

Chapter Seventeen

A New Way of Facilitating Leadership: Lessons from African Women Theologians⁶⁴⁰

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about the historical events and the strong and collaborative leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye of Ghana that led to the launch and creation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989. The Circle, as it is commonly referred to in Africa, is an interfaith association that aims at producing theological literature by encouraging and mentoring women to research, write and publish in the wide scope of religion and culture. Some key areas of concern are highlighted: theological education for women; gender and theology; biblical and cultural hermeneutics; imperialism and globalization; gender-based violence; theology of lamentation; and theology on HIV and AIDS pandemic. Indeed, this is a very timely topic if not already overdue given the many death-dealing challenges confronting us in the world today and in particular in Africa.

My intention in this chapter is to uplift the example of how African women theologians have collaborated in discovering our theological voices and creating a powerful theological platform from which to operate and to

⁶⁴⁰ This chapter was presented as a paper at the American Society of Missiology 2004, and offers a collaborative model of facilitating leadership in God's mission in Africa today.

reclaim our true identity as people created in the image and sound of God.⁶⁴¹ In 1989, we named this theological platform the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,⁶⁴² hereafter the Circle, even though not all African women theologians use this space to research, write, and publish theological literature and mentor one another according to our mission statement. The Circle is organized according to three European languages, English, French and Portuguese, which obviously tells of our colonial past and reality. The Circle has mainly flourished in Africa south of Sahara or tropical Africa and most of the writings are from Anglophone countries.

Certainly, a number of us have written about the Circle and doctoral theses are increasing by the number. In this chapter, however, I will try and trace the nature of leadership that has emerged over the years and the collaborative pattern among the women as well as a few men. I will also highlight key areas that were otherwise overlooked and silenced by western scholars and African male theologians as we seek to create authentic and life-giving Christianity, church and theologies in Africa. From the outset let me declare that I will take the liberty to cite some of the writings at length to do justice to the ideas expressed by individuals or even communally. I am writing as one who has been involved in the making of the Circle long before it was launched and because of my current job I am also involved in the empowerment of women in theological education and ministry.

I. A LEADER AND A LEGACY WORTH EMULATING

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the ecumenical movement in general have played a significant role in providing opportunities and resources for African Christian women to discover one another and to grow in many diverse ways.⁶⁴³ For our purposes and as an example, I would like to highlight the Consultation of Women Theological Students, July 24-30, 1978, hosted by the women's

⁶⁴¹ For more insight on being created in the sound of God see Mary Donovan TURNER & Mary Lin HUDSON, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 19-33.

⁶⁴² <http://www.thecirclecawt.org>.

⁶⁴³ See, Nyambura J. NJOROGE, "Reclaiming our Heritage of Power: Discovering our Theological Voices", in Isabel Apawo PHIRI, Betty GOVINDEN & Sarojini NADAR (eds), *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), 39-57.

department in the WCC⁶⁴⁴ as one occasion that laid the ground work for the creation of the Circle. This consultation is also significant for my own theological and ecumenical journey because I happened to be among the eight African women present out of 53 women who gathered at Cartigny, Switzerland.⁶⁴⁵ Among the other African participants was Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Ghanaian university lecturer teaching at the University of Ibadan in the religious department, Ibadan, Nigeria, and the most seasoned among us. Like in many consultations, we had the opportunity to meet according to our continents to deliberate on issues of common concern and report to the plenary with resolutions and plans of action. This is part of what African women participants said:⁶⁴⁶

“‘Is our theological education culturally relevant?’ Many of the women in the group felt that the emphasis in their education was on the academic rather than the practical. And that the practical skills they will need to minister to the people in their communities are neglected in their education. *Affirming that the true Christian is involved in the world, the women felt that theological education relevant to their culture would enable them to work within the community from a basis of sound biblical and theological principles: not that they neglect academic and biblical part of their training but that they be shown how to use it in their daily lives and work.*

Recognizing the tension that often exists between the church and the culture, the women agreed that this tension should not be ignored but explored throughout their theological education. An honest understanding of the tensions in which they must live will provide them with a theological basis for criticism and creativity within the culture ... *Looking specifically at theological education for women, the group felt that many theological institutions are still unresponsive to the needs of women. Realizing that male students, as well as female, need a broader understanding if they*

⁶⁴⁴ Jean SCOTT & Bertrice Y. WOOD (eds), *“We listened long, before we spoke”* (A Report of the Consultation of Women Theological Students, Cartigny, Switzerland, July 1978), Geneva: WCC Publications, 1979.

⁶⁴⁵ This was the first consultation I attended outside my church and country. Whenever I look back at my theological and ecumenical journey, I recognize how significant these days were, which has taught me to value any gathering that brings people together, ASM 2004 included.

⁶⁴⁶ SCOTT & WOOD, *“We listened long”*, p. 36—italics my emphasis.

are to minister to both women and men, we should work for a larger number of women on theological faculties as well as attempting to influence how male professors think and teach. Finally, we must encourage other women to study theology and seriously consider ordained ministry as a vocation.”

Having identified what was most important and challenging, African participants made the following resolution:⁶⁴⁷

“Pleased to discover one another, they determined that, once back in Africa they would look for the other women in Africa studying theology and bring as many as possible together in a consultation of African Women in Theology. The African Consultation would be a way to share the experience of Cartigny, to find out just what women theologians are doing in Africa, to question the meaning of ministry and women’s part in it, to look critically at theological education in Africa, to encourage women to become more active in the emerging theologies and to discover how the church can be more responsive to the issues and needs of women.”

Mercy Amba Oduyoye owned this collective resolution and left Cartigny determined to fulfill it whether others present joined her or not. She started collecting new names of any women enrolled as students and/or teachers in theological institutions and religious departments of secular and Christian universities. Clothed with passion for justice and great courage, Oduyoye did not allow any difficulties on the way to deter her from her commitment and motivation from Cartigny. She made good use of any space she found to recruit new women and in particular through the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and the WCC Community of Women and Men Study (1978-1981). In 1980, Oduyoye helped to organize the first conference of African Women Theologians in Ibadan, Nigeria, with Daisy Obi, then director of Institute of Church and Society of the Christian Council of Nigeria, and Isabel Johnson, then secretary of women’s department of All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC).⁶⁴⁸ She spent the rest of the 1980s reaching out,

⁶⁴⁷ SCOTT & WOOD, “*We listened long*”, p. 45.

⁶⁴⁸ See, Mercy Amba ODUYOYE, “The Search for a Two-winged Theology: Women’s Participation in the Development of Theology in Africa—The Inaugural Address”, in M.A. ODUYOYE & M.R.A. KANYORO, (eds), *Talitha Qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1990, 31-

recruiting and sharing her vision and commitment. In 1987, she moved to Geneva, Switzerland, to become the deputy general secretary of the World Council of Churches. The following year she convened the first planning committee for the official inauguration of the Circle which took place in Accra, Ghana, September 1989 with 69 women present.

In addition to reaching out, recruiting and mentoring other women to share in her dream and vision, Oduyoye brought with her great open-mindedness and deep Christian commitment that is tolerant of other religions. She writes, "The women of the Circle are practitioners of African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Islam and Judaism may be others too. We do not ask for religious affiliations in the Circle, only that one should consciously live by a belief in God."⁶⁴⁹ In other words, the Circle is both an ecumenical and multi-faith movement, even though the membership is largely Christian. Hardly does one get to know Oduyoye's denominational affiliation, because what matters to her is that one is interested in reflecting, exploring and analyzing the impact of our faith, religion and culture in the life of African women in their religious communities and society to create sound theological literature. Tirelessly, she provided empowering leadership and helped to nurture collaborative model of working together that is captured by Musimbi Kanyoro.⁶⁵⁰

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 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 with a president or a chairperson, or general secretary, were not seen as essential. It was envisaged that members would take up any task that needed to be done and apply themselves to it. The Circle members were free to write and publish in forums other than the Circle. The important fact was for African women to

56. In her address, Oduyoye narrates the story of this conference and the *raison d'être* for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

⁶⁴⁹ Mercy Amba ODUYOYE, "Gender and Theology in Africa Today", in <http://www.thecirclecawt.org>, 2003, 1.

⁶⁵⁰ Musimbi Kanyoro, a Kenyan biblical theologian, moved to Geneva, Switzerland, in January 1988 to work at the Women in Church and Society Desk of Lutheran World Federation (LWF). She worked at the Desk until 1998 when she became General Secretary of the World Young Women Christian Association (World YWCA), the first African woman to hold this position. She was the Circle coordinator from 1996-2002.

nurture and support one another as writers. The Circle women would engage in debate and dialogue with all other theologians, women and men, in Africa and beyond.⁶⁵¹

Despite being multi-faith the Circle has a strong and sound biblical and theological basis that is embodied in the choice of the gospel story of Jairus' girl-child presumed dead who was called to get up or arise—*Talitha cum!*—by Jesus. It is also important for women in the Circle that this story is intertwined with the story of the bleeding woman who touched Jesus for healing.⁶⁵² This pioneering small group of women who planned the launching of the Circle, felt called to arise and to seek for healing from deep wounds of being submerged, silenced, overlooked and devalued. The titles of the published proceedings of the launching of the Circle *Talitha Qumi* and the first publication *The Will to Arise* and another book *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* attest to Circle's biblical commitment and to ensure that posterity will not miss its *raison d'être*. For the launching of the Circle, Teresa Okure, Nigerian religious sister and New Testament theological educator and scholar, wrote the bible study on these two women and connected them to the African women theologians.⁶⁵³

The daughter of Jairus and the woman with the flow of blood: two women who met Jesus at critical points in their lives, when all hope of cure and restoration was gone, one at the age of twelve, the other after twelve years of illness, one through the intervention of the father, the other by the sheer will to live. Women who were as good as dead, physically and socially, but who were personally touched by Jesus and empowered thereby to arise and live; women who, by living, proclaimed God's marvels and God's reign. These two women have much to teach us. Let us lend supportive hands to one another and help one another to arise. For Africa will not arise unless its womenfolk, the mothers and bearers of life, arise. What an awesome thought! What a heavy responsibility on our part! May

⁶⁵¹ PHIRI, GOVINDEN & NADAR, *Her-stories*, p. 19.

⁶⁵² Mark 5:21-43 & Luke 8:40-56.

⁶⁵³ Kanyoro facilitated the first bible study at the convocation of the Circle, on Jairus' daughter and the bleeding women. Later, Musa Dube from Botswana, another New Testament theological educator and scholar, wrote a number of articles on the same text. See Musa W. DUBE (ed.), *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Geneva: WCC Publications & Atlanta: SBL, 2001, 50-60); Nyambura J. NJOROGE & Musa W. DUBE (eds), *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 3-24; PHIRI, GOVINDEN & NADAR, *Her-stories*, pp. 71-93.

God give us the will to arise and the desire genuinely to help one another and the whole continent to arise.⁶⁵⁴

Heavy is the responsibility in that even when Oduyoye retired from the World Council of Churches and after passing the coordination of the Circle to Musimbi Kanyoro during the second Pan-African Conference of the Circle in 1996, she decided to deepen the vision of “the will to arise” by building *Talitha Cumi* Centre, the home for the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture, at Trinity Theological Seminary, Accra, Ghana. The Centre hosts seminars on gender and theology on a variety of issues for people in Ghana, and once every two years, it hosts an international seminar for Circle members and their partners. Through the leadership of this great daughter of Africa, who is always up and about spreading the mission and vision of the Circle, African women theologians have a solid legacy worthy emulating, if we care to listen and to be engaged. Oduyoye is regularly invited to lecture in theological institutions in this country (USA) and elsewhere and is still active in the ecumenical movement.

II. COLLABORATIVE MODEL:

THE STRENGTH OF THE CIRCLE

Still strongly committed and living up to the concerns highlighted at the Cartigny consultation on the nature of theological education in Africa, Oduyoye and Kanyoro collaborated with John Pobee, a Ghanaian Anglican priest, theological educator and scholar responsible for global coordination of Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) Program in WCC.⁶⁵⁵ This collaboration increased the possibilities for more African women to receive scholarship grants to undertake masters and doctoral studies. These women were also encouraged to becoming theological educators and participate in the Circle and ecumenical conferences and activities. As luck would have it, the Circle was born during the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998), hereafter Ecumenical Decade, launched by WCC.

⁶⁵⁴ Mercy Amba ODUYOYE & Musimbi R.A. KANYORO (eds), *The Will to Arise: Women, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 230.

⁶⁵⁵ In 1992 I moved to Geneva to work with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) to establish the department of Women and Men in Partnership, and was welcomed by Oduyoye and Kanyoro to collaborate with them on Circle matters. In 1999 I moved to the World Council of Churches to replace John Pobee, and continued to create more opportunities for African women to further their theological studies.

The Ecumenical Decade helped to create critical awareness for women's theological concerns in the churches and theological institutions. It also increased forums where African women theologians, pastors and leaders of churchwomen's organizations could develop their theological knowledge and voices. This again increased the level and depth of collaboration of the Circle members with a number of staff in WCC, LWF, WARC and AACC, which gave the Circle international recognition even among funding agencies.⁶⁵⁶ In addition to undertaking masters and doctoral (PhD) studies, some Circle members have benefited from the program on International Feminist Doctoral of Ministry (DMin) degree, which is a product of the Ecumenical Decade and ETE Program in WCC.⁶⁵⁷ This degree is coordinated by Letty Russell and Shannon Clarkson (white American theological educators and scholars), who are assisted by a team of women theologians from different parts of the world, including Circle members. The degree has been awarded by San Francisco Theological Seminary, California, USA, since 1995.⁶⁵⁸

One more illustration of global and ecumenical collaboration in God's mission will suffice. By the end of the twentieth century, it had become clear that the global HIV & AIDS pandemic had affected more Africans than in any other continent and that women and children are more

⁶⁵⁶ In addition to the financial support from WCC & LWF, the Circle has been supported by EMW (*Evangelisches Missionwerk in Deutschland*—Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany) and Protestant Churches in Netherlands.

⁶⁵⁷ Rev. Ofelia Ortega, a Presbyterian minister from Cuba, was the member of staff of ETE responsible for the Caribbean and Latin America region, who in 1993 suggested that ETE as a program should seek ways of being in solidarity with women in theological education during the Decade. John Pobee, the ETE global coordinator, supported this idea, and this is how this program was born. It involved women staff from WCC, LWF, WARC and Conference of European Churches (CEC), also with offices in the Ecumenical Centre of WCC.

⁶⁵⁸ This program is based on seminars over a period of 10 weeks, thereafter candidates spend time conducting research and writing their project theses under the supervision of a theologian (female or male). Two weeks in January are spent at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey, Celigny, Switzerland, another two weeks the following January are spent in any part of the world where a small group of women theologians are willing to host and teach together with Letty Russell and Shannon Clarkson, and a further six weeks are spent at San Francisco Seminary, where the candidates join other students following a doctor of ministry degree. The Circle members have hosted the seminars twice, in Nairobi, Kenya (1998) and in Accra, Ghana (2002), and a few of them have supervised theses. While the two coordinators assist in fundraising in the USA for women from the South, most of the funds are raised and administered by the ETE program in WCC, of which I am responsible.

vulnerable. In 2001, a small group of women theological educators at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut, USA, extended an invitation to Circle members to attend a conference on “Gender, Faith and Responses to HIV & AIDS in Africa”, held during February, 2002.⁶⁵⁹ This collaboration led to the invitation of four women from Yale to the third Pan-African Circle Conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in August 2002.⁶⁶⁰ The Conference theme was “Sex, Stigma and HIV/AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture and Social Practices”.⁶⁶¹

I will return to this theme, however, for now it is important to note that this collaborative model with women theological educators at Yale Divinity School further opened another door for Circle women. In January 2003, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies at Yale (CIRA) in collaboration with Yale Divinity School (YDS) and the Yale School of Epidemiology and Public Health (EPH), and with support from the Fogarty International Center, began a program to provide research fellowship training grants to African women, members of the Circle. In the spring of 2003 (January-April), three women attended the first training program, and in 2004 the training was extended to eight months, with two women attending. In addition to the training, the women who benefit from this program are supposed to design a research project for their community to put into practice what they have learned.⁶⁶²

More examples of collaboration with African men will be cited as we discuss other issues. Thus far, I can say with confidence that even though still in its infancy, the success of the Circle has been born and nurtured by a small group of wise, determined and courageous women. These women believe in reaching out, recruiting, mentoring and opening doors for others to come in and share their dreams, vision, skills and potentials in the

⁶⁵⁹The women at Yale who planned the conference are Letty Russell, Shannon Clarkson, Margaret Farley and Kristen Leslie.

⁶⁶⁰ These are Letty Russell, Shannon Clarkson, Margaret Farley and Yolanda Smith. In addition, Karen Bloomquist, director of theology studies at LWF, and Martha Fredricks, theological educator at Utrecht University, Netherlands, were also invited guests of the Circle.

⁶⁶¹ As far as I know, this was the first time the Circle received financial support from outside church-related institutions. The Conference at Yale was supported by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as a large portion of the budget in Addis Ababa.

⁶⁶² In *The Circle Newsletter*, No 2-3, November 2003 & April 2004, the first three women who benefited from the training, Fulata Moyo, Malawi, Vuadi Vibila, DR Congo and Sylvia Kadenyi Amisi, Kenya tell about their experiences at Yale and their future plans.

creation of theological literature that takes seriously women's experiences, perspectives and God-given gifts. These doors have been opened to women and men beyond Africa. No doubt, we can claim that reaching out, recruiting, mentoring and opening doors for others are the hallmarks of the collaborative model of facilitating empowering, effective and responsible leadership. On the other hand, effective, empowering and responsible leadership demonstrates deep passion for justice, yearning for healing and quest for true identity and power with the divine as we participate fully in God's mission. Aware of our vulnerability and powerlessness, we chose to focus on "Transforming Power: Women in the household of God", during the second Pan African Conference of the Circle held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1996.

III. NAMING THE MISSING LINK IN GOD'S MISSION

By retelling the story why and how the Circle came into being, I have alluded to what a few African Christian women named as the missing link in God's mission: lack of affirmation of women's full humanity and denial of women's full participation in God's mission in the church and society as our voices and contributions are overlooked, silenced, devalued and not recognized as fully authentic and credible. In other words, African women have named the "evil" and "injustices" that hinder half of humanity's full participation in God's mission in the church and in society. It is no secret that even in the USA, theologizing and theological education and leadership in the church and participation in decision-making organs of ecclesial institutions has been the preserve of men over the centuries. Even today there are people who cannot comprehend that women are equally endowed with theological mind and leadership qualities, especially if they happen to be black women.

Furthermore, it is not that women do not theologize and articulate their faith and struggle to comprehend the divine in their lives, but it is that our voices are not heard, heeded to or taken seriously. Even when women are present, sometimes men act as if women are invisible. Being heard, seen, valued and acknowledged as full human beings created in the divine image and sound cannot be disputed as key to the success of African women's theologies. Unfortunately, the Bible has been misinterpreted and misused to deny women (and people of African descent) our God-given identity and the power with the divine (our likeness with the divine) despite the biblical affirmation that human beings, female and male, are created equal in God's image. In theology, Mercy Amba Oduyoye brilliantly named this missing

link by reminding us that “a bird does not fly with one wing” at her inaugural speech at the launching of the Circle.

In a recent article, “Gender and Theology in Africa today”, hosted in the Circle website, Oduyoye has perceptively elaborated the crux of the matter.

Gender in current parlance signifies the power relation between masculine and feminine. The gender ideology presupposes that the masculine encompasses the female, or takes priority in relation to the female and is entitled to expect subordination and submissiveness and self-abasement of the female. The gender ideology is not limited to biology. It is also social and appears in relations among men as among women and among nations. It functions, as a pecking order where colonies were females in relation to the colonizing nations. Men slaves are females in relation to women in the master’s household. White women are gendered males in relation to black women, a realization that was among the reasons for a specific women’s theology in the USA named womanist by black women of the USA. ... Though gender refers to hierarchy associated with roles based on biological sex, it transcends it. In this chapter however it is gender as male superiority, patriarchy, androcentrism and kyriocentrism. This offering is about the hegemony of men and androcentrism in African theology. Gender relates to the patriarchal phenomenon that structures relationships in hierarchies and pyramids. When women’s voices were heard on how women experienced life, words like sexism, sexist, patriarchy, androcentric, misogyny, feminist, feminism, androcracy on the tongues of women begun to jar men’s ears and to make “the good women nervous”. As women began to narrate and to substantiate how language, tradition, culture, religion, legal codes, household arrangements stifle their humanity, the word began to go round “women are their own worst enemies.”⁶⁶³

In this article Oduyoye gives us a glimpse of the issues and concerns that have preoccupied the Circle members as we struggle to create a “two-winged theology” in Africa. This article is worth reading in its totality because Oduyoye illustrates power dynamics between women and among men and “among nations”. I single out “among nations” because as people who have been subjected to slave trade and colonization by foreign powers, critical analysis of racism, apartheid and imperialism are critical in our writings. Oduyoye has powerfully demonstrated by telling the story of how a British woman imposed herself on the Circle during the second Pan-

⁶⁶³ ODUYOYE, “Gender and Theology, p. 2.

African Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1996. She also helps the reader to see some of the old-age gender stereotypes in theology, religion and culture and how they impact on African women's lives and relationships. It also profiles some of the key Circle publications that demonstrate our commitment to collaborative model of doing theology in what has been called "communal theology". Church theology, leadership and our understanding of God's mission in Africa has been largely articulated by foreigners and African men and the Circle wants to bring this long legacy to an end. This may explain the fact that the most recent activity by the Circle is the project on "Engendering Theological Education in Africa" in which we seek to transform the theological curriculum in Africa by mainstreaming gender.⁶⁶⁴ Oduyoye writes, "Recognizing and becoming sensitive to gender in theology leads to a theology that is liberative, one that does not remain theoretical but demands ethical choices that will empower the transformation of relationships that have been damaged by sexism and misogynist attitudes."⁶⁶⁵

IV. KEY ISSUES OF CONCERN IN THEOLOGY IN AFRICA:

BIBLICAL AND CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS

In this section I will attempt to give a summary of the key issues that have been left out in doing theology and God's mission in Africa from women's experiences and perspectives bearing in mind that the list is far from being complete.

From the beginning the Circle acknowledged that religion and culture are the basis of our theologizing, and as Christian women, the Bible has a central place in this discourse. Hence contextual bible studies have been

⁶⁶⁴ Since September 2003, a few Circle members have been discussing how to mainstream gender into theological curriculum in Africa. Each in their own discipline, ten women drafted an engendered theological curriculum and then held a workshop in Johannesburg, South Africa (16-21 May, 2004), to thoroughly scrutinize and revise the drafts. More workshops would then be held to test the curriculum and to introduce it to other Circle members and male colleagues. I happened to be part of this process, and my role has been to encourage the women to give the curriculum a strong ecumenical perspective from the beginning. This initiative by Esther Mombo (Kenya) and Musa Dube (Botswana) was yet another follow-up on a plan of action from the Conference on Theological Education and Ecumenical Formation with the theme "Journey of Hope in Africa" sponsored by WCC and held in Johannesburg, September 2002. I was responsible for organizing the Conference together with my colleagues who work on Education and Ecumenical Formation.

⁶⁶⁵ ODUYOYE, "Gender and Theology, p. 2.

critical in our writings, and as already mentioned, the stories of Jairus's daughter and the bleeding woman have motivated and challenged us to rise to the occasion. In this area of biblical hermeneutics we have particularly benefited from the work of Teresa Okure, Musa Dube, Madipoane Masenya, Hebrew Bible scholar from South Africa, and Musimbi Kanyoro, a biblical theologian from Kenya. Each of these women have contributed in "communal theology" as well as individually published books. Together with a few others, they have demonstrated "other ways of reading the Bible", which is actually the title of one of the Circle books. However, in addition to biblical hermeneutics, the Circle has identified cultural hermeneutics as a necessary step for in-depth understanding of the Bible as Kanyoro has rightly argued:⁶⁶⁶

"All questions regarding the welfare and status of women in Africa are explained within the framework of culture. Women cannot inherit land or own property because it is not culturally 'right'. Women may not participate in the leadership because it is culturally the domain of men ... However, it is not enough simply to analyze culture without reference to the people who maintain the culture and on whom the culture impacts. Here is where the need arises for a gender-sensitive cultural hermeneutics because it doubles in addressing issues of culture while being critical of that culture from a gender perspective. As a project done within the framework of theological education, this work must also show how the church is a part and parcel of the subject of analysis. It is in the church that the dilemma of how Africans should live as Christians and cultural people thrives. Since the Bible forms the base and informs the African Christian on what they can validate or not validate in their culture, I will start from the framework of reading the Bible with cultural eyes. I present in this study (on book of Ruth) some of the clues to understanding cultural hermeneutics. I suggest that a cultural hermeneutics is a first step towards a biblical hermeneutics. I argue 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 culture of the text ... Cultural hermeneutics is a necessary tool for those teaching homiletics and pastoral work in seminaries and other clergy institutions, and it is prerequisite to African women's

⁶⁶⁶ Musimbi R.A. KANYORO, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 18-19.

liberation theology. I have discovered this by reading the Bible with communities of African rural women.”

Like Kanyoro, Oduyoye has also creatively expounded women’s experiences and perspectives on culture in *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy*, which articulates the West African context including matriarchal societies.

1. Imperialism and Globalization

We are also writing in a highly globalized and changing world, which demonstrates Africa’s interdependence with the rest of the world and its impact on our lives as women and as Africans. Musa Dube has focused on this area of globalization in her creative ways of retelling and contextualizing the gospel and by articulating the postcolonial theories. In her writings, Dube always attempts to put Africa within the context of imperialism and globalization processes. Her thought provoking *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* is particularly critical for missiologists and biblical scholars. However, for a quick glance at Dube’s analysis of globalization, especially in a context where others argue that globalization has redeemed Africans from the African village to the joys of global village, I highly recommend her article, “Talitha Cum! Calling the Girl-Child and Women to Life in the HIV/AIDS and Globalization”.⁶⁶⁷ Decolonizing our mind, theology, church and literature is key to our success in creating life-giving theologies and Christianity in Africa.

With this comes the urgent need for the Circle to contend with the social injustices and death-dealing challenges that have condemned millions of Africans to a life of extreme poverty and culture of silence, violence and senseless death, including social and ecclesiastical death. Reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer in her social location in the context of globalization, Dube asserts:⁶⁶⁸

“As a black African woman of Botswana—who is a survivor of colonialism and the subsequent neo-colonialism of globalization—I live in the deep shadow of death. To live with the intensification of poverty in African countries, to live with wars and coups, to live with corruption and exploitation, to watch helplessly as beloved friends, neighbors, and relatives slowly

⁶⁶⁷ PHIRI, GOVINDEN & NADAR, *Her-stories*, pp. 71-93.

⁶⁶⁸ Gerald O. WEST & Musa W. DUBE (eds), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 617.

shrivel as HIV/AIDS gnaws at them, is to live where death and life have become identical twins ... This context of death-dealing challenges me to reflect on what it means to profess Christian faith and to pray the Lord's Prayer in the global economic era. I am confronted with a crisis that necessitates a re-examination of the Lord's Prayer. What, in other words, is God's vision for God's creation? What are the roles of Christian men and women, individually and corporately, in bringing God's kingdom on earth? Is there any vision that is pledged to God and to each other when Christians recite the Lord's Prayer? If so, is this a vision we can implement? And, how? These questions shall be the subject of my reading of the Lord's Prayer, through a close reading of the prayer."

2. Social Injustices and Gender-Based Violence

By taking our social location seriously since "African woman" is not a monolithic entity, the Circle has attempted to unpack the plight of African women in different contexts and their contributions in the church and society. In this regard we have attempted to demonstrate churchwomen (including women from African Instituted Churches) as moral agents and their capacity to resist social injustices and gender-biased harmful rituals and to become agents of transformation and bearers of hope. Many of the articles in our "communal theology" have focused on this area but also some individually written books have emerged by Isabel Phiri, Malawi, Christina Landman, South Africa, Helene Yinda, French-speaking Cameroon, Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, Democratic Republic of Congo and Nyambura Njoroge, Kenya.

From the beginning gender-based violence and injustices as sources of misery, suffering and death have taken centre stage. Silence surrounding the area of human sexuality and violence against children and women has been a major concern from the beginning. Breaking the conspiracy of silence and stopping gender-based violence have become even more urgent in the global HIV & AIDS pandemic era which has claimed millions of people in Africa alone and millions of children have been orphaned. This explains why the third Pan-African Conference of the Circle held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, August 2002, focused on global HIV & AIDS pandemic. The first book from this Conference has been published; *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, and three manuscripts are with the publishers.

It is significant to note that when the World Council of Churches (WCC) focused its attention on HIV & AIDS pandemic in Africa, since 1999, Musa Dube was instrumental in creating the HIV & AIDS theological curriculum for theological institutions in Africa as a theological consultant.⁶⁶⁹ Through training of trainers workshops in theological institutions, Dube has trained more than 400 theological educators and 100 church leaders on how to use the curriculum and to create liturgies that speak to our context of death-dealing challenges. As I write, Dube is busy training more theological educators and church leaders. In addition to resource material produced through WCC, Dube was instrumental in soliciting articles on HIV & AIDS pandemic in Africa for *Missionalia* (August 2001), a refereed journal in southern Africa. Other members of the Circle, like Musimbi Kanyoro and Helene Yinda, have been very involved in the battle against HIV & AIDS pandemic in their respective responsibilities at the World Young Women Christian Association (YWCA).

In this regard, creative works of collaboration with male theologians has begun to take shape. On gender-based violence Tinyiko S. Maluleke, South African theologian and one of the few African men who cite Circle writings, worked with Sarojini Nadar, South Africa Hebrew Bible scholar, to solicit and edit papers on “Overcoming Violence against Women and Children” for the refereed *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, November 2002. He also worked with Musa Dube to solicit and edit articles on HIV/AIDS for *Missionalia* (August 2001) mentioned earlier. However the most creative and constructive collaborative work that is gaining global recognition is the contribution of the Institute of the Study of the Bible at the University of KwaZulu Natal, School of Theology, South Africa, which is the current host of the Circle. Through the leadership of Gerald West, professor of Biblical Studies, the Institute of the Study of the Bible and Worker Ministry Project mostly working with women but not exclusively members of the Circle, is focusing on contextual Bible Studies. For instance, the Project has Solidarity Program which journeys with people living with HIV/AIDS from diagnosis until death, but with a predominant emphasis on living positively and with dignity.⁶⁷⁰ Another Program focuses on Women and Gender with a bias on stopping violence against children and women, which has given birth to

⁶⁶⁹ CD-Rom exists on resource material for churches and communities by WCC Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA).

⁶⁷⁰ Gerald O. WEST, “Reading the Bible in the Light of HIV/AIDS in South Africa” in *Ecumenical Review* (WCC Publications), 55, 4, October 2003, 335-344.

Tamar Campaign. This methodology of doing contextual bible studies with women (some who are living with HIV & AIDS) produces biblical and theological resources that restore dignity, healing and wholeness to people. Since 1996, West has worked with women on the Tamar rape story. Recently, I asked West to write an article for *Ministerial Formation*, July 2004,⁶⁷¹ on how Tamar Campaign came into being and in summary West and Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela write:⁶⁷²

“This campaign has changed many people’s lives; Tamar’s protest has given many women a voice. Young women have been infuriated by the actions of the many men in the story who are accomplices in the rape of Tamar. This has encouraged them to promote a different culture of respect and protecting their loved ones. Church leaders have used this text as a tool to encourage a spirit of openness with churches. These issues were for a long time seen as taboo and had no place within the church. Just like during the apartheid years, it took a long time for the church to exercise its prophetic authority. The increase in the number of children and women who are raped has forced the church to recover its prophetic voice and Tamar’s story has provided important resources and has built a capacity for doing this. Aluta continua, the struggle does indeed continue, but we can win the battle against gender violence and the spread of HIV and AIDS, if we work together.”

Because of the impact this Campaign has had on many people’s lives, West has accepted to work with WCC-ETE program so that we can introduce the Campaign to other theological institutions in Africa (and even beyond) through workshops and seminars for women and theological educators. West has also collaborated with Musa Dube in soliciting and editing *Bible in Africa*, a volume that has attempted to document the nature and profile of biblical scholarship that has emerged in Africa over the years. Slowly, African male theologians are beginning to appreciate the work of the Circle, but we have a long way to go to be heard and taken seriously.

⁶⁷¹ Published by WCC-ETE Program.

⁶⁷² Gerald O. WEST & Phumzile ZONDI-MABIZELA, “The Bible Story that became a Campaign: the Tamar Campaign in South Africa (and beyond)” in *Ministerial Formation* (Geneva: WCC Publications), July 2004, 4-12, 12.

No doubt speaking out on issues of human sexuality, HIV & AIDS status, gender-biased rituals and gender-based violence, and especially rape and incest require a lot of courage, spiritual stamina, creative and constructive solidarity. Circle women and others have written on such topics as widowhood, wife inheritance, childlessness, single parenting, female genital mutilation; but so far, great courage has been epitomized by Thandeki Umlilo, a religious sister from South Africa who in *Little Girl, Arise!* relates her experience of incest and sexual abuse by her father, brothers, uncle and other men from her fourth age. At the age of 50, Umlilo writes:⁶⁷³

“For too many years have I lived in the valley of dead bones. Incest and abuse violated the essence of me and held me bound in deadly shame, guilt and self-rejection—a human being that housed a withdrawn, timid and vulnerable child. Today, however, I experience myself as alive, able to take risks, eager to LIVE life to the fullest, knowing the joy of freedom, deeply appreciating the woman that I am, the person whose very Source is the Giver of all life.

This transformation is the hope I hold out to all people who have been abused or victimized in any way. My story in its very frankness is to tell all victims of abuse that we are not sure our experience. Within us is the power to transcend any trauma and to rise victoriously in the glory and splendor of New Life. The second purpose is to make as many people as possible, especially the perpetrators, aware of the devastating effect of abuse. My hope is that this awareness raising will enable perpetrators to treat themselves and all persons with respect and dignity that is rightfully theirs.”

Even though not a member of the Circle, as far as I know, Umlilo chose *Talitha Cum!* to tell her story that speaks for many African women who have suffered incest, sexual abuse and rape, but who unlike her are not so fortunate as to go through the process of counseling, spiritual guidance and healing. Among friends, African women continuously share personal encounters with gender-based violence, including incest and rape, if not their own, those of their daughters, sisters, nieces, cousins, aunts, mothers and friends. Some of these women suffer social death because of deep

⁶⁷³ Thandeki UMLILO, *Little Girl, Arise! New Life after Incest and Abuse* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), book cover.

psychological trauma while others commit suicide. Social death has become such a reality among people living with HIV & AIDS because of stigma, discrimination and silence surrounding the pandemic. The survivors of rape and incest are also deeply traumatized and usually suffer from shame and guilt throughout their lives.

Unfortunately, sufferers and survivors of rape have increased (including girl-children) because of the many war-torn and conflict-infested countries in Africa—where rape is used as a weapon of war (as it has been elsewhere)—and the lack of privacy in refugee camps. African women are also subjected to sex slavery among warring rebel groups and soldiers as well as the trafficking of sex workers outside the continent. In a recent research through the sponsorship of United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf report:⁶⁷⁴

“Violence against women in conflict is one of history’s great silences. We were completely unprepared for the searing magnitude of what we saw and heard in the conflict and post-conflict areas we visited. We knew the data. We knew that 94 percent of displaced households surveyed in Sierra Leone have experienced sexual assaults, including rape, torture and sexual slavery. That at least 250,000—perhaps as many as 500,000—women were raped during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. We read reports of sexual violence in the ongoing hostilities in Algeria, Myanmar, southern Sudan and Uganda. We learned of the dramatic increase in domestic violence in war zones, and the growing numbers on women trafficked out of war zones to become forced labors and forced workers. But knowing all this did not prepare us for the horrors women described. Wombs punctured with guns. Women raped and tortured in front of their husbands and children. Rifles forced into vaginas. Pregnant women beaten to induce miscarriages. Fetuses ripped from wombs ... We heard accounts of gang rapes, rape camps and mutilation. Of murder and sexual slavery. We saw scars of brutality so extreme that survival seemed for some a worse fate than death.”

Much is at stake in the battle against gender-based violence in Africa. Rape, incest and sex slavery and trafficking have contributed to the rapid rate of HIV infection among women and girl-children. Nevertheless, it is

⁶⁷⁴ UMLILO, *Little Girl, Arise*, book cover.

no secret that unhealed wounds of incest, rape and sexual abuse affect the sexual lives of the survivors and some of it has been the cause of dysfunctional marriage relationships. Certainly, this is an area that demands in-depth research and creative pastoral theology, care and counseling that addresses their pain and suffering. This is why Tamar Campaign has become very important for many women in southern Africa and the reason some Circle members would like to see it spending in other countries.

3. Theology of Lamentation

Not surprisingly our death-dealing context and senseless suffering has forced some of us in the Circle to turn to theology of lamentation, as has been the case in most of my writings. It is not enough to argue like John Mbiti, a pioneering African theologian from Kenya, that “one would hope that theology arises out of spontaneous joy in being a Christian, responding to life and ideas as one redeemed.”⁶⁷⁵ I can attest to the fact that when I am deeply depressed, disillusioned and angry and lack words because of the deafening silence of the church on social injustices and evil, such as the ones named above, the only language I understand is lamentation and that is when I have written most of my articles. Similar views about lamentation have been expressed by another Circle member, Denise Ackermann, a South African theologian, who writes:⁶⁷⁶

“Stigma is nourished by silence. Internalized trauma, fear or rejection, cultural restraints and wrong understandings of sin and punishment, all rob people of the ability to speak out and to name their reality. I suggest that our scriptures have given us a language that can deal with suffering. In the ancient language of lament we have a way of naming the unnamable and of crying out to God in situations that are unbearable. What is lament? It is a form of mourning but it is more purposeful. It signals that relationships have gone terribly wrong and it reminds God that God must act as partner in the covenant. It is both individual and communal. It is a primal cry that comes out of the human soul and beats against the heart of God. It calls God to account for our human suffering.

⁶⁷⁵ Quoted in Josiah U. YOUNG, *Black and African Theologies: Siblings or Distant Cousins?* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 92.

⁶⁷⁶ Denise ACKERMANN, “Implications of HIV and AIDS for the Theological Agenda” (Unpublished paper delivered at the UNAIDS Theologians’ Workshop on Stigma and Discrimination, Namibia, December 2003), 4.

Lament is risky and dangerous speech; it is restless; it pushes the boundaries of our relationships, particularly with God; it refuses to settle for things the way they are.”

I contend that African Christians need to recognize and acknowledge the deep valleys of death that Tamar (raped daughter of king David), Musa Dube, Thandeki Umlilo and many others have so eloquently named, have been a missing link in African theology and mission. We must hold ourselves accountable, our churches, governments, religious and political leaders and even God by using every possible language including art to name our suffering and culture of violence and death as we seek for ways of addressing the misery, loss and grief they brings in our lives.

4. Empowering Women in Theological Education

We have come a full cycle from the Cartigny consultation, where a few of us made the commitment to look for one another and to address issues of women, theological education and ministry. We in the Circle must hammer the fact that we cannot be effective, empowering and responsible leaders without the right skills, tools and resources. In addition to writing theological literature, still a lot of work needs to be done in uplifting and empowering our sisters through theological education, especially in the Lusophone (Portuguese speaking) countries where we hardly have women with advanced theological training and who find it difficult to contribute theological literature. Equally important, we need to increase the number of women as theological educators and administrators in theological institutions, as well as in leadership positions in the churches.

Lack of scholarship grants remain the largest hindrance in empowering women through theological education. On the other hand, theological institutions must be willing to change to meet the practical needs of women, their experiences and perspectives that shape their theologies, teaching and research methodologies and ways of doing ministry. These concerns will continue to be part of our struggle in our writings because we cannot bring change unless we are empowered and endowed with the right skills, tools and resources. However, our greatest hope and encouragement is to see the slowly but steadily growing body of theological literature being listed in required readings in theological institutions and the new project on mainstreaming gender in theology. And on this note, I would like to recall the words of our pioneering leader Mercy Amba Oduyoye:⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷⁷ ODUYOYE, “Gender and Theology, p. 1.

“The power of definition of what is theology has to be exercised by community of women and men in theology. The academic world remains uncertain as to assess the alternative epistemologies and methodologies that women claim mainstreaming gender in theology demands. But like it or not the concern for gender has opened up a new academic field, and this has to be acknowledged and appropriated to make the academy responsible and responsive to the world out there. The presumed right of church and bishops to determine what is to be believed, stands in the ways of mainstreaming gender in theology as long as leadership in the ecclesia remains male.”

CONCLUSION:

CALLED TO BE BEARERS OF HOPE AND LIFE

A chapter like this one cannot do justice to the creative and collaborative work of the Circle in facilitating new leadership in Africa in the area of producing theological literature. My task was to try and provide a glimpse of what the labor of love in Christ Jesus can achieve in a continent where sometimes we feel as if “the angels have left us”, the title of a book by Hugh McCullum after the 1994 Rwanda genocide. Or from a continent others have called “the dark continent” as in the days of missionary enterprise and colonialism and more recently “the forgotten continent” in the globalization era. In our small and delicate ways, the Circle, still in its infancy, has demonstrated great potential of recruiting, mentoring and nurturing a generation of bearers of hope and life against many odds. Our courage to speak out, to tell the truth and write about our joys and sorrows in the family, church (and other religious communities) and society have become a threat to some who would rather we remain silenced and submerged or “in our place”.

But we have chosen to touch the cloak of Jesus and to hear his voice calling us to arise! We have chosen to participate fully in God’s mission and to name the missing links in African theology, mission and life, for we too like the men, the Lord says, “See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.”⁶⁷⁸ This is the true identity and power with the divine that we yearn for as we seek to be moral agents

⁶⁷⁸ Isaiah 49:16, NRSV.

and bearers of hope, empowerment, liberation, justice, peace, healing and fullness of life. The Circle women are determined to learn from others and to make a difference in our death-dealing context. May God bless our yearning for freedom and fullness of life promised by Christ Jesus.