organize, stay visible and available to each other and our communities".<sup>4</sup>

#### **A PROMISE FOR TOMORROW**

Our history, short as it may be, holds promise for tomorrow. For many, the promise is for a brighter future for our daughters and us. Our daughters will read books written by us. For women and men alike, the future is a promise of continuity and growth, our covenant with generations yet to come. The Circle's future comes alive through our realization that something exciting has

been happening on our continent and to us. We see our names in print and read each other's writings. We see clearly that the stories of women in Africa reflect those of our own lives and those of our foremothers. They speak to our hearts and to our bodies. They give us the impetus to dialogue with one another and with God. Our reflections have created opportunities to pose questions to God about God, our humanity, and the essence of our being. The determination by African women to address the dearth of theological writings by women from the continent has given birth to women's communal theology. It has led to solidarity for us African women and with our global sisters. It has made true the saying of one of our pioneer feminist theologians:

Women must be able to speak out of their own experience of agony and victimization, survival, empowerment and new life as places of Divine presence and out of these revelatory experiences, write new stories that can tell of God's presence in experiences where God's presence was never allowed or imagined before in a religious culture controlled by men and defined by men's experience. (Ruether 1987, 147)

Critical to our learning has been the realization that African women's commitment to doing theology has come about as a result of the inner conversion by concerned women theologians. It is not motivated by a need to confront, impress, or even win over the church or other religious institutions. If this were the case, we would give up, because many do not read our works. African theology without the faith story of African women is a theology that is incomplete and contextually inept. The distinct gift that we bring to the theology of Africa is to repair this imbalance. Circle theology has posed questions to the content of the theology taught in centers of learning and practiced in religious spaces, as both the theologies of Njoroge and Phiri reveal.

As women of Africa we have come to realize that our liberation partially depends upon us. We have broken the silence to speak for ourselves. In stretching our own theological imagination and our reading of the sacred scriptures, we have become aware of who we are as women of Africa. We have discovered

that we are so heavily attached to our traditions and cultures that we must name these as subjects of analysis and critique within the field of theology. This process began early in Circle history, as can be seen in Mercy's 1986 work, *Hearing and Knowing*. It must continue.

And our theology must be communal. In doing communal theology together across gender, culture and religion boundaries we discover and affirm our humanity across borders. Together we have found that there is no option before us but to challenge the culture of patriarchy so dominant on our continent. It affects the way we treat one another as women and the way we handle ordinary situations, including our God-talk. The pioneering work of Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro has provided a critical framework for doing such cultural hermeneutics.

Finally, after fifteen years of writing, the next phase of our work will inevitably include a review of the impact that our writings have produced. Although it will be the task of other theologians to critique our work, we ourselves will have to begin to critique each other, while formulating alternative and new theories. Thus far, we have enjoyed our journey together and our discovery of basic agreement; but the time has now come to seriously begin an individual analysis of those issues that originally made us one. Our ability to grow further in our interpretation and relationship with each other will be predetermined on our willingness to begin this process. Our future as Circle women and particularly as African women theologians depends on it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> At the outset, I want to state that this paper represents my personal views about a small section of the development of the Circle since 1988. Another Circle scholar might provide a different view, but that is the beauty and license of scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> The Fifth Assembly of World Council of Churches (Nairobi, 1975) recommended the study. It was implemented in 1978–1982 under the leadership of Dr. Connie Parvey.

<sup>3</sup> It took courage to request Mercy to come back to the Committee. She did not readily oblige us. It is the special relationship that we had

developed and her commitment to the Circle that really brought her back. I will be forever grateful to her.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication to the author commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

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